

Challenging the Narratives

A Comparative Study to Understand Girls' Perspectives on Gender Transformative Safe Spaces and Agency in Bhutan and India

"I wish to have a superpower and create a new world. I want to change rules and implement new rights."
- BCW, Raghunathapally, Warangal

"When someone judges us, we will raise our voice and stand up for each other."
- GHS NRR Puram, Borabanda

"The rains are beautiful until our homes are flooded."
-GHS Secunderabad

"Want to become The Pema (queen) of Bhutan."
- Wangsel Institute for Deaf

"Together, women must support each other."
-Drugyel Central

"Actions that we want to take: choosing a good leader through voting, creating our own rights that makes us independent. Creating NGOs."
- BCW, Bacchanapet



"Safe space means being united with confidence without judgements where humans as well as animals feel safe and girls can do anything they like."
– ELC School, Thimphu

Executive Summary

VOICE-4 builds gender transformative safe spaces that empower adolescents and youth. Through various feminist leadership curricula deployed at residential and day camps, they aim to equip girls with the knowledge to develop their agency. VOICE-4 empowers boys to help build a gender equal society. The organisation also has programmes to mentor young women, promotes solutions that foster gender equality, and endeavours to influence gender policy.

The research effort to study gender equity, agency and the impact of climate change on these aspects in Telangana, India and Bhutan was led by researchers Anusha Bharadwaj and Thinley Choden. Respondents were girls in day schools and residential schools in both countries (both urban and rural schools), including a section of girls with speech and hearing impairment in Bhutan.

Key Findings

✚ Safe Spaces

- These were seen as an environment to express openly and honestly without inhibitions, as peer platforms to share knowledge, thoughts and emotions and gain support and solidarity.
- The girls wished to allow people in need of support and guidance, who respect the voices of girls and those who can be trusted, into their safe spaces.
- Boys, people with negative emotions and judgemental attitude, those with a conventional mindset, violent people prone to creating conflict and discrimination should not be allowed into safe spaces, according to the girls.
- Actions that the girls want to take in these safe spaces - create awareness among people, work towards education and gender rights, do advocacy to reduce air pollution, use of plastics and indiscriminate cutting of trees.
- They intend to support each other in a safe space by understanding, sharing knowledge, solving each other's problems, communicating well, building each other's confidence through encouragement, showing respect and non-judgemental attitude.

✚ Agency – How they see their roles as changemakers

'Myself' zone
Many of the girls have mentioned that they want to be a princess or a queen or possess a superpower. They want to use this superpower to address social issues such as food security and also to develop their countries.

'My Circle' zone
Other than the expected parents, friends and immediate relatives, girls from the urban Telangana school and the Bhutan schools have included Korean boys, KPop luxurious house, other countries, Chinese television shows pointing to possibly higher media exposure.

'My Community zone
Telangana girls have included community helpers (police officers, army, farmers, doctors, teachers) while girls from a Bhutan school have included many spaces such as social media, environment, tuition and not just their homes and neighbourhood.

Climate related impact

Body and Health

Both girls from India and Bhutan have reported skin irritation, indigestion, throat pain, and menstrual issues because of extremes in climate.

Home and Family life, School and Learning

Increased domestic responsibility, loss of learning because of missed school days and damaged home and school infrastructure are common fall-outs of climate events for both sets of girls.

Emotions and Health

Fear, anger, stress and mood swings are experienced, along with a sense of strength and resilience that they will endure.

Safety and Freedom

Both girls from India and Bhutan have reported skin irritation, indigestion, throat pain, and menstrual issues because of extremes in climate.

Agency and Strength

They see these aspects in their ability to help others and contribute to society.



Some contrasts

- The girls from Telangana seem well informed about the actions, policies and legislations pertaining to the themes of gender justice, climate change, health and education. The understanding of agency and strength is rather high amongst the girls in India, while in Bhutan it is largely perceived by the girls in terms of physical ability. These variations could be due the Telangana girls having participated in VOICE-4 sessions earlier.
- Girls in Bhutan have also used the words ‘toxic’ and ‘sexist’ as descriptors for those who are not allowed in the safe space, possibly due to wider exposure to such language on social media and other platforms.
- The contrasts between aspirations of girls with disabilities and those without are fairly stark. The former have conservative aspirations about their professions (teacher, shopkeeper, baker) while the girls without disability seem to have given free rein to their dreams (dancing, sports, model, doctor).
- An examination of the responses from girls from rural schools and those from urban schools in Telangana show that the former have many more elements in their circle, possibly indicating a more inclusive outlook and a larger day-to-day social circle.



✚ Recommendations

- An audit of school and community toilets could give objective data which in turn could be the catalyst to better infrastructure in toilets for girls (presence of running water, doors, bolts, sanitary pad vending machines).
- Both girls from India and Bhutan do not see boys entering their 'safe space'. Collaborations with other organisations working with boys and men in the same geographies could enable conversations (on masculinity, share of household work, agency for girls and women) with brothers and fathers of the girls who have participated in the research.
- Researchers can work with the respective institutions to advocate for menstrual awareness, support and comfort for schoolgirls. Another solution could be the advocacy for menstrual leave for girls.
- The girls can be equipped with skills for climate resilience and adaptation - kitchen gardens at home (drumstick trees for example) to tackle food insecurity during floods or painting house and school roofs to reduce heat.
- Engaging in localised climate action by volunteering in initiatives by the state or other NGOs in the region will give the girls a much-needed sense of acting on problems.
- Girls with disability should be given tailored communication on boundaries, safe touch, first response and redressal mechanisms. Organisations who focus on children with hearing impairment could be partners for this.

Objectives

As part of their ongoing work in gender transformative safe spaces for adolescent girls, two practitioners from India and Bhutan decided to delve into a study in contrasts – girls in Telangana and Bhutan.

With support for CRIF, the researchers aimed to investigate the similarities and differences in agency for girls and women by nature of difference in lineage in society and social development. The attempt was to localize and understand national, global data and trends from a girls' perspective and to map what they think, feel and are empowered to do or not. The study focused on the empowerment of adolescent girls', particularly their access to and perceptions of gender-transformative safe spaces (GTSS). An additional perspective explored was the impact of climate change in these spaces and, subsequently, on the lives of the girls.

Methodology

Interactive and creative workshops were conducted at the school premises. Tools such as vision boards and role-playing were used to encourage self-expression. Activities included storytelling, visual mapping and group discussions.

+ Respondents

Bhutan

Government run with British collaboration, co-educational

Drukgyel Central School, Paro, Drukgyel – 35 participants

Private run, co-educational

Wangsel Institute for the Deaf, Paro, Drukgyel – 31 participants

ELC School Thimphu – 31 participants



India (Telangana)

Government run, girls' schools

BCW Bachannapet, Warangal – 27 participants

BCW Ragunathpally – 30 participants

GHS NRR Puram, Borabanda – 23 participants

GHS Kavadiguda, Secunderabad – 21 participants

The schools were chosen carefully to draw participants from diverse backgrounds. Wangsel Institute for Deaf offered the possibility of exploring different perspectives of girls with disability. All the girls from Telangana had been a part of earlier VOICE-4 workshops. Some participants from Bhutan had done Bhutan Climate Literacy and Action workshops.

Background

Bhutan and India present contrasting cultural backdrops while they remain in close geographic proximity.

India ranked 130 out of 193 countries in the 2025 Human Development report.[1] India's Human Development Index value is 0.685, in the medium human development category (high human development index ≥ 0.700). Bhutan ranked 125th with an HDI score of 0.698.[2] Bhutan is at a significantly better position in the Global Gender Gap Index – In 2025, India is at 131 out of 148 countries, while Bhutan is at 119 (Bhutan has improved from 124 in the year 2025 while India seems to have slid down from 129 in the year 2024). However, Bhutanese women continue to be disproportionately burdened by care work and unpaid household chores, restricting their participation in policymaking, leadership development, and entrepreneurial opportunities, thereby hindering their overall empowerment.[3]

Bhutan was an absolute monarchy until the 1950s, when a systematic divestment of power began, culminating in the country becoming a democratic constitutional monarchy in 2008 with the monarch as the titular head of state.[4] Contrastingly, the Telangana state, as part of the erstwhile Hyderabad State and then undivided state of Andhra Pradesh, and subsequently since 2014, an independent state, has been part of democratic governance since 1947. The state religion of Bhutan is the Drukpa Kargyupa sect, a branch of Mahayana Buddhism,[5] and the people are deeply involved in the tenets. Telangana, as part of India, does not have a state religion.[6] The major religions practised are Hinduism and Islam. Interestingly, Buddhism is said to have been a dominant religion until the 8th century AD.

Areas that the girls come from, in Bhutan and Telangana are climate vulnerable (see table below), however, a point to note is that the Bhutanese locations have much lower adaptive capacity (capability to cope with climate change).

DISTRICT	EXPOSURE	SENSITIVITY	ADAPTIVE CAPACITY	VULNERABILITY INDEX
Warangal	0.28	0.69	0.34	0.239
Hyderabad (includes Secunderabad)	0.35	0.93	0.51	0.274
Paro	0.18	0.13	0.18	-0.12
Thimphu	0.14	0.10	0.25	0.00

Sources: https://bfl.org.bt/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/CVCA-Assessment-Report_final.pdf
Source: https://ncdc.mohfw.gov.in/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/28_SAPCCHH_Telangana_21-10-24.pdf

[1] https://www.undp.org/india/press-releases/indias-human-development-continues-make-progress-ranks-130-out-193-countries

[2] https://www.bbs.bt/229140/

[3] https://www.researchgate.net/publication/394302537_Shared_tasks_but_unequal_burdens_Gender_agriculture_and_empowerment_in_Bhutan

[4] https://www.britannica.com/place/Bhutan/Government-and-society

[5] https://www.mfa.gov.bt/rbedelhi/culture/

[6] https://surveyofindia.gov.in/files/Telangana%20Map.pdf

Findings

Key components of GTSS according to girls in Bhutan and Telangana

In small groups, after discussion amongst themselves, the girls created 'blueprints' or models of a safe space for girls, with the help of prompts: Why, Who, What and How. Each group presented briefly.

Why Safe Spaces?

These can be an environment to express 'openly and honestly' without inhibitions: The girls visualized safe space as a place where they can speak 'freely', 'without fear' and without the apprehension of being judged. This would also include asking questions and discussing problems to get solutions.

They are peer platforms: The girls visualised safe space as a place where they can speak 'freely', 'without fear' and without the apprehension of being judged. This would also include asking questions and discussing problems to get solutions.

Safe spaces are also places to share knowledge, thoughts and emotions. These could facilitate peer support and build solidarity. The girls see themselves inspiring and motivating one another in these spaces.

- *Girls from the Wangsel Institute for Deaf described safe space as a physical space within the hostel where they can access sanitation and menstrual hygiene facilities safely.*
- *Girls from the GHS schools in Telangana echo this need for safe toilets.*
- *This points to perhaps isolated or hard to access, poorly lit toilets or those with missing doors/locks etc.*
- *The girls from the Wangsel Institute also specify that this space should offer protection from sexual violence, alluding to past incidents or a lack of safety in terms of infrastructure.*



Who is allowed in the safe space? Who is not allowed in the safe space?

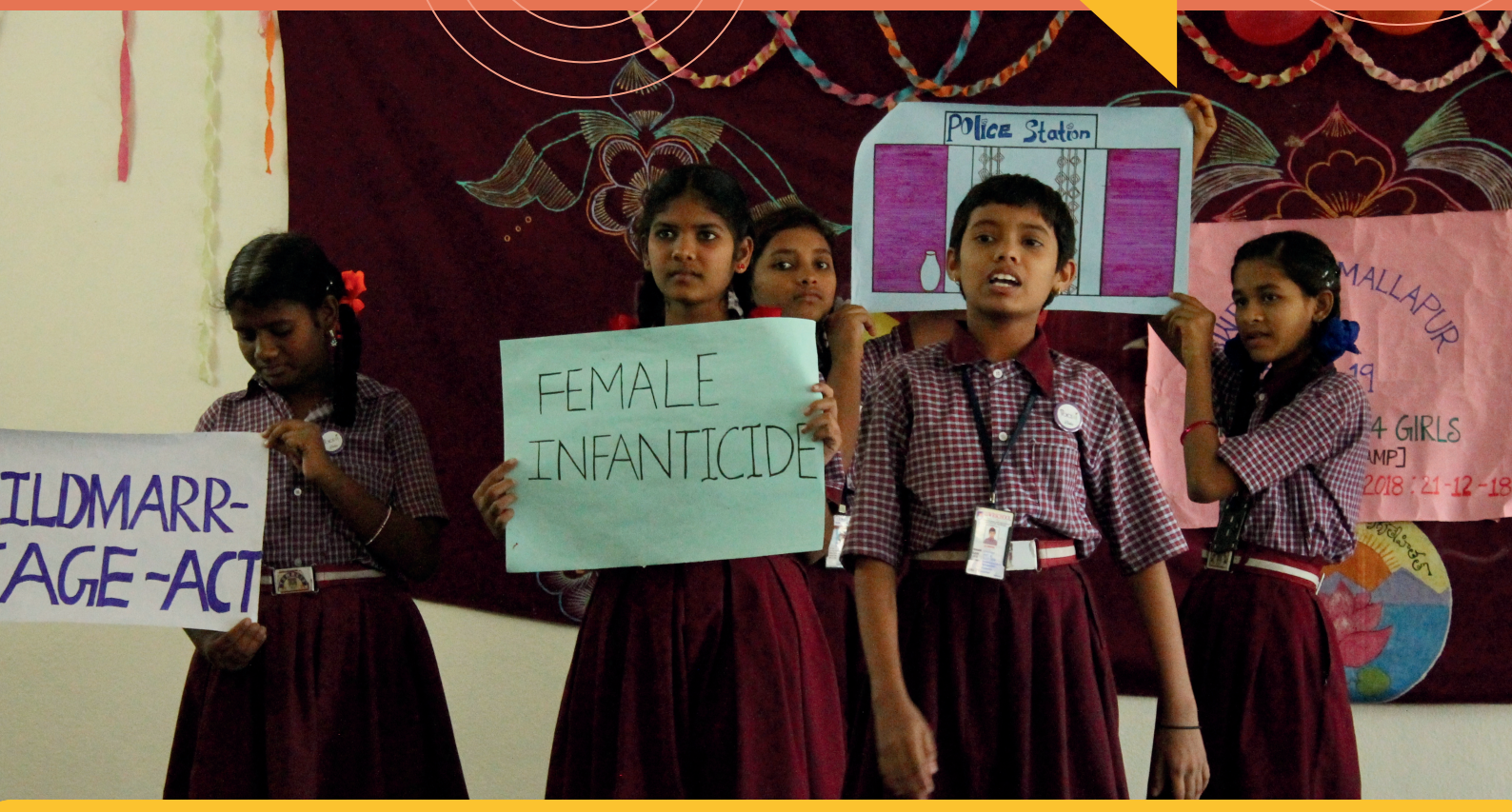
Girls in Telangana and Bhutan seem to have similar views on who will populate the safe space (see graphic below). However, the girls from Wangsel Institute of Deaf were specific about fathers not being allowed in safe spaces and also men who mistreat women. Girls in Bhutan have also used the words 'toxic' and 'sexist' as descriptors for those who are not allowed in the safe space, possibly due to wider exposure to such language on social media and other platforms.

Allowed in Safe Space

- "People who are in a problematic situation and in need of support and guidance."
- "People who respect the voices of girls."
- "Those who can be trusted (from immediate support system)."

Not Allowed in Safe Space

- "People with negative emotions and judgemental attitude, those with a conventional mindset."
- "Violent people who are prone to creating conflict and discrimination."
- "People who impose restrictions and discourage girls from achieving their passion."
- "Boys because of their violent nature. They make girls uncomfortable. They break rules."



What actions do girls want to take?

Though the motivation to take the lead is equally evident in girls from both the countries, the girls from Telangana seem well informed about the actions, policies and legislations pertaining to the themes of gender justice, climate change, health and education. The girls from Wangsel Institute for Deaf seem to lack knowledge about these topics while the ELC and Central school students have plans to generate awareness on these themes.

On safety:

- Should be achieved in all public places - Telangana
- Should be achieved at schools and communities - Bhutan

On Health
Create awareness among people by making banners, speaking to them.

On Rights
Work towards education and gender rights.



On Leadership
Telangana girls want to form clubs and motivate girls to join them. In these clubs they aim to create awareness about some of the key legislation and policies related to child rights and gender rights.

Climate
Reducing the use of plastics, indiscriminate cutting of trees and reducing air pollution - advocacy initiatives with government officials, creating awareness among the general public about tree planting.

How can girls support each other in this space?

The girls from rural Telangana have expressed clear ideas for supporting each other. Overall, the ways in which girls see support are: understanding, sharing knowledge, solving each other's problems, communicating well, building each other's confidence through encouragement, showing respect and non-judgemental attitude. The girls in Bhutan also want to be each other's trusted aide and would also like to celebrate each of their achievements. Support for menses related issues was also mentioned by girls from both countries.

Why? A facilitating environment

What? Formation of clubs to realise rights.

Responses from Bhutan

Who? Fathers not allowed in safe space.
Why? A place where all life (humans and animals) would feel safe.
What? Information on woman empowerment, Secure schools and communities needed.

Responses from Telangana

Definitions and experiences of agency

The girls were asked to reflect upon their understanding of leadership and role as change-makers in three zones - **Myself, My Circle, My Community.** The individual responses of the participants have been studied.

Myself

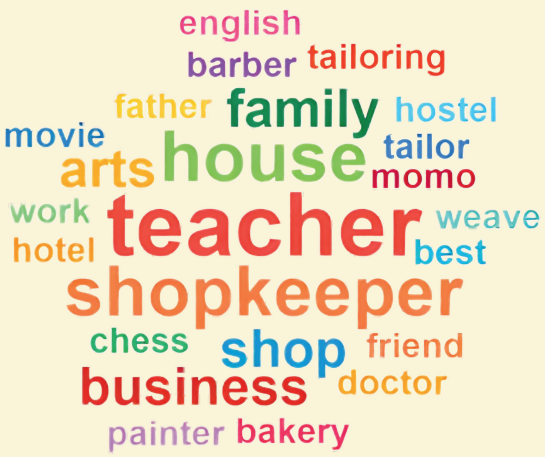
The girls from GHS Kavadiguda, Secunderabad have shown streaks of confidence to take up creative and unconventional careers such as starting a music band or dance school. Many of the girls in Telangana and Bhutan have mentioned that they want to be a princess or a queen or possess a superpower. They want to use this superpower to address social issues such as food security and also to develop their country.

The contrasts between aspirations of girls with disability and those without are fairly stark (see graphics below). The former have conservative aspirations about their professions, while the girls without disability seem to have given free rein to their dreams.



Girls from ELC school and Drukgyel Central School, Bhutan



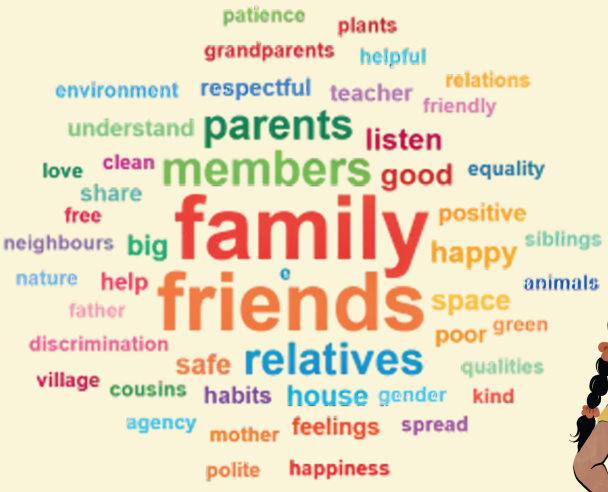


Girls from Wangsel Institute for the Deaf, Bhutan

My Circle

The girls in India have mentioned their parents, friends and immediate relatives. Girls from the Secunderabad school have included Korean boys and luxurious house within this zone indicating that they have exposure to media. Similarly, girls from Bhutan schools seem to have exposure to lives in countries outside Bhutan, as they mentioned K POP, Chinese television shows to be available in this space.

An examination of the responses from girls from rural schools and those from urban schools in Telangana show that the former have many more elements in their circle,possibly indicating a more inclusive outlook and a larger day to day social circle. They have also listed more positive attributes such as patience, being helpful, listening etc.



Girls from GHSS schools, Bachanapet and Raghunathapally





Girls from Secunderabad and Borabanda

My Community

In India the girls have mentioned their family, friends, relatives, neighbours as well as community helpers (police officers, army, farmers, doctors, teachers). Girls of Drukgyel Central School, Paro have also included many spaces within the "My Community" zone such as social media, environment, tuition etc. and not just the their homes and neighbourhood.

The contrast between responses from girls in Telangana and those in Bhutan seems to be that the former have listed more attributes more often - respect, equality, freedom, responsibility etc.



Telangana

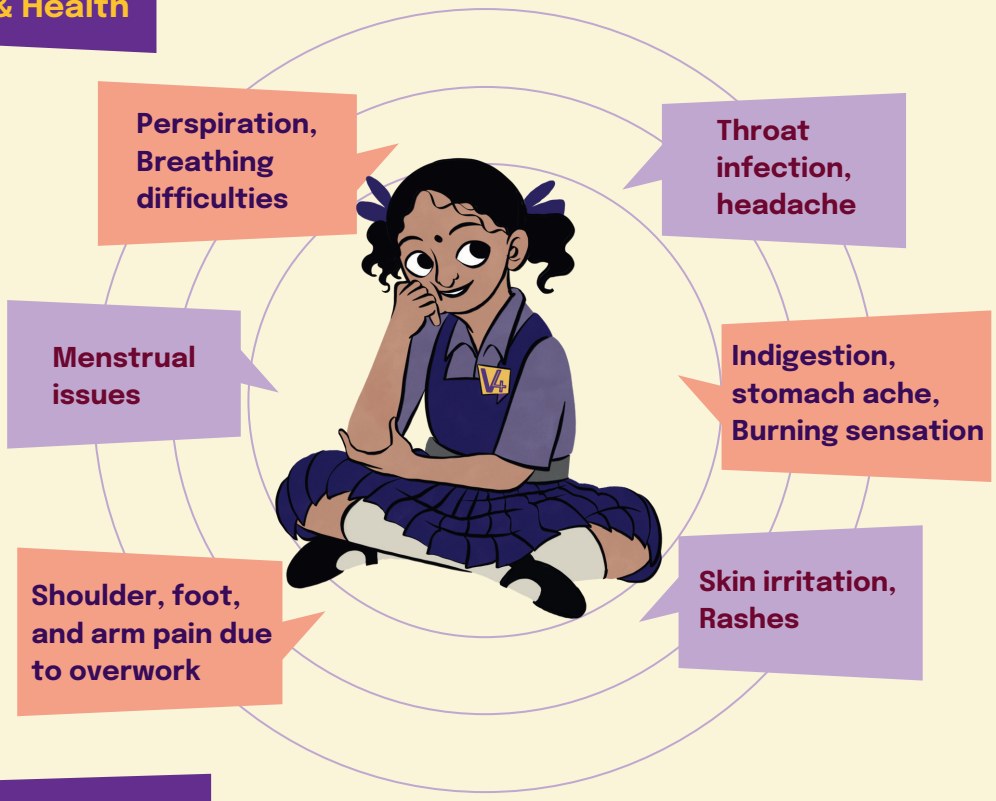


Bhutan

Climate-related issues in Bhutan and Telangana and their impact on the girls in the region

The girls worked in groups, using the outline of the body of a girl, to draw or write or share, based on prompts given.

Body & Health



Home & Family Life

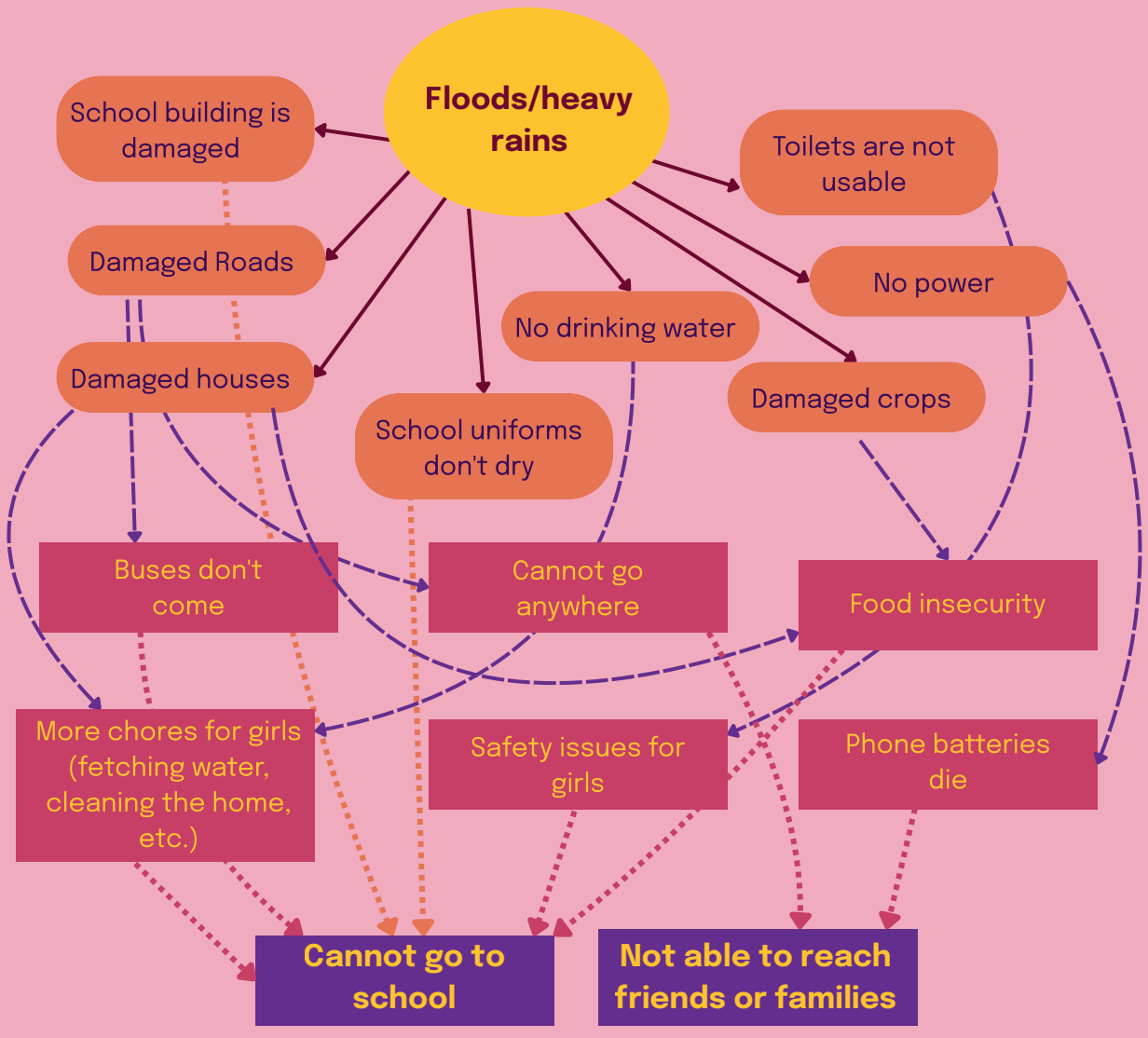
While girls from both Bhutan and Telangana have reported that their responsibilities increase because of climate impact (cleaning damage to the home, fetching water), the girls from Telangana have elaborated more on the destruction of crops, which in turn affects their parents' livelihoods and also results in food insecurity. The family also witnesses damage to property. Lack of drinking water is an outcome of heat waves, and ironically, of floods too.

School & learning

Damaged infrastructure and flooding of schools have been reported by girls from Telangana and Bhutan. When roads are damaged due to climate events, buses do not reach and hence the girls miss school. School uniforms do not dry on time and this is another variable that affects the girls' attendance. Heat waves make it impossible for them to concentrate on studies.

Safety & Freedom

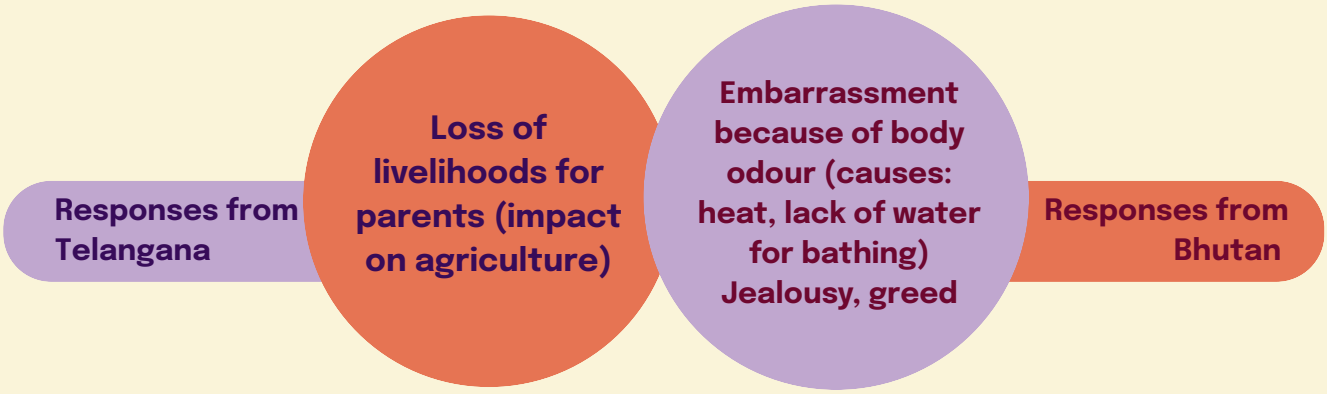
Inaccessibility of sanitation facilities and frequent power cuts (mobile phones run of battery resulting in isolation from friends and relatives) translate to safety concerns for the girls. Damaged roads and infrastructure restrict their mobility and freedom.



The above diagram represents the interconnected impact of climate event on the lives of the girls.

Agency & Strength

The girls in the two countries have stated that their strength lies in their ability to help others and contribute to the society. The understanding of agency and strength is rather high amongst the girls in India, while in Bhutan it is largely perceived by the girls in terms of physical ability.



The above graphic represents the divergences in responses for Climate related impact.

Emotions & Health



Recommendations

Foster GTSS in schools and communities in both countries

Girls in both Telangana and Bhutan have underscored the need for safety in and accessibility to toilets. An audit of school toilets could be carried out by VOICE-4 and the findings presented to the Education departments of governments in both the countries. Objective data could be the catalyst to better infrastructure in toilets for girls (presence of running water, doors, bolts, sanitary pad vending machines).



Enable ecosystem by involving boys and men



Both girls from India and Bhutan do not see boys entering their 'safe space'. This speaks volumes about gender- and patriarchy-entrenched roles that are continuing to be perpetuated. It is recommended that VOICE-4 must engage with brothers and fathers of the girls who have attended the workshop and begin conversations on masculinity, share of household work, agency for girls and women etc. RENEW (Respect Educate Nurture Empower Women), an organisation that primarily supports women and children, has a specific initiative "Engaging Men and Boys" to involve men as agents of change in preventing gender- based violence and promoting positive masculinity within society. RENEW could be a potential collaborator in Bhutan.

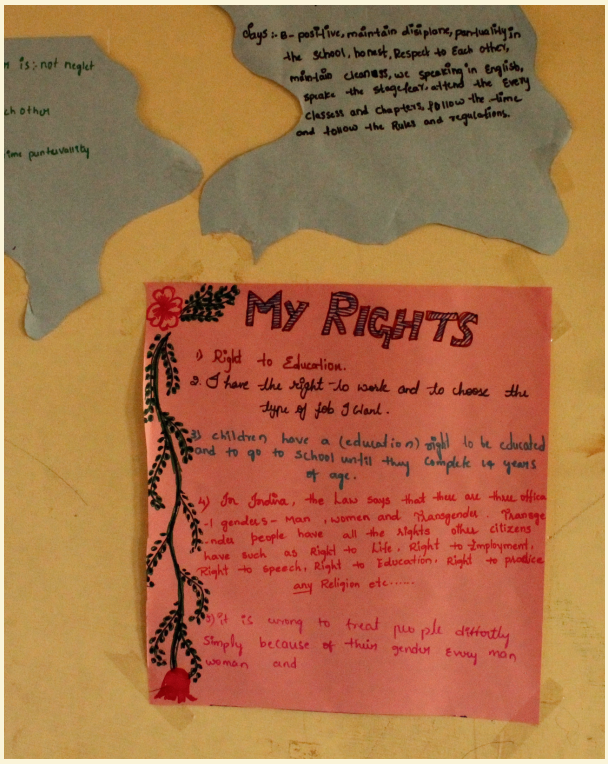
Influence gender-transformative education policies in South Asia – Menstrual leave

Girls in Telangana and Bhutan have expressed their difficulty during their periods. Both researchers can work with the respective institutions to advocate for menstrual awareness, support and comfort for school girls. Another solution is to advocate for menstrual leave for girls. Already the state of Karnataka has set a precedent by drafting the Karnataka Women Wellbeing Leave Bill, 2025, to be tabled in the State Legislature shortly. The state had earlier announced menstrual leave for women working in government-run establishments, and subsequently included girls in schools. The Bill proposes up to two days of leave per month and a two per cent attendance relaxation for menstrual-related issues, with an upper limit of 12 leave days per year.

[7] https://www.pmo.gov.bt/api/uploads/programs/actionPlan-1750761369557.pdf

Equip girls with skills for climate resilience and adaptation

Since the girls live in identified climate risk zones, and they are also fairly clear about the various ways in which climate change impacts their day to day lives, we recommend that they should be equipped with skills to take the lead in implementing solutions or coping mechanisms in their immediate environment.



These could involve kitchen gardens at home (drumstick trees for example) to tackle food insecurity during floods or painting house and school roofs to reduce heat. VOICE-4 could also review Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW)'s five-part video series on how people across India mitigated climate impact.[8]

Engage in localised climate action

Volunteering in initiatives by the state or other NGOs in the region will give the girls a much-needed sense of acting on problems. In Bhutan, one opportunity could be participation in the Nationwide River Cleaning Initiative, launched by the Royal Government of Bhutan. Planned to run until 2028, the initiative has two phases: a pre-monsoon clean-up to remove accumulated waste and debris from rivers and a post-monsoon clean-up to tackle seasonal pollution and ensure long-term river health. Citizens have been invited to participate in this national effort (4000 volunteers were said to have participated in the first action) and the official release[9] provides contact details.[10]

Telangana has a State Action Plan on Climate Change and Human Health. VOICE-4 could mentor the girls in Telangana to volunteer with District Wise Climate Change and Human Health Officers in Telangana (contacts given in the plan).

Equip girls with disability with tailored communication on abuse[11]

The responses from the girls at Wangsel Institute for Deaf indicate a specific vulnerability. Lack of communication makes it harder for girls with a hearing impairment to convey an episode of inappropriate touch or a feeling of threat. We recommend a customised awareness programme such as the one offered by the organisation Vaani who focus on children with hearing impairment. Awareness of boundaries, safe touch, first response and redressal mechanisms are the need of the hour for the girls at Wangsel Institute for Deaf.

8 https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQobV27F4v5SRVX3RzZlYod09tu807fre

9 https://educationworld.in/karnataka-plans-law-to-extend-menstrual-leave-to-students/

10 https://ncdc.mohfw.gov.in/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/28_SAPCCHH_Telangana_21-10-24.pdf

11 https://vaani.in/blog/fighting-the-abuse-of-children-with-hearing-impairment-vaaninogotell/

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