



Action Learning Fellowship – 2020 Final Shareout Series

By Paul Wright, BKF Board Chair

Heera Sharma has embarked on a very big mission, and almost 300 girls (so far) are proof that she is deep at work to achieve it. Born in India, home to the world's largest population of adolescent girls, and currently living in the United States, Heera has set out to disrupt social attitudes toward girls and young women – starting in India but not ending there – by helping build a world “where each girl is empowered to unlock her highest potential, realize her dreams and be an agent of change.”

With these words, Heera describes her vision for Go Laadli (a name that translates to ‘beloved daughter’ in Hindi), an organization she founded in the US in 2017. For Heera, India presents a rich opportunity, located, as she reported in her recent Action Learning Fellowship wrap-up, in the bottom 27th percentile in the global gender gap, including in business, the workforce and the upper reaches of government. With Go Laadli, she hopes to call girls and young women to active citizenship and leadership in India – with plans to go even further.

With 273 girls enrolled, volunteers on three continents and over \$170,000 in donations later, Heera has made an impressive start. To support her vision, she has already launched several programs. Each program impresses me with how it reflects her insight into what empowerment actually means, and how to transform it from an ideal aspiration to something real. For example, the first program – the “Lead Like a Girl Challenge” – invites high school girls to identify and then write about a problem they observe that affects girls and young women, and to offer solutions. By speaking about these problems with others in her community and including what she has learned in the story she submits, each girl is encouraged to exercise critical thinking and engage in real-world problem-solving that takes into account other viewpoints, experiences and ideas, to make her story as robust as possible.

A second program builds on the first. Winners, as well as those who have demonstrated potential through the Challenge, are given a chance to serve on the Girl Advisory Board. The GAB focuses on nurturing leadership and developing diversity-rich networks of peers that provide opportunities for girls to participate in decision-making that helps guide Go Laadli itself. Going further, a mentoring program offers 1-on-1 matches for building real-world skills like goal-setting and leadership development. And just for good measure --- the Go Laadli running team helps spread the word and raise funds, too!

Go Laadli's COVID-19 Campaign shows the resilience of Go Laadli and their ability to respond to crisis. 84 young women from 35 schools in 16 cities across India played COVID-19 myth buster games and created videos that were watched by thousands on social media. In addition to leveraging the leadership and creativity of young women to help flatten the curve, the Campaign served as a way of highlighting, amplifying and elevating young women's voices and leadership during the pandemic.



I'm particularly struck by how Heera has constructed programs that complement one another in critical ways, so that skills acquired in one program can contribute to skills required in another. My sense is that she has started with a vision that grows from her own experience and that of others, showing how experience, self-awareness and observation can converge to achieve change-making results. I also applaud her appreciation of the importance of measuring impact. Heera's focus on data stands out for me, because it demonstrates an understanding that we learn by observing what works and by using the data to see the big picture and look for ways to help us improve our results. And it was especially moving to see and hear the testimonials from the girls who have participated in Go Laadli – in fact, these really drove home for me the beauty of the name she has chosen for her overall program, Beloved Daughter. While her data points are certainly useful, the testimonials present the human impact in a wonderfully personal and authentic way. And finally, I was also impressed that she is giving thought, not only to the question of scaling up Go Laadli, but also to the issue of how to make her initiative sustainable, both important clues to how thoughtfully she is approaching this work. What an amazingly insightful woman!

Following Heera at both the February 29 Showcase event and on July 14, as well as studying her Website, I'm really glad (and, I must say, proud!) that the Foundation chose her to participate in our latest cohort, and that BKF (with the critical input of the Weaver team) has somehow contributed to such a remarkable piece of ongoing work. Go Laadli inspires me to wonder what more we can do to stay in touch with Heera and what she is doing, as well as how her work can help further inform our mission.