

STRENGTHENING EXISTING SYSTEMS FOR PREVENTION OF CHILD MARRIAGE

AN INITIATIVE OF **HAQ: CENTRE FOR CHILD RIGHTS**

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH **JABALA AND M V FOUNDATION**



ABOUT US

HAQ: Centre for Child Rights, based in Delhi, India, began working in October 1998 and was formally registered under the Societies Registration Act, in June 1999. HAQ focuses on children in a holistic way – as Actors in our society, as Citizens of Today and as Adults of the Future. HAQ seeks to recognise, protect and promote all rights for all children in an integrated manner, making crosscutting linkages between all categories of children, especially children who are disadvantaged on account of their gender, caste, class, ethnicity, ability and location, and issues affecting them.

HAQ works through its two main programmes- *Children and Governance* and *Child Protection*. It works as a resource and support base providing information, referral service, legal aid, training and capacity building of all those working with children or on issues concerning them, and the children themselves.

CHILD MARRIAGE STRENGTHENING EXISTING SYSTEMS FOR PREVENTION OF CHILD MARRIAGE

Child Marriage is an age old custom in India and has continued despite social reform movements and legislations against it. Over the years, along with culture “safety of girls”, “having to pay lower dowry for younger girls” have become additional reasons given to justify early marriage.

Needless to say, child marriage is a violation of all human rights of children. While it has severe health

“We paros belong nowhere. We are treated like animals. If a man has to choose between leaving a local woman and one from outside, he kicks us out; if a man is in need of money, we are sold,” said Rubina, originally from Assam, who was forced into marriage at 16.

CONSEQUENCES OF EARLY MARRIAGE:

Early marriage causes girls to lose their freedom and dignity. It is bad for their health. The age difference between the brides and the grooms creates problems in their relationships. If the husband dies, lifelong the girl is a widow. Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) is higher in child mothers, babies are born with deficiencies, more prone to have disabilities.

REASONS FOR EARLY MARRIAGE:

Fear of their daughters getting into relationships and eloping with their boyfriends, and that it would spoil her chance at finding a husband later, families face financial insecurity so want to send their girls away, as the girl gets older the dowry increases, girls are a financial burden on parents because of marriage related costs

Cut- off from native places, ‘paro’ or ‘molki’ women serve as bonded labour in the farm land and households. (Subrata Biswas/ HT) Photos



Source: <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/when-women-come-cheaper-than-cattle/article1-1199052.aspx> accessed on 28 April 2014

implications, what has often not been addressed enough is the aspect of the child's violation of the right to protection. Moreover, it has continued to be looked upon as a social evil instead of crime. Not surprising therefore that the Child Marriage Prohibition and Regulation Act, 2006, remains unenforced in most places.

While both girls and boys are victims of child marriage in the country, it is definitely the girls who remain most vulnerable. It does not help that the Fundamental Right to Education is guaranteed to children only up to the age of 14 years. Girls who finish elementary education are the "prime targets" for child marriage. In fact keeping girls in school is an effective way of delaying marriage. And the girls themselves have come to recognise this.

Falling sex ratio in some states is yet another factor that has contributed to early and forced marriages. Under age girls are trafficked to states that have lesser numbers of girls and women, thanks to high sex-selective abortion over the years are yet another aspect of child marriage.

OUR STRATEGY

HAQ' strength lies in working on children and governance. Hence, recognizing the serious implications of child marriage in the country, HAQ: Centre for Child Rights, in partnership with MV Foundation (MVF) and Jabala Action Research Group (Jabala) is implementing a project on prevention of child marriage through the strengthening of existing governance systems in two states- West Bengal and Telengana which was earlier Andhra Pradesh in 2012. This project is jointly supported by the MacArthur Foundation and the Ford Foundation.

The focus and strength of this initiative lies in its systems approach to preventing a social evil. The key strategy is to focus on the governance system and work towards the strengthening of the existing state mechanisms/structures/institutions through training and monitoring of their functions, and holding them accountable in implementation of the law on child marriage.

Simultaneously, the project focuses on, sensitising and supporting the communities, local self governments, women's self help groups, religious leaders and youth groups to take action to prevent child marriages. Creating and empowering adolescent girls groups is yet another important thrust of the project. This enables them to not just mobilise support from the concerned officials, but also hold them accountable for their inaction. The purpose is to bring together duty bearers and community to form a mechanism that responds to and prevents child marriage.

Introduction of the Integrated Child Protection Scheme in the year 2009-10 has given this project an additional mechanism to address child marriage as a child protection issue. The scheme aims at creating a protective environment for children and creating child protection systems at the local level in the form of village, block and district child protection committees, which are supposed to oversee the functioning of the scheme and laws relating to children's protection, including the child marriage law.

The HAQ programme aims to take up learning and findings from the field for further advocacy at the state and national level.



FORMATION OF PROFESSIONAL SOCCER TEAM OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS

A girls football team has been formed by Jabala in West Bengal. This team consists of many survivors of child marriage. The football team was initiated prior to the child marriage project in Murshidabad district but has been integrated with it. It has been found being in the foot ball team helps girls gain confidence to withstand child marriage and also help others. It also helps the survivors to rebuild their confidence and self esteem

Negotiation with the families has an impact to a great extend in changing social norms. We have learned that if one child's marriage is prevented successfully through collective action; it becomes easier for another parent to opt out of the child marriage. In a way it is about breaking the silence on harmful cultural practice.

SOME OF THE KEY STRATEGIES ARE:

- Setting up and facilitation of child protection / prevention of child marriage committees at the village level.
- Facilitation of Adolescent Girls Groups (AGG).
- Engagement with village level groups, committees, duty bearers and individuals who can play an influential role in prevention of child marriage.
- Creation and facilitation youth groups, which are mostly male.
- Awareness on child marriage through rallies, public events and gatherings, development of Information Education and Communication(IEC) material (wall painting, flex banners, handbills, moving exhibitions etc.).
- Advocacy at the State and National Level.
- While it is important to go on creating awareness about the ill-effects of early marriage, it is also important to stress on the fact that it is illegal and hence a crime- liable to criminal action.

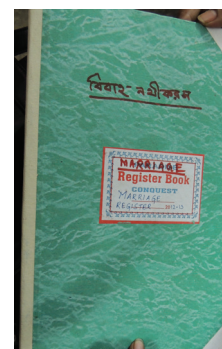
One can already see some results:

- Over last one and a half years 70 marriages in West Bengal (WB) and 75 marriages in Telegana have been stopped or postponed in the villages which are part of the project.
- After a year's intervention, students and teachers are coming forward with information about child marriages in the offing.
- In both, states government officials at the district and block/ mandal/panchayat levels have taken the lead in some of the activities such as creating and distributing IEC (Information Education and Communication) materials such as handbills, flex banners and wall paintings etc. They are participating in the meetings organised under the project and are inviting project team members to participate in their meetings. Most importantly they have started to include prevention of child marriage as an agenda in their meetings.
- Concerned government officials and the police have been stopping child marriages from taking place. The responsible officers of various departments come together and motivate the parents to postpone or cancel the underage marriage.
- Religious leaders have been mobilised, especially the priests / moulavis/ pundits who conduct the marriages and some of them have taken the initiative to influence others. They have put up notices outside their homes saying that they do not conduct under-age marriages and are demanding proof of age.



“I am deeply touched by this programme. I make it my priority to work on this issue because it is my community and these are my people.”

Block Revenue Officer (BRO),
Amravad Block, Mahbubnagar,
Telegana.





- Equally important are the local politicians across political parties. They have been approached and their support elicited. After consistent interactions with these individuals, there has been a reduction in the number of cases where they were trying to influence intervention on preventing child marriages.
- Adolescent girls and male youth groups have been formed in the villages and they are acting as leaders and peer educators. They are also taking the initiative report on proposed child marriages that they are aware of so that action can be taken. In some cases they have even mustered the courage to call the local child helpline (CHILDLINE). At times the girls whose marriage is being considered in the family have approached the village level functionaries such as the early childhood care centre (anganwadi) worker, teacher, our project team members etc. and have asked for support.

- Marriage registers have been initiated in panchayats in West Bengal. Panchayat members are taking the lead in speaking against child marriages and have even been involved in preventing them.
- Several communities are taking a pledge to prevent child marriages and not let it occur in their own homes.



- Thus while empowering adolescent girls (in and outside schools) is an important strategy to prevent their marriage; the governance system is being strengthened to respond when any girl is at risk of getting married.
- After interventions over the last one and a half years and after some child marriages having been stopped by members of the child marriage prevention committees set up in the villages, there has been a drop in instances of child marriage.
- The impact of the activities and events is not limited to the project area but is goes beyond it. Due to wide publicity through various IEC materials, including the contact numbers of responsible officials, people in surrounding areas are also taking action to prevent child marriages. In both states senior government officials are now interested in expanding area of the project and have requested the teams to provide guidance on setting up the system by sharing their experiences.



“The first time the police and Block Development Officer came and stopped a child marriage, the villagers thought that it was a one off incident. The second time it happened, they realized that the government is serious. Since then no child marriages have taken place in the village in the last six months”.

Woman Member of the Child Marriage Prevention Committee in a village in Murshidabad District, West Bengal



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Facebook Page: <https://www.facebook.com/end.childmarriage.India>

(A social media space where individuals and organisations having concerns and/ or working towards ending child marriage come together for sharing and learning.)