

Shifting Norms: Kabaddi for Girls' Empowerment in West Bengal

Authors

Paulami De Sarkar. Programme Manager – Migration and Child Protection (India), Regional Safeguarding Focal Point (Asia) at Terre des hommes Foundation.

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Summary

West Bengal, particularly districts like Murshidabad, Malda, and the Sundarbans, is grappling with the dual burden of climate-induced crises and entrenched gender norms that limit girls' choices and rights. In communities where early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and restricted mobility are normalized for girls, the Kabaddi for Empowerment programme by Terre des hommes and Praajak is challenging these expectations from within. By introducing Kabaddi — a traditionally male-dominated sport — as a space for girls to participate, lead, and excel, the programme disrupts rigid gender roles and redefines what is acceptable for girls. As girls gain confidence and visibility on the field, they also take on roles as peer leaders, advocates, and decision-makers. Parallel efforts with boys, parents, teachers, and community leaders help question and shift the belief systems that sustain inequality. In climate-affected areas like the Sundarbans, where disasters deepen gendered vulnerabilities, the programme offers a powerful counter-narrative: girls as agents of resilience, not victims. With over 3,982 individuals engaged, the initiative is creating ripple effects — normalizing girls' right to play, lead, and be heard, and laying the groundwork for more gender-equitable communities. Norms are not only being challenged — they are being rewritten.

Problem Statement

West Bengal remains one of the most vulnerable states in India when it comes to child marriage, gender-based violence (GBV), and climate-induced risks. Districts like Murshidabad and Malda report some of the highest child marriage rates in the country — 61.3% and 56.8% respectively — according to the National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5). These figures far exceed the national average of 23.3%, underscoring systemic vulnerabilities rooted in poverty, migration,

and entrenched gender norms (NFHS-5, 2021). In Siliguri, a key migration corridor, early marriage and trafficking risks persist due to fragmented family structures and weak protective mechanisms. The Sundarbans, among the world's most climate-vulnerable regions, faces recurring cyclones, sea-level rise, and salinization of farmland. The region is severely affected by climate change, with frequent cyclones, flooding, and coastal erosion disrupting everyday life. According to data, over 46% of households now include at least one member who has migrated — typically within the region or to nearby urban centers — to engage in informal and low-paid labor. This pattern of precarious internal migration is not only a survival strategy, but also a major source of vulnerability for children and adolescents.

In this context, migration disproportionately affects children and adolescents, disrupting their education and exposing them to child labor, early marriage, and mental health issues.

Unfortunately, girls and young women from migrant communities face heightened vulnerability to gender-based violence, including sexual abuse, exploitation, and early marriage. Due to deep-rooted patriarchal norms, they are often forced to drop out of school to shoulder domestic responsibilities or to contribute economically. Many are trafficked with false promises of a better life, then forced into marriage, domestic servitude, or prostitution. However, it is important to note that boys, too, are impacted, especially when they are compelled to support their families at the expense of their education.

In the region, existing protection systems are either inadequate or inaccessible, and local child protection mechanisms are largely ineffective. Social services often fail to reach those most in need, leaving children and adolescents, especially girls, from migrant families at significant risk. Therefore, addressing these vulnerabilities is urgent to break the cycles of discrimination, violence, and marginalisation in this high-risk context.

About the program

In 2018, Terre des hommes (Tdh), UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), and the Olympic Refugee Foundation (ORF) developed Sports for Protection Toolkit to better understand the role that sports can play in the protection and wellbeing of refugees and internally displaced young people. In 2019 Tdh in India with their local partner, Praajak Development Society, contextualized the toolkit as “Kabaddi for Empowerment” and initiated The project titled *“Kabaddi – Empowering Youth through Sport in West Bengal”* programme. In Phase I (2019–2022), the initiative was first piloted in Malda, Murshidabad, and Siliguri, reaching 1,620 girls and 1,080 boys with the aim of empowering them to resist gender-based harmful practices. Building on its success, Phase II (2023–2025) expanded the Kabaddi for Empowerment project to three highly vulnerable blocks (Gosaba, Kultali and Pathar Pratima) in the Sundarbans, where climate risks and gender inequalities intersect, reaching 1282 children.

The programme, targets primarily youth aged 12 to 18, living in highly exposed districts with a particular focus on girls. They mobilise a sport-based approach, using Kabaddi (a traditional male-dominated contact sport) to promote empowerment, social cohesion, and psychosocial wellbeing of girls and boys who participate in structured sport sessions and thematic workshops on gender, child rights, and protection. These activities are complemented by community engagement initiatives involving parents, teachers, and local protection actors.

The primary objective is to create an enabling environment in which young people who are at risk of or affected by migration can drive the most significant change in their own lives, meaning the realisation of their rights and freedom from gender-based discrimination, exploitation and abuse.

To address structural inequalities, the program also engages families, informal community leaders, and adolescent peer leaders. Around 250 youth leaders are trained to advocate for child protection, gender equality, and access to a safe environment. Teachers, frontline workers, and child protection committee members, all receive training on how to identify risks, support victims, and implement inclusive protection systems.

In total, over 10,000 individuals (children, adolescents, caregivers, and professionals) have been reached directly or indirectly. The project has strengthened local mechanisms to address gender-based violence and created inclusive, community-based networks that support safe migration. By mainstreaming gender equity and child protection through sport, the program has contributed to reducing school dropout rates, improving girls' self-esteem, and shifting attitudes toward gender norms. A strong example of this shift can be seen in the testimony of a young boy who shares: *"At first, I teased the girls and didn't let them play. But thanks to the sessions, I learnt that the girls also had the right to play. I realised that it was me who was stopping them, so I made sure they had the chance to play. Now I help clean up the playground."*

Note that, while the program does not explicitly integrate sexual and reproductive health services within health systems, it promotes awareness on related rights and connects youth to local support services when needed.

Outcomes

Kabaddi practice has evolved as a safe space for the participants and coaches to learn, share, and grow. Physical and emotional safe spaces created through the Play-Reflect-Play practiced in this project have enabled transparent behavior and communication among group members and activity facilitators. The game has improved physical fitness and agility on one hand and a sense of values, discipline, rules, fair play, and defense among girls on the other. It has increased their understanding and respect for teamwork and camaraderie and made them more confident. Understanding and experiencing frustration and success together are key elements in this process of empowerment. The clear physical barriers, entrances and exits along with methods of effective safeguarding and critical analysis learnt through the game have direct relevance with real life situations faced by girls. Several instances of objection to abuse faced by these girls were reported after they became confident about their ability to protest. Observations were also made about how girls from different religions played the game together and shared learnings.

Kabaddi revealed itself to be the ideal sport. It can be played in a small open ground which is easily available in any neighbourhood. It also does not require any expensive accessories. It increases mobility and access to public spaces. It also equips the girls to face and prevent challenging and uncomfortable situations. More importantly perhaps, the community is also familiar with the game and approves of their girls playing it.

In addition, incidences of girls getting selected for district and state matches and travelling outside for sport has increased aspirations of many to play the game seriously and consider the sport as a profession. We can thus, capitalize on Kabaddi, as a sport that can encourage gender transformation by building a network for the girls who feel safe, connected, worthy, respected and hopeful. One participant shared: *"These days, girls barely leave the house, but thanks to sport, we can go to different places."*

This increase in physical and social mobility has enabled girls to engage with authority figures, negotiate access to public schemes and entitlements, and express their concerns. A participant explained: *"We explained to our teachers why we wanted to play sport."* These shifts are especially relevant in a context where early marriage, trafficking, and gender-based violence remain

persistent risks. While no quantitative data exists on a reduction in these practices, the programme has enabled youth to lead mural campaigns, street theatre, and public marches addressing child marriage and gender norms.

Notably, these initiatives have influenced local authorities. Members of the Panchayat who were initially hesitant now attend children's events and, in several cases, have taken action to stop child marriages. According to internal reports, cases reported by the youth are now forwarded to the police, ensuring legal follow-up. In parallel, 250 youth leaders have been trained to support other children, lead awareness-raising activities, and participate in protection committees. These developments signal a growing recognition of girls as rights-holders, and a shift towards more responsive and inclusive protection systems at the community level.

Successes

While the outcomes reflect structural change, it is the personal stories that show the depth of transformation. One girl recalled: *"We performed a play about child marriage at the Panchayat. People listened because they saw we weren't just children playing — we were making a difference."* Her words reflect how the programme has enabled girls to become visible and respected actors in public life.

Another participant shared: *"At first, I was just curious about Kabaddi. Now I travel, I speak, and I want to teach other girls."* This journey from curiosity to leadership shows how sport can shift not only perceptions but life trajectories.

The impact of these changes extends beyond the children themselves. One mother said: *"I gained financial independence by opening a small shop. Before, I used to depend on my husband for money, but now I can contribute to my daughter's dreams."* This statement, inspired by her daughter's commitment to Kabaddi, shows how girls' empowerment can also reshape the lives of women around them. This was not an isolated case, a grandmother also shared how her views changed: *"In observing her enthusiasm, I changed my mind about women participating in sport and entrepreneurship. Inspired by this, I helped my daughters-in-law set up a food stall."* This signals a strong and tangible intergenerational change.

Altogether, these moments, while individual, are not isolated. They reflect how creating safe space, entertaining dialogues, and community activities, in this instance, Kabaddi, can reshape norms not only among children, but across households and generations.

Challenges

Gender Norms Restricting Girls' Participation: Deep-rooted patriarchal norms prevented many girls from participating freely in Kabaddi or study sessions. Families — especially in conservative communities — worried about safety, reputational risk, and academic distraction. Overcoming these beliefs required sustained engagement with parents and local influencers.

Low Involvement of Fathers: Fathers were notably less involved in supporting girls' participation in the project. This was often due to patriarchal attitudes, where caregiving and gender discussions were seen as the mother's role, and due to peer influence, that discouraged men from actively engaging in what are perceived as "women's or children's issues." Their disengagement limited the potential for broader family-level transformation.

Safety Concerns in Public Spaces: Although many girls reported increased confidence, they continued to feel unsafe in their neighborhoods due to public alcoholism, gambling, poor lighting, and the threat of harassment. These concerns affected mobility and limited opportunities for participation beyond home or school.

Limited Community Infrastructure: A shortage of safe, accessible public spaces hindered regular Kabaddi practices and group meetings. In many project locations, especially in urban slums or congested areas, girls had to travel far for open spaces, often facing resistance or logistical barriers.

Lack of Female Decision-Making Power at Home: Most girls still lacked authority in household decision-making, which remained dominated by fathers or both parents. This imbalance limited their autonomy despite improved awareness of rights and legal protections.

Unequal Access to Future Opportunities: Despite rising aspirations for education, sports, and livelihood, children reported few local avenues for skill-building, employment, or entrepreneurship, particularly for girls. While awareness grew, structural constraints remained.

Inconsistent Participation in Civic Structures: Although the project promoted child leadership and collective action, sustained involvement in community platforms like youth clubs, school cabinets, and peer support networks required continuous mentoring and follow-up.

Lessons & Recommendations

- **Trust Building Takes Time:** Sustained engagement through local animators and youth leaders helped overcome community resistance, especially toward girls' participation in sports and discussions on gender equality.
- **Sports as a Gateway for Change:** Kabaddi proved to be a highly effective tool to engage children and communities. What began as a recreational activity evolved into a platform for dialogue on gender norms, leadership, and rights.
- **Intergenerational Change is Possible:** Involving parents — particularly mothers — in gender sessions and Kabaddi matches created pathways for broader social transformation. Many women began asserting their agency, inspired by their daughters' participation.
- **Child-Led Advocacy Drives Impact:** Youth leaders effectively led social action events, advocated for services, and facilitated referrals — leading to prevention of early marriages, access to education and health care, and strengthened child protection.
- **Adaptability is Key in Climate-Vulnerable Zones:** Due to recurring flooding and cyclones in the Sundarbans, the project had to shift fluidly between developmental programming and humanitarian response. This demanded flexibility in planning, staff training, and community engagement. Activities had to pivot to address immediate needs — such as safety, shelter, or access to healthcare — before resuming long-term development goals.

- **Small-Scale, Localized Activities Ensure Continuity:** When large gatherings were not possible (due to weather, elections, or political disruptions), small group activities helped sustain engagement without compromising safety.
- **Institutional Collaboration Strengthens Sustainability:** Stronger, consistent partnerships with Panchayats, schools, and local child protection committees are essential to institutionalize gains made through the project and ensure long-term support for children's rights.

References

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