

8-YEAR OLD WINNER OF “HERO PROJECT” SHOWS THE POWER OF LEADING BY EXAMPLE

Women and Girls Lead Global India is helping communities recognize their heroic potential to create safe spaces for girls and women

“Spiderman says, ‘with great power comes great responsibility’.”

March 2015 – In a country like India, where impunity for gender-based violence has been the rule and inequitable gender norms are deeply ingrained in the cultural fabric, it might seem like only a superhero could change things around. Not so, says [Women and Girls Lead Global](#) (WGLG) India’s Country Engagement Coordinator Abhishek Srivastava. “Everyday heroes are cropping up in communities all over India, as they have begun to realize that the solution starts with them,” he says.

It’s been a very busy year for Abhishek. He’s leading the organization’s campaign in India to encourage community solutions that will challenge harmful gender roles and create safer spaces for women and girls. It’s a challenging goal that he’s already had measurable success attaining. Working with partners that include Magic Bus, the Centre for Health and Social Justice, and the International Center for Research on Women, WGLG India has trained over 180 community facilitators to bring powerful documentary films to over 15 thousand citizens in 464 screenings across the country. They are not just any films, but films meant to inspire through example via the “seeing is believing” concept. [Revolutionary Optimists](#), a documentary film by Nicole Newnham and Maren Grainger-Monsen, has been the most provocative and relevant for WGLG’s Indian program. The film profiles Amlan Ganguly, a man who empowers Indian children to become activists and educators-- “mini-superheroes” of sorts-- to create change in their very poor communities in Calcutta. One group of kids was responsible for spearheading the transformation of a garbage dump into a soccer field, another for assuring all children in their neighborhood got a polio vaccine. “When a film like this is shown to communities who are experiencing the same problems, sparks of change begin to surface immediately,” says Abhishek. He continues poetically, “drawn in by the glow of the screen and the excitement of the crowd, these audiences can find role models in the courageous change-makers onscreen, and write a new story for their children.”

One of those sparks led community members in the village of Bhor, about 200 kilometers south of Mumbai in the state of Maharashtra, to start thinking. Says Supriya Tapare, “I was much inspired by this film. The girl in the film married a man against her wishes just to please her family members. Girls should be encouraged to follow their own path, like a career. I will try and make effort to look for life partner who understands that.” Supriya and other students like her were being continually harassed by men when they took the public bus to school and college. There was no alternative to taking the bus, so they either braved the onslaught, or they dropped out of school. “It was always very difficult to even enter the bus. Then boys would block the door, and inside the bus young men occupy all seats. Girls have to travel by standing, nearly always. They used to pass nasty comments and whistle,” attests Kajal Tapare, who with her sister Supriya and others, said enough is enough. Community members made up of men and women organized a series of meetings and made a successful appeal to the state transport and village council authorities to get a designated “safe bus” especially for the women of their community. “We were all so happy that someone finally listened to us and the idea of a separate bus was eventually realized.” Supriya said.

Witnessing all this change at the community level, Abhishek was inspired himself. He saw that people were good at addressing the problems surrounding gender-based violence like public safety and justice for survivors, but they were not as good at talking about two of the root causes of the problem: imbalance of power and inequitable gender roles. Abhishek started [The Hero Project](#) to evoke personal reflection, a sense of responsibility, and a fresh perspective on masculinity through dialogue, via live events, social media and a dedicated website. “We also want to encourage men and boys to take heroic actions against gender-based violence and discrimination in their own communities,” added Abhishek. As part of the campaign, he created a social media contest called “Change the Story,” which invited the virtual community to submit a story of a male hero who addresses gender-based violence appropriately and challenges harmful ideas of masculinity and gender.

Out of 25 entries submitted over two months, one stood out. It was a drawing of a police officer from a girl named Aarna, just 8-years old. But it wasn’t the drawing itself that clinched the contest, it was the story the girl told Abhishek over the phone. “Here she’s not even old enough to write more than a sentence, but she came up with such an insightful fable. She narrated the entire story to me, of how a male cop reprimands his senior for blaming a girl for wearing short clothes who had come to lodge a sexual harassment complaint.”

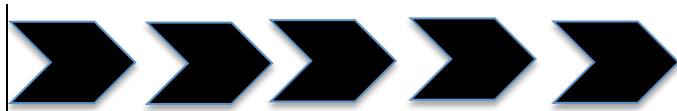
When asked why people in power should respect women, Aarna responded confidently, “Because as Spiderman says, ‘with great power comes great responsibility’. People in power need to respect women because that is the right and responsible thing to do. Also, the others will also learn from them and respect women.”

Out of the mouths of babes comes superhero wisdom.

+++++

[Women and Girls Lead Global - India](#) - is a USAID - funded initiative that uses documentary film to inspire and catalyze community action on important global issues affecting women and girls. Participating countries include: Bangladesh, Kenya, India, Jordan and Peru. Partner funders: ITVS, Ford Foundation, and CARE. www.wglg.org

OPTIONAL SIDEBAR



WGLG REPORT CARD

Change Model	<i>Community</i>
Issue	<i>Equitable Gender Roles and GBV prevention</i>
Films that lit the Spark	<i>Revolutionary Optimists Another Film?</i>
Visible Change	<i>Community Heroes and Heroines arise in many ways to make girls and women safer</i>
Scale Up	<i>200+ community-designed solutions to empower women and make them safer</i>

