



AGA KHAN FOUNDATION



PROJECT LEHAR

CASE STUDIES

Introduction

Aga Khan Foundation (India)'s Project Lehar, which means wave in Urdu, works to empower and improve the quality of life of out-of-school adolescent girls.

It takes a three pronged empowerment approach for adolescents, comprising of scholastic support, vocational training and life skills education.

It supports out-of-school girls to re-enroll into school and distance learning programmes, especially for Class 10 exams. It trains girls in vocational skills to enter the formal job market and fosters entrepreneurship through innovative projects suited to the local context, like mushroom cultivation

Cutting across both the scholastic and vocational skills courses is life skills training which helps the girls build their confidence and agency, and understanding of how to successfully overcome the challenges they face in their day-to-day lives.

Project Lehar was begun in 2015 with support from the United Nations Population Fund and the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives.

These case studies collected since 2016, reflect the transformative journey the girls have taken towards their own social and economic empowerment.



MANJU KUMARI

Manju Kumari, 15 years old, is a committed advocate of education and a role model for her younger siblings, motivating them to continue their education. Manju dropped out of school but with the support of Project Lehar was able to catch up on her studies and re-join formal education. She now proudly attends a government school and is currently in Class 8.

Manju Kumari struggled in school from the beginning and always fell behind with her homework as she couldn't understand how to answer the questions. Unable to keep up with her friends she dropped out of school when she was 12 years old and thought she would never return.

After being out of school for three years, Manju's friend told her about Project Lehar's Chilbili centre nearby where scholastic and vocational skills training was being provided along with life skills coaching. Initially her parents were opposed to her attending the centre, thinking that it would be a waste of time like her earlier time at school had been. However, after learning that Manju would be working towards the goal of completing her Class 10 exams, they were reassured and supported their daughter attending the centre for scholastic training.

Manju explains that when she attended the centre she felt a big difference between her ability to learn at the centre and her earlier time in school. "Before, I was not learning and couldn't understand anything but when I attended the centre the teachers taught us well and encouraged us to ask questions if we didn't understand something." Manju's mother also tells us that she had observed that

“Earlier, she was unable to learn at school, but when she was at the centre she would come back excited, telling us about what she had learnt and wanting to complete her homework.”

After spending six months at the centre, Manju's confidence in her newly acquired skills and knowledge grew. Recognising that she now had the tools to succeed throughout her academic career, the teachers at the centre helped her re-enroll in a government school, where she joined Class 8. She enjoys learning new concepts and says,

“Now when I am given a problem or question I know I can do it. I can see that through a good education I will be able to understand many things and get better job opportunities.”

After realising the benefits of education, Manju has taken on the responsibility of tutoring her two younger sisters so that they don't fall behind in class. She also urges them to be regular in their studies so that they can live better lives, telling them, "Since our parents aren't educated, we should be educated and accomplish something for them." Manju's experience at the centre has enabled her to return to school and develop a love of learning and, as a result, she is now working hard to educate herself and her siblings so that they can carve out a better future for their family.



LADLI PERWEEN

Like many young women her age, 19-year-old Ladli Perween had big dreams for her life when she was growing up. When she contracted polio and was then married at age 13, her dreams began to shrink and for some time Ladli says, “I thought my life would remain the same”.

Ladli had always enjoyed studying; however, after she got married she was forced to leave her studies. Three years later she divorced her husband and returned to her parent’s house – with her two small children, a son and a daughter. Ladli recalls,

“I was physically incapable of working and could not support my family economically. I was totally shattered and frustrated with life.”

In 2016, during a neighbourhood survey conducted by AKF’s Project Lehar team, Hina, a community teacher at the Pragati Centre run in Khalilpura Ward No. 3 met Ladli. After hearing her story, Hina encouraged Ladli to enroll at the Pragati Centre to re-start her education.

Ladli was excited by the prospect of returning to her studies. However, very quickly she began struggling to balance going to the centre with taking care of her children and helping her mother with household tasks.

Hina says that when Ladli joined the centre she was different from the other girls in that she really struggled to find the funds to buy notebooks and books due to financial constraints. She said, “We all used to help her buy these using *zakat* and *fitra* from the community.”

Hina says, “Ladli also had to face the discouragement of people in her neighbourhood who didn’t understand why she wanted to study, this even included her brother and sister-in law. Ladli tells us that she would regularly fight with her brother who told her she was wasting her time.”

In 2017, Ladli passed her Class 10 examination through the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS). She was the first girl from her family to complete her Class 10 education. Buoyed by her accomplishment she is now taking a course in computer skills provided under the Prime Minister’s Skill Development Scheme and is also pursuing senior secondary education at the Rajkiya Mahila College, Gardanibagh.

Ladli is also now sending her own children to a government school and tells us of her plans:

“After mastering computer skills, I will start earning a decent livelihood and will get my children admitted in a better school. Education is so important and I want both my girl and boy to be educated so that they can achieve their dreams,” Ladli says, confidently.



SHAGUFTA

PERWEEN

At 16 years, Shagufta now earns a regular income from tailoring and training girls in her community in mehndi application and paper crafts. Shagufta began learning different handicrafts from a young age and used her passion for learning new crafts to train other girls.

But it's not just crafts that interest her. Shagufta also finds time to study for her Class 12 exams.

“I believe, you should have a skill, work hard and also continue your studies if you can,” she says.

“Studies are very important because after studying, you can do so much more.”

Shagufta lives in Karbala in Phulwarisharif with her mother, her father, two sisters and one brother. She is the second oldest of four siblings.

From her father, who is a tailor, Shagufta learnt basic hemming while helping him. It was through her uncle that Shagufta came to know about the vocational centre being run by AKF's Project Lehar, and enrolled in stitching and paper craft courses in February 2017.

Before enrolling in the stitching class, Shagufta had already enrolled in a mehndi class with an organisation called Bihar Dalit Vikash Samiti, and had become a mehndi trainer. She really enjoys training other girls like her and after she learnt paper crafts at the Project Lehar centre, she began training the girls in this too, finding designs on the internet.

“I find happiness in teaching others and giving back to my community,” she says.

Shagufta earns about Rs. 1,000 per day from mehndi training and Rs. 300 per hour from training girls in paper crafts. She also does tailoring from home and earns additional income from this. During the Eid festival Shagufta earned Rs. 4,000 and used the money to buy clothes for her mother and sisters.

Besides helping her support her family, the skills Shagufta has learnt at the Project Lehar centre have helped her negotiate with her parents to delay her marriage.

“I told my parents that I wanted to continue working and studying and that there was no rush for me to get married, they listened to me because I was confident in what I was saying.”

Shagufta loves spending her time learning more handicraft skills which she can instruct others in, and for now this is her source of happiness. Her dream is to visit Delhi, India's capital, and see all the historic sites and crafts found there.



SHILA KUMARI

Shila playfully moves her hands like a fish, as she recites a poem with the young children she instructs. The children follow her every move, repeating after her with smiles all around. Her style of instruction is engaging, as she likes the children to move, sing, dance and be fully immersed in their learning experience.

“If I’m able to complete my 10th in two years, imagine how much farther these young kids will go, learning from an early age,” Shila says. “I’m happy to teach students, but even happier when they show up to class without me calling them.”

Shila runs an Early Childhood Development (ECD) centre in her village, teaching pre-primary children, Monday to Friday, for three hours a day. On Saturdays she teaches for one hour, sometimes giving the students tests, and then plays with the children for the remaining two hours. Her classes include instruction in literacy and numeracy. Incidentally, her education journey started with no formal schooling when she was a young child and now she is about to take her Class 10 board exam and has also been offered a job with a local NGO.

Shila is 18 years old and the eldest of her four siblings. Her father is a daily-wage labourer and her mother is unwell and living with one of her brothers.

Shila’s father’s earning is not enough to cover the family’s daily costs, and to survive, Shila has taken it upon herself, along with help from her younger sister, to manage the household. Earlier, along with housework, Shila would work on farm plots to earn some additional income, and would earn Rs. 50 a day.

A hard-worker, Shila says that she always knew she was strong-willed but this was really tested when she found the courage to defy her father’s wishes, something she had never done before and which is not common for girls in her community to do.

This started when Shila chose to pursue her studies. Community teachers from AKF’s Project Lehar, came to her village as part of their community mobilisation efforts, and told her about the learning centre they were running to help girls who have dropped out of school, receive scholastic education as well as training in life skills. Initially, when the community teachers came to speak to her, Shila took it very lightly, thinking that many NGOs have come and gone in the area with little impact. Nonetheless she decided to enroll herself at the centre in November 2015.

Despite the efforts of the community teachers, Shila’s father objected to her attending the centre because he thought it was too far from home. One day, she decided to go to the centre when her father wasn’t home and continued going to classes without her father’s knowledge. She quickly began enjoying the classes, especially the life skills sessions which included topics such as, positive thinking, health and hygiene and confidence building.

“Life skills is the reason I’m teaching today,” Shila says. “I used to fight with people a lot, and couldn’t control my anger. Now I stop and think before I reply.”

Surprisingly, when her father came to know about her attendance at the centre, he did not react. Shila continued to go to the centre, balancing courses along with her household and farm work, and even staying at the centre longer than the normal hours to study. Villagers used to taunt her for pursuing her studies instead of remaining at home, but their words never impacted her drive to continue learning.

The second instance of strength was shown when Shila refused a marriage arranged by her father. After three to four months of being at the centre, her father printed her marriage card and arranged for her dowry. Shila knew this was happening but didn’t have the courage to refuse her father. When the boy came to visit her, he requested Shila to write her name and address, even though he himself had not cleared the Class 10 examination, and could barely write. Shila found this situation unnerving and she later confided in her brother and father, insisting that she did not want to go ahead with the marriage. Relatives helped her put an end to the marriage and Shila is now focused on herself and her family.

Currently, Shila balances household work, teaching and preparing for her own exams. She spends the money she earns running the ECD centre to attend preparation courses for her upcoming exams, and once she completes the exams, will most likely begin working for an NGO working on early childhood development.

“My advice to other girls is to not be afraid of anything,” she says. Develop confidence, believe in yourself, and don’t lose faith. You can come out of your homes and go much further.”



REENA KUMARI

Reena's face lights up talking about her past life spending hours watching television and listening to Radio Mirchi. Her adolescent bashfulness is a reminder that she is still a girl, growing and learning. Yet she decided that contributing to community development, and focusing on continuing her education are her true passions and she decided to dedicate her time taking control of a life that was formerly bound to the confines of the four walls of her home.

Reena is 16 years old and lives with her father, Chandesh Chaudhary, and mother, Kaushalaya Devi. She has two brothers, one of whom is married, and three sisters, all of whom are married. Due to polio, her father is unable to work and Reena's mother sells vegetables to earn a living. One of her brothers works in a medical shop and the other in a garage, repairing vehicles.

In 2008, her sister's marriage forced Reena to quit formal schooling while she was in Class 7 and take over the household responsibilities. For eight years she spent her days doing housework and remaining inside her home, only going out for marriages or special family events. Her home was her life.

Then, in 2016, when the Project Lehar team began the mobilisation process for enrolling girls at the local centre, Reena enrolled but it was not an easy adjustment for her. She had little discipline or respect for her teachers and had trouble making friends with the other girls. Her teachers encouraged her to continue studying, and slowly she got closer to the girls and began enjoying her studies.

A course that she was regular in was the life skills sessions. Reena learnt about health and hygiene, adopted a better diet after attending the nutrition classes and her confidence grew.

In February 2018, Reena began tuition classes for children, and she now teaches 20 students regularly at one of the Project Lehar centres. Reena charges the students Rs. 100 per month. She teaches six days a week, giving instruction two days a week in Hindi, two days in maths and two days in English.

“I'm ready to help any girl who doesn't have the means to study,” she says. “I conduct surveys and want to enroll girls in the centre so they too can find a way to step out from their homes.”

A major challenge that Reena faced included preparing for her tuition classes. She still needs proper training on developing lesson plans in order to cater to the needs of the different age groups that come to her classes.

Her personal challenge includes gaining respect from her community. Community members think negatively of her schedule as it starts early in the morning and ends only in the evening.

But Reena is optimistic.

“Their [the community members] perception will change,” she says. “I'll change their perception by first establishing myself, then from my example, others will see and encourage their girls to follow in my footsteps.”

Reena has also encouraged her brothers to continue their education and they are now attending a learning centre run by a local NGO.

Even though she is still a young girl, Reena no longer desires to spend hours in front of the TV. She finds happiness now in motivating other girls to attend the Project Lehar centre so that they too can build their skills and secure their futures.



SHABNAM

Shabnam has always had a natural sense of understanding fabrics and colours.

“It’s something that just comes to you,” she says. The more you practice, the more you observe different patterns and materials, you learn and you develop a sense for what colours go best with others. You can match white with black, black with white, then red also goes good with black and also looks good with white, and so on.

Shabnam, aged 16, attended formal schooling till Class 3 but was forced to drop out due to her family’s financial problems. She continued studying at home till grade eight. Yet, she always had a dream of studying and making something of her life.

Her family includes her father, M.D Saleem, her mother, Akhtari Khatoon, two sisters, one of whom is married, and one brother. Her father is a welder and her brother helps her father with the work, which is seasonal in nature and does not provide much financial security to the family.

Shabnam was enrolled in a girl’s education program run by AKF as part of its Project for Enhancing the Quality of Education in Bihar that ran between 2012 and 2015; however, she joined just four months prior to the project’s closing and could not complete the course.

For one year, Shabnam used to stitch clothes for the community and earn a small income. Then Shabnam came to know about Project Lehar and began attending scholastic classes along with classes on life skills. Although she was unable to pass her Class 10 examination, she has used what she learned in the life skills courses to pursue another dream.

“I was heartbroken [when I learnt that I hadn’t passed my Class 10 exam], I lost all hope and confidence, because I always had the desire to learn and do something more with my life.” Shabnam says.

Through the life skills courses, Shabnam gained the confidence to open up a centre and share her stitching knowledge with other girls. Attending meetings and using her past experience from the boutique she was formally employed at, Shabnam opened the centre hoping to empower other women.

“I feel happy when other people come to the centre and first of all see it’s all women, and then look at the instructor and see it’s a young woman,” she says.

Her class is filled with seven women, who come to the centre for two hours every day of the week except for Friday. Shabnam charges the women Rs. 200 per month.

Opening the centre was another hurdle for Shabnam to overcome. During the centre’s opening, Shabnam’s brother was getting married and her father and brother needed her to commit her time for the wedding preparations. However, Shabnam convinced them that she could spend two out of 24 hours a day running the centre, and with the help of her sister, she managed to open and run the centre while balancing household duties.

Shabnam continues to run the tailoring centre and on account of her popularity now has a waiting list of girls who want to learn sewing and tailoring from her.

“I want to give back to women, just like I was given the opportunity to better my life.” she says. **“Girls should not be dependent on their parents or husband to earn an income, and should fight challenges and try to move forward.”**



POONAM
KUMARI

Poonam Kumari completed the hospitality skills training and is now working in a hotel in Patna.

“I enrolled for AKF’s vocational skills training programme focused on hospitality, and for the past six months have been working. Since coming to the Project Lehar centre I have seen a lot of changes in myself. Earlier I used to worry before even leaving the house, but after going to the centre I have been able to build my confidence and minimise my fears.”

“Through the life skills training I have learnt how to look after my health and diet. And from one of the stories in the life skills curriculum, *Akbar and Birbal*, I learnt to appreciate my brain and intellect and its potential. This is something I have been able to get my husband to understand and as a result he respects and supports my decision to work.”

“In my neighbourhood, many families differentiate between boys and girls. I now want to change the attitude of those around me and am trying to educate them about the reality that girls and boys are equal, and a good society is one where girls can flourish. I have decided I want to become a soldier and have put in my application, and am preparing for the entrance exams. All I will say about myself now is that if someone tries to stop me, I will not listen and will move forward instead.”



SHAHEEN

BANU

A stream of colourful banners was hanging above the streets on the way to Shaheen's house. The Muslim festival of Eid-ul-Fitr was fast approaching. This time of the year also meant more tailoring orders for Shaheen to complete, doubling her weekly income.

19-year-old Shaheen Banu learned how to stitch early on in her life from her sister, but could only make *shalwars*. However, after Shaheen's friend convinced her to attend a stitching and design course offered by Project Lehar at the Phulwarisharif centre, she can now effortlessly stitch beautiful *shalwars* and *kurtas*. Shaheen has greatly enhanced her skills and now many people in her neighbourhood are demanding her tailoring services. Today, she is able to complete 10 orders a week, earning approximately Rs. 1,500 every week.

After Shaheen's father passed away 14 years ago and her mother three years ago, she has been living with her five brothers and sister-in-law and manages the house, including cooking and cleaning for everyone. Like her brothers, Shaheen has completed her Class 10 exams but due to her responsibilities at home never planned on a career or higher education. Initially it was difficult for her to balance both the tasks at home and attend the centre. However, she enjoyed the classes and realised how it could help her, motivating her to adjust her routine to balance both.

Modest about her achievements with her friends and neighbours, Shaheen says to them, "Although there is a lot of work, I have to do it somehow, otherwise, I am only hurting myself."

Shaheen's eldest sister – and her biggest fan – who is married and occasionally visits her family, says, **"Shaheen has learnt to multi-task and I often wonder how she finishes the housework and goes to the centre with such limited time. I'm really proud of her."**

Before attending the centre, Shaheen tells us that she used to feel nervous talking to people, but now she can clearly communicate with others. She feels that this is in large part due to the life skills training she received at the centre, which benefited her work greatly. Shaheen had once accidentally made a client's dress smaller, however, using her life skills understanding she was able to approach the situation sensibly. "I was able to talk to my client nicely and apologised for my mistake because I wanted to maintain a good relationship with her." After fixing the dress, the client was satisfied and now returns to her for other work.

In the future, Shaheen wants to teach other girls sewing and tailoring. She even wants to learn how to paint fabric and buy material to tailor clothes with other girls so that they can sell their designs together.

In the past few months, Shaheen has formed meaningful bonds with other girls in her community, has continued to support her family completing household chores, and has begun earning a livelihood for herself. Today she feels ready for any challenge and opportunity, asserting

"I am never intimidated by any task now."

Shaheen has exemplified that with a little support, a dedicated and hardworking girl like herself can accomplish anything she puts her mind to.



JYOTI KUMARI

Jyoti Kumari, 15 years old, is full of energy and always ready to help her friends and family. She re-started her education after enrolling for a scholastic training course offered at the Project Lehar Laksh training centre. She is diligently preparing for her Class 10 exams and aspires to become a teacher so that she can help other students get an education.

Before attending Project Lehar's Laksh centre, life was quite different for Jyoti Kumari. After dropping out of school, the 15-year-old says, "I used to constantly laugh at everything and argue a lot. I wasn't in school and was just helping out at home, looking after my siblings and waiting for my marriage to be arranged."

One day a community mobiliser from AKF arrived at Jyoti's doorstep to inform her family that a nearby centre run by AKF was offering scholastic training for girls who had dropped out of school. Excited by the prospect of meeting and learning alongside other girls her age, Jyoti was keen to attend the centre and since the training was nearby and only for half a day, her father and mother, both of whom are manual labourers, agreed that Jyoti could go as she would be able to continue her household responsibilities for the rest of the day.

Jyoti has been attending the centre for the past year and a half and is now preparing for her class 10 exams. Since attending the centre, her family and friends have noticed Jyoti's dedication to her studies, managing them alongside her daily household chores, as well as how much she has matured since attending the centre.

Though Jyoti is well known for her bubbly and warm-hearted personality, she often used to disrupt the class by laughing and talking during lessons. However, through the life skills training Jyoti says, "I learnt how to behave properly in different settings and my teacher really helped me to improve my habits and be less argumentative."

Jyoti's time at the centre has also directly helped her family. She tells us about the time she helped her family by writing the names of guests for her sister's wedding cards, a skill she improved upon at the centre and which was really useful for her family since no one else apart from her father knows how to write. These experiences have shown Jyoti and her family the benefits of education, encouraging them to support Jyoti in her academic pursuits even after she finishes the scholastic training at the centre.

At the centre, Jyoti has also built strong bonds with other girls:

"We all live like sisters. If I eat from one plate, then I feed my best friend, Najiya Rani, from the same plate. Here, we do not see different castes or divisions."

Jyoti's teacher says that she has been touched by the compassion the girls have shown to one another and how when Project Lehar organised a girl's festival earlier in the year, Jyoti helped her differently abled friend, Najiya Rani, see the fair by carrying her on her back.

In the past two years, Jyoti's plans for the future have changed and she now hopes to become a teacher.

"I am going to serve my country by becoming a teacher and educating children,"

she says, demonstrating how when girls like Jyoti are empowered, they become positive change agents in their own communities, inspiring others and championing the cause of education.



BABITA

Babita, Jyoti and Shweta of Kurkuri and Bahadurpur villages of Phulwarisharif block, Patna are known as the mushroom girls of their villages. All three girls cultivate large, nutritious oyster mushrooms in their homes and supply them to clients they have developed in and around Phulwarisharif. Along with 47 other trained adolescent girl mushroom growers, they have become trendsetters in their communities.

When Project Lehar was begun in 2015, several market-oriented vocational training options were provided to the girls in tailoring, computer skills and retail and hospitality. However, due to mobility restrictions some girls were unable to travel to the training centres or for work. To support girls who could not travel out of their homes, AKF began providing training in mushroom cultivation and today the girls trained in mushroom cultivation by Project Lehar are continuing the seasonal work and supporting their families with their earnings varying from Rs. 1,000 to Rs. 3,000 per month.

Babita Kumari completed her Class 10 but her parents did not want her to travel outside her village so she stopped her studies and helped with the household chores and looking after her younger siblings.

“I was getting really bored and frustrated so when I learnt that AKF was providing training in mushroom cultivation and that I would be able to grow the mushrooms at home I immediately enrolled.”

After completing the month-long training, she began her own mini-enterprise growing mushrooms in a small, dark room in her home. Babita's mother is the main bread-winner of the family, selling firewood and Babita is the eldest of four siblings. Through the growing and selling of mushrooms, Babita is now significantly contributing to her family's income.

As she tends to a new crop of mushrooms, Babita tells us:

Mushroom cultivation is a “good business and one I want to expand, it needs very little investment — about Rs 150 for husk, some spawn and bags to hang the husk and in 20 to 25 days, some 20 kg of mushroom can be harvested. Currently, I’m cultivating mushrooms in batches of 20 kg and selling them at Rs. 150 per kg.”

Babita's brother helps her market the mushrooms by procuring orders from school teachers and other clients and delivers the mushrooms.

“Mushroom cultivation has become a constant support to me and has helped me feel fulfilled and that I am doing something productive,”

Babita tells us. Besides helping her earn an income it has earned her the respect of her parents and siblings as well as other girls in Kurkuri village who are now, after seeing Babita's business grow, enrolling in the mushroom cultivation course so that they too can make a livelihood for themselves.



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