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Teenage pregnancies: a challenge for communities and governments

A comprehensive life course approach towards prevention in the slums of Kolkata

Calcutta Rescue has made a difference

By Ananya Chatterjee

Adolescence is a unique formative time. Physical, emotional, and social changes, including exposure to poverty, abuse, or violence, can make adolescents vulnerable. Living in a poor or low-income household has been linked to poor health and increased risk for compromising sexual health and rights, unplanned or untimely parenthood because of teenage pregnancy in adolescent group that can persist across the life span. Despite their high need for mental health services, children and families living in poverty are least likely to be provided quality mental health care in and around Kolkata. Realizing the need of the effective mental health counselling Calcutta Rescue tailored its intervention for 650 students of different North Kolkata slums as per their needs.



Parents counselling session is being conducted by a resource person. Photo © Calcutta Rescue

Calcutta Rescue's mental health promotion and prevention interventions aim to strengthen an individual's capacity to regulate emotions, enhance alternatives to risk-taking behaviours, build resilience for managing difficult situations and adversity, and promote supportive social environments and social networks.

The strength of Calcutta Rescue is to focus on the people who are helped by nobody and to "rescue" people from the consequences of ill-health, illiteracy, and poverty. This includes providing qualitative healthcare and education for urban slum children and development of skills which would ultimately lead to employment opportunities and becoming self-sufficient.

Calcutta Rescue (CR) runs programmes on holistic development of adolescent girls and gender equality for the boys. All these boys and girls are enrolled with Calcutta Rescue education projects who receive support in nutrition and education from their childhood throughout their academic and vocational life.

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It is a human right of all people to decide if, when and with whom to have sex, and when to have children – free from discrimination, coercion, and violence

Our mental health counsellor and social workers conduct sessions with the adolescent group of students at regular intervals to talk about sexual and reproductive health and thus we educate the vulnerable adolescents about sex, sexuality, and fertility.

- In a country like India, talking about sex, sexuality and fertility is not very easy with family members or in the formal schools. Young adolescent groups are mostly half-informed or wrongly informed by the friends. There are many myths and taboos in the society related to sex and sexuality.
- These issues are addressed at our education centres as we believe in that good sexual and reproductive health is a state of complete mental, physical, and social well-being.

Access to mental health care is critical

Protecting adolescents from adversity, promoting socio-emotional learning and psychological well-being, and ensuring access to mental health care are critical for good health and well-being during adolescence and adulthood.

Mental Health problems can be the result of concurrent or past sexual and reproductive health ill event and vice versa. Many risk-taking behaviours for health, such as substance use or sexual risk-taking, start during adolescence among these students. Risk-taking behaviours can be an unhelpful strategy to cope with emotional difficulties and can severely impact an adolescent’s mental and physical well-being.

What we prefer to watch out and why

We believe that mental health and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) forms an integral part of overall health and well-being of an individual. Different phases and changes in sexual and reproductive behavior can play an important role in determining and shaping Mental Health status and vice-versa.

These following symptoms within teenagers (if any) are closely monitored by our team in cooperation with the parent community:

- sadness a lot of the time, sudden changes in social behaviour
- a drop in school performance and avoiding social contact
- ongoing worries or fears, anxiety, arrogance
- aches and pains that don't go away quickly, over conscious about weight or physical appearance
- loss of appetite or sleep problems including nightmares
- problems fitting in at school or getting along with other children
- aggressive or consistently disobedient behaviour, or repeated temper tantrums
- seeming down, feeling things are hopeless, being tearful or lacking motivation
- having trouble coping with everyday activities

We expect our adolescent group of boys and girls to be happy and positive, maintain healthier relationships with family and friends, have a sense of achievement and bounce back from upsets and disappointments.

Preventive measures

The following preventive measures are taken by us:

My body my rights

Young boys and girls are sensitized right from their childhood about 'good touch' and 'bad touch'. Conversation is generated by showing dolls with clear genitals so that students know the right names of the organs. Our young students know how to raise voice if they are inappropriately touched.



Touch sensitization session for junior children. Photo: © Calcutta Rescue

Menstrual hygiene: bursting period myths

There are many myths regarding menstrual cycle, pregnancy, and menstrual hygiene against which our social worker and mental health counsellor work closely with adolescent girls and their mothers. Sessions are conducted by resource persons like doctors, health workers every month.

Tackling pre-menstrual syndrome (PMS) of daughters

Ranu's mother thought that Ranu used to throw tantrum before her periods just to seek attention every month and to avoid household chores but now, she realizes that Ranu suffers from PMS.

Girls and their mothers both are counselled at our centres to tackle PMS. They are advised to bring necessary changes in the lifestyle, nutrition and thought process. Many mothers admitted that they never thought of bringing such changes as they learnt wrong things from their mothers or grandmothers or other senior members in the family.

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Daughters need education not early marriage

Education is a protective factor against child marriage. When girls and their mothers are educated, they develop knowledge, confidence, and negotiation skills to assert when, whether and whom to marry. We take help of puppets to tell stories, take help of 'patachitra' singers and our students take part in street- plays to sensitize communities, mothers, and other adolescent girls to spread this message. A whole lot of other activities are conducted every week after the regular academic classes for sensitizing the students and sometimes with their parents and in their immediate communities.

To know one's own body, sexual health and rights intensive workshops are conducted by the specialized persons. Girls and the boys get aware of puberty-masculinity-femineity, gender roles, body mapping, reproductive health, physical changes, unplanned parenthood, and risks of teenage pregnancy. They become able to identify different types of physical abuses, violence, and its effects. Customized picture cards are in use frequently. Students often take part in role play, dumb charade, and debate.

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Dumb charade by a student to enact a situation of abuse. Photo: © Calcutta Rescue

Addressing gender issues

As a part of gender equality programme Calcutta Rescue has taken different initiatives:

- Resource person sensitizing about gender issues
- Monthly gender sensitization sessions for boys
- Customized resource materials particularly based on gender issues
- Target based interventions for boys

- Regular parents' interactions and workshops on gender stereotypes, early marriage hazards, necessity of educating adolescent children
- Community mobilization programmes through street play and discussing issues in the community through outreach programmes

The Gender Equality Measurement Survey (GEM) is administered once a year to measure attitudes towards "Gender-equitable" norms. GEM scale is a well-known valid and reliable instrument. This helped us to understand the issues like violence against women, gender discrimination and gender-based violence. Besides that "Strength and Difficulty Questionnaire" (SDQ) is also administered every year to assess prevalence of mental health issues and risk factors of these students.

Life skills and entrepreneurship development training for girls

Anxiety, financial insecurity, joblessness were some major issues among slum parents during the pandemic that increased cases of food insecurity, domestic violence, gender discriminations at home and overburdened the girls with extra load of domestic chores and care of younger siblings. Some slum families were considering to get their girls married before the right age. Calcutta Rescue started entrepreneurship development project for the adolescent girls from 2020 through which girls and their lady family members realized their self-worth.

Changing agents

A team of senior boys and girls work hand in hand with us. They are provided required training how to talk, what to talk and with whom to talk in their immediate community about issues like gender equality and women empowerment. Thus, they are developing effective communication and listening skills, time management, critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration and delegation. They can mobilize their immediate neighbourhood and make the community think differently on issues like child marriage or teenage pregnancy.



Students are communicating in their neighbourhood. Photo: © Calcutta Rescue

Parent council members

One or two parents are selected from each slum area who are alert and can articulate well. They keep information of our girls and boys living in their vicinity. From time to time, they help us to know the latest information about their immediate communities.

Thus we could contribute to the following success story:

15 years old Sania couldn't believe that she would experience mental trauma because of the emotional and cyber sexual abuse from her own relative. Sania (name changed) is a happy go lucky girl, extremely bright and good at academics, drama, extracurricular activities. Few months back she completely broke down mentally and sought help from CR School counsellor. She feared that nobody would believe her words. Sania identified the red flags of abuse and was seeking help from someone she trusts. Now, she is peacefully living her life as her parents, and she were counselled.

Calcutta Rescue has made a difference



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