

ANNUAL REPORT 2021-2022

FREA/Akshara



AKSHARA CENTRE

Dhuru Building, 3rd Floor,
[Opposite Bank of Maharashtra]
Gokhale Road, Dadar (West),
Mumbai 400028, India

Tel: 022-24328699

Email: Akshara.frea@gmail.com

Akshara is a project of **FREA-India**, a registered Trust, No. F 1656 (BOM), with an exemption from Income Tax under Section 80G and with a FCRA regulation.

Acknowledgements

Report written by **Nandita Gandhi**
with support **Payal Gandhi** and **The EDP**
and **YCP** teams.

Designed by **Aaryama Somayaji**

Contents



1. RIDING THE WAVE

2. THE COMMUNITY OF YOUTH

3. YOUTH TAKING ACTION

3.1 BEING CHANGEMAKERS

3.2 ORGANISING STREET PLAYS

3.3 COMMUNITY CAMPAIGN

3.4 TOWARDS BEING CHANGEMAKER

3.5 AMPLIFYING GENDER REWRITE CAMPAIGN

3.6 IMAGINING INCLUSIVE AND SAFE CAMPUSES

4. DEVELOPING CAPABILITIES

4.1 ORIENTATING STUDENTS

4.2 ENCOURAGING LEADERSHIP

4.3 LEARNING RIGHTS

4.4 CHANGING THEMSELVES TO CHANGE OTHERS

5. INTERVENTIONS FOR SAFETY AND INCLUSION

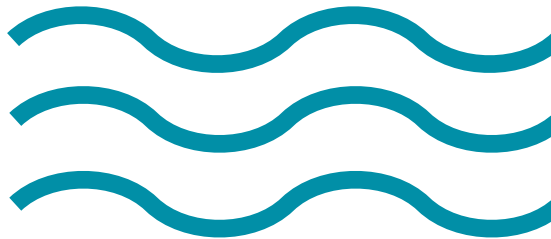
6. SOCIAL MEDIA OUTREACH AND NEW COVERAGE

7. PARTNERSHIPS AND GOVERNANCE

8. FINANCE



1. Riding the Wave



The year before, we were totally unprepared for the tribulations of the COVID 19 pandemic. This year we rode the wave effectively and with innovation. We embraced the grim situation and made the most of it without compromising on our work and engagement with young people. This was possible because of our incredible team which kept things moving, travelling with double masks, learning new online skills and adapting with alacrity. We did not 'make do' but made the best of the trying times. We count this as one of our achievements for the year.

We supported each other by meeting regularly online, not only discussing work but also home problems, isolation and depression. Together we learnt to manage as well unlearned our concepts and programs. We used this period to review and revise our programs bringing in new ideas and methods of engaging with youth. This is part of our Organisational Development process which will streamline Akshara for the future.

Both the youth programs touched the lives of 900 students from 107 colleges. The young women's educational program called the Empowering Dreams Program consolidated its 3 courses, the Saksham, Swayamsidha and Swadhin, which gradually advanced them towards being job ready. The college-based youth program called the Youth for Change Program expanded to cover 2 cities in the state.

The two issues which were emphasised this year were Street Sexual Harassment and Media Portrayal of Women. We produced new resources like training modules, an animated video and a manual for trainers and involved large organisations like MAVIM, FICCI Flo, TrueCaller and Network 18 to advocate for safer streets. Young people responded to challenging gender stereotypes by participating in the Gender Rewrite Competition. Akshara partnered with the Advt Council of India to address creative managers over problematic and stereotypical ads.

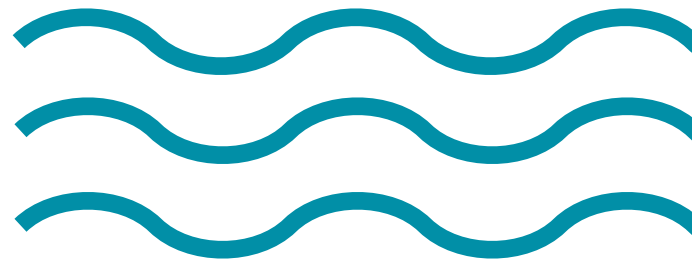
We would like to thank all our partners and donors who have supported us through this difficult period.

Co Directors:

Nandita Gandhi

Nandita Shah

2. The Community of Youth



901 young people in Mumbai | 107 MU affiliated and Autonomous colleges | 91 trained leaders/changemakers

Akshara engages young people in colleges through their National Service Scheme or Women's Development Cells. Mumbai University has over 800 affiliated and 46 autonomous colleges with close to 7 lakh students some of whom opt for the NSS. Some come direct applicants to Akshara's courses.

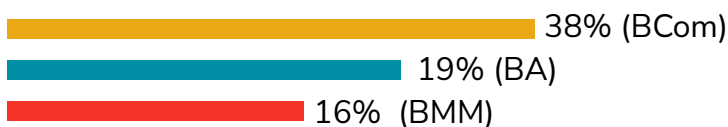
The profile of our young people shows that they are in the 17-to-24-year group, studying in either the Commerce or Arts streams and in their first or second year of college. The majority come from a lower economic segment with a household income of around Rs 10,000 – 30,000 a month. Their families lived in rented rooms in chawls or low-cost houses. Their fathers were the main earners and were engaged in the service sector. A fair number came from women headed households.

They were predominantly Hindus, with the next largest group of Muslims and a minority of Jains, Buddhists and others. Five identified as atheists. Again, the largest group came from the Open Caste and the rest were from the OBC and others.

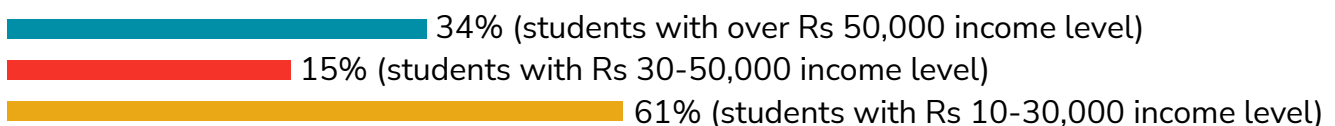
Age



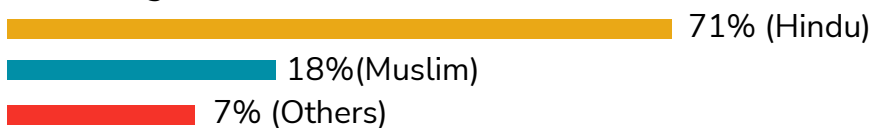
Education



Economic Status



Religion



Caste





3. Youth Taking Action

One of the objectives of Akshara's youth programs is to encourage youth participation in social actions in their colleges or communities i.e., to undertake small actions or programs which will raise their own as well as public gender and civic awareness in public spaces. We believe that these actions along with gender and citizenship training make them conscious of society's inequalities and provokes into action. In the one-year span that they are involved with Akshara, young people take up a variety of actions. One group of our youth program engages young women (the Empowering Dreams Program- EDP) who want to pursue higher education and skills. They form a group of 155 new applicants and 115 seniors. The latter take up various actions. The second group consists of students (the Youth for Change Program -YCP) from the NSS or WDC depts of their colleges.

3.1 Being Changemakers



Applied for College?

**NOW
APPLY FOR
BEING 'SAKSHAM'**

Learn Confidence | To Communicate | Be a Leader
Get Financial Support for this Learning

Who Can Apply? <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ 1st / 2nd Year College Women Students▪ Residents of Mumbai City/ suburbs▪ Girls from low income families	When to Apply? <p>Before July 15th, 2022</p>
--	--

How to Apply?

- Write to urmilas@aksharacentre.org

OR

- **VISIT:** Aksharacentre, Rajgruh Society, SPGRC (BMC), Prabhadevi Station (West), Mumbai - 400025.
- **TIME:** 2.30 am to 5.30 pm from Monday to Friday

Our young women, from different bastis and areas in Mumbai, and graduating from Akshara's courses (EDP) are eager to enthuse other young women in their neighbourhoods to join Akshara's programs. These young women who continue in Akshara's programs for 1-2 years become changemakers and ambassadors for gender equality. There is nothing more satisfying for an organisation than having its 'beneficiaries' becoming its ambassadors.

Having benefitted from Akshara programs, the senior girls spread the word to other young women. 78 young women distributed the appeal message in their areas and through Whats App messages, often explaining the program and giving their own experiences. Parents were contacted and convinced. Finally, we received around 299 applications out of which 155 new applications were selected which were from women headed households and socially and economically underprivileged groups.



As young college students, young women need to be tech savvy and digital smart. Akshara ensures that everyone has opened a bank account. The important part is to use them with ease and confidence. Akshara emphasises the importance of financial autonomy and so encourages young women to learn basic financial literacy. 30 seniors organised visits in 18 banks in different parts of the city for around 137 new young women. They were explained types of accounts, online transactions and digital safety tips, types of loans and how to avail of them. Girls also asked questions about careers in the banking sector and how to prepare for banking exams. These young women will comfortably use their ATM cards, have savings and understand online frauds.

“As a college-going girl, it is a big thing for me to take 9 girls along with me for a bank visit. I asked for permission from several banks and faced rejection too. It helped me to open up and speak with the girls and get to know them. It was a different and unique experience for me. I think that I can manage such activities in the future.” – Naziyabi Khan



Young women find the police intimidating and have probably heard not very flattering stories about them. But they are the first contact in case of complaints and need to know the procedure. 90 young women from 11 neighbourhoods were introduced to police stations and its functioning by 13 seniors. The latter also organised interactions of community people with policewomen from the Nirbhaya Squads and touched on topics like sexual harassment and violence against women.

“If the other girls from Akshara had not asked me – I would have never gone. I am scared of going to a police station. I had never been to one in my life! It felt so powerful sitting in front of the police, talking to them and asking questions. It was like breaking a huge barrier for me.”

– Rukkaiah Ansari, Mankhurd





3.2 Organising Street Plays

Some seniors got together and organised a street play performance with Janata Jagruti Manch and SNDT Women's College in 3 neighbourhoods on Republic Day. Several community people not only saw it but appreciated it.

“Organizing a street play in my community at Jogeshwari was a good experience. A group of us did all the planning, preparation and coordination. We also spoke to our college friends, came up with a concept and searched for scripts. We were convinced that we need to talk about violence and discrimination against girls. Republic Day is a holiday, when people are at home and a good time to perform. As it was a success, we organised it in 4 other areas.”

– Kajol Jha

Enthused by their success in community organisations, the seniors organised a drawing competition which was attended by 100 people and 47 children participants.



3.3 Community Campaign

The 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence is an annual international campaign that begins on November 25th, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, and ends on December 10th, Human Rights Day. This year we invited our youth to participate in the online campaign by sharing pictures of themselves on how they would fight against violence and assert gender equality online.



3.4 Towards being Changemakers

The second group – the YCP - consists of college students through their NSS units. We reached out to around 631 students through online platforms as most colleges were conducting online classes. There was no scope for individual actions in public spaces. So, we put out a competition to involve them in thinking about gender stereotypes in mass entertainment.

What started out as a city-based competition found its way to different parts of the country as we publicized it on our social media handles and reached out to 35 like-minded organisations. As many as 612 young people from across the country participated in the Gender Rewrite competition. The competition was designed to make young people conscious of what they were hearing and seeing in film songs, dialogues and in advertisements and re-write them to be more gender equal and less discriminatory.

Youth spend at an average about 6 and half hours a day on mass and social media, making them the biggest consumer group. The influence of Bollywood films and songs on people is tremendous. Unfortunately, it often portrays women in stereotypical roles and secondary positions besides denying them agency, glorifying harassment as romance and normalising toxic masculinist behaviour. Advertisements, in an effort to attract the maximum number of consumers, attempt to titillate viewers or appeal to common gender notions. Often, they do this by objectifying women's bodies, or by portraying them in the gendered roles of mothers, daughters, and wives. It is not possible to change women's status in society without a collective shift in perception about their roles and priorities.

As in our previous Gaana Rewrite competition, the topic of sexism in media struck a chord with youth. They took up the challenge of rewriting songs, dialogues and ads enthusiastically and sent in a total of 184 entries. A panel of judges comprising well known screenwriter Anjum Rajabali, renowned lyricist Amitabh Verma, media consultant Geeta Rao and Saheli Sinha of the Advertising Standards Council of India selected 29 of these entries - 13 from young people from the Akshara program and 13 from national-level participants - as highly innovative and progressive.

Below is an example of the imaginative entries submitted by the Akshara program youth:

Original song: Khambe Jaisi Khadi Hai (Dil, 1990)

Khambe jaisi khadi hai, ladki hai ya chhadi hai

Shola hai phuljhadi hai, pattakhe ki ladi hai

Aankho mein ghussa hai, labo peh gali hai

Dekho jara dekhjo yaro khud ko samajhati hai kya

Rewritten song by: Anjana Ajimon, Rizvi College
Chattan jaisee khadee hai, ye mushkilo se ladee hai
Shola hai angare hai, junun se ye bharee hai
Aankho me sapne hai rooho me bulandi hai
Sikho jara dekho yaro duniya se ladee hai ye





Dialogue Winners

GENDER REWRITE

#TwistTheFrame!

Noopur Karande, Pune
Original Dialogue : Kabir Singh



"Kabir: Preeti, chunni theek karo"



Preeti: Kabir, soch theek karo

The creators of the winning entries were given certificates and cash prizes in a grand ceremony appropriately named **Twist the Frame** before 500 students followed by singers performing some of the catchy rewritten songs.



Mary Yadav was part of the Akshara program and this is her story:

“... had it been last year, I would have also gone ahead and danced to the tune of this song. But the Gender Rewrite workshop and competition sensitized me to the sexism in Bollywood songs. This was “life changing” for me. So, I decided to take my new learnings to the college committee”.

Mary and her friend were petrified with fear as they entered the hall filled with 309 members of the Organizing Committee of the Wilson College’s fest “OLE”. They had to convince them to change the Bollywood music track on which the students were to perform a dance number. A difficult task as the auditions had been done, the students selected, and the choreography finalized. Mary was expecting to be told that it’s a bit late for any change now.

“I was so nervous when I entered the room, but I was equally convinced in my belief that the selected song had sexist lyrics and objectified women. It glorified stereotypes which the college was teaching us students to get rid of.”

Taking suitable examples of different sexist songs, she explained to the Organizing Committee how the selected song was problematic, and full of stereotypes. To her surprise, there was pin drop silence and then when she finished speaking – she got an ovation! The song was changed.

“I did not stop with this intervention. I decided to talk about the media campaign to students. I got permission from my professor to conduct a lecture on sexism in popular culture. A lively discussion followed and my professor was quite impressed.”



Creativity is a sure way to get young people to think and reflect on issues of gender equality. The Gaana Re-write Competition was followed by another one which involved not changing words but making images.



3.5 Amplifying Gender Rewrite Campaign

The competition showed that it was possible to critically look at popular media. What happens after you identify sexism and gender stereotyping? It is difficult to reach film lyricists and scriptwriters. But the ad industry has a council monitoring it. We invited the Advertising Standards Council of India to conduct a workshop on registering complaints about problematic ads, especially those with sexist overtones. It gave tools to youth to articulate their critique, register complaints and get ads changed.



Secondly, we produced a short video to address sexism within the production process of creating ads. The video takes a look at how discriminatory the casting process can be. We have circulated this video on our social media handles and already some 19,000 people have viewed it. We aim to share it with content creators and initiate discussions around gender stereotyping in media.

Click this link to view the video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5gHRBAUhfqg&t=16s>

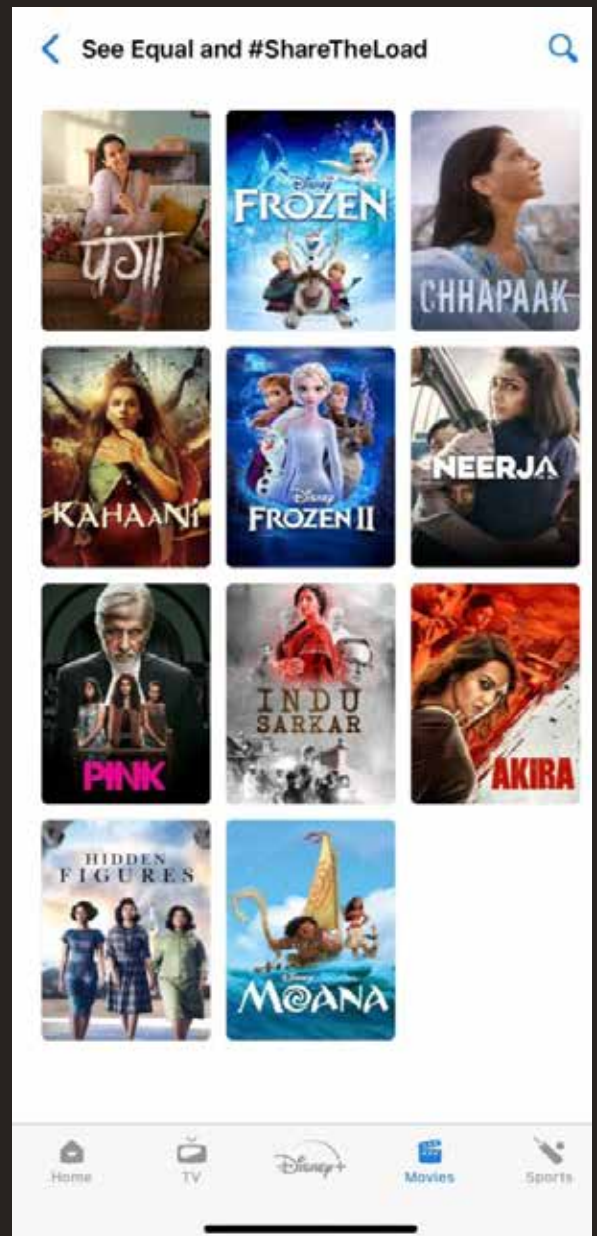


Highlighting the sexist portrayal of women in media is important. But it is also necessary to applaud those who are trying to make a change.

We collaborated with Procter & Gamble's **#SeeEqual** campaign and Hotstar to compile a list of 10 gender sensitive films during the month of International Women's Day.

"In this partnership with Ariel and Disney+ Hotstar, we would like to substantiate few movies and series that have begun showing positive portrayal of women. We invite the audience to join us in changing the negative narrative and making the switch to positive depictions. This will enable us to take stronger steps towards gender equality,"
– Nandita Shah

<https://mediabrief.com/ariel-india-disney-hotstar-list-films-shows-seeequal/>





#ItsNotOk – Women face harassment not only on the streets and in their homes, but also in digital spaces. They often receive inappropriate phone calls and SMSs. Akshara partnered with TrueCaller and Network18’s nationwide campaign *#ItsNotOk* to encourage women to call out harassment instead of ignoring it.

3.6 Imagining Inclusive and Safe Campuses

A college campus needs to be inclusive and safe for women and all genders so that everyone can have the opportunity to learn and interact without fear. However, most of our colleges report incidents of ragging and sexual harassment. The task set before students was – convincing their friends, co-students and lecturers of the importance of inclusive and safe campuses through the medium of reels and posters.

To support the participants in making creative posters, an art teacher from J.J School of Arts and the founder of Social Pathshala conducted an online workshop called Kaleidoscope. The results were remarkable with 50 students coming up with different ideas like changing the college syllabi, looking beyond the gender binary and creating facilities for diverse sexual and gender identities.

The posters and their ideas were shared with the principal for implementation and displayed in colleges. Akshara also shared them on its social media handles.





NIHARIKA KUMAR



SHAMBHAVI THAKUR





4. Developing Capabilities

Akshara's emphasis on active social and public participation of young people is derived from Nobel laureate Amartya Sen's Capability Approach which states that there must be enabling conditions for citizens to realise their constitutional rights. Rights are more likely to remain on paper if citizens are not able to realise them. So not only should people know about their rights, but they must develop the means to actualise them. One of the ways is to get people and, in our context, young people to take action for themselves and for others. Akshara provides them with a platform and an opportunity. We start this process by encouraging young people to be changemakers through an orientation and training workshops.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

At the beginning of the Covid 19 pandemic in 2020, Akshara Centre had to step out of its stated purpose and join other NGOs in COVID relief efforts. It continued these action by supporting the youth and their families who were part of Akshara .

- *Akshara distributed ration kits to 132 youth and provided monetary assistance to 9 of them.*
- *When college classes went online, it was assumed that all students had smart phones. But that was not the case. There were 15 students who could not attend classes, so we distributed free tablets and phones donated by FICCI Flo.*
- *Mental health issues were silently taking a toll. As a support, Akshara connected those students who needed professional help to experts.*
- *Akshara trained volunteers from National College for distributing free sanitary napkins to tribal girls on its usage and advantages.*



4.1 Orientating Students

Orientations help participants understand the program and opt to join it. Two different orientations were organised for the two groups of college students, from the NSS/WDC and the young women from communities. The latter are given financial assistance to complete their higher education and therefore had a mix of gender and skills workshops to be employment ready. The former, a mix of young men and women college students were to be trained to be gender champions. The two Orientations set the tone and the timeline for the year.

The Orientation was entitled 'Khula Asmaan' and it was organised by the alumni or seniors for the new entrants.



This follows the convention of seniors interacting and mentoring freshers to inspire them as well as gain their own self confidence in organizational skills. 151 new entrants attended the event and heard motivational life stories from 2 Akshara alumni, one of whom has joined an engineering course and another who has become a photographer. The third speaker was the captain of an all-girls football team of Parcham, a women's group. Each story showed the new entrants that dreaming is crucial and exciting. Nontraditional professions were exciting but came with hardships but were not impossible to achieve. The talks were followed by a dance performance by senior girls. The entire event was carried out in hybrid mode i.e. online and offline so that all new entrants could view it.

"I was inspired by the speaker's journey and how she fought for her dream. Her story inspired me to believe that I can accomplish anything in life."

On the other hand, the college students' Orientation was an online event. It was organised by the Akshara team in 3 batches with the seniors or peer leaders coming in with their testimonies of the program to 669 students and lecturers from 20 colleges.



The Orientation encouraged the students to look oneself [me] in relations to others [hum] like their peers, family and society. The session also focussed on accessing our citizenship rights and opportunities. Students were also informed about time commitments through the year.

“For me, there were a lot of doubts but I was able to figure it out during Orientation. The process of Orientation was engaging and Akshara made sure that all the students were clear about the year’s program for the YCP.”

– Samiksha Wanve , SIES College (Nerul)

4.2 Encouraging Leadership

The saying goes that leaders are born not made. But research shows that the majority are ‘made’, some by circumstances and others by training. Both programs encourage and support the dormant qualities of leadership within our students. Once they are willing to take on responsibilities, they are encouraged to join trainings which hone their abilities.

The college-based youth who opted to be leaders were called Peer Guides as they would be helping their co-students to band together to take up social actions. 63 students came forward to learn how to lead their college Gender Equality Clubs. To help them function more effectively, Akshara organised 3 interactive workshops in which they could discuss the qualities of leadership, the yearly timeline for issue-based workshops and actions and lastly mental health issues like isolation and virtual relationships in the time of Covid 19. The Peer Guides were instrumental in ensuring the success of the program by galvanising the volunteers to be active and involved.

Feedback from Peer Guides:

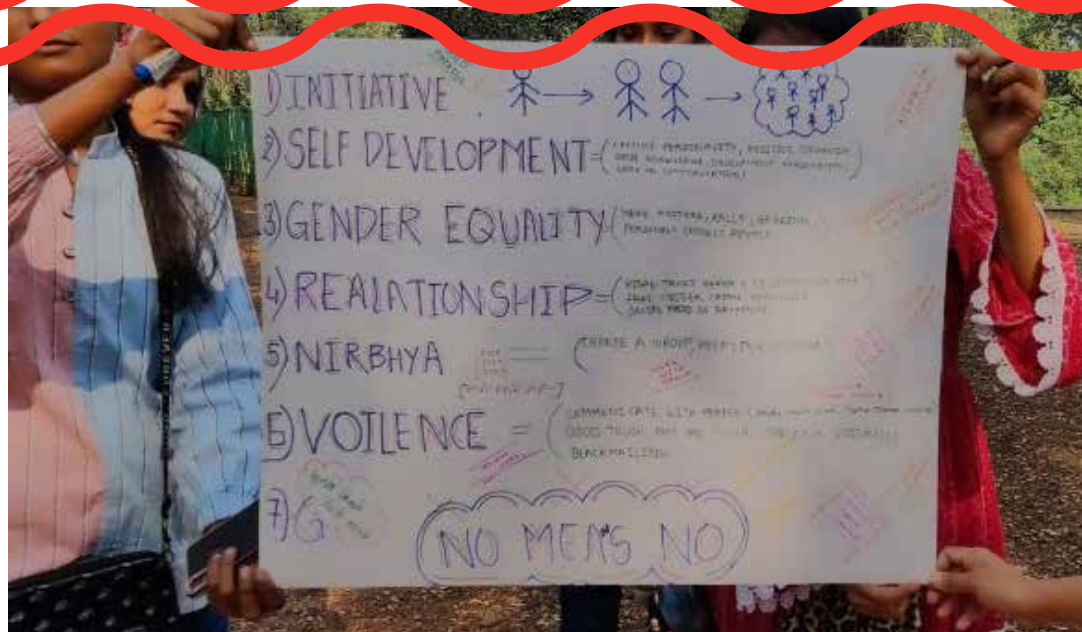
After becoming a peer guide, I realised my potential and the fact that I too can lead people. – Arpit Mallah, R J College

“YCP program and GEC gave me an opportunity to raise my voice. I changed my views on many topics which I hadn’t even give a thought on. Overall, it helped me to improve my personality.” – Kusum Shrivastava, R J College



The seniors amongst the community participants were eager to share their learnings and confidence with the freshers. 40 of them attended workshops to learn logistical management during events and the method of initiating new entrants into Akshara programs. In the process, they found that they gained in confidence and knowledge as well as could play a part in supporting other girls. As mentioned earlier, they invited new entrants to visit banks, police stations and communities, explaining and interacting with them to dispel their fear or hesitancy.

Akshara arranged an out of town one day workshop for the seniors on community leadership. A motivational speaker shared her own journey and encouraged the girls to develop confidence by cultivating the habit of reading and practicing public speaking. She also spoke about the importance of collective change and the challenges of meeting needs of diverse groups of people.



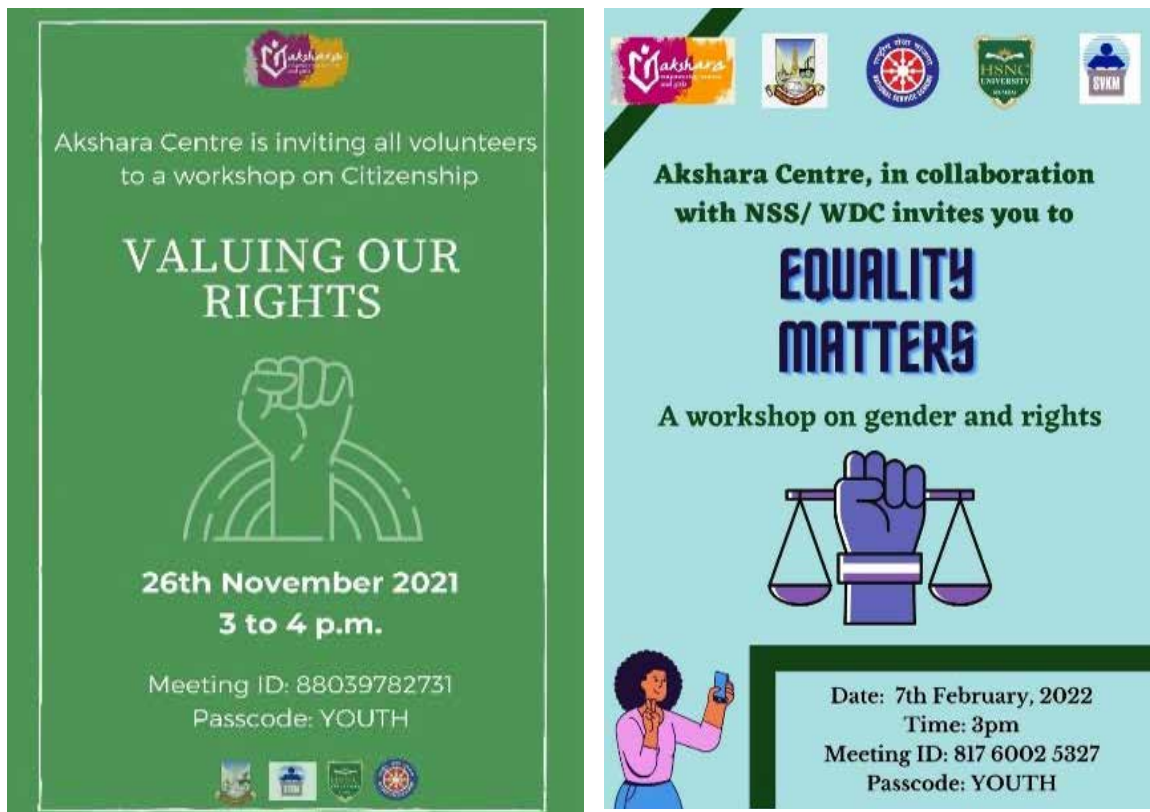
“It was a great experience, meeting everyone and attending session on leadership. We got to learn about why we need to work in our community, how to make action plans and how to present them as a group. Our group is planning to conduct sessions on basic safety to the women in our community” – Gayatri Nadar



4.3 Learning Rights

26th November – Constitution Day seemed the appropriate day to launch the series of webinars for students. There were 2 webinar/workshops entitled Valuing Rights and Equality Matters which were attended by 227 and 249 students. The Akshara facilitators put out a quiz so students could test their knowledge of the Constitution and fundamental rights. How well do you know your rights and which ones are important to you – were some of the questions discussed. The second workshop touched on the issue of the realisation of rights. Students were divided into small break out groups to discuss common situations in the form of stories. The exercise was meant for recognising how rights are violated in our homes and workplaces and the possible perpetrators.

“Being a part of the Akshara program made me understand my fundamental rights and how not to be gender biased. I started looking critically at myself and my own behaviour and started correcting it.” Ravi Wadhvani from HR College



As an assignment, students were asked to create slogans which were later showcased in Akshara’s social media handles and in college WhatsApp groups.

Below are a few shortlisted slogans:

Ramniranjan Jhunjunwala College: Beneath the sky, above the earth, humans should have equal worth.

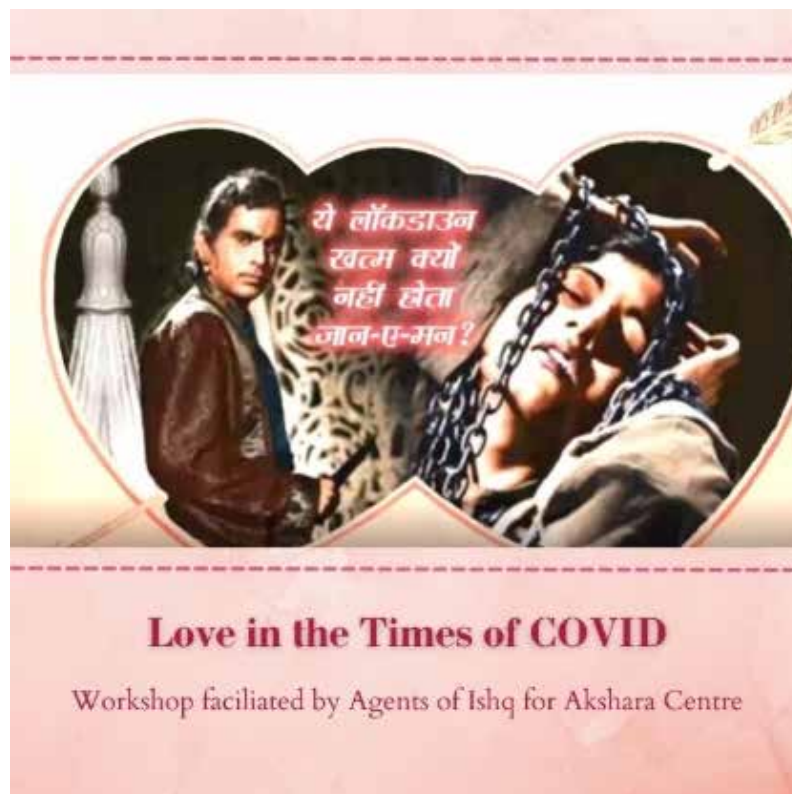
Usha Pravin Gandhi College: We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.

Mithibai College: आओ बनाएँ ऐसा जहान, जहाँ तू और मैं हो एक समान।



“Firstly, we had a workshop on valuing our rights. I think all of us are aware of our rights but we make no effort to understand them. YCP took a great initiative to make us understand the importance of understanding our rights.” – Pratiksha Soni

The Covid pandemic had trapped young people at home and the feeling of isolation and loneliness was deep. Students also spoke about missing their college and classroom experiences and meeting their friends. They had several misgivings and doubts about virtual interactions, especially when it came to romantic relationships. These were recurrent themes in their conversation with Akshara staff. A webinar was organised and two members of Agents of Ishq addressed these topics on Valentine’s Day. The workshop created a space for participants to creatively express their feelings and get practical tips on online dating etiquettes, navigating tricky issues of consent and privacy.



The Covid pandemic had trapped young people at home and the feeling of isolation and loneliness was deep. Students also spoke about missing their college and classroom experiences and meeting their friends. They had several misgivings and doubts about virtual interactions, especially when it came to romantic relationships. These were recurrent themes in their conversation with Akshara staff. A webinar was organised and two members of Agents of Ishq addressed these topics on Valentine’s Day. The workshop created a space for participants to creatively express their feelings and get practical tips on online dating etiquettes, navigating tricky issues of consent and privacy.

“I haven’t seen anyone talking this frankly about relationships. All the information was really very relatable for me. Thank you!”

“It was awesome the fact that they were so open minded and explained everything in such a friendly way just amazed me... I seriously want more sessions.”



4.4 Changing Themselves to Change Others

The 230 young women from communities who joined the 3 courses [Saksham, Swayamsidha and Swadhin] offered by Akshara participated in a total of 19 workshops which can be divided into 3 categories. These covered topics which fell into technical skills and soft or life skills.

Setting Goals

The first rung in capacity building is having a clear vision of one's own goals. So all new entrants attended a goal setting workshops in which they could dream but also be realistic about them. They were also encouraged to not only think of themselves and their future but that of women and girls in general. What would they do to improve the lives of others?

Goals require that the young women graduate with good marks which is often a source of stress for them. Two workshops on mental health were conducted in collaboration with 'Mpower' and information exam preparation, stress management and building resilience were shared and discussed.

"I understood that we should stand up for achieving our dreams. Any family problems or marriage should not become an obstacle in achieving those dreams and we should convince our family to support us politely."

"The most important thing that I have learned from this workshop is that whatever difficulties we face, there is always a solution."



Being Job Ready

Having a CV and interview are the first step towards employment. The seniors were taught the techniques of CV writing and giving interviews. 45 of them joined English speaking classes conducted by the British Council. 16 polished their computer skills in a 10-day course facilitated by Click Point Centre. Communications skills of speaking up and negotiating with family, friends and partners were appreciated by the seniors. In a feedback session at the end of the year, 60% of the girls said they observed an improvement in their communication skills while 50% said they felt confident in public speaking

“According to me, this was an important workshop. I learnt how it is important to dress appropriately for an interview and how to talk with the interviewer,”

To give an idea of the functioning of a factory, they were taken on a trip to a manufacturing firm. But nothing will work unless there is a will. Quest Alliance, a Bengaluru based organisation, held a workshop on perceptions of work and why women should take up jobs, Through these interactive sessions, girls learnt to identify their strength and weaknesses, and to differentiate between interest and aptitude. The workshops introduced the seniors to new and emerging areas of work, job roles, skills and competencies required of them.

“I understood that we should stand up for achieving our dreams. Any family problems or marriage should not become an obstacle in achieving those dreams and we should convince our family to support us politely.”

“The most important thing that I have learned from this workshop is that whatever difficulties we face, there is always a solution.”



Empowering Oneself

Most young women have these 2 freedoms on their wish list - freedom from fear of violence and freedom of choice of partners and on their bodies. Akshara unpacked both these concepts for them through interactive workshops. Why does society hide away from family domestic violence? As women, the new entrants need to face their fear and learn to resist it at home, at the workplace and on the streets. The workshops also provide a space to discuss their experiences and develop the confidence to raise their voices. Feedback from them was that 97% who attended the workshop on violence found it to be relatable and useful.

Fear of sexual harassment, a form of violence, often leads to young women restricting their mobility and not moving beyond the confines of their homes or neighbourhoods. This in turn restricts their choice of education or college and workplace or job. Akshara complemented the workshops on violence with an inspirational talk on fearless travelling by Jaya Bharti Addappalli - a bike rider who had done a solo journey of over 11,111 kms across 20 cities of India.

Changes in the body including menstruation is an amazement for most young people. The workshop gave them info on the body and reproductive rights. Menstruation taboos were the most debated topic. Impossible beauty standards are imposed on young women by the media, how it impacts and what it means was another favourite topic.

"I've learned not to compare the beauty of others to my own. Each is lovely in their own way."

To stress fitness and health, Akshara organised with Savitribai Phule Gender Resource Centre, Purple Ribbon, and FICCI Flo a two-day, free breast cancer screening camp which was attended by 71 mothers and daughters.



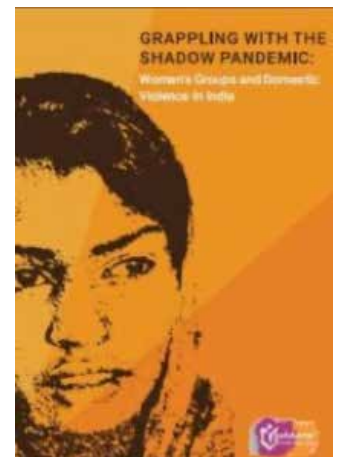
5.

Interventions for Safety and Inclusion

Akshara's core focus is on prevention of violence against women which leads to interventions with community of young people. In addition, we also work with their institutions like colleges and neighbourhoods which has led us to work for a safe and inclusive city. We engage with various stakeholders such as the mass media, government bodies and other NGOs to create awareness and bring about change in attitudes, infrastructure and policy.

Pandemic Problems

During the pandemic lockdown, serious social issues surfaced. Shockingly the cases of domestic violence went up and with the survivor having little or no help. Last year we had launched 2 media campaigns and a web app to give easy access to survivors in the state. In April 2021, Akshara printed 400 hard copies which were distributed by the Sp. Inspector General (Prevention Against Violence on Women) Officer to all amongst police control rooms, special cells for women and children, One-stop centres and district protection officers across all districts of Maharashtra as a quick response guide.



To document the efforts of the unspoken warriors striving to reach out to survivors of domestic violence during the lockdown, Akshara spoke to 13 women's rights organisations across India. The findings were presented in a booklet titled "Grappling with the Shadow Pandemic: Women's Groups and Domestic Violence in India". Many countries too were experiencing this added outburst of domestic violence. Akshara joined 2 international online webinars – with the US based Voices for Change, UCLA, Plan International and Global Plan for Research in Action for the panel entitled "The Shadow Pandemic- A Global perspective". The UN Women and the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs' The Generation Equality Forum announced a series of webinars. Akshara moderated one titled 'Feminist Responses to the Rise of Gender-based violence in the Global South during the Covid-19 Crisis' which had leading international feminist speakers.

The second pandemic related social issue was of Child Marriage which had shown an unusual spike due to closure of educational institutions, loss of livelihoods and parental deaths. Our campaign, #JustAChild in partnership with UNICEF and Govt of Maharashtra's Ministry of Women & Child Development urged people to dial 1098 and report possible cases of child marriage.

5 videos made by filmmaker Pradip Sarkar, singer Ila Arun and actor Sakshi reached 17,89,243 people on social media and were also shared with by the Maharashtra Police, govt departments and ministers as well as influencers.

Refer to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZSbKMDjOZY4>

To help the cause, a set of 4 posters were also released.



**“I was good at studies.
But marriage tests you
in a different way.”**

COVID-19 has led to a sharp increase in child marriage across India. School closures, economic stress and parental deaths due to the pandemic are worsening the problem. Let us ensure that girls under the age of 18 continue their education and are not married off! If you suspect that a child marriage is about to take place, please call **1098** to report it.

#JustAChild



unicef
for every child



**“सबने कहा, मैं सबसे
खूबसूरत दुल्हन हूँ।”**

कोविड - 19 पूर्णतः ही स्कूल बंद होने, आर्थिक तनाव और महामारी से शाह-विवाह की वृद्धि के कारण बाल विवाह के मामले तेजी से बढ़ रहे हैं। हम सब यह सुनिश्चित करें की, 18 साल से कम उम्र की लड़कियां अपने स्कूल जातीं रहें, समुदाय नहीं। यदि आपको किसी नाबालिक के विवाह होने का संदेह हो, तो तुरंत **1098** पर कॉल कर के सूचना दें।

#JustAChild



unicef
for every child



**“सारी सहेलियों में, मेरी
शादी सबसे पहले हुई।”**

कोविड - 19 पूर्णतः ही स्कूल बंद होने, आर्थिक तनाव और महामारी से शाह-विवाह की वृद्धि के कारण बाल विवाह के मामले तेजी से बढ़ रहे हैं। हम सब यह सुनिश्चित करें की, 18 साल से कम उम्र की लड़कियां अपने स्कूल जातीं रहें, समुदाय नहीं। यदि आपको किसी नाबालिक के विवाह होने का संदेह हो, तो तुरंत **1098** पर कॉल कर के सूचना दें।

#JustAChild



unicef
for every child



**“माइया पतीशी
बांधलेल्या गाठीने,
माझी स्वप्न मात्र उसवली.”**

कोविड - 19 मुझे संपूर्ण शाह-विवाह का विलंबित होने का संदेह है। हम सब यह सुनिश्चित करें की, 18 साल से कम उम्र की लड़कियां अपने स्कूल जातीं रहें, समुदाय नहीं। यदि आपको किसी नाबालिक के विवाह होने का संदेह हो, तो तुरंत **1098** पर कॉल कर के सूचना दें।

#JustAChild



unicef
for every child



<https://bestmediainfo.com/public/2021/09/justachild-ad-film-asks-all-to-be-alert-for-possible-child-marriages-call-1098-and-rescue-a-child>

Resisting Sexual Harassment

Akshara has been encouraging students from colleges to do Safety Walks in their colleges and 'audit' its safeness for women students. The methodology of these walks is simple, quick to execute and infuses students to understand sexual harassment. The reports on Safety Walks are submitted to college principals for action. Along with this intervention, Akshara has been holding discussions with them to introduce a para in the College Prospectus on Zero Tolerance for Sexual Harassment. Some have done so. This inclusion makes college administrations conscious of sexual harassment as well as reassures students of a safer campus. Dialogues with the Ministry of Higher and Technical Education had them issue a letter to all colleges for such an inclusion.

COLLEGES PROMISE SEXUAL HARASSMENT FREE CAMPUS

Excerpt from College Prospectus

“Our college abides to zero-tolerance towards sexual harassment of women/girls. Any form of sexual harassment faced by any female students, women teaching or non-teaching staff within the college premises or otherwise while performing task and duties of college at any place, is severely condemned by our college. Appropriate action will be taken against the person found guilty of such an act.”

The Safety Walk methodology has also been used for street sexual harassment. We have worked with several organisations through the years to take 'Walks' to detect areas which are prone to sexual harassment. Pre Covid 19 lockdown, the NSS and WDC units of colleges which were part of the Youth for Change Program had students doing 'Walks' to check on the safety of women. To aid this process, we had produced an instructive Video to explain the process. It is an animated video entitled 'Youth for a Safer City'. Refer to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d8o6t1jCdn4> It is on our YouTube page and has garnered 205 views. To complement it, we produced a Manual in English and Marathi titled "Walking for Women's Safety: A Manual for Making Our City Safe". Refer to <https://Aksharacentre.org/Akshararesources/#manuals>

Akshara Centre has partnered with The Mahila Arthik Vikas Mahamandal (MAVIM) for training their leaders and managers on safety audit methodology. A training was held for their district managers using the manual and the video which was launched by Minister Women and Child at an all Maharashtra event. The managers will in turn train their district workers who will be conducting safety walks in different parts to the city with the intent of covering all major streets in Mumbai.

The second training and walk took place in Mumbai's Bandra area with 50 students and women from Habitat Livelihood and Welfare Association, Rizvi College and FICCI Flo Mumbai conducting safety walks. They used the checklist from the manual to check for such issues as absence of streetlights, dilapidated bus stops and unusable footpaths which will be taken up with local BMC authorities.

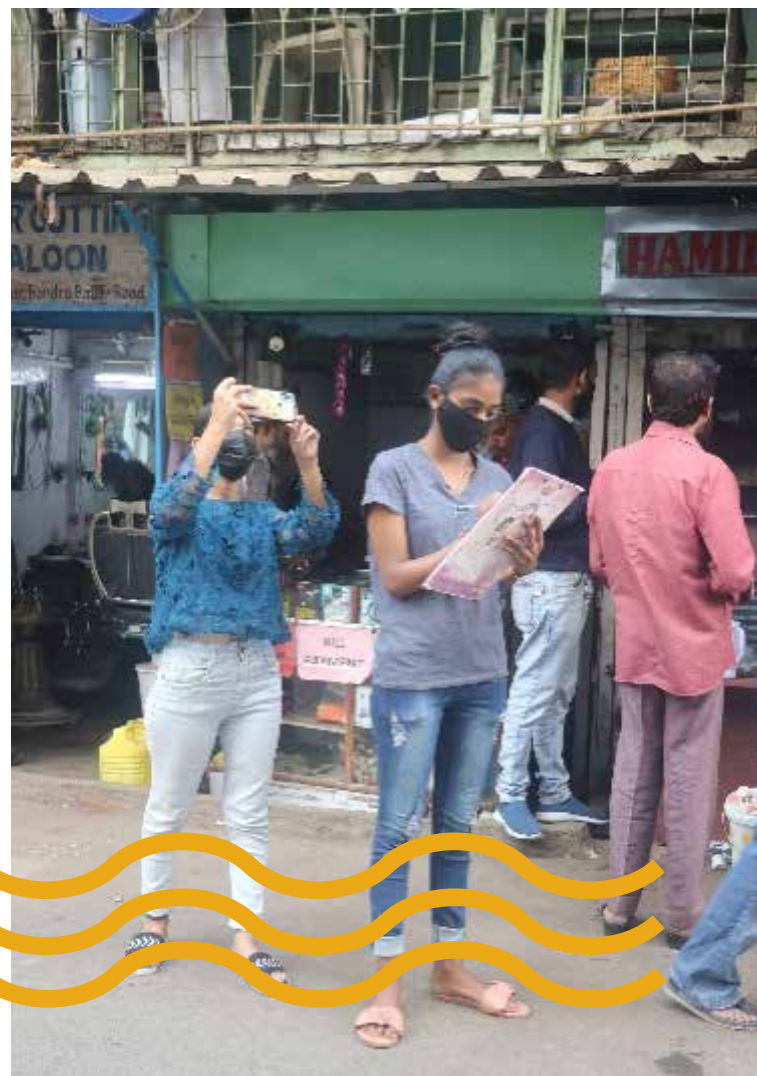




Travelling Safe

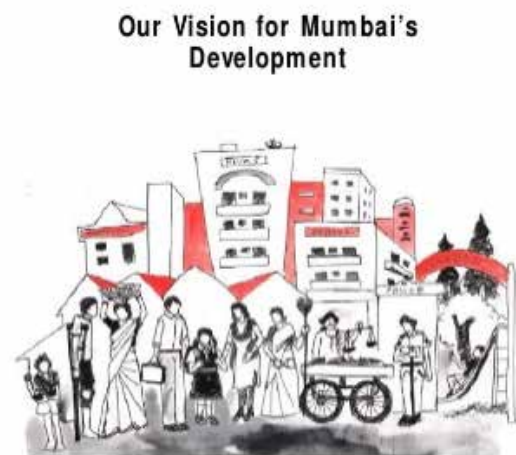
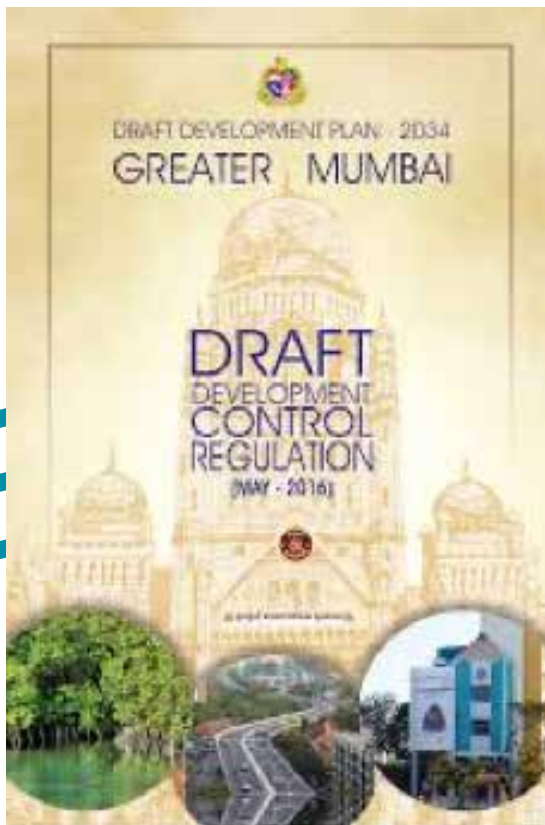
Akshara has been engaging with the public transport system namely the bus and local trains for the past few years. We were successful in training over 5000 bus conductors on sexual harassment and ways of preventing it within their buses. A Rule Book was also issued to over 13,000 bus personnel explaining the issue a few years ago, Mohan Gaikwad, a bus conductor, said “I will be more alert and make sure that every woman and child who are traveling in my bus will travel safely.” The experiment was repeated with Railway Protection Force (RPF) of Central and Western Mumbai Suburban Railway, and 620 RPF personnel were trained on sexual harassment.

The other mass transport line is the Maharashtra State Transport Corporation, which has a huge fleet of 18,449 buses and a daily commuter count of 8.7 million people. A rough estimate shows that one third of them are women. Many have experienced the hazards of sexual harassment in evening and night travel. Akshara put in a proposal for training ST bus conductors on the same lines of BEST and Railways project. It has taken off with a drafting a women commuter safety booklet.



Gendering Urban Planning

Around 2008, The Bombay Municipal Corporation announced and put out a draft of the Development Plan 2034 which maps and allocates the city's land for public use and plans its development. Many organisations working with communities like homeless people, street children, women and slum resettlements asked the BMC to give them a platform to voice their concerns. During that time, a group of women's organisations got together for an inclusion of women-oriented planning. The question they put for the authorities was – how was the DP going to benefit women citizens of the city?



People's Vision Document
for
Mumbai's Development Plan
(2014 -2034)

Tactical Urbanism: City spaces are often designed keeping in mind men's needs and behaviours. To make city spaces truly inclusive, it is imperative to not only think of women as end-users but also include them in the planning process. Akshara Co-Director spoke about the importance of gender inclusion in urban planning on Tactical Thursdays, an initiative of the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai. Click to see the video - [Gender Inclusion in the City](#)

Akshara has consistently followed up and was successful establishing an Advisory Gender Committee of architects, officials, and members of women's groups which developed a plan for Multi Purpose Working Women's Housing in all municipal wards and four of the services are under construction. This year, 4 meetings continued this work by drafting a Standard Operation Procedure and a design for construction. A presentation was made to the Minister of Tourism and Environment.





A Policy for Women

Akshara was a member of the expert group consisting of UNICEF, UN Women and women's organisations to formulate the Women's Policy 2021 under the aegis of the Ministry of Women and Child Development Dept. The Policy was very comprehensive focussing on the social and economic development of women, girls and persons belonging to the LGBTQIA – community. Its focus areas were mental health, involvement of men in gender equality and gender responsive education.

Social Media Outreach and News Coverage

INSTAGRAM

1601

followers

4,51,685

Reach

FACEBOOK

11,130

followers

45,140

Reach

TWITTER

1,164

followers

59750

Impressions

YOUTUBE

38,600

subscribers

10,530,831

views (June 2011)

548785

number of hits

Standupagainstviolence
Website

1237347

number of hits
Akshara Website

NEWS PAPER COVERAGE

Akshara various initiatives were covered in more than 25 newspapers in print and online. The child marriage campaign was supported by 11 influencers also reaching a huge audience. Some of the glimpses are here

Women's groups fight the shadow pandemic of domestic violence - <https://thecsrjournal.in/domestic-violence-shadow-pandemic-india/>

<https://frontline.thehindu.com/social-issues/gender/domestic-violence-during-covid-lockdown/article38034608.ece>

<https://aninews.in/news/business/business/grappling-with-the-shadow-pandemic-an-exclusive-report-by-Akshara-centre20220121164255/>

<https://www.freepressjournal.in/mumbai/maharashtra-govt-launches-state-campaign-for-prevention-of-child-marriage-till-september-2021>

https://public.app/video/sp_qqo41k6u4xvgj (Video clip link)

https://www.vishvauday.page/2021/11/blog-post_27.html?m=1

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/maharashtra-government-prevented-790-child-marriages-in-a-year-during-covid-19-pandemic/articleshow/85077383.cms>

https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/790-child-marriages-prevented-in-maharashtra-during-pandemic-govt-121080501550_1.html

<https://www.governancenow.com/news/regular-story/maharashtra-prevents-790-child-marriages-during-pandemic->



7.1

Partnerships

WITH OTHER NGOS AND AGENCIES

AFM

Aman Network For Peace

Ariel India

Bright Future

British Council

BEST Mumbai

CEHAT

Click Point

82.5 communication

Nishant Naik

Disney+Hotstar

eSkill India

Even Cargo

FICCI FLO

Global Plan for Research in Action

International School of Management and Entrepreneurship (ISME)

Janata Jagruti Manch

KC College

Maharashtra Mahila Hinsamukti Parishad

Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation

Mahila Arthik Vikas Mahamandal

Men Engage Alliance

Ministry of Women & Child, Maharashtra

Moving Women

MPower

Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai

National Social Service (NSS)

Network18

Non-Traditional Livelihoods Network

One Billion Rising (OBR)

Plan International

Procter & Gamble

Purple Ribbon

Quest Alliance

Railway Protection Force

RD National College

Regional Vocational Training Centre, Mumbai



*Savitribai Phule Gender Resource Centre
Special cell for women and children, TISS
SNDT Women's College, Malad
Sonke Gender Justice
Stree Mukti Sanghatana
Swati
Swayam
Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai
TrueCaller
UCLA
UN Women
UNICEF
Voices for Change, USA
Western Suburban Railways, Mumbai
Women and Child Development Department, Govt of Maharashtra*

INSTITUTIONAL DONORS

*American Jewish World Service USA
Ford Foundation, USA
Misereor, Germany
GIVE Foundation
Give India
Ravji Ramji Charitable Trust
Schiller Healthcare India Pvt. Ltd.*

INDIVIDUAL DONORS

<i>Aditi Makim</i>	<i>Pierre- Emmanuel Brusselmans</i>
<i>Ajay Paul</i>	<i>Pramathesh Majumder</i>
<i>Bhargavi Uday Joshi</i>	<i>Rajesh Baid</i>
<i>Bhavesh J Rawal</i>	<i>Ritika Golash</i>
<i>Ila Jayant Vakil</i>	<i>Shankar Srinivasan</i>
<i>Isha Shah</i>	<i>Snehal Sriram</i>
<i>Janet Vaishampayan</i>	<i>Stefan Borchardt</i>
<i>Janhavi Pandit</i>	<i>Vasudev Konde</i>
<i>Manjari Boggarapu</i>	
<i>Mustafa Kachwalla</i>	
<i>Naazneen Maneck Katrak</i>	
<i>Nishith Shah</i>	



7.2 Governance

GOVERNING BODY MEMBERS

Abha Bhaiya

Anjali Dave

Gagan Sethi

Gita Chadha

Nandita Gandhi

Nandita Shah

Nina Kapasi

Pravin Gandhi

Shimul Javeri Kadri

Sudipta Dhruva



8. Finance









Websites:

www.aksharacentre.org

website for info on violence
against women

www.standupagainstwomen.org

Social Media:



Facebook

[aksharacentre](https://www.facebook.com/aksharacentre)



Twitter

[@aksharacentre](https://twitter.com/aksharacentre)



Instagram

[@aksharacentreindia](https://www.instagram.com/aksharacentreindia)



Youtube

[Akshara Centre](https://www.youtube.com/Akshara Centre)



Whatsapp Groups