



At a Glance

THE INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON WOMEN

The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) is a global research institute committed to advancing gender equity and social inclusion through evidence-based action. Its flagship adolescent program, the Gender Equity Movement in Schools (GEMS), is a pioneering, evaluated model for transforming gender norms through education. By working directly with students, teachers, and school systems, GEMS helps young people question rigid gender roles, develop equitable relationships, and prevent violence before it begins—making it a compelling example of large-scale, evidence-informed adolescent empowerment program.

Founding Background

ICRW was founded in 1976 to generate actionable research that advances the rights and opportunities of women and girls. Since the late 1990s, ICRW's Asia Regional

Office, which is based in New Delhi, has led applied research and programming on gender, education, and violence prevention. Building on decades of work in India and across Asia and Africa, ICRW developed GEMS in partnership with CORO

and the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in 2008, aiming to reshape the gendered dynamics of schools and lay a foundation for gender equality across generations.

Overview of Programs Offered

ICRW's adolescent empowerment portfolio includes GEMS, UMANG, Plan-It Girls, Parivartan, and Manthan, all designed to shift social norms through multi-level, gender-transformative approaches (see Table). While each program targets a different stage or population for diverse outcomes, they share a focus on reflection, questioning, agency, and collective action. GEMS, in particular, has been adapted and evaluated in India, Vietnam, and Bangladesh to promote gender equality and violence prevention, while Umang and Plan-It Girls have extended this learning to address child marriage prevention, life skills, and employability.

Target Population

These programs engage adolescent girls and boys aged 12–19 years, primarily in public schools and rural or low-income communities. Within schools, interventions reach both students and teachers, while complementary community and family components address the broader social environment influencing adolescents' aspirations and relationships.

Relationship to Formal Systems

ICRW's programs are implemented in close

collaboration with education departments and state governments. In India, GEMS has been integrated into public-school systems such as Maharashtra's Meena Raju Manch initiative, and in Jharkhand, the government has adapted the curriculum to implement across the state. In Bangladesh, the ministry of education is implementing it with UNFPA support. These partnerships are designed to foster institutional ownership, sustainability, and policy alignment with national education and gender strategies.

Program Structure and Duration

GEMS and related programs are typically delivered over two academic years, through structured cycles of teacher training, classroom sessions, and school-wide campaigns. The incremental design allows successive sessions to deepen students' understanding of gender, relationships, and violence, while reinforcing learning through reflection and practice.

Program Delivery

Adolescents participate in Group Education Activities (GEAs), which are interactive, discussion-based sessions that use stories, debates, and games to explore themes such as equality, respect, and bodily autonomy. Teachers are central actors, trained through intensive capacity-building workshops on patriarchy, violence, and gender-sensitive pedagogy. Principals and School Management Committees receive orientation to create enabling environments, while community members

are engaged through street theatre, murals, and parent meetings. Programs also work with local governance and child protection bodies to strengthen system-level accountability and support.

Curriculum

The GEMS curriculum includes 24 sessions – 12 in year 1 and 12 in year 2. The year 1 sessions focus on three broad domains – gender, violence and bodily changes. Year 2 sessions focus on gender, relationships, emotions, communication and conflict resolution. These sessions use participatory activities, including role-play, stories, vignettes, free-listing, game-playing and debates. The sessions are 45 minutes in duration to fit in with the school

timetable. GEMS has diaries and comic books that are used as additional learning and reflection materials for students.

Geography and Reach

Since 2008, GEMS has reached over 2.8 million students and 28,000 teachers across 26,000 schools in India, Bangladesh, and Vietnam. ICRW's adolescent programming collectively spans more than 35,000 schools and 3 million adolescents and adults through research and interventions in Asia and Africa, demonstrating the scalability and adaptability of its model for shifting adolescent gender norms through education.

For more information, see: icrw.org; icrw.org/icrw-asia; icrw.org/icrw-africa



Summary of select ICRW programs that address adolescent gender norms

Program	Primary Setting	Who Delivers	Relation to formal system	Location(s)	Years Implemented
GEMS (Gender Equity Movement in Schools)	In-school (Grades 6–8, public/ government schools)	Trained teachers (one male and one female per school) supported by ICRW and partner NGOs (CORO, TISS, CINI, LEADS, PyD)	Fully integrated within school timetable; school-wide campaigns; coordinated with education ministries and district offices	India (Mumbai, Jharkhand), Vietnam (Da Nang), Bangladesh (Barisal, Barguna, Patuakhali, Dhaka)	India: 2008–present; Vietnam: 2012–2015; Bangladesh: 2015–2017; 2019-present
UMANG	School + community	Teachers, community educators, NGO facilitators (e.g., SATHEE, Badlao, PCI)	Implemented in partnership with Government of Jharkhand; integrated into government middle schools; extends to village-level committees	India (Jharkhand—Godda, Jamtara)	2018–2023
Plan-It Girls	In-school (Grades 9 & 11, government secondary schools)	Trained female facilitators placed in schools through NGOs; supported by teachers and principals	Works through government schools; aligns with life skills and employability frameworks	India (Delhi and Jharkhand)	2017–2021

CASE STUDY

Program	Primary Setting	Who Delivers	Relation to formal system	Location(s)	Years Implemented
Parivartan	Schools + sports fields (cricket and kabaddi)	Sports coaches and physical education teachers trained as gender-equity role models	Uses sport as an entry point; implemented through schools and youth clubs	India (Mumbai)	2008–2013
Manthan	Community-based	Male peer educators and youth champions	Coordinates with local governance bodies and child protection committees	India (Jharkhand)	2015–2020
PAnKH	Schools + community	Teachers, NGO facilitators, and SMCs	Works through government schools and community mobilization	India (Rajasthan)	2016–2020



OVERVIEW AND MISSION

The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) is a global research institute dedicated to promoting gender equity and social inclusion through evidence-based action. Established in 1976, ICRW's mission is to generate and apply knowledge that empowers women, girls, and other marginalized groups to realize their rights and potential. Over the past five decades, ICRW has built an international reputation for combining rigorous research with practical program design and policy influence. Within this broader mandate, ICRW's Asia Regional Office in New Delhi has become a leader in advancing gender-transformative approaches to adolescent empowerment.

ICRW's work centers on understanding and shifting the social norms that shape young people's relationships, opportunities, and sense of agency. Beginning with the Gender Equity Movement in Schools (GEMS) initiative in 2008, ICRW developed one of the first rigorously evaluated models for changing gender attitudes among early adolescents through education. Implemented in partnership with government and civil society organizations, GEMS engages students and teachers in reflection and dialogue about gender, power, and violence within school settings.

Building on the insights and infrastructure developed through GEMS, ICRW launched UMANG in Jharkhand, India, in 2018 to address the intersecting challenges of gender inequality, child marriage, and girls' limited educational opportunities. UMANG extends the school-based approach to the community level, bringing together teachers, parents, and local governance structures to strengthen support for adolescent girls' education and delay early marriage. The program's integration within state education and child protection systems has made it a promising model for scaling gender-transformative practice across both school and community settings.

ICRW's mission in this field is grounded in the conviction that sustainable gender equality requires transformation not only of individual attitudes but of the institutions and systems that shape them. Schools, communities, and governance structures are therefore viewed as interlinked spaces where adolescents can learn to question norms, exercise leadership, and model equitable relationships. By engaging teachers, principals, parents, and local leaders alongside adolescents themselves, ICRW's programs work to reimagine education as a site of reflection, fairness, and empowerment. Through research, practice, and policy engagement, ICRW works to strengthen the evidence base for gender-transformative education, demonstrating that the promotion of equality and the prevention of violence are mutually reinforcing goals.

Approach to Shifting Adolescent Gender Norms

ICRW's approach to shifting adolescent gender norms is rooted in the understanding that transformation must occur at the level of individuals in terms of their beliefs and behaviors, but also at the social systems that sustain them. The organization works with adolescents at a formative stage of life, when ideas about gender, fairness, and authority are still being internalized. Its programs create opportunities for young people and the adults in their lives to question restrictive norms, practice equality in relationships, and imagine new possibilities for themselves and others. Rather than viewing gender equity as a matter of awareness alone, ICRW's approach focuses on practice, reflection, and relational change.

The GEMS Program

The Gender Equity Movement in Schools (GEMS) program goal is to demonstrate how gender norms can be shifted through the everyday life of schools. It begins by recognizing schools as powerful social institutions where hierarchies of gender and authority are learned and reproduced, but which can also become spaces of fairness and respect. Through a structured series of Group Education Activities (GEAs), adolescents in grades six to eight participate in participatory, discussion-based sessions that use stories, role-plays, and games to explore gender roles, violence, and empathy. The sessions build incrementally, starting from recognition of unfairness and stereotypes, and moving

toward reflection on personal attitudes, communication, and cooperation.

Teachers are at the center of this process. GEMS invests heavily in building teachers' gender perspectives and facilitation skills, conducting intensive workshops that help them reflect on their own experiences of bias and power. These sessions also equip teachers with practical tools for non-violent discipline, classroom dialogue, and inclusive pedagogy. Teachers become facilitators and role models, guiding students toward equitable interaction and respect for difference. School-wide campaigns, assemblies, and creative activities that include slogan writing, student-led plays, and debates, extend this learning beyond the classroom, making gender equality a shared institutional value rather than an isolated topic.

GEMS also deliberately engages the wider school ecosystem. Principals and School Management Committees (SMCs) are oriented on gender-sensitive governance, while parents and communities are drawn in through events and campaigns that highlight respect, empathy, and shared responsibility for children's well-being. This whole-school approach attempts to foster changes in attitude that translate into observable changes in behavior, reducing tolerance for violence and encouraging more cooperative and supportive relationships between students and teachers.

UMANG: Extending Change Beyond the School Gate

Building on lessons from GEMS, UMANG

adapts the school-based model to address the broader social and institutional barriers facing adolescent girls in rural India. Implemented in partnership with the Government of Jharkhand, UMANG integrates classroom-based empowerment sessions with intensive work at the community and system levels. In schools, teachers and students engage in activities focused on self-efficacy, life skills, and the value of girls' education with issues of gender and violence as cross-cutting themes. These efforts are reinforced by community mobilization: parents, local leaders, and Village Child Protection Committees participate in dialogue and training to shift norms around

girls' education, early marriage, girls' mobility, and decision-making.

UMANG is designed for multi-level engagement, linking schools with the formal structures of child protection and local governance. By involving Panchayati Raj Institutions, Block Education Officers, and other government representatives, UMANG aligns program activities with state systems for adolescent well-being. This approach creates a network of accountability and support that extends beyond individual students, embedding gender-equitable practices within community institutions and state policy frameworks.



THEORY OF CHANGE

How ICRW's Programming Attempts to Shift Adolescent Gender Norms?

ICRW's adolescent empowerment programs are guided by a theory of change that draws from the social normative framework and applies it to the construction of gender, power, and violence. The theory recognizes that notions of gender roles, dominance, and the use of violence to resolve conflict are instilled early in life through socialization processes, thereby creating a normative environment that supports certain behaviors and power dynamics. Adherence to these norms is often reinforced and rewarded through institutional structures and mechanisms. Transforming such deeply rooted patterns requires environments that invite people to recognize, reflect on, and practice equality in their everyday interactions.

ICRW's programs therefore prioritize approaches that engage adolescents, teachers, parents, and community leaders to recognize, challenge, and transform gender norms. In schools, teachers are positioned as key pillars of change and are supported to reflect on their own biases while developing the skills and resources needed to change their pedagogy and everyday routines in the classroom. This combination of self-reflection, participatory learning, and institutional support creates conditions for change that are cumulative and self-reinforcing across three interconnected levels: individual, community, and institutional.

At the individual level, GEMS and UMANG combine a cognitive–affective approach with life-skills education to foster both understanding and motivation for change. The cognitive–affective approach recognizes that attitudes have cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. Group Education Activities (GEAs)

engage adolescents through participatory methods—role-plays, stories, games, and debates—that stimulate critical thinking about fairness, power, and respect. These sessions encourage students to connect new ideas to personal experience, helping them see how gender norms influence daily life and relationships.

An intentional feature of this design is the use of cognitive dissonance, or the discomfort that arises when new information challenges pre-existing beliefs or behaviors. By surfacing contradictions between what students have learned to accept as “normal” and what they now recognize as unfair, facilitators guide adolescents to reflect critically and articulate their own evolving values. As one program leader explained, young adolescents not only understand the nuances of gender power relations, they also exercise those on a daily basis. They justify those behaviors, often imitating what they see from adults. When ICRW created GEMS they wanted to create

space for reflection and to create cognitive dissonance, to help adolescents question what they've always accepted as normal and look for alternatives.

Teachers undergo a parallel process. Training workshops are designed not simply to transfer knowledge, but to elicit reflection on power, bias, and discomfort. Through discussions of patriarchy, authority, and discipline, teachers experience their own moments of dissonance and are nudged to acknowledge the tension between traditional norms of patriarchy and control. For teachers, this process of questioning and reconciliation becomes foundational to pedagogical change in their classrooms and schools. An ICRW team member explained, "We've seen that conversations on power and power dynamics can create a sense of fear or threat. So it's not just about a few trainings; it's about creating a space where teachers can share concerns and questions, and continuously connect with the issue."

At the community level, change within schools is deepened and sustained through community engagement. Both programs involve parents, peers, and local leaders in structured dialogues and public events designed to question harmful traditions and celebrate equitable relationships. In UMANG, these efforts are extended through Village Child Protection Committees and Panchayati Raj Institutions, which mobilize collective responsibility to keep girls in school and prevent early marriage. By creating continuity between school and community messages, adolescents encounter consistent expectations of

fairness and care in different settings (home, school, community). Ideally, families begin to value girls' education, share household responsibilities more equitably, and communicate more openly with their children. Boys, too, are encouraged to understand masculinity in terms of empathy and collaboration rather than control. These evolving beliefs and relationships form the social foundation for lasting normative change. As community members begin to adopt and model these shifts, schools and local institutions are prompted to re-examine their own practices, setting the stage for broader structural transformation.

At the institutional level, ICRW works to embed gender-transformative practice within education and governance systems so that change is sustained beyond individual programs. In GEMS, school principals and School Management Committees (SMCs) are engaged to institutionalize participatory decision-making and positive discipline. The Government of Maharashtra integrated GEMS components into the Meena Raju Manch initiative, expanding the model to more than 25,000 schools. In Jharkhand, ICRW collaborates with the Departments of Education and Women and Child Development to align program activities with state frameworks on education, child protection and adolescent empowerment. These partnerships ensure that the lessons of practice and reflection at the school and community levels are reinforced by system-level policy and accountability structures. Through this multi-level approach, ICRW's programs emphasize that shifting norms requires not only personal reflection and

community dialogue but also institutional change.

Research and Program Evaluations

As both a research institute and an implementing partner, ICRW systematically studies how education can influence attitudes, relationships, and institutional practices. Through mixed-methods evaluation, longitudinal follow-up, and cross-country learning, ICRW has built one of the strongest empirical foundations globally for understanding how gender norms form, how they shift, and how those shifts can be measured. Additionally, ICRW has collaborated with academic and research institutions including the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) and international partners such as the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, UK and the University of Lagos, Nigeria, to rigorously evaluate and advance evidence on its work.

GEMS has been the primary focus of these collaborative research projects. In India, a randomized controlled trial and complementary qualitative studies examined the effects of the program after 18 months of implementation. Findings showed statistically significant improvements in students' gender-equitable attitudes, reductions in the acceptance of violence and increase in respectful relationships and bystander intervention. Students exposed to a greater number of GEMS sessions showed stronger gains, demonstrating that change accumulates through sustained engagement. Teachers reported experimenting with alternative ways of maintaining order, while

students described improved relationships and increased feelings of safety and respect within the classroom.

The GEMS model was later adapted and evaluated in Vietnam and Bangladesh, where results indicated its potential for replication in diverse contexts. Across these settings, participation in GEMS contributed to measurable improvements in gender-equitable attitudes, self-efficacy, and communication skills among adolescents. The program's impact extended beyond attitudinal change: in intervention schools, both girls and boys reported greater aspirations for continued education, delayed marriage, and more supportive peer dynamics. For the UMANG program, monitoring and evaluation data show that in intervention areas, the increase in child marriage rates, during and after COVID-19 pandemic, was substantially lower than in comparable control areas. Girls exposed to the program demonstrated higher self-efficacy, more positive gender attitudes, and greater support for continuing education. Parents and community members also reported more open discussions about gender and a growing awareness of girls' rights and aspirations.

Beyond documenting program outcomes, ICRW has pioneered the measurement of gender norm change itself. Through its research, the organization has advanced conceptual and methodological tools that move beyond simple attitude scales to assess shifts in social expectations, reference groups, and sanctions, the core elements of social norms theory. This includes the

development and application of multi-dimensional gender attitude indices, norm diagnostic tools, and life-course frameworks for measuring how norms evolve across adolescence. These contributions have shaped how global organizations, from UNICEF to UNFPA, conceptualize and measure gender-transformative change in education and beyond.

What is Working?

ICRW's programs demonstrate a thoughtful integration of theory and practice in efforts to address gender norms through education. The approach brings together insights from the social normative framework, which explains how expectations and sanctions sustain inequitable behavior, and from the cognitive-affective model, which highlights how reflection and emotion influence learning. Within this structure, the use of cognitive dissonance, inviting students and teachers to examine contradictions between beliefs and experiences, serves as a key pedagogical strategy. By encouraging reflection on what has been taken for granted, the programs enable participants to consider fairness, empathy, and cooperation as values that can be practiced in daily life.

Another important feature of ICRW's work is its emphasis on teachers as both learners and facilitators of change. GEMS and UMANG begin from the recognition that teachers themselves are shaped by social norms around gender and power. Capacity-building therefore focuses first on reflection, allowing teachers to examine their own assumptions and experiences before

introducing participatory tools for classroom use. This process encourages teachers to experiment with non-violent discipline and more inclusive forms of classroom dialogue. As they integrate these practices, teachers begin to model new relational patterns for their students and colleagues.

These ideas are put into practice through interactive lessons, as the Group Education Activities (GEAs) provide the main pedagogical structure for student engagement. These sessions use discussion, role-play, and storytelling to prompt dialogue about gender relations, respect, and cooperation. Learning is cumulative and experiential, giving students repeated opportunities to practice collaboration and empathy. School-wide activities and student-led events using simple games and activities, such as snake and ladder game, reinforce these messages and begin to shift the informal culture of schools toward greater inclusivity and mutual respect.

Also central to ICRW's approach is that both GEMS and UMANG extend beyond the classroom to engage families, communities, and local institutions. Parent meetings, community theater, and collaboration with Village Child Protection Committees, Panchayati Raj Institutions, and School Management Committees help to create continuity between what is learned at school and what is reinforced at home. These efforts contribute to a more supportive environment for adolescent girls and boys and link school-based learning with broader processes of community awareness.

Finally, ICRW’s research and evaluation work strengthens this practice base. As both an implementing and a research organization, it has advanced approaches for assessing gender norm change, developing tools that capture shifts in attitudes, expectations, and reference groups. Evaluations of GEMS and UMANG have documented positive changes in gender-equitable attitudes, self-

efficacy, and teacher–student relationships, while also identifying the importance of sustained engagement for lasting impact. The adaptation of GEMS in Bangladesh and Vietnam provides evidence of the model’s flexibility across diverse contexts and its potential relevance for other education systems seeking to integrate gender-transformative approaches.

