



# How This 'SAFE SCHOOLS' Project Trained Children to Act as Community and Help Each Other During Disasters



## The 'Safe Schools' Project Implemented by SEEDS And Funded By Honeywell Is A Perfect Example Of Institutionalising Sustainable Community Based Disaster Risk Management Practices.

Every time Mrs Arti Qanungo tried bringing up menstruation in a conversation with her prepubescent students, the girls would laugh or look shocked and hastily announce they “did not have it, so they don’t need to know”. “These girls were in the sixth standard and even the mention of periods or sanitary napkins would make them uncomfortable,” Mrs Qanungo said in an interview.

A teacher at the Government Girls’ Senior Secondary School in Shakarpur, East Delhi, Mrs Qanungo has been in the profession for nearly 20 years and understands exactly why the girls felt unnerved listening to conversations about periods. Lack of awareness and conversations at home, a feeling of taboo imposed on the subject by society at large and the absence of an older female figure who seemed comfortable with the subject contributed to the girls’ discomfort.

Qanungo has been trying her best for a while, and a couple of years ago help appeared when she was least expecting it to. The school was selected as a part of a ‘Safe Schools’ programme designed and implemented by SEEDS in collaboration with Honeywell Hometown Solutions India Foundation. Funded by Honeywell, the programme was a part of several projects undertaken by SEEDS to expand its efforts to institutionalize sustainable Community Based Disaster Risk Management (CBDRM). An important aspect of CBDRM is empowering a community to create a coping mechanism strong enough to hold in the face of a disaster before help from elsewhere arrives and menstrual health is an important challenge that must be considered not just by women, but the community as a whole. And a necessary step towards securing a community’s defences for health challenges is making children and young adults understand the basic health issues and the science behind dealing with them.

Mrs Qanungo narrated that once the SEEDS expert arrived at her school, it became significantly easier to talk to the young girls. The SEEDS counsellor befriended the girls and spoke to them gently about how ‘normal’ it is to have periods and that most adult women they know menstruate, even if they are not talking about it. “The children had a lot of questions then and asked things like when they should expect to start on their periods, would it hurt, do they have to hide it? The SEEDS expert answered all their questions patiently and the kids seemed less shocked than before,” Mrs Qanungo said. Sanitary pads were also distributed and the girls were taught about disposal and usage.

This little triumph exemplifies what the Global Network of Civil Society Organisations for Disaster Reduction (GNDR) set out to do with its USAID-funded project to facilitate institutionalisation of sustainable CBDRM. It helped young children act and behave like a community with a common goal. The project brought together teachers, parents, students, the Delhi government and a not-for-profit organisation to work towards a common goal to ensure children can protect themselves and help each other during disasters.



The 'Safe Schools' project created a system that functions seamlessly with private and government stakeholders, with individuals and organisations, to help a community living in an earthquake prone zone, made doubly dangerous by unplanned construction and insufficient development. It also created a sense of ownership in the community, leading them to undertake efforts to build resilience against disasters, themselves.

Mrs Qanungo's school was just one of 50 schools in East Delhi which were covered by the 'Safe Schools' programme. Menstrual health was one of the several structural and cultural issues that experts deployed by SEEDS covered during the project. The programme was able to empower 52,000 children, 45,000 parents and 2,200 teachers across 50 schools in East Delhi. It was then extended to Uttarakhand, as schools in the state have to battle a high risk of floods and earthquakes. The program hopes to bring another 31,000 students, 50,000 parents and 700 teachers across 100 schools in Dehradun and Haridwar districts of Uttarakhand in its fold.



## How Does 'SAFE SCHOOLS' Serve as a Model for Institutionalising Sustainable CBDRM Projects?

### Collaboration with major government stakeholders:

SEEDS collaborated with the following government departments to provide training and awareness to students, teachers and parents.

- The District Magistrate's office
- The Department of Education
- Traffic Police Department
- East Delhi Municipal Corporation
- Chief Minister/Deputy Chief Minister's office
- Delhi Fire Department
- District Disaster Management Authority

### **Structural and non-structural risk assessments and technical intervention:**

- Engineers and architects carried out assessments of school structures and investigated issues of damages, seepage etc.
- Non-structural elements like fans, cupboards, lights which could be potential safety hazards during a disaster were also checked and fixed.
- Early warning systems against disasters like earthquakes and fires were checked and upgraded.
- Hygiene and first-aid infrastructures were investigated and bolstered.
- Emergency kits comprising water bottles and torches among others were distributed and schools received First Aid and Search and Rescue kits with torches, latex gloves, basic medication, antiseptic solutions among others.

### **Participation of children as ‘communities’:**

Mrs Sarwat, a teacher with Rajkiya Sarvodaya Bal Vidyalaya, Shakarpur said that prior to the SEEDS activity children knew that fire extinguishers existed in the school, but during the project, they learnt to use it first-hand thanks to demonstrations by the fire department. They were also taught to take care about both physical and mental health. During the pandemic, counselling sessions focussed on the uncertainties children experienced due to closure of schools and the new sanctions of their lives. During another activity, children used microscopes to see the germs in their own hands and said they felt more strongly about handwashing. In 30 schools, child-friendly games were installed to explain issues like Carbon Footprints and disaster hazards so that the students felt included and had fun while learning about these issues. Mrs Sarwat said often, kids came to her asking for these activities to be repeated. They also came up with new, meaningful questions about their health and safety, thereby indicating the intervention was working.

