



‘My Body, My Choice’:

Tracing the Impact of Action
Projects in It's My Body
Program

A case study of Sakar, Bareilly

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CREA works with a vision to create a world where young women are recognized as individual right bearers, independent of their roles; where they exercise control over their bodies and sexuality by challenging social norms, expectations, restrictions and roles that limit their agency. CREA believes in an equitable, fair, and peaceful environment, where all human beings will be able to live with equality, dignity, and respect.

CREA co-implemented the It's My Body Program (IMB) with its community based organisations located in different districts of Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand. One of the organisations being Sakar, located in Bareilly district in Uttar Pradesh; they are working with adolescent girls and young women from systematically excluded communities in Karampur, Ata, Abhaypur, Pipariya, Dabhora, Sagalpur, Bhojipura villages. The primary function of the organisation is to build the capacity of young women on issues of gender, sexuality and reproductive rights by using sports in a rights affirming way.

Young women are trained in this program by IMB trainers to cultivate leadership skills and equip them to challenge deep-rooted social norms, by seeding and strengthening the capacity of adolescent girls and young women on gender and sexuality; at the same time fostering their agency, enabling them to raise their voices against the oppressive societal structure. In this backdrop, the present report attempts to understand the action projects undertaken by the adolescent girls and young women of Bareilly, working with the organisation 'Sakar'. Primary aim of this exercise is to assess the different modalities of the action projects and their impact in instilling leadership and at the same time providing a platform for exercising leadership to bring about structural changes in the society by questioning and challenging societal norms especially on issues of gender and sexuality.

The interlace between the IMB program and the action projects is exemplified in the words of Bhakti (name changed), an IMB program trainer working closely with the young women of Sakar in Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh. As a trainer she facilitated and encouraged participatory discussion with young women and girls on the issues around gender and sexuality. The organisation created an enabling space for them to share experiences influenced by social and gender norms. They facilitated

discussions through an intersectional lens and supported young women and girls to identify issues for action projects. One of the many topics raised in the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and the In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) at Bareilly is the behavioural problems of men in the village because of alcohol abuse. This included inappropriate behaviour of men leading to domestic violence, marital rape and open molestation with cat-calling on the streets. Cases of violence in the village were not addressed by the local police. The IMB girls intervened, tried to register the complaints, lodged a few FIRs against the criminals and attempted to address the situation. The young women with the help of the IMB program trainers worked in this action project to improve the socio-cultural condition of the village.

“Men who drink in public and engage in domestic violence drink often (heavy drinkers). So, the young women urged the Panchayat to shut down the liquor shop which remains open from 6 a.m. to 11:30 p.m.” (Bhakti, a program trainer of IMB).

The participants of IMB program with the help of the community members brought to the notice of the *mukhiya* (village head) about the gender based violence rooted in the socialisation practices underlying men’s abusive behaviour against women, exacerbated by alcohol. They highlighted the consequences of uncontrolled drinking, which included domestic violence, marital rape, violence against young girls in the open fields and videos of which are circulated in social media leading to honour killing, attempt to suicides etc.



It happened with my relative. My cousin's daughter was going to her coaching to deposit the fees, around 3 p.m. The roads here mostly remain deserted during those hours. A gang of men drinking on the roadside, pulled her to the bushes, gang raped her, made videos and sold the videos for 10/20 bucks. The girl was threatened that if she speaks about this, they will kill her father and brother (who goes out for work). While the video was getting circulated, it came to a relative's attention. Initially, the survivor's parents refused to believe, stating they wanted to ruin their daughter's reputation. Later, the girl confessed the entire incident, after almost a fortnight." (narrated by an ASHA worker during FGD).

This is not an isolated incident in the village, says the community women during the discussions. There are multiple cases where women face violence if they move out of the house without being accompanied by a male member of her family. Domestic abuse is perpetrated by the husband, and his family members. Society tends to diminish marital rape, stating it is the responsibility of a woman to fulfil her husband's desires.

"My mother-in-law and my sister-in-law say that now my identity is that I am his wife, hence it is my duty to bear all his responsibilities. If I am unable to fulfil his desires, he will go to other women" (a community member from the FGD).

The young women of the IMB program, with the help of the Bhakti and other IMB program trainers, mobilised women survivors of abusive behaviour, conducted meetings and group discussions with them in the afternoon, in the absence of men, in which women shared that they coped with the violence and abusive behaviours including unwanted sexual demands from their husbands who are addicted to drinking.

For the most part, women suffered without seeking any help making significant efforts to be self-reliant by seeking employment in and outside of the home (domestic help, sewing and tailoring jobs) to address the financial needs of themselves and their families often shamed by their spouses and in-laws.

“Unfortunately employment oftentimes seemed to result in further negative consequences when husbands took their wives' income for alcohol or accused them of cheating with other men because they worked outside of the home. As situations grew more intolerable, women sometimes turned to family and neighbours for help; but all too often responses from family members reflected the dominant cultural norms and re-enforced negative situations”. (a young woman of the organisation).

“Women come to my chamber, sometimes even to my house seeking medical help. Sometimes, they bleed from their vaginas, sometimes their foreheads or nose bleed. I told them several times to file a complaint. In some cases, women refuse stating how a wife can complain against her husband and in some cases, when women are willing to do so, police do not register those complaints” (a nurse from Bareilly).

The community members said that police refuse to take FIR stating ‘it’s a matter of your household. Try to solve it within, why do you want to complicate matters which can be easily solved inside the family’.

The Action:

The young women of the IMB program with support of their trainers decided to take this as their action project. After conducting meetings with the community women, they prepared their plan of action with the support of the program trainers. The first step was to put the matter in front of the village Panchayat. The Mukhiya asked the young women about their expectations. The young women demanded that the liquor shop in the village should be shut forcefully, or at least there should be some fixed timings of the shop. The young women during the FGD shared that the liquor shop operates from 6 a.m. in the morning and it remains open till 11/11:30 at night. In the late evening hours, men drink on the roads standing next to the shop and even if the shopkeeper pulls down the shutter, men have forcefully asked to open the shop to procure alcohol. The girls and young women of Bareilly wanted to prove that the majority of the problems are associated with alcohol consumption. Initially, the Mukhiya did not agree, stating the government reaps lots of taxes from the shop.

This issue attracted media attention. It was highlighted in the local newspaper and captured in local news. The young women mobilised the community members (most of whom were women for this particular project) and brought this to the notice of the police and registered complaints

“We had prepared a team of 6-7 young women to talk to the police officers. Seeing the media and so many cameras, 4 women backed out, stating they don’t want to feature in the newspaper article. Their parents will scold them. Two women of 18 years said their marriage got fixed already and getting featured in the news might affect them and break their marriage ” (said a young woman leader of Sakar).

The young woman leading the action project shared that 20 more women gathered outside the police station to support, but those 7 young women leaders were most important, as they spoke to the police and other stakeholders since all women are not vocal when it comes to public speaking. Moreover, certain preparations are needed to speak to the officials, says the team leader. According to her, collective support is necessary for sloganeering and oftentimes, officials get more vigilant when there is a large gathering.

Plan of Action

The young women with the support of program trainers drafted letters to the Gram Panchayat, *Mukhiya*, police officers and media personnel. The young women chose a leader amongst themselves, who is vocal, has communication skills and ready to lead the team. Young women leaders, along with other young women, decided to do a series of street plays, around the violence and the abuse women in the village encounter on a regular basis. The threats they go through and capture the mental trauma through their plays. After their initial activities, a group of healthcare providers (doctors, nurses, ASHA workers) agreed to help the young women of the program.



“All the young women chose me as their leader in an open meeting of the IMB program. They asked me to lead their way and represent them. This is a huge responsibility that I have been given. I try to be present in every meeting and stay in front in all the protests. It is my duty to update all the members of my group of the progress on the ongoing action projects. I try to make decisions with consent of all the young women as well as our program trainers. I have to arrange meetings and demonstrations keeping in mind everybody’s schedule”. (a young woman leader of 18 years of Sakar, Bareilly).

The doctors and the nurses of the community, who witnessed the bruises on the woman, gave free prescriptions to support the action project led by the young women. These helped them in filing the FIRs and made their point much more rooted to the social structure of the village. Some men also joined the organisation and supported the group of young women leading the action project. The men volunteered in the street plays and also participated in the protests and the sloganeering. The street plays highlighted the consequences of alcohol on women’s lives. It also depicted how alcohol and heavy drinking leads from physical and verbal abuse to emotional and sexual violence.

Result of the project on violence against women

The young women of the organisation narrated how constant pressure was created by the community members on the officials to shut down the liquor shop. The *Mukhiya* agreed to close the shop at 6 p.m. and not let it operate till midnight. A police chowki has been set up in the vicinity and there is constant vigilance of policemen in the locality surrounding the liquor shop. The police officials have pledged support to the young women of the IMB program, that if any further discrepancies are observed, they should immediately report in the police station and prompt action will be taken. Due to this, rape and molestation cases have reduced significantly. There are even limited cases of domestic violence and marital rape, as noted by the young women of Sakar.

"I cannot say that there is no gender-based violence, no abuse of women in Bareilly now. I will not say that the officials have agreed to all our complaints and have shut the liquor shop permanently. But I will definitely say that women have learned to understand that it is not normal to tolerate violence. They should voice if their rights are violated and file complaints if necessary. The number of cases have reduced significantly as women have become vocal now and do not hesitate to complain. The men now understand that if they do anything inappropriate, it will no longer remain veiled" (a program trainer of Sakar, Bareilly)

Advocacy and Impact of the Action Projects

Apart from designing, planning and executing the various action projects, the adolescent girls and young women of Sakar collectively advocated for their rights on the issues of sexuality, right to body autonomy, right to information about contraception and access to it, right to safe abortion, right to raise their voices against domestic violence and sexual abuse. Some of these young women advocated the need for a regular health check up for the girls and women of the village. They demanded the provision for sexual and reproductive health services from the service providers. They stated their right to a 24-hour health facility in the village, which can be accessed during an emergency. The women narrated how complications related to pregnancies and childbirth have resulted in maternal deaths as it took long hours for the pregnant women to be carried to the district hospital. The participants believe that these lives could have been easily saved if there was a 24-hour health facility within the village.

Another group of young women raised issues of forced marriage and problems associated with child marriages; such as to early pregnancy, severe complications leading to maternal deaths, domestic violence because of dowry, trafficking of girls, and other gender based violence. They have even raised all these concerns in front of the Panchayat and Mukhiya. a program trainer of Sakar commented in her interview,

“This is a process where these young women are building their networks. These girls present an image to the non-IMB girls (the ones who refused to be a part of the organisation) of their success through the different action projects that they have performed in the villages. These projects have given these adolescent girls and young women self-confidence and recognition.”

This truly encapsulates the structural changes being brought about by the action projects.

These are not merely a fight for shutting down the alcohol shops or opening of health facilities in the village, however essential they may be. This is a process for young women to exercise their leadership, collectivise and address issues that are important to them by following a rights based approach. Young women taking part in these action projects and turning into young women leaders being politically aware of their rights and holding stakeholders accountable, will in turn, encourage more young women to raise their voice against restrictions.

Opinion of the young women on the Action Projects

The young women of the IMB program said that they greatly benefited from the program. From being hesitant to participate to joining is where their journey started and now they feel proud of their decisions. By being part of the program they could understand issues connected to gender and sexuality, exercised leadership, negotiation with family and other stakeholders, exercised sexual and reproductive health rights and collectivise to amplify their voice by strengthening those rights. They said during program they developed leadership qualities uncovered hidden talents in sports, street plays. They want more and more women to be a part of the IMB program and voice their opinions, questioning the misogynistic social structure. Earlier they thought that joining this program will not reap any benefits, even their parents said they assumed it to be a waste of their time and they will gain nothing from it. Now, they feel happy that they are a part of the IMB program

"I became popular in the community after getting featured on the first page of a newspaper article. I raised my voice in front of the police officials, stating my rights as a woman during the action project. I feel proud that I did not step back when the media interviewed me about the problems the women of Bareilly are facing regularly". (young woman and IMB member of Sakar, Bareilly).

The young women of the IMB program expressed their views on playing outdoor games, such as football and kabaddi. They narrated how in the process of socialisation, right from childhood they have been taught that public space is of men and domestic space is that of women. This protectionist attitude of parents restricted mobility of young women by reinforcing gender and social norms. They have been told how a good woman is defined, the one who stays at home, performs all the domestic chores, cooks food, cleans the house, cares for family members and sacrifices all her desires are the characteristics of a good woman. Earning money, working outside home, playing outside are for the men. Women should play games like ludo, not kick balls in the sun. Being part of the IMB program and performing the action projects made them question and equipped them to challenge the existing norms.

It has never come to the wildest of my dreams that one day I will play football at the district level. We were always told by our elders that we are women and our space is in the kitchen. Playgrounds are for men, not for us". (young woman of 18 years, who won a prize for excelling in football).



The participants said that they have received jerseys with shoes from the organisation for playing football, and whoever excels in the game receives prizes and gifts too. This gives them motivation to learn the games, practise and play.

The very notion of ‘women cannot do this’ and ‘women should not do this’ has undergone a sea change, with the intervention of the IMB program in Bareilly. The young women said that they now feel confident and do not shy away from talking to the officials and voice their opinions about their rights. They now do not seek permissions before stepping out of their households, but inform the elders of the house of their schedule. They are not escorted by fathers, brothers or husbands everywhere, they have gained the freedom to move around independently.



“Earlier my father used to escort me even if I wanted to go to a friend’s house within a kilometre. Now, I go out of the district alone and nobody questions me about it. Last month I went to Budaun to stay with my aunt on a public bus (more than 50 kms from here). I went all by myself. This is something the IMB program has given us.” (an 18-year-old woman from Sakar).

Challenging the norms around body and sexuality

The adolescent girls and young women with the support of the IMB program trainers have started questioning and challenging the existing social and gender norms within their communities. They have started claiming their rights which were earlier denied by the older members in the communities and even by caregivers. They actively raise their voice against these norms by exercising bodily autonomy through the medium of football, by challenging the existing social norms and talk about their right to choice, to consent, access to information on contraception, right to safe abortion and talk about their sexual and reproductive health and rights. They expressed their thoughts on the issue of gender discrimination, control over woman’s body and sexuality, right to choice and supported their argument with relevant facts.

“We made paintings on the walls of the village and performed street plays depicting the sufferings and pain of women in a patriarchal society” (a young woman of 19 years from Sakar, Bareilly).

“Earlier we used to wear only salwar suits and after marriage, women used to wear sarees in our village. Our fellow villagers had lots of issues regarding women wearing shorts and t-shirts and playing football. They wanted us to wear salwar kameez and play. Now, we not only wear shorts and play football, but also wear shorts in our home. This is what the IMB program has gifted us. We want this program to continue in this village”. (17 year old girl from Sakar, Bareilly).



“Neither do our parents or relatives question us on our dress, nor do they taunt us on going out alone. Earlier people used to tell our parents, such spoiled girls you have. Will they become CM of our state now or what? Get them married, they will be automatically controlled.” (a young woman of 18 years).

Young women and adolescent girls have developed their understanding of their sexual and reproductive health and rights. They have learned to raise their voice against norms that confined them within the domestic space. All the young women in the focus group discussion in unison said, they want IMB program to continue, as they gained confidence and independence, learned about their SRH rights, and advocated for rights in front of the service providers.