

# Alone together



## AN ACTION RESEARCH: INSPIRED, INITIATED AND LED BY ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG WOMEN

- During lockdown in 2020, 18 young women, all between 17-20 years got together remotely, using Zoom, email, Whatsapp and voice calls - to explore the issue of loneliness in urban adolescents.
- Lockdown had intensified the experience, but the young researchers agreed that urban adolescents experience loneliness outside lock down too.
- The group generated a bank of questions, finalized a survey, collected data and reflected on findings to come up with recommendations.
- Recommendations are aimed at all sorts of stakeholders, across all ages - including local municipal governments, city officials, business and corporate houses, school authorities, non profits and adolescents themselves.

## YOUNG URBAN VOICES

- The young researchers were from five cities (Mumbai, Patna, Varanasi, Lucknow and Kolkata) and decided to interview peers.
- Together they interviewed 255 respondents, all between 12-20 years and most between 16-18 years.
- 51% of those surveyed were from low-income groups and 49% were from high-income groups. The report highlights both commonalities between groups as well as some differences. For example: Talking about factors that led to bullying and marginalization, one of the top three responses from the group was "CASTE DIFFERENCES," and all these came from girls in the low income group.

# What the Data Says

**84%** SAID THEY EXPERIENCED RECURRING LONELINESS

SOMETIMES:

**76%**

ALWAYS:

**8%**

- 51% across income groups said they had been bullied. This left them feeling excluded and even isolated. The main factors linked to being bullied or marginalized are: introvert qualities, caste or being "too different."

"Introversion which was a neutral term in the past has now taken on a negative connotation. Perhaps it's related to how the world we live in has changed where visibility and self-advocacy have become increasingly important. Today, if one is shy there's a real chance that one will simply be left behind. In schools, it's not just about knowing, it is about being seen to know things." — Moneisha Gandhi is the parent of a child teenager with Down Syndrome and informally advocates for inclusion.



- 33% experienced loneliness most intensely during the day, within what would typically be school or college hours. Most of these respondents are from income families. This indicates possible challenges linked to school/college access and attendance.

"School is a space that provides much more than curricula to students—it is a site for co-learning, partnerships, social capital and role models." — Dr Nisha Dhawan is Country Director at [EMpower](#), the Emerging Markets Foundation and a [TEDx speaker](#).

- While thinking of specific situations and conditions that are linked to feeling alone and disconnected - 15% named physical separation from friends and family as compared to 71% who named social emotional factors. Responses include statements like: "I feel most alone when...nobody listens to me", or "when I am criticized," "when I am anxious about exams or overburdened with housework."

"This is an age group that is already vulnerable to existential questions of meaning and purpose...The lack of solidarity and absence of safe spaces where girls have the freedom or express or share their concerns makes them feel more alone and impacts their self-esteem." — Sonali Gupta is a clinical psychologist, author and columnist She is passionate about ending the stigma around mental health.

Across income groups, entertainment helps respondents cope with loneliness. Additionally, 31% (primarily from the lower income group) said learning a new skill or taking on an academic challenge helped them to feel more fulfilled and engaged.

- 56% said they would not reach out to anyone for support when they felt lonely or low.
- 90% said they felt supported by family, especially their mothers. However they would prefer to reach out about academics, functional things like schedules or getting information. Only 7% would seek out parents to talk about personal issues like bullying or harassment and 7% would talk to parents about feeling vulnerable, lonely or depressed.
- To talk about more personal things like relationships, fears and other emotions, 47% prefer to approach peers.
- 46% felt silenced by adults and those around, believing their families prefer they do not speak publicly about themes like loneliness, depression and other mental health issues.
- 55% spend time online to communicate – either enjoying access to larger groups (30%) or small groups of friends and acquaintances (25%). The rest go online primarily to play games, access online learning or gather information.
- Talking about what kinds of conversations make them feel better supported, respondents identify the following:

a) reinforced bonds of friendship,

b) specific kind words

c) acknowledgement of their feelings

d) planning an activity together

#### • WHEN IT COMES TO SHARING PROBLEMS:

57% WOULD PREFER TO SPEAK FACE-TO-FACE

41% FEEL MORE COMFORTABLE COMMUNICATING ONLINE



"We have known for the last 10 years, is that the digital space is a big part of our cities. It is a counterpart to the physical space. All the connections and the web of networks between devices, which are essentially people talking to and communicating with each other, comprise invisible digital currents. They are facilitating different things just as physical spaces do, whether it is education, romance or unsafe situations like abuse – all this is being experienced through technology. It has brought a new layer to cities which are not yet recognized as being part of the urban landscape."

Bishakha Datta works at the intersection of gender and sexuality and runs the non-profit [Point of View](#)



# What Can Cities do for Adolescents and Young Women

Young researchers reflected on data, thought about their own experiences and came up with the following broad recommendations:

- ▶ Make public spaces more accessible to adolescents and young women
- ▶ Make the cities safer for adolescents and young women
- ▶ Ensure spaces and city events for young people for creative expression
- ▶ Provide opportunities to participate in city or neighborhood improvement
- ▶ Break the silence, addressing stigma around mental health
- ▶ Activate support networks for young people
- ▶ Develop and implement NO BULLYING action
- ▶ Increase women and girls' access to technology

## ACTION PLANNING:

# What we Can Do for Our Cities

## Local elected representatives, (municipal) government and officials

Consider specific allocation of resources and budgets for adolescents and young women to be utilized on goals like:

- Mental health resources for the community: This is often neglected, despite the well-established fact that poor mental health can have adverse effects on youth health and development, earning capacity, social outcomes and behaviours. Ensuring active and accountable community resources to deal with youth problems like substance abuse, adolescent pregnancy, school/college drop out, depression is important. These can be accessible through local hospitals, schools, colleges or phonelines.
- Youth Wellbeing Teams or Committees: Bring together a multi-stakeholder group of education officials, local doctors, schools and local non profits to ensure campaigns, local events, programs or sessions targeted to families and adolescents. Not all solutions will require financial resources, rather this Team will also include the role of civil society.
- Assign public spaces or timings that encourage adolescent girls and women to gather as a group in neighborhood parks, community centers or streets. Often males tend to occupy such public spaces in Indian cities, and communities rarely see young women sharing this space, especially in the evenings.
- Appoint neighborhood teams of women and adolescents to provide information/data to police and other officials about unsafe spaces or conditions. Unless the city is safe, families could isolate girls, at home and be reluctant to send them to the park or even to school.

- Community centers can become "hubs" for adolescent interaction, providing a safe space for homework or recreation after school. It could also be resourced to have more structured events and classes. Partnering with local non- profits or schools might help ensure that centers are staffed with mentors, teachers and volunteers. If building a new structure is not feasible, then assigning available spaces in the interim (like using government schools on weekends) could provide a short-term solution.
- Award Youth Project small grants for young women, who have designed, planned and run city projects to improve the lives of adolescent and young women, thus promoting citizen participation as well as encouraging young women to be entrepreneurial. Partnering with business houses or philanthropists on conceptualizing such awards/investment could help link youth to mentors and resources.
- Access to Technology: If more women and girls have smart phones, they can access information, take remote classes, run business or communicate. Going by the data from this study, accessing entertainment also helps young people cope with stress.
- Calendar of creative events to help teens across grades connect and bond. Events like film clubs, book clubs, music concerts, speak easy festivals or theatre groups can help adolescents have meaningful conversations and connect to each other.
- Community Work clubs that help students participate in meaningful service activities are both satisfying and good for community building.
- No Bullying policies and campaigns, including detailing a detailed online policy that includes students and their families.
- Inclusion Policy: Whether or not schools have a written inclusion policy, the first step is to have a group (representing students, families, teachers and administrators) to define inclusion. Based on what seems most relevant in the student policy, it could emphasize themes like caste, disabilities, and gender.
- In both cases - bullying and inclusion, school authorities should ideally go beyond a paper policy or limit work to legal compliance (with the Right to Education Act). Rather being creative and alert, bringing in teachers, older students or families in to take specific action can do a lot to create a genuinely inclusive school environment.
- Family workshops could help parents support adolescents better.

## *School and College Administrators*

- Schools and colleges could have Teen Wellbeing Committees that could be student-led (by adolescent girls) and could include teachers, family members and student counselors.
- Appoint a school counselor. If unavailable, train teachers and parents or older students do some support and mentoring work (Note: This would not be counseling and in serious situations like cases of abuse or a learning disability, bringing in a counselor would be important).



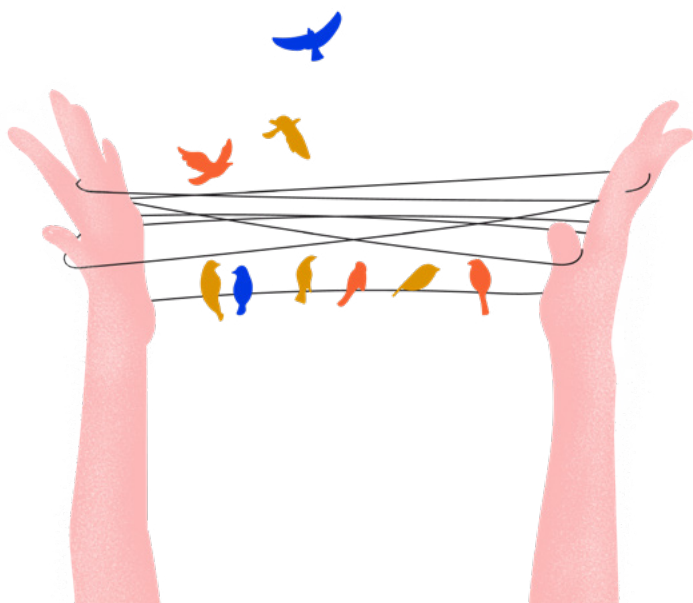


## Community Groups

- Consider prioritizing mental health, wellness and social emotional learning while planning investment or funding programs, developing CSR strategy or planning philanthropic contributions.
- If you are working on youth brands consider taking up the issue of loneliness in urban adolescents/ youth through products, services, advertising campaigns or celebrities who might endorse your brand.
- Launch or join city networks dedicated to adolescent mental health and wellbeing. If these include a combination of elected representatives like officials, local businesses, doctors, psychologists, creative artistes and adolescents – you could plan a holistic intervention and ensure collective impact that benefits youth across the city. For instance a city-based phone could be jointly supported by such a network and be accessible to teens and young women.
- Companies can provide space for adolescents to come together as a community – if available on weekends or after hours.
- Mentor, sponsor and support youth-led initiatives towards city improvements.
- Sponsor, host, arts-based awards and creative platforms or online/live events.

## City Businesses and Corporate Houses

- Organize informal neighborhood or city projects that help women and girls access public spaces whether it is cycling groups, gardening clubs, group runs, youth events.
- Support and mentor adolescents and young women launching projects, or events.  
Start or join a team to help adolescents and young women create safe online spaces.
- Start or join city networks, which bring together partners like government, educators, and philanthropists to work towards collective impact. For instance community organizations could create a bank of volunteers across the city trained to provide support, mentoring or information to adolescents and young women.
- Create a citizen audit group for neighborhoods or a larger one to cover the entire city to understand gaps and needs, take this data back to officials and jointly plan solutions.
- Community campaigns to target themes linked to marginalization, bullying or exclusion. For instance this action research found that introvert qualities seem to have a negative connotation with the group (mainly high income adolescents). As a community group if you work in schools/colleges it could be interesting to explore this idea more deeply and plan a way to start a conversation that challenges this notion.
- Break the silence around mental health, especially by reaching families through live or online communication – to encourage parents to talk to adolescents openly. It could help if community based organizations or group across the city chose to take up brooders issues like this jointly, as it would greatly amplify the message.



## Adolescents and Young Women

### CLAIMING THE RIGHT TO PUBLIC SPACE

*"I just want to go out in my neighbourhood to walk, run have fun and feel free."*

The book *Why Loiter* by Shilpa Ranade and Sameera Khan inspired two young readers to start off the [Why Loiter Movement](#) in Mumbai. Neha Singh and Devina Kapoor decided to organize city events to find pleasure, relaxation and fun in a city, and as a group of young women. Sometimes this meant having a late night cup of tea at a chai tapri, playing a game of badminton in a deserted neighbourhood street, or sitting down in a local park. While it is common in Indian cities for males to occupy such spaces, it is rare to see young women claim their right to the city.

You could get together with friends to host or organize city or neighbourhood events, picking a location to gather. Coming together to do a community to walk, group run, cycle or simply to celebrate the city will be fun. But do remember, to make this a supportive inclusive event, reaching out to broad groups of young women who are beyond your usual social circle. This could include tying up with schools from a different neighbourhood or income group.

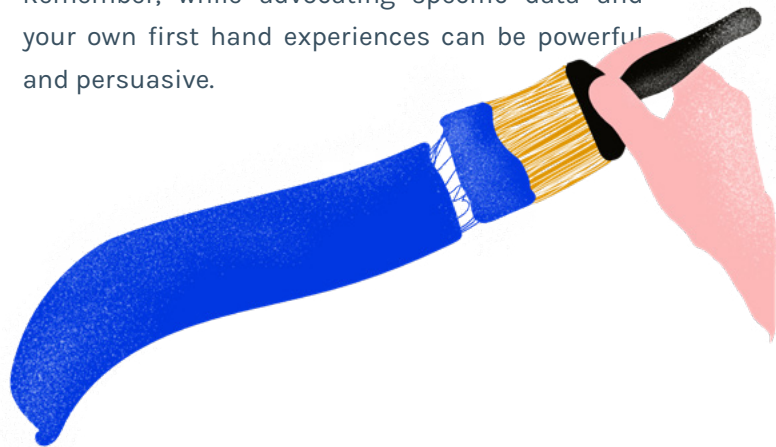
### SAFETY MAPPING

*"I used to go out and meet my friends in the neighbourhood, but with the increasing number of incidents of harassment, my parents don't allow it any more."*

Adolescent girls in cities across India are pulled out of school, stopped from playing outdoors, sometimes even isolated at home because their families worry about their safety. Getting together to do safety audits could be one way to bring police or officials' attention to unsafe spaces.

In Barcelona, Spain, a feminist collective of urban designers, [Punt 6](#) has been working to map communities and everyday life spaces of the neighbourhood to understand how a space is used and what remains inaccessible. As part of this mapping exercise, it asked questions like, 'Why do you choose certain routes streets to walk down?' 'Where do you meet friends?' 'Where do you rest?'

Starting or joining a group to do such safety audits might could be very effective. You could participate in collecting data. Or you could be part of a team that gets the data to officials, the media or peers in order to advocate for safety measures. Another way to get involved is to be part of the solutions that arise from data collection. For instance if neighbourhood safety data shows problems like unlit streets, harassment in a public park or a lonely school route - you could start/join an advocacy team to make sure municipal authorities install lights or that police patrol parks and school routes. Remember, while advocating specific data and your own first hand experiences can be powerful and persuasive.



### CREATIVE SPACES

*"My neighbourhood should have a place where young people can spend time with others and enjoy themselves."*

If you have felt that adolescent voices are often unheard and ignored, then you will agree, that creative spaces help young people express, share and get conversations started in a hopeful spirit. Not only do they help young people collect as a

community, but art, dance, stories or poetry provide wonderful ways to bond. You could plan to do arts based events at a large city scale. Or you could be more specific and plan something for your neighbourhood. One interesting example is a traveling library founded by a young woman who live in Mumbai. Acqui Thami started to celebrate the voices of women through books and literature. Her traveling library has also become a hub for young women to gather and have conversations.

### NEIGHBOURHOOD PROJECTS

*"As young people, we want to do something good for our cities."*

The [Edible Schoolyard Project](#) started by chef and author Alice Waters in Berkeley, California is an interesting example of teachers and students pitched in to turn a vacant lot into a garden, a process that was valuable, to local business, the city and also helped students to participate. Getting together as a team to do something good for the city or marginalized groups in the city could be inspiring for a group of adolescents and at the same time benefit the city.

Community service and volunteering could be short or long term –whether it is a day's of doing a beach clean up or collecting and providing rain gear pre-monsoons, or it could be a longer term plan like engagement at a local non profit, or starting/joining a neighbourhood or city theatre group to break the stigma around mental health.

### BREAKING THE SILENCE

*"Girls should be able to speak up freely about mental health issues."*

Shifting the narrative and creating space to talk about issues that are neglected or treated as taboo subjects is difficult, but important. Public

campaigns have a significant role to play to lift the curtain on what otherwise remains hidden away. Get together with a team and plan a campaign.

[Mann Mela](#) is a virtual museum that uses art and technology, to urge people to access help. Having public figures openly talk about issues that have stigma attached to them also makes room to change the discourse. Stand up comedians for instance, have spoken openly about dealing with anxiety, depression and helped other young people break their silence.

This action reports points out that adolescents might feel silenced by their families. Thus targeting a campaign to parents or educators might help along with addressing young women.



### NETWORK OF SUPPORT

*"Sometimes all you need is to know that somebody has your back, and will support you in difficult times."*

A 2011 study identified different strategies to address loneliness and social isolation. This included improving existing social support and increasing opportunity for new social contact. Providing options to help adolescents connect could include mentoring clubs, a phone support line for



adolescents, virtual support groups or building a bank of supporters for teens across the city.

HiDidi ([hididi.org](http://hididi.org)) is an online peer-mentoring program that connects adolescent girls from low-income schools to young women of Indian origin studying in the West (primarily in colleges in the United States). It builds a supportive online student community - across countries and income groups. The program builds mutually supportive relationships. "I think it is a genuine desire to connect with their roots that motivates mentors. Most of them are young women in very challenging academic programs. They find the time to mentor young women in India," says the Founder, Divya Sahney.

#### ANTI-BULLYING ACTION

*"I wish my school would take bullying much more seriously."*

Since school children spend most of their time in school or college (second to home), it is crucial to make sure this is safe space. As a young student there are numerous things you can do with your peers in school, have a school network so that other city schools work closely with yours, participate in developing anti-bullying policy and more importantly things of solutions and implement these in your school or college. Introduce Bystanders Can Stop Bullying groups to ensure those who are bullied are not feeling isolated and help more adolescents find effective ways to intervene, limit or disrupt bullying behavior and participate in a school or neighborhood groups that identify most-marginalized.

Data from this action research revealed that shyness, caste and being "too different": were three most-disliked groups. Buddy programs in school or the neighbourhood can reduce feelings of exclusion and isolation. Try to create a large group of those willing to reach out to someone who feels marginalized.

#### ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY

*"Having a phone means I can call a friend, ask for help or use the internet to learn something."*

While there is ongoing debate about the role of technology in the lives of young people, there is acknowledgement that technology can positively affect the quality of life for city residents. For adolescent girls public safety, health, well-being and connectedness can be significantly improved.

NGO Point of View and works on gender and sexuality. Their idea 'Feminist Forwards' builds capacity to make Whatsapp creative cards. Young girls are equipped to express themselves in "online language" that enables them to go from a place of not belonging to understanding and participating online.

You could use a "hybrid model" and organize community meetings partly digitally through Whatsapp Zoom or Google meets, as well as smaller group meetings in person, which could be held once a month.

Consider other ways to create supportive online communities. You could think about what to do in case you are a "bystander" to online bullying, or you could form a cyber bullying audit team and check platforms or social media groups where there is too much cyber bullying or harassment. Or you could simply host chats and online events as a team, ensuring that you reach out to peers who are typically excluded.

