

Young women researchers draft Charter of Demands for better education and livelihood training opportunities



Abhivyaakti held a public event where young women presented a 'Charter of Demands' to improve education opportunities in their villages.

The public event, aimed as an advocacy activity, was successful in highlighting girls' education in rural areas as an important policy and programme directive for the state as well as civil society.

Abhivyaakti Media for Development, in partnership with ASPBAE and the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), has been engaged in an action-research project on girls' education in Nashik for the past 18 months. Abhivyaakti has been working with girls from five villages in the Nashik and Dhule districts of Maharashtra. Approximately 8-10 girls from each village have undergone training in research, data analysis, leadership, gender awareness, and report writing. The girls have drawn maps of their villages, conducted a census of the girls in their villages, as well as an in-depth survey on girls' education. Based on the data gathered, the girls have also written reports on the education status of girls in their village. One of the highlights has been their effort to compile a list of demands. The demands highlight the plight of the girls and ways in which the challenges can be addressed.

Abhivyaakti organised a public programme on the occasion of the International Day of the Girl. Abhivyaakti invited key government officials from the education departments of the *Panchayat Samiti* (sub-district headquarters) and *Zila Parishad* (district headquarters) of Nashik, along with the Block Development Officer. A few other government officials were also invited from the sub-district level. The guests of honour were two women - A *sarpanch* (village head) of a village where Abhivyaakti has extended the youth-led action research, and administrative officer from the Nashik Municipal Corporation. Abhivyaakti also invited parents of the girls, villagers, elected representatives from the village, and school teachers. Local civil society organisations (CSOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs) were also in attendance. Abhivyaakti's partner organisations, such as PUKAR, also took part in the event.

The event began with a small play performed by the girls, after which they read out their six main demands. The demands were -

1. School up to 12th grade in each village - Along with safe and inclusive access to schools and colleges in neighbouring villages.
2. Livelihood training for girls - Training to be provided in technical and 21st century skills for equipping girls to new and dignified livelihoods.
3. Library for girls in each village - Library as a non-formal learning centre for girls. Space for the library to be provided by the Gram Panchayat.
4. Priority given to girls' health and wellbeing - Regular free health check-ups; access to scientific information about menstrual and reproductive health; free sanitary napkins in schools, colleges, and government clinics; regular provision of a nutritious diet.
5. Zero tolerance to violence and harassment - Girls should be able to move freely and without fear in their villages.
6. No marriage without the girl's consent - Strict action to be taken by the Gram Panchayat against early and coerced marriages.



The young girls presenting their Charter of Demands at the public event in Nashik.



The girls narrated their experiences of research with passion and confidence.

The girls presented their demands clearly and assertively, demonstrating that they had put together the demands after much reflection, personal experience, and evidence-gathering. They narrated their experiences of research with passion and confidence. The girls further gave an opportunity to different stakeholders to understand their context. The audience came together in different groups to deliberate on the demands and their response.

Different influencing groups, which played a significant role in the girls' lives, such as parents, government officials, civil society members, elected representatives, and teachers then engaged in discussions. The groups were presented with the written demands and asked to discuss how they could contribute in fulfilling them. Two representatives from each group were asked to respond to the demands which applied to them. For instance, what was the parents' response to the demand of girls' mobility or no early marriage? What was the response of the education officials to the demand of having higher secondary schools in each village?

The response from the different groups was interesting. While everyone applauded the confidence and the empowering effect of the action research, the response was mixed. The parents narrated their dilemma and anxieties. The education officials talked about how they were already doing much for enabling girls' access to education, especially in the rural sector. The elected representatives promised to make the village safe for the girls. The civil society members appreciated the girls' efforts and promised their support. They also announced that they would collect books and supply it to the *Shodhini* (researchers) girls' libraries, which were opened a few months ago in the five villages.

The chief guests narrated their own stories of struggle, having come from similar backgrounds and how their hard work had benefitted them. The motivating speeches were meaningful and encouraged the girls to continue with their pursuits.

The public event, aimed as an advocacy activity, was successful in highlighting girls' education in rural areas as an important policy and programme directive for the state as well as civil society. The demands put forward by the girls reached out to important stakeholders such as parents and education officials.

For the girls, being able to voice their demands to such an audience was an important milestone. Their hard work in completing the research bore fruit in this concrete action. They felt honoured and were in the spotlight, which is usually never accorded to them.

The issue of how their demands can lead to concrete action is something that Abhivyakti and ASPBAE need to keep in focus and follow up as a priority.



SHODHINI CHARTER OF DEMANDS
ON THE OCCASION OF DAY OF THE GIRL 2017

- SCHOOL UP TO 12TH STD IN EACH VILLAGE**
Along with safe and inclusive access to schools and colleges in neighbouring villages.
- LIVELIHOOD TRAINING FOR GIRLS**
Training to be provided in technical and 21st century skills for equipping girls to new and dignified livelihoods.
- LIBRARY FOR GIRLS IN EACH VILLAGE**
Library as a non-formal learning centre for girls. Space for the library to be provided by the Gram Panchayat.
- PRIORITY GIVEN TO GIRLS' HEALTH AND WELLBEING**
 - Regular free health check-ups.
 - Access to scientific information about menstrual and reproductive health.
 - Free sanitary pads in schools, colleges, and government clinics.
 - Regular provision of a nutritious diet.
- ZERO TOLERANCE TO VIOLENCE AND HARASSMENT**
Girls should be able to move freely and without fear in their villages.
- NO MARRIAGE WITHOUT THE GIRL'S CONSENT**
Strict action to be taken by the Gram Panchayat against early and coerced marriages.

Abhivyakti Media for Development