

## Empowering Adolescents in India The Better Life Options Program

In 1987, the Centre for Development and Population Activities (CEDPA) established the Better Life Options Program in India to address the numerous concerns and needs in an adolescent's life. The program seeks to break gender stereotypes and change the gender balance between boys and girls; develop life skills; and build self-esteem, confidence and feelings of self worth in young people.

### The Model

The Better Life Options Program (BLP) is based on an empowerment model and combines elements of education, family life education, life skills, vocational training, health services and character development.

The program is based on CEDPA's Better Life Options and Opportunities Model (BLOOM), which focuses on an integrated and holistic approach to adolescent development. At the center of the model is the goal of developing a cadre of empowered adolescents—educated, healthy, economically empowered and capable of making autonomous decisions in life. This is achieved through an enabling environment that provides adolescents with options to make choices and take advantage of opportunities that can translate into action for their well-being.

It includes a non-formal education curriculum that is central to the program. Program facilitators conduct sessions using two training manuals: *Choose a Future! Issues and Options for Adolescent Girls in India* and *Choose a Future! Issues and Options for Adolescent Boys in India*, which have been adapted for India and are currently available in both English and Hindi. These manuals follow an experiential learning and participatory training approach and have been used widely by non-governmental organizations and government agencies throughout India.

The program lays a strong emphasis on capacity building of local organizations, developing partnerships and networks, and building advocacy. It also ensures the buy-in of various gatekeepers and stakeholders of the community to enable the program to have a lasting impact and create an environment conducive to realizing behavioral changes in adolescents.

### Program Profile

CEDPA/India initiated the Better Life Options Program for girls in 1987 based on the belief that early intervention would be most effective in improving their long-term status and empowering them to later take their place as full and equal partners with men in Indian society.

It has included a mix of approaches depending on the contextual circumstances in the implementing area. These include:

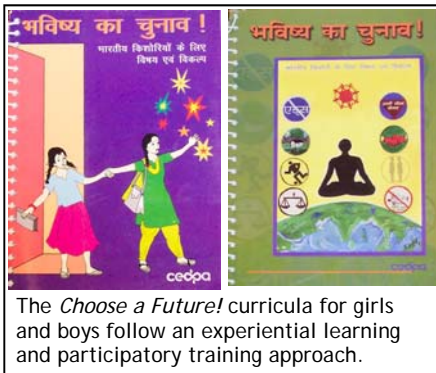
- **Long-term or Integrated approach**, in which the program is integrated into other youth programs such as vocational training classes, remedial tutoring classes, recreational clubs and gym activities.



Girls in India learn electrical repair through the Better Life Options Program.

- **Short-term or camp approach**, in which adolescents are intensively trained in camps of short duration.
- **School approach**, in which the training is delivered in the classroom.

While working with girls, CEDPA realized that women's empowerment and equality resided not just in the hands of women but required male support and behavior change as well. Young women and girls in our program would often remark that "you have changed my life, now please change the thinking of my future husband." Community members and boys themselves also expressed the need for a similar gender program for adolescent boys.



The *Choose a Future!* curricula for girls and boys follow an experiential learning and participatory training approach.

The launch of CEDPA/India's Better Life Options Program for adolescent boys in 2001 represented a shift in thinking at CEDPA and its partner organizations. We evolved from working exclusively with women, to working with men and boys in order to create an empowering environment for women and girls, to addressing the special needs and issues of adolescent boys themselves.

CEDPA's Better Life Options Program for girls and boys has evolved in other ways over time. In 1999, the 'BLOOM Adolescent Network' was established to work towards building the capacity and providing technical assistance to organizations working with or interested in working with adolescents. In 2001, CEDPA included an adolescent-friendly health services component into BLP. In 2004, the *Choose a Future!* curriculum for girls was updated, with a special focus on Muslim girls and was subsequently implemented in Muslim-majority communities.

### Program Outcomes

Since 1987, CEDPA has reached a total of 107,384 adolescent girls and 60,316 adolescent boys through 3,000 trained program personnel working with over 260 NGOs across 11 states.

Beyond the numbers, a 2001 impact study showed that adolescent girls who completed the program were more likely than their peers to be literate, to have completed secondary education, to be employed and to have learned a vocational skill. In addition, alumni were more likely to make autonomous decisions about their own movement, spending what they earned and deciding when to marry. An important behavioral outcome of the program was that young married women discussed family planning with their husbands and were significantly more likely to use contraceptives than a control group.