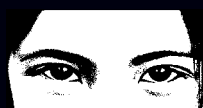


India:

How Kabaddi transforms girls' lives

Excerpts from our magazine published in September 2022



Terre des hommes

Helping children worldwide.



Paulami De Sarkar
Head of the protection
programme in India

Fighting for each girl's rights in India

Growing up in India, I faced a lot of difficulties because I was a girl. Boys are associated with play from birth while girls have to learn how to cook. I saw my male friends making choices very easily while I had to fight for everything. Being a woman in India is my primary motivation to fight for the rights of every woman to be independent.

Kabaddi is a very popular sport in the country. Our project integrates this sport and is close to my heart because it's an excellent tool to achieve equality. It gives girls strength and freedom. Many of them are unfortunately denied these liberties. They only aspire to find a husband, sometimes forced to marry when under the legal age. West Bengal, where Terre des hommes has been present since 2008, is the state in India with the highest number of child marriages. In Malda, Berhampur and Siliguri, the three towns where the project is based, the exposure of young girls to human trafficking or forced marriages is very high.

With Kabaddi, the girls discover the strength of a team. After the game, there is always a reflection exercise where they try to identify how the moves they made help them work as a team and defend themselves together. They gain confidence and manage to change attitudes in the community. These girls serve as role models for other girls. Before, they had no aspirations. Now they know what they want and make their own choices.

*«They gain confidence
and manage to change
attitudes in the community.»*

The strength of this project is that it raises awareness about gender issues and the protection of girls. Boys and families are also invited to meetings where rights and equality are discussed. Sport is an addition. We did not intend to take the girls to professionalism, but some talented players have been selected for competitions.

I invite you to discover how Terre des hommes uses Kabaddi, this incredible sport which is all about freedom from constraints. In the main article, you will see how this sport is helping to transform the destiny of young girls in West Bengal. They now have a new idea: to decide for themselves what their life is going to be.

Paulami De Sarkar



India: In the footsteps of the girls that play Kabaddi

In March 2022, a team of young girls supported by Terre des hommes met in Calcutta to compete in a Kabaddi tournament. Traditionally reserved for men, the practice of this popular sport in India is a way for girls to emancipate themselves and strengthen their self-confidence in a social context that is very unfavourable to them. This is the story of a sporting adventure and a quest for independence.

«The most important rule of Kabaddi is freedom, which must be maintained at all costs.» Soma Das, Kabaddi project manager for Terre des hommes (Tdh), knows her mission. The girls she accompanies must become free. On the field, but above all, off it. And if the path to reach the objective is long and tortuous, great progress has already been made. You only have to watch the girls get off the train in Calcutta one by one: determined but joyful looks, smiles on their lips, joking, laughing, and getting livelier. They arrive from Malda, Siliguri or Berhampur, where they live, to participate in the Kabaddi league. Belonging to communities that have migrated from rural areas so as to be closer to the big cities, they are not really used to travelling. For some of them, this is the first time they have set foot outside their neighbourhood. Naturally, their eyes are wide open and they take in every detail of this novelty. «Those who had experience of the first tournaments helped the others,» explains Paulami de Sakar, head of the protection programme in India. This is one of the strengths of Kabaddi and of this project initiated by Tdh with Praajak, its partner in India, together with the government of West Bengal and the local authorities: to encourage the girls to feel strong collectively, to help each other and to create links to understand that it is easier to defend oneself with others. Kabaddi is a very popular sport in India and has two major advantages: its accessibility and its



«The most important rule of Kabaddi is freedom, which must be maintained at all costs.»

simplicity, as Soma explains: «It doesn't require any equipment or a large field, as a space of 3.5 m by 2.5 m is sufficient.»

Noise and emotion at the competition

In Calcutta, the audience has come in large numbers for the competition and there is a buzz during the match. In Hindi, Kabaddi means «hold your breath». It is easy to understand why this name was given to a sport where every player and spectator holds his or her breath: the confrontations are intense and the tension of the match is felt, exacerbated by the shouts of the

audience but especially of the players, ready to do anything to encourage their team and win the game. The girls compete in teams of seven and use their wits, flexibility, physical strength and tactical discipline. Each game session lasts 30 seconds, during which a team sends one of its members, the «raider», into the opposing camp. This person must manage to hit at least one opponent and return to her camp without being caught, otherwise she is eliminated. And if she manages to hit an opponent, she takes her out of the game and «resurrects» one of her friends. The team with the fewest

40%

of girls in West Bengal are subject to child marriage

1404

girls were involved in the Kabaddi project

142

teenagers were trained to facilitate gender sessions

< Punam (left), 12, and Kashmira (right), 16, two players on their way to participate in the Kabaddi league - a first in Calcutta for these girls from a small village.



©Tuhir R. Roy

^ **The first big challenge for our on-site teams is to gain the trust of parents to let their daughters play Kabaddi and participate in our gender sessions.**

number of women eliminated at the end of the game wins the match. After the tournament, the girls are congratulated by government officials, champions of the sport and members of the national federation. Paulami is happy to see these tributes. *«It means a lot to the girls, but especially to their parents: they are even more encouraged to entrust them to us, thus generating a positive repercussion in the community.»*

Convincing parents, the first big challenge

This was one of the major challenges at the start of the project: convincing families that teenage girls have the right to play Kabaddi and attend gender sessions. Normally they are restricted to the family home. When they go out, it is to go shopping or fetch water,

sometimes far away. *«Our social workers did a lot of field work to gain the trust of the families,»* explains Deep Purkayastha, director of Praajak. The challenges were many. The first was to get permission for the girls to leave the house, especially in sportswear when they are not normally allowed to wear shorts. The second was to get them to leave their neighbourhood. *«Some people said to the girls: ‘You are going to Calcutta with these people? But they will sell you’,»* says Soma. Tdh had to show that the aim of the project was not to use but to help the girls. This reaction was to be expected in a context where young girls are vulnerable to human trafficking. But once this hurdle was overcome, Soma says they had to deal with the negative reactions of parents after the first modules. *«The*

children heard: ‘What are you saying? Sex and gender? Wow, you’ve learned so much and now you’re trying to control me!’ But since the first Kabaddi league, things have changed.» It must be said that parents quickly grasped the issue when a decisive argument was put forward: the possibility that girls could find a job if they perform in Kabaddi, as Deep summarises: *«Thanks to the certifications of the Kabaddi federation, they can enter law enforcement bodies. This could be the police, industrial security, airports, or borders, but they could also become coaches by joining the federation. So it is a chance for the parents if their daughter can find a job.»*

The future is a concern for families. In these very poor communities, the question of work is crucial. The young girls are destined to be married off quickly to relieve the family finances. The young men, no more motivated by the idea of an early marriage, must also accept their parents’ decision and leave school to support their new home. And the story repeats itself, generation after generation. The men usually work in factories or as day labourers. They may also have small businesses such as fast food or fruit selling, while the women, when allowed to work, are employed

Kabaddi players during their training: team spirit is a life skill they learn there. v



©Tuhir R. Roy



^ Kashmirira with the trophy that her team won in the Kabaddi league for the under 18 category.

as maids in private homes or in medical settings. These communities are often located in unsanitary areas where public facilities are scarce. Many have taken up government land around the railways and their makeshift housing is not weatherproof. Not to mention the incessant din: a deafening noise caused by the passing trains. *«We're not afraid, we're used to it,»* say children and parents, as the metal walls tremble dangerously at regular intervals.

However, this resilience does not lead to resignation. The young girls, encouraged by what they learn from the Tdh facilitators, want to fight. Deep cites an event that illustrates this fierce will to resist: *«The girls have launched petitions to ensure better waste disposal and water supply conditions. Success was achieved in two cities. Their self-confidence has grown and they are able to galvanise the community and present their grievances to local administrations.»* This change in behaviour has been very rapid, despite Covid-19 restrictions and periods of forced shutdown during heavy monsoon rains. Despite all the headwinds, the girls found slots to meet and practice, holding on tightly to their playground.

Role models for other girls

Gradually, parents are not only accepting these changes but are proud of them, as Sulekha, the mother of 16-year-old Kashmirira who participates in the Kabaddi project in Malda, points out: *«I want my daughter to be an educated and independent person.»* The father testifies to Kashmirira's metamorphosis: *«Earlier she was very quiet but now she has become the most talkative person in the house.»* The main person concerned is aware of her

evolution. She already knows how to react if her parents decide to force her into marriage: *«I will stop eating, threaten to leave the house and show my angry face.»* Kashmirira wants to live her life as she sees fit because she knows that her future is being decided now. *«If I get married without a job, I will be worthless. If I have a job, I will contribute to the family as much as my husband does, so I will have the same rights to express myself as he does.»*



«If I have a job, I will contribute to the family as much as my husband does, so I will have the same rights to express myself as he does.»

Kashmirira, 16 years old

A message she also wants to convey to other young girls. *«I want to tell them:*

Involving boys too

Although boys do not take part in our project's Kabaddi training, more than 900 of them participated in sessions on the gender thematic. They became aware of inequalities and privileges, but they also learned to fight against the stereotypes of which they may be victims. Soma, the project leader, reveals that *«boys sometimes receive negative comments in their community when they enjoy household activities such as cooking or cleaning: they are then accused of being a girl or doing a woman's job.»*

The same applies to sexual abuse, which is difficult to report. Soma cites the example of a teenager followed by Tdh. *«His grandfather used to touch him inappropriately, so he understood when he attended the module that he was being sexually abused. He talked about this with the facilitators and protested against his grandfather. So he was able to solve the problem.»*



'If you have any problem, come and talk to me and we will find a solution together. I want to help disadvantaged girls like me, to make sure that no girl is tortured or forced into marriage like my mother was. They don't have to suffer.'

Kashmira feels so strong today because of the lessons she learned at Kabaddi and in the gender sessions. She says she is also inspired by the story of a playmate, Hasina, which she finds «*amazing*». Hasina escaped marriage at the age of 16 by joining the Kabaddi team. Since then, she has been an icon for many teenage girls in her community as she has been selected at state level and is looking forward to a professional future in the sport. «*On the field, a mysterious power automatically enters me and I really feel stronger inside,*» Hasina reveals with pride. This strength reflects on others, like Kashmira. When she goes out on the field to give advice, her new status impresses the younger players. Because that is what it is all about



^
Kashmira (left) interacts regularly with Hasina (right). Hasina avoided marriage as a teenager and is now committed to ensuring that other girls have the same fate.

now: passing on. Tdh needs to leave a solid foundation after its passage so that this transformation will stand the test of time and become a new norm in the community. Deep warns: «*If this system collapses, things can quickly go back to where they were.*» This is an unthinkable outcome for the more than 1400 girls who got their start

through the Kabaddi springboard. Whether they left Calcutta and the Kabaddi league with or without a medal was of little importance: for each of them, the journey was a further step in their quest for freedom and independence.

Marc Nouaux

When Kabaddi reveals a champion... of athletics!

Punam, 12 years old, lives in Malda. During her first training sessions at Kabaddi, she stood out because she is a fast runner. She was then directed to athletics, where her coach Ashit Pal had nothing but praise for her: «*There is no faster runner for 600 metres than Punam in her age group in the whole of Malda district.*» Now he hopes she will pass the Sports Authority of India's selection test so that she can benefit from state-of-the-art training. In the meantime, Punam is not forgetting the Kabaddi as she still participates in sessions with her classmates. She says it has become essential for her balance. «*Alone, it is not easy to defeat someone. It's always good to play with friends.*» Paulami, the head of the child protection programme in India, believes that this example illustrates the springboard that Kabaddi represents: «*It gives girls exposure to sport in general. If they play well, they are spotted and can be selected for other sports.*»



Bandana Mandal, animator

Bandana Mandal is an animator and has been working on a daily basis since 2019 in several cities in West Bengal as part of the Kabaddi project run by Terre des hommes (Tdh). She describes the situation of the young girls she follows and the risks they face. In a touching and sincere testimony, she also reveals how she herself has achieved personal transformation and emancipation through this mission.



«The relationship between women and sport was ambivalent: the playing field was a place of peace but also of harassment, fear, or tension. But now it is above all a place of freedom.»

What is the general situation of the adolescent girls with whom Terre des hommes works?

The girls tend to have a migrant background and often live in poor housing. Their parents move around a lot, every five to seven years. When I started interacting with them, I quickly identified their lack of autonomy. Some had never been out of their homes or to school and had no idea how to maintain their health and hygiene. They needed support to understand these crucial things.

Are these girls at risk of dangerous migration or human trafficking?

They are prey. They are offered work, they are told they will be well paid, but they are ultimately trafficked or taken to a place from which they can never return. Some don't even have the capacity to recognise that they are victims. There are some who voluntarily go to the traffickers in the hope of a better future, without realising what is really waiting for them. They don't know how to distinguish between a job opportunity and a trap.

How do they relate to sport in general?

Since they cannot leave their homes, playing Kabaddi is like conquering Mount Everest. So initially they felt ashamed to play. Imagine conquering Everest and receiving sexual harassment or bitter words as a reward. The relationship between women and sport was ambivalent: the playing field was a place of peace but also of harassment, fear, or tension. But now it is above all a place of freedom.

Why is the Kabaddi decisive for this project?

Building trust, collaboration, communication, managing emotions, accountability, creative thinking... These life lessons learned on the job have an impact on their daily lives. There is a saying: when you want to make macro changes, you start by making micro changes. The Kabaddi acts as a stepping stone in a larger scheme.

In concrete terms, what is your role on a daily basis?

I go from door to door and talk to families. I have one-on-one interactions with children, help them play Kabaddi, hold

meetings with community members and facilitate sessions on gender issues. These sessions have a practical impact on my life because before I teach certain values, I already try to implement them in my own life.

What motivated you to choose this work?

With the society and family background I come from, I never thought I would ever get this far. I used to think that I was stuck, that I wouldn't get my liberty because I was a woman and that I would be under the societal pressure to marry no matter what. So the opportunity to show who I am, to be available for an organisation like this, was important for me. Through my own development, I had the chance to help others develop. As long as you can give, people can take from you too. And it goes both ways: the more I give, the more I can take. And the more I can take, the more I can give back.

Is there a particular story that symbolises your work?

At a session on gender where I was only with boys, some of them laughed at me, wondering what I could teach them because I was a young woman. Later I received phone calls and one boy asked me: «I have a friend whose period has stopped, what can I do to help her?» It's not an extraordinary example but compared to the original situation, it's a touching progress.

What positive changes are noticeable in everyday life?

First of all, many gender biases have been broken. The revolutionary idea that girls have the right to play has been catalysed by Kabaddi. Secondly, many more parents trust their daughters to leave the house alone. When children in turn try to communicate their thoughts to their parents, they express themselves better. This helps parents understand their children, it's a gain for everyone. Finally, when boys help with household chores, mothers realise that it is not only the children who benefit from the sessions, but the whole family.

What are your wishes for the children you work with?

Today they are sharing their stories and their dreams with me, they are becoming sensitive to gender issues, growing up. My wish for them is to become pillars and foundations for society to stand on. I want them to have such strong foundations that they can help other weaker foundations to become stronger.

Interview conducted by Marc Nouaux

The girls learn skills during the training that they can apply to their own lives.





How you can help

By making a donation, you will contribute to our children's aid projects worldwide.

Here's how you can support us:

By online bank transfer: **CH58 0076 7000 R047 0535 0**

At a post office in Switzerland

Via www.tdh.ch/donate

With the following amounts of money, we can, for example:

30 EUR

inform 5 adolescents on the risks of migration, on the topic of gender and sexuality

60 EUR

support a life skill training for 5 girls and boys living in urban slums

90 EUR

coach a girl in Kabaddi for empowerment for a year



Writing and realisation

Resp. editor: Joakim Löb
Coordination: Tatjana Aebli
Writing: Marc Nouaux
Design and layout: Maude Bernardoni
Reporting in India realised with the support of Paulami De Sarkar and Deepali Savvasachi.

Supported by:



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
Confederazione Svizzera
Confederaziun svizra

Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC

Certified by:



Terre des hommes
Helping children worldwide.

Siège | Hauptsitz | Sede | Headquarters
Av. Montchoisi 15, CH-1006 Lausanne
T +41 58 611 06 66, e-mail: info@tdh.ch
www.tdh.ch, CCP: 10-11504-8