

Developing Local Young Women as 'Leaders of Change': i-Saksham's Role in Fostering Belonging and Inclusion in Rural Bihar, India

Theme: Social

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Abstract

This paper explores how i-Saksham, a grassroots initiative in Bihar, India, develops marginalized young women as community-rooted leaders, fostering inclusion, belonging, and social cohesion. Operating in socio-economically and culturally fragmented areas, i-Saksham nurtures confidence, skills, and social connections through experiential leadership and guided reflection. These young women, known as "edu-leaders," pursue roles of their choice, influence peers and adolescents, shift gender norms in families, and become community agents of change. They collaborate with local institutions and government actors to address regional challenges and confront discrimination. The paper draws on third-party evaluations, internal data, and field stories to illustrate how a youth-led, culturally contextualized model bridges traditional values with modern aspirations to build inclusive communities.

Keywords: Young women, experiential leadership, edu-leaders, choice, inclusion, belonging, gender equity, rural Bihar, youth empowerment

Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected world, the challenge of building inclusive societies while addressing deep-rooted inequalities is more urgent than ever—particularly in marginalized geographies. In rural Bihar, India—one of the country's most impoverished states with a per capita GDP of approximately \$1,000—young women face multiple barriers shaped by entrenched gender norms, caste hierarchies, poverty, and limited access to education (88% drop out of higher education) and employment (96% exit the labor force). These patterns of exclusion not only limit their opportunities but also deprive them of a sense of belonging, voice, and agency within their communities.

i-Saksham emerged from the co-founders' firsthand experiences during their time as Prime Minister's Rural Development Fellows. With a vision of "*Voice and Choice for Every Woman*," i-Saksham's mission is to develop **marginalized young women as 'Leaders of Change' (edu-leaders)** who can drive change

from within. The initiative integrates global best practices with local realities to foster individual transformation and collective impact.

Methodology/Approach

This study employs a qualitative case-study approach, drawing on internal program data, third party assessment report (Populi LLP, 2023) covering interviews with edu-leaders, parents, and community leaders. It is informed by theories of social capital, youth civic engagement, and agency. The lens focuses on how young women develop leadership while challenging social norms.

Findings and Argument: The i-Saksham Model- A Young Women-Led, Community-Rooted Approach

i-Saksham's 2-year Edu-leader Fellowship program is deeply embedded in the rural and socio-culturally diverse communities, incorporating **global best practices** in youth leadership and women's agency—such as experiential learning, mentoring, safe spaces, and opportunities to pursue choices while subtly introducing **progressive norms** around gender, education, and autonomy.

1. Building the Capacity of Individual Leaders: Pathways to Voice and Agency

i-Saksham selects young women through a multi-stage process that includes assessments, interviews, family counselling, and community verification, ensuring they are locally rooted and context-aware.

The leadership journey begins through a month-long induction followed by 10 hours per month of intensive capacity-building sessions and structured coaching focused on leadership development, aspiration cultivation, understanding of gender, and community engagement. Training is delivered by alumni in local languages, using relatable analogies, case studies, and stories that reflect participants' daily lives and showcase women from similar backgrounds who have overcome challenges. This makes the learning community-centric and leadership accessible and relatable.

The relevant global tools of leadership development are contextualized to resonate with the lived realities of rural Bihar. For example, GROW model (Goal, Reality, Options, Way Forward), Fixed/Growth mindset, and Development Relationship Framework are used to foster structured problem-solving and empathetic relationships. This fusion with **critical global competencies** empowers young women to navigate modern aspirations while remaining anchored in their roots.

2. Opportunities to Demonstrate Leadership And Influence Others

After induction, the program gradually moves toward social influence where each edu-leader works with 20–30 adolescents and their families, mobilizing peer circles, running life-skills sessions, connecting girls to entitlements, and organizing campaigns.

3. Shifting Social Norms: The Ripple Effects on Families and Communities

Rather than challenging traditional norms head-on, i-Saksham's model works through **gradual, embedded influence**. Young women take on life-coach roles, lead community sessions, or mediate local issues—alternate roles, but are locally respected.

They engage families and communities in dialogue, showcase the potential of their daughters, and invoke their support. The process recognizes the value of existing social structures and reclaims positive cultural narratives—an approach validated by global insights on behavioural change and tailored to the nuances of Bihar's social fabric.

4. Fostering Inclusion and Belonging in Fragmented Contexts

Bihar's rural landscape is marked by **caste divisions, religious tensions, and gender-based exclusions**. i-Saksham addresses these by nurturing **shared identities and collective belonging**. Young women from diverse backgrounds (around >70% coming from scheduled and other backward castes) are grouped in training cohorts and led by peer-facilitators from a similar profile. They inspire, demonstrate a safe space to voice their aspirations, and build solidarity.

In the final semester, edu-leaders receive career and education counselling and are connected to opportunities in higher education, economic participation, and public leadership through collaborations with academia, corporates, NGOs, and government institutions. As they grow, they become role models and change agents for their communities to address local issues, deliver developmental services and bridge social divide.

After graduation, fellows also join a peer-led collective that fosters continued learning, mutual support, and collective civic action — ensuring that their leadership journey sustains beyond the fellowship.

5. Evidence of Impact: What the Data and Stories Say

Since 2017, i-Saksham has grown from a network of 15 to 900 edu-leaders directly impacting 25,000 adolescents and their families across 5 districts of Bihar. Independent assessments (Populi LLP, 2023) and internal monitoring suggest significant shifts captured through the following 5 C's framework:

Immediate outcomes

a. Confidence:

- o 90% of edu-leaders demonstrate increased self-belief, voice, and clarity of aspiration. Some of the powerful **narratives of change include**—a girl who convinces her father to let her pursue post-graduation in a metro city; another who challenges caste exclusion among children in a school.
- o Adolescent girls show increased participation in group discussions and self-expression activities as measured through attendance data and live observation.

b. Competence:

- o Edu-leaders improve their academic performance and problem-solving abilities, with over 90% of them enrolling in an undergraduate degree (where the state average is just 12%). Some examples of their successful campaigns include enrolling out-of-school girls by surveying 150,000 households and preventing early marriage in a conservative hamlet.

c. Connection:

- o Populi LLP, 2023 highlights that edu-leaders build trusting and supportive relationships with families as reflected in their improved mobility and 12 out of 13 family members interviewed (parents/in-laws and spouses) saying that they would include the Edu-Leaders in big financial decisions.
- o Adolescents experience reduced resistance from families toward mobility or public participation.

Inter-mediate outcomes

d. Choices:

- o At least 60% of edu-leaders pursue livelihoods, or civic roles of their choice with support from established linkages (where the state labor force participation rate for young women is just 4%)
- o Adolescent girls and their families access information and entitlements related to education and career options.

Long term Outcomes

e. Community:

- o Community members recognize edu-leaders as role models and report greater openness to shifting gender norms and supporting women's aspirations. Populi LLP, 2023 notes "Edu-leader's presence and movement within the community have allowed other parents in the community to feel comfortable with their daughters/ in-laws travelling alone to nearby locations."

A literature review conducted by Pluriversal Research and Action (2025) establishes that the impacts demonstrated by i-Saksham **resonate with global evidence**, including Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977), Kabeer's work on agency and empowerment (1999), and USAID Positive Youth Development Framework (2016), among others.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Lessons for the Field: What Makes Youth-Led Models Work

i-Saksham offers valuable lessons for other programs working in fragile or conservative settings:

- Change is most sustainable when **youth are not just participants, but designers and drivers**. By empowering individual leaders, establishing stakeholder collaboration, and undertaking family, community engagement, sustainable social change can be unleashed.
- Cultural respect and **strategic subversion** can coexist—working within the system while quietly reshaping it.
- Models that **synthesize local cultural insight** with **global evidence-based practices** create deeper and more durable change.

Recommendations:

- **Scale and Adaptation:** Replicate and adapt the i-Saksham model in similarly marginalized regions, ensuring cultural contextualization.
- **Policy Integration:** Incorporate young women's leadership models into state rural education and youth development policies.
- **Longitudinal Research:** Invest in long-term studies to track the impact of youth-led inclusion efforts on broader social indicators like gender equity, education, and civic engagement.
- **Cross-Cultural Dialogues:** Facilitate regional and national exchanges among youth changemakers to broaden intercultural understanding and solidarity.

i-Saksham model demonstrates how to **reimagine youth development, esp. for women in the Global South**, where tradition and modernity must meet not in opposition, but in creative tension.

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