Navigating Gendered and Structural Barriers to Aspirations

Experiences of Youth in Kalyanpuri, New Delhi

A Study Report

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Acknowledgements

Executive Summary

The period of adolescence is marked by physical, emotional and intellectual change, during which a person navigates their aspirations alongside socio-economic expectations. Aspirations often represent a desire to be in a better state of being in the future and a potential to break the poverty cycle, especially for the economically underprivileged adolescents and youths. However, aspirations are shaped and constrained by socio-cultural norms, limited resources and capacities (Appadurai 2004). The Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST), New Delhi, carried out research and programmatic interventions at Saathi Centre and Yuva Saathi Centre to explore the aspirations of adolescents and young adults from underprivileged backgrounds living in Kalyanpuri, an informal settlement in Delhi. The research comprised three key components: a situational analysis using mixed methodologies, case studies employing qualitative methods to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of gender-based violence in the lives of girls, and team participant observations based on the participatory programmatic activities with adolescents and youth enrolled at Yuva Saathi Centre.

The situational analysis which was initiated in January 2018, investigated the socio-economic factors that shape youth aspirations, such as demographic, occupational, and educational backgrounds. Most of the participants belonged to the Hindu community, with a sizable portion from scheduled castes and backward classes. For the most part, parents worked in the informal sector, with fathers as primary wage earners. More than 70% of mothers did not earn any wage. Most of the participants attended government schools. It was found that girls' dropout rates were higher after 8th grade due to lack of financial resources. In the case of boys, higher dropout rates were because of substance abuse, experience of violence at school and lack of interest. Additionally, when financially feasible, parents tended to prioritize their sons' attendance at private schools, highlighting gender-based disparities in education.

The aspirations of individuals are often shaped by their access to resources including economical, educational, and human and social resources such as information and guidance, access to social support networks, training and presence of role models (Kabeer, 1997). This study discerned that factors such as gendered norms and control exercised by families, partners and community further restrict girls' access to education and exposure. Financial resources and gender norms created a digital divide, with boys having greater access to digital devices and app usage, while girls faced restricted use due to patriarchal control, limiting their exposure and self-expression. Financial constraints and socio-cultural norms limited access to quality menstrual health, normalizing discomfort and pain at the same time restricting discussion, revealing gender disparities in sexual agency. Additionally, it was found that local role models could be a resource that played a crucial role in enhancing aspirations. In terms of social support for adolescents and young adults, girls received 18 percentage points less financial support from their families and 6 percentage points less from their communities compared to boys. Regarding non-violence, only 60% of boys and 50% of girls felt they had a non-violent home environment. Additionally, girls faced more control and surveillance over their mobility and resources, along with a greater fear of public violence, limiting their access to opportunities.

The situational analysis revealed distinct experiences of gender-based violence among adolescents in Kalyanpuri. Girls reported higher levels of mental and sexual violence, both within households and in public spaces, while boys experienced more physical violence in schools and neighborhoods. There was a marked gender difference in perceptions of safety, with girls feeling less safe, particularly at night, compared to boys who felt secure both day and night. Fear of sexual violence and concerns about family

honor were used as tools to control girls' mobility, limiting their employment opportunities. Many girls believed that financial stability could provide access to safer areas. Case study interviews indicated that girls faced physical, mental, and sexual violence when pursuing strategic life decisions related to marriage, education, and career. These findings underscore that when girls exercise agency, especially in ways that challenge power structures and societal norms, it often results in violent repercussions.

The situational analysis shows that a majority of both males and females make their own career decisions, with slightly more males (60%) than females (50%). Boys (51%) tend to choose more practical career aspirations compared to girls (31%), suggesting both genders are realistic about career barriers, though males are slightly more practical. Girls perceive their career aspirations as harder to achieve, often setting lower goals to avoid constraints. Additionally, only 20% of boys and 13% of girls choose their marriage partners, with fathers playing a dominant role in marriage decisions. Beyond employment and marriage, girls aspired for personal freedom, self-expression, and mobility. The case studies captured a 'repertoire of everyday aspirations' a broader range of aspirations focused on immediate needs, these on the other hand significantly influence their future direction and potential. To cope with the barriers and violence against this range of aspirations, both strategic and immediate, girls negotiated, adapted, and at times internalized conflict. Many changed their behavior to gain family trust by hiding their activities to avoid conflict. Some turned to self-harm and emotional breakdowns. However, despite these challenges, the girls sought help and support from peers and mentors to manage stress and build self-confidence to pursue their aspirations.

The report concludes with a discussion on the ongoing 'Yuva Saathi's Explorations in Building Adolescent Agencies', informed by the research findings and aimed to empower young adults and adolescents, especially girls, to increase their capabilities and agencies. As a first step, Yuva Saathi aimed to create a safe, non-judgmental space where adolescents could freely express themselves, crucial for building their agency and recognizing their capabilities. Through creative activities like theatre, storytelling, and comic making, the Centre encouraged youth to challenge societal norms, explore their identities, and confront gender and caste-based discrimination. This environment fostered critical thinking and self-awareness, enabling young people to better understand and navigate the social structures affecting their lives. Further, involving boys in a program aimed at empowering girls and creating a supportive environment was essential for breaking down barriers and building allies within the community, significantly impacting the social dynamics that affect girls' lives. Gender sensitization training at the Yuva Saathi Centre is central to fostering a critical awareness of gender-based discrimination among adolescents.

I. Introduction

The period of adolescence is marked not only by rapid individual changes in one's physical, emotional and intellectual capacities but is also a stage of life when the person is constantly negotiating with their aspirations and myriad other expectations from their socio-economic environment. Thus, it is a period fraught with uncertainties and dilemmas that could enhance one's vulnerabilities but on the other hand, it is also a stage that represents scores of opportunities and choices to shape one's life. The aspirations among adolescents and youth, especially the economically underprivileged, are of particular interest due to their future orientation for positive possibilities of being. It talks of 'desire, or ambition' as well as denotes a yearning to reach up or be in a better state of being in future. And therefore, has a high potential to result in better life circumstances or break the poverty cycle. The definition of aspiration as 'possible selves' by Markus and Nurius, who introduced the concept in 1986, is quite relevant here.

> *An individual is free to create any variety of possible selves, yet the pool of possible selves derives from the categories made salient by the individual's particular sociocultural and historical context and from the models, images and symbols provided by the media and by the individual's immediate social experiences. Possible selves thus have the potential to reveal the inventive and constructive nature of the self but they also reflect the extent to which the self is socially determined and constrained." (Markus and Nurius, 1986, p. 954)*

The definition of aspiration by Markus and Nurius (1986) as 'possible selves' reveals the inventive nature of persons and, very importantly, notes the boundedness of aspirations to social experiences and culturally determined systems of idea. At the same time, aspirations in its operationalisation present dynamism and agency expressed in constant everyday negotiations with socio-cultural norms and structures. It stimulates concerted action and legitimises and gives meaning to that action.

However, several studies point to the understanding that poverty conditions such as poor access to resources and deprivation are key factors that constrain the realisation of aspirations (Dalton et al., 2016). Aspiration failure is therefore seen as a result of multiple factors that are external to the individual, determined by socioeconomic and cultural factors. However, Appadurai (2004) emphasises that the characteristics internalised by those living in poverty result in their lack of capacity to aspire. To Appadurai, the capacity to aspire is more fully developed in the relatively rich, as greater power, dignity and material resources that the rich possess result in better navigational ability to grab opportunities. On the other hand, those living in poverty are surrounded by experiential limitations 'that create a binary relationship to core cultural values, negative and sceptical at one pole, over-attached at the other' (Appadurai, 2004, p. 69). Thus, in Appadurai's contention, the capacity to aspire and its realisation is internal to the culture of underprivileged populations impinging on the persistence of poverty. Nonetheless, 'aspirations,' especially among the young or those living in poverty, are studied for their potential to drive better future prospects in terms of quality of life. And since, 'the capacity to aspire depends on the existing capabilities and practices' (Nathan, 2005, p. 38), there is a possibility that with development in capabilities aimed at aspirations, the capacity to aspire may also be expanded.

The Study

Inspired by ideas that conceptualize 'aspiration' in terms of its role in shaping better future possibilities, and motivated by an interest in understanding the aspirations of young adults from underprivileged backgrounds living in an informal settlement in Delhi, the Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST) launched a research cum action project at its community center, Saathi, located in Kalyanpuri, East Delhi. This project, which began in December 2017 with funding support from the American Jewish World Service (AJWS), comprised, 1) a situational analysis using mixed methodologies; 2) case studies using qualitative tools to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of gender-based violence in the lives of girls; and 3) ongoing programmatic activities at Yuva Saathi centre with adolescents and youth on a range of issues connected with building a gender sensitive approach, critical understanding, self-awareness, confidence, and most importantly agencies and negotiation skills

In 2018, a situational analysis in Kalyanpuri and nearby areas used a mixed-method approach, including a survey of 127 young adults (aged 13-25) and qualitative tools like focus group discussions (FGDs) with adolescents, young adults, parents, and community elders. The study aimed to explore how socio-cultural and economic factors shape the aspirations of these young individuals and how they navigate these factors. Data collected covered personal and family backgrounds, resource access, time use, safety issues, aspirations and their reasons, influential figures, NGO involvement, and experiences with socio-cultural norms in pursuing their goals. This situational analysis found that gendered challenges significantly shaped the aspirations of participants, with girls facing early marriage, education discontinuation, and heightened fears of sexual violence, while boys dealt with substance abuse and delinquency. Despite these barriers, all participants aspired for income, status, and independence, with a strong desire to bring pride and recognition to their families and communities.

Subsequently, it became crystal clear from the situational analysis and the programmatic interactions with adolescents and youth at the Yuva Saathi Center, that particularly for girls, life is dominated by manoeuvrings and decisions to dodge gender-based violence (GBV) against their being. In other words, we observed that the presence of a range of violence at different points and in every facet of life resulted in depriving girls of the liberty to work towards their desired aspiration. However, while violence may have numerous implications on the lives of adolescent girls and their future possibilities, many forms of violence go unobserved or unreported due to limited understanding and even normalisation of violence, especially in "safe" private spheres of natal homes or largely considered safe public zones such as schools. Fear and stigma associated with violence also have played a role in discouraging reporting and any discussion. Observing that the problem of GBV against girls can have complex implications on their lives and future prospects; we delved deeper into the study of GBV from the perspective of the lived experiences of girls. GBV in this study is broadly understood as denial of freedoms and its multi-dimensional repercussions on the girl's beings and doings and her idea of future possible selves or aspirations. For this study we employed a qualitative case study methodology with girls enrolled at Yuva Saathi. Five participants from varied backgrounds were selected to provide a wide range of insights and perspectives to violence against girls and their aspirations for themselves.

Further, this report is not only based on research activities but also observations made and experiences from the Yuva Saathi Centre. Informed by the findings from situational analysis and the case studies, the interventions and activities at Yuva Saathi centre were designed to enable free expression as well build negotiation skills and agency among the youth. For girls, the interventions particularly focussed on improving communication and negotiations with families on the question of early marriage, violence and sexual abuse, restrictions on mobility, choosing partners, and career opportunities, among other things. The Yuva Saathi centre was specially created as a

dedicated safe space with an aim to foster dialogue, skills-building, learning and critical thinking among young people through creative and participatory mediums and methodologies. Techniques from theatre, community radio and comics for storytelling were used to build confidence, self-awareness and self-esteem and advance gender sensitive analysis using non-threatening and creative media. Further, as part of the research exercise, observations were made while conducting these activities and were recorded by the team members to understand the reception, lived experiences and stories shared in relation to aspirations, capacity to enhance critical understanding from a gender sensitive lens, and the use of these techniques by the youth in communicating with families and local communities.

This study report consolidates the research findings, observations, and reflections from a research-cum-action project conducted at the Yuva Saathi Centre. It aims to explore the aspirations of adolescents and young adults from underprivileged backgrounds living in Kalyanpuri and nearby slum areas in New Delhi. Drawing on five years of research and engagement through Saathi and the Yuva Saathi Centre of ISST, the report captures valuable insights, experiences, and learnings from this initiative.

Conceptual Framework

One of the most influential people-centred frameworks of the recent past to assess development has been the 'capability approach' by Amartya Sen (1995, 1999) and Martha Nusbaum. Nusbaum further developed the capability approach, especially in terms of its practical applicability. The capability approach moves away from the utilitarian focus on provision and access of goods and commodities to an approach that focuses on quality of life achieved by enhancing capabilities and functionings and, ultimately, freedoms. So, instead of concentrating on the means, i.e., goods and commodities, the focus is

brought back to the quality of life measured in terms of humans' capabilities and functionings to convert these goods and commodities to advance their freedoms. On the other hand, the capabilities and functionings depend on various contingent factors that could be socio-political, economic, environmental or even person-centric. An approach that has also significantly influenced the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Index and report. Thus, 'a utilitarian measure of human welfare would indicate that people are worse off if their standard of living is lower; the capabilities approach shows that with greater freedom and choice, welfare may increase. Poverty is viewed as a deprivation of basic liberties as opposed to just low income' (Sen, 1999). Income is not necessarily an end in itself but a means to an end. The end is to increase the functioning and capabilities of people, so that an adequate measure of welfare ought to measure these capabilities.' (Pyles 2008, p. 27).

Some other key concepts that are of significance for this report, and drawn from Sen's capability

approach are, **i)** 'violence', understood as the denial of capabilities, functionings and freedoms. **ii)** where 'capability' can be 'regarded as the vector of the potential functionings that an individual can achieve (Sen, 1999). It denotes, someone's capability to function (Sen, 1992). It comprises all the possible functionings from which an individual can choose (e.g. having the choice: to be a mother, to pursue certain career regardless of gender, to earn the same wage for the same work regardless of any other factor, to elect and be elected, should these options be deemed valuable after reflection). Further, **iii)** 'functionings are achieved "beings" and "doings" that people value and have reason to value (Sen, 1999). **iv)** 'Freedom', in the capability approach, is a means and an end. Freedom can also be understood as expanding capabilities to do and be what one has reason to value (Sen 1995). The freedom to achieve well-being is of primary moral importance under the capability approach. Finally, **v)** Agency, refers to what a person does or can do in order to pursue any of her goals and objectives, not just those that advance her own wellness. It is an evaluation of "what a person can do in line with his or her conception of the good" (Sen, 1985, p. 206 cited in (Velástegui, 2020, p. 4)

Nussbaum emphasises that the inclusion of 'agency and freedom' makes Sen's capability approach more in alignment with the feminist critique of dominant paradigms of development such as utilitarianism that make women passive subjects of development. However, according to Nussbaum (2011) it falls short of proposing a non-negotiable list of fundamental capabilities that could be used as framework for analysis in various contexts. Focussing on the applicability of the capability approach, especially for examining gender, violence, and social justice issues, Nussbaum has advanced a 'list of 10 capabilities that include; i) Life, ii) Bodily Health, iii) Bodily Integrity, iv) Senses, Imagination, and Thought, v) Emotions, vi) Practical reason, vii) Affiliation, viii) Other Species, ix) Play, x) Control over the environment. Each of these ten capabilities is explained by Nussbaum in her various writings in her attempt to justify the need for a definitive list that encompasses 'the central requirements of a life with dignity (Nussbaum 2011).

The study's two phases and the interventions at the Yuva Saathi Centre were also influenced by Naila Kabeer's (1999) framework for women's economic empowerment which is structured around three interconnected dimensions: resources, agency, and achievements. In brief, a) Resources, include not only material resources (economic assets) but also human and social resources that enhance individuals' capacity to make choices. These resources are acquired through various social relationships within institutional domains such as family, market, and community. Resources can be actual allocations or future claims and expectations. b) Agency is the ability to define one's goals and act upon them. It encompasses more than observable actions, including the meaning, motivation, and purpose behind actions. Agency can take various forms, such as bargaining, negotiation, deception, manipulation, subversion, resistance, and cognitive processes like reflection and analysis. It can be exercised individually or collectively. c) Achievements refer to the outcomes of the ability to exercise choice, measured in terms of well-being and valued ways of 'being and doing'. (Kabeer 1999)

Methodology

The situational analysis was conducted in 2018 using mixed methodologies for data collection. A survey of 127 young adults aged 13–25 was administered in Kalyanpuri and nearby areas. Focus group discussions were held with girls, boys, and parents using participatory tools. Data collection involved adolescents and youth from the Saathi Centre, as well as those who had not previously been part of the Centre. Participatory tools used for focussed group discussion (FGDs) with the adolescents and youth such as 'Line of Communication', 'Roadmap to Success' (RMS), 'Activity Mapping', 'Flower Power' and 'Mobility Mapping' (see Annexure 1 for description of these tools). Similar participatory tools were also used during FGDs with parents with a slight change to

capture their perceptions for their children particularly daughters, these included, 'Aspiration Mapping', 'Flower Power - Who influences my daughter's life', and 'Access to opportunities' (see Annexure 2)

Case studies were written about selected girl participants from the Yuva Saathi Centre between November 2022 and April 2023. The primary methods included in-depth interviews with five principal participants aged 17–23 and semi-structured interviews with significant family members and other key influencers in their lives, such as peers, intimate partners, teachers, and NGO representatives. Participatory methods, such as Flower Power (mentioned earlier) and RMS, were used prior to conducting the in-depth interviews. The RMS activity helped explore the aspirations of adolescent girls and the barriers they face in achieving them. Field notes and participant observations were recorded during various group-based activities with adolescents and youth from the Saathi Centre and Yuva Saathi Centre. These field notes, prepared by the Yuva Saathi team, provided valuable insights into the experiences of conducting the activities and the participants' responses.

Research Sampling

The participants of the study activities at the Yuva Saathi center were mainly from Kalyanpuri and nearby areas, including Trilokpuri, Khoda, Khichdipur and Kondli. The distribution of respondents by locality, gender and age in the situational analysis survey conducted with adolescent and youth participants is below in Table 1.

Table 1: Number of Respondents by Area

Area	Nos of Individuals
Kalyanpuri	77
Trilokpuri	17
Khoda	14
Khichdipur	4
Kondli	12
Other	4
Total	**127**

Female participants in the survey were about 10 percent higher than male participants. The 60 and

Research Questions

Main research question:

How do socio-cultural, economic factors, and gender-based violence shape the aspirations and capabilities of adolescents and young adults, particularly girls, belonging to low-income groups in an urban settlement?

Sub questions

- What are the various aspirations of adolescents and young adults in Kalyanpuri?
- How do socio-cultural and economic factors shape the aspirations of these adolescents and young adults?
- In what ways does gender-based violence impact the capabilities of girls, and how do these experiences affect their ability to pursue their aspirations and achieve well-being?

Figure 1: Frequency Distribution by Age

Legend:
- 13-17
- 18-22
- 23-27

Values shown: 77, 43, 7

Figure 2: Frequency Distribution by Gender

Legend:
- Female
- Male

Values shown: 51, 76
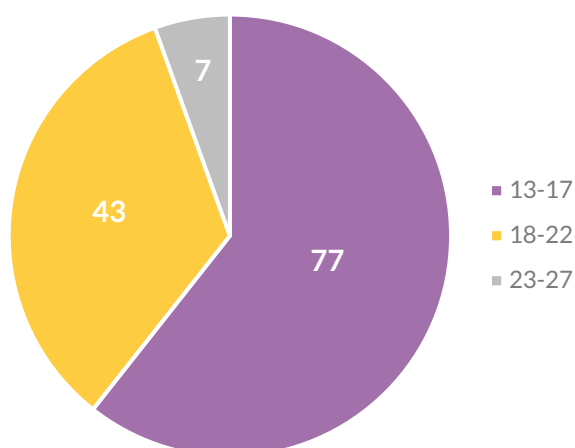
40 percent in female and male participant ratio was more or less maintained in other research tools as well – qualitative and participatory activities carried out for this project during the situational analysis.

The research site for the case studies was the Yuva Saathi Centre in Kalyanpuri, a space dedicated to adolescents and young adults from Kalyanpuri and Trilokpuri in East Delhi. All participants regularly attended the Yuva Saathi Centre. A purposive sampling method with maximum variation was employed to identify participants for the case studies. This approach was chosen to ensure a diverse range of backgrounds, providing a wide spectrum of insights and perspectives. The sample consisted of five principal female participants aged 17-23, as well as twelve significant individuals from their lives. All participants resided in blocks within Kalyanpuri or Trilokpuri. In-depth interviews were conducted with the significant others of the principal participants, including guardians or primary caretakers, partners, siblings, friends, and other support systems, such as the Yuva Saathi Centre staff.

Table 2: Qualitative Case Studies' Details

Case Studies	Age	Locality	Significant Others interviewed
Amrita	19	Trilokpuri	• Mother • One Yuva Saathi Centre staff
Kareena	22	Kalyanpuri	• Mother • Elder brother
Kiran	17	Kalyanpuri	• Grandmother • Sister
Shanaya	19	Trilokpuri	• Mother • Elder sister • Friend • Partner
Vani	18	Kalyanpuri	• Mother • Elder brother

Research Objectives

The purpose of the situational analysis was to explore the various socio-cultural and economic factors that shape the development of aspirations among adolescents and young adults, as well as how they evaluate and respond to these factors in relation to their aspirations. Our goal was to assess elements such as access to resources, time use, access to information, issues of safety and security, aspirations and the reasons behind their aspirational choices, influential figures in their lives, affiliation with non-governmental organizations, socio-cultural norms, and the experiences of adolescents and parents in negotiating available resources and norms in their efforts to realize their aspirations. The situational analysis also informed the formulation of programmatic activities with youth, particularly girls from Kalyanpuri at Saathi.

Subsequently, using case study methodology we delved deeper into the interconnections between gender-based violence (GBV) and their aspirations in the lives of girls. These case studies of girls aimed to examine how the presence and range of violence across various stages and aspects of life restricted girls' freedom to pursue their aspirations. Therefore, the second component of the study explored how gender-based violence against girls affected their future opportunities and capabilities.

Ethical Considerations

An informed consent process was conducted to ensure respondents and researchers agreed on the interview's duration, participants, content usage and distribution, and the nature of the questions. For respondents under 18, consent was also obtained from their parents or guardians. Respondents were fully informed about the research's purpose and topic beforehand, and consent was provided either verbally or in writing. Given the sensitive nature of discussing violence, respondents were briefed on the types of questions to be asked, and their support systems were ensured to be available during and after the interviews. To maintain anonymity, respondents' names were not used, and explicit consent was sought before audio-recording the interviews. Respondents were informed they could leave the interview or discussion at any time or decline to answer specific questions. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents had the right to withdraw from the study if they felt uncomfortable.

Respondents were asked if they were willing to share their stories with us, considering factors such as the time that had passed since they experienced violence, whether they had previously shared their experiences with anyone else, and whether they had access to psychosocial support. The staff members at the Yuva Saathi Centre played a crucial role in identifying potential respondents, and as a support in case any interventions were needed.

Limitations

When conducting case studies to understand GBV and aspirations, we encountered two significant limitations during the data collection process. First, violence is a sensitive topic, making it difficult for participants to openly discuss their lived experiences. As a result, some participants were hesitant to fully express their thoughts. Additionally, we faced challenges in framing questions appropriately, particularly when engaging with participants and their significant others, such as family members. Finally, the concept of 'aspirations' posed a linguistic challenge, as its translation into Hindi may have altered its meaning, making it difficult to convey accurately and potentially leading to misunderstandings.

II. Literature Review

Defining aspirations

'Aspirations are personal and dynamic' as the meaning of it varies from one person to another and they 'develop in response to different environments and circumstances' (Leavy & Smith, 2010, p. 6). They start forming in early childhood and adapt or change themselves 'in light of new experiences, choices and information (Leavy & Smith, 2010, p. 6). Previously, research on aspirations has mostly focused on the educational and occupational aspect of it. Sirin et al. (2004) stated that specifically in the case of adolescents, their future aspirations are their 'educational and vocational 'dreams' they have for their future work lives' (p. 438). However, aspirations acting 'as putative shaping forces' for personal objectives has been a recent addition to the literature on aspirations (Clair & Benjamin, 2011, as cited in Baillergeau, Duyvendak & Abdallah, 2015, p. 2).

Huijsmans et al. (2020) described aspiration as 'an orientation towards a desired future' and these orientations can be called 'drafts' as they are constantly revised (Bois-Reymond, 1998, as cited in Huijsmans et al., 2020, p. 3). Appadurai's (2004, p. 67) conceptualisation of aspirations says that they are socially produced because 'aspirations are never simply individual' and 'always formed in interaction and in the thick of social life.' This brings the focus to how 'institutions and social relations, as well as everyday practices and specific encounters' help in formulating and transforming aspirations or contribute 'to their waning' (Huijsmans, 2020, p. 3). In this context, it is pertinent to mention "that young people most commonly develop a set of aspirations, all reflecting a partial vision of the 'good life'" (Baillergeau & Duyvendak, 2019, p. 10). Here, 'good life' is looking beyond the realms of the labour market and education. Overall, these set of aspirations together makes an aspirational repertoire (Baillergeau & Duyvendak, 2019).

Factors shaping and influencing aspirations

Parents, mentors and peer groups play an important role in the formation of aspirations of an individual. In fact, 'there appears to be a strong relationship between the aspiration of parents for their children and those of the children themselves' (Morrison Gutman & Akerman, 2008, as cited in Leavy & Smith, 2010, p. 6). Young people's aspirations are also shaped based on the daily bargaining and negotiations that take place with their family members around discussions about a 'long term balance of support and reciprocity'. Hence, youth's aspirations are 'framed within the implicit and explicit expectations placed upon them by family and kinship networks, which in turn are influenced by gender-based societal customs and norms' (Whitehead et al., 2007, as cited in Leavy & Smith, 2010, p. 6). Relatedly, according to Baillergeau, Duyvendak & Abdallah (2015), adolescents' aspirations are not only influenced by their 'personal features, place and social status', but also by interactions in which they may or may not be involved (p. 6).

In a study with poor working-class African-American and Latino youths of Cape Verdean, Sirin et al. (2004) have talked about how aspirations are affected by aspects of individual abilities and social context, especially in the case of urban poor adolescents. Most of the time these adolescents 'experience tension between their valuing of education and the (often) limited resources and opportunities' (Sirin et al., 2004, p. 438).

Future aspirations of adolescents are influenced by several factors like social class, inequities in resources, poverty and social network connections. External barriers to future aspirations are reflective of the 'inequities in resources that are a product of social class position' (Rossides, 1990; Kozol, 1991, as cited in Sirin et al., 2004, p. 439). In this context, Coleman's (1988) concept of 'social capital' is useful to describe how 'structural constraints prevent urban adolescents from accumulating forms of 'capital'...which provide access to resources that facilitate

educational and occupational attainment' (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, as cited in Sirin et al., 2004, p. 439). These factors impede future opportunities of adolescents.[5]

Further, aspirations of adolescents are influenced by individual and social factors such as locus of control, self-esteem, perceived self-efficacy, social support, school commitment and peer relations (Hendricks et al., 2015). Lastly, in context of the well-being approach, it is important to consider 'notions of happiness, quality of life, lifestyle and satisfaction as ultimate life goals' as they affect educational aspirations and occupational choice (McGregor, 2007, as cited in Leavy & Smith, 2010, p. 5).

Several studies point to the understanding that poverty conditions such as poor access to resources and deprivation are essential factors that constrain the realisation of aspirations (Dalton et al., 2016). Appadurai (2004) says that the poorer members of society 'have a more brittle horizon of aspirations' because poverty undermines people's positions to 'wish, want, need, plan, or aspire' (p. 69). They emphasise that the characteristics internalised by those living in poverty result in their lack of capacity to aspire. To him, the capacity to aspire is more fully developed in the relatively rich, as greater power, dignity and material resources that the rich possess result in a better navigational ability to grab opportunities (Appadurai, 2004). The capacity to aspire is a process that needs to be learned and requires 'resources, time, and teachers or role models' and these are more accessible by the relatively rich (in Flechtner, 2014, p. 2).[6] Zipin et al. (2015) build on Appadurai's (2004) concept of aspirations, showing that youth from less privileged backgrounds have a lower capacity to aspire compared to their higher-class peers, largely due to limited exposure to a diverse "archive of concrete experiences."

Aspiration failure takes place because the low capacity to aspire leads to underachievement. Consequently, 'an aspiration trap occurs when these aspiration failures contribute to persistent poverty and persistently low future aspirations, perpetuating a negative cycle' (Flechtner, 2014, p. 1). Ray (2003) reiterates that 'poverty stifles dreams or at least the process of attaining dreams' and thus, poverty and aspiration failure leads to a self-sustaining trap (p. 1).[7] Further, Bourdieu's (1979) work links aspirations and identity. He 'describes how a person's social environment generally determines his or her interests, tastes, and ideas about life' (as cited in Flechtner, 2014, p. 2). Since the poorer members of society have a narrow horizon of aspirations (Appadurai, 2004), they only pursue what they know and consider the experiences of 'a person like them' (peers) (Ray, 2006, as cited in Flechtner, 2014, p. 2). Ray (2006) links aspirations to social inequality, showing that limited interaction between the rich and less affluent widens the gap, making the achievements of the wealthy seem unattainable to the poor (Flechtner, 2014). This hampers the capacity to aspire among disadvantaged groups, as they lack exposure to the experiences of the rich. Flechtner (2014) suggests that a more equal society would enable disadvantaged groups to better observe and learn from those who are better off. (p. 3).

From a gendered perspective, aspiration traps can also hinder upward mobility, often arising from a sense of inferiority. For instance, women are socialized in ways that lead them to underinvest in their human capital and to internalize a second-class status, resulting in choices that perpetuate their disempowerment (Alsop et al., 2006, as cited in Flechtner, 2014). In contrast, privileged

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[5] However, adolescents come up with their individual coping mechanisms to deal with social constraints (Sirin et al., 2004).

[6] The rich and powerful have a denser 'archive of concrete experiments' with the 'good life' at their disposal, and this 'experience of success' gives them the power to influence 'one's future position in society' (Appadurai, 2004, as cited in Baillergeau & Duyvendak, 2019, p. 5). Whereas, those living in poverty are surrounded by experiential limitations (Appadurai, 2004). Drawing on their own observations made in Europe, Baillergeau and Duyvendak (2019) have argued along similar lines - development of the capacity to aspire is 'always tied to specific concrete circumstances and the availability of opportunities to learn', which altogether make 'archives of experience' (p. 12).

[7] It becomes a vicious cycle where 'poverty and social disadvantages promote low aspiration levels' and vice versa (Flechtner, 2014, p. 2).

individuals tend to be more optimistic about their capabilities (Flechtner, 2014). Summing up, perspectives on expectations and gender highlight how "gender stereotypes from parents, significant adults, and the social/cultural milieu contribute to gender variation in expectations" (Mello, 2008, p. 1069).

Basu et al. (2017) found that gendered socialization influences girls' career aspirations, with girls in Delhi being discouraged from pursuing jobs and instead encouraged to focus on household chores and their future roles as wives. This socialization begins as early as age 8, while boys are prepared to take on jobs and provide for their families. Gendered socialization steers girls toward relationships with boys and roles as wives and mothers (Marini, 1978), making them less likely to view higher education as a viable option. This leads to gendered aspirations, directing girls toward low-paying, traditionally female careers such as teaching, nursing, and administrative support, which contribute to occupational segregation and the gender pay gap (Post-Kammer & Smith, 1985; U.S. Department of Labor, 1983, as cited in Rainey and Borders, 1997).

While talking about the formation of gendered aspirations, it is imperative to mention the role of family. In the Indian setting, it has been found that mothers 'influence their children's attitude towards gender more than fathers do which may in turn impact children's aspirations for themselves' (Dhar, Jain, and Jayachandran 2015, as cited in Sharma and Wotipka, 2018, p. 2). A study by Jacobs (1991) discussed 'how parental gendered stereotypes were related to their adolescent children's own perceptions of their ability' and, aspirations (Mello, 2008, p. 1069). Hence, parents, from low socio-economic background, take part in gendered socialisation by prioritising their son's

education and investing more in son's human capital, and focusing on their daughters' familial roles and duties. Relatedly, Ram et al. (2014), in their research study, showed how 'female youth experience more mental health problems' when their families invest more in their male counterpart's human capital (p. 1).

The aspirations of young girls and their future opportunities are often met with several barriers and restrictions. 'A key factor determining girls' access to opportunities was a facilitating versus restrictive family context' (Agarwal et al., 2016, p. 19). Compared to male youths, young girls face more barriers to independence 'as they were less likely to engage in independent decision-making in their day-to-day lives, faced greater restrictions on their mobility, and lacked access to money. To the extent that these are key steppingstones for success in adulthood' (Ram et al., 2014, p. 9).[8] To sum it up, aspiration reduction takes place with 'individuals who perceive, anticipate, or experience barriers' (Gottfredson, 1981, 1996, as cited in Mello, 2008, p. 1070).

Violence and aspirations

In relation to possible future selves, particularly for girls, the entirety of life is often shaped by efforts to avoid real or potential violence against their being. And here, by violence, we mean all acts – physical, sexual, or psychological—that would count as a gender-based assault on her being, but also those acts in the private or public domain that are intentionally targeted at limiting her capabilities to do or be in a manner that enhances her freedoms (Nussbaum 2005, Sen 1995). Nussbaum has given examples of how violence or the threat of violence harms women's capabilities, especially the ten capabilities. Violence is seen to be 'a major area of unfreedom for women, affecting all their other

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[8] While talking about families, there is literature on how migration has also affected adolescent girls. In a research study by Agarwal et al. (2016), experiences of 18 migrant adolescent girls in Indore, talk about how they would have preferred focusing on their education which would have helped their future aspirations. Instead of that, they had to contribute to their families' income as an extension of their familial roles (Ibid.). Since families invest less in girls' human capital, girls' education is often less prioritised and families focus more on girls' economic contribution to the family (Ibid.). These economic contributions are through jobs that the girls treat as obstacles to their 'true' aspirations (Ibid.). These jobs and migration act as 'barriers to accessing fulfilling employment opportunities' (Ibid., p. 14). Further, after migrating to a city, 'more severe restrictions on girls' freedom of movement affected their ability to access educational, employment, training and social opportunities in the city' (Ibid., p. 14).

major capabilities' which deprives them the liberty to work towards their desired aspirations (Nussbaum, 2005).

Pyles has discussed how violence against women hampers their full functioning and how violence is an oppressive instrument of patriarchy to control women by 'power, force, manipulation and isolation' (Pyles, 2008, p. 28). Violence also has implications on women's physical, emotional and economic well-being. Further, violence experienced by adolescent girls has a wide range of negative influence on their aspirations and their expectations for the future. There are negative outcomes such as low levels of expectations of achieving their aspirations, feeling of hopeless and depression (Kabiru et al., 2018). Kabiru et al., (2018) have also mentioned how peer victimization in academic spaces affect academic aspirations and how victimization in childhood and adolescence affect early-adult life.

One form of violence that affects the girls' well-being, freedom etc., is isolation. 'People who abuse women may use the tactic of isolation by deliberately isolating them from friends, family, work and social institutions. These abusers often perceive connections with others in the community as a threat to their system of power and control.' (Pyles, 2008, p. 29). Isolation also works in a different way which is carried out by self. Survivors/victims might be ostracized by the community, may experience shame and self-isolate or may be cut off from contact with others, including support services and friends or family. These impacts hinder the ability to effectively exercise agency and thus act as a barrier to capabilities (Pyles, 2008, as cited in Duvvury et al., 2021, p. 102536).

Corboz et al. (2020), refer to UNICEF and show that 'nearly one in three adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 in formal intimate partnerships (married or dating) report having ever experienced emotional, physical or sexual IPV' (p. 3).[9] These girls are also at risk of experiencing sexual violence. 'Sexual initiation among adolescents is often marked by sexual coercion and force, which intersects with a range of negative health behaviors and subsequent impacts on health and life opportunities, especially when followed by pregnancy' (p. 3). Other than IPV, youth capabilities are also affected by Teen Dating Violence (TDV) 'because TDV is by nature a violation of bodily integrity and mental well-being' (Nussbaum, 2006, as cited in Whitaker and Savage, 2014, p. 165).

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[9] Adolescent girls specifically are at risk of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) due to several reasons, and they are as follows: 'their lack of economic and social power, the intersection of gender inequality and age, early and forced marriage and childbearing and general inexperience in relationships, which means they are less able to negotiate power dynamics' (p. 3).

18   Navigating Gendered and Structural Barriers to Aspirations (A Study Report)

III. Aspirations: Actors, Institutions and Experiences

The Socio-Economic Background of the Study Participants

Understanding the socio-economic determinants of aspirations among youth requires a comprehensive examination of the demographic, occupational, and educational backgrounds of the study participants. This section provides an overview of the religious, caste, and occupational profiles of the adolescents and their families, which play a crucial role in shaping their aspirations and future possibilities. As observed in the Figures 3 and 4, most study participants identified with the Hindu religion, while smaller proportions identified as Sikh or Muslim. Most participants were from the general category, followed by those from scheduled castes and other backward castes (OBCs), with only 1 participant belonging to the Schedule Tribe group.

Figure 3: Religion of Participants

Figure 4: Caste Background of Participants (in %)

Figure 5: Family Size (in %)
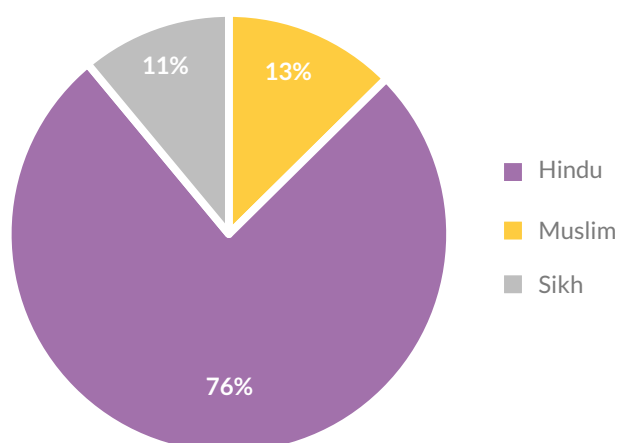
The parents of the adolescent and youth participants in the study and program activities were primarily employed in the unorganized sector as informal workers or were self-employed. Fathers were mostly daily wage workers, street vendors, or involved in small businesses, while some worked in nearby factories. Only two fathers in the sample were government employees with

access to social security. Mothers primarily worked as domestic workers, home-based workers, or unpaid family labor, with a few employed in factories. None of the mothers held government jobs. Notably, over 70% of mothers reported not earning a separate income, highlighting their financial dependency and the role of fathers as the primary earners. The predominance of employment in the unorganized sector among the participants' families points to limited economic stability and restricted access to social security.
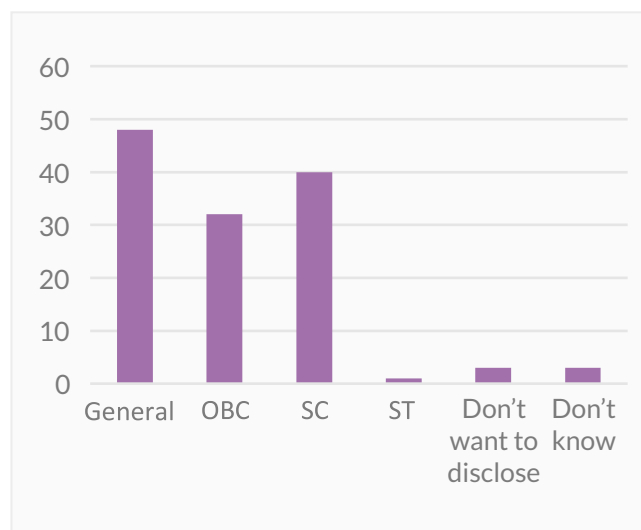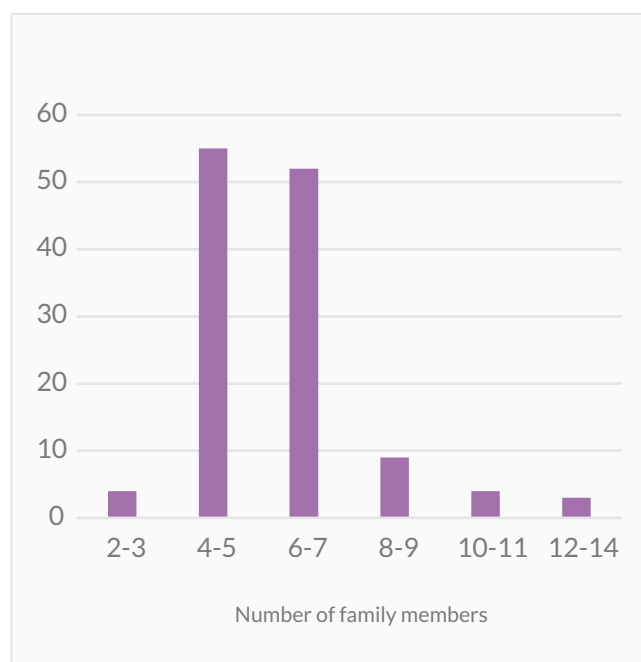
Family size patterns (Figure 5) reveal that 43% of respondents lived in households with 4–5 members, while 41% were part of slightly larger families with 6–7 members. Notably, 13% of respondents belonged to families with more than 8 members, which may indicate greater financial strain and limited resources per individual in larger households.

Given the economic profile, the families could afford to send their children to mainly government schools (Also note Figure 6). Government schools also offered schemes especially to promote girl's education by offering monetary compensation, and covering costs of books and uniforms at least until 8th grade. "With families having to incur the cost of schooling from 9th onwards, the drop-out rates of girls increased, but the rate of drop-out among boys was also high due substance abuse and lack of interest in studies" (FGD with girls, and parents, February 2018). In families that could afford private schooling, boys were prioritized, as private schools were perceived to offer better quality education (FGD with parents, February 2018). The reliance on government schools, combined with the financial burden of continuing education beyond the 8th grade, underscores the challenges of sustaining education—particularly for girls. Gendered norms further reinforced these dynamics, with fathers typically serving as primary earners and boys more likely to attend private schools when resources permitted.

Figure 6: Type of School

- government school
- private formal school
- open school/distance learning
- other
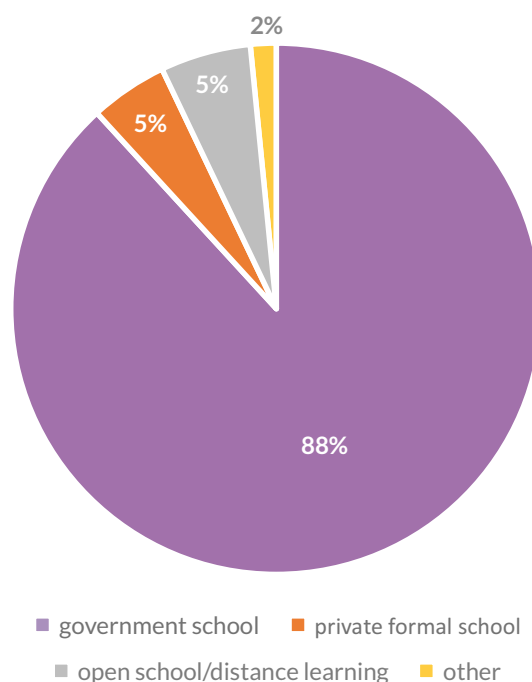
Access to Resources

A person's aspirations are often shaped by their capacity to make life choices, particularly during adolescence—a phase marked by uncertainty. The concept of choice inherently depends on the availability of alternative options, which is closely tied to access to resources. While existing literature highlights how access to resources influences aspirations, our focus goes a step further to explore the factors that determine this accessibility.

Traditionally, resources are understood in material terms within conventional economics, such as financial means, access to quality education, or digital devices. However, Naila Kabeer (1999) expanded this definition by emphasizing the importance of human and social resources. These include access to information and guidance, social support networks, training opportunities, and the presence of role models, all of which significantly enhance an individual's ability to make meaningful choices.

Access to Education

Access to quality education is one of the most important aspect that shapes aspirations. However, we have observed access to quality education is a major challenge for the adolescents of Kalyanpuri due to financial instability. Most of the time these adolescents 'experience tension between their valuing of education and the (often) limited resources and opportunities they are afforded within their schools and communities' (Sirin et al., 2004, p. 438). As discussed earlier, boys and girls in Kalyanpuri mainly join government schools, however, where parents can afford private schools, preference is given to boys. Many children also benefit from government schemes of financing education up to the 8th standard, this makes it a challenge to continue education after 8th standard. In an FGD, a father expressed his anguish, *"Support in buying schoolbooks etc...we get it only until the 8th ..1100 per year – it is not enough.*

My girl wants to become a teacher and my boy a police officer. There are many financial issues, until 8th the government supports, but 10th and beyond we must see our finances." (A father, Parent FGD, 2018).

As shown in Figure 7, 'Highest Qualification', most adolescents and youth who participated in the situational analysis survey completed education only up to grades 8 or 10, with boys slightly outpacing girls at these levels. However, some girls were able to continue beyond higher secondary education, progressing to senior and university levels at rates higher than boys.

Due to poor financial backing, the access to educational facilities and services after school continues to be limited. For instance, Kiran, one of the participants mentioned that due to financial crunch in their family, she chose to pursue her

Figure 7: Highest Qualification (in %)
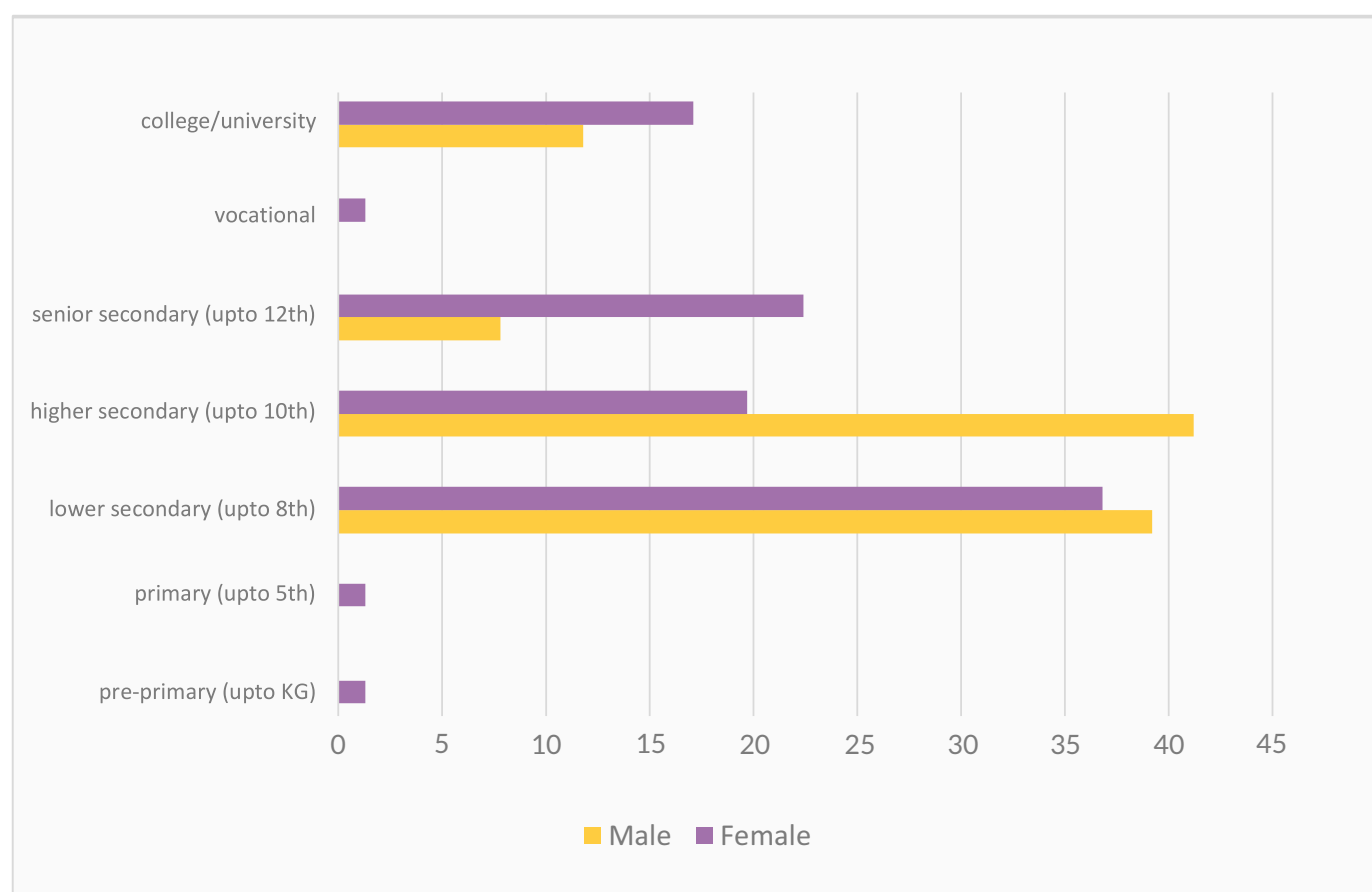
higher education from SOL (School of Open Learning) instead of regular college, so that she could save on everyday travelling expenses (Interview, 2023). This example very well suggests that limited financial resources has not only limited her access to educational services, but also affected her mobility and reduced chances of increasing her social network and exposure.

The Figure 8 presents data from the survey on adolescents and youth who have benefited from government schemes, while majority of participants mentioned not benefitting from any specific schemes, the SC/ST group mentioned receiving educational scholarship and some girls benefiting from the Ladli scheme of the government. One child also secured admission to private schools under the scheme for Economically Weaker Section (EWS). But families remain the primary source of financing and supporting their children's education.

In some cases, we have seen dependency of girls on their family and partners to sponsor their education resulting greater control of the financiers over her choices. It largely depended on the perspective of the person who is willing to pay for the education.

Shanaya shared some similar experience, *"he (her partner) says that do some courses and I say okay. I asked Sahil if the college admissions are going on and should I get it as it costs only Rs. 100 and he said no that I will not go to college, and he says that he will get me to do the computer class again."* *(Interview, 2023). Some enterprising girls self-finance their education by offering home tuitions to younger students in the community, this also supports independent decision making to some extent.*

(FGD with girls, RMS, 2018)

Accessing quality education is often seen as a reflection of women's agency. While this may hold true in some cases, Naila Kabeer (1997) highlights that women often make choices that align with patriarchal power dynamics due to their internalization of gendered norms that normalize their subordinate status to men. This may have influenced Kiran's decision to choose humanities with embroidery as her subject of study.

During our conversation, Kiran mentioned that her family encouraged her to take up commerce,

Figure 8: Access to Government Schemes (in %)
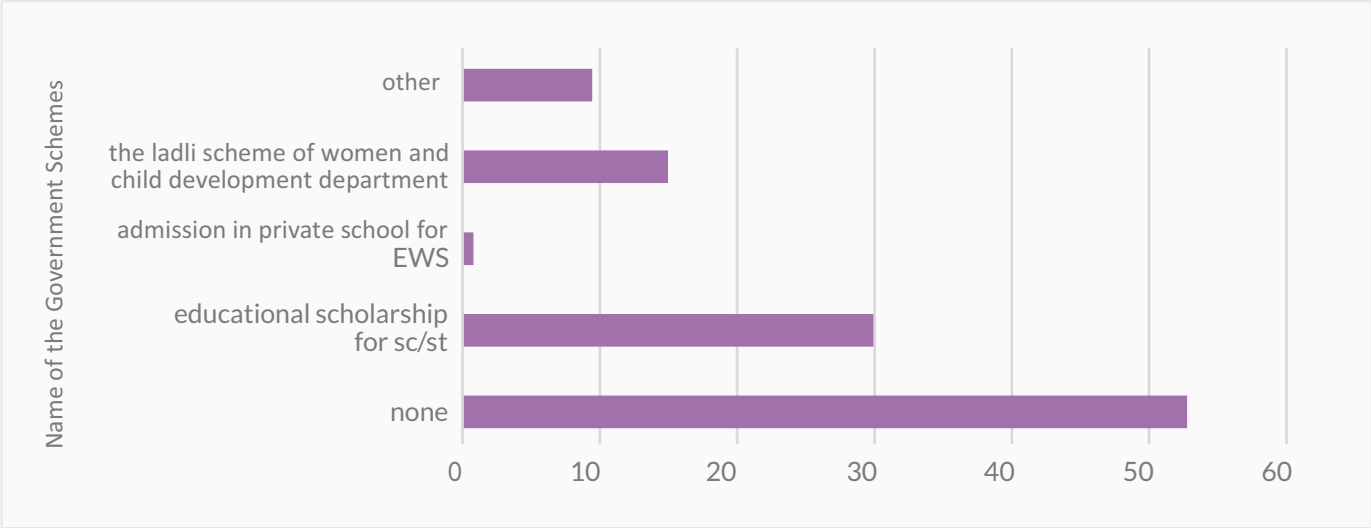
seeing its potential to lead to a successful career. However, she refused and opted for humanities for her higher secondary education. This interaction shed light on the perceived hierarchy of academic disciplines: commerce is often seen as superior to humanities because it involves subjects requiring calculations and is associated with better job prospects, whereas humanities is viewed as an easier option (Interview, 2023). Kiran's remark, *"I am confused about the subjects that I should be taking up for my higher education" (Interview, 2023),* reflects a lack of guidance and support in making informed choices.

This underscores the importance of intangible resources, such as access to information and mentorship, in shaping aspirations and decisions. In Kiran's case, financial instability was not the only factor influencing her choice—deep-rooted gendered socialization played a significant role. Similarly, in Shanaya's situation, her dependency was not merely financial but also shaped by her partner's influence. Despite having the financial

means to support her, the power dynamics in their relationship allowed him to make decisions on her behalf, limiting her autonomy.

Kareena's brother Chandu shared his opinion on the education of his sister,

> *Kareena wanted to do a fashion designing course. However, according to me, it was not a good thing to do, hence, I did not give her permission to pursue the same. She did not question my decision at all.*
>
> *(Interview, 2023)*

This quote again highlights the mindset of the person who is going to sponsor the education. It's not only about the socialization of girls but also about the socialization and awareness of those

Figure 9: Challenges in Accessing Education (in %)
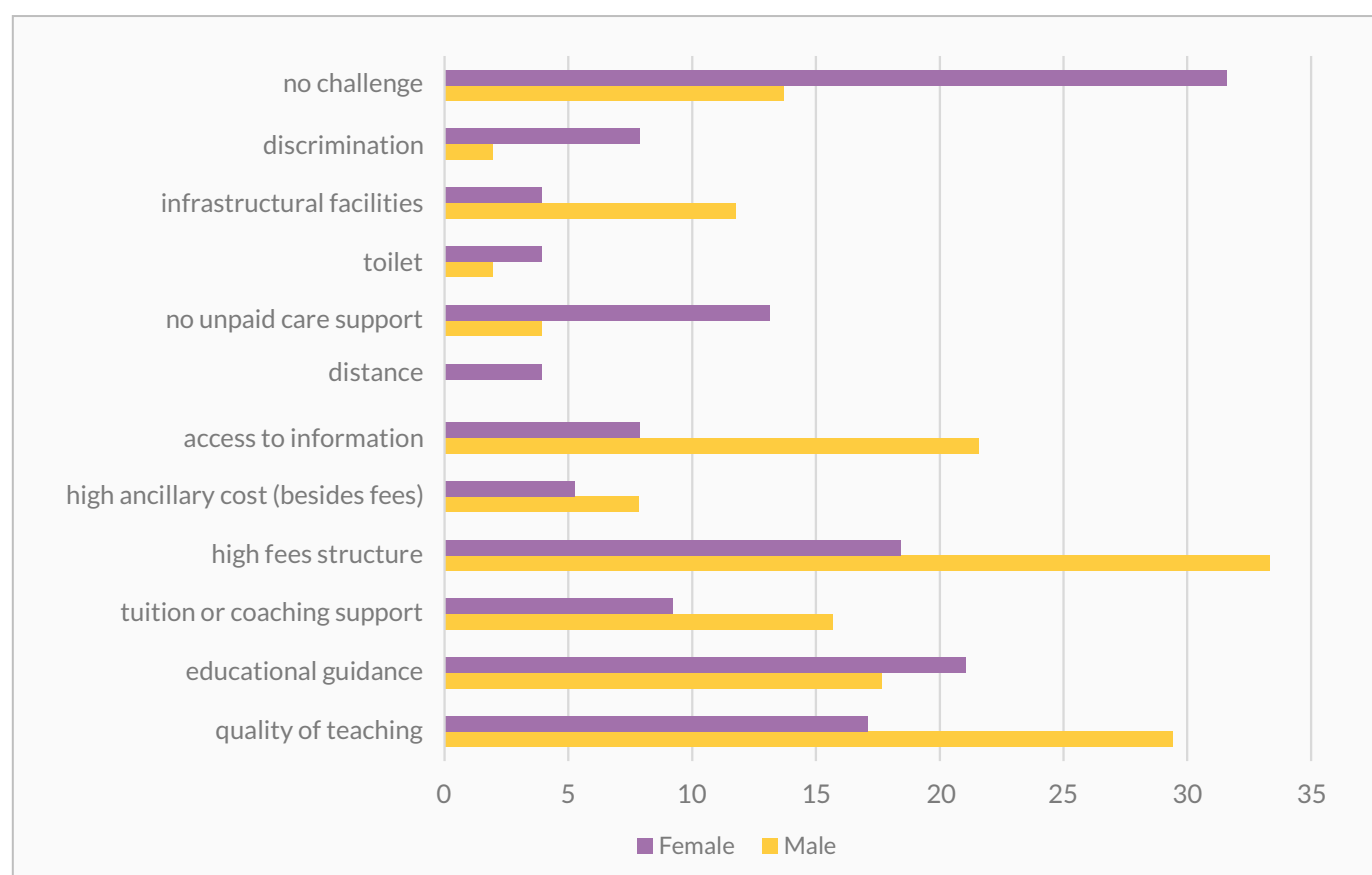
who hold financial power and therefore by default exercise decision making authority over their dependents.

Figure 9 highlights some of the key challenges faced by boys and girls. Interestingly, nearly 32 percent of girls reported facing no challenges, compared to only 14 percent of boys who felt the same. Among the remaining respondents, girls were more likely to report discriminatory behavior in school based on gender, class, or caste, inadequate toilet facilities, the burden of unpaid care work at home, long distances to school, and a lack of educational guidance. In contrast, boys emphasized issues related to infrastructure, access to information, high fees, and additional costs.

These findings reflect the impact of discriminatory gender norms within educational institutions and services, particularly for low-income groups. Despite the differences in challenges faced by boys and girls, both struggle with limited access to information, guidance, and quality education.

Access to Digital Devices

In an era of expanding digital spaces, these platforms offer numerous opportunities for individuals to explore alternative options. However, access to these opportunities is heavily influenced by the financial resources available within participants' households. Digital spaces today have evolved beyond mere virtual environments; they have become crucial arenas for shaping and expressing identity, values, and aspirations.

In the survey data reflected in Figure 10, a similar percentage of boys and girls said that they do not use internet, reflecting issues in accessing internet. And those who could use the internet, mainly used it for recreational and entertainment purposes, followed by use of internet to access educational information. Use of the internet for social content and sports was higher among boys than girls. The Figure 11 on App Usage, again reflects higher access and usage by boys than girls of various applications, with Whatsapp and Youtube being more popular among the girls, and Facebook and Instagram being most used by boys.

Figure 10: Reasons for Internet Usage (in %)
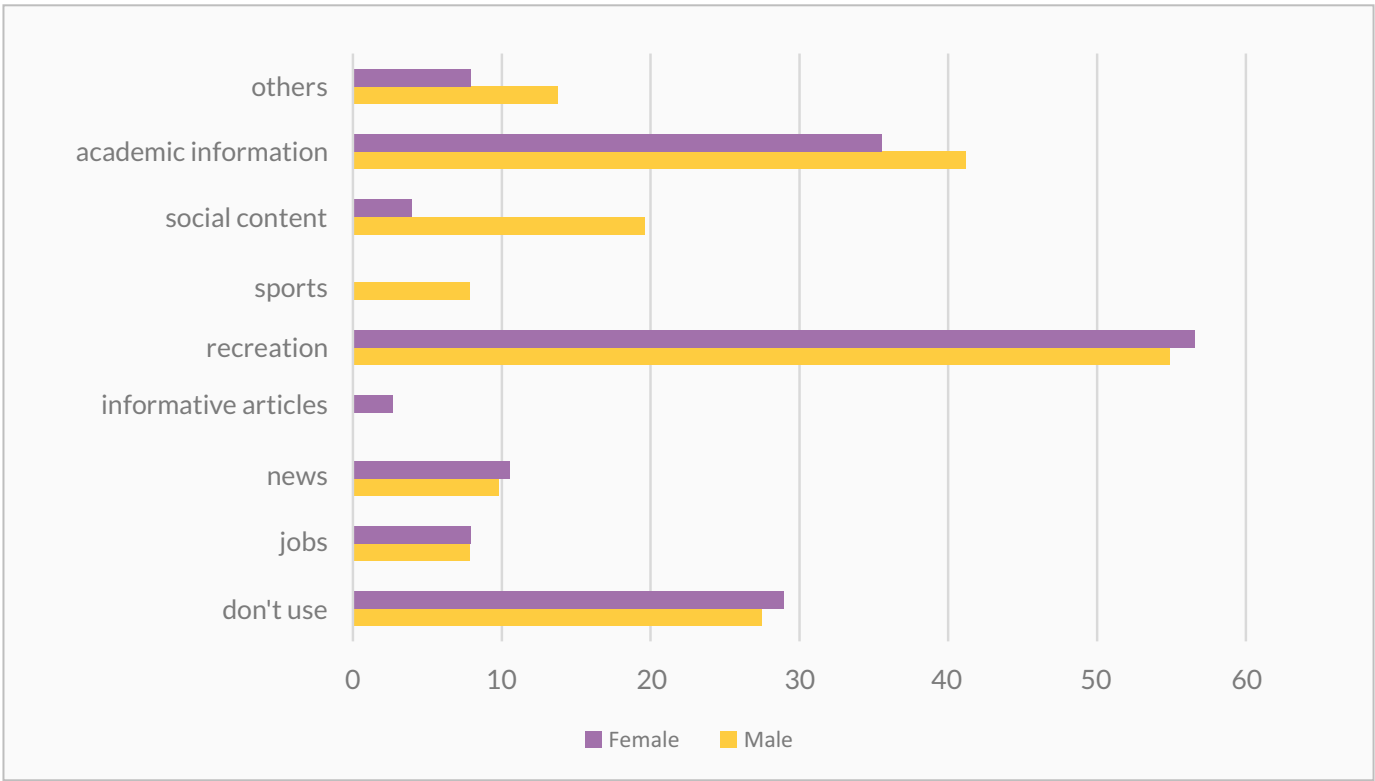
Figure 11: Apps Used by the Participants (in %)
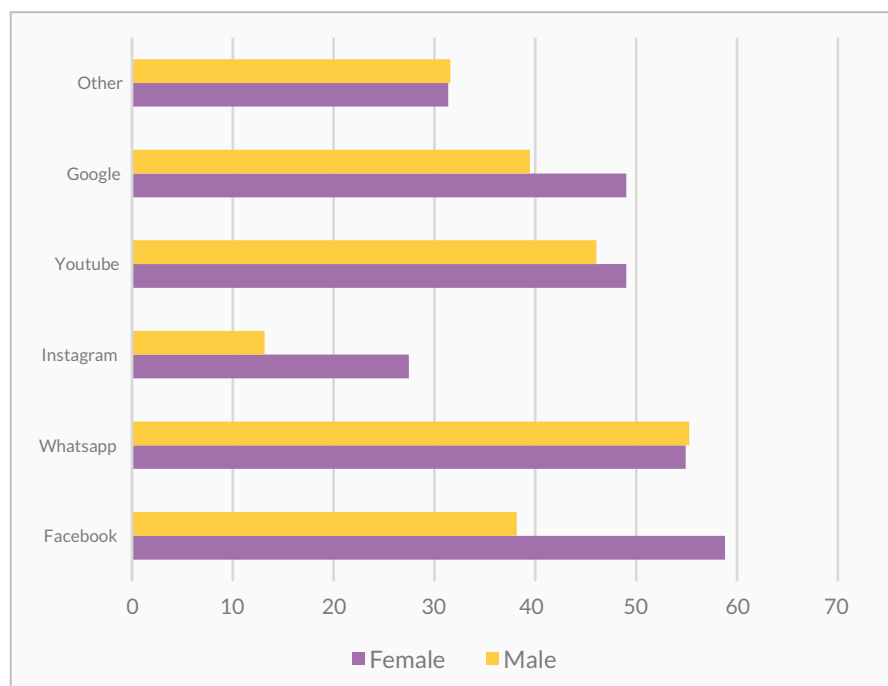
> *I do not know anything about a phone. I do not use anything other than Youtube on a phone. It is okay if I get the phone for some time at night, or not at all. I am okay with anything.*
>
> *(Kareena, Interview, 2023)*

The access to digital devices is mediated by affordability and gender norms. Kiran shared that her family of seven could afford to own only two mobile phones, leading to constant struggles over their usage. In Kareena's case, financial constraints were compounded by other factors that made it impossible for her to access the mobile phone at home. She revealed that her access was restricted, while her brothers had full access to such resources.

> *There is a phone, the brothers use it. If I have to see any information related to my tuition, then I use the phone for some time, and only for that purpose. All three of my brothers have a mobile phone.*
>
> *(Kareena, Interview, 2023)*

For Kareena, this notion that it is normal for her brother to have access to digital devices has also led to suppressing her desire to own a mobile phone and making her believe that she does not need it,

Often, even when access to a device is granted for a short duration, the person in power ensures constant monitoring of what is being accessed and how. As mentioned earlier, these digital spaces can be instrumental in shaping identities, values, and aspirations, but they also reinforce power hierarchies. These dynamics are evident in the control over accessibility to digital devices and spaces, as well as in determining what can be shared and by whom. For instance, girls are often expected to be cautious about what they present on social media platforms and who is watching them. Surveillance thus becomes a key tool to monitor and control a woman's every move. This may also explain why fewer girls access social media apps like Facebook and Instagram compared to boys, as they seek to avoid patriarchal scrutiny. This situation mirrors the way women's physical mobility is controlled through social surveillance. The concept of power over someone, as explained by Naila Kabeer (1999) and Jo Rowlands (1995), erodes a person's agency to make decisions. Consequently, many girls internalize the belief that it is normal for a man (in most cases) to decide whether they should have a digital device and, if so, to what extent they can use it.

Another important aspect of digital devices is how the content the girls and boys consume shapes their sense of self. In our interactions with girls, we observed that much of the content they consumed came from social media platforms, which can lack authenticity. As can be seen in Figures 10 and 11 above on internet and app usage, it is being done for recreational purposes. Their wishes and needs were heavily influenced by what they encountered online. The absence of proper guidance on the use of digital devices can lead to the consumption of misogynistic, homophobic, and extremist content. We also found that some patriarchal ideas are reinforced under the guise of awareness, normalizing discrimination based on gender, caste, and religion. However, as usage of internet and apps is also for academic purposes and to seek information, there is also a positive side, where information provides exposure to new ideas, helping them understand the changing world and their desires as women. Access to digital devices is a crucial tool for gaining exposure and self-expression, something that is often difficult to achieve in physical spaces due to their social identities.

Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health Services, Information, and Decision making

Similarly, access to financial resources empowers individuals to make healthy life choices, a power that was notably absent for these girls. It is important to note that Shanaya also mentioned her limited access to menstrual products like sanitary pads. In her family of five women, they often prefer using cloth over sanitary pads. In this context, Shanaya said

> *Sometimes I use pad when it is there at home otherwise, I use cloth.*
>
> *(Interview, 2023)*

This situation raises the question of whether different choices might have been made if proper guidance, information, and awareness had been provided.

Vani added her experience with the menstrual cramps and pain,

> *I used to take pain medications during my menstrual cycle. Now I do not that as it can turn into a bad habit.*
>
> *(Interview, 2023)*

This also reflects how women prioritize their medical needs and the societal expectation for women to endure pain, particularly during menstruation. The belief that it is a woman's destiny to endure pain—beginning with menstrual cramps and later as preparation for childbirth—stems from deep-rooted patriarchal notions that see a woman's primary role as a biological mother. Additionally, this highlights the lack of awareness around important topics like menstruation, largely due to the shame associated with it. Girls have noted that schools often avoid such discussions, instead advising them to speak with their mothers. The absence of institutional support exacerbates this shame, making these conversations even more difficult. Amrita shared her experience with her sister at home, further illustrating this issue,

> *There is no support at home when I am in pain during my menstrual cycle, not even from my sister. One time I had asked my sister to help me cook for the family as I was in extreme abdominal pain, but then, no one helped and I ended up cooking alone.*
>
> *(Interview, 2023).*

Meanwhile, Amrita's experience with her male friends was quite different, she said:

> *One time, while travelling to Mathura, I got my period. My male friends bought chocolate for me and massaged my shoulders and feet.*
>
> *(Interview, 2023)*

Typically such gestures by boys could be a product of their engagement at Yuva Saathi centre, where such sessions on gender sensitivity are conducted on a regular basis with mixed group of girls and boys. These open discussions dismantle the idea of shame associated with topics related to women and their sexuality.

Figure 12 from the survey data highlights how women's bodies and sexual decisions are of interest to various authoritative figures. This question was asked only to respondents aged 18 and above. The figure reveals a stark disparity in who influences male and female youth, reflecting deep-rooted patriarchal norms.

For females—especially unmarried girls—decision-making about sexual relationships is often influenced not just by themselves or their partners but also by family members, particularly parents and brothers. This aligns with traditional gender norms where a woman's sexuality is closely monitored and controlled by her family. Such control reflects broader societal expectations that emphasize the protection of a girl's "purity" and honor. As a result, women's decisions about their own bodies are often not fully autonomous but shaped by external pressures.

In contrast, male youth may experience greater autonomy in making sexual decisions, highlighting a double standard in how male and female sexualities are perceived and regulated. While men are often granted the freedom to make independent choices, women face stricter surveillance from family and community members. This control is frequently justified as being for a girl's protection, but in reality, it reinforces gender hierarchies and maintains patriarchal power.

Furthermore, the data suggests that young women are socialized to internalize these norms, making them more likely to accept family influence in their sexual decision-making. Meanwhile, young men are often encouraged to prioritize personal

Figure 12: Decision on Sexual Activities and Relationships (in %)
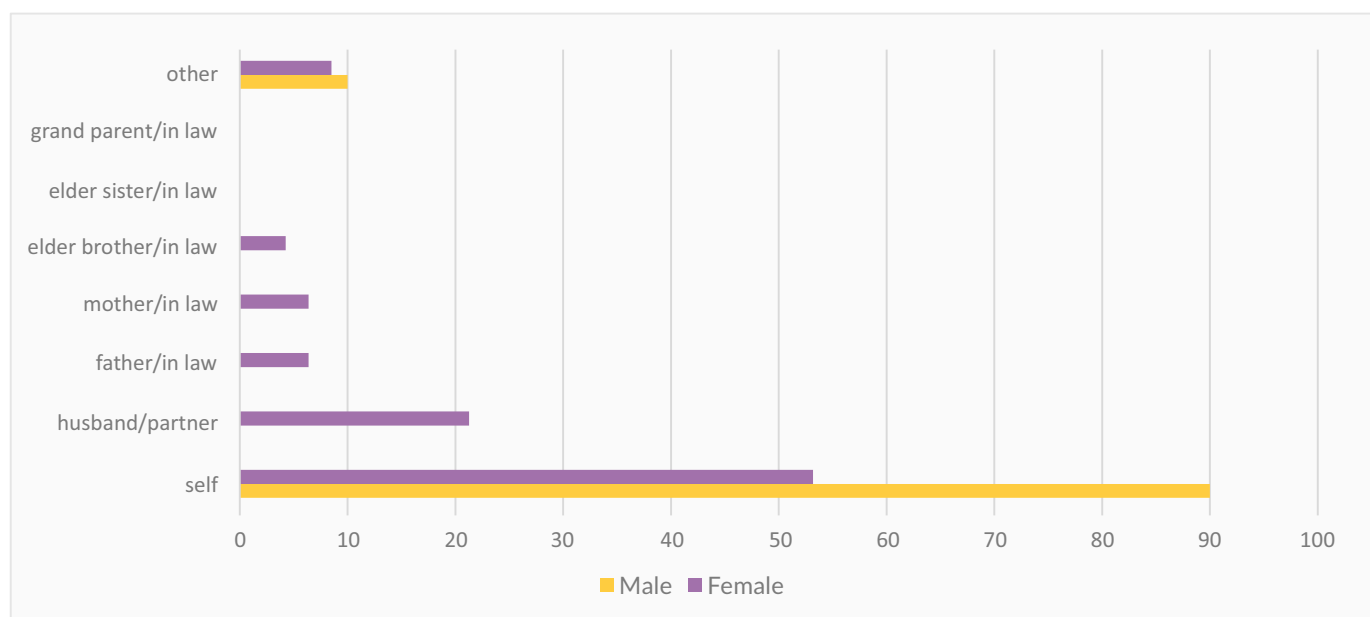
autonomy and desire, reflecting societal norms that afford them greater freedom in this area. Ultimately, these gendered patterns not only restrict women's sexual agency but also sustain broader systems of inequality.

Access to Inspiring Figures in Shaping Youth Aspiration

Figure 13, titled "Figures of Inspiration," illustrates the gendered differences in who boys and girls perceive as inspiring figures. The data shows that a higher percentage of girls consider parent figures as their primary source of inspiration, slightly more than boys. Girls also demonstrate a greater preference for siblings or cousins as role models compared to boys. This suggests that girls may rely more on family members, particularly parents, for guidance and motivation, reflecting traditional gender roles that keep them closely tied to family expectations.

While boys also value parent figures, siblings, and cousins, they do so at a lower rate than girls. This may indicate that boys are encouraged to seek inspiration outside the family or are socialized to be more independent. Both boys and girls look up to teachers, though girls show a higher affinity for them, underscoring the crucial role educators play in shaping aspirations across gender lines.

When it comes to peer influence, boys appear to find inspiration from friends more frequently than girls, though the overall levels remain similar for both. Inspiration from community role models and external figures remains relatively low for both genders. However, girls show a slightly higher tendency to look up to external role models, such as public figures or mentors outside their immediate community.

Notably, a significant percentage of girls indicated that they do not have any inspiring figures. While this could reflect a sense of independence, it may also point to a lack of accessible role models, which could be concerning from a developmental perspective.

The Figure 13 shows limited access to role models or inspiring figures, especially in terms of providing

Figure 13: Figures of Inspiration (in %)
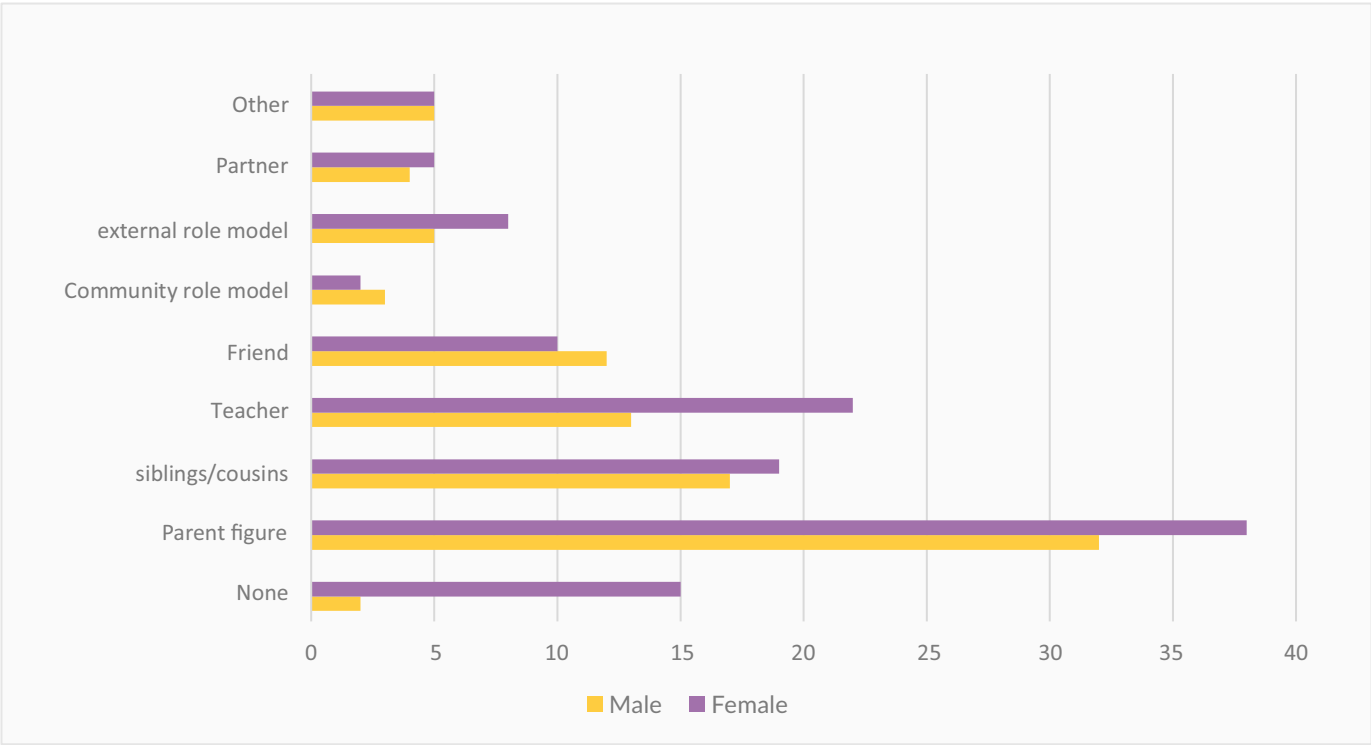
directions to future career paths. However, during in-depth interviews with girls, it was observed that the presence of a role model has enabled them to explore opportunities that were previously absent. For instance, Kiran mentioned that her interactions with people at the Yuva Saathi Centre have helped her explore career opportunities in the development sector, such as becoming a social worker or teacher.

> *When I think of being a social worker, I think of how you and Kriti di teach the children at Yuva Saathi. If I do it, then I will earn money and will be able to help my father repay his debts too. My brother and I will have to get it done.*
>
> *(Kiran, RMS Activity, 2023)*

In another interaction with Amrita, she expressed how the presence of the Yuva Saathi Centre has helped her to not just explore the possibility of her career but also other life choices regarding marriage and education.

> *Maybe my priorities would have been different if I had not come to Yuva Saathi Centre. Maybe my focus would be on marriage and not on my education because I used to think that marriage is the only possibility in life for me. But coming here, I realised that even I can have a career. I can become a social worker and impart knowledge.*
>
> *(Amrita, Interview, 2023)*

Through these interactions, we observed that role models not only open opportunities related to career aspirations but also influence other important life aspirations such as marriage and education. The presence of a role model encourages individuals to navigate their lives based on these experiences. However, access to role models is contingent upon various factors, including financial resources and social identities and positions. For example, even if someone has the financial means, their ability to interact with a role model may be limited by gender, caste, or religious identity. For instance, many girls in Kalyanpuri do not have access to the Yuva Saathi Centre due to restrictions on their mobility or the caregiving responsibilities they are expected to fulfill.

When discussing the role of role models in shaping girls' aspirations, it is crucial to understand their impact. Individuals from financially marginalized backgrounds often have limited scope for aspiration and may seek a safety net by looking to the experiences of "people like them" (Ray, 2006, as cited in Flechtner, 2014). We observed that these

girls' trajectories are shaped and constrained by local information networks and societal expectations of what is deemed appropriate for "people like me."

The presence of role models can serve as an 'archive of experiments,' a concept explained by Appadurai, which suggests that poverty limits risk-taking and, in turn, reduces opportunities for experimentation in life. This pattern is evident among adolescents in Kalyanpuri. Kiran and Amrita, for example, expressed their desire to follow in the footsteps of a team member from the Yuva Saathi Centre—someone from their own community who had once been a student at the Saathi Centre and later became a community mobilizer.

Access to a Safe, Non-judgmental and an Enabling Environment

In Figure 14 above, we examine the experiences of boys and girls with respect to the presence of an enabling environment across different variables. These variables include the existence of financial support for pursuing educational and career related aspirations, existence of non-violence, and a non-addictive (indicating freedom from substance abuse) environment. Additionally, whether there was availability of career guidance (indicating easy access to information and advice on choosing career paths), and whether respondents experienced a trustful environment was also assessed. The experiences related to these variables were observed across family environments, communities, and peer groups or friends.

Figure 14: Enabling Environment (in %)
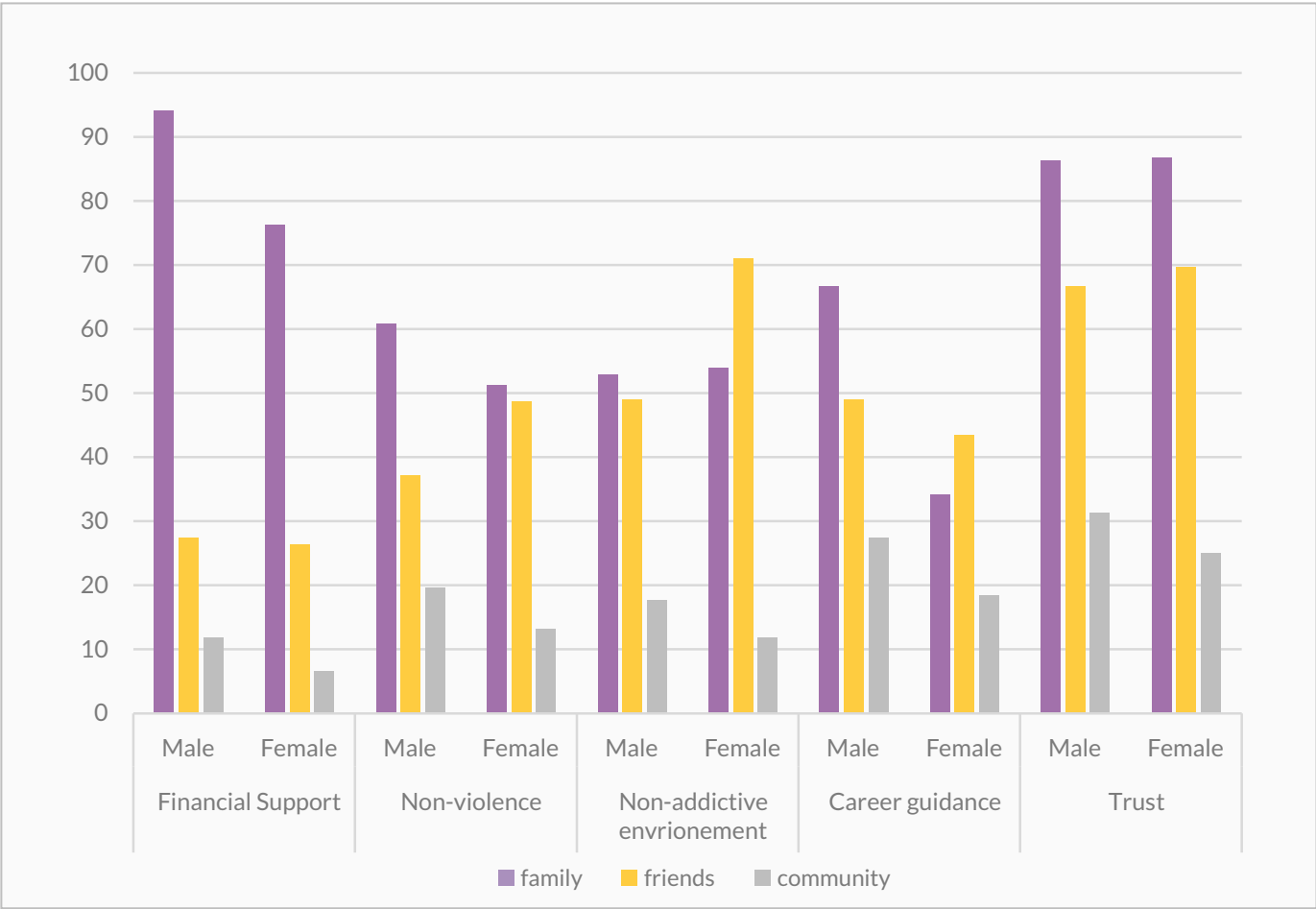
Understanding that these variables could be interpreted and experienced differently by boys and girls living in the same environment, the figure highlights these gendered differences. Compared to boys, girls experienced 18 percentage points less financial support from their families and 6 percentage points less from their community. However, the primary financial support is expected from the family. Regarding non-violence, only 60% of male respondents and 50% of female respondents felt they had a non-violent environment at home. Interestingly, boys reported an even lower level of non-violence among friends, suggesting bullying, peer pressure or presence of aggressive attitudes. For girls, the experience of non-violence is about 48% among friends. The lowest levels of non-violence were found in the community environment, with only 19% of boys and 13% of girls reporting a non-violent community environment. Except for a slight difference among friends, the family and community environments are predominantly violent, especially from the perspective of girls. A similar pattern emerges with the non-addictive variable, where girls experience slightly less exposure to substance abuse among their friends. Another notable gender difference is in the availability and accessibility of information and guidance, with boys experiencing a more enabling environment compared to girls. We also compared the level of 'trust' experienced by girls and boys from their family, friends, and neighborhood. There was not much notable gender difference, except that girls felt more surveilled and monitored in their community activities and engagements.

Furthermore, access to a safe neighbourhood and public space emerged as a key issue for the girls particularly, the fear of violence in the public spaces, led to greater control by parents over the girl's mobility, severely limiting her choices and negatively affecting the access to resources and opportunities. This fear of violence and experience is discussed in detailed in the next section on 'Aspiration and Experiences of Violence'.

Aspiration and Experiences of Violence

Our findings explore the different forms of violence which are not only limited to the physical aspect of it but also deal with sexual and psychological violence – anything that would count as a gender-based assault on one's being, but also those acts in the private or public domain that are intentionally targeted at limiting her capabilities to do or be in a manner that enhances her freedoms (Nussbaum 2005, Sen 1995). The participants have shared that any form of violence takes away their ability to look beyond their present violent situation and focus on their aspirations. Nussbaum (2005) has stated, violence is a major area of unfreedom that affects women's capabilities and takes away their liberty to work towards their aspirations. Based on our findings, this statement still stands true. Additionally, our findings show that violence leads to low levels of expectations for the future and for achieving their aspirations, and leads to feelings of hopelessness.

Gendered Perceptions of Safety: Navigating Mobility, Fear, and Control

The Figure 15 on 'Experience of Violence in the Past 6 Months' compares the experiences of violence—physical, mental, and sexual—among male and female adolescents and youth in Kalyanpuri, across four different settings: home, school, immediate neighbourhood, and public space. The figure reflects a troubling reality of violence in the lives of adolescents and youth in Kalyanpuri, with clear gender differences in the types of violence experienced. Mental violence is the most significant issue for girls at home, with a higher percentage (~24%) of females reporting it compared to males. For boys, physical violence at home is greater than girls. While sexual violence is reported for girls only, at 1.3%. The home environment stands out as a particularly problematic setting for girls, where they

Figure 15: Experience of Violence in the past 6 months (in %)
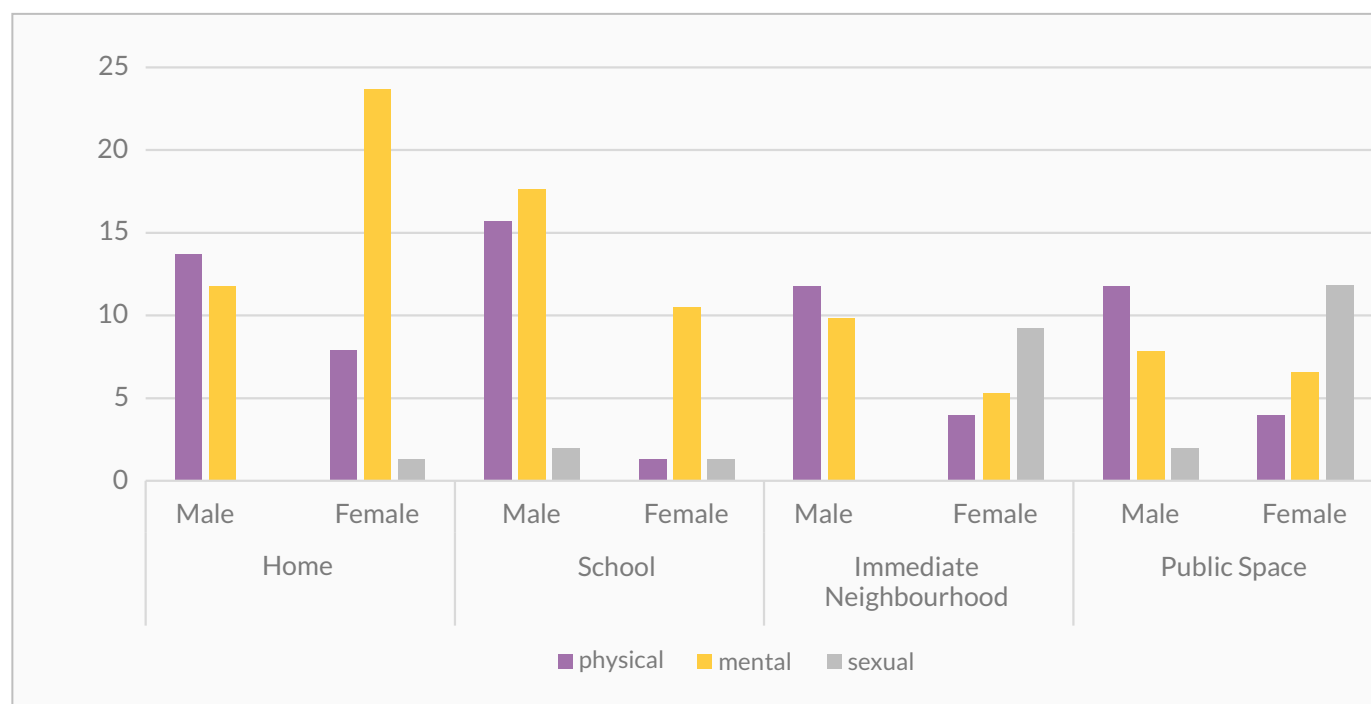
experience the highest rates of mental violence and physical violence. This underscores the need for interventions targeting family dynamics and addressing abuse in the natal family. This data also challenges the assumption that the natal family is a safe space for adolescents or youth, particularly for girls.

In comparison, boys face much higher violence in schools across the three types of violence, reflecting on the reason for higher number of boys bunking school, 'lack of interest' shown by boys in attending school and high rates of drop out (FGD, Activity Mapping, 2018). In case of girls, experience of mental violence in school is significant. In the immediate neighbourhood, boys again face a higher rate of physical and mental violence in comparison to girls, while none of the boys reported sexual violence, about 9 percent girls reported the same. Experience of sexual violence continues to be high for girls in public spaces, while the same is true of physical violence in the case of boys. The Figure 15 clearly shows that the experiences of violence are gendered, with males facing more physical violence and females experiencing more mental and sexual violence.

These differences suggest that boys and girls in Kalyanpuri face distinct challenges that need to be addressed through tailored interventions.

Perceived Safety in the Neighbourhood

The survey also sought response to the question, 'Do you feel safe while walking alone around the area you live in during the day/night time'. The Figure 16 'Safety in the Neighbourhood', shows the perceived safety of girls and boys as categorized into three levels of perceived safety: 'never,' 'occasionally,' and 'frequently.'

The perception of safety reveals a stark gender disparity, with females consistently feeling less secure than males, both during the day and at night. While boys generally report a higher sense of safety during daylight hours, girls experience greater uncertainty and vulnerability. This disparity becomes even more pronounced at night, where a significant majority of girls report never feeling safe, in contrast to boys, who still largely feel secure. The findings highlight how gendered experiences shape mobility and access to public

Figure 16: Safety in the Neighbourhood (in %)
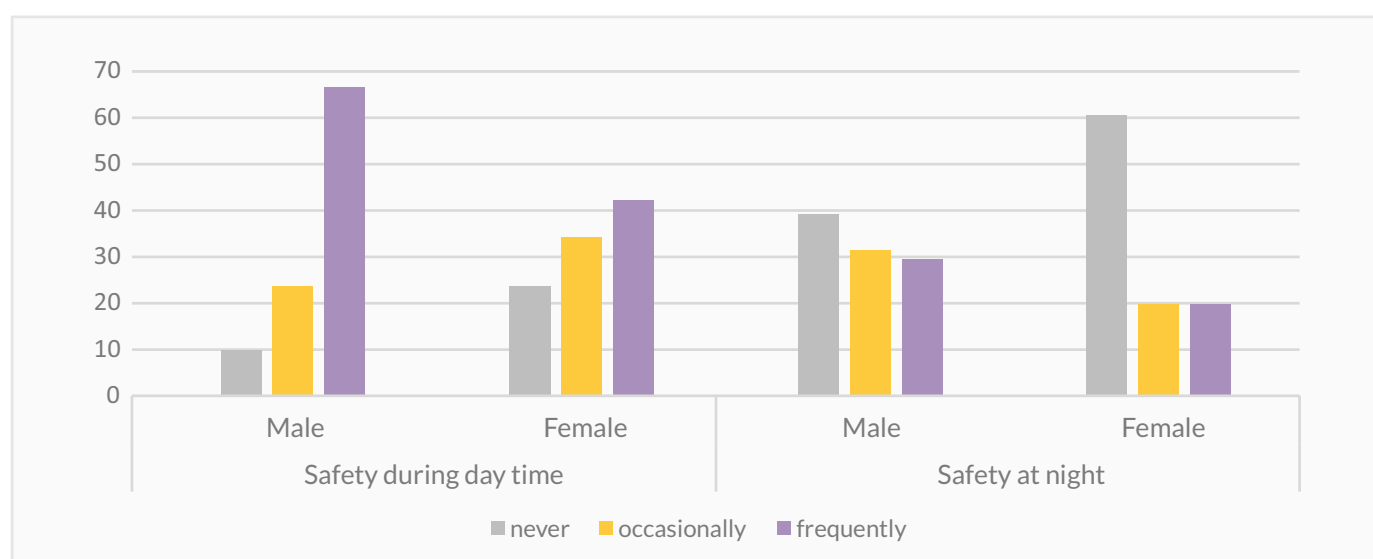
spaces, with safety concerns acting as a persistent constraint for girls. However, it is also important to recognize that boys are not entirely exempt from feeling unsafe, indicating broader concerns about public safety that impact youth across gender lines.

Concerns about safety and the threat of violence against girls and women strongly resonated with parents, shaping their perspectives on mobility and work. One mother expressed her deep anguish over the unsafe environment, saying,

> *There is sexual harassment on the way to school. The girls cannot go alone; we have to drop them off and pick them up. There are also thefts along the way. If a child goes alone, we constantly worry whether she has reached safely or not. Boys on bikes harass girls. Earlier, there was only one school gate for everyone, but we insisted on separate entrances. Now, there are different gates for teachers, boys, and girls.*
>
> *Parent FGD, 2018)*

Another mother justified restricting her daughter's mobility and work opportunities, linking the fear of violence to family honor:

> *Girls can study as much as they like, but people believe they should not earn because it is tied to family honor. A job should be done with respect. Some girls, under the pretext of working, might go elsewhere, and we wouldn't know whether they are actually at work or spending time with friends or boys. We cannot be sure what she is up to. We have seen many such cases. That is why parents do not permit it. Kyunki aaj kal ka mahaul bohot kharaab hai (Because the current atmosphere is really dangerous).*
>
> *(Parent, FGD, 2018).*

These perspectives illustrate how concerns over safety translate into stricter control over girls, confining them to home and educational institutions. Allowing girls to take up jobs would mean relinquishing some of this control, exposing them to unfamiliar environments that are perceived as risky—not just to their bodily

integrity, but also to the family's honour.

Navigating Fear and Safety Concerns

During interviews and discussions, girls and boys expressed fear about living in Kalyanpuri due to safety concerns. They face regular street harassment and stalking, making even stepping outside feel daunting for girls. Kiran shared an experience where she feels incapable of navigating physical spaces and fears she might get lost. This fear could be a byproduct of her experiences with street violence in Kalyanpuri. As Nussbaum (2005) noted, the fear of potential violence is itself a form of violence that disrupts one's decision-making capabilities. Kiran's ability to move freely, which falls under the category of bodily integrity (as per Nussbaum), has been compromised due to this fear of violence. It is not just Kiran; many girls believe they must be extra cautious in public spaces. Therefore, this fear not only stemmed from their personal experiences of harassment faced in this area but was also influenced by their peers' stories.

The fear and apprehension about the participant's known neighbourhood manifested in the form of self-imposed and parental-imposed mobility restrictions (Foster and Giles-Corti, 2008, as cited in Fernandez et al., 2023). For example, Kiran shared how she feels extremely uncomfortable to walk in an area of Kalyanpuri where boys and men are drinking alcohol. Similarly, Amrita expressed her fear of 'Kalyanpuri and Trilopkpuri boys' and the area. She said,

> the boys sing and say some stuff and because of that, I have this fear in my mind. What if they do something to me or harm me physically?
>
> (Interview, 2023)

These findings confirm that individuals constrain

their behaviour by not going to specific areas that are perceived to be dangerous, as stated by Fernandez et al., (2023). To add to this, Kareena had shared that going for stitching classes was one of her aspirations, but unfortunately, her brother had restricted her mobility because he believed that the area where the classes were located was unsafe. The fact that girls choose colleges and workplaces that require less travel also highlights how they sometimes forgo opportunities. This restriction in mobility due to lack of safety can have broader social and economic implications, limiting women's access to opportunities and their participation in community and social activities.

One of the key aspirations expressed by the girls was the desire to escape the unsafe environment of Kalyanpuri. Many emphasized that financial stability would allow them to move to a safer, better locality, significantly improving their lives. Kiran shared a similar aspiration:

> When our entire family is together, we talk about career paths and jobs. They ask us to study well and get a good job because that will help us earn enough money to move away from this neighbourhood. You know, there are men and boys who drink in the lanes of my locality.

Understanding Violence Through the Eyes of Girls: Perceived Causes and Contributing Factors

The struggles behind various types of violence are not always apparent in quantitative data. However,

the in-depth qualitative interviews and FGDs revealed the complex dynamics at play, shedding light on the interactions and underlying reasons for the prevalence of violence, as well as how it is experienced by girls and boys. These interviews provided a deeper understanding of the context, motivations, and emotional impacts that quantitative data alone cannot fully capture. Although it is difficult to articulate straightforward explanations for why the participants believed that they experienced violence, they nonetheless reflected on their encounters and provided insights during qualitative interactions with them including FGDs, and case study interviews. Below we analyze the respondent reflections using the feminist framework of power and agency particularly in case of strategic life choices or decisions that are critical to leading a meaningful life and have a significant impact on a person's well-being and future (Kabeer 1999). These choices are termed 'strategic' because they shape the direction of one's life and involve fundamental issues such as: marriage, education, job and employment, childbearing, mobility and so forth. Given the high prevalence of violence in the natal family as presented in Figure 15 above, the instances shared and discussed here are mainly from the home front.

Violence Due to Exercising Own Agency on Strategic Decisions:

By stating that the participants exercised their own agency, we mean they possessed the 'power within' and the positive sense of the 'power to' define and pursue their own life choices, even in the face of opposition (Kabeer, 1999). Our findings align with Kabeer's conceptualization of agency as decision-making, involving 'forms of bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance' (Kabeer, 1999, p. 1069).

Shanaya's experience exemplifies this agency—she stood up to both her natal family and her partner's family, enduring extreme physical violence and public shaming. Her aspiration to marry her now-husband, Sahil, was a significant life decision, but her family strongly opposed it. As discussed earlier,

this aspiration also reflected her desire to break away from her family and build an independent life. In pursuing these choices, Shanaya faced severe physical violence and rejection, sometimes even from her partner. She recalled that her family justified their actions by claiming she had 'resisted' their wishes. However, we view Shanaya's persistence as an assertion of her agency and her right to make her own choices.

> " *Then at home, my uncle had come from the village. So, he beat me up a lot. Then he asked me... 'When the elder sisters are still unmarried, why are you in such a hurry to get married?*
>
> *(Shanaya, RMS Activity, 2023)* "

Beyond physical violence, Shanaya endured taunts and public shaming from her family and their social circle. The experience of being ostracized led to feelings of shame and self-isolation, yet she remained firm in her decision. Notably, strategic life choices like marriage were not the only triggers for violence at home. For instance, Kareena faced physical abuse from her elder brother simply for casually chatting with a neighbor and sitting outside her home in the evening.

When it came to daily taunts from family members, especially parents, Amrita had a similar experience to Shanaya. However, the reasoning behind her parents' shaming stemmed from Amrita's aspiration to work in an NGO, a strategic life decision. She shared that her family would constantly discredit her work as a social worker and discourage her from continuing her role as a volunteer at Yuva Saathi Centre. Nevertheless, Amrita was sure about this career path, given the fact that she was also inspired by a person like her (Ray, 2006); she proudly shared the fact that she chose to continue her volunteer job at Yuva Saathi Centre. Here, Amrita's agency had a positive meaning in relation to power (Kabeer, 1999).

> *Then I only decided, even if my mother says no or anything, I want to do this. Then I came here and talked to you and other didis and joined here. So, this was my choice only.*
>
> *(Amrita, RMS Activity, 2023)*

Another example of positive agency is Kareena's story. She had shared that her elder brother was against her continuing with higher education post school as he believed that girls from their family, especially a family from Bihar, should not pursue higher education. However, she negotiated and bargained with him with the help of Yuva Saathi Centre staff. She conveyed to us that she had expressed strong commitment to her strategic decision regarding pursuing higher education, making it known that she was not going to back down and compromise. Additionally, she also faced restrictions regarding attending Saathi Centre's computer courses. However, Kareena expressed that after attending one of our gender training workshops in Palampur, Himachal Pradesh, she was being able to exercise her own agency and 'resist' the restrictions imposed on her. She said,

> *Right after going to the Himachal workshop, I have become very headstrong. I become stubborn and do things purposefully. You can beat me up, but I will learn computer.*
>
> *(Interview, 2023)*

In Vani's case, she shared that constant arguments arise over the mobility restrictions imposed on her job, stemming from her family's lack of trust in her. She explained,

> *My mother told me that she cannot even risk sending me for a job because she thinks that I will use my job as an excuse to roam around in Delhi.*
>
> *(Interview, 2023)*

Beyond these restrictions, Vani also faces physical violence—not only for wanting to work but also for spending time with friends, wearing clothes of her choice, and using her mobile phone. She expressed her frustration:

> *They have a problem with me going out and in clothes of my choice. They just want me to study and do household chores. I cannot do all this.*
>
> *(Interview, 2023)*

Vani often finds herself giving in to the violence in her family, experiencing a deep sense of hopelessness regarding her life choices and aspirations. This aligns with findings by Kabiru et al. (2018), who suggest that violence has detrimental effects on emotional well-being.

Questioning Power Relations and Dynamics

As per our understanding, questioning power relations and dynamics in simple words could be challenging the set norms and behavior of society which could be deeply rooted in the patriarchal ideology or casteist or classist approach or could be all of them. Many participants have shared their experiences of questioning the everyday norms and behavior in their family or friends. For instance, Amrita discussed her mother's idea of marriage,

where she thinks, woman's primary role is of taking care of the house and fulfilling the responsibility of a "good" wife and daughter-in law. These responsibilities are mostly about catering to the demands of the family and being submissive. However, Amrita's notion of marriage is completely different from her mother's idea. She believes that it should be an institution of shared responsibilities and equal respect. She also shared how this topic has become the point of everyday discussion at her home accompanied with lots of taunts.

Amrita is not the only one who experiences the mental stress that comes with constant negotiations; others have shared similar struggles. Her family believes she should be educated only as a safeguard against adversity—so she can manage if her husband is unable to earn enough or if something unfortunate happens to him. However, Amrita refuses to give up and keeps the conversation alive, navigating it through continuous negotiation. On some days, the pressure to prove herself and justify her choices to her family becomes mentally exhausting. Similarly, Vani shared how she faced physical violence from her brother and mother when she attempted to make independent decisions about her clothing or mobility. Kareena also expressed frustration, explaining that questioning her brother's alcohol addiction is seen as inappropriate by her mother, leading to violent repercussions, including beatings and taunting.

Amrita on marriage

> " *I do not have a problem with marriage, but I do have a problem with the way people view marriage. I get angry when my mother keeps on saying that a man marries a woman so that she can take care of his parents.*
>
> *(Interview, 2023)* "

In each case, it was observed that everyone decided to exercise their agency in making decisions regarding certain aspects of their life which could be influenced by their engagement at Yuva Saathi centre. Kabeer, 1999, has explained the term resources as not only in material terms but also human and social resources to enhance the capacity to make choices. This access to resources further leads to the power of making potential choices or realizing their choices due to availability and exposure of choices. These choices can be strategic life decisions like those related to marriage and education or choices which were denied to them in the past. Making choices or decisions is a way to measure the agency of an individual.

It is interesting to note the way agency has been defined by (Kabeer, 1999) as an ability to define one's goal and act upon them. It is beyond observational action, and it incorporates the meaning, motivation and purpose which individual brings in their activity. Agency can be observed through other forms like negotiation, bargaining, deception, manipulation, subversion, and resistance and more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis. Hence, when Amrita negotiated with her family for marriage and education, when Vani bargained for her mobility and clothing or when Kareena reflected on her brother's unacceptable behavior, some form of agency was exercised. Furthermore, agency can be positive or negative as explained in each case. If agency is positive in nature, then power is within to make decisions for oneself as each participant discussed in their case and if agency is negative then it manifests as control as exercised by the authoritative figures. In the examples quoted from the lives of girls - parents, peer group, partner, and siblings exercised control through the use of mental, physical, sexual violence or surveillance.

When discussing agency, our expectations often center around the idea that it should lead to some transformational outcome. However, agency can also manifest in the decision not to make certain choices, as observed in the case of Kiran. Kiran believed she had the freedom to pursue her life choices, but when we spoke with her grandmother,

it became clear that many restrictions were imposed on her indirectly through socio-cultural norms. For example, she is expected to marry by a certain age and cannot choose a partner from a marginalized caste. Kiran has accepted these restrictions and views them as 'normal'. Naila Kabeer (1999) also highlights that agency is a complex concept, especially when it comes to women's decision-making. The naturalization of certain norms under the guise of culture often makes these restrictions non-negotiable. 'Adaptive preferences' as discussed by Sen (1995), similarly occurs when individuals adjust their desires and aspirations to match their circumstances, particularly in situations of deprivation or inequality. For instance, if someone is repeatedly exposed to certain social norms or constraints, they may begin to accept these conditions as 'normal' and even choose within those limited options, which can appear as exercising agency. Due to their social conditioning and acceptance of a subordinate status, women often make choices that reinforce their lower standing in society, ultimately undermining their well-being.

Everyday Negotiations

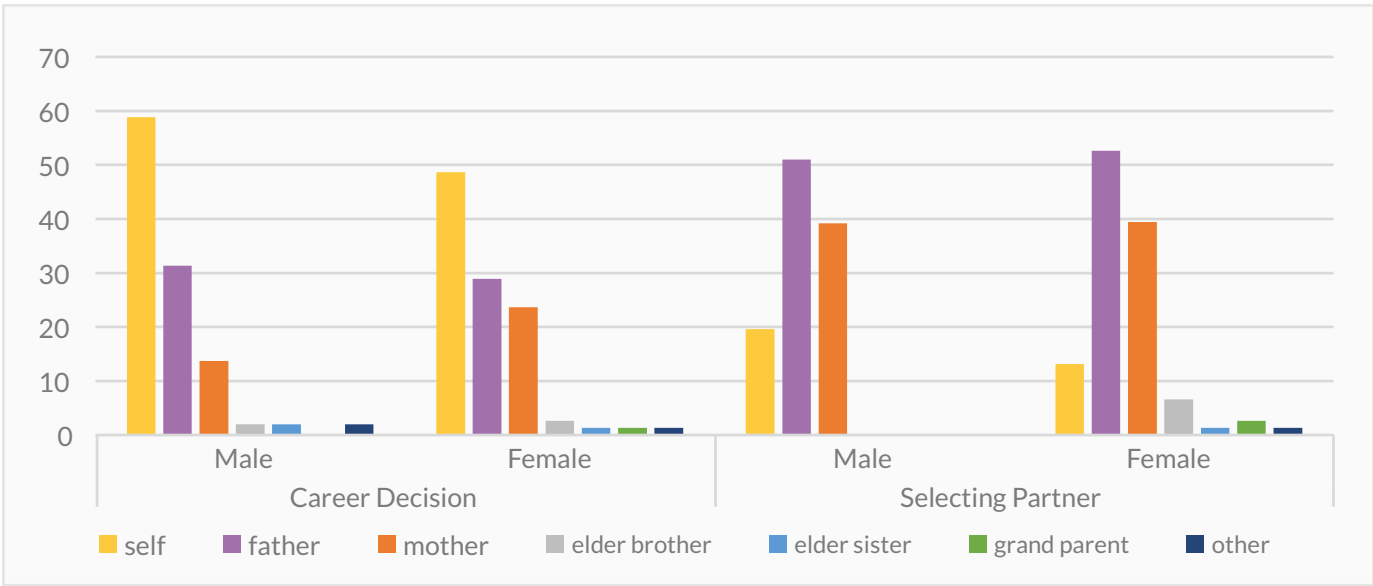**Figure 17: Key Decision Makers (in %)**

Figure 18: Flower Power Activity, FGD with Girls, 2018

Key Decision Makers

The Figure 17 on 'Key Decision Makers' compares the decision-making power for career choices and selecting a partner among males and females in Kalyanpuri. A significant majority of both males and females make their own career decisions according to the survey, with slightly more males (around 60%) doing so compared to females (around 50%). However, the involvement of 'self' in decision making drops in case of choosing a partner for marriage, both in the case of boys and girls, 20 and 13 percent respectively, but the role of the fathers is significantly high in case of choosing partners both in the case of boys and girls. Mothers too play an important role in deciding marriage partners, but somewhat to a lesser degree than fathers.

It is important to note that, elder brothers play an influential role in the lives of girls, especially when it came to choosing marriage partners, but also influence decision making on career choices for their sisters. Similarly, an FGD was conducted with girls using a participatory tool, called 'Flower power' (Figure 18) to discuss decision making patterns on key decisions and events of life. Besides parents, the presence of elder brothers, is also prominent in the flower power tool presented above. Mothers do exercise influence on all the important decision making matters, however to a lesser degree than fathers, suggesting rigid patriarchal norms being followed by the families.

Perceived Challenges in Achieving Career Aspirations

During the survey, respondents were also asked on the perceived difficulty level of the career aspirations they had set for themselves (see Figure 19). Boys and Girls reported a significant perception of difficulty in achieving their career aspirations, with the girls setting a difficulty level of 10 percentage points higher than boys. Both genders feel that their chosen aspirations are practically achievable, though boys (51%) more so than girls (31%). This suggests that a substantial number of both girls and boys being realistic of the barriers and challenges they face in view of their career, though males are slightly more practical than girls.

A small minority of both genders have set a goal that is easy, or have set the difficulty level as low, with a greater number of girls setting a lower aspiration so as to experience the least barriers or challenges in achieving their goals. Many respondents of the survey, appear to negotiate with the challenges in their environment by setting aspirations they view as either practical or, in some cases, deliberately lower to avoid insurmountable barriers. This negotiation is a form of self-preservation and adaptation to the gendered limitations imposed by societal norms and expectations. By recognizing the difficulty of their aspirations, both boys and girls are making a conscious effort to align their goals with the realities of their environment. For girls, this often means tempering their ambitions to fit within the constraints of their social and familial roles. The fact that a small minority of girls set lower aspirations to reduce perceived barriers suggests

Figure 19: How difficult is it to Achieve your Aspiration? (in %)
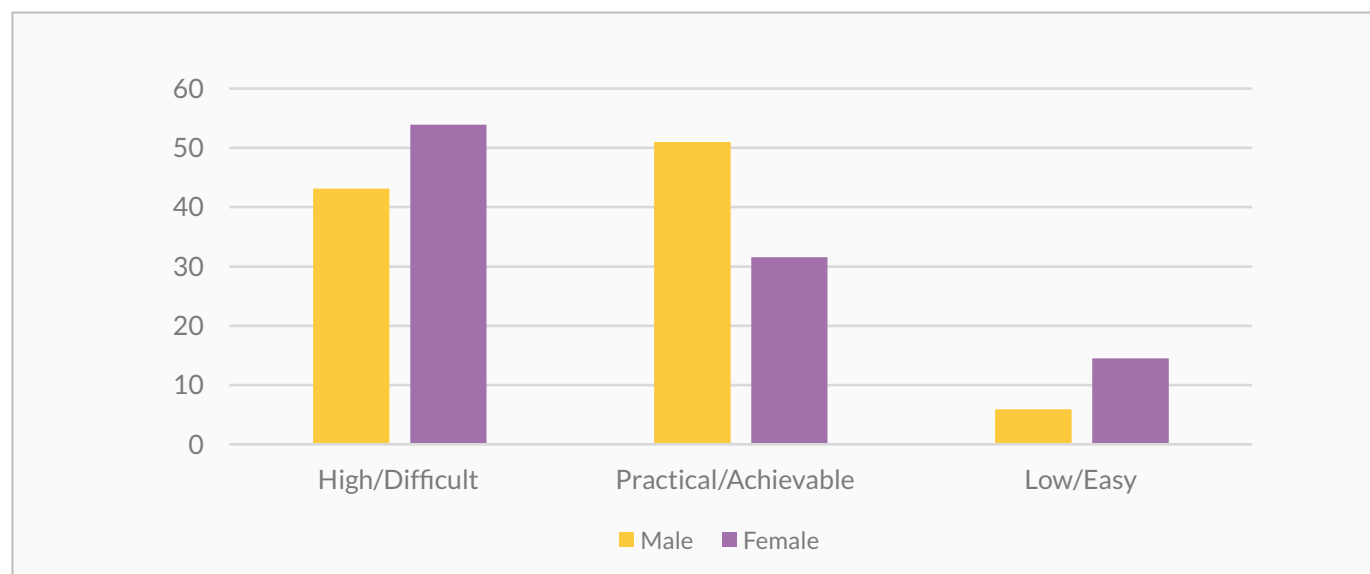
an internalized understanding that certain opportunities may be out of reach due to their gender. This internal negotiation reflects a broader pattern of gendered socialization, where girls are conditioned to aim for what is seen as achievable rather than what is truly desired.

Figure 20: Line of Communication Activity, FGD with girls, 2018

The analysis also reveals that a significant number of girls, more so than boys, have chosen career aspirations they perceive as highly difficult to achieve. This choice indicates a willingness among these girls to struggle against the gender norms and societal expectations that traditionally limit their opportunities. Despite the challenges they foresee, these girls are setting ambitious goals, suggesting a desire to transcend the constraints imposed by their environment. This determination to aim high, even in the face of considerable obstacles, presents a hopeful outlook for the future. It reflects a growing resilience and a refusal to be confined by the traditional roles and limitations that have long been ascribed to them.

Gendered Communication Patterns and Societal Dynamics in the Roadmap to Success

The image (Figure 20) of the FGD activity 'Line of Communication' (LoC), is presented above to show the gendered nature of interactions a girl typically engages with significant people in her environment. It also presents sibling rivalry, where the respondent highlighted that she does not engage with one of her sisters, but with the other sister she talks on 'home related' topics. With her brother, her interaction is limited to educational topics. Another participant at the FGD summarised her relationships as such,

> *I am close to my mother and sister - I tell them everything. I feel a bit scared from my father. I like my tuition teacher, he is more like a friend. He also guided me and gave me career guidance. My friends - they stay close to my house and I share everything with them. I am also close to Yuva Saathi Coordinator - she speaks to us nicely.*
>
> *(FGD participant, LoC Activity, 2018)*

Similarly another girl participant said,

> *My mother is closest - I can tell her everything. I am also close to my Math teacher. With friend, I speak to her about studies. Next is my father - on finances, or if I need something, or on my studies. My elder sister - (single line). younger brother – I am quite frank with him, I teach him.*
>
> *(FGD participant, LoC Activity, 2018)*

The older siblings seemed to take on paternalistic attitudes towards their younger siblings.

In an another FGD (Figure 21) using a participatory activity called 'the Road Map to Success' (RMS), the girls charted their future possible journeys given the circumstances they live in, identifying various events, milestones, and situations that will present them with opportunities and challenges. The range of aspirations included, teacher, police woman, professional social worker, bank manager, sports - Kabaddi player, Math teacher, fashion designer, CA/bank manager, and Governor of RBI. The girls were divided into groups based on similar aspirations, below is the group reflection by girls aspiring to take up banking jobs:

> *The first challenge faced after 12th grade is, your studies are complete, now get married! But if we take up an independent job and manage our expenses through a part-time job, we cover our own costs. However, the fees are high, and travel expenses increase. If we get family support, society pressures us to get married. And if we manage to fight or surpass societal pressures, many paths open up for us, but we often don't know what to do next. At graduation, we face the question, what do we do after this? Guidance becomes a hindrance. The main speed bump is after 12th grade. Regarding the perception of family and society on banking as a career—it is considered good because the timings are manageable, and it's an office job. It's not fieldwork. It's safe, and the salary is decent.*
>
> *(FGD with RMS activity, 2018)*

Figure 21: Roadmap to Success, FGD with Girls, 2018
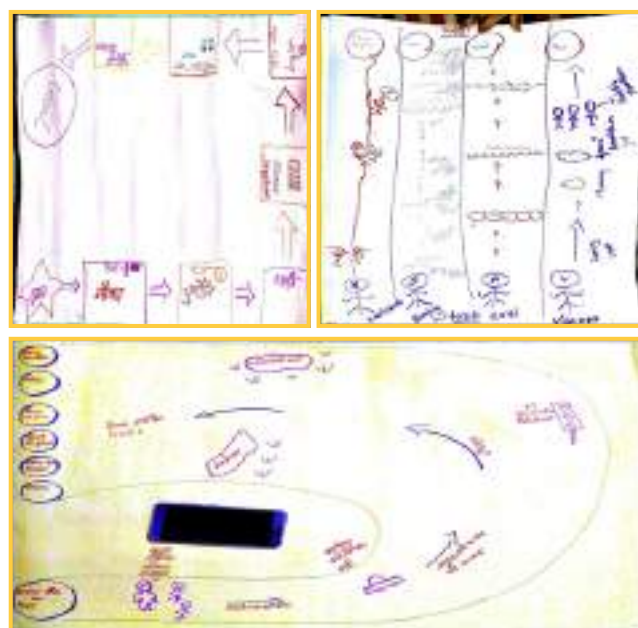
The reflections by the group that had chosen aspirations that did not align with societal expectations, reflects greater struggles and conflicts with the family and school,

> *Parents are opposed to the idea of becoming a fashion designer. They don't give it importance or take this profession seriously. There are financial issues, including the cost of pursuing this course privately. There's also confusion about what to choose. Sports are not taken seriously either. They keep telling you to study, and think kabaddi is a waste of time. I joined kabaddi for a while, but then I had to miss classes in school and couldn't study well. The teachers and principal were also informed. I had to hide from my parents that I was missing school to practice kabaddi. The opposition is also because they believe there's no earning potential in kabaddi. They tell you to do something that will bring in money, and to finish 12th grade first before playing kabaddi.*
>
> *(FGD with RMS activity, 2018)*

The participants also reflected on how experiences of gender based violence was used to control mobility of girls in view of protecting them but by victim blaming,

> *Parents do not trust their children, but they are also scared for them. There are so many cases of sexual assaults and harassment. They tend to blame the girls and view them as being in the wrong.*
>
> *(RMS, FGD with Girls, 2018)*

The quotes from the FGDs provide a qualitative layer to this analysis, shedding light on the real-life negotiations girls undergo. The first challenge many girls face after finishing their 12th grade is societal pressure to get married. However, those who aspire to be independent by taking up jobs or continuing education often encounter financial constraints and a lack of family support. Even when family support is available, societal pressure to conform to traditional roles persists. Girls who manage to resist or bypass these societal pressures find themselves at a crossroads, uncertain of the path ahead due to a lack of guidance and mentorship.

Coping Mechanisms in the Context of GBV and Everyday Negotiations

The aspirations of young girls in Kalyanpuri are not free from barriers and various forms of violence. To cope with the constant societal pressures, familial expectations, and instances of violence, these young girls have developed their own coping mechanisms and strategies. The participants shared how they navigate these challenges on a daily basis, engaging in a continuous process of negotiation and compromise. It is important to emphasize that this relentless need to strategize and adapt is mentally and emotionally exhausting— The girls are constantly balancing their ambitions against the reality of their environment, often having to make difficult decisions about their future, education, and career paths. This continuous effort to manoeuvre through societal constraints, while striving to achieve their aspirations, takes a significant toll on their well-being.

Often, these negotiations are internal; instead of openly expressing their needs and desires, they may forego them to avoid conflict. For example, Vani mentioned that to avoid conflicts with her family over mobility restrictions, she declines even local invitations from friends. She narrated her story,

> " I just cancel my plans with my friends. They always ask me and I say no. I mean; they know it by now that my family does not allow me to go to places with my friends... and added...we fight a lot about me going out. I am stubborn, so even I say that I will go out somehow. But, the reality is that I cannot go. "
>
> (Interview, 2023)

Negotiating Trust: Strategic Compliance to Pursue Aspirations

Beyond mobility restrictions, which are evident in most of our case studies, these girls also face limitations in making other strategic life decisions. Often, they engage in repeated conversations with their families, but they also modify or adjust their behavior to gain their families' trust. This trust-building serves as a strategy to further pursue their aspirations. In this context, Kareena shared how she has been trying to align with her family's expectations by staying at home, completing household chores, and fulfilling her caregiving responsibilities. She consciously maintains the image of a girl with 'good character' so that her family will trust her enough to allow her to pursue her education. Kareena narrated

> " I feel that I am capable of studying. Didi, they say no to jobs too. If I study, maybe they will start understanding me. I have tried a lot to gain their trust" and added, "I have assured my brother that I will not go anywhere. If I am going to my tuition, you can call and ask them if I am there or not, you can come and check it yourself too. "
>
> (Interview, 2023)

Kareena has also mentioned how she has taken the help of Yuva Saathi Centre's staff's help to navigate within her family's restrictions, especially with regards to her education. She explained,

> " My family said no to coming to Yuva Saathi as well. Then I made them speak to Kriti didi and Dhoni Bhaiya. After that he agreed to let me come here. However, the condition is that, my mother will drop me and pick me up from here. "
>
> (Interview, 2023)

It is important to note that negotiations and bargaining not only happen within the family space, but also within the girls' immediate environment, such as their peer groups. All of their strategies do not have the same motive where it has to lead to less restrictions, they are also helping the girls to put forward their own opinions and gain self-confidence. This helps with their aspirations to be heard and seen as rational individuals. For example, Amrita has several conversations with her male peers against the concept of dowry. She added,

> " I used to not say that their mentality is wrong, but we I would end up fighting with them a lot. Now, I have started to pretend to not understand what they are saying so they understand the problematic statements themselves. This is the only way to teach them. "
>
> (Interview, 2023)

Navigating Violence Through Hiding and Internalization

While negotiation and bargaining are tools some young girls use to cope with violent situations, these strategies are not always feasible. Often, girls resort to hiding their activities to avoid confrontation and achieve their aspirations without triggering violence. In many cases, hiding also serves as a coping mechanism to suppress traumatic experiences. Women frequently manage life stress through internalization—a consequence of socialization that discourages vocalizing grievances and normalizes violence. This pattern reflects broader societal attitudes that position women as secondary and unequal.

As discussed in the section on access to resources, men in Kalyanpuri often express frustration through hypermasculine behaviors, while women are socially conditioned to respond submissively. Vani, for instance, considers herself a vocal individual but could not speak about an instance of sexual assault, possibly due to the shame attached to women in such situations. Additionally, many girls hide their presence on social media, carefully controlling who can access their profiles—an agency they lack in public spaces. However, this choice is not solely about privacy; many women and young girls keep their accounts private to avoid becoming targets of trolling and shaming. Shanaya shared her experience,

> " *I do not show all my photos to my parents, I do not even show all the photos that I post on social media. And I have not added any of my relatives on social media.*
>
> *(Interview, 2023)* "

Similarly Amrita believes,

> " *I fear that if I put photos with my male friends, someone will say something bad. My cousin also hides her stories on social media when she posts with her male friends.*
>
> *(Interview, 2023)* "

There are also instances where girls have hidden about going for the extracurricular activities on the pretext that they are going to Yuva Saathi Centre, because they understood that family might allow them to go to Yuva Saathi centre because of the reputation and the repercussions involved in revealing the truth, as any other activity that involves mobility and having their presence in public spaces would be denied. Kareena explained,

> " *My family would only allow me to go to my tuitions. So, I would lie to them about my tuition dates and go to my stitching classes.*
>
> *(Interview, 2023)* "

Emotional Breakdown and Self-Harm as Coping Mechanisms

Few of the girls view emotional breakdown and self-harm as a coping mechanism to deal with their ongoing violence. At times having an emotional breakdown helps them to release the stress of their ongoing tensed period. Shanaya shared that if someone in her family is using the tool of taunting to perpetrate mental violence, then she lies down, covers her head with a blanket and cries it out. During these emotional moments, they also remind themselves of the positive interactions they have with the staff of Yuva Saathi Centre. Adding to this, Amrita shared,

> *People used to make fun of me by calling me Chinese and momo because of my facial features. I used to cry a lot previously" and added "I cry a lot but then I try to remember all the good things you all have said to me. I try to make myself feel better by remembering the appreciation that I receive. Then I stop crying.*
>
> *(Interview, 2023)*

From our findings, it is seen that the girls view self-harm as a result of emotional breakdown. These instances of self-harm also include periods of time where they do not eat. They view self-harm as a way to immediately escape violent situations. For example, Kareena has shared,

> *I had once told my family that I should die because I am at the root of all the tension, right? I used to think this way and I said it.*
>
> *(Interview, 2023)*

IV. Aspiration Mapping

In this section we have attempted to map various desires and aspirations held by girls and boys from Kalyanpuri, influenced by their individual capacities, gendered circumstances in terms of access to resources, and socialization processes. These aspirations were captured in the survey carried out during the situational analysis, and the in-depth interviews and FGDs to understand the motivations. While the main focus is on career-related aspirations, we have also explored other inter-related but also significant aspirations denoting different possible ways of being in the future—such as marriage, living standards, self-growth, and social image—that often reflected states of being that have been denied to the respondents in the present circumstances.

Gendered Aspirations on Employment

In Figure 22 below, titled 'Various Career Aspirations,' we observe the gendered nature of career aspirations, which reflects the traditional divisions in the types of work that girls and boys aspire to.

Teaching as a Gendered Profession: A significant gendered difference is seen in the aspiration to become a teacher, with a much higher percentage of girls (33%) choosing this career goal compared to boys (12%). This suggests that teaching is still a gendered profession, perceived more as a female-oriented job.

Fashion and Beauty Industry: Similarly, a career in the fashion and beauty industry, traditionally associated with women, is pursued by 18% of girls, while none of the boys opted for this profession.

Police and Army as Male-Dominated Careers: Police and army-related careers show a higher preference among males, with the army being chosen exclusively by boys, and the police career

also seeing a stronger male preference. However, about 6.5% of the girls aspired to join the police force, which may be correlated with the proximity of the Saathi Centre to a police station, where some respondents accessed educational services and training. This indicates the positive influence of environment in changing gender perceptions.

Business and Financial Sectors: A larger number of boys aspire to enter the business field, possibly reflecting societal expectations for men to pursue entrepreneurship or leadership roles. The financial sector, represented by careers in banking and chartered accountancy (CA), also reflects a higher preference among boys, though some girls also expressed interest in these fields.

Girls' Preference for 'Office Jobs': In our interviews and discussions, many girls expressed a preference for 'office jobs,' which they perceive as more decent and safe compared to fieldwork. Both banking and CA are considered office jobs and thus appealing to them.

Interest in Performing Arts: Interestingly, 4% of the total respondents were interested in a career in performing arts, with boys showing greater interest.

Uncertainty and Flexibility in Career Aspirations: A small proportion of both genders are still undecided about their career aspirations, reflecting a shared uncertainty or flexibility in their career planning.

Figure 22: Various Career Aspirations (in %)
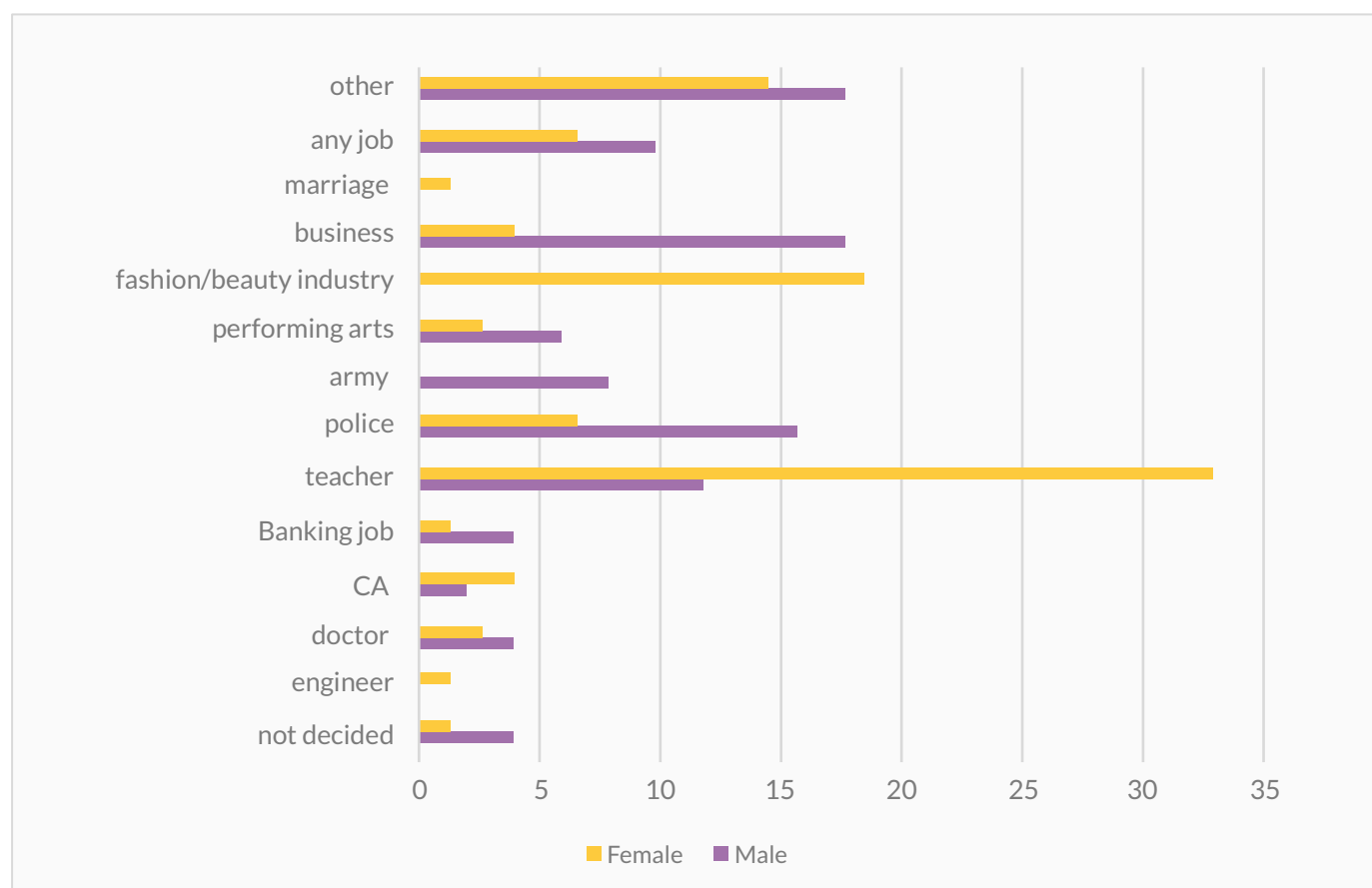
Sector Preferences in Career Aspirations: Government vs. Private Sector

In a following survey question seeking responses on preferences with respect to the sector where the aspired career would be located (Figure 23: Job Categories), the government sector emerged as the most preferred job category for both girls and boys, with boys showing a slightly stronger preference. Government jobs were seen as desirable in case of girls due to job security, benefits especially maternity benefits, and social status associated with these positions (Girls FGD, 2018).

The private sector is the least favored, this was due to concerns related to job stability, workload, or compensation compared to government positions. While a small portion of respondents in both genders are flexible about the sector they work in,

Both genders are equally interested in self-employment, indicating a shared interest in entrepreneurship. While boys wanted to expand the traditional businesses their fathers undertook or venture into newer business terrain, in case of girls self-employment was also related to the flexibility it offered in terms of balancing income generation and unpaid care activities.

(Mixed group FGD, Activity mapping, 2018).

as indicated by the "does not matter" category. This reflects a general trend toward valuing job security and autonomy.

Figure 23: Job Categories (in %)
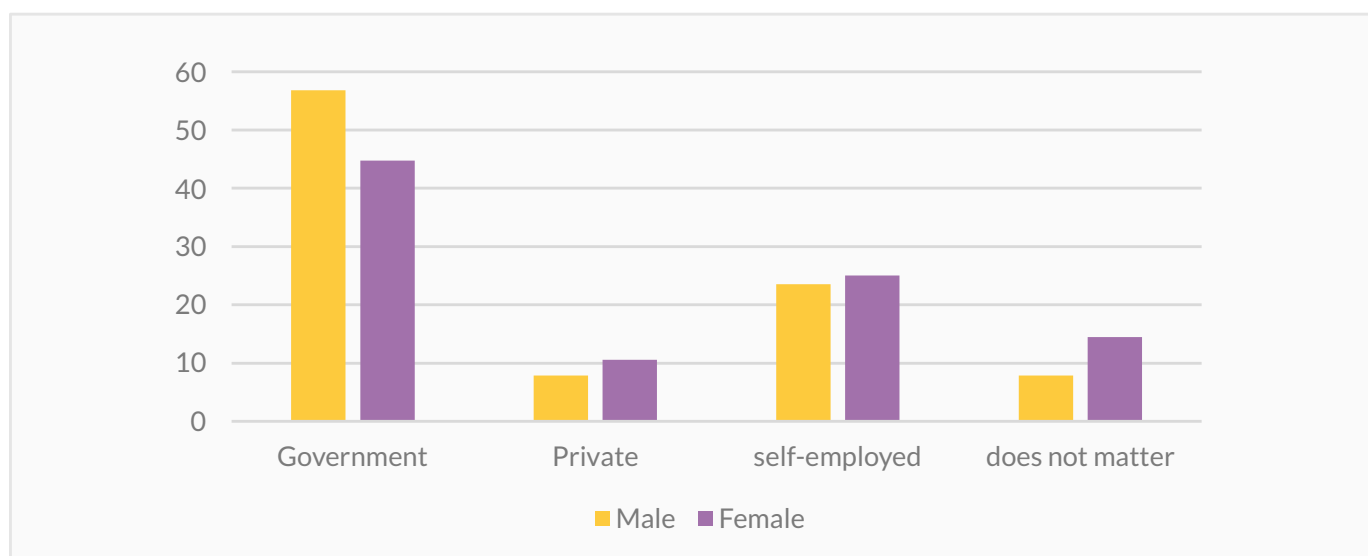
Gendered Barriers in Achieving Career Aspirations: Anticipated Challenges

Figure 24: Challenges Anticipated in Achieving Job Aspirations (in %)
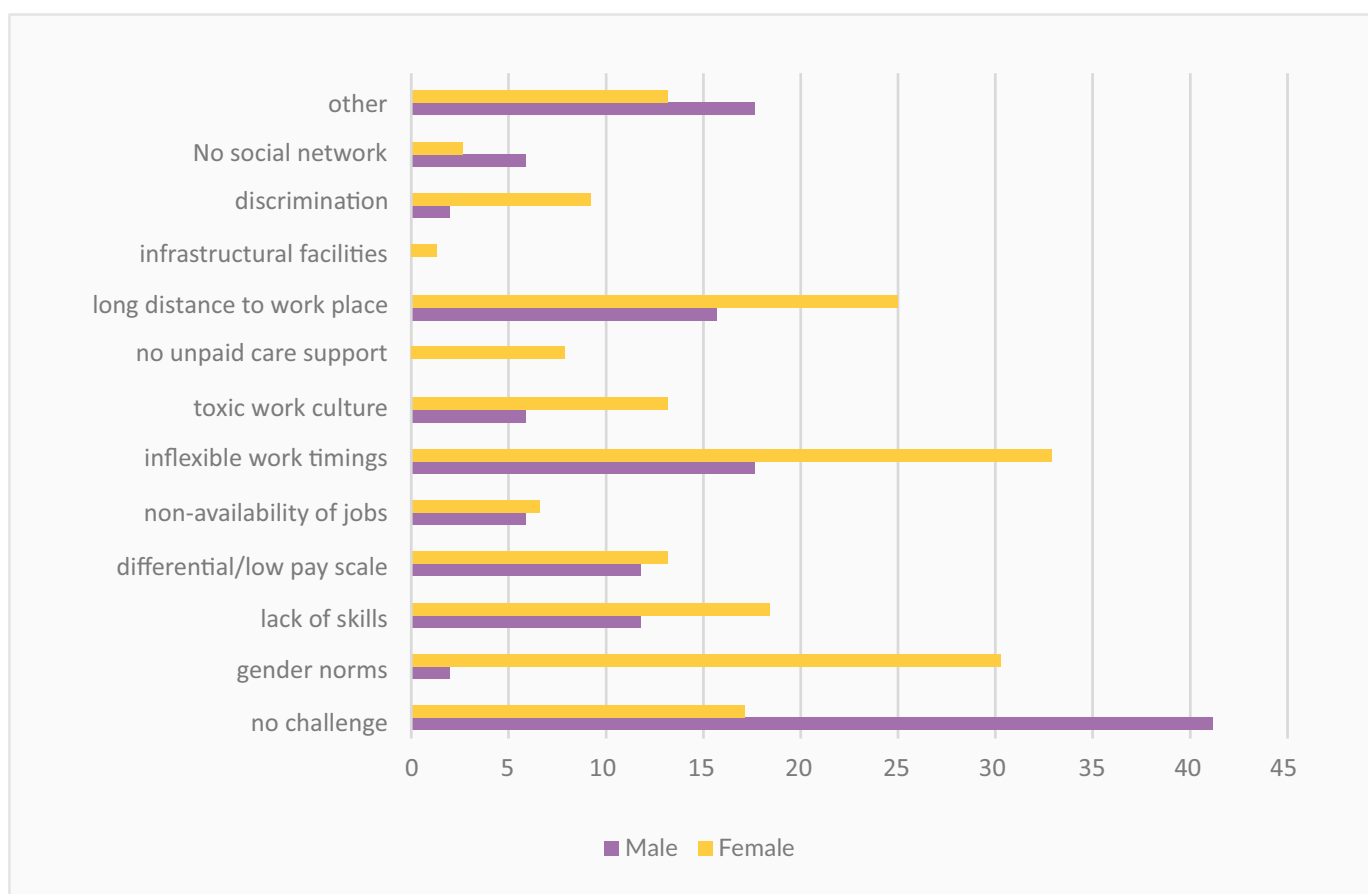
Furthermore, we inquired about the possible challenges that the respondents foresee in achieving their job aspirations. Figure 24, 'Challenges Anticipated in Achieving Job Aspirations,' underscores a gendered disparity. While males are generally less concerned about barriers, females foresee more systemic and social hurdles, particularly those related to gender norms, care responsibilities, and discrimination. It is noteworthy that a much larger proportion of males (around 41%) reported anticipating no challenges in achieving their job aspirations compared to females (less than 17%). This suggests that boys generally perceive fewer obstacles in their career paths. Almost exclusively, girls (around 30%) anticipate gender norms as a barrier, while this is negligible in the case of boys. This reflects societal expectations and restrictions placed on women, limiting their career mobility and choices. Similarly, inflexible work timings and distance to the workplace are already a concern for girls much more than for boys. To some extent, girls also feel that infrastructural facilities, toxic workplaces, and workplace discrimination based on gender and other social identities would present a problem.

The need for better skilling opportunities for girls is also highlighted by the figure, as they apprehend a lack of skills proving to be a problem in achieving their aspirations. Among other concerns, girls appear to be more concerned than boys about the differential pay scale between men and women, as well as the lack of unpaid care support. However, these anticipated hurdles also reflect the ongoing challenges women face in accessing and advancing in the workforce.

Aspirations Beyond Employment

Gendered Aspirations and Family Expectations: Navigating Marriage and Social Roles

In the case study interview, Amrita shared her aspirations about marriage, particularly when she would like to marry and the type of partner she envisions. Despite her parents pressuring her to marry at the young age of 19, she has firmly expressed that she does not want to marry between the ages of 20 and 25. This reflects positive agency (Kabeer, 1999). Amrita's main issue is not with the institution of marriage itself but with her family's gendered expectations, where she is socialized to be a dutiful wife, expected to take care of her husband and in-laws. This mirrors the gendered socialization that Mello (2008) and Basu et al. (2017) have discussed, where girls are trained for their future domestic roles from a young age. Basu et al.'s work has discussed the effects of gendered socialization on girls' career-related aspirations; however, in our case studies, we have observed that this relationship is weak. In fact, our findings reflect the formation of a negative image of the institution of marriage as a result of gendered socialization. For example, Amrita aspires to have a marriage where she is treated equally and not as someone's subordinate, expected to abide by the husband's orders. Similarly, Vani has stated that she is in no rush to marry, primarily because she doesn't want to be burdened with household chores, reflecting her negative view of marriage as well.

Both Shanaya and Kareena expressed that they view marriage as an escape from their troubled natal family lives. Kareena even mentioned,

> *I feel like marrying that random boy and leaving my problems behind at home.*

This perspective showcases how, for some, marriage is seen as a way to break free from familial issues rather than a personal or emotional choice. However, in Kiran's case we observe that a family environment that is supportive and not restrictive can result in a relaxed approach to the decision of

marriage. When Kiran was asked about her marriage-related aspirations, she mentioned that she has not thought much about it, largely because these discussions are not prevalent in her family. Her family, particularly her grandmother, encourages her to focus more on education and career, likely due to the financial pressures her family faces.

It is clear from the above experiences and expressions of girls on marriage that aspirations are deeply shaped by the ongoing negotiations and expectations within their families. These aspirations are framed by the implicit and explicit expectations from family and kinship networks, which are heavily influenced by gender-based societal norms (Leavy & Smith, 2010). Our findings reveal that aspirations related to education, occupation, and marriage are strongly influenced by parental aspirations, consistent with the findings of Gutman & Akerman (2008).

A recurring observation was that some parents supported their daughters' education and employment not to empower them but to improve their marriage prospects. Educated girls are seen as having better prospects for marriage, reducing dowry costs and enhancing the family's social image. This support often does not stem from a desire to make the girls independent and self-sufficient but to present them as 'modern' while remaining tied to traditional familial roles as wives, sisters, and mothers. For example, Amrita's parents support her job, but only so she can save for her dowry. With the condition that her job would not interfere with her familial duties as a daughter/future wife and should have less community work and physical movement in public spaces. They also expect her to marry between 20-22 years old. Similarly, Kareena's brother only approves of a traditional female career, such as teaching, because it allows flexible hours, enabling her to fulfill her primary role as a caretaker.

Another common theme or expectation that ran across all the case was the parental preference for their daughters to marry within their own or a higher caste, with the threat of family estrangement if this was not followed.

Aspirations linked to the Neighbourhood

The Figure 25 "Aspiration for the Neighbourhood" illustrates the differences between male and female respondents in the survey regarding the changes they desire in their neighborhoods. It reflects strong gendered differences as a result of their lived experiences in Kalyanpuri and nearby areas. Due to the significant impact of easy access to substances, boys overwhelmingly prioritized an addiction-free environment. Likewise, given that Kalyanpuri is a crime-prone area, a greater percentage of boys highly valued the enforcement of law and order against violence, showing similar levels of concern as for an addiction-free environment. Following this, there was also an aspiration for peace and harmony in the neighborhood, as well as for better sanitation facilities and services. While girls also expressed a strong desire for a safe neighborhood free of violence and addiction, as well as an aspiration for peace and harmony, they expressed a much higher aspiration for an environment free of discrimination based on gender or other social identities. This analysis highlights how gendered lived experiences influence perceptions of community needs, with women focusing more on rights and safety, and men on structural and environmental conditions.

Repertoire of Everyday Aspirations

In addition to strategic decisions related to employment, education, and marriage, the participants of this research have expressed a more varied range of aspirations that are "immediate" in nature. By "immediate," we mean the agency to make decisions for their current needs, which can positively impact their future orientation and potential. For example, all the girls expressed a desire for 'azadi' (freedom) from the restrictions imposed on them. They want freedom of mobility, the ability to talk to anyone regardless of gender, the freedom to eat whatever they choose, access to digital devices, and the ability to have a safe space where they are heard, loved, and supported by their family. They also desire a safe

Figure 25: Aspiration for the Neighbourhood (in %)
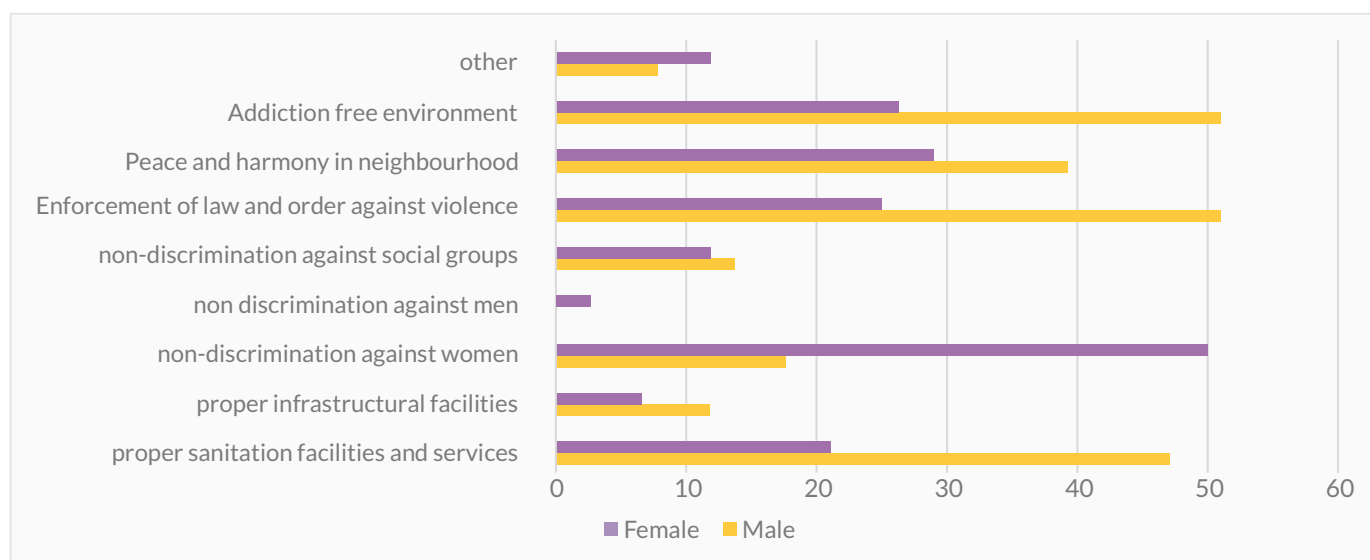
neighborhood so they can step outside their homes.

In this regard, Kareena explained,

> " *I want freedom so that I can talk to anybody, be it a boy or a girl. I want the freedom to roam around and travel, and to have access to education. I want the freedom to eat whatever I feel like and go anywhere with my friends if I want.*

It is relevant to note that young individuals typically form a collection of ambitions, each representing a partial conception of a 'good life.' Within this framework, the concept of the 'good life' extends beyond considerations of employment and education. Collectively, these aspirations constitute what Baillergeau and Duyvendak (2019) refer to as an aspirational repertoire.

To be Loved

Since the participants have been exposed to various forms of violence, mostly perpetrated by their natal families and kin, they aspire to have relationships where they will be loved – and these relationships do not need to be romantic in nature. Vani's main aspirations is to be loved by someone, preferably a romantic partner, since she feels devoid of love and affection in her paternal family. Additionally, she wants the partner to be respectful, caring and loving. She explained, *"They should have money. Didi, I just want love because I do not get anywhere, right?"*

Crafting a Social Image

Some of their social and immediate aspirations reflect their aspiration for a better social image/class. For example, Shanaya and Kareena both aspire to wear 'short and fancy' clothes. Additionally, Kareena shared that she would like to do the same without wearing a muffler (pallu). Their aspirations also tell us how they do not want to conform to traditional norms performed with the help of specific clothing. Their wish to wear specific clothing is also linked to their aspiration to post photos wearing these clothes on social media. However, more than the need to be on social media, their need to get their mobile phones was more.

To Loiter without Cultural restrictions

Majority of our participants have the same aspiration to explore the city without any restrictions. However, they are unable to do the

same due to mobility restrictions and the fear of unsafe physical spaces. The concern and unease regarding the participant's familiar neighborhood, coupled with concerns about encountering strangers, result in limitations on personal movement imposed both by oneself and by parents (Foster and Giles-Corti, 2008, as cited in Fernandez et al., 2023).

With the cultural and social milieu, parents' roots and migration status also play an important role in the formation of aspiration in young girls. Families after migrating to this big city, have imposed more restrictions on the girls' mobility and opportunities. The girls shared that they are often met with the diktat *"girls from our village do not do this".* Contrarily, the girls aspire to go out and explore their neighboughhood and Delhi solely because they feel that "after coming to a big city, you should be roaming around or do something that you cannot do back in the village". In this regard, all of them shared how they would like to change the mentality of their families. Despite the desire to loiter in their neighbourhood, the location is often restrictive in nature because of lack of safety in these spaces, as discussed earlier.

Sexual Exploration free from Coercion

Shanaya disclosed that her early sexual encounters involved coercion, as her partner emotionally manipulated her into participating in sexual activities. Vani revealed that her encounter with sexual harassment was her initial experience involving physical contact. This incident significantly influenced her perspectives on sexual activities and pleasure, leading to the development of negative attitudes. Hence, both have said they aspire to experience sexual experiences on their terms, without being coerced. The findings are consistent with existing evidence by Corboz et al. (2020) as adolescent sexual initiation frequently involves instances of coercion and force, which intertwine with various adverse health behaviors, subsequently impacting both health outcomes and life prospects. Additionally, Teen Dating Violence (TDV) violates two crucial human capabilities – bodily integrity and mental well-being (Nussbaum, 2006, as cited in Whitaker and Savage, 2014).

To Play Outdoors

Kareena shared that she aspires to continue to engage in outdoor physical activities and taking part in street plays organised by Yuva Saathi Centre. However, her mother is against these outdoor activities because she contends that Kareena's age no longer aligns with the societal expectations on engaging in such public actions. Kareena is expected to limit her movement within the realms of the private sphere and uphold 'traditional cultural notions of modesty and conventional femininity' (Peng et al., 2023, p. 11); any kind of extra-curricular activity that requires physical movement is looked down upon if a young woman does it. Kareena added to this, *"Yeah, I play with people, but everyone keeps on telling me that I am not a child anymore and I should not play outside like children. But I want to do that. From the beginning, I have been involved with ISST and I have taken part in sports and other physical activities. I participate – be it running or street plays. I want to be involved in these. But my mother taunts me by saying that I am too old to play outside."*

Navigating Gendered and Structural Barriers to Aspirations (A Study Report)

Motivations behind the Aspirations

During the survey, we also explored the motivations behind the respondents' preferred career goals—in other words, the desired future states they aimed to achieve through these career aspirations. Figure 26 below provides gender-disaggregated data on the motivations that drove their career choices. We observe that both boys and girls highly value a sense of fulfillment for themselves and their parents, status, and income, indicating common priorities in their career aspirations. However, girls placed a slightly higher emphasis on confidence, independence, and status, while boys were more focused on income and fulfilling parental expectations. This reflects both shared and distinct societal influences on career motivations across genders.

Aspiring Material Well-Being

Qualitative interviews and discussions were better suited to understanding the meanings and motivations behind these career goals. From the case study interviews[10], we observed a common aspiration related to paid work shared by Shanaya, Amrita, Vani, Kareena, and Kiran, was that, they all aspire to have stable jobs with a steady income in the future, which they believe will help them achieve financial independence. Albeit it is important to note that the reasoning behind becoming financially independent was diverse. Shanaya wanted to be financially independent so that she could leave her violent paternal household and live on her own. However, during this fieldwork she was not earning a livelihood, and hence, she planned on escaping her paternal family by marrying her then-partner, now husband. Despite this, she was clear that she also does not want to solely depend on her partner as a pathway to 'freedom', as he has engaged in acts of physical and mental violence directed at her. In this context, Shanaya further added that she has lost all hope for

Figure 26: Motivations Behind the Choice of Career (in %)
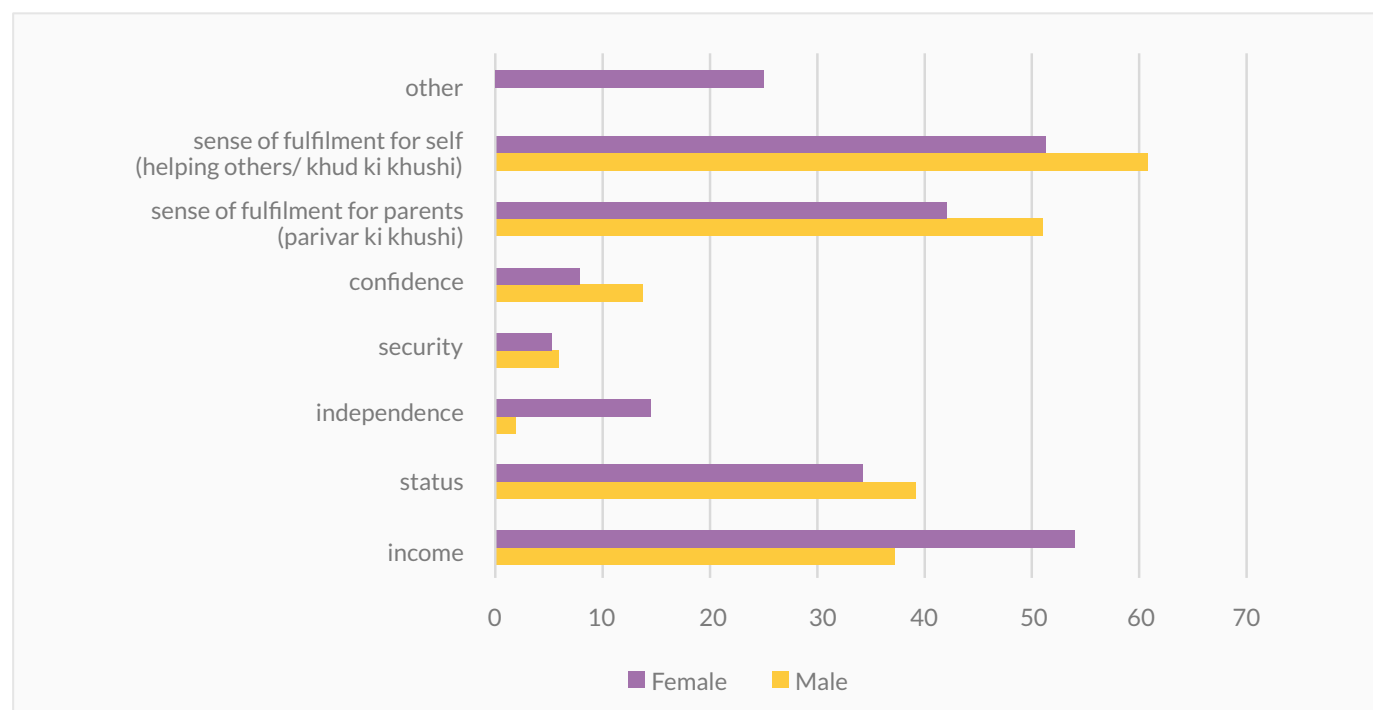
[10] Case study interview quotes in this section from in-depth interviews conducted in 2023.

any career-related aspirations due to all the violence that she has faced from her partner and family. She had planned to become a teacher, but she added that, *"with new situations especially related to violence, life decisions change as well."* This phenomenon of feeling hopeless about oneself and their aspirations, and experiences low levels of motivation takes places due to encountering barriers and lack of notions of happiness in life. Existing research by Hendricks et al., (2015) and Leavy & Smith (2010) substantiates that this phenomenon occurs, as also proposed in our literature review.

Both Kiran and Amrita want to pursue a career as an NGO worker or social worker and follow in the footsteps of the team at Yuva Saathi Centre, who are themselves from the same community as the research participants. This observation confirms that marginalised young people's life trajectories are informed by local information networks, community role models and the experiences of their peers and people like them (Archer and Yamashita, 2003; Archer et al., 2005, as cited in Sharma and Wotipka, 2018; Flechtner, 2014; Ray, 2006), similar in terms of social class, ethnicity, and gender. Nevertheless, their motives for pursuing similar career trajectories are different. On one hand, Amrita aspires to have a job so that she can pay for her own higher education and exercise her agency to make life decisions. On the other hand, Kiran aspires to secure a well-paying job to support her family financially, with a primary focus on helping her father repay his debt. Because of this, she has set aside her other desires and is solely focused on saving money. Her sister told us,

> *Kiran tells me that she wishes to go forward in life, have money, and then go to places without any tension about money. And if we want then we can buy and eat anything too.*

Additionally, Kiran wants financial stability to also to move to a new locality and house. Her aspiration

for material well-being is not only limited to having better financial status but also to live in a better physical space. This aspiration to move to a new locality and house has been a result of staying in an unsafe locality of Kalyanpuri, New Delhi. She expressed,

> *When all my siblings are together or when our relatives visit, everyone talks about jobs only. They ask us to study so that we can do jobs and earn money. Actually, this is not a good area. You know men and boys stay in the lanes and they drink. So, it becomes difficult to go out. That is what they say – get good jobs and money and then move to a new house in a good locality.*

Additionally, Kareena's need for material well-being is linked to her aspirations related to key life decisions. Her aspiration does not directly focus on her need for financial stability, but it reflects her aspiration to practice her talent of sewing and have her own business and identity. She shared,

> *I wanted to learn stitching because I was really interested in it. I thought that after I master it, I will open my own clothing shop."*

At this juncture, it is fitting to conclude that the aspiration to have material well-being is linked to the participants' aspirations of achieving stability in their lives – this stability is not only going to be financial in nature but also related to mental well-being, safe physical space, and self-growth.

Aspiring Self Growth through Employment

Our findings suggest that the participants perceived employment as a pathway to self-identity. Kareena expressed that she aspires to pursue a job as a police officer after finishing college because she wants to create her own identity. She shared that she wants to make the most of her education and does not want to sacrifice a job for the pressure of staying at home and solely taking care of domestic chores. According to Kareena, she wants her self-identity to resemble the image of a woman of the modern age and to achieve this 'image' she is set on pursuing a career. However, she is aware of her family's disagreement with the job of a police officer as it requires a lot of physical mobility. Kareena also shared how her family does not support women engaging in activities that require physical movement and take place in public. Hence, she is still figuring out which other career path she can pursue. This finding confirms how parental gendered socialisation affect career aspirations where young people become less hopeful about their capabilities and aspirations, and reduce their aspirations because of barriers (Basu et al., 2017; Flechtner, 2014; Mello, 2008). Kareena reiterated,

> After studying I do not want to just clean the house and do household chores. I want to do household chores and my studies, and a job too. In today's world every girl is working outside, so I also feel like working.

The passage reveals that respondents like Kareena are making clear value judgments on paid work versus unpaid domestic work. Paid employment is viewed as a means of self-identity and personal fulfillment, while unpaid domestic work is seen as an obligation tied to traditional gender roles. Kareena's desire to pursue a career, specifically as a police officer, reflects her wish to break free from the limitations imposed by societal and familial expectations, particularly the idea that women should prioritize domestic duties over professional aspirations. Also revealing a tension between traditional domestic roles and modern professional aspirations, with paid employment clearly being more highly valued.

Like Kareena, Vani seeks to establish her own identity through her career, but her primary motivation is to dispel her family's misconceptions and negative perceptions of her. She is determined to prove her self-worth. Vani shared,

> Let me just get a job; maybe then they will think that I am doing something worthwhile.

Similarly, Shanaya expressed that she wants a career to become financially independent. She desires to live away from her family to escape the violent environment at home. For her, having a job represents the power to exercise her own agency and leave her paternal home. This aligns with Kabeer's (1999) conceptualization of agency as the ability to make decisions.

Aspiring for Self-Growth through Education

In the context of education-related aspirations, Kareena aimed to pursue a Fashion Designing course at the Industrial Training Institute (ITI) and sought the agency to pursue higher education (college). She felt the need for agency because she lacked the ability to define and act on her goals (Kabeer, 1999). Currently, her family is reluctant to let her attend college, as it would require her to leave home frequently. Even if she cannot enroll in the Fashion Designing course, Kareena still wants to attend college for the new experiences and exposure it would offer. For her, pursuing higher education is not just about career aspirations but also personal growth. She explained,

> *I feel that if I complete my education, I can achieve everything. There is winning in education.*

Similarly, Kiran expressed her desire to pursue higher education after school. However, due to financial constraints, she plans to enroll in the School of Open Learning (SOL), where she would only need to travel on weekends instead of five days a week. Despite Dalton et al.'s (2016) research, which suggests that lack of resources constrains aspirations, Kiran's financial limitations have not hindered her goals. She aspires to continue studying and enroll in English classes to secure a well-paying job.

V. Yuva Saathi: Explorations in Building Adolescent Agencies

Yuva Saathi was designed based on findings from the research studies conducted in Kalyanpuri, including the situational analysis using mixed methodologies and case studies on violence against girls. Additionally, the Saathi Centre of ISST had already been serving the Kalyanpuri community through its educational, child support, and youth programs. The Saathi Centre team's deep understanding of the community, gained through years of experience, trust, and expertise, provided a solid foundation for a more in-depth exploration of the lives of youth, particularly girls, in Kalyanpuri. With funding from AJWS, this exploration began in December 2017. From the outset, the aim was to design a program informed by research and evidence, with the understanding that observations made during programmatic activities would generate further research questions and contribute to program design. As discussed in the 'Conceptual Framework' of this report's introduction, the Yuva Saathi program in Kalyanpuri was deeply informed by the capability approach articulated by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, alongside Naila Kabeer's concept of agency. These frameworks were essential in shifting the focus from simply providing resources to enhancing individuals' capabilities and removing barriers to agency, particularly for girls in the community.

Sen and Nussbaum's capability approach emphasizes the importance of expanding individuals' capabilities—their actual opportunities to achieve valued functionings, such as education, health, and employment. This approach is not merely about access to resources but about enabling people to convert these resources into real opportunities for well-being and flourishing. In Kalyanpuri, research and years of experience revealed that gendered and intersectional barriers often limited the ability of individuals, especially girls, to convert available resources into actual functionings. These barriers among other things included restrictive social norms, gender based violence, lack of access to

decision-making power, and limited mobility. The capability approach highlighted the need for a multifaceted strategy that goes beyond providing material resources to enhancing the ability of individuals, particularly girls, to make meaningful choices and pursue their aspirations. For example, while girls might have access to education, the strict control over their sexuality, mobility, and social engagement—often justified in the name of safety and care—significantly limited their freedom to develop their capabilities. Therefore, Yuva Saathi was designed not just to provide resources but to enhance the capabilities of girls to address these social constraints. The program aimed to support their personal development and ensure they could access a safe and secure environment in which to pursue their dreams.

Further, Naila Kabeer's concept of agency provided an additional layer of understanding by emphasizing the importance of access to both material and non-material resources. Non-material resources include access to information, decision-making power, skills, and training—elements crucial for exercising agency. Kabeer argues that the quality of choices available to women and girls is a key indicator of their agency. It's not just about having options, but about having the power to make strategic life decisions—such as continuing education, choosing

when and whom to marry, and pursuing a career—that are essential in defining their futures. In Kalyanpuri, the research found that even when girls had access to some resources, their ability to exercise agency was often constrained by social norms, family expectations, and gender based violence at home and the neighbourhood. For instance, while some families allowed their daughters to work or continue education, these opportunities were often conditioned by the expectation that they should not interfere with their primary roles as caretakers or future wives. By focusing on enhancing agency, Yuva Saathi sought to empower girls to make informed and autonomous decisions about their lives, moving beyond simply providing resources to ensuring they had the ability and freedom to use those resources effectively.

Below we describe some key foundational elements in the design of Yuva Saathi Centre:

Creating a Safe Space

Creating a safe space was seen as foundational in building agency and recognizing one's capabilities. The Yuva Saathi Centre was intentionally designed to be more than just a place for guidance; it was meant to be a non-judgmental and secure environment where adolescents and young people could openly express their thoughts and emotions without fear of repercussion. This safe space was essential because it allowed individuals to explore their identities, challenge socially ingrained behaviors, and engage in critical self-reflection—key components in building agency.

By providing a setting where young people could candidly discuss their feelings and experiences, the Centre enabled them to become more aware of their capabilities and the barriers they faced in exercising those capabilities. For instance, through participatory activities such as theatre, comic making, and storytelling, the youth were encouraged to challenge societal norms and rethink attitudes and beliefs that had been

internalized from a young age. These activities not only provided a creative outlet but also helped in recognizing and addressing the social and gender-based constraints that limited their agency. The Centre's use of art-based activities, such as theatre workshops and comic making, further contributed to creating a safe and non-threatening environment where participants could explore their identities and express their ideas freely. These activities were particularly effective in helping the youth confront and question the caste-based and gender-based discrimination they encountered in their daily lives. By facilitating discussions on intersectionality and the complexities of identity, the Centre helped the youth develop a more nuanced understanding of the social structures that impacted their lives, thereby enhancing their capacity for critical thinking and self-awareness.

A key aspect of the Centre's approach was the active involvement of the youth in its activities, fostering a sense of ownership and belonging. For example, during the Gender Community Mela, *"Aao Charcha Kare,"* in May 2019, young participants were involved in leading, designing and executing interactive games and activities that addressed gender-based discrimination. This participatory approach not only reinforced the importance of agency by giving the youth a direct role in the learning process but also helped them internalize the concepts of power dynamics and social hierarchies in a personal and meaningful way. Likewise, 65 young people were actively involved in managing Women's Day celebrations, *"Kalpana se Hakkikat tak,"* in March 2024. This initiative aimed to bridge the ideological gap between the youth and their mothers, allowing the participants to take on responsibilities and manage events. This involvement was crucial in helping the young people see the space as their own, fostering a sense of ownership and inclusivity.

Conflict is inevitable in any group setting, but the team at Yuva Saathi is committed to resolving issues with respect and dignity. For example, during a gender session discussing the challenges faced by women in public spaces, boys in the group raised the issue of being teased by girls. The

facilitator addressed this by fostering a discussion that recognized all forms of violence as unacceptable while also emphasizing that the experiences of boys and girls differ in terms of frequency, intensity, and structural forms of violence. By addressing the concerns of both boys and girls and recognizing the different ways they experience violence, the Centre helped participants develop a deeper understanding of social issues and the structural factors that perpetuate inequality. This awareness is crucial for building agency, as it empowers the youth to recognize and challenge the societal norms that limit their freedom and choices.

The Yuva Saathi Centre's commitment to breaking down hierarchies within the space and fostering an environment of mutual respect and empathy is foundational in building trust—an essential element in developing agency. The Yuva Saathi team's openness about their own vulnerabilities and their recognition that learning is a continuous process for everyone created a culture of equality and support. Personal counseling and one-on-one interactions further strengthened this trust, ensuring that participants felt safe to share their thoughts and experiences without fear of judgment. We ensured that any personal information shared with us was kept confidential unless consent was given to share it. For instance, when a young girl at the Centre expressed her feelings of attraction toward a boy, the team engaged in separate, respectful conversations with both individuals. They discussed their priorities and potential consequences, empowering them to make informed decisions. This non-judgmental approach allowed the youth to navigate their relationships critically and thoughtfully. We recognized that romantic relationships often provided the attention that may be lacking in other areas of their lives. However, it was crucial for us to convey the concept of a healthy relationship—one that is rooted in respect, equality, and trust.

The Yuva Saathi Centre's efforts to create a safe space are integral to the process of building agency and recognizing capabilities among the youth of Kalyanpuri. By fostering a supportive environment grounded in respect, empathy, and trust, the

Centre enables young people to critically engage with their surroundings, challenge societal norms, and develop a stronger sense of self and community. This foundation is crucial for empowering the youth to make informed choices, pursue their aspirations, and fully realize their potential.

Inclusion of Boys

Including boys in a program designed to build agency and create an enabling environment for girls was found to be crucial not only for breaking down barriers but also for fostering supportive allies within the community. While empowering girls is essential, it is equally important to ensure that boys are engaged in the conversation, as they play a significant role in shaping the social dynamics that influence girls' lives.

Initially, program activities were largely conducted with girls. However, soon the girls highlighted a significant issue: while they were becoming more aware of their rights and empowered to challenge the status quo, they often had to return to environments where their brothers and male peers were not sensitized. These boys, still entrenched in traditional gender norms, continued to exert control over the very spaces where the girls were expected to exercise their newfound agency. This realization underscored the importance of including boys in these sessions. The team recognized that to create a truly enabling environment for girls, boys needed to be involved in discussions about gender, power dynamics, and respect. Without their inclusion, the risk remained that girls would face resistance or even backlash when they attempted to assert their rights and make independent choices. By sensitizing boys, the program aimed to shift their perspectives, helping them understand the value of equality and the harmful effects of rigid gender norms on both girls and boys.

Nevertheless, including boys in a program designed for girls within a context that has restrictive gender norms presented some several

Inclusion of Boys in various discussions

challenges. Social backlash was a significant concern, as traditional views on gender roles led to criticism from the families of the children, further, some team members at Saathi and Yuva Saathi team needed continuous re-orientation. Furthermore, mixed-gender settings, particularly in outdoor play setting, required careful attention to creating a respectful and secure environment, where especially girls continued to feel safe and unrestricted. Logistically, the program needed to adapt its structure and resources to accommodate both genders, which could involve additional planning. The preconceived biases of both boys and girls affected their participation, for instance, concerning consent in romantic relationships, on issues or mobility, sexual and reproductive health, gender roles, and so forth and the program was required to navigate cultural and religious norms regarding gender interactions sensitively. Furthermore, integrating boys could shift the focus of the program away from its original objectives aimed specifically at addressing issues unique to girls. Addressing these challenges effectively necessitated careful planning, open communication with participants, and a deep understanding of the cultural context.

However, we have been observing that boys who frequently participated in Yuva Saathi activities not only support the empowerment of girls but also found benefits for themselves. It encouraged them to question societal expectations, develop empathy, and engage in healthier, more respectful relationships with women and girls in their community. Moreover, by engaging boys, the program's aim to create supportive allies for girls within the community resulted in boys who were part of activities on gender equality were more likely to stand up against discrimination and violence, and support the aspirations of their sisters, friends, and female peers (based on expressions by boys on how they stood against gender discrimination). This allyship was seen as critical for sustaining the progress made by girls and ensuring that the community as a whole moves toward greater equality.

Inculcating a Gender Transformative and a Reflexive Approach towards Aspirations

Gender sensitization training is one of the core activities at the Yuva Saathi Centre, focusing on developing a sensitive and critical approach among adolescents and young people toward gender-based discrimination and challenging stereotypical gender practices. In the first year, the project adopted an exploratory approach, using various innovative activities and methods to develop the group's critical understanding. Initially, sessions focused on self-discovery and acceptance with girls, exploring their self-perceptions and gradually fostering confidence and self-respect within the group. Subsequently, the sessions introduced the concept of social identity, discussing societal dynamics and addressing gender-based discrimination, stereotypes, and norms through reflective discussions.

Activities included a series of exploratory discussions with adolescent girls and boys, life skills training on gender, sexuality, play, and the social environment. The team on the ground adopted a multi-method approach to conducting sessions. Some were led by team members to initiate conversations, while others involved external resource persons for deeper discussions on themes such as gender, communication, and career counseling. This approach aimed to foster holistic growth for both the group and the team, while also developing mutual trust. This collaborative strategy consistently helped the team explore new ways to create an enabling environment for the group. For example in 2018, the team collaborated with SWASTHI, an organization experienced in training on gender, sexual and reproductive rights, and sexuality. SWASTHI conducted separate training sessions with girls and boys over four months, covering six courses for each group.

The gender training led to an increased demand from the girls for follow-up sessions to address the different questions and challenges they faced in their families and communities. Later, various other topics were introduced, including sessions aimed at improving the group's understanding of financial decision-making and introducing them to non-traditional career options. Sessions on careers, English language skills, personality development, and job-oriented computer skills were developed, with a focus on enhancing communication skills to build the confidence needed to voice their opinions. Several participatory methods were also used, such as audio-visuals, to engage the group in discussions around gender.

The situational analysis and the gender training in the first couple of years of the project helped identify key areas that needed particular focus to create an enabling environment for adolescent girls. These areas were identified through ongoing dialogue with the adolescents and their parents. After consistent engagement with the adolescents, the team continued activities and discussions centered around gender.

The team also worked on the curriculum used for the sessions with out-of-school children, specifically the PACE (Parvaaz Adolescent Centre for Education) curriculum formulated by Nirantar. This curriculum integrates gender into learning basics such as writing their names, understanding mathematics and languages, and enhancing their general knowledge, among other things. Furthermore, previous evaluations with out-of-school adolescents revealed that adolescent girls had inadequate knowledge about their bodies. Consequently, discussions were designed to educate them about their bodies, dispel confusion, and include the concept of agency. In recent years, there has been a significant shift towards conducting gender training almost every month with mixed groups of girls and boys, focusing on addressing prevalent issues in the adolescents' lives, based on daily team interactions on the ground. These interactive, judgment-free sessions varied in format from structured sessions to informal reflective discussions about their

relationships with society. Activities included movie screenings and book readings from the perspective of gender and other intersectional identities. Discussions went beyond questioning societal power dynamics and gender roles and norms; they also included ways to negotiate and show respect for other marginalized genders and sexual identities, as well as the concept of consent. Individual and group counseling was also provided as needed. The goal has always been to create a safe space for the girls to think, reflect, and ask questions about society's rigid structures.

Residential training workshops conducted away from Kalyanpuri or their residential areas were also successful with the girl participants. In 2018, a rigorous two-day residential gender training was organized in two batches of approximately 30 participants each. The residential training for girls was, in itself, a significant step in breaking barriers, as girls in the community were typically not allowed to participate in such activities outside the family. This led to a great deal of excitement among the girls. The sessions discussed the issues young girls face and how the socialization of certain norms can shape their thinking in a gendered manner. Given the success of the residential training with girls, the team organized another short trip in 2023 to the Sambhaavnaa Institute in Himachal Pradesh for 60 girls, also in two batches. The trip aimed to encourage the girls to critically examine their environment and be mindful of their actions. This two-day training session addressed issues faced by adolescents related to relationships, attraction, consent, and the role of

gender in these contexts. Due to cultural restrictions, boys were not included in these residential trainings.

Exposure trips and meetings were organized for both girls and boys to introduce them to new experiences and learning opportunities, breaking down gender and social barriers. An intervention called 'Antarang' was initiated as a co-learning activity for adolescent girls. In this initiative, a girl from Kalyanpuri was paired with a college student from Delhi, referred to as Saathi and Dost, respectively, for exposure and mutual learning. The pairs met periodically and went on monitored excursions based on their common interests. The intervention began as a pilot initiative with seven pairs in August 2018. By the end of February 2019, two pairs continued to meet and share, while the other pairs stayed in touch. Through the Antarang project, one of the Saathis managed to find a social work job that she aspired to, encouraged by her Dost. This initiative was not only about giving girls exposure to different career opportunities but also about presenting them with various life choices that might otherwise seem unattainable. These types of exposure trips are crucial for helping girls see beyond the limitations imposed by societal norms and encouraging them to envision broader possibilities for their futures. In 2023, the team organized a two-day exposure trip combined with a gender session in Alwar for 35 adolescent girls and boys. This trip, in collaboration with IBTADA, allowed the adolescents to observe gender-related work in a rural setting, further breaking down the barriers of gender and social expectations. The experience led to insightful discussions about their observations from a gender perspective. The group also visited monuments and museums in Alwar, which provided additional cultural exposure.

Adolescent and youth participants of the Yuva Saathi Centre, particularly the girls, faced significant pressures during the pandemic, including unpaid work responsibilities, limited access to digital devices for continuing education, and demands for early marriage. Despite these challenges, the girls remained enthusiastic about participating in the Centre's various activities through offline modes. This resilience can be

largely attributed to the sense of ownership and leadership that had been fostered through the Yuva Saathi approach. Prior to the pandemic, the Centre emphasized building agency and empowering the youth to take charge of their own learning and development. This was achieved through participatory activities, peer-led sessions, and opportunities for the adolescents to lead discussions and initiatives. As a result, when the COVID-19 lockdowns restricted physical gatherings and limited the presence of some team members, the participants were better equipped to continue their engagement with the Centre's programs independently.

The leadership and sense of responsibility nurtured within the youth allowed them to adapt quickly to the changing circumstances. Girls who had previously taken on roles as peer leaders within the Centre stepped up during the lockdown, organizing small group discussions, sharing educational resources, and supporting each other through the challenges they faced. They also played a crucial role in disseminating information about COVID-19 safety measures and ensuring that the younger participants remained connected to the Centre's activities, even when access to technology was limited. Furthermore, the strong community ties established through the Yuva Saathi Centre provided a support network that extended beyond the Centre's physical space. The participants leveraged their leadership skills to advocate for their continued education and delayed marriage, resisting societal pressures during this difficult time. The ownership they felt over their learning and development was instrumental in maintaining their engagement and motivation, ensuring that the Centre's impact persisted even in the face of the unprecedented challenges posed by the pandemic.

Building Agencies and Negotiation Skills through Art

Throughout the project, the main aim was to instil feminist ideas and create an enabling environment for adolescents and young people. Activities and sessions were designed to build this understanding within the group over time. Initially, the focus on building the agency was through self-awareness sessions, conducted to help them see themselves beyond the roles of mother, sister, and daughter, encouraging them to view themselves as individuals. During team interactions, it was often noted that girls blamed themselves for anything wrong happening in their families. To help them recognize their self-worth and avoid turning to anger, sadness, and destructive thoughts, self-awareness sessions were held. Experiencing such emotions is common in Kalyanpuri and often hinders individuals from understanding their potential and desires, as also discussed in the 'coping mechanism' section of this report. Therefore, the team developed sessions focused on building the group's agency, not just to strengthen their capacity to make decisions but also to act on them.

The team also understood that agency and the ability to make choices are influenced by the socialization of gender norms. With this in mind, the concept of agency was rooted in critical thinking on every day negotiations with regards to the everyday repertoire of aspirations as highlighted earlier in the report. Many girls in Kalyanpuri believed that getting married at an early age was a form of agency they could exercise to escape natal family violence, but they often did not fully consider the complexities of marriage and the new challenges that this decision might present. To strengthen their capacity to exercise agency, sessions on gender, using theatre, were introduced. The team at ISST has always been keen on using art as a medium to initiate important conversations. Theatre, as an art form, combines various other forms such as music, dance

(movement), storytelling, and more. It can also be used to explore the idea of self and express it without fear of judgment. With this in mind, ISST decided to introduce theatre as a means of exploration, building confidence, enhancing articulation skills, and developing critical understanding.

Initially, the plan was to introduce 'forum theatre' at the Yuva Saathi Centre. Forum theatre is an innovative and exploratory form of the Theatre of the Oppressed, used in several communities. It involves direct interaction between the audience and the actors, to the extent that the audience becomes an integral part of the performance through direct conversation and dialogue about their community's issues. Such forms of art give audiences the space to interact and express their opinions without hesitation. The goal was also to provide girls and boys with a space to use their imaginations to critically explore their lives, develop a plot inspired by their experiences as well as get in live negotiations with their actual community.

However, while exploring this form of art, the theatre team faced multiple challenges, as it was a new concept to the group of adolescents and youth. It was crucial to make them comfortable with the space through various activities. Additionally, challenges arose in maintaining a controlled setting for the audience, where dialogue could be initiated and directed toward a solution. Techniques like improvisation helped the group use their imagination to act out certain situations, requiring careful observation to behave and act in specific settings. Similarly, image theatre involved imagining a scenario and painting a picture in one's mind. Improvisation began when the group had to act out what was in their minds, with each prompt altering their actions. Another interesting activity was "minimum surface contact," where participants were instructed by facilitators to touch the ground in specific ways. For example, if the facilitator said to touch the floor with two hands, participants were only allowed to touch the ground with two hands. This activity was designed to challenge the idea of what is normal and question patterns through physical activities,

Theatre Performance by Youth in Kalyanpuri

which later influenced the participants' thinking processes. The first phase of theatre focused on introducing these activities and techniques and bringing out the stories of Kalyanpuri. Participants underwent nine months of training, during which they learned to develop stories, enhance their language skills, work as a team, use their imagination, write, share, give and receive feedback, integrate analytical skills, and improve voice and speech, spatial awareness, breath control, and body movement. Most importantly, they learned to face an audience. Theatre as a tool also built confidence within the group, especially among the girls. Each activity helped them overcome their reluctance to be in public spaces. Every interaction encouraged participants not only to break societal norms but also to build assertiveness and agency in their physical spaces.
After receiving a highly positive response from the adolescent group towards theatre, the team decided to take it further by introducing them to a theatre company. This exposure was significantly different from the previous engagement as it involved a larger scale, exposing the group to various theatre performances. Unique activities were introduced to improve language, diction and articulation skills. The group performed nukkad

play they engage in discussions about the challenges they face in their community, particularly concerning access to education, career opportunities, and gender-based roles.

Besides theatre, Community radio workshops were conducted with a diverse group of out-of-school and in-school adolescents and youth 2020-21. The participants were trained in various self-expression skills through a training in developing radio programs. This included crafting their stories, scripting, recording their concepts and ideas, and editing their work. The training process, which was initially in-person, was disrupted by COVID-19 and transitioned to an online format. Despite these interruptions, community radio proved to be an effective medium for participants to express themselves and share their stories. The workshop helped participants overcome hesitations in speaking and communicating. During the lockdown, they continued to engage in the sessions and shared their recordings based on their self-created scripts. Given the positive impact, training

natak (street play); however, the essence of forum theatre was lost in the process. The performance devising and plot development became somewhat mechanical, causing the group to lose interest in theatre as an art form. It no longer resonated with their issues or the issues of their community, becoming grander in nature. Therefore, the team felt the need to continue with theatre but in a form that could help bringforth the group's issues, which could then be discussed in sessions or activities. The focus was on making the performances relatable to the community, addressing issues such as gender biases and stereotypes influenced by patriarchal practices. Rigorous improvisations were conducted to give the participants a sense of character and ideation as they presented their stories publicly. Several movement-based games were used to synchronize body and mind, enabling quick responses during live community interactions. Presently, the focus has shifted to practicing forum theatre infused with the essence of nukkad natak. The entire theatre was collaboratively developed by a group of 24 youth participants, including 18 girls and 6 boys. In this

in expression through story telling in audio continued with an audio podcast project with an organization called 'Kahani ki Dukaan' in 2022, to further develop skills in researching, writing, and producing stories in an audio format for global dissemination.

Furthermore, adolescents and youth were trained to create comics, another powerful communication tool, based on their own ideas and social observations. This self-exploratory process not only refined their ideas but also enhanced their ability to convey messages in a non-threatening way, written creative forms. Comics were particularly effective in low-literacy areas and among individuals drawn to visual content. The comics created by the children were displayed at public locations such as shops, bus stops, and notice boards. The workshops revealed hidden talents in using comics as a medium of expression. Some adolescents became young trainers, generating interest among other community children by conducting sessions.

At the Yuva Saathi centre, youth and adolescents with strong interests in theatre and comics took their skills into the community through performances and comic displays, often combining both to engage the public. Presently a robust pool of adolescents and youth has been built proficient in these media, enhancing their abilities to think critically, reflect, and perform.

The idea of Yuva Saathi from the beginning was to focus on aspirations beyond the traditional realms of jobs and education. The key elements built into the Centre helped shape aspirations by fostering a critical understanding and awareness of rights, leading participants to realize that the concept of a better life could be different and free from violence. Over time, the team has observed the evolution of aspirations among adolescents, particularly girls. Initially, there was a limited understanding of themselves, but throughout the project, they began to see how aspirations can vary widely.

The girls' initial aspirations centered around being heard and loved, likely influenced by the supportive environment provided by the space. Their desire to share space with boys without judgment reflects the development of their concept of equality. Their aspirations to move freely without the fear of harassment in the streets and at home, and their desire to make their own decisions about what to wear and whom to be friends with, demonstrate their evolved understanding of personal freedom. The aspiration for a safe space like the Yuva Saathi center has played a crucial role in shaping these ambitions. This variety of aspirations resulted from conversations and discussions that encouraged them to question power dynamics. Their perspectives broadened as they experienced an alternate reality, slightly removed from daily violence. The power to challenge structural barriers and then aspire for themselves became possible through these interactions. Many girls expressed a desire to travel the world freely without restrictions. Some shared their thoughts on the unequal expectations placed on women within the institution of marriage. One boy spoke about the burden of having to figure out the expenses for his elder sisters' marriages and how this space served as his haven from the chaos. All of this indicates how they have begun to reject society's idea of "normal."

VI. Conclusion

This study set out to explore the aspirations of adolescents and young adults in Kalyanpuri, with a particular focus on the intersection of socio-cultural and economic factors and gender-based violence in shaping their futures. Grounded in the capability approach and Naila Kabeer's framework on resources, agency, and achievements, our findings from the research and the Yuva Saathi Centre interventions highlight the complex negotiations that adolescents—especially girls—undertake to navigate systemic barriers and gendered constraints.

Aspirations and the Socio-Economic Landscape

Previous research on youth aspirations has largely focused on education and careers within the context of poverty. While economic constraints are crucial, this study extends the focus to social resources such as networks, support systems, an enabling environment, and role models. Gender-based violence also emerged as a key determinant in shaping aspirations, as restrictions on mobility and decision-making particularly affect girls.

Career aspirations were found to be highly gendered, with girls favouring roles in teaching, beauty, and caregiving—fields aligned with societal expectations. Limited investment in girls' education reinforces these choices, with parents often prioritizing sons' human capital. Many girls internalize these constraints, adjusting their ambitions to fit within the boundaries imposed by socio-cultural and economic factors. However, through engagement at the Yuva Saathi Centre, several participants reported increased confidence in pursuing careers beyond traditional gender roles.

Beyond employment and education, girls expressed aspirations for a safer neighbourhood free from crime and addiction, as safety concerns heavily restrict their mobility and opportunities. Some saw financial independence or early marriage as potential escape routes from oppressive and violent natal family environment. This highlights the need for an environment where bodily integrity and well-being are not compromised. Additionally, aspirations for personal freedom—including the right to dress as they choose, engage in social activities, and exercise autonomy over relationships—were prevalent. These desires reflect a push for agency and social mobility beyond conventional expectations.

The aspiration to be loved also emerged as significant. Well-being depends not only on material resources but also on emotional and social support. Many participants shared their struggles with natal family violence, that can have can have long-lasting mental effects, emphasizing the importance of an enabling environment that fosters confidence and aspirations beyond survival. Further research is needed to examine the forms and nature of natal family violence and its long-term repercussions on children and young adults. Understanding how exposure to such violence affects their emotional well-being, decision-making abilities, and future prospects is crucial. Investigating the intergenerational impact of violence within family structures can help develop interventions that foster healthier environments and expand the capabilities of young individuals to pursue aspirations free from fear and psychological distress.

Finally, boys shared fewer everyday aspirations, as gender roles and societal expectations position them primarily as future breadwinners, leaving little room for emotional expression or personal ambitions beyond financial responsibilities. Social conditioning reinforces this expectation, often restricting their ability to articulate aspirations outside economic roles. This restrictive framework highlights the need to challenge traditional norms

and create spaces where both girls and boys can envision futures aligned with their true aspirations.

Gendered Constraints: Violence, Mobility, and Decision-Making

This study identifies various constraints to girls' aspirations, present within family spaces, intimate relationships, neighbourhoods, peer groups, and online digital spaces. A key cross-cutting issue is the concern for safety and the threat of violence against girls and women in public and private spaces. The pervasive fear of 'stranger danger' significantly shapes both girls' and parents' perspectives on mobility and work. This fear stems from the everyday violence that permeates life in Kalyanpuri. According to the capabilities approach, the fear of violence—disrupting one's decision-making power and freedom—is itself a form of violence. This fear is not only imposed by parents who restrict girls' mobility but is also internalized by the girls themselves, shaped by their own and their peers' experiences. Parental and self-imposed mobility restrictions limit the opportunities necessary for girls to develop aspirations, particularly those related to career and self-expression.

Based on the girls' experiences, this study categorizes the perceived causes of violence. Most incidents occur when girls exercise agency in decisions regarding clothing, marriage, education, mobility, and employment or challenge existing power dynamics within families and intimate relationships. Beyond physical violence and mobility restrictions, verbal taunts are a widely encountered tool of oppression. These taunts have long-term psychological effects, undermining confidence and negatively impacting mental well-being. Such a violent environment stifles aspirations, leaving girls feeling hopeless and discouraged from pursuing their goals. In some cases, these feelings of hopelessness manifest as self-harm, further diminishing their well-being and the fundamental capabilities needed for a healthy and fulfilling life.

Resources and Agency: Negotiating Opportunities

Access to material and social resources is central to shaping young people's capacity to aspire. However, this research reveals significant disparities in access, particularly along gender lines. A pronounced digital divide exists, with boys having greater access to mobile phones and the internet, while girls' usage is closely monitored and restricted. Financial dependence further limits girls' ability to make independent life choices, reinforcing family-imposed constraints on their education, career, and personal relationships.

Despite these barriers, some girls employ covert strategies to navigate restrictions—self-financing their education, seeking informal support networks, and negotiating their aspirations within family constraints. However, many lack access to supportive social networks or role models who could help broaden their horizons. Where local role models do exist—whether in the form of mentors, teachers, or professionals—they play a crucial role in expanding girls' sense of possibility and self-confidence.

The study found that girls with exposure to role models, such as those at the Yuva Saathi Centre, were more likely to articulate long-term aspirations and explore unconventional career paths. For instance, participation in activities at Yuva Saathi introduced some girls to fields like journalism and social work—options they may not have previously considered due to societal norms. Such exposure not only expands career possibilities but also strengthens their agency in negotiating opportunities for themselves.

The Role of Yuva Saathi: Building Capacities and Creating Safe Spaces

The study underscores the critical role of Yuva Saathi Centre in fostering adolescent agency. By providing a non-judgmental space where youth can express themselves freely, the Centre enables them to challenge social norms and develop self-awareness. Through creative mediums such as theatre, storytelling, and comic-making, participants have begun to articulate their aspirations and negotiate their rights with greater confidence. The engagement of boys in gender sensitization programs has also been a crucial step toward shifting harmful masculinities and fostering a supportive community for girls. These interventions highlight the transformative potential of collective spaces in expanding the capabilities of marginalized youth.

Additionally, interventions at Yuva Saathi have helped the youth in developing strategies to cope with restrictive environments. Some girls reported using indirect negotiation tactics to delay early marriage or pursue higher education. Others gained confidence to challenge societal norms, such as participating in public debates or questioning family decisions about their futures.

Final Reflections and Way Forward

This study contributes to the growing body of research on youth aspirations and gender justice by illustrating how structural barriers and gender-based violence shape the lived realities of young people in urban low-income settlements. The findings emphasize the urgent need for multi-pronged interventions that address economic inequalities, gender norms, and institutional violence. Policies that expand access to quality education, digital literacy, social protection, and safe public spaces for girls are essential for fostering an enabling environment where aspirations can thrive.

Furthermore, while individual agency and resistance play a role in navigating constraints, structural transformation requires sustained engagement with institutions, families, communities, and policymakers. The study reinforces the argument that aspirations must be understood not only as individual trajectories but as collective struggles for dignity, freedom, and justice. By centering adolescent voices and experiences, this research calls for a renewed commitment to gender-transformative policies and programs that empower youth to shape their futures on their own terms.

Equally important is the creation of safe and enabling spaces within communities that support youth, particularly girls, in navigating restrictions and overcoming limited access to resources. These spaces provide a crucial foundation for exercising positive agency, strengthening negotiation capabilities, and fostering the confidence needed to challenge societal norms. By ensuring such spaces are widely available, communities can empower young people to envision and work toward futures that align with their aspirations, rather than those dictated by restrictive socio-cultural frameworks.

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Annexure 1: FGD Tools

A. FGD Participatory Tools For Adolescent and Youth

Only Girls Groups

i. Flower Power - Who influences our life?

Objective: To understand who influences the girl's life. Decision making roles

Number of people expected to participate: about 8-12, but max 15

Time to be taken: approximately 1 hour

Preparation required: A chart paper, Sketch pens

Steps:

a) Ask the participants to draw a flower as follows:

b) The 'life of a girl child' is in the centre of the flower. Discuss with the participants and identify four major decisions/ situations in a girl's life. These could include *higher education of the adolescent, career choices or employment opportunities, choice of partner and marriage, mobility and communication, access to resources (eg. mobiles) etc.* The smaller four petals of the flower represent four such situations.

c) For each of these four smaller petals draw a larger petal around it that represents who in the household makes the decisions. The bigger petals surrounding these four smaller petals will represent members of the family - father, mother, grandparents, brothers, uncle-aunts, fathers etc and the girl herself. The bigger petals hence represent people who decide on aspects of girl's life indicated in the smaller four petals.

d) Discussion to be encouraged at each and every step.

ii. Road Map to Success

Objectives: To identify different enablers and challenges that participants perceive on their path to achieving their aspiration. To understand the role of the community centre in enabling girls to achieve their goal

Number of people expected to participate: about 8-12, but max 15

Time to be taken: approximately 1 hour

Preparation required: A chart paper, Sketch pens

Steps

a) Explain the objective of the exercise.

b) In a chart or two charts joint together ask the girl participants to draw a road — ascending to show progression towards the aspiration or the destination

c) Ask them to draw a circle on each end of the road showing a beginning and an end

d) Different symbols can be used to indicate an 'enabler' and a 'challenge' or a 'threat'

e) Have a discussion on how challenges or threats could be addressed and what role can the community centre play.

Mixed Group of Boys and Girls

i. Line of communication

Objective: To plot and understand how children communicate with the people in their lives. To identify important people in their lives and the pattern of communication.

Number of people expected to participate: about 8-12, but max 15
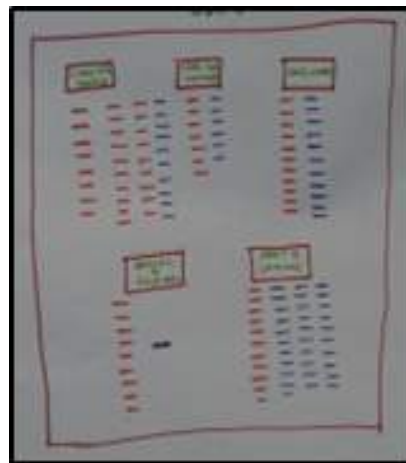
Time to be taken: approximately 1 hour

Preparation required: A4 or A3 size sheets for each participant.

Sketch pens enough for all participants

Steps

a) Each participant is given a sheet of paper.

b) The participants are instructed to draw themselves in the middle of the sheet or you can write their name

c) Next participants told to draw or name all the important people in their life. The more important they are, the closer they are to their own drawing/ figure in the middle. If you talk to them a lot, draw three lines from you to that person. If you don't talk much to them, draw one line and if you talk somewhat, draw two lines from you to that person. On the line, write what you talk about.

ii. Aspiration Mapping

Description: This session looks at the various aspirations of girls and boys, and these are further mapped out with the help of cards for participants to categorise. Here the aspirations could be anything that the children aspire – it could be related to work, education, relationships, mobility/ freedom etc

Objective:

* To explore how aspirations differ or resemble between girls and boys.

* To explore the underlying norms and assumptions behind the aspirations of girls and boys.

* To explore the motivation behind these aspirations.

Number of people expected to participate: about 8-12, but max 15

Time to be taken: approximately 1 and a half hours

Preparation required: cards with symbols drawn about the different categories; ample amount of two different coloured cards.

Note to facilitator: FLIP the cards one by one in the following order:

o Paid work

o Education

o relationship

o mobility/ freedom

o giving back to the family

o economic or materialistic

o other

Steps

a) Divide participants into two groups, boys and girls. Give each group cards and ask them to list out ALL the major aspirations that they have. This is an exhaustive, all-inclusive list from all participants – not an agreed list that everyone needs to have. Participants draw/write, one card per aspiration. Boys and girls will be given different coloured cards – for instance, boys may receive green cards while women receive yellow cards.

b) The facilitator then flips the first card, and asks: 'Which of these aspirations are related to paid work?' Participants group these aspirations together and the facilitator places the card entitled 'Paid work' above these group of cards

c) The facilitator then asks, 'Which of these aspirations are related to education? Participants then group these aspirations together and the facilitator places a card above these aspirations titled 'Education'.

d) The facilitator asks, 'Which of these aspirations are related to relationship? This may include aspirations like having a stable relationship, or marrying into a 'good' family etc. Participants group these aspirations together and the facilitator places a card above these titled 'relationship'.

e) The facilitator asks, 'Which aspirations are related to greater mobility and freedom?' Participants group these aspirations together and the facilitator places a card above these titled 'Mobility and freedom'. This includes travelling, breaking barriers, etc.

f) The facilitator asks, 'Which aspirations are about giving back to the family or community?' Participants group these aspirations together and the facilitator places a card above these titled 'for family and community'.

g) The facilitator asks, 'Which of these aspirations are related to economic wellbeing or owning a material thing?' Participants group these aspirations together, and the facilitator places a card above these, titled 'economic or material aspiration'. This includes owning a car, a house, etc

h) Now let the participants move cards around if they want, under the categories above, until they are satisfied. Now ask: Does this aspiration mapping capture all the aspirations you do? Is there anything missing? What aspiration did you forget? Why? (after this question, participants may choose to add more cards to the spread) (This may not be necessarily yesterday, but significant).

i) The facilitator looks at the cards and picks out certain cards (2-3 normal/repetitive cards and 2-3 unusual aspiration cards) and probes the participants on that to generate discussion. Now ask:
   - What aspirations do boys and girls have that are the same and why?
   - What aspirations do boys and girls have that are different and why?
   - Can both boys and girls have the same aspirations listed here?
   - What are the motivation behind the different aspirations
   - Include a discussion on what will enable this aspiration, and what will hinder achievement of this aspiration. What are you presently doing to achieve it?

Ask participants to summarise and what did they learn new. Ask if they have any questions.

iii. Mobility Mapping (access to different institutions and resources)

Objective: To understand access to different resources and institutions by boys and girls separately

Number of people expected to participate: about 8-12, but max 15 – participants should preferably be from the same locality

Time to be taken: approximately 1 hour

Preparation required:

A big sheet of paper – chart paper or brown paper

Ample amount of two different coloured cards or post its

Sketch pens or marker pens

Steps:

a) Seat the girls and the boys in separate group

b) Ask the participants to think or list out all the places they visited in the last month (these could include – school, shop, market, cyber cafe, saloon, health centre, friend's house, a particular street...etc).

c) Draw the places/ institutions visited on the card – one institution per card/ post it

d) Lay out the chart paper on the floor

e) Ask a participant to draw the boundary of their locality in the centre of the chart paper

f) Based on the distance of the institution, ask the participants to stick the post its on the chart paper within or outside the locality boundary.

g) Examine the difference and similarities between the boys and girls

h) Discuss:
   a. who accompanied them on these visits
   b. the distance they travelled and the mode of transport
   c. What time of the day they visit

d. how long are they allowed

e. Are there other places not listed or drawn here that they need to visit but have not – explore the reason.

B. FGD Participatory Tools with Parents of Adolescents

FGDs to be conducted with parents group in the community to understand their perceptions and roles in determining aspirations of adolescents particularly the girls. FGDs would also be conducted to get an overview of what girls and boys generally achieve in terms of education and career and probe the reasons underlying this trend. Participatory tools and exercises will be used to conduct the FGDs - to make the discussions more interesting for the participants, to remain focused on the topic, and to collect specific information based on the objective of the exercise.

There are three participatory tools that have been designed for this purpose - explained below. Each tool will be administered at least twice with separate group of parents to cover at least 30 participants.

i. Aspiration/ Career Mapping (What do I aspire for my child)

Description: The tool asks participants (parent) to think about all the spheres in which they would like their children to excel and list these out on cards separately for the male and the female child

This includes would include spheres such as education, work, home, marriage, hobbies etc

Objective

1. To explore whether there are gender differences in career aspirations expressed by parents for their children

2. To explore the underlying norms and assumptions behind these expressed aspirations for boys and girls.

Number of people expected to participate: about 8-12, but max 15

Time to be taken: approximately 1 hour

Preparation required:
Two set of different colored cards
Two cards/placard with a boy and a girl drawn
Sketch pens

Steps:

a) Divide participants into two groups. Ask one group to think only about their girl child, and the other group to think about their boy child (instruct the two groups secretly).

b) Give each group cards and ask them to list out ALL the aspirations they have for their boy/ or girl child. This is an exhaustive, all inclusive list. Participants draw/write one card per aspiration. Parents will be given different coloured cards – e.g.green cards for the boy group and yellow cards for group thinking about girls.

c) Ask participants to lay out the cards as per the title card displayed by the facilitator

   Note to facilitator: FLIP the cards one by one in the following order:

   o Paid work

   o Education/ training

   o Relationship/ marriage

   o mobility/ freedom/ empowerment

   o success/ famous

   o economic or materialistic

   o other

d) The facilitator looks at the cards and probes the participants on that to generate discussion – some of the questions could include

   o What aspirations for boys and girls are the same and why?

   o What aspirations for boys and girls are different and why?

   o Can both boys and girls do the same things listed here? Why or why not?

o   What are the different challenges that boys and girls face in achieving these aspirations? Are there gendered differences?

o   Are these aspirations for your child the same as what your child aspires? Are there any aspirations that are unacceptable to you for a girl/boy

o   Discuss on prioritizing aspirations for boys and girls

ii.   Flower Power - Who influences my daughter's life

Objective: To understand who influences the girl's life. Decision making roles

Number of people expected to participate: about 8-12, but max 15

Time to be taken: approximately 1 hour

Preparation required:

A chart paper

Sketch pens

Steps:

a)   Draw a flower with the participants as follows:

b)   The 'life of a girl child' is in the centre of the flower. Discuss with the participants and identify four major decisions/ situations in a girl's life. These could include *higher education of the adolescent, career choices or employment opportunities, choice of partner and marriage, mobility and communication, access to resources (eg. mobiles) etc.* Draw smaller four petals of the flower represent four such situations.

c)   For each of these four smaller petals draw a larger petal around it that represents who in the household makes the decisions. The bigger petals surrounding these four smaller petals will represent members of the family - father, mother, grandparents, brothers, uncle-aunts, fathers etc and the girl herself. The bigger petals hence represent people who decide on aspects of girl's life indicated in the smaller four petals. Encourage discussion at every step.

iii.   Access to opportunities/ Estimation of achievements by young adults in the community or locality

Objective: To get an overview of educational and career choices made by children, paths and opportunities generally available to girls and boys of a particular community. To provoke a discussion on what is being aspired by parents and the present level of achievements by children and youth in the community

Steps:

a)   Ask parents to estimate the percentage of children (boys and girls separately) achieving the following in their locality.

b)   Probe and discuss during or after completing the table

Achievement	Estimate % of boys in the community	Estimate % of girls in the community
Completed 8th std		
Completed 10th std		
Completed 12th std		
Certificate course (6th month)	(Also probe kind of course)	(Also probe kind of course)
Diploma course (1 to 2 years)	(Also probe kind of course)	(Also probe kind of course)
Completed Bachelors	(Also probe kind of course)	(Also probe kind of course)
Completed Masters	(Also probe kind of course)	(Also probe kind of course)
Paid work (full time)	(Also probe kind of course)	(Also probe kind of course)
Paid work (part time)	(Also probe kind of course)	(Also probe kind of course)

Annexure 2: Case Studies

1. Kareena

Kareena, 22 years old, has completed her higher secondary education at a public school. She lives in Block 11 of Kalyanpuri with her mother, a homemaker, two younger and one elder brother, a fruit seller. Reflecting on her neighbourhood, she considers it to be one of the most unsafe blocks of Kalyanpuri, where street harassment is rampant. Her family migrated here 40 years ago from Bihar. After her father's demise, her standing in the family deteriorated. While reflecting, she fondly speaks about her father, recalling how she was allowed to partake in certain actions that are now beyond her reach. Her elder brother became the sole decision-maker in her life – controlling the occupational and emotional spheres. The restrictions imposed by him are supported by her mother. For example, professional constraints and pushing to only pursue stereotypically gendered jobs. It is crucial to highlight that Kareena's mother finds herself under her son's control, adhering unhesitatingly to his wishes. Her mother has internalised this and expects Kareena to emulate, blindly obeying her elder brother's directives.

Mobility restriction is one of the biggest barriers in Kareena's life. Her family exercises careful control over her movements and social engagements including selective interactions with non-family members. They restrict her from conversing with any women, driven by their specific criteria for categorizing women as 'good' or 'bad'. This has contributed to Kareena's own bias regarding what is 'socially right'. The imposed mobility restrictions prevent her from moving around freely in her neighborhood or going out for any kind of activity, including attending college and visiting Yuva Saathi Centre, even after being a part of the centre for a year. One of Kareena's aspirations is to pursue higher education, however, she has been barred by her brother to do so, because it involves less control over her mobility restrictions. Her elder brother keeps track of her movements to such an extent that he is aware of the approximate amount of time Kareena can take to go to a few local places. Kareena mentioned how this is an unjust treatment towards her as the same is not applicable to her younger brothers. She feels upset about the unequal division of access to resources as compared to her brothers. Kareena expressed that she wants a mobile phone, go out with her friends, attend college and do all the things that the other girls of her age are doing. Being aware of the restrictions and her position at home, she is ready to negotiate on a few days. However, on some days, this constant bargaining for her wants becomes a tiring task - *"I want to focus on my career. I feel bad that I am living like a prisoner. All the girls around me are free"* (Kareena, Interview, 2023).

During a conversation with her brother, he articulated the belief that an ideal woman should primarily stay at home unless financial constraints necessitate employment. In such situations, choosing a job that allows the woman to prioritize her household and caregiving responsibilities is crucial. He holds Kareena to the same expectations. Just like her eagerness to pursue higher education, she has other aspirations in life as well, such as to be able to find a future partner who is not violent, to have freedom of mobility, to explore new hobbies, to be able to do a job of her own choice, and overall agency to make daily life choices. Despite a lot of restrictions, Kareena has been able to pursue a few of her hobbies by hiding them from her family. She is interested in learning stitching and embroidery, and she has been able to make salwar suits for herself for special occasions. She shared an instance where her family shamed her for wearing her self-stitched salwar suit without a dupatta. After this incident, it became clearer to her that to fit in with her family's definition of a 'good girl', she must get permission for everything.

However, whenever Kareena has expressed her aspirations, needs and wants, she has mostly faced backlashes from her brother and mother in terms of verbal and physical violence. Kareena has shared how these violent instances have made her feel suicidal as well; she has felt that her options in life are limited and hence, there has been a time where she could not see past the incidents of domestic violence. Currently, to deal with her situation, Kareena remains resilient and strategic - she does this by doing all the household chores, by letting go of her wishes, 'follows' all the instructions, tries to 'maintain a good character' and puts in a lot of effort to gain her family's trust; trust that she will not digress from the 'right path' of life.

2. Vani

Vani, aged 18, lives in Block 15 of Kalyanpuri with her parents, one older and younger brother. Her father has a small food catering business while her mother manages the household full-time. Even though she was born in Aligarh, she grew up in Delhi. Currently, she is pursuing the BA Program from School of Open Learning, New Delhi. Her relationship with her family, especially with her mother, has been unstable and it has been a contributing factor in her disturbed emotional well-being. Also, due to this reason, deciding whether to pursue higher education after school was a challenging journey for her. She finds solace in mentally distancing herself from her family and spends most of her time using her mobile phone and with her friends. This behaviour has led others to perceive Vani as aimless, lazy, inactive, distant and cold-hearted. While sharing her life story, Vani mostly mentioned numerous instances of domestic violence. Her experiences included graphic details of physical violence, mostly inflicted on her by her brothers. The violent instances take place quite regularly in her household and they have left her feeling extremely hurt and confused; confused as to whether her family loves her. Vani's confusion has led her to believe that her life is devoid of love and affection, and these are a few reasons why she believes to have a sour relationship with her family. Hence, other than educational and occupational aspirations, Vani's immediate and most prominent aspirations are to be loved, supported and understood by anyone, but mostly by her family - *"At times I feel that I should not get involved in anything regarding my family. I feel that when I get married then I will not come here at all...I tell them also. I tell them that they have made me cry a lot"* (Vani, Interview, 2023).

Most of Vani's aspirations are beyond the realm of education or employment and that stem from the fact that she has been facing gender-based discrimination in her family since childhood. She shared that her family expects her to bear the burden of all the domestic chores, unlike her brothers. They also restrict her from spending time with her friends or outside home, which results in keeping her whereabouts secret, for example when she is going out with her friends. Additionally, her refusal to obey her family's orders resulted in domestic violence. In this context, her elder brother shared that Vani often quarrels with her mother and expresses opposition against doing the household chores which 'compels' him to physically abuse her. This kind of domestic violence was justified by Vani's mother and her elder brother under the garb of corrective actions. Vani expressed that her life is full of various forms of violence because she constantly feels misunderstood. After joining Yuva Saathi Centre in 2019, she believes that the centre is her only safe space where she can express her thoughts and feelings in a candid manner. Vani feels that it is unfair for her to follow the gender roles set out in her family. All she wants is for her choices to be treated with an equal amount of enthusiasm as her family does for her brothers. Vani wishes for equal opportunities in terms of mobility, education, career choices and access to resources.

3. Shanaya

19-year-old Shanaya used to live with her parents and two elder sisters in Block 2 of Trilokpuri. After migrating from Bihar, her father started working as a street vendor specializing in cleaning appliances, while her mother took on the role of a clothing factory worker. Shanaya completed her higher secondary education and, in 2019, began to attend Yuva Saathi Centre to study Mathematics.

During her six-year journey with our community centre, Shanaya has had enthusiastic involvement in various activities, particularly those that allowed her to showcase her dancing prowess and spark meaningful discussions among her peers. Since her childhood, she has constantly been compared to her sisters due to which she has never been able to gain the confidence to pursue her career aspirations. To impress her family, she was determined to be financially independent, and she was striving for it. However, a year ago, a noticeable change occurred as Shanaya became more reserved, maintaining silence and irregular attendance at the center. Many informal conversations with her regarding the shift in her behavior led to nothing. After Yuva Saathi's team's constant effort to have an open conversation with Shanaya, she confided in us about her issues with her family and partner. Sahil, her partner, aged 25, worked as a shopkeeper in a garment shop. They started their romantic relation in 2021. Also, she talked about how her family disapproved of her romantic relationship. When discussing her relationship, she explicitly noted that the nature of their relationship had become sexual as well. She experienced significant pressure from her partner for sexual favors, with him asserting it as his entitlement even when she expressed reluctance. Amidst these challenges, she became the unfortunate target of both physical and mental violence from both her family and partner. When questioned about her consistent involvement with her partner, she explained that she sought solace in their relationship for the infrequent moments of attention and affection that were lacking in her familial interactions. She said she could not focus on her personal aspirations because she often found herself entangled in episodes of violence involving her immediate family and her extended family and partner. Also, she stated that her old aspirations to become a teacher have become a distant dream because of the restrictions and control imposed by her partner. Shanaya conveyed her lack of self-confidence and motivation as she cannot see past her current life situation - *"Mom and papa are keen to push forward their own perspective only. They feel I do not want to understand their views and one day I will be a great lost case for them. No one wants to even listen to me, let alone understand my problems – meaning no one looks at me and everyone wants to see their point of view only"* (Shanaya, Interview, 2023).

However, one day the Yuva Saathi Centre team found out that she eloped with her partner. She said that after her marriage she feels extremely lonely as she has lost contact with everyone around her, especially with friends and family. Shanaya said that the presence of Yuva Saathi centre in her life was the only source of happiness as she had the space where she could express openly. She told us how her partner (husband) 'forbids' her from going out of home and coming to the centre because he thinks that she would start questioning the existing power dynamics of their relationship and become a 'bad wife'. Even these ongoing problems, Shanaya is determined to take stand for herself.

4. Amrita

Amrita, 19 years old, lives with her parents in Block 2 of Trilokpuri in a nuclear family setup, while her extended family members live within the same building. Her mother is a homemaker, and her father works in an electronic shop. She hails from Delhi, where she was born and raised, yet her family's ancestral roots extend to the mountainous region of Uttarakhand. As a young woman coming from a migrant family, where both social support and secure employment hold significant importance, she consistently grapples with the delicate balance between pursuing her career aspirations and fulfilling familial responsibilities. In her family's perspective, there is a strong belief that a woman should prioritize her domestic duties. Due to this notion, Amrita has to face many challenges especially with respect to her mobility, choice of work and aspiration of being understood. She is currently pursuing her Bachelor's degree from the School of Open learning of University of Delhi and has been part of the Yuva Saathi Centre at Kalyanpuri for the last six years furthermore actively worked as volunteer in Yuva Saathi centre. Amrita has a strong will to become a social worker in an NGO. However, while Amrita's employment prospects are limited for roles that demand physical mobility, she faces constraints on her occupational choices. Her family is also of the opinion that a job in the NGO sector does not meet their remuneration expectation. Paradoxically, her family's desire for her financial independence, aimed at providing support to the household, places a contrasting demand on her career prospects - *"Since I became a volunteer, I became alone. I want to support someone else by giving whatever advice I can give. I used to think very negatively. I felt that what am I doing wrong for my family because they don't support me and I mean they don't know anything about my work...my sisters are working differently - they want to get married after doing jobs...but mummy said that I am confused because my sister took jobs after school...and wants to get married, this makes me feel very irritated"* (Amrita, Interview, 2023).

Due to her close involvement in our community centres, since 2019 she has become an individual with her own critical thinking and questions the restrictions enforced by her family and the power dynamics of her surroundings. Amrita's engagement at the Yuva Saathi Centre provides valuable insights into her way of looking at the world. Being financially dependent on her family, she navigates a continuous internal struggle, carefully selecting and prioritizing the battles she chooses to fight. Amrita possesses a distinctive worldview, marked by a constant questioning of societal hierarchies, a perspective that often draws criticism from her family, particularly her mother. Their relationship is characterized by a unique dynamic, with her mother consistently taunting her for her outspoken nature. Despite the challenges, Amrita remains introspective, regularly reflecting on her surroundings and the impact of her choices. While Amrita's family holds traditional views on marriage, emphasizing the importance of a well-to-do family within the same or a higher caste and social class, Amrita is resolute in her own expectations and is committed to pursuing her vision of marriage. Also, her family and friends subject her to ridicule and taunts related to her employment at the Yuva Saathi Centre, which results in the delegitimization of her professional endeavors. Therefore, taunts from the family are daily dose of her functioning which leads to unstable mental well-being. Even after all this she is determined to make space for herself, sometimes through negotiations and discussions and sometimes by staying quiet amongst her family and friends.

5. Kiran

Kiran, aged 17, lives in Block 18 of Kalyanpuri with her grandmother, father and four siblings. She recently graduated from high school and is pursuing her Bachelor's degree from the School of Open learning of University of Delhi. Having lost her mother at a young age, she found solace and support primarily from her grandmother, making their bond the strongest within her family. Her father is the sole wage-earner in her family at this moment. Kiran said that she does not feel the need to roam around with her friends, just like other girls of her age. Instead, she enjoys dedicating her time to her family, particularly with her grandmother, often spent watching TV together. In recounting her daily routine, she mentioned engaging in activities such as studying, watching TV, and cooking for her family alongside her siblings. Kiran experiences a supportive environment and has affirmed that she encounters no instances of violence within her family.

Kiran shared that her family has not imposed any mobility restrictions on her yet. However, she said that she is not enthusiastic about going outside her house. Even when she does go outside, she prefers to do it with her cousin sister. She has subtly conveyed that residing in an unsafe neighborhood is a factor that makes her feel histant to venture outdoors and explore. In contrast, her father and her grandmother want her to go out more often to be prepared for the 'real world'. They want her to take different bus routes and visit places in Delhi. Her grandmother wishes for Kiran to experience all the things she herself couldn't, including higher education and travel - *"Now if you ever go out alone, then only more opportunities will open. Sometimes you should take the bus or something. If you keep roaming, you will find things. So, you should roam around in this area. That is why it is necessary to get educated. Now, I have not studied, hence I cannot read bus numbers. Now if the children get educated, they can see the bus number and travel, right?"* (Kiran's grandmother, Interview, 2023).

Even though she does not have mobility restrictions, her grandmother specified certain limitations concerning marriage. Kiran is expected to marry within her caste and choose a partner from a different locality. She also expressed her preference for Kiran not to wear attire that is considered short or revealing. Kiran recognises the flaws in these restrictions but tends to not problematize them in her context as she does when the same happens to her friends. Also, she has not yet engaged in discussions about such matters within her family.

While talking about her aspirations, she mentioned she wants to be a teacher or social worker inspired by the people around her, especially those present in Yuva Saathi Centre. Kiran has been part of the community centre since 2021 and has gotten inspired to pursue her career aspirations. She receives support from her family regarding her career aspirations as they align with the aspirations they have for Kiran. One of her primary life objectives is to secure a well-paying job, enabling her to assist her father in repaying his debt. In reality, the burden of debt looms consistently in her life. Every aspiration, be it related to clothing, marriage, or travel, is intricately entwined with her father's financial obligations, and her determination to assist in repaying them. She consistently expresses the belief that true enjoyment of life awaits her once her father achieves financial stability. Only then does she envision the freedom to live for herself.

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