# FIGHTING A DIVIDE

**THIS 20-YEAR-OLD IS HELPING WOMEN FIND A PLACE IN THE TECH WORLD**

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In a classroom full of boys, Aashana Shroff was used to being one of the few girls who was keen to study computer science.

"I completed Class XI and Class XII from Chirec International School and my friend and I were the only two girls in the batch," says Aashana, adding, "I would sometimes feel sad when all of the boys would form a group together to work on a project for our school work and my friend and I would be left alone."

However, she adds that her love for the the subject helped her not to think too much about the gender imbalance in her classroom.

But it was only when the 20-year-old moved to the US to study computer science and economics at Stanford University in California that she realised how far left behind women really are in the tech sector.

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"There is this whole movement going on in the US, one aimed at inclusion of women in this sector," says Aashana, who was herself, motivated to usher in the change back home. "If you look at the scenario, especially in India, there aren't many women in the tech sector, there is gender disparity, one that I feel needs to be addressed and dealt with," she says.

And that's how she came up with Girls Code Camp (GCC), the prototype for which was launched at Chirec in December 2014. Last summer, a team of students from Stanford University taught introductory computer science workshops to 500 girls across five schools in Hyderabad. "When we asked the students to name top men in the technology sector, most of them said Steve Jobs or Mark Zuckerberg. But when we asked them about women in the sector, they were unable to answer," says Aashana. "Did you know that even though Charles Babbage is called as the 'father of computer', it was Ada Lovelace who wrote the notes down for the invention? Or the fact that even the CEO of YouTube (Susan Wojcicki), Yahoo (Marissa Mayer) and COO of Facebook (Sheryl Sandberg) are all women? These were some of the insights that we shared with the girls during the workshop, where the idea was to give them women role models to look up to. And



**WORKING TOWARDS A SOLUTION:** Aashana Shroff during one of the workshop sessions that were conducted in the city last summer

the kids did enjoy the session. They found it interactive, fun and since we, as instructors, were so young, they found they could relate to us easily," she adds.

In its very first year of existence, GCC has garnered the support of Stanford University's Haas Center for Public Service. "There are 300 million young women in India. We, at GCC, are on a mission to make these 300 million young women come up with 300 million solutions to India's problems. Our long term vision is to extend GCC's programming to government school students, and girls with limited access to technology. The schools we have worked with in the past

are privileged lot, so we want to extend our activities where such privileges are absent. We are already in conversation with our partners in India and the United States to accomplish this in a sustainable manner," she says.

The two-day introductory workshop also comprised mobile application development, where students learn to develop their own Instagram clone, web development, where students learnt the basics of HTML, CSS and Javascript to build an online, dynamic game such as Flappy Bird or snake and hands-on tinkering, where students used Arduino boards and electric kits to build and

programme interactive toys, sparkling bracelets and their own fabric or fruit pianos. "Just because you have taken up computer science, doesn't mean you will end up as an engineer in a software company. The knowledge can be used at a larger context. Because the truth is everything is now technologically driven and you need to know how to use this tool effectively," she says.

And now, Aashana and her team are hosting a hackathon on December 26 at Chirec International for girls in the age groups of eight to 12. "GCC Hack Day to provide an opportunity for the girls to leverage the skills they learnt to build something that they are passionate about. This is a one-of-a kind hackathon catered especially for female students at the middle and high school level," she says.