

NISHTHA

Community Approach Analysis

• South 24 Parganas



EdelGive
Foundation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report documents and analyses Nishtha's programme practices, organisational approaches, and learning from its long-term work with adolescent girls, women, families, communities, and institutions. It examines the design choices and organisational practices that have enabled Nishtha to build sustained community leadership, engage multiple stakeholders, respond to evolving vulnerabilities, and maintain continuity of participation over time.

A key learning emerging from the programme is that long-term collaboration enables communities to become active actors in identifying, responding to, and preventing risks that endanger them, thereby strengthening social impact. Importantly, it reflects on leadership building that is cultivated progressively through ownership, experiential learning, and mentorship that translates into community responsibility.

The report also highlights the importance of multi-stakeholder engagement as an intentional design process. Nishtha's long-standing presence in the region, credibility with communities and institutions, regular relationship-building, and understanding of local power and social dynamics have enabled it to engage families, boys and men, women and mothers, community leaders, schools, Panchayats, law enforcement, and other public institutions. These relationships create an enabling environment in which community groups can mobilise, negotiate, escalate, and seek institutional action.

Nishtha's work also exemplifies the intersectional relationship between multiple vulnerabilities and social issues of a region. Through education and community mobilization, the NGO responds to regional challenges of human trafficking, domestic violence, social gender norms, and economic distress. The experience demonstrates the need for an intersectional lens and community capacity building to build a program that responds comprehensively to a community.

Beyond programme design, the report examines what enables organisations to sustain this work. Nishtha's experience points to the importance of long-term funding, organisational capacity, leadership continuity, alumni engagement, institutional relationships, and flexible approaches to implementation. It also identifies areas requiring further strengthening, including data systems, outcome measurement, documentation, vocational linkages, institutional response mechanisms, and organisational capacity to respond to emerging needs.

The report seeks to move beyond documenting '*what Nishtha does*' to understand '*why and how these practices have worked, what conditions have enabled them*'. It attempts to create and offer transferable learnings to organisations working to deepen their work through community development and multi-stakeholder approach in their relevant areas of work, for long-term social change. It serves both as a reflection of what has worked and as a learning document to inform future programme design, organisational strengthening, grant-making, and continued partnership.

NISHTHA

Founded in 1975, Nishtha is a community-based organization focused on empowering women and children by raising awareness of their rights, education, and collective action. Operating in over 300 villages in South 24 Parganas, West Bengal, Nishtha addresses issues such as child marriage, trafficking, domestic violence, and gender inequality through community-led initiatives.





Context of the South 24 Parganas: Where does Nishtha work?

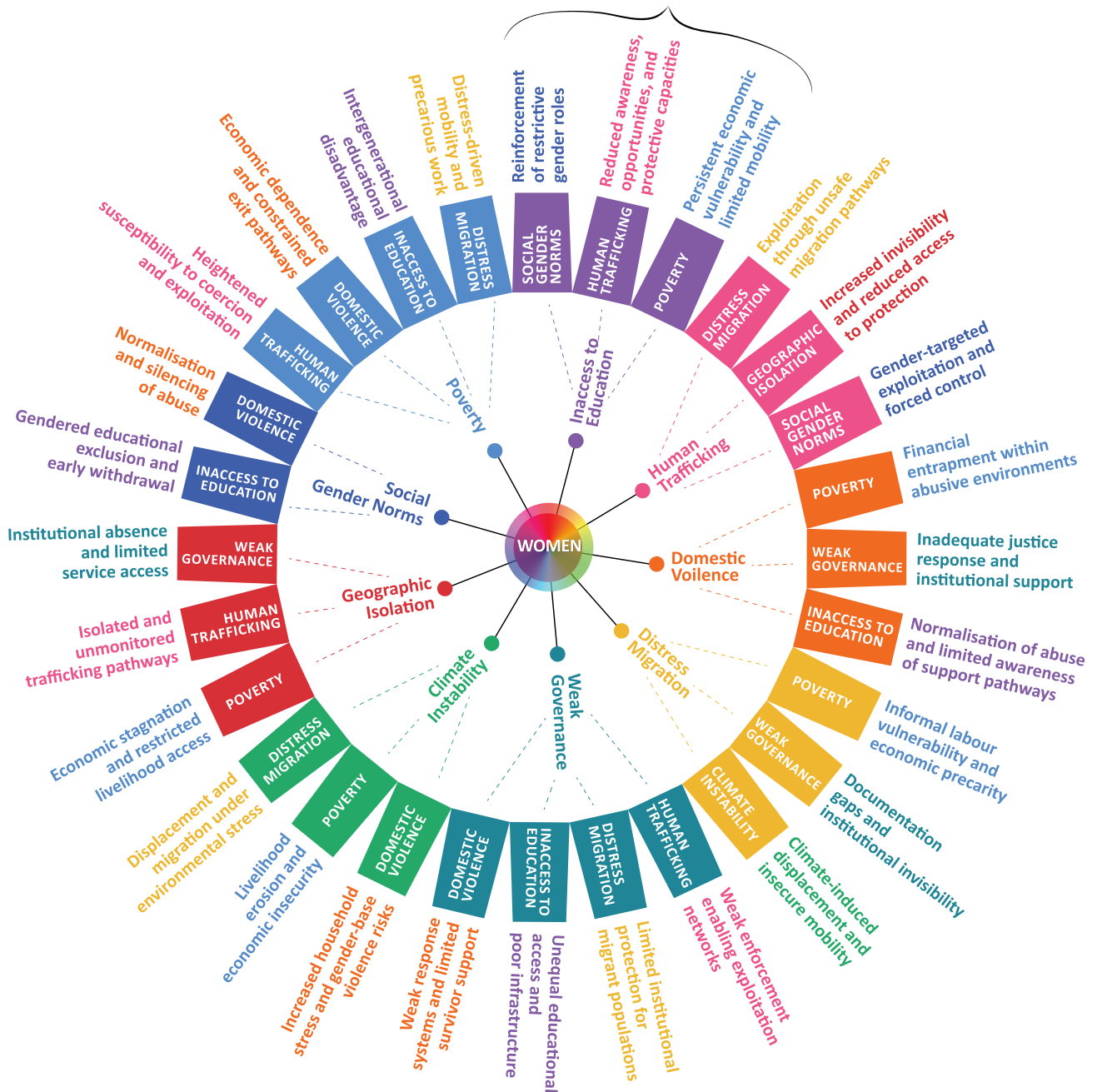
The South 24 Parganas of West Bengal is marked by persistent poverty and limited economic opportunities. Livelihoods in the region are dependent on natural resources and local ecosystems that are becoming increasingly unstable due to environmental disruptions. Over the past decades, this fragility has been repeatedly intensified by a series of cyclones, to which the coastal geography remains particularly exposed - Cyclone Fani (2019), Cyclone Bulbul (2019), Cyclone Amphan (2020), Cyclone Yaas (2021), Cyclone Dana and Remal (2024). These events have had far-reaching consequences, damaging crop production, fisheries, water systems, and housing infrastructure, while also leading to loss of life and assets. This places the South 24 Parganas in a sensitive climate context.

This economic and geographical vulnerability forces distress migration in the region. The onset of COVID-19 further compounded these vulnerabilities. Economic opportunities shrank, incomes declined, and gender-based violence and migration intensified as households sought alternative means of survival. The resulting mass migration further amplified vulnerabilities and created new risks of exploitation.

Distress Migration, geographic isolation, and weak governance together form a critical enabling context for the human trafficking corridor that runs across West Bengal, commonly referred to as the Indo-Bangladesh border route. Within this landscape, South 24 Parganas functions simultaneously as a source, transit, and destination point, making it particularly vulnerable to trafficking networks. Limited access to education and low levels of awareness further deepen this vulnerability, constraining informed decision-making and reducing the ability of individuals and communities to recognise and respond to risks of exploitation.

The communities where Nishtha works are among the most marginalized, with families struggling to meet even their basic needs. These families, living in extreme financial distress, often find it difficult to sustain themselves, let alone bear the educational expenses of their children. For girls in particular, access to education is shaped by both economic limitations and deeply embedded gender norms. Even when families aspire to educate their daughters, structural barriers persist. At the same time, government schools in geographically isolated areas often face infrastructural and quality constraints, limiting their ability to provide consistent and meaningful education. Geographical isolation further compounds these challenges by limiting access to services, markets, and institutional support.

Nishtha's Primary Intervention



INTERSECTIONALITY IN SOUTH 24 PARGANAS:

■ SOCIAL GENDER NORMS	■ POVERTY	■ INACCESS TO EDUCATION	■ HUMAN TRAFFICKING	■ DOMESTIC VIOLENCE
■ DISTRESS MIGRATION	■ WEAK GOVERNANCE	■ CLIMATE INSTABILITY	■ GEOGRAPHIC ISOLATION	

Cause evaluation and development: How does Gender vulnerability intersect with the multi-layered context of South 24 Parganas?

These vulnerabilities observed in the region do not operate in isolation; they interact with one another in a cause-and-effect amplifying relationship; they emerge through the interaction of multiple structural and situational factors. Economic distress, unemployment, migration, lack of education, and deeply entrenched patriarchal norms continue to exacerbate vulnerabilities, making women and girls more susceptible to violence, both inside and outside the home. Traffickers take advantage of the desperate economic conditions and social gaps, luring young girls and women with false promises of employment and marriage.

Restricted access to education, shaped by financial barriers, infrastructural gaps, and gender norms, weakens an important protective pathway. Withdrawal from education places girls at the intersection of multiple risks—early marriage, restricted mobility, and heightened susceptibility to exploitation. Violence against women and Human trafficking, in this context, cannot be understood as an isolated phenomenon. It emerges as a convergence point of gendered inequalities, economic impoverishment, governance gaps, and climate instability, manifested in violence/exploitation vulnerability.

Trafficking changes with changes in vulnerabilities, which themselves are dynamic. For example, personal vulnerabilities and family vulnerabilities also make young girls prone to human trafficking. Distress on a family level and weak guardianship in the family can also attract human trafficking agents to a woman who is distressed at home, depressed, or maybe looking for a way out in desperation. These vulnerabilities evolve with time and situations, requiring NGO to be quick, observant, and adept to respond.

COVID-19 led to the emergence of newer pathways of human trafficking and newer vulnerabilities. A lot of pre- and post-COVID changes were noticed because of livelihood disruption. Job fraud became one of the major pathways of human trafficking. Survival needs shifted people's focus from education to sustaining immediate livelihoods for basic necessities such as food and shelter. This led to increased negligence towards education within communities, causing drop-outs. News and exaggerated rumours about a poor job market during the pandemic-caused economic crisis further accentuated vulnerability to falling prey to fraudulent job offers. Because of deprivation of resources, families became prey to fraudulent marriages during COVID, which became another pathway and a different, more vulnerable route into trafficking.

Beyond these rumours, the broader economic crisis discouraged people from pursuing education, leading to greater school dropouts and more young people looking for quick sources of income and consequently becoming vulnerable to job fraud and trafficking.

With time, social media has also increased vulnerability to violence, trafficking, and fraud. In these ways, the pathways into human trafficking continue to evolve.

The NGO leverages a strong community and multi-stakeholder approach to create ground-level checkpoints, vigilance systems, and prevention mechanisms to safeguard women and young girls against the risks of human trafficking.

Program Response: How does Nishtha's program, Unnatir Udaan, address this?

Nishtha responds to this context with an integrated program that reduces this vulnerability through **education, vocational support, and community sensitizing and strengthening.**

- Nishtha works to reduce school dropout by supporting girls' education. By retaining them in school, they ensure their protection from early marriage and trafficking by building their awareness, critical capacities, and maintaining vigilance. The support includes enabling provisions of educational materials, coverage of tuition fees, and facilitation of age-appropriate learning sessions.
- Recognising the role of economic vulnerability in trafficking, distress migration, labour exploitation, and gender-based violence, Nishtha promotes financial independence through vocational training, skill development, and entrepreneurship initiatives.
- Through awareness campaigns, street theatre, workshops, and dialogue-based platforms, the organisation fosters community awareness around gender, violence, and trafficking, engaging men and boys, mothers and fathers. Through collectives and alumni networks, long-term community engagement and leadership are cultivated.
- The program also works in partnership with local governance structures, including panchayats, law enforcement, and administrative bodies, to strengthen institutional responses to trafficking and gender-based violence, while promoting accountability and access to justice.



Case Vignette:

Rescuing Rabeya from Child Marriage

Rabeya, a bright student preparing for her higher secondary exams in March, faced intense pressure from her parents to marry. As the wedding discussions progressed, her movement was increasingly restricted, and she was no longer allowed to attend Kishori Vahini meetings. Concerned by her absence, group members visited her house, only to be met with hostility from her father, who refused to let them see her. Sensing something was wrong, they immediately alerted the rest of the group and Nishtha's social workers. In the meantime, Rabeya accessed her father's phone and informed the group about the situation.

Realizing the urgency of the situation, the group first approached the local Panchayat Pradhan, seeking his intervention. However, he dismissed their request, citing other commitments. Undeterred, they then turned to the local police station, where officers initially responded with excuses and delays. Determined to protect Rabeya, nearly 30-40 girls from Kishori Vahini, a community group, marched to the police station the following day, demanding action. Their persistence paid off—faced with immense pressure, the police finally agreed to intervene. That same day, they accompanied the girls to Rabeya's house, confronted her parents, and warned them of the legal consequences of child marriage.

Following this intervention, members of Kishori Vahini and Mahila Mandal maintained a steady presence at Rabeya's home, ensuring her safety and providing continuous support. They counselled her parents on the importance of education and the harm caused by early marriage. Their efforts were successful, Rabeya continued her education, appeared for the exams, and participation with the groups.

*This document analytically explores two key program strategies: Community leadership and Multi-stakeholder approach.

COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP



Why invest in building community leadership?

The case vignette above illustrates how community leadership translates into alertness, proactiveness, and collective action. It is a result of deliberately building systems of community vigilance, action, and governance through collectivized groups and leadership.

These groups are capacitated to:

- **Identify problems early**
- **Understand escalation pathways, determine *who to approach, when, and how***
- **Apply a range of response strategies: negotiation, collective pressure, and counselling**

1) Community Social Intelligence

The community groups' judgment of which strategy to deploy in which context is critical to their strength in implementing action in the field. Community leaders, women in these groups, are closest to the internal social dynamics that shape these issues. Their understanding of relationships, power structures, and risks allows for contextually intelligent action. They know when to negotiate, when to counsel, when to apply pressure, and on whom. Their existing social knowledge is an asset that, with collectivization, sensitization, and training, evolves into a self-responsive system of protection and action.

2) Local Vigilance System

In South 24 Pargana's context, this has built a strong system of vigilance and local governance. For issues such as trafficking, early marriage, and school dropout, where early detection is critical, such systems enable timely intervention. Unlike external monitoring, community-embedded vigilance is more responsive and less resistant, as it operates within existing social structures rather than attempting to penetrate them from outside.

Community members are trained to build an active vigilance system through participatory mapping of their local context. This includes identifying key resources such as PHCs (Public Health Centers) and schools, while also marking safe and unsafe spaces (e.g., poorly lit or isolated areas). The mapping further captures the locations of group members' homes, ensuring that leaders and co-leaders are strategically placed across different parts of the village rather than clustered together. This enables wider coverage, quicker response, and shared responsibility, allowing communities to use their local knowledge to monitor risks, track movement, and coordinate timely action.

3) Scaling support

Community leaders function as an extended arm of the organisation. This allows the organisation to operate at a large scale. It enhances both breadth and depth of reach. They significantly expand the:

- **Reach of the program**
- **Frequency of engagement**
- **Speed of response**

When initiatives are peer-led, participation increases, people are more likely to engage in spaces where they feel represented, and their experiences are understood.

4) Relatable Role Models

The integration of Alumni as leaders has created a system of visible and relatable role models. Participants see examples of individuals who come from similar contexts, have navigated similar challenges, and transitioned to leadership roles. This for NGO has become a means to encourage more people by fostering aspiration and motivation through community leaders. It is important for people to see an alternate reality that can be relatable for them to pursue, too. Community leaders inspire the possibility of change.

5) Sense of Active contribution and accountability

This also strengthens the identity, agency, and ownership of individuals. It transforms the community from recipients of change to contributors to change. Leaders develop a stake in community outcomes, making interventions more sustainable.

6) Self-sustaining ecosystem of Motivation

A key strength of this model is its Self-Sustaining ecosystem of Motivation. Motivation in this community leadership is self-reinforcing. Alumni inspire young participants, younger participants motivate alumni, mothers support daughters, and daughters influence mothers. This creates a mutually reinforcing ecosystem of support, accountability, and aspiration.



How has Nishtha built Community leadership?

1) Structured Community Groups

Nishtha has established two key structured community-based groups. These groups play a crucial role in implementing and sustaining the Unnatir Udaan program, with 50 mothers' groups and 50 girls' groups directly engaged in the initiative. Each group is composed of ~12–16 members, and has a leader and a co-leader.

- **Adolescent girls (Kishori Vahini)**
- **Women and mothers (Mahila Mandal)**

2) Designed interlinkages across groups

These groups are not isolated units; they are linked together through intentional design, bringing together generations and roles. This is enabled through joint sessions, mentorship spaces, and shared spaces. This builds a larger ecosystem of allies beyond siloed groups.

3) Comprehensive Training

Nishtha has designed tailored engagement and training. Each group receives context-specific training, designed based on age, social role, and lived realities.

The trainings include:

- **Communication and negotiation**
- **Crisis response**
- **Identifying warning signs**
- **Leadership development**
- **Mental health support**

Training and learning in the group are experiential and reflective. Personal journeys and experiences strengthen reflection, support, and collective learning. This enables deeper internalisation. By engaging with real-life situations, role plays, and peer discussions, participants are able to recognise patterns within their own environments, test responses in a safe and supportive setting, and build confidence to act in similar situations outside the group. It also fosters associative learning, where new concepts, such as rights, gender equality, or negotiation, are understood through familiar experiences, making them more meaningful and easier to recall in moments of need.

Their training efforts manifest through diverse strategies such as:

- **Conducting awareness rallies and campaigns**
- **Participating in stakeholder meetings to demand policy changes**
- **Intervening in cases of child marriage, gender-based violence, and other rights violations**
- **Tracking migration patterns to ensure the safety of those seeking work outside their villages.**
The program strengthened community networks to monitor the movement of traffickers and prevent young girls from being deceived.

4) Focus on psycho-social wellbeing

Mental health is integrated into the training and the leadership model. Alumni and leaders provide formalised emotional support to each other by assuming the position of Mental Health Champions; they actively identify distress and support the community's psychosocial wellbeing.

5) Designing for intrinsic motivation

The team identified the following key motivations in individuals:

- **Sense of Identity, Confidence**
- **Sense of Belonging, Support**
- **Space for Expression**
- **Actionable Skills**

The activities of the program are designed to tap into and strengthen the motivations and interests of the participants, making the engagement self-driven. Collectivization, Leadership building, Role and Responsibility allocation within teams, Skill-building, and practices meet the identified needs of the community members.

The training and conditioning that they are brought up with since their early years of participation and through the progressive stages of group engagement, motivates their self-driven initiative and continued participation. Their experiences in these groups are ones of complete ownership, freedom, and belonging. This experience, which conditions self-driven motivation, is shaped by small-group norms, such as members shaping and deciding their own rules and regulations, the timings of their meetings, and the topics that they want to discuss. The groups create a sense of safe space for the members as they grow up, ultimately solidifying their connection to the group and creating a self-driven motivation to remain connected to what they associate as their space.

6) Leader- Co-leader Model

The leadership structure of the groups is of shared responsibility and decentralized decision-making. Each group has a leader and a deputy leader.

A key feature of the model is that leaders develop their own strategies in response to their context, needs, and strengths. They adapt approaches to local contexts and situational requirements instead of applying externally imposed frameworks.

7) Alumni Integration

Girls who graduate from the Unnatir Uddan program continue their association with the program as alumni. The NGO has successfully retained a graduates as alumni who stay connected with the community in roles of mentors, facilitators, role models, and mental health champions.

Records are maintained for each group, and a social worker maintains regular contact for six months after the exit. They stay in touch, invite alumni for trainings as they are conducted, and organise events for which invitations are sent. Even group members or alumni who may have migrated out of the city travel to attend these events as and when they can. Continuous training and active peer networks ensure continuity, knowledge transfer, and sustained engagement.

Continued participation of phased-out girls in group structures has proven critical in preserving community trust, leadership continuity, and program credibility. The Alumni guide current participants, support group leaders, and help manage group dynamics.

This learning is informing Nishtha's transition planning across project phases and donor cycles. The cyclicity of community leaders and groups keeps the program objectives met actively. This evolving leadership structure becomes an important foundation for building self-led communities and strengthening community-owned systems of support and accountability.

8) Designed sequenced preparation for leadership and community action

Leadership is pre-conditioned through early and phased engagement. An important design feature of the program is that community leadership is prepared and cultivated much earlier through a structured, age-based engagement model.

The program recognises that a girl's journey is one of continuous transformation and therefore designs engagement across three developmental stages: 8–13 years, 14–18 years, 19–25 years.

Each stage receives tailored inputs aligned with its developmental needs and social realities.

In the early years (8–13), the focus is on building foundational capacities that prepare girls to recognise themselves as individuals with agency, which becomes critical for later participation. As girls move into the 14–18 age group, the engagement shifts towards leadership exposure and participation. They begin to engage with Kishori Vahini groups, participate in community activities, and interact with local stakeholders such as village leaders and federations. In the 19–25 age group, many transition into alumni roles.

Girls enter collectives already prepared with foundational capacities, making group processes more effective and enabling faster transition into active roles.

A key insight from this model is that the program follows a sequenced approach, introducing concepts and responsibilities at stages where participants are most able to absorb and apply them. This reflects an understanding that leadership is developmental, behavior change is gradual, and impact is strengthened through timing.

9) Leadership retention and continuity

The NGO has designed a clear progressive leadership pipeline that feeds back into the tri-layered system, with each level interacting with the others.

Participant —————> **Leader** —————> **Alumni mentor**

The NGO has sustained its engagement, even as the composition of the community evolves and changes, by maintaining connections if a woman or alumni moves out of the program, for example, those who marry off and move to other villages or may migrate for other reasons. They maintain close ties through their alumni networks, annual meet-ups, and an active referral support system, ensuring the cycle of mobilisation and empowerment continues.

A very interesting point noted through the discussions was how, when a woman may migrate out of her neighbourhood or region, the NGO reported cases of these women starting their own groups in these other neighbouring or destination migration places. This happens because, as part of their training in these groups, girls also learn about group organising, mobilisation, and building, which enables them to mobilise and organise in the regions that they may also move to. Additionally, Nishtha provides them support by training and need-based guidance, providing travel allowances wherever needed, and maintaining constant touch.

However, while this is a unique and very interesting case of scaling through alumni initiatives outside the primary region of work for an NGO, the NGO has not yet maintained proper aggregated data on such out-migration-led group formation and group expansion.

These strategies, as summatively highlighted below, have enabled the NGO to have a long-term, sustained, and evolving community leadership model:

- **Role evolution of alumni**
- **Continued, tailored training**
- **Regular meet-ups for check-ins**
- **Active networking**
- **Integration of different groups**

10) Focus on group development

The program actively invests in group dynamics, participation equity, mental well-being, capacity, skill-building, and internal cohesion. This reflects a parallel to organisational development, where internal functioning is as important as external outcomes.

GUIDED INQUIRY *What enables this?* For Grant Managers and Design Implementer SECTION

*What kind of program budgeting enables sustained, tailored engagement across multiple groups?

*How are resources allocated for training, mentorship, and cross-group activities?

*What is the organisation's capacity and strategy to identify metrics of monitoring and managing data for this program plan?

*What is required to build the organizational strength to run a long-term, multi-stakeholder program?

*What is sustainability in the context of community leadership? How can it be ensured programmatically?

*How will smooth operations be ensured in community groups for an equitable representation and long term sustenance?

*What kind of staff capacity and roles are required to facilitate: multiple groups, ongoing trainings, and community engagement?

*What are the defined goals and outcomes of building leadership that will support the community in its specific context and contribute to the planned program?

*What conditions allow individuals to become active agents of their community? How does the program create those conditions?

MULTI-STAKEHOLDER COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT



Why is multi-stakeholder engagement within the primary community critical?

Nishtha's intervention engages with a diverse ecosystem of stakeholders within the community. The program works with:

- **Adolescent girls and young women**
- **Mothers and adult women**
- **Boys and young men**
- **Fathers and adult male community members**
- **Elder community members and informal leaders**
- **Public governance institutions and systems (including local authorities and law enforcement)**

1) Socio-Ecological Framework

Access to rights, safety, and empowerment requires an enabling social environment. Such an environment can be built when multiple actors within the community are engaged simultaneously, each influencing different layers of social life.

Each stakeholder group plays a distinct role in shaping women's experiences:

- **Boys and young men influence peer norms, everyday interactions, and the early formation of gender attitudes.**
- **Fathers often act as key decision-makers within households, shaping decisions around education, mobility, and marriage.**
- **Mothers and adult women mediate between tradition and change, often negotiating within households while also influencing daughters' aspirations and choices.**
- **Community members hold social authority and help reinforce or challenge normative practices.**
- **Institutions (police, panchayats, committees) control access to justice, enforcement, and formal accountability mechanisms.**

Together, these actors form a microcosm of power and influence, where change across groups is required for sustenance in changes in one.

Multi-stakeholder engagement helps create shared spaces of dialogue, where issues such as violence, early marriage, and discrimination become discussable in external spaces. When multiple groups are engaged, widespread conversations enable de-stigmatization, creating more spaces for women and girls to express concerns.

2) Cross-age solidarity and support

Engagement with women across age groups strengthens solidarity within the women's ecosystem. It builds a support system for girls while also addressing the needs and constraints of mothers and other adult women in the group. Intergenerational dialogue between mothers and daughters fosters mutual understanding, shared problem-solving, and collective resistance.

3) Engaging men with gendered social structures

Gender norms are socially produced and sustained. Men in particular, as the NGO recognizes, play a critical role in sustaining patriarchal expectations, regulating women's mobility and choices, and shaping the consequences and responses to movements. Engaging them, therefore, is a crucial part of the program. By involving them as participants in dialogue and reflection, the program seeks to shift attitudes, redistribute responsibility, and build allyship in advancing gender equity. Discussions around peer pressure, masculinity, and safety are actively facilitated.

4) Collective response

When communities are organised and multiple stakeholders are actively engaged, the response to incidents becomes more collective, timely, and effective. Community mobilisation enables:

- **Faster identification of risks**
- **Coordinated action across groups**
- **Stronger, more sustained pressure on institutions to respond**

This collective engagement transforms isolated responses into shared accountability, strengthening both prevention and response mechanisms within the community.

One of the reasons that Nishtha has been able to achieve a strong multi-stakeholder approach in its programmes is because of its long-standing history. Nishtha is a 50-year-old organisation. It has been in the region for decades, which has made it a credible, popular, and trustworthy name, not only among public institutions but also among communities. And that is what also allows Nishtha to build, to have built, such a strong multi-stakeholder approach.

Nishtha's trajectory of reaching this milestone also, in itself, traces strategic actions that allowed it to build a strong community and multi-stakeholder approach.



How does the NGO engage with multiple stakeholders?

1) Building community collectives as anchor institutions

The program has collected different stakeholders among women into structured groups of adolescent girls, women, mothers, peers, and alumni. These groups are capacitated and integrated into action, positioning them as active agents who engage with other stakeholders, making them multi-stakeholder engagers themselves.

2) Community Dynamics and Motivation mapping

A strong multi-stakeholder strategy begins with understanding the fabric of the community an organisation is entering. This involves mapping the composition of the community, understanding the relationships and dynamics between different stakeholders, and identifying both the points of influence and areas of vulnerability within the community. Such an understanding allows the organisation to anticipate tensions, navigate existing power dynamics, and design engagement approaches that are responsive to the local context.

For example, before engaging with a community, an NGO may seek to understand who holds social influence, whether that influence is positive or negative, who is trusted, and how different stakeholders relate to one another. Understanding these relational dynamics helps the organisation determine how and with whom it needs to engage, rather than applying a uniform approach to all stakeholders.

It is important to recognise that different stakeholders have different interests, motivations, needs, and capacities. Rather than treating them as a homogeneous group, a multi-stakeholder approach seeks to understand what matters to each stakeholder and uses this understanding to design appropriate modes of engagement.

In this way, multi-stakeholder engagement becomes a deliberate strategy of understanding each stakeholder individually and then creating spaces where their different interests and capacities can be brought together towards a common purpose.

3) Institutional engagement through relationships

While community groups often negotiate, escalate, and apply pressure on institutions, the NGO's approach also focuses on building informal, trust-based relationships with stakeholders such as panchayat members, local authorities, and law enforcement.

This dual approach integrates institutions into the ecosystem, reduces friction during escalation, and improves responsiveness over time. Having a strong grassroots presence also requires having a strong public institutional relationship. To have impact and support at the village level, it is important to have support at the block level, and so on. So, it is important to invest in strong institutional relationships that feed into support and strength at the grassroots as well.

4) Action building pathways

While discussions are exploratory, a key focus is on translating awareness into action. Participants are encouraged to identify what they can do in their roles, how they can intervene in specific situations, and how they can support others.

These interventions and action solutions are guided, reflective, participatory, and emergent in nature. For example:

- **Mothers learn how to respond to early marriage attempts, maintain communication with teachers, and collectively raise concerns.**
- **Men and boys explore ways to challenge harmful norms and support girls' participation.**

Discussions and group activities are based on real-life stories and shared experiences of the group, making them relatable, realistic, and practical in application.

Through this design, Communities are enabled to act collectively and independently. The program fosters:

- **Local ownership of issues**
- **Context-responsive action**
- **Shared responsibility across stakeholders**

5) Iterative and sustained engagement

Behaviour change is recognised as a long-term process. The program, therefore, adopts an iterative engagement model, involving:

- **Repeated sessions**
- **Continuous follow-ups**
- **Ongoing facilitation support**

This sustained engagement allows participants to revisit ideas, reflect on experiences, and gradually shift attitudes and behaviours. Regular touchpoints through conversations, home visits, and informal interactions with different stakeholders help build familiarity, trust, and rapport over time. Once these relationships are established, the NGO is better positioned to bring different stakeholders together around shared issues and objectives.

6) Targeted engagement with men and boys

The NGO has focused sessions with male stakeholders. Their sessions are designed using BCC tools and personal story and experience sharing. The sessions aim to:

- **Sensitize them to gender issues**
- **Explore their roles as allies**
- **Examine and discuss how their behaviors influence outcomes for women and girls**

Facilitated by social workers and alumni mentors, these engagements are context-sensitive and adaptive, responding to how different groups receive and process these conversations. The challenges faced in this facilitation and the design techniques for such targeted activities open an exploration into behavior and mindset shifts that the NGO aims to catalyze.

7) Behavior change communication

The NGO conducts Behavior change communication activities with its diverse stakeholders. They use tools like street theater, workshops, campaigns, and educational sessions. The focus is on bringing sensitive issues into public discourse, creating spaces for discussion, and encouraging reflection.

A key strength of this approach lies in its nuanced and adaptive design. Rather than relying on directive or prescriptive messaging, BCC here functions through soft, participatory methods that prioritise conversation, storytelling, and shared reflection. This makes it particularly effective in contexts where resistance or discomfort may be high. The gradual and engaging nature of these tools allows the program to build trust over time, enabling deeper engagement with complex social issues.

Importantly, the NGO uses it as a flexible and context-responsive approach, tailored to different stakeholder groups. It is deployed both in homogeneous settings (e.g., sessions exclusively with adolescent girls or with fathers) and in heterogeneous spaces (mixed-group discussions), depending on the objective and sensitivity of the topic.



What are the challenges faced in implementing this strategy?

- Initial disengagement with male stakeholders was observed as limited participation, especially among older male community members, when engaging with discussions on gender equality and social norms.
- While many stakeholders, such as law enforcement, community leaders, and local government bodies, have become more sensitized and active in supporting victims, their response is sometimes delayed or restrained due to existing socio-cultural ties within the community. Many hesitate to take immediate action against perpetrators, fearing backlash or social repercussions.

GUIDED INQUIRY

What enables this approach?

For Grant Managers and Design Implementer

SECTION



*What kind of program budgeting enables sustained engagement across diverse stakeholder groups?

*What human resource capacities are required to facilitate such varied and continuous interactions?

*What kind of monitoring and evaluation lens is used to understand and record behavior change?

*What are the challenges anticipated in a multi-stakeholder approach and the support mechanisms put in place for the same?

*What distinct value does each community group bring to the multi-stakeholder plan? What are the means required to actively engage them based on this distinct purpose and value?



Limitations of the NGO:

Nishtha's work demonstrates strong programmatic depth; however, some structural and operational challenges persist.

1) Fundraising Strategy and Scope

- The current fundraising narrative is primarily centred on girls' education, which, while important, may not fully capture the breadth of Nishtha's work. This limits its appeal to a wider donor base. Expanding the narrative to reflect its work on gender justice, systemic empowerment, child protection, climate vulnerability, livelihoods (including fisherwomen and agriculture), this could support the NGO's access to more diversified funding streams.
- At the same time, limited digital presence, including an inactive website, constrains visibility and outreach, further affecting fundraising potential.

2) Data Systems and Documentation Gaps

- There is an overreliance on manual systems (field notebooks and basic Excel sheets). They present limitations in ensuring data consistency, traceability, and real-time accessibility. Field observations and program-level interactions indicate that data is often recorded across multiple formats and locations, leading to challenges in consolidation, verification, and timely use for decision-making. These documentation gaps have had direct programmatic implications. For instance, challenges in retrieving required documentation in a timely manner.
- In addition, the absence of a centralized and standardized data management system limits the organization's ability to:
 - Track Program progress longitudinally across program phases (e.g., from enrolment to alumni stages),
 - o Monitor transitions such as education-to-livelihood pathways
 - o Systematically capture and analyse behavioural outcomes from interventions such as community mobilization and behaviour change communication (BCC)

3) Financial Sustainability and Funding Constraints

- Raising funds for operational and human resource costs remains a persistent challenge.
- The organisation's non-government-funded schools for first-generation learners face particular financial strain, as their independent operation requires sustained and flexible funding.
- The limited corpus fund further limits long-term financial stability and the ability to absorb funding fluctuations.
- Additionally, there is a degree of external funding reliance for critical inputs, such as special education support, which are essential for ensuring school retention.

»» *Way forward for the NGO:*

1) Engaging with Boys and Men

Currently, the NGO is at an initial stage of engaging young boys and men in regular conversations. They have recorded an encouraging participation from the demographic, also sharing emerging shifts in gender norms and support.

- Since the NGO considers male engagement in the program a crucial cog in their theory of change, it is important to map its role and associated goals in the program, both tangible and intangible, to the future activities. While important programmatically, this mapping also holds sectoral importance as a guide for similar engagements across different initiatives in the social development landscape that are increasingly integrating men for gender empowerment. The monitoring is mapped till activity level in the program, its output and outcomes require definition with evolution in the program.
- It is important to explore future possibilities of growth, map expected change, and monitor it. This is important for the design of the program for focused effort, monitoring of change, and effective communication in the ecosystem for learnings.

2) Domestic Violence cases

Recent NGO data trends indicate a decline in trafficking cases alongside a rise in reported domestic and sexual violence. It reflects a shift in both risk patterns and reporting behavior.

- Strengthened community mobilization, collective support systems, and improved confidence in institutional mechanisms have enabled women and girls to better identify violence, recognise their rights, and actively seek support.
- Sustained awareness efforts have also begun to break the long-standing culture of silence around domestic and gender-based violence, bringing previously unrecognised or unspoken issues into public discourse.
- At the same time, there is a deepening gender consciousness, with women and girls increasingly able to identify discrimination across multiple domains—from mobility and education to work and household roles.

This shift signals a transition from hidden vulnerabilities to visible and contested issues. This carries implications for program strategy, highlighting the need for:

- Building internal capacities for case response and support, and strategically collaborating with specialised organisations in the region to ensure comprehensive, coordinated care for survivors.
- Deepening engagement with institutions for timely action.
- Strengthening support networks, mediation capacities, and safe spaces for continued dialogue.

- Enhancing organisational capacity, especially human resource capacity, with trained staff and community facilitators equipped to handle sensitive cases, conflict, and trauma-informed engagement.
- Advancing monitoring systems to track cases, responses, and outcomes with greater reliability and transparency.

3) Behaviour Change Communication Outcome

The program places strong emphasis on shifting gender norms and attitudes through Behaviour Change Communication (BCC), with intentional inclusion of boys, men, mothers, and other community stakeholders. BCC strategies are carefully tailored to different stakeholder groups, recognising the varied barriers in reaching and engaging them. This includes the use of context-sensitive approaches, along with capacity building of community groups and facilitators to effectively navigate resistance, enable dialogue, and sustain engagement.

- These efforts have contributed to observable shifts in attitudes and behaviours, as reported by the NGO, reinforcing the effectiveness of sustained and nuanced engagement. As the program evolves, there is a clear intent to continue and deepen these efforts.
- With the progression of such initiatives, it becomes equally important to strengthen systems for monitoring and capturing BCC outcomes. Given that many of these changes are intangible and qualitative in nature, such as shifts in perception, confidence, and behaviour, the organisation will need to build more robust data collection and documentation mechanisms to systematically map, validate, and communicate these outcomes. Male engagement has contributed to enabling environments for girls' education and protection; however, deeper documentation of behavioural shifts among men remains an area for further strengthening.

4) Bridging the Education-to-Livelihood gap

The program has contributed to increased awareness around education, a reduction in child marriage, and improved enrolment and retention of girls in schools. As more girls are now completing their education, a new challenge is emerging at the next stage of their journey.

Despite educational progress, girls continue to face:

- Mobility restrictions
- Limited access to vocational and livelihood opportunities

This indicates a gap between educational attainment and economic participation, where the benefits of education need to be translated into expanding life choices and financial independence. At the same time, this expansion must be approached with care and contextual sensitivity, given the region's vulnerability to human trafficking. Increased mobility and livelihood-seeking behaviour, if unsupported, can heighten exposure to exploitation.

As the program matures, there is a need to adapt its strategy to address this transition point by:

- Building strong vocational linkages
- Creating pathways to safe and meaningful employment
- Establishing support systems that enable girls to access these opportunities

This makes the education-to-livelihood transition a critical site of both empowerment and risk mitigation within the program's scope of future development.

5) Alumni trajectory and migration mapping

The NGO has been operating in the region for many years, during which the community has grown in size and strength, and changed in its composition. Members have changed roles from participants to leaders to alumni. Alumni have migrated for varied reasons. Despite these evolutionary changes, the NGO has maintained its connection with the migrating alumni and provided the support they require to expand their work to the new geographies. The narrative essays of this are very encouraging to explore and map strategically and structurally - the migrating record, support requests, support provided, and the independent progress. This will serve as a very important learning in program expansion across interventions sectorally.

Overall challenges:

1) Financial Sustainability and Funding Constraints

- Raising funds for operational and human resource costs remains a persistent challenge.
- The organisation's non-government-funded schools for first-generation learners face particular financial strain, as their independent operation requires sustained and flexible funding.
- The limited corpus fund further limits long-term financial stability and the ability to absorb funding fluctuations.
- Additionally, there is a degree of external funding reliance for critical inputs, such as special education support, which are essential for ensuring school retention.

CONCLUDING NOTE

This learning exercise has brought to light the work that Nishtha has undertaken within the complex social context in which it is situated. This offers insights into how communities can be approached, nurtured, and strengthened. We hope that these learnings enable organisations, programme managers, designers, practitioners, and others working alongside communities to relate to and draw from active community-building strategies in their own contexts.

These insights are the result of years of consistent work, long-term commitment, and relationships of trust built between Nishtha and the communities it serves. They underscore the importance of sustained engagement, not only for building programmes and community-led initiatives, but also for generating knowledge that can be articulated, reflected upon, and shared with the wider development sector. This learning exercise demonstrates the value of creating spaces for reflection and inquiry between organisations and partners, where practice is examined, articulated, and continuously strengthened.

At the same time, this study has opened up new avenues for inquiry. It raises important questions about

What enables men and boys to become allies in women's empowerment? What it takes to challenge deeply embedded patriarchal conditioning? It also prompts reflection on

How organisations continue to adapt as the nature of the challenges they address evolves? As forms of violence, trafficking pathways, and social vulnerabilities change over time, how do community-based organisations remain responsive while sustaining progress and relevance?

These are questions that emerge from this report, creating opportunities for future learning, reflection, and collaborative knowledge-building among practitioners, funders, researchers, and communities alike.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to express our sincere appreciation to Nishtha and its entire team for generously sharing their experiences, reflections, practices, and learning through this exercise. The depth of this report has been made possible by the openness with which the organisation reflected on its achievements, challenges, adaptations, and evolving needs that have shaped its work over the years. We are particularly grateful to the programme managers, field teams, community leaders, and other members of the Nishtha team who took the time to engage in detailed conversations, share programme experiences, provide examples and case stories, and help us understand the thinking behind the organisation's approaches. Their reflections have enabled this report to look beyond activities and outputs towards the relationships, systems, leadership practices, and organisational choices that sustain the work.

We hope that this report serves as a reflective documentation of Nishtha's journey, and as a shared resource for continued reflection, dialogue, and learning between Nishtha, EdelGive, and the wider development ecosystem.

NOTES

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