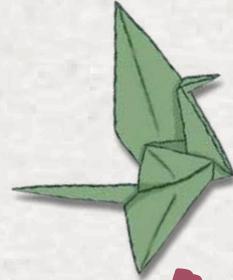


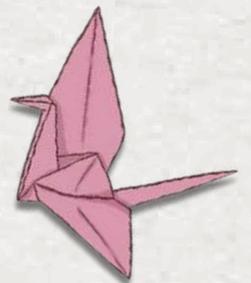
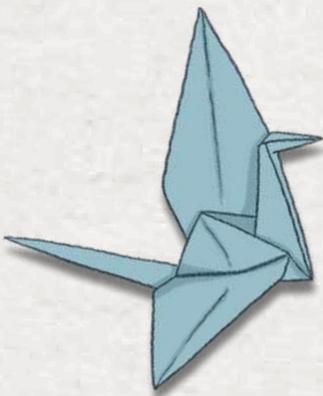


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IN THEIR WORDS:

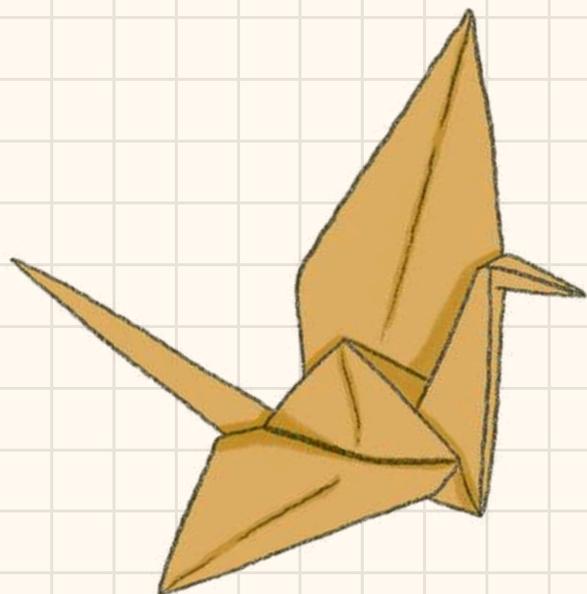
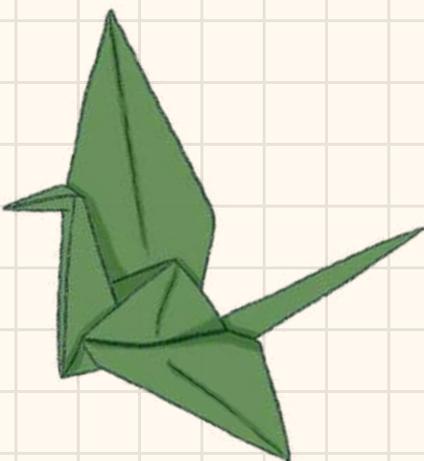
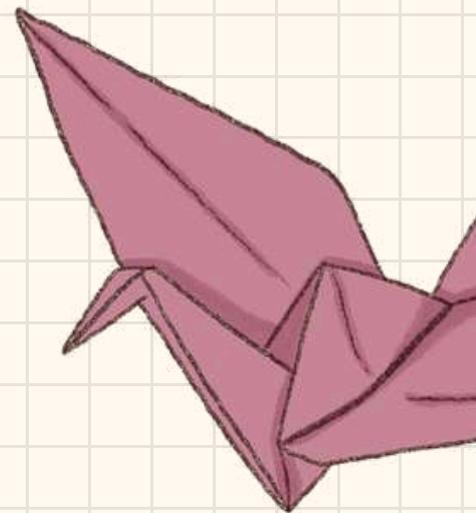
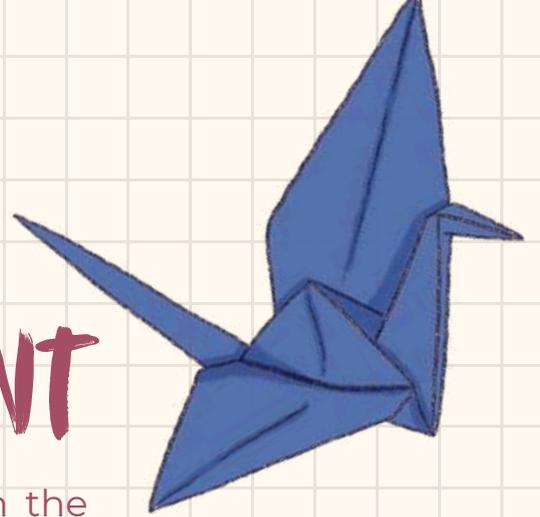
STORIES OF ADOLESCENCE, ACCESS AND GROWING UP

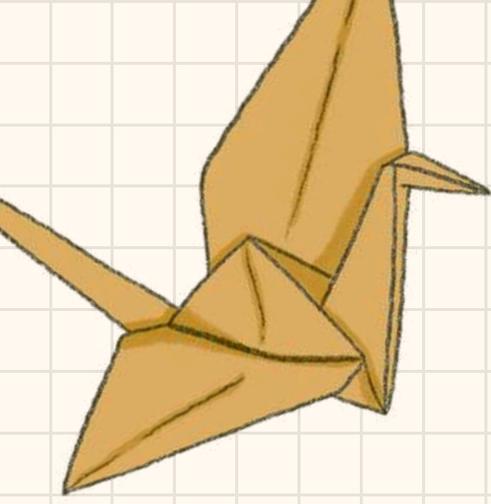


ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research was made possible through the trust, time, and openness of the adolescents, mothers, and community members who shared their stories and experiences. Their willingness to speak about everyday life, challenges, and aspirations shaped the heart of this research, and we are deeply grateful to them. We acknowledge the role of our Peer Leaders, and community facilitators who supported the research process and helped create spaces of dialogue, reflection, and care. Their engagement and insights were central to understanding the social realities explored in this report.

We also thank the field team and staff of Rangeen Khidki Foundation for their guidance, logistical support, and sustained commitment to adolescent wellbeing and rights. Their community rooted work provided the context and trust necessary for this inquiry.





INTRODUCTION

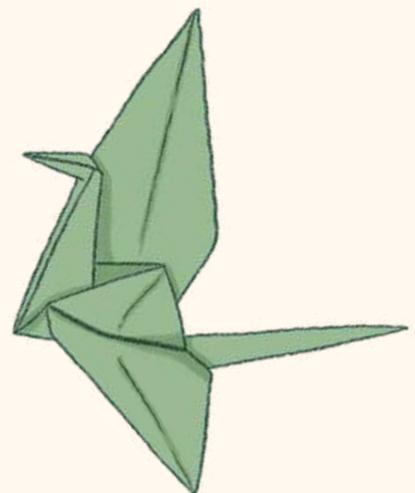
Rangeen Khidki Foundation is a youth led feminist organization based in Kolkata working in the space of sexual and reproductive health and rights with adolescents and youth along with stakeholders like parents, teachers and other adults in their ecosystem. Our work is rooted in gender equity using innovative approaches and models to address inequality and improve the quality of lives of all adolescents and youth.

This narrative enquiry research document draws on stories, reflections, and lived experiences emerging from Rangeen Khidki Foundation's programmes and engagements. Moving beyond purely quantitative or outcome-based assessments, the study adopts narrative enquiry as a methodological approach to foreground voice, context, and subjectivity as critical sources of knowledge. The document seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how young people experience, interpret, and navigate issues related to gender, sexuality, and rights within their social and institutional contexts.

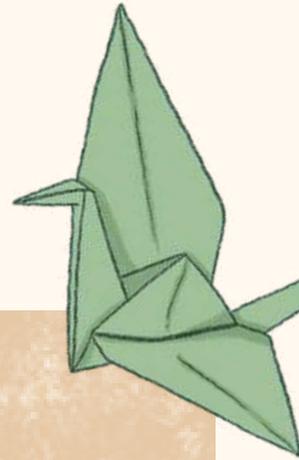
CREDITS

Researcher: Tista Nandi

Design and Illustrations: Shoi



WHY?



1.1 BACKGROUND & RATIONALE

Across rural and peri-urban pockets of South 24 Parganas, in West Bengal, adolescence unfolds within layered social, economic, and cultural realities. These are the six village communities where Rangeen Khidki Foundation (RKF) implements the **My Body My Rights (MBMR)** program, a community-based **Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE)** initiative that advocates for adolescent & youth empowerment through peer leadership.

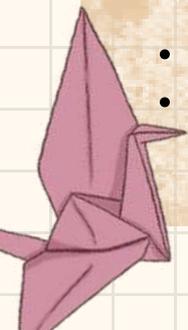
While program teams regularly document activities, deliverables, and quantitative progress, what often remains unrecorded are the daily lived experiences of the adolescents themselves; how they understand their own bodies, choices, relationships, aspirations, and constraints within the community structures that shape them. The initial idea for this study emerged from this gap: the need to pause, step back from project indicators, and truly listen.

1.2 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This research was designed as a narrative inquiry to foreground **the voices of adolescents at the grassroots**. Rather than measuring outcomes, the study sought to explore and represent the textures of their everyday lives, their hopes, fears, responsibilities, friendships, gendered expectations, negotiations with family and community, and the ways they locate their own agency within these landscapes.

Through conversations, field interactions, and story-based interviews, the study aimed to understand:

- How adolescents in these six villages interpret their life conditions;
- What they identify as challenges related to mobility, education, relationships, safety, and bodily autonomy;
- How they imagine their future;
- And how CSE exposure through MBMR influences their sense of agency.



HOW?

2.1 RESEARCH DESIGN: NARRATIVE INQUIRY

This study used a **narrative inquiry approach**, which understands stories as windows into how individuals make meaning of their world, allowing adolescents' stories, language, and lived experiences to guide the process rather than predefined categories.

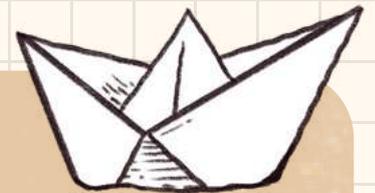
Instead of treating adolescents as data points, this approach recognises them as **narrators**, whose accounts help us understand how structural factors like gender norms, family responsibilities, social environments, peer relationships, mobility restrictions, and aspirations, are interpreted, negotiated, and embodied in their everyday lives.

2.2 GUIDING QUESTIONS

The inquiry revolved around broad, open-ended questions such as:

- How do adolescents describe their daily lives in their communities?
- What challenges and negotiations shape their routines, decisions, and relationships?
- How do they perceive concepts like freedom, safety, autonomy, and future possibilities?
- How do they experience or interpret Rangeen Khidki Foundation's My Body My Rights (MBMR) program and peer-led CSE spaces?

These guiding questions served as an anchor but did not restrict the emergent nature of storytelling.



2.3 STUDY SITES

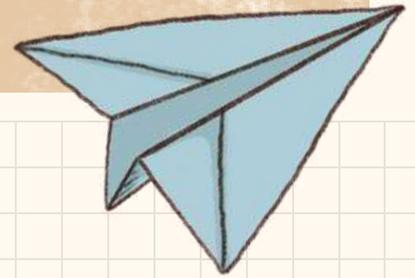
The research took place across **six villages** in the Sonarpur block of South 24 Parganas district in West Bengal. These sites are the primary implementation areas of the organisation's MBMR program. While each village has different cultural, socio-economic, and infrastructural characteristics, they share common themes: **limited mobility for girls, financial precarity, early marriage pressures, school-to-work transitions, and intersecting layers of caste, class, and gendered expectations.**

2.4 PARTICIPANT SELECTION

A **purposive sampling** strategy was used. Communities and adolescent peer groups already part of MBMR were approached. Participants included:

- **80 Adolescents** aged 11–19 (peer leaders + other adolescent girls engaged through field visits)
- **35 Mothers/caregivers** of adolescents
- **2 Local actors** such as ASHA workers.

No real names were used; all identified respondents appear under pseudonyms, while others are referred to collectively as “Adolescents” to ensure privacy and clarity.



2.5 DATA COLLECTION

Data was collected through various interactions with each groups between **July 2025 and October 2025**, using a combination of narrative and ethnographic tools:

Narrative interviews

Open-ended, story-based conversations with adolescents and selected mothers, focusing on experiences of menstruation, mobility, schooling, safety, work, and dreams.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Semi-structured group discussions conducted with adolescents in each community, enabling shared reflections, comparative insights, and collective meaning-making.

Informal group conversations

Naturally occurring conversations in after sessions, or during walks through the village. These spontaneous interactions provided nuance about peer dynamics, humour, fears, and everyday negotiations that do not always surface in formal settings.

Field observations

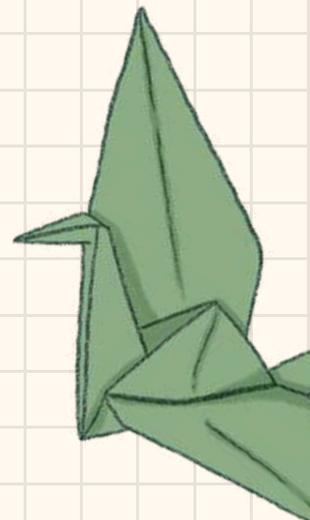
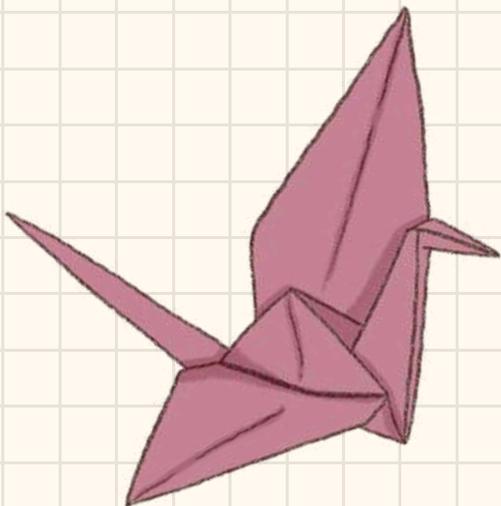
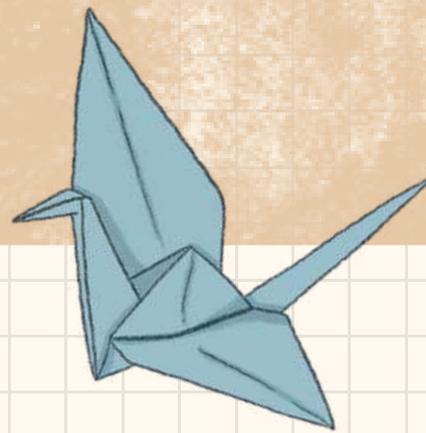
Observations of community spaces, homes, roads, schools, markets, and gathering points enabled the researcher to understand environmental constraints, body language, mobility patterns, and social interactions that shape adolescents’ lived experience.

Reflexive Field Notes

Detailed notes written during and after each visit, capturing interpretations, surprises, emotional reactions, and reflections on positionality, central to narrative inquiry.

2.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

- **Informed verbal consent** was obtained from all participants and their guardians, with ongoing verbal check-ins to ensure continued comfort and willingness.
- **Pseudonyms** have been used for all participants to illustrate key cases, and identifying details (such as age) have been modified to safeguard confidentiality.
- **Voluntary participation** was ensured; participants were free to withdraw or skip any questions at any point without consequence.
- **Sensitive topics** were approached with care, prioritising emotional safety and ensuring that participants felt supported throughout the discussion



VILLAGE SNAPSHOTS

Across the block, adolescents' lives unfold within distinct yet overlapping village environments that shape how they move, learn, socialise, and imagine their futures. These snapshots offer contextual grounding for the narrative stories & themes that follow, highlighting the everyday settings through which young people negotiate gender norms, safety, mobility, schooling, and community expectations. Across the six villages, some are situated closer to Kolkata (city) while others are more geographically remote. Noting their relative proximity to the city helps contextualise the differing everyday realities of adolescents, as access to services, public spaces, and information often shifts with distance. Rather than offering exhaustive ethnographies, these brief descriptions foreground the social and material conditions that form the backdrop of adolescents' stories and the negotiations that mark their daily life.

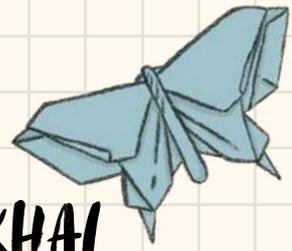
3.1 GOALBATI

Goalbati is a large peri-urban settlement on the edge of Sonarpur, where livelihoods are centred on fishing, farming, factory-linked work, and small businesses. Many households have roots in other parts of West Bengal and neighbouring states like Bihar, Jharkhand. The village faces routine infrastructural concerns, including broken streetlights and poor waste management, which affect mobility and perceptions of safety. Adolescents generally attend the local primary school and view it as a valued social space that offers interaction and a sense of autonomy beyond home. Access to mobile phones varies, and restrictions on girls' movement remain common. Social norms around behaviour and visibility shape how adolescents organise their day, often requiring them to balance expectations with a desire for communication, connection, and leisure. Although public spaces are limited and community judgments are frequent, young people continue to create small pockets of privacy and peer engagement. Their everyday strategies reveal how they navigate the opportunities and pressures embedded in a rural environment that sits close to an expanding urban centre.



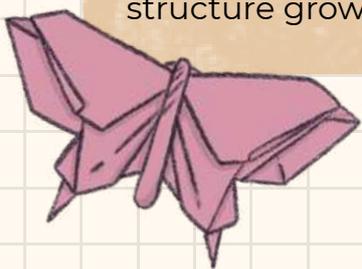
3.2 KOLARKHAL

Kolarkhal is a compact peri-urban rural settlement defined by closely built homes, narrow lanes, and limited civic infrastructure. A single shared water tap, irregular waste management, and an unfinished access road shape the rhythms of daily life. Most households depend on low-wage labour that fluctuates across seasons, with many women employed as domestic workers in nearby urban complexes and many men engaged in local transport or logistics work, including auto driving. Adolescents move through public spaces where community surveillance is strong and concerns about safety are common, particularly for girls whose movement is often monitored or restricted. Schooling takes place in Goalbati as well as in nearby rural and urban schools, requiring travel that families evaluate carefully. Privacy is scarce, and leisure spaces are limited, prompting adolescents to negotiate when and where they can meet peers. Despite these constraints, peer groups and facilitated sessions provide meaningful opportunities for young people to share experiences and articulate questions that may remain unspoken at home. Kolarkhal's spatial density and infrastructural gaps distinctly shape the everyday negotiations that structure growing up in this context.



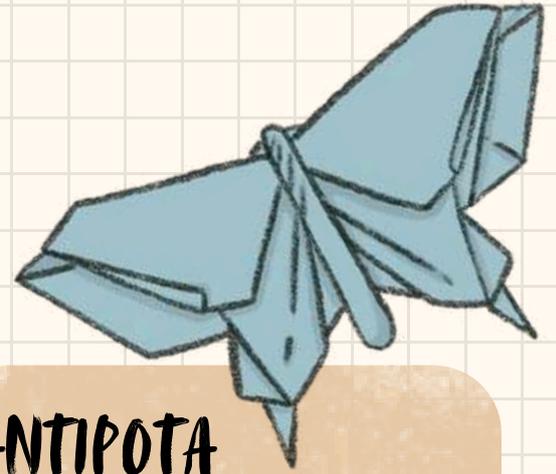
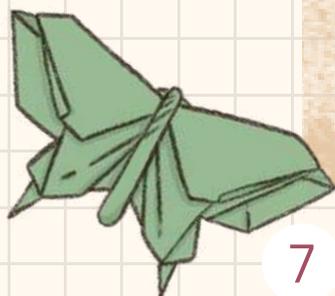
3.3 CHOK KOLARKHAL

Chok Kolarkhal is a dispersed rural settlement organised around large ponds that support small-scale fishing, the primary livelihood for many households. Families rely on seasonal and daily-wage work, and many have migrated from neighbouring states of West Bengal like Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha. Access to essential services remains limited. The nearest government hospital is more than an hour away, contributing to delays in maternal care and routine health needs. Poor drainage and recurrent waterlogging influence movement and shape how adolescents plan their school and household responsibilities. Schooling options are located in the nearby urban centres, and travel requires long walks or shared transport, contributing to uneven attendance and occasional dropout. Adolescents navigate layered pressures tied to financial strain, caregiving roles, and expectations around early marriage. Gender norms, community surveillance, and periodic political tensions inform public behaviour and interpersonal interactions. Within these conditions, young people carve out small spaces for connection, balancing their aspirations with the realities of their environment. Their daily negotiations reflect how structural limitations subtly and persistently shape the experience of adolescence.



3.4 DEARA

Deara is a rural village situated near canal and wetland networks, with closely spaced homes, uneven lanes, and frequent waterlogging during rains. Infrastructure is limited, with broken streetlights, inconsistent electricity, and few public spaces. Long walks to distant schools are common, and poor road conditions often disrupt attendance. Households rely on agriculture, fishing, and informal labour, and economic precarity shapes family decisions. The settlement also includes families who have migrated from Bihar, Jharkhand. Adolescents negotiate layered restrictions around mobility and visibility, especially girls who are often discouraged from moving outside after dark due to safety concerns. Conversations about bodily changes, relationships, or personal dilemmas tend to remain subdued within homes. At times, local health workers encourage families to engage more openly with issues related to adolescent well-being. Peer-group spaces offer young people opportunities to ask questions, reflect on their experiences, and share concerns. These interactions reveal how adolescents balance familial expectations, structural constraints, and their own emerging sense of self in an environment marked by both limitation and slow transformation.



3.5 KANTIPOTA

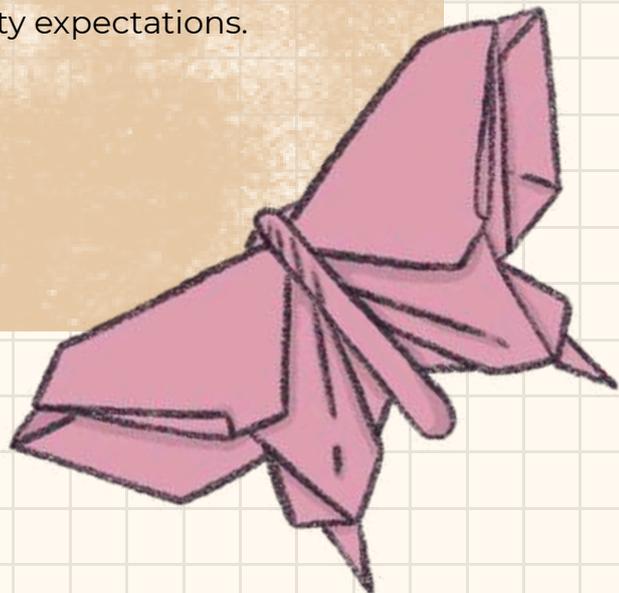
Kantipota is a rural settlement bordered by fields and connected through narrow pathways that become difficult to navigate during rains due to waterlogging and inadequate lighting. Limited public transport means adolescents often walk or cycle long distances to reach schools or nearby markets. Households engage in agricultural labour, domestic work, child care (nanny work), nursing, fishing, and daily-wage jobs, with financial uncertainty shaping routines across the year. Gender norms and expectations around propriety strongly influence mobility and social interaction, particularly for girls. Peer conversations often happen in brief moments negotiated between responsibilities. Facilitated group discussions create openings where adolescents can share concerns, articulate aspirations, and think critically about their everyday experiences. In Kathipota, the rhythms of rural life combine with infrastructural gaps to frame adolescence as a period marked by quiet restrictions and small acts of negotiation that allow young people to build connection and meaning.

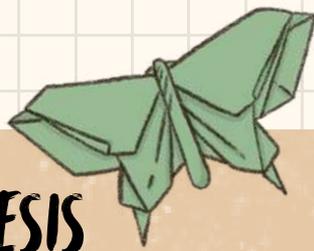
3.6 KHORKI

Khorki sits in a transitional zone between town and village life, shaped by narrow lanes, scattered houses, and an irregular water supply that relies on government taps or private connections. The population includes many migrant families from nearby districts and other states who work in low-wage urban-adjacent jobs such as canteen services, cleaning in residential complexes, and informal labour. Adolescents commute to city-based schools, a journey that often requires multiple transport changes and carries concerns about cost and safety.

Gendered expectations continue to structure daily routines, and topics such as bodily changes, relationships, and personal safety often remain unspoken at home.

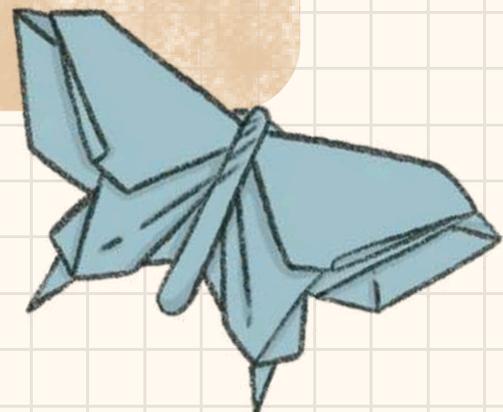
Exposure to urban settings introduces new possibilities and anxieties, creating a complex mix of aspiration and constraint. Peer-group spaces provide rare opportunities for adolescents to voice uncertainties, seek clarification, and reflect on their experiences. Khorki's peri-urban character frames adolescence as a process of navigating overlapping rural norms, urban pressures, and shifting community expectations.





3.7 SYNTHESIS

Across the six field sites, adolescents live within environments shaped by infrastructural gaps, gendered expectations, and socioeconomic precarity, though each village presents its own configuration of these constraints. Limited transport, weak drainage systems, irregular utilities, and poorly lit roads form the material backdrop that influences how young people move, study, and socialise. These shared conditions intersect with social norms, particularly around girls' mobility, safety, and continuity of schooling, creating everyday negotiations that adolescents must navigate as part of growing up. In several villages, women's employment as domestic workers in nearby urban housing complexes further shapes household routines, commute patterns, and adolescents' responsibilities. A notable feature across the villages is their demographic diversity, shaped by steady migration from neighbouring states like Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha. These migration histories influence linguistic practices, occupational patterns, and community networks, creating a social landscape where multiple cultural norms coexist and shape everyday life. Within this context, peer-group spaces supported by Rangeen Khidki Foundation create small but meaningful openings where adolescents can reflect, ask questions, and build connections that may not be available elsewhere. Taken together, the snapshots provide the contextual ground from which adolescents' narratives of agency, vulnerability, and hope take shape, anchoring the stories and themes explored in the following sections.



STORY 1

Mishti (name changed) is 15, the eldest of three sisters, and lives with her mother in Goalbati. Her mornings begin with household chores and a short puja before she heads to school with her neighbours and friends. The school is close, but the walk always feels watched. Boys gather near the park; “they talk and do substances, it feels very disturbing,” Mishti’s friend said, and so the girls prefer staying in groups.

Mishti, as a young peer leader of the Organisation, observes others closely. Learning about menstrual health has changed the way she talks at home; now, whenever conversations turn toward taboos, she brings in what she has learned. “Whenever mother says anything, I am able to speak back with the right information.” The rules have not disappeared. She still is not allowed to touch the puja ghar during her period, but she notices that now she can at least question them without fear.

Her friends once shared how shame and rumours are used to control girls in their communities. “People spread all such rumours about you, they say if you do not get your period you will not be able to reproduce. As a girl you have to have periods.” They also spoke about fear in certain parts of the community. “You will feel scared going there, many incidents of assault, it feels horrifying to travel anywhere now.” People in the community can go to great lengths in cases of inter-caste or inter-religious marriages, Mishti said.

At home Mishti watches her mother run a small business, and she takes a simple lesson. “Even if it is small, you must do something of your own in life.” Mishti wants to keep studying, first school, then college. Some days she talks about becoming a singer, other days an airhostess. For her these dreams are possibilities she allows herself to imagine while balancing everyday responsibilities, community expectations, and the leadership she is slowly growing into. Her days are shaped as much by the chores and conversations inside her home as by the peer group spaces where she listens, teaches, and learns. Through these everyday movements Mishti is becoming part of a small but steady shift in how girls in her community understand safety, dignity, and their own futures.



STORY 2

Sreya (name changed) is 11 and one of the youngest girls in the group that the Organisation works with within Kolarkhal. She moves through the narrow lanes reminding others about the sessions, carrying small responsibilities that make her feel part of something bigger. She recently performed in the Menstrual Health Management event at the local village council (Gram Panchayat), explaining menstruation to neighbours and elders. She has not begun her own periods yet, but speaking publicly about a subject usually kept hidden felt like an act of courage. In the group the girls have begun sharing more openly. Sreya recalls that recently a man had made inappropriate gestures at her friend on the way back from school. Sreya remembered the discomfort in her friend's voice and encouraged her to attend their peer group sessions, saying that learning together might help her feel more confident handling such situations.

Diya (name changed), 15, listens more than she speaks. Her thoughts often offer clarity in the group. Recently her younger sister moved to a boarding school, and the weight of her absence sits quietly on her. For Diya, the peer group sessions have become the one space where she can breathe, sit with others, and feel less alone. She often says that learning about their bodies helps them make informed choices and unlearn the shame that surrounds them.

Saathi (name changed), 17, is a peer leader. Her participation, like that of many of her peers, is shaped by restrictions at home. A new brother in law has begun dictating her movements, and although her mother supports her, she cannot challenge him openly yet. Saathi was also recently harassed near her para (neighbourhood). When others advised her to stay silent and "keep peace", she confronted the boy, "If I stay silent today, they will get me again tomorrow."

The girls often talk about the boys who gather near broken streetlights and call out to them after school. Some lights are intentionally damaged, making the lanes darker and easier for boys to drink or use substances unnoticed. "Our mothers tell us to ignore them, but we want this to change," one of them said. The girls want more than caution. They want change.

Even with these constraints, each girl imagines a different future. Sreya wants to be a police officer. Diya wishes for a life where decisions are her own. Saathi hopes for a world where speaking up is not treated as disobedience. Between school, chores, and peer group activities, the girls build small pockets of safety and understanding. In these circles they learn about their rights and bodies, support one another through fear and uncertainty, and slowly create a sense of belonging that feels rare in their crowded lanes.

STORY 3

Priya (name changed) is 15, the youngest of three sisters in her family living in KolarKhal. All of them left school when their father's tuberculosis made it harder for the family to continue their education, but for Priya it was never only about money. She often says studies didn't interest her much, that classrooms felt more confusing than encouraging. Together, these reasons pushed her out of school, though she sometimes wonders how things might have been if learning had felt different. Now she waits to turn eighteen so she can start earning and help steady the household. "I want to work and be independent. I don't want to get married like my older sister." Priya's friend wants to be a veterinarian and often observes a local vet when she gets the chance, even though home is tense with an older brother who is unemployed and easily angered. "He breaks things when he gets angry," she said quietly. "Ma and Baba can't stop him." Another girl practises makeup in her spare moments and wishes to run her own beauty parlour. Their friend dances on her veranda between chores, even though her family insists that such ambitions are not "proper" for girls. Their hopes sit alongside Priya's, shaped by limited opportunities but kept alive through persistence.



The girls also talk about the things no one explains to them properly. Many remember how frightening their first period felt, how shame and silence made their own bodies feel unfamiliar. Now they share what they've learned "The most interesting thing I learnt was why do period cramps occur, and I love explaining it now to others" , and the belief that "boys should know these things too." A friend of Priya's still struggles to balance what she learned in the sessions with the religious restrictions at home. "They say the goddess will be angry if I touch *pujo* (worship) items." She whispered once. "But is that really true? I feel very scared." Her fear was not only about menstruation itself, but about crossing an invisible line between the "sacred" and the "not-allowed." Despite being so close to the city, these areas have rituals and religious spaces which often draw strict boundaries about purity, and adolescents absorb these cues long before they understand them.

Beyond their conversations, the village's larger problems shadow their everyday lives. Water taps that barely run, forcing families to rely on pond water- making everyday chores feel both necessary and risky as exposure increases to water-borne diseases. Streetlights that stay broken, making evenings unsafe. Political workers who arrive with promises of money for unfinished houses, electricity lines, and relief, only to fade after elections. Many families continue to live in partially finished homes, doing what they can on their own. Still, every week when the girls gather, something changes. In that circle, Priya is no longer only a girl who had to leave school. She is someone imagining a future she can build for herself, surrounded by others doing the same. Their circumstances differ, but they hold space for each other's hopes, learning and growing together in small but meaningful ways.



STORY 4

Preeti (name changed) is 17. Her family migrated from their village in Bihar, a few years ago and now lives in Dera, where she has finished school and is preparing for the medical entrance exam. In the evenings she tutors neighbourhood children, helps with chores, and moves through a conservative joint family where a recent “puja” [religious ceremony] for her younger brother’s well-being reminded her how expectations often fall differently on boys and girls. Even then, her mother’s quiet determination keeps a small doorway open for her ambitions. “If we had stayed with our extended family back in our village,” Preeti often says, “I doubt I would have studied this far.”

Safety remains uncertain. A boy from their school has been bullying girls in the lane for months, even pushing one to stop attending. With no response from teachers, a friend’s father has warned he will withdraw his daughter if it continues. Preeti carries these moments with her, and they show how fragile girls’ education can be. In peer group sessions, the girls talk about things they cannot say at home: a 12-year-old observes how her aunt must follow the aatur ghor custom (the postpartum confinement period, including the dedicated room where a new mother and baby stay in isolation for a time, based on traditional Bengali notions of purity and recovery) revealing how purity norms continue to shape even moments of joy. Others are excited to learn about female anatomy and teach their classmates what they have learned. Before Durga Puja, the adolescents led a mothers’ meeting on child protection. Preeti stood at the front, performing and explaining with a calm confidence that comes from being heard. “Laws exist for our safety,” she said. “And we need mothers who stand by us.”

Her cousin Maahi (name changed), visiting for the holidays, spoke up too, something she rarely is able to do at home: “You always say girls should not do this or that,” she said. “Let us move forward. Don’t decide everything for us.” In that moment something shifted, a mother murmured softly that daughters must be listened to more carefully.



Nearby, two younger sisters from the same peer circle talk about the futures they want, one practicing karate, the other drawn to stitching. Their mother, who faced early marriage and difficult pregnancies that led to multiple surgeries, now pushes her daughters to stand firm. When she worries they're becoming "too outspoken," the older one replies, "If someone says something wrong about me, why should I stay quiet?" Their voices gather around Preeti. Across communities like Deara, learning, safety, and autonomy are daily negotiations. Through her steady persistence and the shared learning that moves between peers, cousins, and mothers, Preeti works toward her own dreams while helping other girls imagine theirs.



STORY 5

Growing up in Kantipota, 14 year old peer leader Shefali's (name changed) day moves between home, school, and the small pockets of time she claims for herself. She described her routine simply:

"I wake up, get everything ready for my mother, serve food to my father, and while my younger brother sleeps, I do that one thing I love the most, listening to songs on FM (radio) until it is time to leave for school. Then I come back, eat, rest, make chaandmala (a type of beaded craft or jewelry-making) , another thing I enjoy, go to tuition at 6:30 pm, come back, help my mother with dinner, and then I sleep." Her rhythm is similar to many girls across the communities. They often say that their days move between care work and school, through lanes that may lack lighting or flood in the monsoon, which can be quite challenging, Yet the open fields and quieter spaces offer small pockets of ease; moments to breathe, talk, and play in ways they cannot always find within the crowded village lanes or homes.

In the evenings, when they gather in their peer circles of the organisation, the tone shifts. They share pieces of their lives, talk about things they cannot say at home, and learn from each other's experiences of growing up. Like other places, people in the neighbourhood often comment on the girls' mobility. "They say we are shamelessly coming here for refreshments and have no work to do," Shefali said. Her mother hears these remarks too. She admitted she once worried about sending her daughter, but after attending a meeting and understanding what is discussed and learnt in these sessions, she no longer hesitates.

Amid these conversations, a quiet solidarity forms. For Shefali, it becomes a space where care, school, worry, curiosity, and hope can be spoken about openly, and where learning comes not just from information, but from listening to other girls whose days look a lot like her own.

STORY 6

Tiyasha (name changed) and her best friend Riddhi (name changed), both 14, live in Khorki. Their days move between school, long commutes and household responsibilities, patterns familiar to many adolescents in the area. Tiyasha's family migrated here a few years ago. Her mother works long shifts in a nearby housing complex, and Tiyasha manages chores and care work at home. She is outspoken and often shares both her joys and difficult experiences. She once described how a relative touched her inappropriately, and how she insisted on telling her mother even when others wanted her to stay silent. She also recalled seeing her minor cousin brother being married off to his underage girlfriend. "No one reported anything," she said. For many adolescents in the community, these silences around child marriage still persist. Tiyasha dreams of becoming an actress but believes her parents would not allow it, calling such careers "improper."

Riddhi's challenges are different. A past accident and years of treatment left her dealing with phases of anxiety. She opens up mostly to Tiyasha. Her mother encourages her to attend the sessions because "she feels lighter when she returns." In groups, she speaks softly and often says she simply wants "everyone to know about our bodies and rights properly," even if she doesn't yet know where this learning will lead her.

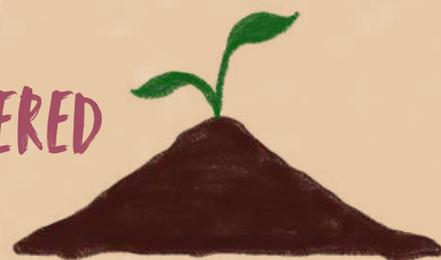
Schooling is difficult for many in their peer circle. The nearest schools require multiple transport changes, and costs add up. A few girls have dropped out. One, who loves baking, turned down work at a beauty parlour because, "My father does not like me going out or working outside." Moral surveillance shapes their everyday lives too. "If we are seen talking to a boy or wearing anything Western, people assume the worst," the girls said. This constant watch affects friendships, mobility and their sense of freedom. The organisation became one of the few spaces where they could talk openly, about their bodies, about shame, and about the rules that govern their lives. "Why do shopkeepers hide pads in black plastic? Every girl bleeds," one girl asked. These conversations slowly shifted their thinking. When a classmate called menstrual blood dirty, Tiyasha corrected her. "She didn't agree," Tiyasha said, "but I still try to tell people the right things." She still feels a little awkward buying pads by herself but is unlearning these silences, even speaking more openly with her father now. She remembers her first period clearly, her mother only said, "When it happens you'll understand," so when she saw blood, "I thought something was wrong with me."



Some of this learning travelled home. A few mothers began asking more questions than usual. For Tiyasha's mother, her daughter's confidence is unmistakable: "I could not stop my nephew's marriage," she said, "but I know my daughter will fight for her own choices." In these small, steady ways, Tiyasha and Riddhi show how adolescents reshape norms while supporting each other as they figure out what growing up can mean.

THEME 1

MOBILITY, SAFETY, AND THE GENDERED GEOGRAPHY OF EVERYDAY LIFE



Across villages, adolescent girls' mobility is shaped by a gendered geography where infrastructure, social norms, and surveillance converge. Broken streetlights, dark lanes, waterlogging, and irregular transport create practical barriers to moving safely, while family concerns, community gossip, and the threat of harassment add further layers of restriction. These conditions influence everyday decisions: when to leave home, which route to take, whether to walk alone, and, at times, whether to attend school at all. As one adolescent noted during a discussion on safety, "I feel safest when I am alone," a response that reflects how public spaces including trains, markets, and even familiar neighbourhood lanes are often experienced as risky. In one village, adolescents and mothers described a recurring pattern of sexual harassment that significantly affected girls' sense of safety. A man who regularly arrived in a car was reported to have repeatedly exposed himself to adolescent girls and women in the area. While the harassment was widely known and discussed within families, there was initial uncertainty about how to respond or where to seek support. With facilitation and collective discussion, adolescent girls approached the local government body (panchayat) together and informed ASHA workers. Following this intervention, the man stopped coming to the area. This episode illustrates how sexual harassment in public spaces is often normalised through silence and fear, but also how adolescents, when supported by trusted community networks, can mobilise collective action. Safety, in this case, was negotiated not through formal policing alone but through local governance and health workers, underscoring the importance of accessible, community-based pathways for redress.



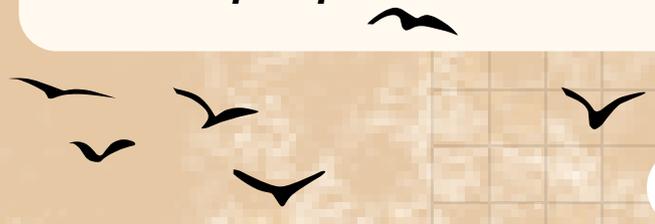


On the other hand, adolescents' concerns about community conditions were consistent across villages: better roads, reliable water, safe pathways, schools, and electricity, improvements they see as directly tied to their ability to move freely and confidently. Yet within these constraints, adolescents continually negotiate small forms of autonomy. They walk in groups, share alerts about unsafe areas, and support one another when faced with harassment. Peer spaces facilitated by Rangeen Khidki Foundation create rare opportunities to talk openly about mobility, gender norms, rights, and bodily autonomy. Through CSE sessions, girls correct misinformation on menstruation, discuss SRHR, child marriage, POCSO, digital safety, and child rights, and even carry these conversations at home and in their neighbourhoods. These everyday acts; asking questions, offering support, holding peers accountable, demonstrate how adolescents navigate and subtly challenge the restrictive spatial and social boundaries around them. Taken together, the patterns show that while structural and gendered constraints heavily shape their daily worlds, relationships, shared knowledge, and peer solidarity enable young people to carve out meaningful spaces of confidence, safety, and participation within these limits.

If streets, schools, and neighbourhoods form one layer of adolescents' gendered geography, households form another, often quieter, more ignored, but equally shaped by power and control.

AN UNSPOKEN REALITY WITHIN HOMES

Several adolescents' and mothers' accounts across villages pointed to domestic violence as an unspoken but recurring reality within households. These experiences were often shared hesitantly, framed as "gharer byapar" (family matters), and rarely accompanied by formal reporting or institutional intervention. The following composite vignette draws on multiple such narratives to reflect how domestic violence is lived, normalised, and navigated within families, particularly from the perspective of adolescents who witness it.



In many households, violence within the home emerged as a normalised condition, rarely named directly; instead, it became part of the background of daily life, sustained through silence, endurance, and adjustment. Alcohol use and irresponsible financial practices by male family members were frequently described as triggers. Women spoke of being physically assaulted, verbally abused, or threatened by husbands and marital families, often in the presence of children. Economic dependence, concern for children's well-being, and pressure to preserve family honour constrained women's ability to seek help or take action. Mothers' narratives further revealed how domestic violence intersected with reproductive choices and bodily autonomy, with limited say over family planning, and fertility control frequently resolved through female sterilisation after multiple pregnancies, reflecting unequal gendered responsibility for reproductive labour. In one account, prolonged violence and isolation led a woman to attempt self-harm, underscoring the cumulative toll of sustained abuse in the absence of accessible support systems. Across accounts, formal reporting to authorities was absent, reflecting fear of social repercussions and limited knowledge about how to recognise violence, where to seek help, or whether resistance was even possible. For many girls, this silence shaped early lessons about agency and endurance. Yet they were not merely passive victims. These experiences informed how they navigated their lives, sometimes mirroring their mothers' silence, and at other times finding ways to speak up, which became slightly easier when they had access to rights-based knowledge; in one such instance, an adolescent girl approached the organisation directly after witnessing ongoing violence by her father against her mother, indicating both the severity of harm within the household and the importance of trusted, community-based spaces for disclosure. Such moments highlight how adolescents often carry emotional responsibility beyond their age, navigating fear, loyalty, and the desire for safety within deeply unequal power structures.

Taken together, these narratives complicate the assumption of the “baari” / the home, as a safe, protected space. Instead, the home emerges as a site where power hierarchies shape adolescents' emotional worlds, sense of responsibility, and early understanding of gendered relations.

THEME 2

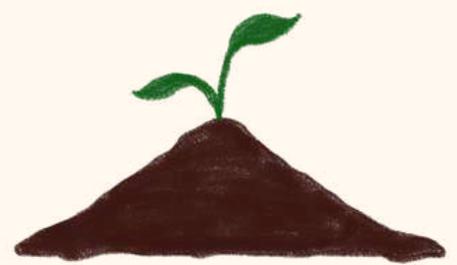
FAITH, MENSTRUATION, SHAME, & THE MORAL BODY

Across the narratives, girls learn about their bodies through silence, partial information, and moralised ideas of purity. Many describe their first period as confusing or frightening, with mothers offering minimal explanation or calling it “dirty” or “impure.” These messages shape everyday behaviour where they can sit, what they can wear, how freely they may speak, and how much they are allowed to understand about their own bodies. Faith-based norms surface quietly through restrictions on worship, ideas of “good girl behaviour,” and unspoken expectations that link menstruation with secrecy, shame, and bodily discipline. Yet the stories also show quiet disruptions to this moral framework. The adolescents question why shopkeepers hide pads, correct classmates who call menstrual blood “dirty,” and gently push back against the taboo while still respecting their faith. One adolescent remarked, “*Maayero nishchoi periods hoy*” [The Goddess must also bleed like us], and others noted that their mothers, who grew up with even less information are now slowly becoming more open. For some, attending the organisation’s sessions created opportunities to separate faith from misinformation and build a more confident relationship with their bodies.

One adolescent said, “*ami aage jantam na kintu tarpur school e giye amar bondhuder bojhai je amader joinange 3te chhidro ache, ekti prosrab korar, areti period blood ber houwar aar tritiyo ti potty korar. Eta amar bondhu jene khub chomke gechilo, ar o boleche ekhane aro shikhar jonno aaste chay.*” [Before I did not know, but then I told my classmate that the female genitalia has three openings, one for urinating, one for menstrual blood, and one for passing stool. She was shocked and said she wanted to come to these sessions to learn more.]

Similarly, a thirteen year old spoke about her comfort using a menstrual cup. *“ami ekhan theke menstrual cups er bepare jante paari, ekhon amar aar chinta hoy na aar ami ja icha tai korte paari.”* [I learned about menstrual cups here. Now I feel very free and can do whatever I want during my periods]. On the other hand, a mother shared that when she began her periods relatively later, neighbours spread rumours that she was “hijra” (a derogatory term often used to target transgender or intersex people). The shame and gossip were so intense that her own mother stopped taking her to the doctor. This moment shows how stigma and misinformation around menstruation persist across generations.

The moral body does not disappear, but adolescents are not passive. With new knowledge and peer support, they slowly push against inherited shame, carving out small but meaningful spaces to understand their bodies with confidence, curiosity, and dignity.



THEME 3

LABOUR, CARE, RESPONSIBILITY, AND THE QUIET BURDENS OF GIRLHOOD

Across villages, girlhood is shaped by forms of labour that often go unseen. Girls wake early to fetch water, prepare meals, care for younger siblings, and support mothers who work long hours. This care work is treated as “natural,” even when it limits their rest or time for school. These responsibilities intensify when families face migration, illness, or financial strain. Alongside physical work, girls also perform emotional labour; managing conflicts, soothing siblings, and absorbing stress. As one adolescent said, “*amar dadar khub raag... amaro raag hoy onek shomoy, tokhon amay onek kotha shonano hoye*” [my brother gets angry very quickly and no one says anything, but when I feel angry, I am scolded].

These burdens sit uneasily beside girls’ aspirations and their need for space to simply be young. Long routines and household duties leave little room for friendships, hobbies, or rest.

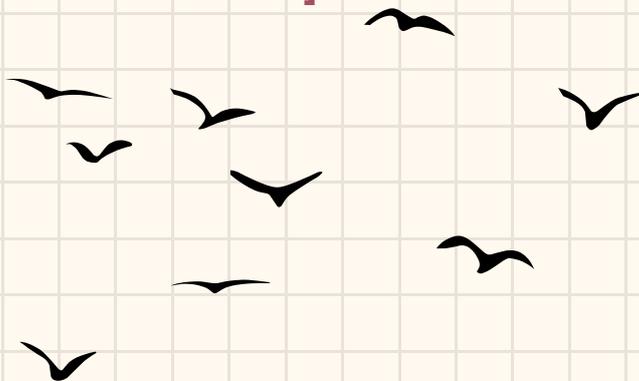
Many carry emotional weight silently; street harassment, family pressure, witnessing early marriage. Yet the narratives also show quiet acts of refusal and care: a mother encouraging her daughter to attend sessions to “feel lighter,” a girl choosing not to ignore violence, peers motivating each other to learn about rights. As one adolescent said, “*Ei jayga ta amader jonno onek moja aar eker opor ke chener jayga*” [The organisation’s peer groups are a place to enjoy freely and understand each other]. These moments reveal how adolescents navigate and sometimes gently resist the roles placed on them, reshaping expectations with insight, solidarity, and a desire for change.

THEME 4

MAPPING ASPIRATIONS THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS, AND EMERGING SUPPORT

Across narratives, adolescents speak of their dreams in ways that reflect both their constraints and their curiosity about the world. Their aspirations are varied and wide ranging. Some imagine becoming police officers, doctors, teachers, or working outside the village. Others dream of being dancers, singers, artists, or simply having more time to practice what they love such as drawing, singing, watching videos online, or resting. For many, access to the internet becomes a small but significant avenue of exploration and autonomy, particularly in village settings where opportunities to participate in public life are limited. Within households shaped by responsibility, surveillance and lack of open stigma-free conversations, these expressions of interest signal how adolescents continue to imagine possibilities beyond their immediate circumstances. These aspirations appear in everyday moments, whether a girl dancing when chores are done or another quietly sharing her hope to live with greater safety and ease.

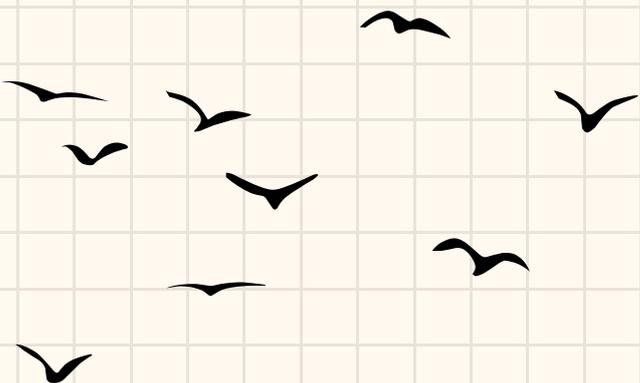
As one adolescent asked, “amader keno shomaj k shob shomoy sune cholte hoy? Amra nijer moner moton ta keno korte parina” [Why do we have to listen to society all the time? Why cannot I do what I like.]



Mothers and ASHA workers often emerge as quiet but significant allies in this landscape. A mother shared, *“meyera jokhon aro jaanbe shikhbe, oder theke amrao jante parbo ar ora nijeder surokkhito rakhte parbe... o jibone ja kichu korte chaye, amra maa babara shob shomoy pashe achi”* [when girls learn more, we also learn from them, and they can keep themselves safe... whatever my daughter wants to do in life, we will stand by her]. An ASHA worker similarly reflected, *“jodi amra nai shikhi, jaani, tahole ki bhabe amader meyeder jonno shothik ta bujhbo”* [if we do not learn about rights, laws, and bodies ourselves, how will we decide correctly for our daughters]. In another account, an adolescent described how her father encouraged her to attend sessions, a rare but meaningful instance of adult support that widened the space for aspiration.

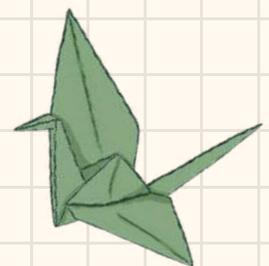
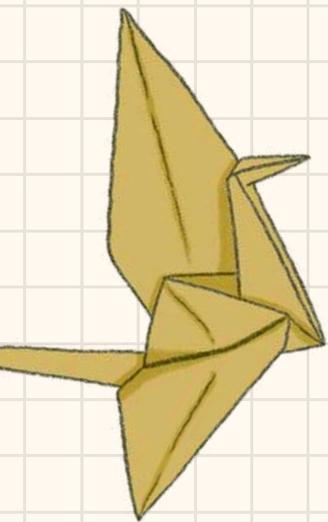
At the same time, aspirations are shaped by intersecting inequalities of gender, caste, and class. One adolescent who expressed that she did not wish to marry spoke, for the first time, about wanting to own a motorbike and travel freely. Her mother dismissed this desire, saying, “gorib ghorer meye hoye eto boro shopno!” [how can a girl from a poor family dream so big]. Such moments reveal how structural and social limits define not only access to resources but also the boundaries of what is considered an acceptable dream.

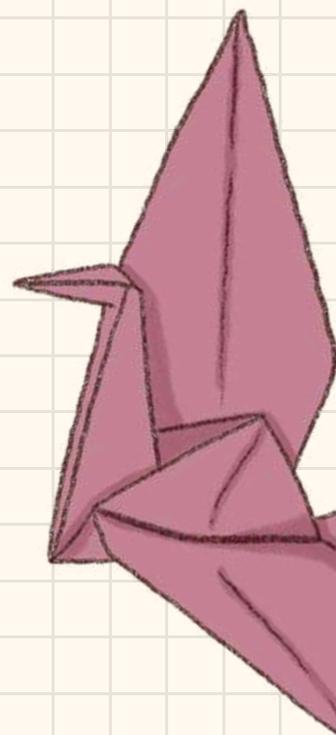
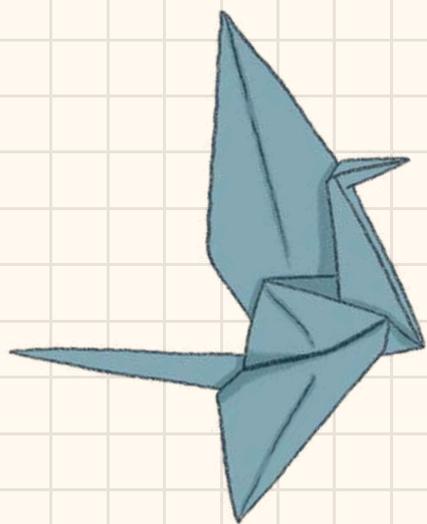
The Peer spaces amplify these shifts. **The groups do not give resilience; they allow the resilience adolescents already hold to surface,** emerging as a network of support within communities and beyond.



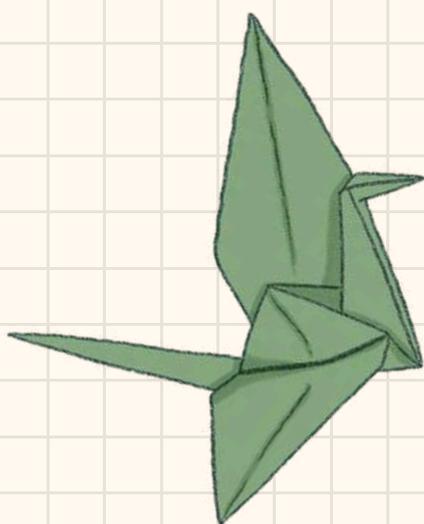
CONCLUSION

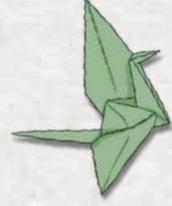
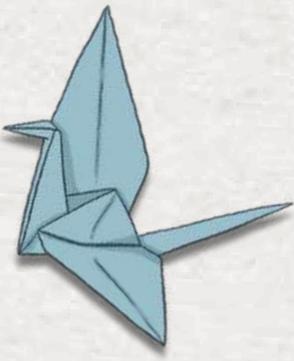
The research shows that adolescents' aspirations do not exist in isolation of the constraints around them; **they are shaped through the everyday ways young people learn to navigate family expectations, community norms, and limited resources. Their dreams emerge in small acts of resilience:** speaking up, learning together, reimagining safely, and demanding greater choice. Rangeen Khidki Foundation's work emerges as a critical space within this landscape. Through Peer Leader Groups and Comprehensive Sexuality Education, adolescents find environments to voice their curiosity and experiences without judgement. These conversations help them recognise that their bodies are not shameful, that violence is not normal, and that claiming the bare minimum; dignity, knowledge, autonomy and the right to not be limited by their gender; is not unreasonable, but essential. Knowledge shared within these spaces shapes & travels through how young people talk to friends, neighbours, and family members, and how they understand their own rights and wellbeing. As one adolescent reflected, **"ami ekhane asi karon nijer khyal rakhte shikhte chai, bhoy na peye"** [I come here because I want to learn how to take care of myself, without fear]. Her words echo a broader pattern across the narratives: agency is not taught as a concept, but built gradually through relationships, shared learning, and collective support.





EVEN WITHIN RESTRICTIVE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENTS, ADOLESCENTS ARE ACTIVELY IMAGINING, QUESTIONING, AND RESHAPING THEIR WORLDS, MAKING ROOM FOR FUTURES THAT FEEL MORE LIVABLE, DIGNIFIED, AND THEIR OWN.





RANGEEN KHIDKI

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