

## **Strengthening Existing Systems for Prevention of Child Marriage**

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### **Organisation**

HAQ Centre for Child Rights

### **Region**

West Bengal and Telangana, India

### **Length of programme**

January 2012 to March 2015

### **Supported by**

Jabala Action Research Organisation, M.V. Foundation  
Donors, MacArthur Foundation and Ford Foundation

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## **1. Project summary**

HAQ is working to strengthen existing systems within the government and at the community level to prevent child marriage.

The project works to:

- Build the capacity of government officials so they are able to fulfil their obligations.
- Mobilise girls, boys, mothers, school teachers, and religious and caste leaders to stop child marriages.

## **2. What is /are the anticipated outcomes of the project as identified in the Girls Not Brides Theory of Change?**

- Robust legal framework against child marriage in place that sets 18 as the minimum legal age for marriage and protects girls' and women's rights.
  - Increased accountability and monitoring of national / regional / community institutions.
  - Families and communities and young people are increasingly aware of the harmful impact of child marriage and alternatives available.
  - Girls are increasingly aware of their rights.
  - Girls have the opportunity to develop solidarity with one another through peer groups and collective action.
  - Increased access of married and unmarried girls to health, education, economic and legal support.
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## **3. What are the key activities of the project?**

### **Capacity building**

HAQ works with government officials and community groups to sensitise, mobilise and build their capacity to protect child rights and prevent child marriages.

This may involve having one-on-one discussions or organising workshops with key officials to train them in child protection issues or ensure they have the capacity to use the powers vested in them by the government to take the required action. For example, in Telengana, between May 2012 and September 2014, 58 circulars were issued in two districts by different officials addressing subjects such as 'forming child marriage prevention committees' at village and mandal level as well as encouraging officials to attend regional coordination meetings, review meetings with priests or participate in training programmes organised by MV Foundation and round tables with political parties.

### **Providing support**

Providing support to girls, their families and officials to enable them to prevent or postpone marriage until the legal age is an important part of HAQ's work.

Government functionaries and especially frontline officials working at the village level, are hesitant and often scared to intervene in cases of child marriage as it may lead to reprisals and even violence against them. Supporting these officials by linking them to local NGOs and community groups is therefore important in building momentum to intervene and stop child marriages.

HAQ also supports girls who report a child marriage by notifying government officials and the community support structures that can help. For girls who are already married, HAQ works with the family and others involved in the marriage to ensure that she is safe, can continue her education and has support via existing government programmes and schemes.

### **Creating space for action**

HAQ has also created task forces at the district and block levels, child protection committees at the village level as well as parents, youth and girls groups all designed to mobilise against child marriage.

- Task forces at the block and district level take responsibility for coordinating and monitoring activities at the village level, providing support wherever necessary. They review child protection issues, collect information on child marriages and take action in the case of proposed child marriages that have been reported.
- Village level child protection committees maintain a database of children in the village, ensure births and marriages are registered, and that children are attending school as well as following up on cases of child marriage.
- Dialogue with adolescents and youth groups helps to empower girls to make informed decisions about their own marriages, and enables young boys to take a stand and participate in efforts to prevent child marriages. It also builds young people's capacity to understand their rights and make formal complaints so they too can be change-makers and peer educators in their own communities.
- Engaging duty bearers and individuals who can play an influential role in preventing child marriage is also integral to HAQs work. HAQ endeavours to work with self-help groups, religious groups and individual religious leaders, political groups and leaders, village elders and duty bearers including the teachers, and panchayat members.

### **Documenting progress**

As part of HAQ's learning on what works to end child marriage, they ensure that processes are properly recorded and that analysis of what's worked is undertaken. This allows them to create models which are replicable.

### **Advocacy**

HAQ advocates for better implementation of existing support mechanisms at the local level. They use evidence to advocate for the creation of new policies, programmes and laws at the national level.

## **4. Has the project been evaluated?**

There has been a mid-project evaluation which was used for internal learning between January and April 2014.

## **5. What have been the challenges in implementing the project and how were they overcome?**

- Child marriage continues to be a deeply culturally embedded issue. Unlike in the past, most communities and parents are well aware that there is a legal age of marriage as well as the harmful effects of marrying their daughters at a young age, but still the practice continues.
- Even though the legal age of marriage is 18 years for girls, poor implementation and contradictions between civil and customary law mean child marriages continue to be widespread and are still valid unless voided by the minor party in the marriage.
- A sensitive political landscape with frequent transfers of officials and government officials means creating lasting change is challenging.

- While child marriage used to be practiced across castes and class, it is now mostly confined to the poor; the lower castes and the most marginalised groups. The priests, who conduct the child marriages for example, do not marry off their own children before they are adults. Alleviating poverty is therefore integral to ending child marriage and must be addressed.
  - Child marriage is still a sensitive issue with threats frequently directed at girls who have reported a child marriage as well as social workers and field staff working on this issue.
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## **6. What factors were important in the success of the project?**

1. Working with credible partner organisations in the community as well as the local government has been invaluable. Being able to trust them to take ownership in taking forward the agenda has been integral to our approach.
  2. Adopting a 'partnership' approach with both the government and community has helped to bring the two together wherever needed.
  3. The availability and the back-up support provided by the field team to both the government officials as well as community members has meant our work could be efficient and effective.
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## **7. What pieces of advice would you give other civil society organisations considering implementing a similar project**

1. Our biggest learning has been that we cannot work with the community on one single issue (in this case child marriage). Any intervention that we make has to be informed by multiple lenses and embedded in a broader agenda such as child rights or child protection. Dwelling on one issue makes the community defensive and is also a lost opportunity to work on inter-related issues.
2. While the law may be a guiding document, it cannot be the only framework to work with as immediate implementation of the law (through penal action for a cultural and social norm or practice) will potentially lead to too much social unrest, the withdrawal of a community's willingness to support other interventions and potentially drives the practice further underground. The old method of working with the community to change norms cannot be underestimated.
3. Working with state systems to increase their performance and hold them accountable must be done in combination with working with the community. Providing support to girls and families who seek help is crucial as is building the capacity of grassroots workers in communications, child rights and documenting their work.