

Girls Can!

From juggling to gender equity

By Sasha Kiessling, April 2004

"I can do anything - step by step - just like learning to juggle " says Malati.

Until now, Malati, and her friends Suravi, Drupadi, Anita and Sumati were too shy to even stand in front of their 8th standard class at school. The thought of performing circus tricks with three colorful balls in front of a large crowd therefore seemed terrifyingly impossible.

In fact, until now, Malati had never performed anything new or ever done anything different from all the other girls of her village. But then again, juggling has never been a part of traditional rural Indian village life - until now.

Malati, along with 17 other of her female classmates are members of the group 'Girls Can'. As the name suggests - she CAN juggle and after nine weeks of the 'Girls Can' Programme, she has also learnt that she can do anything she puts her mind to! 'Girls Can' was a personal development programme developed by Sasha Kiessling and Marta Kaszubska, for senior high school girls of Gram Vikas' residential High school at Konkia, Ganjam district. Gram Vikas is one of Orissa's leading NGO's - and runs five residential schools across the state. These schools provide education up to 10th standard for more than 650 of Orissa's adavasi (tribal) children. The children come from extremely remote, rural villages where existence is marginal and regularly threatened by natural disaster, disease, poverty and exploitation. These regions lack basic facilities such as schools, health services, safe drinking water, natural resources, electricity and communications. It is the norm to find Government 'ghost schools' - school buildings lying empty and abandoned unvisited by teachers for years on end - contributing directly to the state's dismal 49% literacy rate (35% literacy for female's). Gram Vikas has responded to the pressing needs of these communities in many ways - one of which has been by setting up district level residential schools - like the one at Konkia, and more than 120 village level primary schools.

Gram Vikas aims to improve the quality of life for all rural adavasi communities and education is one of the core programmes through which it is achieving this. Their unique approach not only educates children in the standard reading, writing and government approved curriculum, but adds its own elements of vocational, creative and culturally appropriate 'life education' - all delivered through a unique 'Joyful Learning' methodology. Gram Vikas residential schools are colourful places of song and traditional dance, thriving kitchen gardens, daily yoga classes, and now juggling!

Despite all this, living away from home for months at a time is not easy for the young children who come to Konkia to study. The sacrifice they make to receive the privilege of education is more than just loneliness and separation from their families. For most of these children - who are often the first in their families to receive an education, spending time away to study also means time away from the traditional family commitments of working in the fields and forests, minding younger brothers and sisters, cooking and cleaning at home. It is for this reason that boy children are more likely to be favored to receive education; girls only make up 34% of the students at Gram Vikas' residential schools as they are preferred to fulfill their traditional duties at home.

Education is recognized as a critical factor in empowering women, and in 2003 Gram Vikas launched a major campaign to promote education for girls, campaigning in rural villages to promote girl-child enrollment and their retention through to high school. This ongoing campaign encourages parents and the community to value education for girls and creates incentives and support mechanisms that free daughters from family and household commitments. This is just one element in Gram Vikas' far reaching gender equality programmes.

It may seem a long way from juggling to gender equality, but Gram Vikas' 'Girls Can' programme has brought the two together in a unique and innovative blend and has proved a powerful tool in their campaign to encourage and support school-going girls. The trial programme was piloted in October 2003, for possible expansion to Gram Vikas four other residential schools across the state.

"We learnt juggling step by step. Each activity we do in life, we will also learn step by step."
Suravi

The 'Girls Can' programme used juggling as the center-piece of its 9 week course, and drew on a range of 'joyful' and interactive games, activities and learning methods that filled each weekly class with fun and laughter. More importantly, however, the course drew on this circus-skill as a metaphor, and as a trigger for the themes and discussion topics of the 'Girls Can' programme; the themes of - building dreams, building confidence and building equality.

Building dreams

"I liked sharing our dreams, and juggling." Anita

Learning to juggle is about setting goals and learning to go for it! 'Girls Can' used juggling to demonstrate that things that seem impossible at first, can soon become achievable when they are broken down into step by step parts. Each week the girls had a new target as they were progressively taught - step by step - how to make their own juggling balls from locally available materials and then, how to juggle one, two, then three balls.

Juggling was also used as an example for recognizing mistakes as 'learning opportunities'. This programme encouraged the girls to try new things and begin to overcome their fears of failure. Learning to juggle was time consuming, frustrating, annoying, embarrassing or tedious for each of the girls at some point in time. Some even thought about giving up. It took commitment, practice and dedication - all essential life skills. Learning to juggle was about learning to pick up their juggling balls each time they dropped them and trying again. 'Girls Can' taught them about turning dreams into goals and finding the path towards realizing them.

Sessions on career planning were used as a real-life practical application for the goal setting abilities they developed in juggling. Students came to realize that step by step, their aspirations for the future could also be achieved.

"I liked that each person shared their dream - to be a social worker, to remove literacy, to cure people, to improve the lot of the community we live in. Each one said that she would go back and do something good for their village. "
Sanjoo (Konkia school teacher)

The Gram Vikas long-term vision in education looks towards graduating students returning home to their villages to become community leaders and role models in the development of their own communities. Each of the girls in the 'Girls Can' group identified an ambition to further her

studies and an intention to return and in some way contribute to improving the living conditions in her village. They each now have the confidence and leadership skills to do so successfully.



Group members write their dreams, amongst the fun and color of balloons and juggling balls

Building confidence

"We played, danced, sang, and learnt juggling. Each person helped each other out. We co-operated." Sumati

As the girls built on their juggling skills, step by step, so too did their confidence and self esteem grow. Pretty soon they were the envy of the entire school as they showed off their new skills to others in the playground. Their sense of achievement was enormous! Learning to juggle was an opportunity to feel good about themselves. In a culture that assumes the invisibility and submissiveness of women, these girls have now had a small taste for the importance of their own self worth.

Each week the group participated in games and problem solving activities designed to build confidence and self-esteem. Through these games they were also able to practice and appreciate the value of teamwork, trust and communication. Through juggling and the other activities covered in the programme, they began to recognize their own individual strengths and personal qualities. As a group they supported, encouraged and acknowledged each other and together celebrated their new skills and achievements.

The programme focused on the importance of support networks and unity between women. This was also complimented by weekly sessions in public speaking. Each girl was able to build up her confidence and ability to articulate herself in a supportive and encouraging environment. *"If there is unity, even things that are difficult can be made possible,"* says Namita. A valuable lesson she will come to depend upon on her return to village life.

Building Equality

"I learnt to speak in front of the large group. We also learnt about sex and gender, cooperation and friendship." Draupadi

Above all else, juggling was used in the 'Girls Can' classes as a metaphor for the many roles and duties that women 'juggle' in traditional Indian society. The group participated in public speaking activities on equality, played many different gender-related games, did brainstorming sessions on the different roles of men and women and did role-plays on the changing positions of women in society. The group looked in depth at the position of women both today and in their mother's era - as defined by society, tradition and culture. They discussed the status of women in the reality of village life, as compared to their status in the law, and how this position has changed over generations.

Change was a powerful theme throughout the nine weeks as the girls looked at the capacity for change in their lives, in their villages and in society as a whole. *"We realized the potential of girls,"* says one participant, Mamata. She and the rest of the group came to realize that women's traditional roles can change and that they can be the agents of that change.

"I've learnt how we have changed since our mothers were young, and the differences between boys and girls. I liked sharing our dreams, and how we can realize them. There is unity between girls. We can start in a small way and then make it bigger and better." Lalita

The pilot 'Girls Can' wrapped up in December 2003. Gram Vikas is now assessing the impacts and documenting the feedback from the participants, however the response has been overwhelming and the idea will be promoted at Gram Vikas' four other residential schools throughout 2004. In just nine weeks the programme proved a unique way to recognize and celebrate the commitments made by senior girls at the Konkia school and has promoted them as role models and motivators to junior girls and the wider community. The 'Girls Can' programme has begun to address many of the issues facing young (adavasi) women in rural India today, building their capacity to overcome and empowering them with goals, confidence and a sense of equality.

Today, Malati, Suravi, Drupadi, Anita, Sumati and the other girls can confidently stand up and speak in front of their class and are proud to show off their new circus-skills to curious onlookers. At Gram Vikas' 25th birthday celebrations in January 2004, the 'Girls Can' team prepared and performed during the cultural programme, singing and dancing to a crowd of 5000. What seemed terrifyingly impossible before, has proved to be seemingly easy for these girls - who today are re-writing the script of their role in rural Indian village life. The 'Girls Can' programme has provided them with the ambition and courage to perform these new roles. The programme has given them the ability to set achievable goals as well as the leadership skills and confidence to realize them. Not only are they successful jugglers, but also they are now confident in the belief that Girls Can!