

Empowering Young Girls from Underserved Backgrounds through Digital Access: A Capacity Building Program (Privilege Fellowship) by Lex Foundation

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Abstract

This paper describes a project by Lex Foundation called Privilege Fellowship, aimed at Capacity Building and Women Empowerment by providing focused mentorship through professionals from industries and financial aid for girls' education from 11th Class to Graduation.

Privilege Fellowship is a capacity building & women empowerment initiative of Lex Foundation. This provides financial help and focused mentorship to girl students from weak socio-economic backgrounds.

Under the Privilege Fellowship program, Girls students get financial support for their education from 11th class to graduation and focused mentorship from professionals from different fields for their overall development, academic and non-academic. This initiative aims to transform girls from low backgrounds into dignified women empowered with education and financial independence. It also contributes towards poverty alleviation, gender equality, literacy and inclusive society.

This paper further describes how technology (virtual connections) has become a critical infrastructure in terms of reaching out to students and their parents located in different places across the country. It facilitates the selection of students, regular interaction with them and their parents, conducting weekly sessions to educate and mentor these students by professionals located at distant places in India and abroad, and providing financial aid directly into the bank accounts of the students selected for the program.

Further, in the introduction section, the paper describes the deep-rooted social issue of gender-based inequality that prevents girls' education, resulting in the continuation of the cycle of poverty in underprivileged communities. It discusses a strategic intervention called the Privilege Fellowship undertaken by the Lex Foundation to address this social issue. This section also talks about how technology has made it possible to reach out to different stakeholders virtually, which otherwise would not have been possible. The following section of the paper describes and illustrates with some pictures how the intervention was implemented and enabled stakeholders to connect with the help of technology (virtual connections) to conduct educational sessions. The subsequent section describes how this model works, followed by paragraphs on measuring success and testimonials from some of the beneficiaries from the states of Kashmir, Haryana, and Delhi.

Next it describes the digital infrastructure needed to use the technology for virtual connects, Financing the Model, Scaling of the model to enhance the impact in more geographical areas followed by a conclusion.

Introduction

In India, gender, poverty, and societal disparities remain deeply entrenched issues that create immense barriers to education. This especially impacts girls from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. According to a report National Survey Estimation, 2014, India has over six million children out-of-school between the ages of 6-13, with girls accounting for 47% of this figure. The factors driving this crisis are complex and multifaceted, rooted in long-standing patriarchy, economic constraints, and a lack of access to quality educational opportunities.

In many low-income families, a girl's education is often deprioritized due to the perceived lower economic returns compared to a son's education. Families facing financial hardship often rely on their daughters to contribute to household labour or care for younger siblings, forcing them to drop out of school. Additionally, safety concerns, inadequate sanitation facilities in schools, and a shortage of female teachers also discourage parents from sending their daughters to school, especially in villages and remote areas.

This educational gender gap not only violates the fundamental human right to education granted by the Indian Constitution but also perpetuates a vicious cycle of poverty, disempowerment, and gender inequality. Without access to quality education and mentorship, girls and women are deprived of the knowledge and skills necessary to break free from economic dependence, make informed choices, and fully participate in society.

In 2021, Lex Foundation carried out a needs assessment and found out that families at the bottom pyramid of society were not very positive about girls' education, and they prioritise marrying their daughters at an early age just to avoid any liabilities & financial burden resulting from their education. They prefer to save money for dowry over education, even though their daughters are willing to continue their education and have been doing great in their studies in previous years.

This propelled Lex Foundation to launch the **Privilege Fellowship** program, a strategic intervention to address this social issue by empowering this section of society. Solution designed by Lex Foundation to address this issue includes 1) counseling the parents to change their priorities for their daughters' education, 2) providing financial help to support these families for their daughters' education, 3) providing mentorship by working professionals from various industries and providing career-oriented skills enhancement through online sessions. Privilege Fellowship provides this support from the 11th class till the students complete their graduation.

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Technology has enabled us to reach out to these students virtually, even in far remote areas of the country, including villages in remote areas of Kashmir, to connect them with professionals in metro cities in India and out of India. Without technology, it would not have been possible for us to implement this project because the professionals who are volunteering to mentor and educate these girls are placed in cities and would be able to visit remote places where these beneficiaries are located. Technology has played a key role in implementing this project in terms of reaching out to students and professionals to educate and mentor these students.



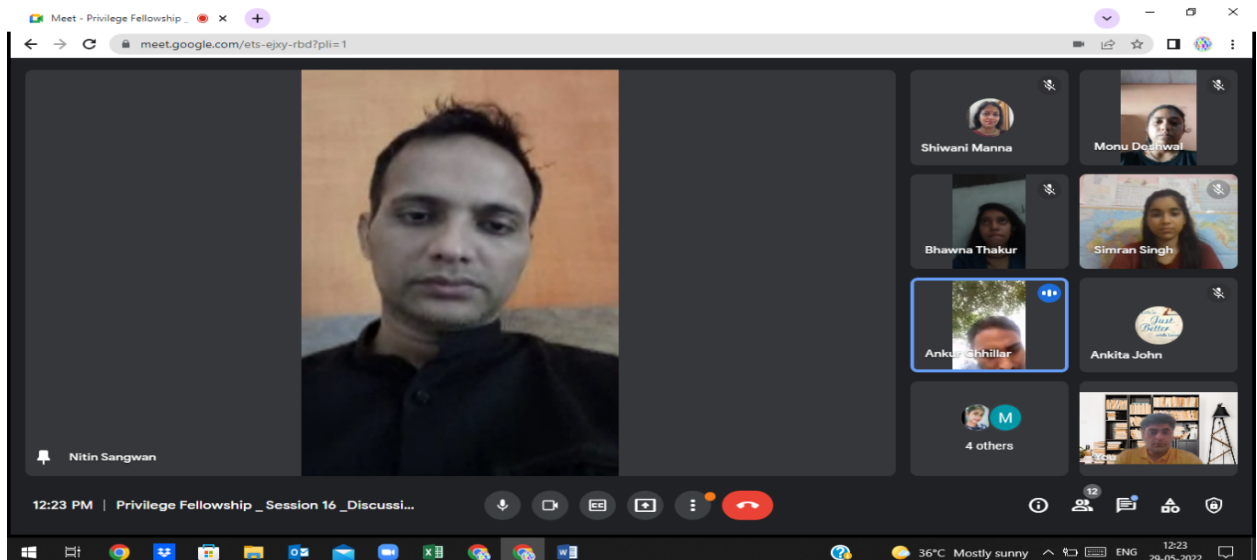
Pic: a virtual session for girls' fellows from Kashmir conducted by Ms Ankita John from Australia, on 3rd Jul 2022.

The Innovative Solution: The Lex Foundation Privilege Fellowship Program

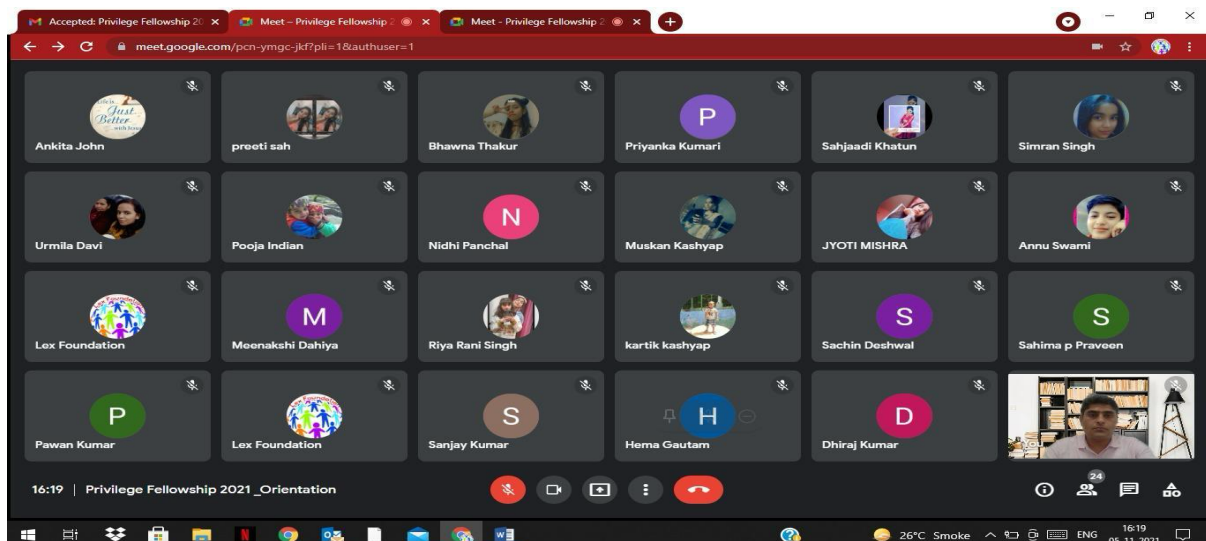
The Lex Foundation Privilege Fellowship is a holistic initiative aimed at empowering girls from underprivileged backgrounds through education, mentorship, and financial support. The program provides far more than just a scholarship; it offers a comprehensive ecosystem that nurtures the academic, personal, and professional growth of its fellows.

Mentors and Professionals from different industrial backgrounds are virtually connected from different cities across the country to our fellows to share their journey to motivate the fellows and answer their queries related to their chosen career options. Technology has played a crucial role here by enabling Lex Foundation to connect professionals in different cities to students in remote areas over the weekend. These professionals share their experiences and their career journey voluntarily.

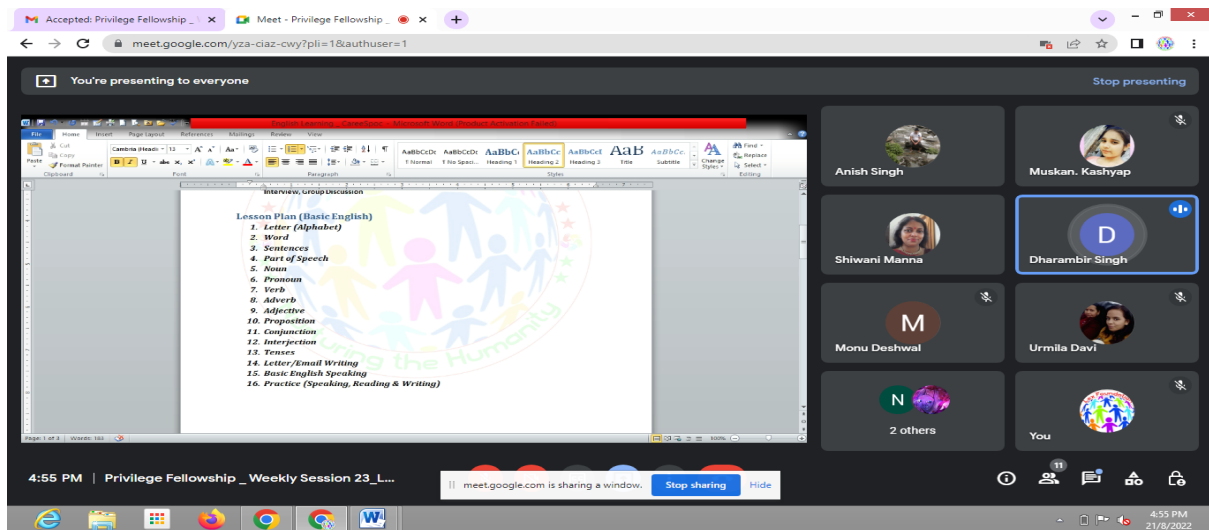
We conduct weekly sessions every Sunday between 1600-1700 hours to connect volunteer professionals with students. To date, we have conducted over 100 online sessions to connect professionals with different industrial experiences, including IAS and professional career counselors. Some pictures given in the subsequent section reflect the use of a virtual connect facility to connect different stakeholders and conduct online sessions for our fellows.



Pic: A virtual session for girls fellows from different parts of Haryana was conducted by IAS Mr Nitin Sangwan and posted in Gujarat. It was conducted on 29 May 2022.



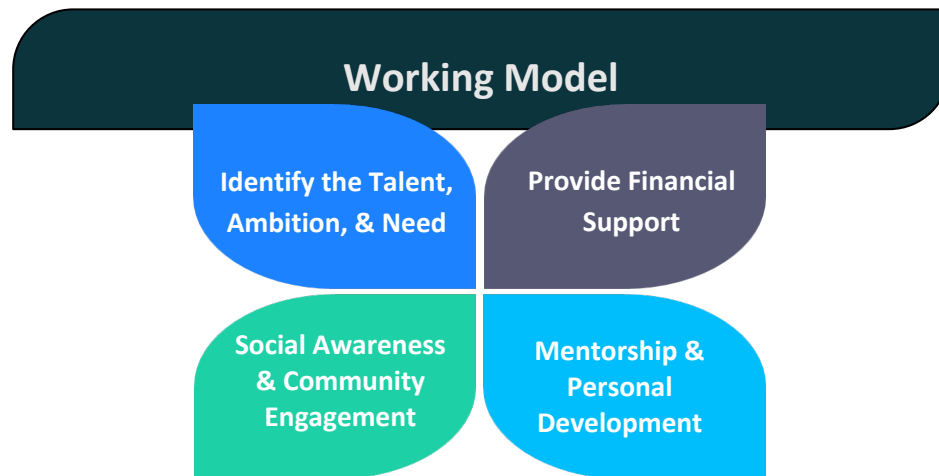
Pic: a virtual orientation session for girls' fellows from various parts of India conducted by the Lex Foundation Team on 05 Nov 2021



Pic: a virtual weekly session for girl fellows from various parts of India conducted by Ms Shiwani Manna from Agra, UP

How the Model Works:

1. **Identifying Talent, Ambition, and Need (TAN):** The fellowship employs a unique screening process that focuses on identifying girls with exceptional potential, ambition, and genuine financial need. This TAN approach ensures that the program supports those who possess the drive and capability to excel but lack the resources to pursue their educational aspirations.
2. **Financial Support:** fellows receive financial assistance of up to Rs. 12,000 in a year. This financial assistance is meant to partially support the fellows with their educational expenses, such as tuition fees, books, transportation, and other related costs. This financial aid alleviates the burden on families and enables girls to focus on their studies without the distraction of economic constraints.
3. **Mentorship and Personal Development:** The fellowship pairs each girl with a dedicated mentor – an experienced professional from various fields who provides guidance, support, and inspiration. Additionally, the program organizes monthly workshops and seminars covering diverse topics, ranging from academics to personal growth, to broaden the fellows' perspectives and develop their personalities.
4. **Social Awareness and Community Engagement:** To instill a sense of social responsibility, fellows are required to dedicate a prescribed number of hours to community service and social work during their fellowship tenure. This exposure fosters empathy, leadership skills, and a commitment to giving back to society.



Measuring Success

The success of the Lex Foundation Privilege Fellowship is measured not only by the academic achievements of its fellows but also by their personal growth, self-confidence, and ability to navigate life's challenges. Key outcome and impact measures include:

- **Graduation rates:** The ultimate goal is for all fellows to successfully complete their college degrees and build skills of communication & public speaking to become more likely to get employment breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty and illiteracy. There is over 99% success rate for completing the Graduation for all our students. So far 200 students have benefited under the Fellowship program.

Of these 200, two fellows who were on board for the fellowship in 2021 batch dropped out after their parents got them married just after they completed their 12th class without knowing us. We got to know of this only after they got married and stopped attending to online sessions that we conduct and when we checked on them we were told that their parents decided to get them married as they did not see any benefits in doing graduation.

Four fellows are in employment, one in a central govt job, and two are in the private sector and still continuing their graduation education. All of the rest of the fellows are pursuing higher education.

- **Societal impact:** As empowered and educated women, fellows are expected to become role models, advocates, and agents of change within their communities, inspiring and supporting other girls to pursue education. We get 30-40% of inquiry calls from girls who either have been directly referred by some of our old students or have read about our program and then contacted us for the details.

Testimonial

Name	Kali
School	State Government School
Address	Haryana
Current Occupation	Indian Postal Service
Privilege Fellowship Year	2021
<p>“I wanted to take a moment to express my sincere gratitude for the opportunity to be a part of the Privilege Fellowship Program under the Lex Foundation. This experience has been incredibly impactful on both my academic journey and personal growth.</p> <p>I would like to extend my appreciation to my mentors for their unwavering support and guidance throughout this program. Their insights, encouragement, and willingness to share their experiences have been invaluable. Their mentorship has not only helped me navigate academic challenges but has also inspired me to strive for excellence in all aspects of my life. I am truly grateful for their dedication and commitment to my success.</p> <p>Moreover, I cannot thank the Lex Foundation enough for the financial aid provided through this fellowship. As a recipient, this support has relieved a significant financial burden and has allowed me to fully focus on my studies and extracurricular activities. The financial assistance has enabled me to access resources and opportunities that would have otherwise been out of reach, and for that, I am extremely grateful.”</p>	

Name	Simran
School/College	Shri Aurobindo College B.A. programme (economics + political science)
Address	Delhi
Current Occupation	Student
Privilege Fellowship Year	2021
<p>“I like the interactive way of the sessions. The sessions are directed towards improving our mind-sets. These programmes are designed to impart some values that are essential for life, so that we could not only become good employees but also a better person. The focus of sessions are on excellent communication skills. All the mentors and coordinators make the sessions very effective. The one-to-one counselling sessions are also very effective. It helps me in my career planning. The financial help as a scholarship provided by Lex Foundation also helps me buy my books and other stationery products. Overall, the schemes and programmes of Lex Foundation help me and all other</p>	

fellow girls who are unable to afford their studies and need mentorship for their career. I am highly thankful for the guidance that I have received from your side.”

Name	Mansi
School/College	IGNOU
Address	Haryana
Current Occupation	student
Privilege Fellowship Year	2021

“This program has helped me immensely with my course curriculum with its focussed sessions on various subjects. The sessions on improving communication skills really helped me a lot to improve my communication skills and filled me with confidence in the area of public speaking. The mode of imparting mentorship was online and this helped me to connect with our mentors from my home at my convenience and saved lot of time which could have been spent while travelling to a classroom setting. Digital platforms also facilitated registration, examination, classes, tests, results, status tracking etc. very conveniently and it also helped me learn some online tools like Google Meet, Google Calendar, PPT, Excel, MS Word etc.

The financial help provided by the Lex Foundation helped me avail books and other necessary stationary items. This is a great help for those underprivileged girls who could not study and pursue it due to lack of financial help. Lex Foundation ensures that no underprivileged girls are left behind and can be accommodated to the program.

Overall, I would like to thank Lex Foundation from the bottom of my heart to help girls like us with necessary mentorships and financial aid so we could pursue studies and achieve our goals in life.”

Name	Iqra Fatima
School/College	Govt School
Address	Kashmir
Current Occupation	Student
Privilege Fellowship Year	2022

“I am Iqra Fatima from Bandipora, Kashmir. I am so thankful to the Lex Foundation for providing us so many facilities regarding our studies. They conduct the weekly sessions on different topics including life skills, language skills writing skills, personality development, etc. We also meet offline after every month. Apart from this they provide us financial support after every month. I am very thankful to the team of Lex Foundation. Thanks for everything you did for us, we hope for

further support from you. We have learnt many things from this programme so far, like how to develop a positive attitude, and how we can focus on our studies.”

Unique Model

While numerous scholarship programs exist in India, the Lex Foundation Privilege Fellowship stands out for its comprehensive and long-term approach. Unlike traditional scholarships that primarily provide financial aid, this fellowship offers a holistic ecosystem of support, including mentorship, personal development, and community engagement. The program's focus on **TAN** sets it apart from models that primarily rely on academic performance or income thresholds. By recognizing the multidimensional nature of potential, the fellowship opens doors for girls who may not have excelled academically due to socioeconomic circumstances but possess the drive and capability to thrive given the right opportunities.

Digital infrastructure is used considerably in the entire process to ensure smooth and fast selection & onboarding of students, connecting them with their mentors, regular online classes and assessments, disbursement of financial assistance, and generating references for employment opportunities, etc. All the fellows were educated about email communication; none of the fellows had email IDs, so the first thing was that they all were made to create their personal email IDs and then educated on how to draft formal emails for their personal usage. Some fellows only have a single smartphone in the family, which is generally used by a father who goes to work.

Such fellows took help from their neighbours to attend weekly one-hour sessions. Digital platforms have helped bridge the gap between remotely placed students and suitable mentors to ensure proper engagement and fruitful mentorship. For example, Lex Foundation connected an IAS (Indian Administration Services) officer from Gujarat to the students of Delhi and Haryana for a session on the 'UPSC (Union Public Service Commission) Exam' preparation needs. With the help of technology only, we have been able to connect mentors from Kashmir to provide mentorships to students of Delhi & Haryana and vice versa.

Financing the Model

The Lex Foundation Privilege Fellowship so far is funded through a combination of individual donations. The foundation is actively looking for active association/partnership with corporations and individuals who share its vision of empowering girls through education, seeking their financial support and collaborations. Additionally, the foundation is exploring innovative financing models, such as crowdfunding campaigns, micro-lending initiatives, and social impact bonds, to ensure the sustainability and scalability of the program.

Scaling to Expand the Impact

Since its inception in 2021, the Lex Foundation Privilege Fellowship has already made a significant impact in the states of Haryana, Delhi, and J&K, benefitting 200 girl students from underprivileged backgrounds with financial support and focused mentorship for their

education from 11th Class to Graduation. However, the need for such initiatives extends far beyond these regions as the educational gender gap persists across India. **(3)**

To scale its impact, the foundation aims to establish partnerships with educational institutions, government agencies, and non-governmental organizations operating in underserved areas including regions like Rajasthan, Bihar, Jharkhand & UP.

By leveraging these collaborations, the fellowship can expand its reach, identify deserving candidates, and establish localized support systems for its fellows.

Furthermore, the foundation recognizes the importance of policy advocacy and collaboration with policymakers to address systemic barriers to girls' education. By sharing insights, success stories, and best practices, the program can influence policy decisions and resource allocation to create an enabling environment for girls' education at a larger scale in the country. More organizations like Lex Foundation can implement this project in their areas of presence, which the foundation is ready to support in terms of sharing knowledge and available resources.

As the Lex Foundation Privilege Fellowship continues to grow, its fellows will become ambassadors for change, inspiring and mentoring future generations of girls to pursue their dreams through education. This ripple effect has the potential to transform entire communities, breaking the cycle of poverty, empowering women, and driving sustainable development.

Conclusion

The Lex Foundation Privilege Fellowship exemplifies the transformative power of education in combating gender inequality, poverty, and societal disparities. By providing holistic support, mentorship, and financial assistance, the program empowers girls from underprivileged backgrounds to unlock their full potential and become agents of positive change.

Through its innovative approach and commitment to scaling its impact, the fellowship not only addresses the immediate educational needs of its fellows but also contributes to larger societal goals, such as gender equality, economic empowerment, and sustainable development. As the program continues to expand, it serves as a beacon of hope and inspiration, reminding us that investing in girls' education is an investment in the future of entire communities and nations.

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