

Gender-Responsive Education in Tribal Schools — What Odisha Is Piloting and What NGOs Can Do

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The Breakthrough gender equity curriculum — based on the "Mann Deshi" model developed with J-PAL researchers — is an interactive, discussion-based curriculum that challenges gender norms through scenario-based learning, role play, and peer discussion. It does not lecture students about gender equality; it creates structured spaces where students examine real scenarios from their own lives and communities and discuss whether those scenarios are fair, why they happen, and what alternatives might look like.

The Punjab evidence, from a randomised controlled trial with 6,250 schools, demonstrated significant changes in students' gender attitudes and a measurable increase in girls' agency — their sense of having options and the confidence to exercise them. The J-PAL case study describes the outcomes as stronger life skills including increased agency, more equitable gender norms, and stronger socio-emotional support networks.

The Odisha adaptation took the Punjab curriculum and contextualised it for Odisha's diverse student population — including the tribal and PVTG communities that constitute nearly 23% of the state's population. The curriculum is being integrated into social studies textbooks, which means it reaches students in regular class time rather than as an add-on programme that competes with the academic schedule.

The global systematic review on girls' education barriers

A 2022 systematic review of 82 experimental and quasi-experimental studies on gender-related barriers to girls' school participation in LMICs found several consistent findings directly relevant to Odisha's tribal context:

- Economic incentives (scholarships, conditional cash transfers) consistently improve girls' enrolment and attendance, particularly when combined with other interventions

- Safe spaces programmes — creating peer groups where girls can discuss their lives, aspirations, and challenges — produce significant improvements in agency and in ability to delay marriage
- Male engagement — including boys and fathers in gender norm change programmes — produces more durable change than programmes targeting girls alone
- School quality improvements and teacher gender sensitisation are important complements to girl-focused programmes

The tribal girls specificity

A Brookings analysis specifically on tribal girls and multilingual education in India (2023) makes a finding that is important for NGOs working in Odisha's tribal schools: girls are more heavily impacted than boys by inadequate language skills in primary school, because girls' average years of schooling is shorter than boys'. The foundational literacy gap that accumulates in tribal schools creates greater long-term harm for girls, who are more likely to drop out before the gap can be addressed. This finding connects gender-responsive education directly to the foundational learning work in the TaRL Practice Note: ensuring tribal girls have strong foundational literacy is itself a gender equity intervention.

The ScienceDirect systematic review on PVTG girls' education found that beyond socioeconomic barriers, PVTG girls face lack of female teachers, inadequate safety provisions, discrimination at school from students of other communities, and the medium of instruction barrier. These barriers operate in addition to the gender norm barriers that the Breakthrough curriculum addresses — which means the curriculum is necessary but not sufficient for PVTG girls' education.

What Odisha's Government Initiative Does — and Doesn't Cover

The Department of School and Mass Education's 2024 initiative provides:

- A curriculum in social studies textbooks for Classes 6–10
- Teacher training for delivery of the curriculum
- Government funding for materials and training

It does not, by itself, provide:

- Community-level awareness of the curriculum's content and goals
- Engagement with parents and community members who may be resistant to gender norm change discussions in schools
- Additional support for girls at risk of dropout or early marriage while the curriculum is

being implemented

- Specific support for the tribal language contexts where curriculum in Odia is insufficient for student comprehension
- Monitoring of whether trained teachers are actually implementing the curriculum vs. skipping it to cover examination content

These gaps are exactly where NGO facilitation adds value.

The NGO's Role: Five Practical Activities

Activity 1: Community preparation for the curriculum

The gender equity curriculum will likely generate questions from parents — and in some tribal communities, resistance from community members who view gender norm discussions as inappropriate or threatening to traditional family structures.

NGOs with community relationships can prepare the ground: holding community meetings (ideally with SMC members, panchayat representatives, and respected community leaders) that explain what the curriculum covers, why the government has introduced it, and what parents can expect their children to discuss at home. Framing the curriculum in terms of children's safety and confidence — not as ideology — is generally more accessible for community engagement than framing it as gender equality.

The goal is not to argue against community norms but to create enough understanding that the curriculum is not rejected before it begins, and that children who come home with questions from the curriculum have family members who can engage rather than shut down the conversation.

Activity 2: Safe spaces for girls alongside the school curriculum

The systematic review on girls' education barriers consistently identifies safe spaces — peer groups where girls can talk about their experiences, aspirations, and challenges without the social pressure of mixed-gender school environments — as among the most effective interventions for girls' agency and school retention.

NGOs that facilitate girls' safe space groups — meeting weekly or fortnightly, in community settings, facilitated by a trained female community member — are providing the peer solidarity and reflective discussion space that the school curriculum alone cannot. These groups are particularly important for girls at risk of early marriage: the peer network that knows a girl's situation and can provide support and information is the most accessible form of protection available.

Connection to VLCPCs: Girls who are identified in safe space groups as being at risk of early marriage should have a clear pathway to the VLCPC — the community child protection institution whose role includes preventing child marriage. The safe space and the VLCPC should have an explicit relationship, not operate as separate programme components.

Activity 3: Boys and fathers engagement

The global evidence is consistent: gender norm change that involves only girls is less durable than change that involves the whole community, including men and boys. The Breakthrough curriculum is delivered in mixed-gender classrooms — boys and girls together — which is one of its important design features. NGOs can complement this with community-level engagement specifically with men and adolescent boys:

- Men's discussion groups on gender, fatherhood, and family decision-making — framed around children's wellbeing and family health, not gender equality as an abstract principle
- Sessions with fathers specifically about girls' education — what it means for their daughters' futures, what the curriculum is teaching, why keeping girls in school matters economically and socially

The Breakthrough model in Punjab included community outreach alongside the school curriculum for exactly this reason.

Activity 4: Supporting trained teachers

The consistent finding from gender-responsive pedagogy research is that teachers need ongoing support to implement changed classroom practices after initial training. A teacher who has been trained to ensure equal participation of boys and girls, to use gender-neutral language and examples, and to facilitate discussions of gender norms — but who teaches in a school where none of these practices are normal — needs a supportive peer or mentoring relationship to sustain the change.

NGOs that work in schools where the Breakthrough curriculum is being delivered can play a peer support role for trained teachers: attending classroom sessions as observers (with teacher consent), discussing implementation challenges, sharing what worked in other schools, and creating informal communities of practice among teachers in a cluster who are all navigating the same new curriculum.

Activity 5: Linking curriculum learning to entitlements

Girls who are in Classes 8–10 and who are engaged with gender equity content through the curriculum are particularly well-positioned to understand and assert their own educational and legal entitlements:

- Pre-matric scholarships (see Secondary Dropout Practice Note) that keep them in school
- Legal rights around minimum marriage age (18 for girls under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act)
- Their right to report child marriage cases to the VLCPC or Childline
- Government schemes for girls' education including KGBV residential schools

NGO facilitation that connects the curriculum's gender norm content to specific, actionable information about entitlements converts attitude change into behaviour change. A girl who knows she has the right to stay in school and knows how to access a scholarship to support that is more likely to exercise that right than one whose attitude has changed but whose knowledge of options has not.

The Specific Challenge for Tribal Schools

Odisha's gender equity curriculum is delivered in Odia. For students in tribal schools who are most comfortable in tribal languages, this creates the same language barrier as every other curriculum delivered in Odia — the students engaging with the gender norm discussions are doing so in a second language, which reduces both comprehension and the depth of authentic discussion that makes the curriculum effective.

Practical adaptations:

- Ensure that in tribal-language communities, a community member who speaks both the tribal language and Odia is present during curriculum sessions as a language bridge — not to translate mechanically, but to enable genuine discussion in the language students think in
 - Where possible, advocate with the DSME for tribal language adaptations of key curriculum scenarios — the situations described in the curriculum should resonate with students' actual life contexts, not with urban Odia-speaking contexts
 - In community safe spaces, use the tribal language entirely — this is where the deepest discussion will happen
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Measuring Change

Gender attitude and behaviour change is slow and cannot be reliably measured in a single academic year. The metrics that matter over a two-to-three-year period:

- Proportion of girls in Classes 8–10 who remain enrolled (tracked against school records)
- Child marriage cases identified and intervened in through VLCPC or NGO response —

per year, in communities with safe space groups vs. without

- Self-reported agency scores from girls in safe space groups (using simple questions about decision-making and confidence) — at programme start and annually
- Teacher self-assessment of curriculum implementation — are they delivering all sessions or skipping them?

These are not easily comparable to standard programme indicators. They are the right things to measure.

Related Knowledge Commons content: Education Sector Primer (Sector 04) · Practice Note: Secondary School Dropout Prevention · Practice Note: VLCPC Activation — child marriage as a dropout cause · Practice Note: Entitlements Mapping — scholarship access for girls

Evidence Grade: A/B — The J-PAL Punjab RCT evidence on the Breakthrough curriculum is Grade A. The systematic review on gender barriers to girls' education (PMC 2022, 82 studies) is Grade B. Last reviewed: April 2026.

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