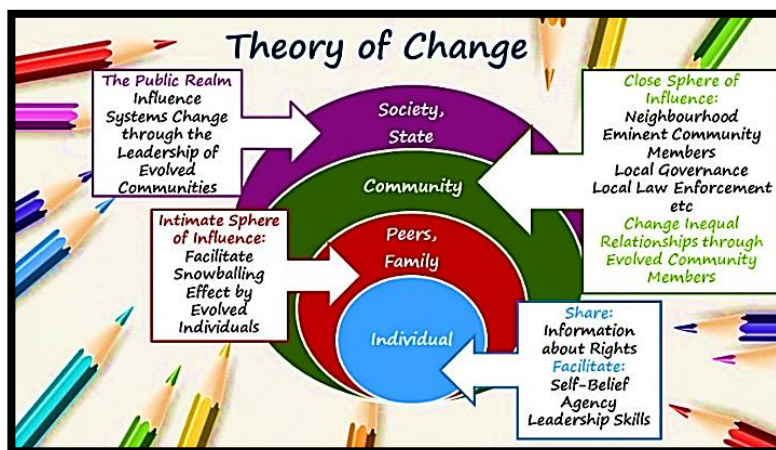




## DIKSHA: Championing Dignity, Equity, and Empowerment

The origin of DIKSHA (Discovering Inner Knowledge and Sexual Health Awareness) can be traced back to 1999 when Paramita Banerjee initiated an experiment supported by a MacArthur Fellowship for Leadership Development. The pilot, based in Kolkata's Kalighat and Wattganj red-light areas, provided a non-intrusive and non-judgmental space for adolescents to discuss issues of gender and sexuality. This groundbreaking initiative formally evolved into DIKSHA, a Public Charitable Trust, in 2002. Today, DIKSHA is committed to fostering a gender-just world where young people, aged 6 to 25, actively challenge hierarchies and inequalities through empowerment and resilience-building initiatives.



### Groundbreaking Interventions in Red-Light Areas

#### Core Focus: Building Safety and Resilience

DIKSHA's hallmark is its direct work in red-light areas (RLAs) – Kalighat (Ward 83), Munsiganj and adjacent slums (Wards 75 and 76), and Sonagachhi (Ward 17). DIKSHA also works in two quasi-red-light areas (QRLA) – Lakar Math (Ward 84), and Tollygunge (Ward 89). All of these are within the Kolkata Municipal Corporation area, West Bengal.

In all these areas, DIKSHA's interventions aim to break FORCED intergenerational reliance on the sex trade – girls and so-called feminised boys as sexual service providers; and boys as bootleggers and drug peddlers who would grow up to be pimps and traffickers. Safe spaces for children during mothers' working hours protect girls from customer abuse and boys from substance abuse. Regular counselling, home visits, and team-building activities foster collaboration and focus among children. Key strategies

include child profiling, successful school enrolment and retention drives, and the empowerment of youth leaders with knowledge and skills about their rights.



A 2019 Violence Mapping exercise conducted with over 200 children from red-light area communities underscores DIKSHA's impact. Findings revealed a significant reduction in extreme verbal, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse cases, from 38% to 16% within a year. This translates to the prevention of approximately 50,000 extreme abuse cases annually, showcasing the transformative power of DIKSHA's model.

The organisation's unique **Community-Based Resource Teams (CBRTs)** comprising evolved and enabled youth leaders play a pivotal role as watchdogs, offering 24/7 crisis intervention and prevention services. A "Protection-through-Participation" strategy facilitates the creation of CBRTs.

### Tackling Trafficking

DIKSHA's initiatives highlight the dual role of red-light areas as both trafficking destinations and sources. The organisation's strategies include:

- ✓ **Educating adolescent girls** on safety in romantic relationships.
- ✓ **Sustained couple counselling** to prevent underage marriages or elopements.
- ✓ **Family counselling** to alleviate pressures that push girls into risky situations.



### Sports for Gender Justice



The **Life Unlimited: Sports for Change** initiative leverages sports to challenge gender norms and empower girls. **DIKSHA supports three football teams in rural Birbhum District in West Bengal** consisting of young women from tribal and scheduled caste families. These players overcome societal bias, economic hardship, and gender stereotypes to excel in a male-dominated sport.

This initiative fosters leadership, teamwork, and confidence, equipping participants to transcend limitations in all aspects of life. DIKSHA's earlier badminton programme for marginalised girls, including those from conservative Muslim families, is currently paused due to funding constraints, but is set to resume, as soon as the DIKSHA Team can generate the funds needed for that.





## Additional Programmes

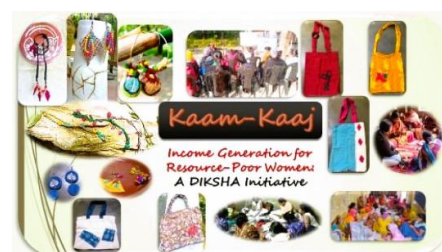


### **Padded with Love**

Operating in three districts — Kolkata, Murshidabad, and Nadia, this menstrual hygiene promotion cum income generation initiative ensures access to quality sanitary napkins at a rate cheaper than the market. It includes an eco-friendly disposal machine. Collaborations with Ma Foundation and SEWA Bharat (West Bengal) and promote health, dignity and income among women and girls – without increasing the carbon footprint caused by the disposal of used sanitary napkins.

### **Kaam-Kaaj**

Kaam-Kaaj empowers women through eco-conscious income-generation programmes. Participants create products from recycled materials while gaining skills to foster economic independence. The programme also provides POSH (Prevention of Sexual Harassment at Workplace) training to job-ready youth, equipping them to navigate and promote safer workplaces.



### **Resilience During COVID-19**

DIKSHA's adaptability during the COVID-19 pandemic was evident in its relief efforts from April 2020 to February 2022. Key initiatives included:

- **Providing essential supplies** to over 14,000 individuals.
- **Facilitating online education** to prevent school dropouts.
- **Promoting vaccination** and distributing PPE kits to health workers.

Special attention was given to mitigating domestic abuse, absenteeism during online classes, and economic hardships. DIKSHA's response during Cyclone Amphan further underscored its capacity to address dual crises effectively.

### **Aligning Local Action with Global Goals**

DIKSHA's initiatives align with the United Nations' [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs):



**SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being**



**SDG 5: Gender Equality**



**SDG 4: Quality Education**



**SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities**





As a member of [Catalyst 2030](#), DIKSHA amplifies grassroots voices on global platforms and contributed to the People’s SDG Report submitted to the UN General Assembly. Plans include generating a Youth SDG Report in West Bengal to drive collective action.

### **Future Forward**

DIKSHA’s progress is supported by partners such as the Rebuild India Fund, Skychildren (Italy), SVP India (Kolkata chapter), and individual donors known as DIKSHA Dosts (Friends). These collaborations enable the organisation to:

- Deepen the red-light area programmes in the existing locations and expand to new locations.
- Deepen and expand the football programme to holistic support beyond the current remit.
- Resume the badminton initiative for marginalised girls.
- Enhance educational support through hybrid models.
- Scale up livelihood initiatives like Kaam-Kaaj.



### **Paramita Banerjee: A Visionary Leader**



[Paramita Banerjee](#), DIKSHA’s founder, is a visionary social activist dedicated to empowering marginalised youth. Opting out of academia over three decades ago, she established DIKSHA in 2001, building on her **MacArthur Fellowship**-supported work in adolescent sexual and reproductive health in Kolkata’s red-light areas.

An **Ashoka Fellow** since 2016, Paramita is celebrated for fostering grassroots leadership and driving systemic change in youth empowerment and gender justice. Her collaborations with organisations like UNICEF, Amnesty International, and Save the Children underscore her expertise in equity, dignity, and inclusion. As a member of **Catalyst 2030**, she contributes to advancing the Sustainable Development Goals.

Paramita’s literary contributions include translating stories by Mahasweta Devi and editing anthologies amplifying the voices of women in the sex trade. A sought-after speaker, she addresses global forums on critical issues like child protection and youth leadership, envisioning a world where every young person can rewrite their life script in an equitable, inclusive, and gender-just society.



For more information or to support DIKSHA’s mission, visit [www.dikshaworld.org](http://www.dikshaworld.org).

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