

## FAT's Young Women's Leadership Program (YWLP)

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YWLP's genesis can be traced to the in-depth understanding of the structural issues and values that perpetuate the inequalities based on gender, caste, religion and sexuality, through a feminist lens. The interplay of power in the structures of discrimination enables patriarchal values to operate in a manner, which restricts the girls and young women to contest multi-tiered marginalisation. FAT's YWLP program uses the innovative combination of developing feminist understanding on these structures with basic technology training and promotes young women's voices for their rights through innovative use of technology they learnt to use through this program.

The program places the adolescent girls and their issues in the core, making the interventions grounded in their lived realities and culture specific issues. In that context one of the strengths of the program is its participatory approach where the program elements like strategies, methodologies, content and pedagogy are designed collectively with them as equal partners. This is important for the realization, recognition and expansion of their autonomy, negotiation skills and agency.

The other strength is the curriculum based on women oriented politics with the two underlying and inseparable concepts of Gender and Sexuality. Specifically in the context of the experiences of adolescent girls and young women, sexuality plays a very crucial role. The fear of young people being sexually more active is in the core of all the restrictions and violence inflicted on them. Thus conveniently making them believe that they are passive recipients of norms who have no decision making power. But it is important to understand that this approach also inculcates the feeling of shame, fear, ignorance around sex and sexuality. Hence, the curriculum and pedagogy recognizes and engages with their curiosities and anxieties around their bodies, desires and the changes they are going through; with an empowerment approach.

The curriculum aims to develop technical skills together with new values to reclaim spaces, rights and entitlements, choices and consent, agency and autonomy. Thus it does not only confine the pedagogy to classroom teaching but also integrates community action and exposure visits.

In the last ten years, the power of information and knowledge has increasingly concentrated to the new age communication technology. On one hand, where technology can be a tool to build leadership amongst adolescent girls and young women; as it opens up a whole world of possibilities and connect them to the larger knowledge society. On the other hand, the technology sector has also become a structure that supports and furthers gender inequality and discrimination. Hence, we learnt that technology can be a very powerful tool to build leadership among women, only when it is integrated with an approach that factors in their socio-economic political realities and develops critical awareness. We understood this as a feminist approach to technology.

FAT began its work with adolescent girls and young women by creating an inclusive space called the Tech Center in 2010, which is an open/easy/unrestrained/enabling and non-judgmental space for girls and young women to learn about technology based new media tools from a feminist lens. Girls from socially and economically disadvantaged families from nearby urban poor settlements come to equip themselves in everyday technology—basic computers, Internet, photography, and filmmaking. The concepts around technical skills are intertwined with the understanding of gender, women’s rights and entitlements, sexuality, patriarchy and feminism. Perspective building around these is done through workshops as part of the curriculum. Thus, the idea is to encourage and inculcate feminist leadership among young girls, through equality based strategies and pedagogy, to be able to reclaim their rights, spaces and voices.

We have established four levels of leadership in our program

- First level of leadership: Girls join the YWLP program and learn the basic computer skills – software and basic hardware, engage in tasks that require the use of these skills and build an understanding on various issues related to gender, patriarchy, identity & marginalisation and women’s rights. As leaders they start engaging with their experiences, expressions, emotions and desires through a feminist lens. As a result of which they develop self-esteem and confidence, positive images of themselves as well as other adolescent girls and women; explore their identities and their worth/existence among their families, friends, tech center and communities.
- Second level of leadership: Girls from the first level of leadership who decide to continue to the second level, learn photography and filmmaking and build a more nuanced

understanding of the concepts covered in the first level. In addition they also build understanding on new concepts like sexuality and feminism. This prepares a ground for them to see themselves as active beings capable of taking decisions, questioning, making informed choices and recognizing their dreams. Together with this they are also able to critically analyse and relate their individual struggles to the larger political struggles of women's movement against violence and discrimination. This level of leadership hosts a unique opportunity to learn how to plan a campaign through collective action around their issues. Thus sharpening the aspects of decision-making, negotiations and collective action.

- Third level of leadership: Girls in this level have a wider choice to explore as leaders ranging from being part of the collective action on different issues; interning with FAT or any other organisation to learn the professional skills of facilitation, administration, reporting and documentation, planning etc.; taking up individual fellowships on issues of their interest; exploring job opportunities in various sectors; to taking up a stronger leadership role within their communities.
- Fourth level of leadership: We have seen that girls who have graduated from all the previous 3 levels of leadership successfully emerge as new leaders both within their communities as well as within with feminist movement. We see them as leaders who are our colleagues working with us together to achieve the larger mission of women's equality. Some of them also get integrated into the program as team members to contribute as influential committed leaders while some may choose their own paths of leadership.

We have recently expanded the work of our YWLP program by setting up Tech Centers in Pune (Maharashtra), Giridih (Jharkhand) and Ajmer (Rajasthan) in partnership with local partners, and are setting up 3 more centers in Palamu (Jharkhand) and Patna (Bihar). We are also exploring partnerships for expansion in other states.