

# Girls but not Brides

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*Leading to a lifetime of disadvantage and deprivation, child marriage is at the root of many gender-related problems and is a clear violation of child rights. When this happens in poor, underprivileged families, the results are all the more distressing*

After completing three months with PRADAN and my field engagements with the rural communities of Jaisinghnagar block, Shadol district, Madhya Pradesh (MP), last November, I came back to Kerala for my home visit. A news report about girl child marriages caught my attention. Almost all the TV news channels in Kerala reported the news that four girls from two districts of Kerala had got married in the last three months. The source of this news was an investigation report submitted by the local police to the Women's Commission, Kerala.

I found the reaction extraordinary because in Jaisinghnagar, over the last few months, I had seen many rural families where the girls had got married at as young as 12 years. The marriages took place with the knowledge of village representatives, local leaders, government agencies, and the local and national NGOs working in the area. I wondered why the authorities in MP had not responded to the information whereas in Kerala there was a strong reaction. The law enforcement system and the constitutional rights are the same for everyone in this country. Why then are only some States alert to such transgressions?

Clearly, these problems are partially because of a weak law enforcement system or the lack of proper media attention and partially because of the social vulnerabilities of some groups of people. This remains a great challenge for professionals working in this area.

Child marriages are a clear violation of child rights. They impact the gender structure, engender inequalities and, in the long run, are the cause for most of the gender-related problems that rural women face. One important fact is that these practices are happening mostly in poor and under-privileged families.

According to UNICEF, "Child marriage, defined as a 'formal marriage or informal union before the age of 18', is a reality for both boys and girls, although girls are disproportionately more affected. Child marriage is widespread and can lead to a lifetime of disadvantage and deprivation." India has the highest number of child brides in the world. Approximately, 47 per cent of the girls are getting married below the age of 18; of these, 18 per cent, get married before the age of 15.

MP is amongst the worst-affected states in India, the others being Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. MP has a higher rate of girl child marriage than the country's average rate. The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (PCMA) 2007 has set the minimum age of marriage at 21 for men and 18 for women, and the violation of this is a punishable offence. This remains a big concern for development professionals and this is where the law enforcement system begins to weaken. Another important fact to be considered is the Infant Mortality Rate (IMR). According to UNICEF, the IMR is 76 per cent among women aged less than 20 years with 50 per cent for women aged between 20 to 25 years. One in every six girls in India begins child bearing between the ages of 15 and 19. These early pregnancies increase the risk of complications during delivery and of maternal and child mortality.

### PRADAN'S APPROACH

Working as a development agency, PRADAN in Jaisinghnagar has its own agenda and vision on gender, caste and class-related issues. Services in the form of training programmes, focussed

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group discussions, displaying of posters, etc., have been extended to the communities. When I was in Kusmi, a small village in Jaisinghnagar block, I first observed that these practices were an integral part of the lifestyle of the people.

I was approached by Durga, a young girl of 14, who requested me to talk to her elder brother to allow her to study further. Just like every girl in that village she was under pressure to get married at an early age. When I

talked to her brother, he gave me arguments, which I could not counter. He believed that there was no benefit for a girl child to be educated and that it was better for them to get married and start a family life as early as possible. Although this was a small incident, it showed me the approach and thinking of the adults on these issues. The real picture is that none of them thinks that early marriages have an impact on the future generations and on the health of the society as a whole.

### IMPACT ON SOCIETAL LIFE

The social vulnerabilities that, according to me, are the reasons of this 'social injustice' are related to the economic standing and the educational levels of these families. The girl child bears the brunt of the social impact of child marriages or early marriages. One of the issues that it impacts is education. Due to early marriages, girls are unable to complete their secondary school education. School registers and discussions with school teachers clearly reveal that the reason for more than 75 per cent of drop-outs among girls is because of marriage. This eventually leads to a higher level of unemployment for village women and to a system where the social standing of women remains backward.

The other grave problem is that the health of young girls and newborn babies is compromised. Often, there are complications in the early stages of pregnancy. The IMR of babies born to mothers of 16 years and below is much higher. Most adolescents in rural areas do not have any sex education and that leads to complications during the time of pregnancy. Usha Singh, an *anganwadi* teacher in Kusmi village, and Rani *bai*, an ASHA worker in Tendutol *panchayat*,

say they handle many complicated health problems of women during their pregnancy and most times the child-bearers are girls below the age of 17. They have also found that child-bearers of this age group show a reluctance to come to the clinic for regular check-ups which, then, leads to a delay in identifying any problems at an early stage.

Early marriage has an impact on the mental and physical maturity levels of boys and girls. It creates a pressure on them to take on family responsibilities at an early age. The changes that take place for boys and for girls because of early marriage are different. Boys get more respect and acceptance in their families and society after they get married whereas girls face more restrictions, have limited interaction with the community, increased work pressure and low access to society. This hampers their social, psychological and political lives from an early age and leads to a situation in which they have very little say in decision-making, lack of opportunities and fewer choices of lifestyle.

### **IMPACT ON THE GENDER STRUCTURE**

In Indian rural communities wherein a higher level of patriarchal norms exist and male dominance is prevalent in each and every

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aspect, girl child marriages contribute to shape such a gender structure, which results in unpleasant effects on women. Clearly, girls get married only because they are girls and they have no say in the matter. This demonstrates the lack of a girl's rights and ownership on her life, and the lack of freedom to take her own decisions.

The problems are rooted deeply in the social norms and practices of the community where in men

in the family always want to see their women rely on them. The conviction is that the men have the right over a woman's life, and the power of taking decisions about her life should always rest in a man's hands. This shows us how men perceive their women and their role in the family. Most of the gender structures in the rural areas have been defined in terms of roles and responsibilities of men and women in the family as well as in society. The established family set-up and practices require women to perform unpaid household work. The most underrated and unrecognized work on farms, the homestead and in households is carried out by women. Women are entrusted with the role of enlarging the family workforce and they are exploited by imposing the idea of role descriptions and the ideology of motherhood. Men always want to have a command over the women's lives. When a girl marries early, a clear message is given to the women that the decision-making power about their lives always rests in the hands of the men in the family.

Early marriage limits the employment prospects of girls. It hampers their accessibility to schools, restricts their social life and the quality of mental growth. It ultimately results in fewer employment prospects for women

and also prevents them from achieving self-sustainable and dignified lives. The lack of skill development and knowledge in girls restricts them from contributing to the finances of the family.

It also affects their psychological empowerment and thought process and eventually leads girls to rely on the male members of the family; it results in the girls accepting a role of dependency and support seeking. Unless there is a sea change in this social practice, poverty cannot be reduced and women will continue to remain the most vulnerable section in society. Until we bring about a change in these processes and practices, the vicious circle of patriarchy, dependency and poverty will continue and have an even greater negative impact on coming generations.

Another major finding is the connection between gender inequality and patriarchal practices in society. The distinctions, discrimination and inequalities between the genders set the stage for their future roles in the family and the basic economic outcomes from them. The sad fact is that it is inbuilt in patriarchal societies in the villages of Jaisinghnagar and Gohparu that there is very little expectation from a girl child in terms of economic, social and physical contribution to the family.

Saroj bai of Patori village, Gohparu, says that she could never enjoy her school life as the boys did. She liked school and spending time with her friends. At the age of 14, however, her parents got her married and she moved to her husband's home. That stopped her from achieving what she wanted to in her life. She explains that her parents did not see

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any advantage or benefit to the family by sending her to school.

The two main obstacles to encouraging the education of the girl child are the high opportunity costs and the lack of economic benefit from educating a girl. A girl is considered part of her husband's family and, therefore, any money spent on her education is only going to benefit her marital home and not the home of her birth. This results in parents preparing their

daughter to become a capable, domestic, unpaid labour.

Families are proud to raise girls, who are obedient, modest and respectful to parents and elders. This pressure makes girls more inhibited and restricted. The girls, often, see marriage as an escape and an opportunity to break free from the barriers imposed on them. Sukhmanti Singh from Amjhar village, Gohparu, said that marriage at an early age was her own choice because it helped her to move away from the obstacles she faced in her own home. Her parents never treated her as equal to their two sons, whether it was in terms of school education, clothes, food or decision-making in the family. She thought that if she were married, she would have a new place to live, where she might have dignity and equal choices. Now, she is the eldest daughter-in-law in her marital home and the other family members treat her with respect. Like Sukhmanti Singh, there are many women in Jaisinghnagar and Gohparu blocks, whose lives are positively affected by early marriages.

In a patriarchal system, the father or the eldest male member has the responsibility and the authority to protect the family's honour and reputation by protecting the sexuality of the

girl child in the family. Early marriage is a way of handing the responsibility over to the marital family and the girls have 'no say' in the matter. Once a girl is married, it becomes her responsibility to prove her fertility to the new family, and she is under compulsion to bear a child as soon as possible without regard for her health. According to the ANM, ASHA workers and *anganwadi* teachers in some villages, there is a strong connection between infant mortality and the age of the mother. Pointing to three instances of infant deaths from Naktitola and Tutatola in Tendudol *panchayat*, ASHA worker Sangeeta Singh says that early pregnancies weaken the physical strength of women and lead to health complications.

There is also a connection between girl child marriages and the gender structure. Early marriages make women dependent and helpless, and vulnerable to control by male members of their family and that, in turn, results in them becoming the most vulnerable and disadvantaged section of society. Sometimes, it is difficult to say whether the hierarchal and patriarchal norms are the root cause of this practice or whether girl-child marriages actually strengthen those social norms. However, one thing is certain that the men always enjoy a greater command over the women through these early marriages.

## REASONS

In many of our gender training sessions, we have tried to investigate the reasons for early marriages and whether the causes are poverty, social standing, traditional values, literacy rate, patriarchal social norms, and infrastructure availability. The main reason, according to our observation, was that it was because their ancestors had followed the same practices and these are now socially accepted norms that they cannot change. These same norms give

rise to the fear of losing the family honour if a girl or a boy were to marry someone from another caste. However, even in this situation it affects the girl's family more. About 70 per cent of the participants in our gender training said that if a girl eloped with a boy of another caste, it would bring more dishonour to her family than if a boy were to run away and marry a girl of another caste. The parents of girls are anxious at all times that something unpleasant may happen to their daughter.

Another reason most families favour early marriages is because a girl child is considered a liability for the family. Early marriages are a solution to get rid of this liability. Due to extreme poverty in the family and lack of sufficient basic resources for all family members, these child marriages are a solution to reduce family size.

Families in villages such as Amjhar, Patori and Pathar in Gohparu block revealed yet another reason for early marriages. Parents feel compelled to fulfill the grandparents' wish to see their grandchild's marriage before they expire. This, we found, was a fairly common practice. People do not always take the age of the child into consideration when under emotional pressure from the elders in the family.

In Durga's case—the 14-year-old girl who had approached me to advocate her case with her brother—the availability of infrastructure such as roads, a secondary school and electricity also influenced the decision of her brother. One of his reservations about sending her to school was about her travelling the distance to the school. I understood from his comments to me that he would have considered her request if the village had an easy access to a secondary school and a good road for her to travel to and from school.

The practice of *kanyadaan* (giving away the girl at puberty) is a very popular custom. Giving away one's daughter as a gift when she attains puberty is believed to bring wealth and prosperity to the family. In the focussed group discussion with eight women (those who were married before the age of 16) in Naktitola during a Village Level Committee (VLC) meeting, three of the women said that they were victims of this practice. They said the practice was quite common when they were growing up. They recalled that even their mothers had no say in the decision-making of their marriage of their daughters.

The women believed that because only women could understand the difficulties and struggles of getting married at early age, the 'no say' directive for women during decision-making makes the situation much worse for young girls. Impressive it is that drawing from their own experiences and struggles, these eight women have taken the decision to put an end to the barriers that restrict them and are involved in the decision-making process of their daughters' marriages. They have clearly communicated that they will not allow their daughters to get married before the age of 18. They want to give their daughters a life of dignity and self esteem.

It will be injustice if we only talk about the issues faced by the girls in the family. To a lesser degree, the practice of early marriage also affects the lives of many boys as well. Boys at 18 or below are not mature enough, both physically and mentally, to get married and take on the responsibility of a family.

### **THE GOVERNMENT'S APPROACH AND STANCE**

The Women and Child Welfare Department is undertaking the working of Akikrit Bal Vikas Pariyojana (ABVP) at the block level in every

district. (ABVP was first introduced on 2nd October 1975. In 1985, it launched its first project in Jaisinghnagar block. ABVP directly undertakes the working of the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) under the supervision of the block Child Development Project Officer (CDPO). From the year 2014, it established its separate wing for women welfare under the supervision of the block Mahila Sasaktikaran Adhikari).

The project officer in every block manages the work of supervisors. For example, Sarvari Begum, one of the supervisor at Gohparu block, coordinates the works in four *gram panchayats*. She explained to us the difficulties and struggles she faces while working with the communities to stop child marriages. The maximum number of cases of child marriage is reported from tribal societies. Practices such as *kanyadaan*, *pundaan*, etc., are very popular among the largely tribal population of Gond, Bhaiga, Kol and Paav. Changing these customary practices and traditions is difficult without an intensive effort by the government or Non-government Organizations (NGOs). A fundamental change in perceptions of the villagers needs to also take place. During her 15 years of experience with the rural community and working in various sectors such as education, the adolescent issues of girls, child nutrition, and women's health and sanitation, she admitted that preventing child marriages is one of the issues with which she encountered the most difficulty.

The Women and Child Welfare Department has its own network of resource persons, *anganwadi* and ASHA workers, which disseminates information about the ill-effects of child marriages at the village level. Their interventions have helped create awareness among the villagers of Gohparu block and also include direct action to stop 10–15 child marriages every year.

The Police department has its own limitations about intervening in the issue. Manish Bansol, Assistant Sub Inspector in Sidhi Police Station, reveals the struggles and difficulties that the police face when dealing with cases on child marriage.

A matter of concern is that only a few cases of child marriage have been reported by the community so far and these have mainly been initiated by the *anganwadi*, ASHA, ANM and sometimes by rival families. Unfortunately, even after the police intervene to stop the wedding proceedings, the community still goes ahead with it once the police go away. Some of these girls do not have a birth certificate or any other document that shows their real age. Most of the children in remote areas are born at home and the parents neglect to register their child's birth in the *panchayats*. This failure of registration of birth creates difficulties for the police department because they are unable to bring the case before the court.

Another problem is that most of these marriages are never registered. Every tribal community has its own traditional wedding customs and practices. These are not in compliance with the marriage registration requirements and cannot be registered under either of the two Marriage Acts: the Hindu Marriage Act 1955 or the Special Marriage Act 1954. Therefore, the parties neither have a proper marriage certificate nor registered documents as proof. Whereas people are not bothered about reporting these marriages to the police, they are very particular about filing a report with the police when their children elope.

Manish Bansol told us three different stories from three villages of people eloping. In two cases, the boys were more than 21 years old and were sentenced to imprisonment under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006 whereas the girls were sent back to their

parents. Police officers say that the practice is more prevalent in remote villages than in those to which they have easy access. The inaccessibility of the villages proves to be a hurdle for the police and other responsible bodies to reach the location and take action in time.

The Mahila Bal Vikas Pariyojana in both the blocks, under guidance from the district office, has organized many training programmes, awareness creation camps and workshops for adolescent girls with support, at the ground level, from *anganwadi*, ASHA workers and ANM in all its villages. The problems of accessibility, poverty, lack of family planning, illiteracy, established social norms, customary practices, high level of patriarchy and lack of women's institutions are the main hindering factors to achieving the set objectives of these programmes.

#### **EXPECTED OUTCOMES FROM PRADAN'S APPROACH**

The last four years of work on gender, class and caste issues with under-privileged tribal women in two blocks of Shahdol have given sufficient feedback to the PRADAN team to reflect on how the three aspects are interconnected. Because of the actions taken by PRADAN through its training programmes on gender, caste and class, group discussions and awareness creation in SHG and VLC meetings and grooming of women leaders to act upon these issues, the team is expecting that the women's collectives will be able to start discussions, identify problems and also seek feasible solutions to these problems. It hopes to reach out to the most deprived and silent women and to bring them to the group discussions in their respective collectives and to prepare a pool of women leaders, who will help the community take action on issues related to gender, caste and class. Engagement with

the community during meetings and training sessions revealed some positive signs of change, based on the understanding and reactions of the women participants.

Probing questions regarding early girl child marriage and the consequences of it are very common during these meetings. As facilitators and trainers on gender issues, we have tried to raise the issue among these women rather than prepare them to take physical action against it. It is more important to prepare the women to identify the social causes and problems connected with this issue rather than to advise them to take action against it. Creating awareness and involving the women in these discussions gradually creates a better level of understanding for them to conceptualize their problems and also leads to community driven action against the issues.

Although we have seen an appreciable increase in participation from the community in these trainings, an area we are lagging behind in is the absence of requisite follow-up measures in both, the pre- and post-monitoring actions after these trainings and discussions. When engaging in other topics such as livelihoods, governance and citizenship, rights and entitlements, education and much more, the team is unable to give their continuous attention and follow-ups to this matter.

As much as the post monitoring and evaluation processes are important in this matter, pre-monitoring processes are also required. Almost all these central trainings are conducted at the block level and the participants are not familiar with each other. More time is required for

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women to adjust and open up during the discussions. For this reason, the community demands that there needs to be primary level visioning, planning and problem identification training in villages. These sessions will help them understand the problems, the objectives of the trainings and also the expected outcomes.

## CONCLUSION

Undeniably, there is no more effective tool for development than the empowerment of women. An understanding of how the gender structure and child marriages are inter-connected and how the latter restricts women from enjoying their individual rights to education, enjoyment, protection from exploitation, employment and free social life is also important. Child marriages have a severe impact on a girl child's cultural, social, economic and psychological life. The reasons for the practice to continue could be many such as gender inequalities, poverty, cultural norms, protecting sexuality, lack of enough outreach of law and inadequate policies.

The practice of institutional patriarchy creates discrimination in all aspects of society. The slow outreach of law, policies and Acts in the rural areas of our country also restricts the development workers. In spite of the fact that child marriages are common among tribal communities, there has been a substantial change in the attitude of the people to the practice and there has been some decrease in the numbers compared to the previous decades. One reason for this could be the outreach and awareness about the law and the government policies.



Also, there has been an impact of the interventions of government agencies, NGOs and other community based organizations. Women do not want their daughters to suffer like they did. They know that girls are undervalued and have unfulfilled dreams because of the deeply rooted norms and practices of rural patriarchal societies; and they want to work towards change. Development workers are challenged by these social norms

and traditional practices. This experience has given me a basic insight:

**“Change in behaviour can only be possible through change in perception.”**

The first step towards change in perception is to help women imagine how they envision their life, prepare them to set their goals and make sure that these goals are achievable.