



EMPOWERING GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN
THROUGH SPORT FOR DEVELOPMENT

SLUM SOCCER CASE STUDY

NAGPUR, INDIA

Introduction

Slum Soccer is based in Nagpur, India and originally began working with young people living on the streets and in slums around Nagpur in 2001. They describe themselves as an organization that uses football (soccer) as a vehicle that transcends race, religion, language and gender to change lives of street dwellers. They now have activities with schools and communities in different cities across India and work with thousands of children and young people. Slum Soccer has a variety of programs that teach life skills, math skills, build leadership and coaching skills, and also specifically create opportunities for girls to play football and build personal skills.

Slum Soccer had always included girls in its activities, but female participation was never equal to that of the boys. The Slum Soccer Co-Founder and CEO Abhijeet Barse recalls that by 2009 it was obvious “that girls need a separate program, one they can call their own and then sort of build on it.” As a result, Slum Soccer created a girls-only program called Shakti Girls in 2014 that has greatly increased female participation and opened pathways to leadership for girls within Slum Soccer. Furthermore, the creation of an all girls playing environment also fostered a sense of female empowerment. “Shakti” means power in the local language, and Abhijeet explained that he came up with the name because he felt that the girls who play in the program exhibit this energy and power that comes out naturally while they are playing football.



Shakti Girls’ female focus is not exclusive to the participants but extends to the staff as well. Abhijeet recognized that a lack of female coaches as a potential barrier to participation of girls. Currently, Slum Soccer has only two female coaches, who are both new to coaching and have been participants in the Slum Soccer’s Young Leaders program.¹ Abhijeet aims to increase the amount of female staff and coaches at Slum Soccer over the coming years (currently there are no female senior staff members), but has faced challenges in finding and recruiting experienced women coaches. For this reason, they have decided to prioritize developing the capacities and opportunities for young women within Slum Soccer to become the new leaders and managers, especially of the Shakti Girls program. Abhijeet explained that their vision for Shakti Girls is:

As much as possible, we want to sort of take out the male involvement in the Shakti Girls and have it led completely by women. And then even if the guys do come in, it would be more in advisory capacity, or in supporting roles, and not driving the project.

Upon launching operations in 2014, Shakti Girls immediately encountered resistance from local families and communities which led to low participation. This forced a program-wide overhaul and official re-launch in 2015 that showcased the program’s willingness and ability to identify and overcome challenges to better engage girls in the community. The overhaul was to carry out the program through schools, rather than directly organizing on community pitches. The flexibility to change the program based on identified challenges is common across the Slum Soccer organization, which prioritizes community buy-in and creating the most comfortable and safe environments possible for female participants. The program’s impact has grown to impressive proportions in only two years. Shakti Girls teaches life skills and football to girls between the ages of 8 and 14 years, is currently in four schools in the Nagpur area and has 270 girls registered.

What lessons can we learn from Slum Soccer?

- Creating a girls-only program (or activities) is essential to engaging girls.
- Creating pathways for girls to become leaders within the organization can contribute to more girls’ participation.

¹ This was true during the case study visit in September 2017. Since September, Slum Soccer has hired two professional female coaches.

Brief Literature Review: The Lives of Girls in India

As in other countries, the challenges to engaging and empowering girls in India relate to diverse factors including social class, location (rural/urban) and family structure. Generally speaking, the barriers that girls encounter in their daily lives include (Dasra, 2014, Vacha, 2017, Modi 2017, census data 2011):

- Familial/societal expectations of early marriage limit their potential. 30.2% get married before the age of 18,
- Early childbearing: 22% of Indian girls have already given birth by age 18,
- Limited access to secondary schools because [none may exist in a community,]
- Disinterest in and devaluing of education in families of girls,
- Violence,
- Unsafe public spaces (toilets, streets, sports fields, libraries),
- Unpaid Work/Double Burden—pressure to complete work at home and earn income.

A report by Dasra (2014) suggests that one of the most effective strategies for change is “cultivating role models as peer leaders.”



Barriers for Girls

As outlined above, India is a context where girls and women face many social barriers to education, leisure activities, safe spaces, paid work, and sport. Through Shakti Girls, Slum Soccer creates an environment that helps girls overcome these barriers. They also react to the barriers experienced by girls in their communities, and attempt to create pathways and opportunities that allow girls to go beyond participation, and to become leaders in sport and maximize their personal development opportunities. They have identified and begun to address several important barriers for girls, including: gender mixed football activities, male coaches, family expectations on studies and work, rural settings, community gender stereotypes and religion.

The design of the Shakti Girls program is based on Slum Soccer having identified a specific barrier for girls in their other programs. They saw that there was very low female participation in their mixed gender programs. The Shakti Girls program manager explained the importance of having a single-gender football program for the girls:

[In the mixed gender group] the main problem is they don't get a chance to kick the ball as many times as they get to when they are playing alone. So that is the only reason we separated this program and they get more chance to play and they get more chance to communicate and have fun at the same time.

He goes on to explain that he has observed a change in the girls since Slum Soccer started the Shakti Girls program. The girls used to not have the confidence to play with the boys, whereas now they have built confidence through playing on their own. Now they even feel more confident playing with boys. This observation is supported by the experiences of the Shakti Girls themselves, who said that they now feel playing with boys is the same as playing with only girls. There may be other contributing factors to the confidence of the girls who were interviewed, but most of them have been part of Shakti Girls for over a year, so it is probable that the program has had a positive influence on their confidence in football.

Although Slum Soccer is investing in training female coaches, they also think it is important to challenge the social stigma that girls should not play for male coaches because this continues to present a barrier for girls across India. For this reason, male coaches continue to regularly meet with parents to put them at ease, especially parents of the Shakti Girls. Although coaches think girls connect better with female coaches, the Shakti Girls themselves did not state any difference between how they feel with their female coaches and male coaches. When asked about their favorite coaches and their role models, many of the players said their male coaches, or brothers, while others said their mothers or female coaches they know. This coupled with the fact



that the girls have said they now feel comfortable playing with boys indicates that the intentional separation of the girls in their own program leads to improved gender parity between the girls and boys on the football pitch, at least in the eyes of the girls, once they have had the opportunity to grow within Shakti Girls.

Families' and community's combined reluctance to see girls engaging in sport in public and distrust of male coaches working with girls emerged as a significant barrier that was mentioned by the coaches and staff. The program manager described how they changed the model of Shakti Girls in 2015 to begin working in partnership with schools, in reaction to community resistance:

So, we had started this program...the main challenge is when we go to our community, the community says you cannot teach the girls, especially when a male coach goes there. So we found a way to go to our schools and start teaching through the school itself, rather than coaching in the community itself. Doing it through the school gives legitimacy to the program in the eyes of the families and community members.

Barriers for Girls (cont.)

Partnering with local institutions that parents' and community members' trust and respect has achieved community buy-in with which Shakti Girls originally struggled. It has not simply improved participation of girls, but has ultimately helped overcome various related barriers such as the opposition to male coaches by parents and the reluctance to let girls play football. Slum Soccer learned that when community trust and goodwill is established, many barriers for girls dissolve, making community buy-in an especially important objective for an SfD organization in India. The legitimacy that the manager refers to has allowed some the male coaches to continue to coach the girls while Slum Soccer determines how to engage more female coaches. To ensure community buy-in the male coaches visit and hold meetings with the girls' parents to ensure that they are happy that their daughters are participating in the program and that the girls continue to perform in school (a priority for parents in India).

Parents in India prioritize studies for both sons and daughters, above recreational activities like football. This presents a barrier for all participants at Slum Soccer, but girls face a doubly difficult barrier when this expectation is combined with the expectations that girls help with domestic work in their homes, an expectation that is not present for boys. When Slum Soccer can show through the Shakti Girls program that the girls are excelling in school and demonstrating personal development, parents are more likely to allow daughters to attend the program. This barrier is particularly pronounced in rural areas, where poverty is higher and there are more expectations on girls in the family. The program manager said,

Here it is a city.... in rural areas they have to look after their homes, cooking food, looking after like their younger brothers or sisters and go to work in the farms with their mother or father. But here it is not the same culture as in the rural areas so we can engage girls but sometimes we feel like this is challenging but more challenges we face when we go to rural areas and coach them.



Girls in the communities where Slum Soccer works face multiple barriers to joining the football program that are not only related to their gender. Slum Soccer has observed additional barriers for Muslim girls and experienced challenges in engaging them in football. The staff explained that it is easier for Hindu girls whose parents have fewer concerns about them playing football. Muslim parents are often worried about the clothes that the girls wear to play football, and therefore may not allow them to play. This is particularly acute in the rural Muslim communities, which, according to the Slum Soccer coaches, are more conservative. Slum Soccer has begun to work directly with Muslim schools in an effort to increase participation of Muslim girls. In addition to working with schools, the program manager explained that the best way to work with the communities where there is resistance from parents is to actively engage the parents and work with them to understand the benefits of the program. They have found it useful to engage a Muslim coach as a staff member who can go to these communities and discuss Slum Soccer. The CEO and program manager think that these staff members have been key in getting more Muslim girls to participate.

? What lessons can we learn from Slum Soccer?

- Working with community-trusted institutions, like schools, helps overcome parents' doubts and barriers to allowing girls to participate in programs.
- Regular communication with parents by coaches helps maintain girls' participation.
- Separating girls and boys in their own programs will lead to girls building confidence to play with boys and feel more equal to them in the future.
- Rural areas have greater expectations on girls in the home, which presents a greater barrier to participation.
- In Muslim communities where girls face additional barriers to participation based on religion, engaging coaches who are from the community and who can speak to parents and community members can facilitate girls joining the program.

Female Coaches and Role Models

Slum Soccer maintains that female leadership and mentorship can encourage girls to play football and become coaches and leaders. Abhijeet sees female leadership as important for enabling girls to realize their own potential. He explains that the young female coaches at Slum Soccer do not always recognize that their work is making a difference, and he says that it is important for them to have women who inspire them in order to recognize the cycle of how they can inspire other girls. The organization would like to find a female coach who can work with Slum Soccer as a role model and mentor for the young female coaches, but this has been challenging. Recruiting female coaches has been challenging for two reasons; one, there are not many female football coaches in India or in Nagpur, and two, because the few female coaches tend to work for the football federation or football clubs because it is better pay. In order to address this challenge, Slum Soccer has decided to build female leadership from within the organization by providing opportunities and building capacities for three young women who have been participants and are now beginning to coach and work as staff members.

In addition to providing young people training opportunities to become coaches, Slum Soccer has begun to send new coaches to football federation trainings in India to gain more skills and coaching credentials. They have prioritized sending the young women coaches to the federation trainings, in an effort to build female leadership within Slum Soccer quickly. Slum Soccer's model of providing internal leadership pathways for girls and then providing them with jobs is helping to be essential to providing girls with female role models, as well as demonstrating to communities that females can be effective coaches and leaders in sport. At the same time, the fact that the coaches come from the community and were once participants themselves, significantly contributes to the sustainability of the organization. Abhijeet explained the reason for their model to invest in young people to become coaches:

So, it is something of an internal pathway which we are taking, more of the organic approach, which I feel is better because it has sustainability in it. But I also realize that we need support from outside. Unless they see what a good woman coach looks like, they will be unable to wrap their heads around it. Like, ok this is what a good female coach looks like.

In addition to providing the young female coaches with role models, Slum Soccer sees female coaches as important role models for girls in the program, as well as for their parents. One of the coaches explained that having female coaches in the program makes the parents more comfortable with their daughters playing football. For example, when he coaches girls, they

listen and are comfortable with him, but the problem is that the parents are not comfortable and they only want their daughters to play with women. Another of the young male coaches shared that when he started coaching in a rural school, he had girls in his training sessions at the beginning, but they stopped coming because the parents did not want them to be coached by a man. One of the young female coaches agreed that the best way to start is for the community to see they have female coaches for girls. She said:

So, I think it is good that we have female coaches to coach the girls and for the parents to interact with... and the girls also feel it's easier for them to talk to other girls that they can share their experiences with, something which they cannot do with the male coaches. And after some time we can switch or mix them up.

Slum Soccer also believes that girls playing football can be role models for their peers. The Shakti Girls program manager explained that simply seeing girls on the local football grounds can have impact because it encourages other girls to play and shows families the benefits of participating. These benefits are two-fold; one is the life skills/personal development skills that Slum Soccer trains the girls on, and the other is their skills and confidence as football players. This means that although Slum Soccer emphasizes fun and an openness to all abilities for participants who want to enter the program, they also prioritize quality training for coaches so that they can help girls build skills. The Shakti Girls can be important role models for other girls in their community through demonstrating their skill and ability in football. The program manager, who is also the Shakti Girls' head coach, explained that girls from other schools have come with their parents to meet him on the football pitch to ask if they can join the Shakti Girls program. He sees this as a significant change in community attitudes toward girls' participation since the program began.



Female Coaches and Role Models (cont.)

One of the young female coaches, who was a participant in Slum Soccer, tells her story of how being good at football opened doors for her and inspired friends to join:

When I was in eighth grade I started playing football and when I started there were no girls in my team...my parents didn't like when I started because there were no girls playing football and there is no development of football so that is why they opposed it at first because they said this is not for girls, this is for boys... but my school teacher talked to the parents and they all agreed. And then I started playing football at school and we won at the championships and so my parents really appreciated my success and my playing and I continued my playing and then after that we were told about this organization Slum Soccer which helps both boys and girls and so I came here for the young leadership program ... I really like it so I continued with Slum Soccer. XXXX is my friend and after one year she joined me and we attended the girls program and after that we learned how to coach the children and how to talk to them and also many things regarding coaching and also leadership. I really enjoy coaching and so I started teaching young children and girls.

This coach now coaches a new Shakti Girls group of young girls. She has seen them build confidence since they joined the program in early 2017. She says that at the beginning they could barely look her in the eye when she came to the football pitch greeted them. Now, they come and shake hands with all the coaches and say hello a little louder. There is a clear distinction between

the new Shakti Girls and those who have been in the program for over a year. Those who have been in the program for over a year come running up when a visitor arrives to their training, introduce themselves, and look all the visitors in the eye with a strong handshake. The sustained participation and retention of these girls in the program has meant real change in their lives and their personal development. Slum Soccer emphasizes retention in the Shakti Girls program, because they have seen the changes in the girls over time. The coaches continue to meet with the girls' parents to ensure that the girls stay in the program. If they stay in the program for years, then in the future they will take on one of the leadership pathways that Slum Soccer will offer them, which will lead to even more girls getting involved.

? What lessons can we learn from Slum Soccer?

- If you cannot find female coaches in the community, build pathways for girls and young women within the organization to become coaches.
- Invest in training for female coaches as a means of empowering girls within the program.
- Build parents' acceptance of girls playing football by hiring or training female coaches.
- Girls who are seen demonstrating football skills on local football pitches helps break community gender stereotypes and open doors for more girls to join the program.
- Through sustained engagement in the program, girls build confidence and skills through football.



Promising Practice Spotlight:

Building girls' confidence and peer role models

Slum Soccer coaches have seen the Shakti Girls build confidence over the time that they have been involved in the program. It was clear in meeting the girls that they do not shy away from expressing their opinions, some of which may actually help Slum Soccer create new strategies to better engage girls.

For example, when the Shakti Girls were asked if they have any ideas as to how Slum Soccer could get more girls involved in football, they all thought carefully about the question. One of them raised her hand and said,

Slum Soccer is a private organization but ...going to... the government places and tell them what we are doing and then the government can then go to the community and say this is the stuff that we are doing because the Indian people look up to the government so it can easily get to the parents and to the girls. Because it will have a government name.

This level of analysis and thinking is representative of the intelligence and leadership shown by the entire Shakti Girls group, who were eager to share ideas and their experiences. Most of them said that their reasons for joining Shakti Girls are not just for football, but to inspire other girls to do something more than just studies in school. They want to be role models for their peers and friends. One of them explained that she believes Shakti Girls has social impact. When asked what social impact, she said,

many things like boys and girls playing sport, that is social impact, in my community I play football but sometimes some girls don't have a reason or cannot come here but I am able to come here and play but many girls are having problems to come here.

