BACKGROUND
Young people around the world face challenges brought about by unequal access to resources and opportunities. These challenges particularly impact youth in India, a country with the largest number of young people in the world.

Various social, cultural, financial and ideological restraints hold young people in India back from making their own choices and achieving their aspirations. Gender and caste attitudes often set specific, strict expectations for youth. For example, many youth in India face family and community pressure to enter early, arranged marriages. In poor, rural areas, many have little access to mobile phones and the internet, and young women often have limited freedom to leave their homes. These restrictions frequently lead to anger and frustration among young people.

In 2016, Mahila Sarvangeen Utkarsh Mandal (MASUM)—a community-based human rights organization that works with adolescent girls and boys in rural Maharashtra—conducted research to better understand how social norms were affecting the perspectives and decisions of the youth living there.

RESEARCH GOALS
• Understand how social norms are formed in the Purandar Block of Pune District in Maharashtra, India
• Explore which norms (related to gender, caste, religion) most shape young people’s attitudes and abilities to achieve their aspirations in this region
• Determine how an organization working from a feminist human rights perspective can help nurture progressive values (social justice, democracy, etc.) in this area of Maharashtra
• Measure the impact of MASUM’s three-day residential camps for youth in Purandar

METHODOLOGY
• Site: Purandar Block, Maharashtra, India
• Purposive sampling: 106 participants (59 women and 47 men) including staff, participants in MASUM activities and other youth who had or had not chosen to make unconventional life decisions
• Data collection: 13 focus group discussions and individual questionnaires with 75 youth age 16 to 26; in-depth interviews with 31 people age 20 and older

HIGHLIGHTED FINDINGS
Impact of Social Norms
• Gender and caste social norms have a major impact on youth.
  ▪ Gender norms: Devalue household work while cementing it as a woman’s role; suggest women should lack mobility and financial, political and employment rights; condone violence against women; restrict remarriage for divorced or widowed women
  ▪ Caste norms: Link caste and poverty; support rampant discrimination based on caste hierarchy; prohibit inter-caste friendships and marriages
• These social norms are changing, but not in predictable ways.

Emerging Evidence is a series of short summaries of research that American Jewish World Service (AJWS) supports as part of our strategy to advance gender equality and end child, early and forced (CEFM) marriage in India.

The study described here, “An Enquiry into How Young People Negotiate Change in Their Lives Amid Restrictive Social Values and Other Challenges,” was produced by Mahila Sarvangeen Utkarsh Mandal (MASUM).
Youth exposed to human rights education express an increased ability to identify and try to stop discrimination.

Obstacles to Fulfilling Aspirations
- Most important: poverty and living in a rural area (lack of resources and infrastructure)
- Gender and caste discrimination
- Early marriage (lack of choice of partner, end of educational opportunities)
- Restrictions on friendship with members of the opposite sex
- Domestic violence at home, lack of parental trust and lack of general freedom
- Sexual harassment in public spaces and lack of safe, easy transportation options

Consequences
- While many youth still express their agency and negotiate with restrictive social norms and other obstacles to achieving their aspirations, many struggle with:
  - Poor mental health (feeling trapped, smothered, depressed, anxious)
  - Loss of interest in people and activities that used to engage them
  - Running away from home, self-harm, fights, theft, substance abuse, suicide

CONCLUSION
Young people in India today are caught in a paradoxical situation—often faced with many more options and choices than their parents ever had, yet unable to fully access these options due to a variety of constraints.

MASUM is using the results of this study to develop and refine its interventions with young people in Purandar Block, to better meet young people’s needs and maximize positive impact on their attitudes, aspirations and progressive beliefs. For example, MASUM plans to increase its efforts to support youth mental health, address substance abuse and facilitate parent-child dialogue about difficult topics.

Visit ajws.org/research for more insights on CEFM and gender inequality—in India and around the globe. For questions or to sign up for updates on AJWS research, email EmergingEvidence@ajws.org.