

# A pull to infinity

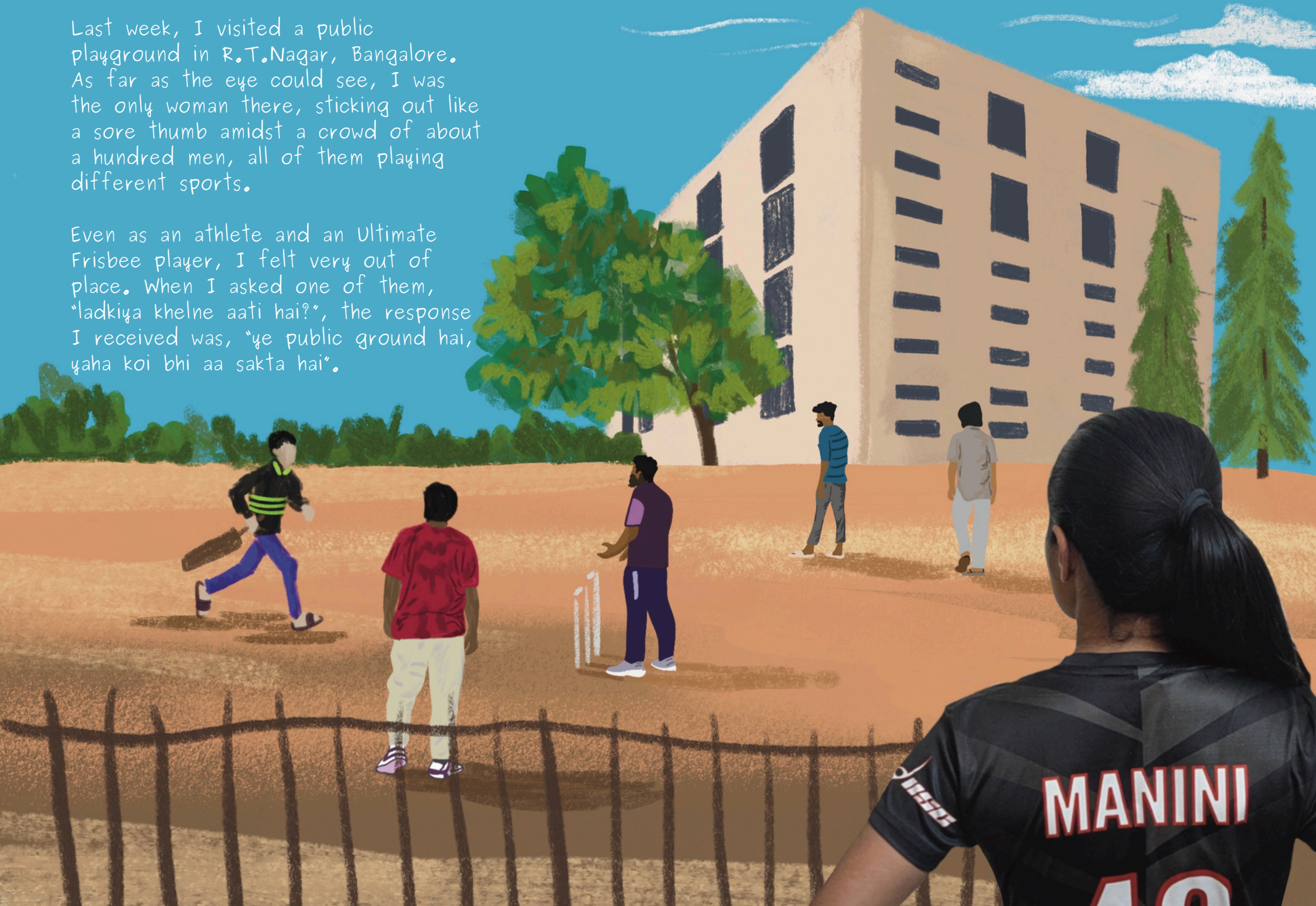
Finding freedom through Ultimate Frisbee



Joshila's journey with Ultimate Frisbee, traced through thoughts, illustrations and photographs by Manini

Last week, I visited a public playground in R.T.Nagar, Bangalore. As far as the eye could see, I was the only woman there, sticking out like a sore thumb amidst a crowd of about a hundred men, all of them playing different sports.

Even as an athlete and an Ultimate Frisbee player, I felt very out of place. When I asked one of them, "ladkiya khelne aati hai?", the response I received was, "ye public ground hai, yaha koi bhi aa sakta hai".





I sat there for a while, just thinking about what he said and thought to myself – correct, koi bhi aa sakta hai, par ladkiya hai kaha? Over the years, I've noticed a similar trend across Bangalore and other cities, with an overwhelming majority of the sports fields I've come across primarily occupied by men. On the rare occasion that a woman is seen on the field, she is there as a spectator, off to the side, simply observing but never playing.

On the other side of the country, in Kotra, a small village tucked away in the Aravalli Range in Rajasthan, Joshila, also a frisbee player, had a similar observation to share. "Haan, aisa hi hota hai. Hume ladke kehete hai ki hum khel nahi sakte."

So, when Joshila and her friends began to play, they knew they needed a plan. "We have a fixed time and date so no one can stop us. We're forced to make this kind of schedule because Kotra has very little free space. Most of the land is either used for farming or is too rocky for sports."

This is  
Joshila

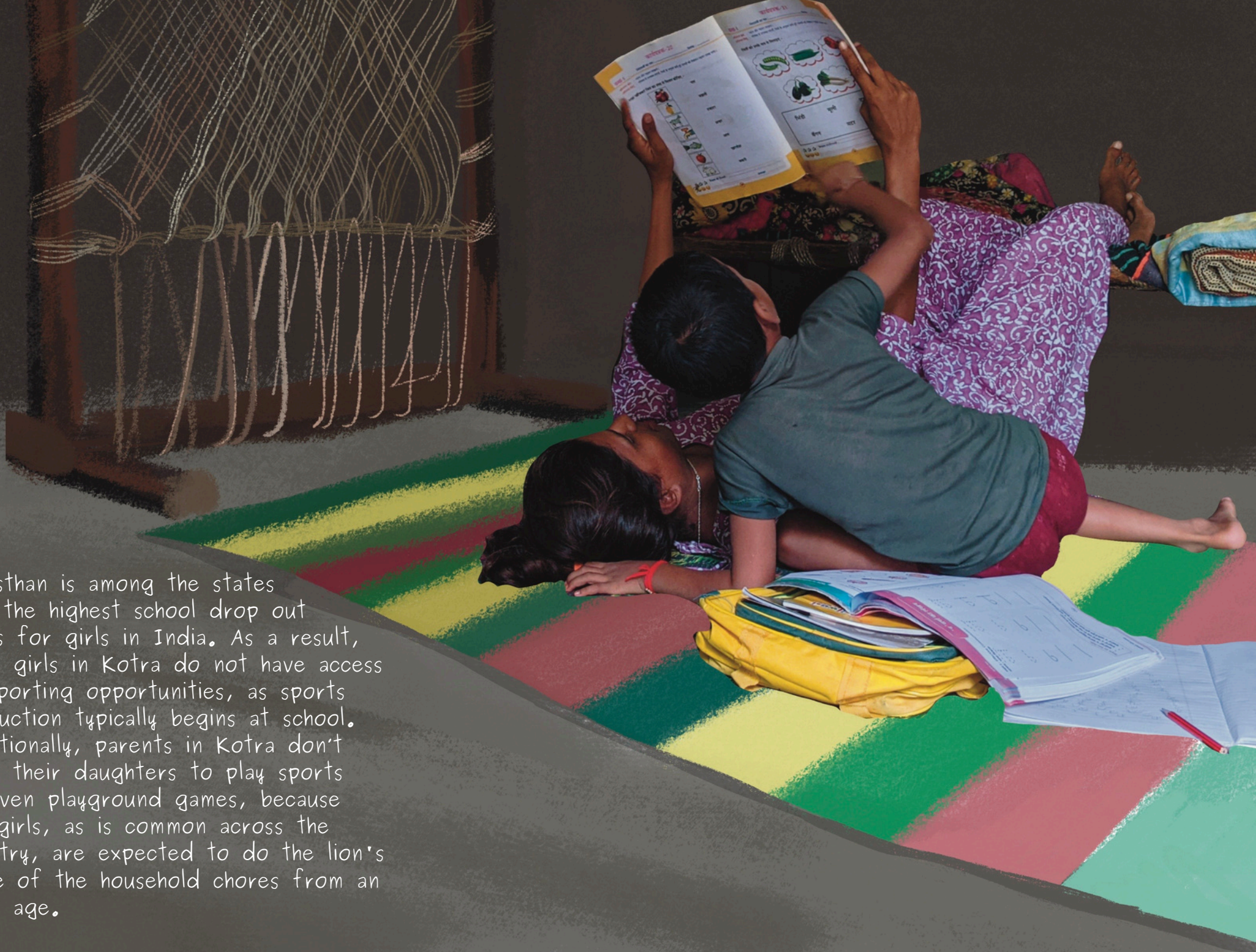


Ultimate Frisbee, or Ultimate, is a mixed-gender team sport, wherein players pass a disc around and score by catching it in the opposing team's end zone. It's played on a field similar to a football field, and the games are fast, with lots of running, jumping, and diving.

The thing that makes the sport special is what is known as the 'Spirit of the Game', meaning players are expected to play honestly and fairly. They also call their own fouls as there is no referee. A 'pull' (mentioned in the title of this story) is a long throw that begins a game.



Rajasthan is among the states with the highest school drop out rates for girls in India. As a result, many girls in Kotra do not have access to sporting opportunities, as sports instruction typically begins at school. Additionally, parents in Kotra don't allow their daughters to play sports or even playground games, because the girls, as is common across the country, are expected to do the lion's share of the household chores from an early age.





Joshila's  
mother,  
Temali

"I know these responsibilities don't lessen with age. My father passed away when I was 9 so my mother raised us. I remember her being jovial and fun-loving when we were young, but she became very reserved after his death, as she had to shoulder all of the responsibilities alone."

These days, Joshila's mother, Temali, only spends her time at home, looking after her grandchildren and tending the cattle.

"My mother used to play kabbadi and langdi (hopscotch) as a child, but she didn't have the chance to go to school. She says I can play and enjoy as much as I want, as I had the opportunities she never did."



"I consider myself lucky in this regard. I played many games during my childhood and I started playing Frisbee in 2019 through a fellowship by the NGO Kshamtalaya Foundation. Having been introduced to the sport in grade 12, it has now become my safe space.

The Frisbee team is like a family, they understand me. I've also learnt so many things from playing - communication, respect, honesty, belief, teamwork, cooperation, patience and most of all, positivity. The notion that girls can only play a few sports whereas boys can play anything is proven wrong when we play Frisbee, because on the field, we are equal to the boys."

"Since finishing high school, I've been working with Kshamtalaya Foundation and Playquity (an initiative that promotes gender equity) as a coach. I teach other young girls across three different schools in Kotra, and I love that I can continue playing the sport while making a living from it. The kids really enjoy it as well, as they have never had the opportunity to play a sport before this. If I can't attend a session, they use a bucket lid to practice throwing, all on their own."



Last year, Joshila was selected to attend a camp organised by Ultimate Peace Organization in the United States, where she received training from international coaches and met young people from across the world.



Joshila  
A girl from  
Kotra



“A girl from Kotra, unmarried at 25, being able to go outside the village itself is unimaginable. So, this was really a big moment for me.”



"While I am proud of what I have achieved, people in Kotra have very different expectations of what it means to be a good girl."

A good girl wears salwar kurta  
A good girl has long hair  
A good girl doesn't argue with her parents  
A good girl doesn't wear shorts  
A good girl doesn't go alone anywhere  
A good girl doesn't talk to boys  
A good girl doesn't fight for her rights  
A good girl doesn't know her rights  
A good girl should manage the house  
A good girl should marry someone older  
A good girl should not pursue her dreams  
A good girl doesn't play sports

"A good son? In my experience, there is no such thing. A boy can be anything he wants to be, within limits."

I have my sister Balli to thank for so much. She has been my pillar and has always supported me. Even with the small income of Rupees 3,000 she used to earn, she gave it all to me and her husband, keeping nothing for herself. I think she takes after my father. For his time, he was a very forward-thinking man. He recognised the value of education and tried his best to give us a good education. In fact, he even sent my sister to a private school."

Joshila's  
sister, Balli



Joshila, on the other hand, studied in her own village up to class 8, after which she was sent to a girls' boarding school. There, she had her first taste of independence and self-sufficiency, qualities she practises to this day.





"Pata hai mera naam kaise rakha? Joshila was the name of a local laundry soap, which my sister would use. When I was born, she was trying to come up with a name, and suddenly remembered Joshila. She says it was a 'very good soap that removes dirt and brings brightness to clothes.' I try to be like this too."

"Even though I'm independent and have my own career now, life in Kotra comes with its own challenges. How I dress, how I behave in public, how I speak to people, how I have chosen not to be married, how my hair is short and how I 'play', everything is scrutinised by the community.

"I am one of the few girls in the village that rides a scooty. I enjoy it so much as it makes me feel free and independent. It's my happy place. But whenever I ride, people always stare because it's so rare in our village."



"Where I'm from, women are always pushed into a corner and it's next to impossible to fight your way out. Even when sick, women are expected to do all the household chores, whereas the men can just sit around and relax. This makes my blood boil. I am one of the more outspoken women in the village, but the other girls are crushed under the weight of society's expectations. I wonder if men even understand how that feels. I don't think they do."





"The girls in our village don't have a lot of agency or power. We're told to not ask any questions or make any decisions on our own.

"Especially when it comes to sports, we are not given any importance. People often say, "kya kar loge khel ke?" Even so, I never stop dreaming. My biggest dream is to play Frisbee for India. I want to become a role model for the girls of Kotra so that they see that they can play any sport they like."



"Since frisbee is a new sport in our country, there are many limitations in terms of funding and representation. Although I hope to play at the international level, this seems impossible as participation in competitions usually requires self-funding and can cost anywhere between Rupees 1.5 - 2 lakhs, depending on the location. I know many exceptional players who can't compete because the cost is simply unaffordable.

"Back home, the situation is even worse. Children don't even have shoes to wear so they are forced to play barefoot. In the summers, though, the ground becomes too hot, so they wrap their feet in palash leaves. This is the only way they are able to move around. Isn't that terrible?"

Access to sports, whether recreational or professional, has always been a form of privilege. A privilege that is hard to recognise because we believe that sports provide a level-playing field and only the best athletes rise to the top.

However, in reality, there are various deep-rooted systemic barriers that benefit some and disregard others.

Who has the freedom, time and resources to play a sport in India? What kind of spaces are they allowed to occupy?

In a country that is dominated by upper-caste, upper-class, able-bodied and cisgender men, there are very few public spaces that are both safe and accessible for women, who seem to have become an afterthought in most spheres of public life.

Central contracts of Indian cricketers are a perfect illustration of this disparity. While top male cricketers earn upto Rs. 7 crores, their colleagues on the women's cricket team make no more than Rs. 50 lakhs, if that. It should come as no surprise, then, that funding, salaries and viewership also favour men's sports.



Ultimate promises something different, something better. As a mixed-gender sport, most competitions require teams to have women on their rosters, not as a tokenistic form of inclusion but to strike an intentional balance. In this way, it has immense potential to break traditional gendered boundaries that are often seen in Indian sport and bring more more women into the fold. Currently, there are around 25000 players across the country, roughly forty percent of whom are female athletes. These numbers continue to rise with growing interest in the sport.



"Frisbee has taught me so much. I've understood my own interests and learnt to make my own decisions."

Joshila knows that this transformation is not merely a consequence of playing a sport but of finding herself within the community it has brought her. This is what she hopes for her students too. In fact, in a society where women's mobility and access to opportunities are restricted, a flying disc has become a powerful symbol of what breaking barriers and building bridges can look like for the girls of Kotra, and hopefully, many more villages across India.



## Acknowledgements

It's rare to find friendships that are so supportive of your work – I haven't come across many.

I want to thank Pragya for being the backbone of this project – from the very beginning, when she encouraged me to apply for the grant, to the end, always checking in and giving thoughtful feedback. Soumya, for being the reason I could explore Kotra and bring this story to life. And most of all, Sanjana – for going out of her way to help me, for her incredible editing skills, and for bringing flow to this story.

There are so many more people I'd like to thank, but the list would go on forever. All I can say is that I'm lucky to have some truly special people in my life, and I couldn't be more grateful.

–Manini

Manini Bansal is a documentary photographer and visual communication designer with nearly a decade of experience working in the space of wildlife conservation. Her work is at the intersection of ecology and the social sciences. Being an Ultimate Frisbee player herself, she seeks to discover new ways to leverage sports as a tool for empowerment, community building, and reshaping traditional gender roles.