

# Milaan Girl Icon Program Exploratory Study



## Objective

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The Girl Icon Program takes place as girls' transition from adolescence into young adulthood, a critical life stage as post-secondary education, marriage, and employment prospects are considered and questioned. The Girl Icon program aims to support adolescent girls with the necessary tools to follow their aspirations and provides the safe space for girls to practice their newfound skills. This exploratory study assessed the benefits Milaan's Girl Icon Program by comparing beliefs and attitudes of gender norms, leadership skills, and self-positive traits between Girl Icon participants and non-participants!

## Methods

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Adolescent girls were organized into either Girl Icons (GIs) or Girl Icon Alternates (GIAs). GIs were randomly selected participants in the 2016–2018 cohort in Uttar Pradesh. GIAs were finalists for the 2016–2018 cohort; they completed the final in-person interview with Milaan staff but were not admitted into the program. All participants resided in Uttar Pradesh at the time of data collection.

We present summarized results from 43 semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with GIs, GIAs, their parents, and male siblings.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of the IDs was to understand individual beliefs and perceptions around gender norms, decision making responsibilities in the household, adolescent girls' goals and aspirations, and experience with the Girl Icon Program.

## Results

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The Girl Icon Program provided GIs three essential pillars of empowerment and leadership: knowledge of gender norms and inequity, access to mentorship and guidance, and the development of self-positive traits. Compared to GIAs, GIs confidently spoke about the gendered challenges that girls and women experiences in their communities. GIs set goals and aims due to their increased access to mentorship and guidance.. Overall, GIs had increased sense of agency and conviction in their abilities.

### Knowledge of Gender Norms and Inequity

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GIs were able to differentiate between the knowledge acquired at school and the knowledge acquired via Milaan. One GI noted that **“school teachers told us about our rights, but Milaan taught me how to use them.”** Milaan discussed topics “things relevant to society” such as the differences between sex and gender and gender equity. GIs spoke boldly about the lack of gender equity in their homes and communities noting that **“we always use to think that men work so hard and get tired after working the whole day. But we realized that women work harder than men.”** Another commented that **“when I joined Milaan, I wasn't aware of many things like discrimination in our society and the natural and equal rights of women.”** One girl commented that her father believed that everyone should listen to him because he is an elder member of the family, but she believed that both **“husband and wife should be considered as equal and both should have equal rights.”** GIs eagerly shared their newfound understanding of gender vs. sex with their families, particularly their female kin. One GI commented that she “learned about gender(s),and had a discussion about transgender...with [her] didi (sister).”

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<sup>1</sup>This study was independently conducted by Gauthami Penakalapati, MPH and Isha Ray, PhD at UC Berkeley. Milaan provided logistical support during data collection but were not involved in sample selection, data collection, data analysis, or data interpretation and writing.

<sup>2</sup>Empowerment metric surveys and ego-centric surveys were conducted with the GIs and GIAs. The likely similarities between those who were almost selected (GIAs) and those who were actually selected (GIs) means that a small sample size (n=12) is insufficient to assess differences between GIs and GIAs in this report. Rather, this report should be treated as an exploration of key characteristics and outcomes and for preliminary insights into the relationships between these. These results should inform a larger study for formative as well as summative assessments of the GI program.

Milaan’s training informs girls about their rights as they pertain to the dowry system, child marriage, and domestic violence. A GI commented that **“earlier, I wasn’t aware of these things...I got to know how girls are suppressed in their own homes.”** All GIs highlighted how the Girl Icon life skills training broke the silence and stigma around menstruation. Milaan’s programming encouraged girls to “openly” discuss menstruation with family and friends. Another said she became comfortable talking to her father about menstruation. Mothers were nervous and “afraid” at their daughter’s openness to discuss such a taboo topic, but their GI daughters confidently questioned the misinformation and stigma around mensuration.

## Mentorship + Guidance

Milaan staff provided much-needed mentorship and guidance for many of the GIs. Girls commented that Milaan provided the **“guidance which I was craving badly.”** Another commented that **“before joining Milaan, I had no dreams, no aim. Nobody has guided me.** I only used to stay and at home, no one guided me.” GIs named specific Milaan staff members as sources of support because they “understand me well and I am sure that [name of Milaan staff member redacted] will do something to help me out.”

## Self-Positive Traits

GIs talked about themselves as two different selves: one before Milaan and one after Milaan. A GI noted that **“earlier I used to think that being a girl, I can’t do anything. I can’t go out whenever I feel so, but after joining Milaan, I got to understand that even I have rights. Even I can do something for myself and take decisions regarding my life.”** Another said she “started taking [a] stand for myself after joining Milaan” and began to articulate her aspirations to do an BA and MA to her parents.. The GI programming develops and fosters a series of self-positive behaviors that are essential for continued resilience and future leadership.

Self-Positive Traits	
<b>Independent mobility</b>	GIs travel to cities throughout Uttar Pradesh to participate in training, forcing GIs to become more comfortable with traveling “outside” their communities. GIs who were once “scared to go alone” to a nearby towns now had the “confidence to travel alone.” Milaan gave on GI “an opportunity to step out of my home” to attend trainings in Lucknow, Bhopal, and other locations.
<b>Knowledge of resources &amp; rights</b>	GIs were aware of their legal rights and knew of crisis resources. One GI commented that “I can seek police help since I am an adult now and nobody can force marriage on me.” Information and knowledge of resources were shared with family and peers. In addition, GIs proactively sought advice from Milaan staff and school teachers about their education and career oriented next steps.
<b>Leadership</b>	The community action projects and peer groups force GIs to publicly engage with stakeholders, community members, and peers. GIs came to view themselves as role models for other girls in the community. Girls participating in their peer groups “think of becoming like us [GI].” One GI noted that her “influence on people is growing.”
<b>(New) Awareness of gender inequity challenges ahead</b>	<p>The GIs noted how the lack of gender equity prevented them from achieving their goals. Girls commented that they did not want for “only boys to enjoy all the freedoms but girls also should be given equal rights and equal freedoms.” In their communities, girls are “under tremendous pressure;” they fear that they will (have to) get married if they do not focus on their studies yet “aspirations of girls are not given any importance.” Parents restricted girls’ mobility out of fear and security; boys “eve tease” girls who are then “told to cover [their] face and head. Parents “don’t allow girls to step out in such [an] environment.” Girls, in turn, have limited exposure to women who are mobile and independent. Many girls spoke about the prevalence of domestic violence. GIs felt that “women are not allowed to live life according to their own wishes.”</p> <p>Despite the difficulties ahead, girls were motivated to address these challenges. One GI took a career based exam in spite of her parents’ restrictions. Another spoke out against gendered education stating that “they said girls can’t do maths, they should take arts only, but I took maths and I did many works which girls can’t do.” One commented that these “differences can be removed...not letting girls study can be removed, child marriage can also be stopped...and violence can [be] stopped.”</p>

<p><b>Expressing oneself</b></p>	<p>GI addressed their newfound leadership qualities and ability to speak up and to “express” themselves. Many girls commented that they were afraid of talking to people and were unable to “muster courage to speak to big or elderly people or in front of a crowd.” One girl commented that before Milaan, she “wasn’t able to talk confidently in front of others.” But Milaan “takes the hesitation out and teaches how to talk to others.” Being able to express themselves contributed to girls’ self-esteem and ability to vouch for themselves. GIs believed they could “express themselves in a much better way,” helping them become more vocal at school and in front of elders. Since Milaan, one girl started “raising [her] voice and expressing [herself].” A GI commented that “I didn’t use to talk much in class or with teachers. After joining Milaan, I started sharing [my] experiences.”</p>
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Overall, these self-positive behaviors contributed to girls **believing in their own capabilities**. One GI claimed that “I have learned about my rights, and I am capable of doing many things now.” All GIs shared that their confidence increased after joining Milaan; girls felt they could “talk confidently in front of anyone” and “explain what is wrong and what is right. What needs to be done and what should be avoided.” Another GI noted that before Milaan, she “couldn’t talk properly in front of others” but Milaan increased her confidence “tremendously” and she later became the class monitor; now she “can’t believe that I have enacted a play, have sang and danced in front of 50-100” people. GI were empowered to make their own decisions. Two GIs enrolled in college without their parent’s permission, and one has “been choosing [her] own subjects in every class.” These self-positive behaviors facilitated identity formation and capability development.

## Recommendations

The Girl Icon program encourages the development of self-positive traits by educating girls with the knowledge and language of gender norms and inequity and providing access to mentorship and guidance. These necessary skills foster resiliency as adolescent girls continue their personal empowerment journeys into adulthood. The diversity of girls’ backgrounds and experiences makes it challenging to develop one comprehensive empowerment curriculum that works for everyone, but Milaan’s Girl Icon Program is an excellent stepping stone, exposing girls to structural gender challenges and encouraging girls to believe in their own abilities and sense of self.

## Selected recommendations

**Family engagement:** Mothers and elder brothers were key stakeholders in GI success. Though mothers were nervous about their daughters traveling “outside” at the onset of training, they were also hopeful about their daughters’ future by the end of the program. In contrast, fathers were not engaged with their daughter’s lives; but as primary household decision makers, they had to be convinced (by their daughters, wives, and sometimes, sons) to allow their daughters to attend the Girl Icon Program. GIs with elder brothers who were students, unmarried, and close in age to their sisters were their sisters’ primary cheerleaders and allies. These brothers used their household decision making power to promote their sister’s opportunities and well-being. One brother noted “I want to make her [a] computer science engineer because I think that she is capable of becoming one.” Because brothers are influential family members, Milaan should consider organizing training specific to elder brothers to promote their allyship and participation in their sisters’ well-being and success.

**Mentoring:** In addition to Milaan staff providing mentorship and support, pairing GIs with successful local women will provide targeted guidance and mentorship. In addition, GI-alumni are also great resources of support to future GI cohorts, especially.

**Highlighting GI success:** Currently, GIs are publicly celebrated during their Girl Icon graduation ceremony with families, local stakeholders, and government officials. We encourage Milaan to highlight and congratulate GI success throughout the program duration as proof to the GIs, their families, and their communities about the local GI's determination, progress, and advancement. Options can include an advert in newspapers, banners in markets, or award ceremonies in schools or government spaces. Public displays of success could influence family and community to buy-in to the program.

**Interim empowerment programming:** High-level empowerment skills such as agency, authority over strategic life decisions (i.e. age of marriage, choice of groom, continuing education, employment), and critical consciousness are essential to females' life-long empowerment journey. However, GIs are coming from stressful and low-resources environments, and the Girl Icon Program is their first foray into leadership and personal development experiences. Therefore, we recommend that Milaan focus on developing interim empowerment programming such as public speaking, speaking with and negotiating with elders and those with greater authority, speaking with non-kin males, verbal self-defense, and situational safety awareness. These skills are interim because though they are not sufficient, they are necessary intermediary steps to achieving high-level empowerment.

**Monitoring and evaluation:** rigorous baseline, midline, and endline data collection on a variety of outcomes including: empowerment, mental health, well-being measures. Comprehensive data collection will allow Milaan to conduct evaluations. Evaluations such as process evaluations will allow Milaan to identify if programs are being implemented as intended, and impact evaluations will assess program effectiveness.

- Selected indicators/measures include: mobility, public speaking, knowledge of gender norms, comfort with discussing taboo subjects such as menstruation, speaking with elders and those with greater "authority", inter-family conflict management, and negotiation skills

Empowerment is a personal journey, as unique and diverse as individuals themselves. For example, for a rural girl, simply stepping outside of her home without her parents' permission could be an act of rebellion and development of her capabilities. For another who frequently travels outside her community, asking her brothers to help with the household chores is her form of personal growth. In both cases, girls are exercising agency but in difference capacities. We argue that the self-positive traits of independent mobility, knowledge of resources and services, awareness of gender inequity challenges, and ability to express oneself are examples of interim outcomes that support development of resilience, identity development, and empowerment. Milaan's Girl Icon Program provides essential empowerment training for girls who may not otherwise receive this training; the program is an excellent stepping stone, exposing girls to structural gender challenges and encouraging girls to believe in their own abilities and to foster a sense of self.

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