

Breakthrough — The Gender Curriculum That Odisha's Schools Are Now Teaching

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Women Empowerment

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From 2013 to 2017, researchers from J-PAL (Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab) partnered with Breakthrough and the Government of Haryana to answer a specific question: can a school-based curriculum actually change adolescents' gender attitudes, aspirations, and behaviours?

The programme was Taaron ki Toli — a series of interactive classroom discussions over two and a half academic years in 150 government schools, targeting students between 11 and 15 years old. The finding: yes. The curriculum produced more gender-progressive attitudes and gender-equitable behaviours among participating adolescents. Not marginally. Measurably, verifiably, with a randomised control group for comparison.

This was the beginning of the government adoption story. Once the RCT results were published, Punjab's state government deployed the curriculum across all 6,250 public schools, reaching over 334,000 adolescents. Odisha's government signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Breakthrough and J-PAL for integration of the same curriculum into government schools statewide. Breakthrough's 2.3 million adolescents reached directly and through government partnerships is the cumulative result of this evidence-to-policy pathway.

Who They Are

Breakthrough Trust is a human rights organisation focused on making violence and discrimination against women and girls unacceptable. Founded by Mallika Dutt — an attorney and human rights advocate who was working in social justice at the Ford Foundation when she conceived the organisation — Breakthrough changes gender norms by building the leadership of adolescents and communities, using media campaigns, the arts, popular culture, and school-based education to build a more equal world.

Their theory of change is grounded in a specific observation: gender-based violence is not primarily a legal or economic problem. It is a norm problem. Norms that make violence acceptable, that restrict girls' education and mobility, that define masculinity as control — these are learned in childhood and reinforced in adolescence.

Interventions that reach adolescents with counter-normative content at the right developmental moment can shift trajectories that would otherwise calcify into lifelong gender attitudes.

The Punjab Scale-Up: All 6,250 Schools

In July 2022, the Breakthrough curriculum was rolled out across all 6,250 state-run schools in Punjab. More than 12,000 government school teachers received training. The curriculum was embedded in the state's teacher training model with government master trainers, and integrated into official curricula and textbooks for English, Wellbeing, Life, and Social Studies. The Former Principal Secretary of Punjab's Department of School Education declared at the launch that gender sensitisation throughout Punjab would bring about a "ripple effect" as the curriculum shifts gender norms and behaviours among students who will "grow to shape the fabric of our state."

This is the institutional shift that distinguishes Breakthrough from awareness campaigns: the curriculum is no longer Breakthrough's programme delivered in

schools. It is Punjab's curriculum, taught by Punjab's teachers, assessed by Punjab's examination system. Breakthrough created the content and built the capacity. The government owns the delivery.

The Odisha MOU

Breakthrough and J-PAL secured a tripartite MOU with the Government of Odisha for integration of the gender equality curriculum within Odisha's state education system and roll-out to all public schools. The curricula to be integrated with Social Studies were developed, and training of master trainers and teachers was in progress with curriculum roll-out expected from 2024.

This makes Breakthrough directly relevant to every NGO in Odisha working on gender, education, or adolescent programming. The same curriculum framework that will be delivered to Odisha's government school students is available for NGOs to understand, support, and complement through their own community programming. Gender norm change at the school level and gender norm change at the household and community level need each other — one creates the awareness; the other builds the practice.

The Media Campaigns: Tens of Millions Reached

Alongside school-based programming, Breakthrough runs media campaigns that reach tens of millions of people — producing documented influence on cultural norms, including a documented increase in the age at which girls are married in areas where the campaigns ran. The campaigns use film, theatre, social media, and popular culture — recognising that gender norms are reproduced in entertainment and culture and must be challenged there as well as in classrooms.

Working across four states, 11 districts, and 733 Gram Panchayats, Breakthrough has reached over 700,000 adolescents and communities directly through grassroots programming. Their systems-change scale-up operates in two states across 53 districts and 56,000 schools.

What This Means for Odisha NGOs

Any Odisha NGO working on girls' education, child marriage prevention, GBV response, adolescent health, or women's empowerment needs to understand the Breakthrough curriculum that is entering government schools. The curriculum creates a generation of adolescents who have been formally exposed to gender-progressive content — community programmes that build on this exposure, rather than starting from zero, will be more effective.

Contact and Further Reading

Website: inbreakthrough.org | **Contact:** New Delhi headquarters; also Lucknow and Secunderabad offices

Key evidence:

- J-PAL Case Study: *Interactive Curriculum to Reshape Gender Norms* — documents the Haryana RCT and Punjab/Odisha scale-up
- Global Innovation Fund: Breakthrough profile — Punjab 6,250 schools, Odisha MOU, tripartite government partnership
- Breakthrough website: inbreakthrough.org — 2.3 million adolescents reached, current programme scale
- Skoll Foundation profile: media campaigns reaching tens of millions, child marriage age impact

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