

Greetings on International Literacy Day!

A recent report by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) revealed that around 38% of the respondents knew at least one female student who had dropped out of school, an alarming data point on female literacy (Telegraph, 2022). Mana Mandlekar, a woman exemplar of the 2019 cohort, would have been one such female student had chance and choice not played a key role in changing the direction of her life.

Mana was asked to leave school and start a conjugal life at 18 due to financial instability. Committed to continuing her education, she convinced her parents and travelled long distances to attend school. On the way, she had to face eve teasing and harassment, making her uncomfortable in public spaces and restricting her mobility. However, she continued schooling to be the first girl in her village to start college.

At college, Mana enrolled in Karate classes where she saw a massive difference in her self-confidence and leadership skills. The classes inculcated self-discipline in Mana, and she now knew how to conduct herself better, giving her confidence to respond to episodes of eve teasing and sexual harassment. Occupying a space of sports traditionally thought to be only for boys and going on to represent India for the Asia Cup, Mana began to break stereotypes and create space for girls in areas traditionally demarcated for men. Realising that Karate had given her a voice, she refused many jobs to train young girls and adolescents in Karate in her district in the hope that they too would feel confident to start participating in their life decisions.

Establishing her organisation, she has worked with 4000 youth and children, paving the way for girls in her community to pursue education and sports and challenge entrenched gender norms.

She says, "parents of many of these young girls only wanted their sons to attend the karate training, not their daughters. I made the classes free for girls and asked every boy to come with his sisters to generate interest."

An interesting strategy to involve more girls in sports, Mana's example of being the first girl in her village to complete college and start her organisation created a positive role model in a male-dominated field, proving that girls and women can carve an identity for themselves outside the domestic realm. The girls trained by Mana are continuing their education and possess an enhanced self-image and better appreciation of their physical strength. Because the girls and boys train together, struggle together and see each other fail as well as succeed, **"the girls no longer believe the myth of male physical superiority and therefore are less scared, which is the first step towards taking control of their own lives"** says Mana, adding that the classes have proved to be great equalisers. Mana has single-handedly identified and mentored 25 girls, peer leaders, building their leadership skills and expanding the outreach of her work to include families and community members holding discussions around child rights, gender violence, and sexual and reproductive health, thus contributing to a more gender-equal society.

Mana has secured a dedicated space for karate training of children and youth in 12 panchayats, 20 schools and 1 college in Harda, Madhya Pradesh. These schools have reported a massive reduction in dropouts among adolescent girls and a significant increase in their decision-making capabilities. Seeing this, the Government of Madhya Pradesh has made Karate classes mandatory in all government middle schools of Madhya Pradesh for 3 months a year, a milestone in Mana's journey of fighting gender stereotypes.

Mana wants to set up a residential sports center in the Harda district of Madhya Pradesh where she can continue training girls and make them next-generation sports icons as an example to expand sports education in the entire state of Madhya Pradesh. To know more about Mana's work on reducing dropouts among girl children through sports, and to support women such as Mana, please write to us at:

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