Site Visit Report to Sakhi for Girls’ Education, Mumbai

This is an official evaluative site visit report for Sakhi for Girls’ Education located in Mulund (W), Mumbai, Maharashtra. Sakhi, stewarded by Sameer Saptarshi and Ashley Goyal, has been supported by Asha for Education, Berkeley, since the fall of 2018.

As written on their website, the word “sakhi” in Hindi refers to a female friend who provides support and guidance. Sakhi for Girls’ Education was founded in 2008 by Aarti Naik, a resident of the Mulund slums, with the aim of providing a safe learning space for girls living in the slums to build their confidence and enthusiasm for education. Aarti had failed her 10th standard exams and dropped out of school as a young girl, which led her to realize that if she had the proper support and confidence to understand what was going on in school, she would have continued pursuing an education. As a result of her passion and inspiration to drive change in her community, she started Sakhi. Eleven years ago, the Mulund community saw many girls dropping out of school. Since then, no student who has worked with Sakhi has dropped out.

Sakhi serves as an after-school center that provides supplemental support to girls who are already enrolled in formal schooling. The main objective is to provide basic language and math skills, in addition to other basic life skills, to each girl through a variety of activities. The organization serves 75 beneficiaries from the local community in Mulund, all girls ranging from LKG to 10th standard. The center operates every day of the week, providing a continuously accessible community space for the Mulund girls. Many of their mothers are domestic workers, and their fathers are often autorickshaw drivers; both professions are not permanent jobs, so income is unstable based on daily earnings. Through this organization, Ms. Naik aims to drive social change in the Mulund slum community by empowering young girls to excel in school and continue their pursuit of an education, while also encouraging the community to support and motivate girls in their endeavors without regard to traditional gender roles.

Visit Summary
The main girls’ learning center is one room, located near the entrance to the Mulund slum community. Here, Sakhi’s 9 teachers hold sessions for batches 1 and 2 every day of the week. Batch 1 consists of roughly 18-20 girls who attend public school, which runs from 10:30AM-4:30PM each day; their session at Sakhi is from 5:30-6:45. Batches 2 and 3 are significantly larger, consisting of roughly 50-60 students total, whose session runs from 6:45-8:30. Batch 3’s session is held in a
community hall nearby, which also serves other purposes such as a venue for weddings. The student to teacher ratio is nearly 1:1 in batch 1 due to the small size of the group, but is still relatively small (at most 1:5) for batches 2 and 3. Two days of the week are dedicated to language skills, two days to math, and the remaining days of the week to arts and crafts or other special activities.

There are currently 9 teachers for 75 students, compared to just 3 teachers for 95 students last year. This increase in teaching staff was facilitated by Asha Berkeley’s donation last year. Ms. Naik hires teachers who have completed 12th grade at minimum (though most hold university degrees) and demonstrate a sincere passion for girls’ education. Each teacher is given the same salary and receives regular trainings. Ms. Naik is assisted by two program coordinators as well.

The main learning space, which is roughly 10 feet by 10 feet in total area.

The community hall which is used as a secondary learning space.
Each session begins with prayer and meditation, followed by time allotted for a meal. Ms. Naik noticed that girls tend to eat dinner rather late, around 10PM, resulting in a long gap between lunch and their next meal. Although she tried to request the girls' mothers to send them with meals, this proved to be logistically infeasible for the families. Thus, she decided to incorporate a nutritional aspect to her daily program, consisting of a simple hot meal. After the meal, the students each sit with their assigned teacher to complete the lesson scheduled for the day.

One of the most unique aspects of Sakhi’s strategy is that an individualized study plan is designed for each girl in the program. When a girl joins Sakhi, she is administered a pre-test in order to assess her grasp of basic language and math skills. Based on her existing capabilities, her teacher designs a quarterly, monthly, and daily lesson plan. These are reviewed daily by the program coordinator, who not only gives her own feedback but also solicits input from the students regarding the quality of the lesson. The teacher also writes an encouraging note to each student. By regularly evaluating student progress, the teacher is able to get a sense of each student’s learning speeds and capacities and plan accordingly.

A sample pre-test administered to a new student to gauge her basic language and math skills, and an example of the daily plan created for each student. This is closely monitored by one of the two program coordinators who work under Ms. Naik.

Sakhi conducts outreach to the community through their book bank program. Every week, a group of 7 adolescent reading leaders -- who are some of the older students in Sakhi -- distribute books to 400 girls (including the 75 Sakhi beneficiaries) in the Mulund community. Then, they collect them back and redistribute the next week. Through this, Sakhi is able to both increase access to reading material, help girls maintain their interest in reading, and raise awareness of their activities.
Every student is also given a pocket diary each week that they are able to freely decorate during an arts and crafts session, providing an outlet for their creativity. They are given a weekly category, on the basis of which they are supposed to write a list of related words. This activity is meant to expand the girls’ vocabularies and general knowledge as they expose themselves to the English names of common objects they encounter on a daily basis. The student with the “best” diary is given a small prize each week, which is an additional source of motivation.

An example pocket diary.

Jolly Phonics, a teaching method developed in the United Kingdom, is used at Sakhi to teach basic language skills. Sounds and letters are grouped together in conjunction with pictures and sounds to help the students memorize and pronounce words correctly. The teachers receive regular lessons from a UK-based trainer on how to utilize Jolly Phonics effectively. Sakhi teachers also use a variety of Teaching & Learning Materials (TLM) to make lessons more engaging and exciting for their students. Each teacher is given the liberty to use different methods such as flashcards, games, posters, or other activities to help their students learn better.
Examples of TLM for language and math.

Another one of Sakhi’s unique initiatives is the saving bank project. Each student gives 1-2 rupees to a communal fund when they are able to, and the amount accumulates over time. Since the financial situation of many of these girls is often unstable, they can draw upon this pooled money for any emergency expenditures related to their education. Ms. Naik initiated this activity not only to provide additional financial support for the children, but to also teach them good saving habits that they can use in the future.

Sakhi also holds life skill building sessions for its older students (roughly fifteen girls between the ages of 12 and 18). These events, held during weekends, are intended to provide the girls with an opportunity to learn about values and strategies to deal with personal issues, such as with regard to interpersonal relationships. The sessions take a variety of forms, such as dance therapy or drama activities. Other weekend activities include script-writing skills, outdoor activities, arts and crafts, and festival celebrations.

Over time, the community’s support of Sakhi has greatly increased. All the students are in school; Sakhi conducts individual home visits if they learn a student has been missing school. With the support of their parents and the confidence that Sakhi gives them, the girls continue to be motivated to pursue an education in order to attain their aspirations of becoming a doctor, policewoman, IAS officer, etc. In the future, Ms. Naik hopes to expand Sakhi’s programs to serve the hundreds of girls currently on the waiting list. She firmly wants to maintain the student to teacher ratio, as she believes the individualized support is key to the students’ success. However, with additional financial support, she can hire more teachers to work with more students and open another girls’ learning center. Additionally, 15-20 mothers currently receive vocational training and basic literacy skills through a weekly program held at Sakhi, which started after some of the mothers began expressing interest in receiving an education themselves. Ms. Naik would like to expand this program as well to effect further socioeconomic change.
After visiting Sakhi, I was inspired by the organization’s attention to quality rather than simply quantity. Each of the teachers is very passionate about working at Sakhi, as demonstrated by their efforts in developing their own TLM for their students. Additionally, I was impressed that they create individual study plans for every student, showing their acknowledgement of the fact that every student learns differently and adapting their program to suit individual needs. Moreover, Sakhi is not just providing academic education but is also holistically supporting the girls in multiple aspects of their lives. This is a truly impressive community space and it is clear that they have benefited from Asha Berkeley’s support.

Me with some of the students from Batch 1.