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**10CHILDREN Pune reportage**  
*Brechtje Zwaneveld*



“Where are you from?” a girl’s voice asks. Another voice tumbles over hers: “Can you even understand the performance?” I’m sitting on the concrete steps of the arena at one of the largest girls’ schools in Pune, a metropolis in western India. About twenty girls’ heads are peering down at me. It’s intermission during the performance **सोपं नसतंच काही** (*Nothing is easy*), created as part of 10CHILDREN. Of the five hundred girls, boys, and adults in the arena, this group has rushed toward me at full speed. They speak to me in English. I explain that I don’t understand the performance because I don’t speak Marathi, but that I traveled here with the people who initiated this production and therefore I do understand what it’s about. I ask them who their favorite character is.

“Sapna! Because she really struggles with her life,” says one. “Just like her, I can’t study at home in the evenings after school either.”

“Why not?” I ask.

“Because our house has only one room, and my father has to sleep then, so the light can’t be on.”

Another girl mentions Sunny, a girl who dresses and behaves like a boy because she feels her father would be prouder if he didn't have only daughters. I ask about the third character, and then it falls silent. Komal has fallen into the hands of a loverboy.

**10CHILDREN – Art for Change** is the international movement at the intersection of social action and art led by director Liesbeth Coltof and dramaturg Dennis Meyer. In ten cities around the world, they bring together artistic and social partners to give children growing up in poverty a platform to make their voices heard.

On the one hand, to give these children self-confidence and the awareness that their lives are just as valuable as those of children growing up in more privileged circumstances. On the other hand, to encourage politicians not to see the 385 million children living in extreme poverty worldwide as a staggering statistic, but as real human beings whose bitter circumstances must be addressed.

Each city has its own theme, from which a visual art project, a theater performance, a documentary, and depending on the partners' possibilities and wishes, a congress, professionals meeting, or educational project is developed. Central are those for whom it matters: children growing up in poverty—or, as I've since learned to say: children growing up in underserved circumstances.

Their lives, struggles, dreams, resilience, and creativity form the beating heart of 10CHILDREN; these children are both participants and audience. Since the first edition of 10CHILDREN in Cleveland, USA (2023), which focused on health, I've been traveling along and gradually discovering the true power of this social community project.

In Pune, the theme is girls: **ती (SHE)**. More specifically, adolescent girls.

Vibhawari Deshpande is an actress, writer, director, and founder of Rainbow Umbrella. On the shaded veranda of the organization's office in central Pune—beneath us the rickshaws, cars, scooters, and handcarts honk and rattle by—she explains who “SHE” are:

“In India, most marriages are arranged by parents. Girls marry into the groom's family, so people say: a daughter is someone else's wealth. In families that barely have the means to survive, parents choose to marry off their daughters as soon as possible. The legal age for that is eighteen. After marriage, these girls often stop studying, which means they don't become independent and can't improve their financial situation.”

Shrirang Godbole, co-founder of Rainbow Umbrella, adds:

“To be eligible for marriage, a girl must have no stigma. She must not have been harassed on the street, physically or verbally. Assault and rape happen often, but even flirting can damage a girl's honor in the community. In families with a low socio-economic status, parents keep their daughters indoors once they start menstruating and impose strict restrictions. This prevents girls from developing and overcoming their situation—something every human ultimately desires.”

Deshpande and Godbole have been making theater together since the 1980s, inspired by the socially critical **GRIPS Theater** for children by Volker Ludwig in Berlin. They work as volunteers, with amateur actors, without subsidies and with a clear mission.

“We’ve adopted several principles from GRIPS Theater,” says Godbole. “Adults play the roles of children, we tell stories about social issues, and we choose accessible forms, often with songs and music.”

Their work targets the middle class—and that’s where they find their largest audience. But this also gnaws at them.

Deshpande:

“Since we started, we’ve realized there is a much larger group of children than the ones we reach now. Children from lower social classes, children from the **Vastis** (slums), sometimes come to see our performances, but it remains one-directional. We come to deliver something and then we’re gone. We feel a moral responsibility to represent their stories, problems, and dreams too—but we didn’t know how to approach that.

**10CHILDREN** inspired us to step outside our own bubble and build a bridge. We got in touch with the volunteer organization **Seva Sahayog Foundation (SSF)**, which runs educational programs in Vastis, aiming to bridge the gap between a struggling, disadvantaged population and a proud, ambitious one.”

### **The safety of the abhyesika (study room)**

“When my brothers quit school, my parents didn’t allow me to continue either.”

In one of the Vastis where Rainbow Umbrella visited through SSF to conduct research, I speak with about fifteen girls aged 13 to 16. Every Wednesday evening, they gather in this cramped space made of corrugated metal sheets, lovingly called their “study room.” Under the guidance of an SSF teacher, they discuss topics like personal hygiene (menstruation is taboo, and sanitary pads or tampons are not a given) and the difference between love, attraction, and friendship.

The girls receive help with homework and go on outings outside their Vasti to broaden their horizons and build self-confidence. A red plastic chair has been placed for me; they sit on a large rug on the floor. There’s some giggling when I decline the chair and sit on the ground at their eye level.

**Radhika Kondejkar**, one of SSF’s founders, asks me if I’m sure I want to sit there—and finally accepts that I do.

The girls look at me with a mix of expectation and reserve. I explain I’m here as a reporter to talk about their experiences with 10CHILDREN and Rainbow Umbrella.

When I tell them they can also ask *me* questions, they immediately burst out:

“What is your education level?”

“What cultural customs exist in your country?”

“What rights do women have in your country when they are abused?”

These girls know exactly what they want to talk about.

They want to be doctors, police officers, dancers, or farmers. They patiently explain that

although they're jealous their brothers can come home later than they can, they also understand their parents' rules. The narrow, unpaved streets of the Vasti are not safe after sunset, and some houses aren't either.

If they could change one thing about their situation, many girls say they want the abuse and violence to stop.

The personal despair behind this general plea hits me hard.

But they don't linger in their misery. They quickly point out how safe they feel in the study room and how much it helps them focus on what's important: studying, getting good grades, becoming independent, and—just like me—traveling the world.

Ideally, they'd leave with me right now.

"So," says the girl who had to stop going to school because her brothers can no longer protect her, "we can't come along, but our words are going all the way to the Netherlands?"

She finds that a good alternative.

They then enthusiastically tell me how they cut out their favorite objects from colorful fabrics in a **10CHILDREN** workshop by artist **Vaishali Oak**, how they played the acting game *ZipZapBoink* in a workshop led by Vibhawari Deshpande, and how they divide their time between house chores, schoolwork, and fun—if they still go to school. A group of boys escorts them all home.

**Radhika Kondejkar** later explains:

"Parents are crucial, especially mothers, who are responsible for the children and the household. We want them to understand how important it is that their daughters continue school after age fourteen (the end of mandatory schooling here), but we don't want to interfere with their values. That creates confusion and costs us trust.

Abuse is a complex subject because it often comes from family members or acquaintances. So we can't address parents directly. If we do, they'll keep their daughters away from us. That's why our programs focus on making the girls themselves aware of their rights and possibilities."

**SSF** is powered by over 22,000 volunteers, including its founders and directors. Only the teachers and coordinators in the Vastis are paid. For that, SSF works with over 200 sponsors.



### **A sense of community at the cellular level**

In a completely different part of the city—with wide avenues and less traffic—I meet **Vaishali Oak** and **Raju Sutar**. Oak is an artist who works with textiles. Her artworks travel to cities like Beijing and Mexico City for exhibitions. “By post,” she says triumphantly, “that’s the advantage of fabric—you can just fold it up.” Sutar is a painter and curator. Together they are responsible for the art project created at the request of Rainbow Umbrella as part of 10CHILDREN. Their concept focuses on the hope, ambition, and connectedness of the girls in the Vasti.

Together with sixty girls, Sutar painted a gigantic canvas in one afternoon. Expression, joy, and freedom were the key words. The colorful cloth, with handprints and brushstrokes, is connected to three open frames that display the fabric-cut favorite objects of the girls I met in the Vasti.

The piece is titled **Interwoven**.

Sutar:

“Some problems can’t be solved alone. The vast inequality of our time demands a sense of community. A feeling that must be awakened at the cellular level in everyone. We are not separate from each other, despite our different socio-economic layers and perspectives—we are intertwined. In the end, we’re all part of the same whole. That is often forgotten. And those in the hardest positions, like these girls, suffer the most from it.

With this art project, we return to them a sense of pride and creativity that is taken from them by the circumstances they live in. We've created an ecosystem together, where everyone is allowed to dream."



### **Education is the solution**

Where *Interwoven* emphasizes the importance of free dreaming, the play *Nothing is easy* highlights the importance of education.

**Deshpande** of Rainbow Umbrella wrote a script in which three girls from the Vasti end up in a dump yard.

"Every middle-class apartment building has such a place," she explains. "An empty unit where everyone dumps their junk. If you grow up in a Vasti without support from volunteers, NGOs, or scholarships, that's how you feel: like waste, locked away where no one cares."

The characters **Sunny**, **Komal**, and **Sapna** receive help from a magical woman who introduces them to historical role models to show the value of education like India's first female doctor (**Anandi Gopal**) or the first female police officer (**Kiran Bedi**). And the magical woman herself turns out to be **Savritri Phule**, a 19th-century educator and women's rights activist who fought alongside her husband for girls' education.

The message is clear: women's empowerment and life improvement begin with education.

To Western ears, it may sound like a heavy-handed message. But I realize it's a harsh necessity in a reality where girls are kept home because the risk of assault is too high, and

where they usually stop schooling after marriage at eighteen—so why invest in their education beforehand?

And even if families want to, there are always other pressing financial priorities.

In one of the many buildings on the green campus of MKSSS girls' school in Pune, I talk with **Radhika Ingale** about Indian education. She supports the SHE project logistically and artistically. In the 1980s, she did theater with Godbole and Deshpande, and now she heads **SMART**, the art and media department of MKSSS.

This girls' school educates over 35,000 students—from preschool to university and PhD level. It's funded entirely by private donations, not government money.

Ingale explains that Indian education has only recently begun to move away from the British colonial curriculum, which remained dominant even after independence. Slowly, there's a shift toward a more Indian curriculum based on Indian thinkers, historians, and educators.

Primary and secondary education increasingly adopts a holistic approach, emphasizing not just knowledge and academic preparation but also social, emotional, and physical development. Skills like problem-solving, critical thinking, and collaboration are encouraged to help students understand both themselves and the world.

When I ask why girls are taught separately from boys—shouldn't boys and girls learn together how to respect and protect each other?—Ingale replies:

“Just to be clear: in India, there are now more highly educated women than men.

128 years ago, education for women was forbidden. The progress has been enormous.

The girls who come here come from families with very little means. Their parents would never allow them to attend school during puberty if a girls-only school like ours didn't exist.

And of course, we don't completely separate them from boys: there are male teachers, boys are welcome on campus—we're an open institution.”

### **A global community**

The evening before the premiere of *Nothing is easy*, **Renuka Chaudhari**, who plays Komal, speaks about her role:

“She struggles with a man who seems kind, but actually abuses her. I come from a better social background than my character, but harassment happens in all layers of society. Even in my circles, girls don't dare to talk about it because they fear their parents will impose restrictions. We all want to live as freely as possible. But it's important to talk to someone when something like that happens. That's what we show in the play.”

**Shirin Barve**, who plays Sunny, is nervous:

“As a child, I also sometimes wanted to be a boy, because when guests came over, my brother could lounge around in his pajamas while I had to sit up straight.

But I'm nervous about performing for girls from a part of society I've never had real

contact with. I don't know what it's like to live their lives. I hope the play gives them the courage to solve their own problems. But maybe they'll think: who are you to speak? You don't understand anything about my life."

Barve's fears turn out to be unfounded.

During the **two-day festival**, everything comes together.

By day, the auditorium of MKSSS hosts a congress with various volunteer organizations, a street theater group of girls from the Vasti (who write, rehearse, and perform their own pieces), local politicians, and activists from Pune and surrounding areas.

**Godbole** sets the tone in his opening speech:

"This conference is for the girls. We are the guests, not they."

Girls involved in SSF's programs introduce the speakers and share what they've learned.

One of them, **Siddhi Nigot**, says:

"I have confidence in myself, in my ambitions and goals.

You can only achieve those yourself—without constantly comparing yourself to others or feeling small because society looks down on you.

SSF taught us to speak our challenges out loud, look for solutions, and make our own decisions."

**Kondejkar** of SSF describes the collaboration with 10CHILDREN and the various artists as enriching:

"Through art, girls can express themselves in new ways. This project goes beyond social borders, language barriers, and national boundaries.

In the end, SHE is simply a girl next door who wants to share her thoughts and feelings—just like anyone else."

**Dr. Neelam Gorhe**, vice president of the Maharashtra Legislative Council and chairwoman of SAK (a women's rights organization), underscores the importance of the gathering and commits to creating conditions that allow such projects to continue in the future.

In the evening, visitors view the exhibition and watch the documentary **विद्ये विना** (*Without knowledge/learning*).

Then, the performance begins.

Students from MKSSS, groups from the Vasti, congress participants, and local guests crowd into the large arena.

The divide between physical and social distance disappears.

Afterward, everyone—audience and actors—openly shares experiences and feelings.

**For Liesbeth Coltof and Dennis Meyer**, 10CHILDREN Pune is a success in multiple ways.

Just as SSF emphasizes that it can only point out opportunities, while the girls must take their own steps, Coltof and Meyer stress that they don't want to dictate how local partners shape the project.

They offer inspiration and a theme, plant a seed, keep it alive, listen, think along, offer preparatory workshops and lectures, give dramaturgical and directing advice—and eventually, they step back.

**Coltof:**

“We’re not the only ones who *are* 10CHILDREN.

The partners in all those different countries *together* make up 10CHILDREN.

They have to work based on their own needs and insights.

And that’s been done wonderfully here—connections were made that didn’t exist before, with great impact.

**Vaishali Oak** is now working with women from the Vasti through SSF to create textile-based businesses—for instance, by making bags.

**Rainbow Umbrella** will continue this way of working, collaborating with children in the Vasti and various artists.

I hope someone finds funding for them.

I hate that we can’t provide it.

But so far, no fund wants to support us.

For social funders, the project is too artistic; for artistic funders, it’s too social.”

**Meyer** adds:

“It’s important to understand that social change doesn’t happen in grand, globally visible leaps.

But for all participants, something changes:

in awareness, in confidence, in connection, in thinking about the meaning of art, or in breaking out of isolation.

All these small steps are necessary.

And slowly, they reach more and more people.

We’re seeing how 10CHILDREN is spreading like an oil slick—and we’re working toward making the stories and solutions of the children in this growing global community visible to an ever-larger audience.”

**Documentary विद्ये विना (Without knowledge/learning)**

In the short documentary *Without knowledge/learning*, **Tejas Kulkarni** and **Mahesh Khandare** use carefully composed images to offer a glimpse into life in the Vastis.

Studying beside a garbage heap because there’s no space at home, tightly packed houses made of plastic and corrugated metal, decaying rickshaws, colorful fabrics hanging on clotheslines.

Girls talk about their dreams, and mothers speak about their struggles to give their daughters a better life than they had themselves.

Here too, the key word is *education*, and the film closes with the wise words of **Savritri Phule**, the 19th-century teacher, feminist, and poet:

“Oppression is the consequence of a lack of education.”

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## 10CHILDREN – What's Next

10CHILDREN will be part of the **Westwind Festival in Düsseldorf (Germany)** from **31 May to 6 June 2025**.

Upcoming editions include:

- **Cape Town**, on the responsibilities children carry within family life *(no date yet)*
- **São Paulo**, about Indigenous children growing up in the invisible corners of the city *(no date yet)*
- **Accra (Ghana)**, about child labour *(no date yet)*
- **Curaçao**, about boys and their chances and opportunities *(2026)*
- **Sittard-Geleen (Netherlands)**, in collaboration with Het Laagland, about transportation *(2027)*

In **2028**, a **10CHILDREN festival in Amsterdam** will present work from all previous editions and host a multi-day conference for international exchange.