

Levelling the playing field: advocating for a sportsground for girls in an urban settlement in Mumbai, India

Background and context

Mumbra is a neighbourhood located about 30 km from the huge metropolis of Mumbai in India. Despite its proximity to the country's financial capital, it is an under-resourced predominantly Muslim neighbourhood that has seen waves of inward migration of Muslims affected by communal riots in other parts of Maharashtra state. Public services such as education, health, and sanitation in Mumbra are scarce and unable to adequately serve the large population.

As it is a Muslim community in a state and country with a history of sectarian strife, there is a deficit of trust in the government and public sector, resulting in further alienation. Women and girls bear the brunt of the impacts, which include stringent restrictions on what they wear, their recreational activities, relationships, rigid gender-based norms and lack of access to services. Despite this hostile environment, many Muslim women, and girls, contrary to public perception, exhibit resistance and resilience while negotiating their everyday lives.

Parcham, a local non-governmental organization based in Mumbra, was started in 2013 with the goal of organizing and empowering Muslim youth. It has focused especially on women and girls as part of an effort to challenge the stereotype of the "voiceless Muslim woman", address the climate of communal hate by bringing Muslim and non-Muslim girls together, and support them to claim their rights as citizens of India. The organization works with girls and young women using a combination of consciousness-raising activities, collective action, and advocacy with the local administration to highlight concerns of this constituency. One of its important endeavours has been to increase access to public space for girls and young women, for which it has been advocating with urban planning authorities.

The process and actors: what was done, by whom

Since its inception, Parcham has used football as a medium to advance progress toward these goals. This initiative is based on the belief that playing sports is essential for the holistic physical and social growth of girls, including in terms of encouraging good nutrition and countering harmful gender stereotypes and norms – especially those around shame, body image, and non-traditional professional aspirations. Through football, Parcham has helped to instil skills in the girls to navigate dynamics within their families, work with each other as a team, make decisions about their education, plan for their future and so on. It also introduces and discusses the concepts of citizenship and governance systems, especially local governance, and the rights that girls and women have as equal citizens in a democratic country.

When Parcham began mobilizing girls to play football, one big challenge was that of finding space. Initially, when playing out in common spaces, there would be a lot of men around watching the girls play, which made many of them uncomfortable. They also faced harassment from boys who did not want them to play there. The organization realised that due to the lack of a safe and conducive environment, girls who were dropping out and those who were interested were deciding not to participate.

Parcham therefore realized that there was a need for societal acceptance of women occupying a public space without a threat of harassment. But until such time a "women's-only" space would be needed to allow girls to play at ease. After identifying a plot of land in the area that was vacant and could be used for this purpose, it began negotiating with the municipal corporation and the member of the Maharashtra State legislative assembly to have it allotted for sports, specifically for women and girls. The girls organized a campaign in support, obtaining signatures from more than 900 women and girls in the area. In 2014, the local authorities agreed in principle to make this land available, but two years later the administration had done nothing to make the land usable for football – claiming, among other excuses, that the land was located in an area governed by coastal regulations and could not therefore be used for a sportsground.

Parcham challenged these claims, including by pointing out that there would be no ecologically harmful consequences since no construction was required. Moreover, a stadium had already been constructed adjacent to the plot earmarked for the sportsground for women in the same coastal regulation zone. The organization continued to keep up the pressure, including through effective use of positive stories and attention in the media. It organized women's football tournaments to further help build support for the idea of women engaging in sports. The lengthy effort finally achieved success when, in 2019, the sportsground was inaugurated by the Member of Legislative Assembly as the Fatima Bi Savitri Bai Sportsground for Women. The name brings together two pioneers of women and girls' education, from two marginalized communities, as a marker of solidarity among women with different religious identities which today have been pitted against each other for political gain.

However, much remains to be done three years later. Part of the ground has not been cleared out and levelled, so there is a risk of injury. And although there is a sign stating that the land is reserved for women for playing sports, it is a site for dumping debris. Parcham players have continued to seek improvements, including by organizing cleaning drives and asking the municipal corporation to take the necessary steps to level the ground. Their efforts have received support from leaders in the community, activists from other social movements and organizations in the area, and their own families.

Impacts and benefits

In addition to helping procure a sportsground, Parcham's intervention has contributed to a wider range of benefits from the perspective of young women and girls' well-being and state accountability:

1. At an individual level, being part of a football team and Parcham's capacity-building programmes has improved girls' physical health and positive perceptions of their bodies. Many benefits result from them paying more attention to their fitness, nutrition and illnesses. Also, the Parcham programmes that raise awareness of gender dynamics and patriarchal and communal systems have given them new ways to think about their lives in the context of the greater society. Solidarity in the face of shared challenges has resulted from bringing together Muslim and non-Muslim girls, which has encouraged more convivial relations between girls from the two communities and helped them recognize the similarity of their lived experiences as girls in a patriarchal society.
2. Being part of a collective team has imparted a sense of belonging and strengthened social support to the girls, which are important components of well-being. As a result, other team members have helped many to navigate difficult circumstances within their families and communities (e.g., responding to domestic violence, resisting early marriage, and continuing education).
3. Greater understanding of citizenship and governance systems has equipped the girls with information and confidence to be able to approach and engage meaningfully with community leaders, elected representatives and government officials, as well as more broadly within their own communities, to make their needs and demands known. Although there was strategic guidance and facilitation by senior activists, the players themselves were involved in negotiations and actions to secure the new sportsground.

Meanwhile, Parcham's work with and on behalf of the football players has made the organization a credible and important voice in Mumbra that is seen as legitimate by elected representatives and office bearers in local government. This has created a space for it to raise other important concerns around civic amenities, education, and health services.



Photo credit: @Siddesh Raghavendra

Lessons learned

This initiative to establish an important space for girls and young women in Mumbra holds important lessons for doing strategic accountability work with adolescents and young people.

1. The creative use of sport as a medium to build solidarity, challenge stereotypes about women's bodies and visibility in public spaces, and instil awareness of entitlements as citizens can be a successful approach to mobilize this constituency.
2. Because the intervention has taken an intersectional approach, it recognizes multiple layers of vulnerability (gender and religion). This in turn enables it to constructively transform power relations not just between the girls and the state, but between the girls and the larger community within a context of communal polarization.
3. While this case study is primarily about the effort to procure a sportsground for women, Parcham's work is more generally focused on building citizenship. This non-thematic emphasis is important because it makes space for raising bottom-up issues that are important to youth while also providing a broad-based collective that can support and take forward their demands.
4. Parcham has not focused on the use of tools (like scorecards) or setting and rigorously following a pre-determined intervention pathway; instead, its approach has been context-sensitive and flexible. This has allowed the organization to capitalize on new and unexpected opportunities for action and to build solidarity with a broad base of constituencies both within Mumbra and outside it.

Additional information about Parcham's work to build and enhance football-playing opportunities for girls and young women as well as individual stories about some of the girls themselves is available at:

<https://www.parchamcollective.org/>

This case study is based on the work and ideas of Parcham. It is authored by Sana Contractor and Sabah Khan.