

## WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

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### Mind, Body Wellness Workshops 2020 – Bangalore, Mumbai

ICA's Women's Leadership team had an amazing 2-day workshops in January 2020, with 30 teen girls ages 14-17 and 35 women -18 to 25 years each, at the two locations of VIDYA in Bangalore and Mumbai. VIDYA is an NGO that has worked with underprivileged communities for over three decades and a long time ICA Partner NGO. The main objective of this workshop was to offer young women some critical information on issues that had a strong impact on their wellbeing and instill in them a belief in their control over the choices that were available to them.

The expectant smiles and warm greetings that welcomed us were a positive sign of how the day would progress and combined with our own friendly, relaxed approach helped establish a connection with the group. Building this rapport was important given the difficult issues we were going to address. The topics for both the teens and the young women were the same but were age-specific with different focus and perspective. They were gathered in a room at the top of a modest house which housed VIDYA in Bangalore, with an adjoining open rooftop gathering place. In Mumbai, the workshop took place in a small room above a neighborhood store located with several others in a crowded 'chawl' in Powai.



Most of them were from surrounding areas with parents involved in low level occupations intent on giving their children access to education. One surprising aspect was their knowledge of English though very limited, provided by VIDYA in all their schools.

We were especially touched by their openness, given the fact that these young women are tackling some of the toughest issues facing them, such as gender-based violence, sexual harassment, lack of information on health, nutrition and menstrual hygiene and a

lack of safe space for girls with little information on how to protect themselves in and around their homes. But kudos to Vidya staff for starting them off with some key information enabling them to participate with some acquaintance with the problems and a keen awareness of its importance.

Our goal in this **Mind and Body Wellness workshops** was to normalize conversations around some of these sensitive topics. It was tightly packed and interactive, involving participatory learning while exploring the key concepts through activities and examples. We had hoped that they would come ready to participate actively during the sessions and we were not disappointed! The overall enthusiasm and cooperation of the staff and of the participants was great. They were eager to learn and the questions they asked showed their interest.

The first day of the workshop on **Physical Wellness** was wholistic, filled with specific information about how the body functions and how to take care of it. The medical member of our team turned it into an effective session by giving accurate information on the importance of feminine hygiene especially on their future reproductive health, breaking down negative social norms and stressing that good health practices matter. Their lack of important knowledge about sexual and reproductive health were woefully visible among teens as well as young women even though a couple of them were already married. We set out to help fill this knowledge gap through discussion around those crucial issues as well as practical exercises like hand washing, dental care etc.



The nutrition session of the workshop was designed to engage, educate, and motivate young women to incorporate healthy diet into their daily lives. Topics ranged from how nutrition impacts one's overall physical and mental health, tips to including some form of fitness and creating a workout routine, strategies to stressing less. In both locations, having a local doctor speaking the local language, who was aware of regional customs about food and cooking and of local availability while asking



them to talk about family preferences made it all fun and easy to remember. We could see that this was one of their most favorite topics of the day.



The second session was on **Setting Goals, Visioning and Decision Making**. The teens were completely enthralled and motivated by this session. It began with a group game followed by explanation of the importance of setting goals and the ways to achieving them. The session for young women who were all undergoing some form of basic training in small home-based micro-enterprises was next. Spread around the room were computers and sewing machines that they used for their learning. What became clear from our conversation though, was their belief that significant real-life barriers such as having little self-confidence, no financial support, no support from families and limited understanding of how to navigate social and cultural norms were holding them back from pursuing income-generation as an option and leaving them feeling isolated. This was when our transformative method of training came to their help.



The second day of the workshop was a session on **Resilience, Self-Esteem and Communication** with practical ways to achieve it. This workshop featured a curriculum aimed at building confidence and self-esteem, teaching coping skills and educating about healthy relationships and friendships. The session was complemented by the inclusion of real-life stories of people who showed resilience and never gave up. The students also shared their own stories in groups. It was an emotional time but a power-packed session with lots of positivity and optimism.

The second day ended on a high note talking about the importance of **Safety and Personal Security**. These young women with no support system in place seemed most vulnerable and at risk with severe consequences on their health and development. This session threw light on the various aspects of safety, discussing tips and tools and how to keep themselves physically safe and protected at times of need, in and out of their homes.



When we initially reflected on how we could tailor our training for these young women to be prepared for success in their lives and livelihoods, we focused on:

- Designing a training program with inputs from host NGO;
- Delivering the training by a knowledgeable, experienced WLP team deeply committed to seeing women and girls thrive;
- Engaging them in interactive sessions that would captivate their interests;
- Inspiring them to feeling empowered to take control of their own lives while boosting their self-esteem and their sense of self-worth.

Even in the short time we spent with them, the main takeaways for the WLP team were many. We were all impressed with the willingness to learn by these young women and a staff who believed that such sessions are necessary in bringing about subtle but definite positive changes in the participants' lives. When we saw a gleam in their eyes, their faces lit up with understanding and a hand raised to claim the moment, it was a privilege and we knew why we were there. Our lasting memory is of the refrain we heard again and again *“mam, please come back and do this again for us”*

But most of all, our time with them increased our own awareness of the barriers and limitations that a large number of women & girls face in India due to poverty, unequal access to resources and gender-based discrimination but ultimately, we felt optimistic that these girls and women had enough incentives to bring about exponential change in their lives.

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Read 2019 India trip report here –

<https://icaonline.org/portfolio-item/womens-leadership-initiative-wli/>

WLP 2020 Team

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