

CHILD MARRIAGE: ROBBING CHILDREN OF INNOCENCE

Good Practices in Preventing Child Marriage, Bihar



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- A world which listens to children and learns
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List of Acronyms

ANM	Auxiliary Nurse Midwife
ASHA	Accredited Social Health Activist
AWW	Anganwadi Worker
AWC	Anganwadi Centres
BEPC	Bihar Education Project Council
BCC	Behaviour Change Communication
BDO	Block Development Officer
BPL	Below Poverty Line
CBO	Community-based Organization
CBO	Community Based Organisation
DC	District Collector
DCPO	District Child Protection Officer
DLHS	District Level Household Survey
DM	District Magistrate
DPEP	District Primary Education Programme
GoB	Government of Bihar
ICDS	Integrated Child Development Scheme
IEC	Information, Education & Communication
INGO	International Non Government Organisation
NFHS	National Family Health Survey
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NGO	Non Government Organisation
NRHM	National Rural Health Mission
OBC	Other Backward Class
PRI	Panchayati Raj Institutions
PHC	Primary Health Centre
SC	Scheduled Caste
SHG	Self Help Group
SSA	Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan
VEC	Village Education Committee
VVC	Village Vigilance Committee

Introduction



Children play at the Child Friendly Space in Village Rukhminiya, Khagaria district.

The first time Gita Kumari's mother suggested she get married, she thought her mother was joking. Only 14 years old, Rita had not yet finished school. Gita laughed at the suggestion. The second time her mother mentioned it, Gita told her she wasn't interested.

Her mother did not relent.

Gita's father, Rakesh, was away in distant Bangalore, having migrated to earn a livelihood as a master mason to support his family on a daily wage of Rs 300. He was against Gita getting married, and had told his wife, Roopmati, in as many words. "She should be studying alongside her other sisters, not preparing for some joyous wedding ceremony," he told her over the phone. "My father was away at that time, and I missed him because he always supported me," Gita says, wiping her moist eyes. "I was absolutely against getting married. I wanted to continue my education along with my friends."

Wearing a faded blue salwar-kameez, Gita looks like any typical teenager. Her braided hair is pulled back and held in place with a tiny rubber band and though her ears are bereft of earrings, her shy smile is enough to add a sparkle to her face. She tells her story sitting outside her tiny hut in her village in Khagaria district in the North Indian state of Bihar.

Gita did not get married. But there are many children who are not so lucky like Gita and continue to get married at a young age.

1.1 Child Marriage in India

As per 2001 Census, the population of married children below 18 years was 63.9 lakh¹ persons (male-15.2 lakh; females-48.7 lakh). The NFHS-3 (2005-06) gives the trends of post census period. As per this survey, nearly 47.4% of women aged 20-24 were married by the age of 18 years. National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data reflects a decline in the number of girls who were married below 18 years- from 54.2% in 1992-93 to 47.4% in 2005-06.

It is thus apparent from both the data, Census 2001 as well as NFHS-3, that number of child marriages is on the decline.

1.2 Child Marriages in Bihar

However, despite the falling trend in child marriages in other parts of the country, it continues to be a serious cause for concern in Bihar, largely due to the poor socio-economic situation (the state continues to be at the bottom of the table for most development indicators - lowest Per Capita Income, lowest HDI, lowest Literacy Rate and lowest Female Literacy Rate) and social acceptance of child marriages (the average female age at marriage continues to be below 16 years)².

The National Family Health Survey -3 (NFHS 3) conducted in 2005-2006 reports that 45 percent of all women aged between 20 and 24 years were married below the legal age of 18 years. The median age at first birth is also low, at 19.8 years, with 16 percent of women already pregnant, or mothers, by 19 years of age. Over the last fifteen years the percentage of females married below the legal age has come down from 54 percent to 45 percent.

According to the District Level Household Survey-3 (DLHS-3), the mean age at marriage for boys is 21.4 years, while for girls it is 17.4 years (as against 19.5 for India). . Further, 48.2 percent girls marry before reaching 18 years of age, while for boys it is 45.2 percent (DLHS 3).

1.3 Reasons for Child Marriage

Social customs, tradition, family and societal pressures, economic conditions perpetuate the practice of child marriage. The girl child is generally considered to be a burden, to be married off as early as possible. The justification given by parents and the community is that of having to pay lower dowry (bride price) when the bride and the groom are young. Safety of the girl child from sexual violence and the inability of parents to guarantee such safety is another justification for child marriage. There is a belief that child marriage is a protection for girls against unwanted male attention and promiscuity.

Also, parents see early marriage as a way to secure the girl's future socially and economically. Lack of education and awareness about the consequences of child

¹ 10 lakh=1Mn; A **crore** (often abbreviated **cr**) is a unit in the Indian numbering system equal to ten million (10,000,000; 10⁷), or 100 lakh.

² "Age at Marriage", UNICEF India; http://www.unicef.org/india/AGE_AT_MARRIAGE.pdf.

marriage is another reason for the continuation of child marriages (educating a child will lead to 'difficulty in finding a suitable partner or become 'independent' in taking their own decisions).

1.4 Consequences of Child Marriage

Child marriage has serious consequences on the well-being of a child. It is a blatant violation of child rights. It deprives the child of her/his childhood and development to grow into an empowered adult. It denies a child her/his basic right to good health, nutrition, education, and freedom from violence, abuse and exploitation. It results in their (children) remaining illiterate and unskilled.

Child marriage, especially in the case of girls, has serious health consequences. Those aged under 15 are five times more at risk of pregnancy-related deaths than those aged over 20 years³. Women in early marriages are more likely to contract HIV/AIDS and other sexually-transmitted diseases, as well as being at greater risk from domestic violence⁴.

1.5 Legislation against Child Marriage

The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006 (PCMA, 2006) was notified by the Government of India on 10 January, 2007 to overcome the constraints of the former legislation (Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929) in effectively dealing with the problem of child marriages in India and to put in place a comprehensive mechanism. It came into force on 1 November 2007⁵.

The law seeks to prevent child marriages by making certain actions punishable and by appointing certain authorities responsible for the prevention and prohibition of child marriages. It makes child marriages voidable by giving choice to the children in the marriage to seek annulment of marriage. The law provides for punishment for an adult male above 18 years of age marrying a child. It also lays down punishment for those performing/conducting/abetting a child marriage⁶.

The State Government of Bihar has formulated and notified the 'Bihar Child Marriage Prohibition Rule 2010'. Under the Rules, Sub Divisional Officers (SDOs) have been designated as Child Marriage Prohibition Officer and the key role of District Magistrates (DMs), First Class Judicial Magistrates, Police, Family Courts, Block Development Officers (BDOs) and Sarpanch (Headman) of Panchayat Raj Institutions (local governance structures) defined. The Women Development Corporation has involved a number of Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) to bring about convergence of interventions and strategy on the issue of child marriage.

³ "Ending Child Marriage", by International Planned Parenthood Federation, quoting UNICEF. (2001) "Early Marriage: Child Spouses". Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research.

⁴ "Early Marriage, a Harmful Traditional Practice", UNICEF, 2005.

⁵ Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, The Handbook on the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, pp 9

⁶ Ibid, pp 10, 12

1.6 International Convention and Instruments

India is signatory to several international human rights instruments that protect children from all forms of abuse and exploitation. These include the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Convention on Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and International Covenant on Economic Social Cultural Rights (ESCR)⁷.

1.7 Government Schemes & Programmes: Bihar



Girl children in a discussion in Village Siswah tola, district Khagaria

The Department of Social Welfare (DSW), Government of Bihar (GoB), is actively seeking to strengthen legal and administrative measures to address the issue of child marriage in Bihar, and is in the process of reviewing Rules to implement Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006 (PCMA 2006).

The state government's has also rolled out efforts to cater to the needs of girls through mainstreaming their concerns in a number of initiatives/ policies & schemes like:

1. *Kanya Vivah Yojana*: which encourages marriage only on completion of legal age for girls. Under the scheme, the government will issue a bond of Rs. 2,000 at the time of the girl child's birth. The bond will mature when the girl attains 18 years of age.

⁷ Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, The Handbook on the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, pp 7

2. *Mukhyamantri Kanya Suraksha Yojana*: wherein the state government would invest Rs. 2,000 for the first two girls in a family living under the Below Poverty Level (BPL) and born on or after November 22, 2007. The amount of Rs.2,000 will be invested by Women Development Corporation on behalf of Government of Bihar in UTI-Children's Career Balanced Plan-Growth Option. On completion of 18 years an amount equal to the maturity value will be paid to the girl child (Rs. 18,000).

3. *Mukhyamantri Balika Cycle Yojana*: under which a schoolgirl gets a cheque of Rs 2,000 on passing class VIII to buy a bicycle to enable her to go to school every day.

4. *Mukhyamantri Balika Poshak Yojana*: under which girl students from Class VI to VIII get Rs.700 every year for purchasing two pairs of uniforms.

5. *Mukhyamantri Nari Shakti Yojana*: to empower women to form Self Help Group (SHGs), and

While schemes like *Mukhyamantri Balika Cycle Yojana* and *Mukhyamantri Balika Poshak Yojana*, are not direct programmes for elimination of child marriage practices, they, however, help the girl child to continue her education, thus significantly impacting on reducing child marriages in the State.

The current model of Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) is based on preventing child marriage through social mobilization, strengthening child protection systems, linking children with school education and ensuring a strong social protection system for community to access and availability of Government services and provisions (health, education, livelihood and information).

2. Convergent Approach to Child Marriage in Khagaria District, Bihar

2.1 Context

The State of Bihar shares its border with the neighbouring country Nepal. On 18 August 2008, heavy monsoon (rainy season) resulted in a breach of Kusaha embankment, inundating hundreds of villages in North Bihar districts of Khagaria, Supaul, Araria, Saharsa, Madhepura and Purnea. The flood submerged most of the Kosi alluvial fan area, affecting 4,642,000 people across 18 districts and 2,528 villages; the cropped area affected (in Hectare (ha)⁸) was 338,000 while 387,189 houses were fully damaged⁹.

Families sought shelter in camps, roads, railway stations, alongside rail tracks and embankments. With families and communities displaced and separated across district boundaries, the emergency eroded or considerably weakened familiar community structures, aggravating in its wake many already existing child protection related issues like child labour, child marriage, child trafficking, and violence against children.

⁸ 1 Hectare= 10,000 square metres

⁹ SITUATION REPORT FLOODS 2008, Ministry of Home Affairs, 2008

2.2 Strategy

Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) concerned about the vulnerability of children and to prevent incidences of child marriages in the affected area of Khagaria, stepped-in with a holistic programme to address the same.

The approach of Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) in Khagaria district was to compliment work done by Government of Bihar and other INGOs/NGOs in ensuring a child-focused and child-centred approach to child protection by including children's 'voices' on issues impacting their lives. This was carried out across 50 villages in Khagaria and Madhepura districts, covering almost 26,000 children and 7,000 adults.

Special focus was given to participatory, meaningful engagement of children belonging to marginalised social groups, out-of-school/drop-out children", children from destitute families, child-headed households, single parent or orphaned children.

The project is located in Khagaria (and Madhepura) districts in the Northern Indian state of Bihar, across 50 villages. Partners involved in the project, include Government of Bihar, and non-governmental organizations "Kissan Vikas Trust" and "Nidan". Project outreach covers reaches out to 26000 children and 7000 adults, and key target groups include children, parents, religious leaders, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) members, teachers and community members.

Specifically, Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) target group included *children, women and adult members of socially excluded Dalit community affected by the flood, while key stakeholders included Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) members, teachers, parents, children, government service providers in village, block, district, media representatives, local leaders, adolescent, youth, I/NGOs, religious leaders and existing self help group members*, through a local-level multifaceted approach and partnership with existing civil society organizations and service delivery structures for creating enabling structures to advocate for change.

The interventions adopted by Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) include:

1. Awareness Generation for Creating an Enabling Environment for Social Change
2. Ensuring Children's Participation
3. Involving community Members
4. Multi-sectoral approach

2.3 Documentation Methodology

This documentation of this project employed a mixed methods approach. First a comprehensive literature review was conducted to ascertain current research and policy knowledge in the area. Information gained from these reviews enabled a clearer conceptualisation and focus and necessary methods and procedures to gain the information required. At various stages of the documentation process, team meetings with the collaborating organizations/NGOs/civil society actors were conducted. To

highlight areas of specialist knowledge, in-depth case studies of specific protection initiatives and cases were conducted. Qualitative experiential data formed the main source of data. This required examination of child protection methods through content analysis of available documentation and comparing it with observation of day to day activities including intervention with children, team meetings and community visits. Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) and local child protection staff were interviewed at various stages of the project. Qualitative data was achieved through observation, interviews and follow-up data quantitative data collection to examine major trends, size and impact of specific child protection interventions.

Because the child marriage project is being implemented in 50 out of 85 villages, a total of five villages (sample size) were visited in Khagaria district. In-depth qualitative interviews and discussions were held with media persons, teachers, government representatives, NGOs, PRI representatives, Child Protection Committee (CPC) and community members and children belonging to Bal Panchayats (Children's council) to get as wide a perspective of Save the Children's interventions on child marriage.

2.4 Interventions Adopted

a. When Girls and Women Win, Everyone Wins: Awareness Generation for Creating an Enabling Environment for Social Change

"During the rainy season, children are not able to attend schools as the roofs leak. The number of children in each classroom is very high; most are tightly packed in small classrooms. Teachers are not regular and are not motivated to teach us. There is no provision for recreational activities. This often keeps children away from schools since their parents have become cynical of educating their children, especially daughters. Parents prefer to get their daughters married instead...I will not remain silent when a child is abused, either through child labour or early marriage.!" –member of a Bal Panchayat (Children's Council). A champion for child rights, and fights against child marriage and discrimination.

Alongside advocating for effective implementation of laws against child marriage and gender equity, Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) is working towards creating a holistic environment that supports, builds capacity and empowers individuals, community stakeholders and organizations to change attitudes and cultural norms that perpetuate child marriage.

A critical component to this effort is **supporting awareness-raising and public education programmes** about the negative effects of child marriage to help change attitudes and strengthen duties of parents, guardians and the community to protect vulnerable girls is central to the communications strategy of Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat).



Children of the Bal Panchayat rehearse a play in village in district Khagaria

There is little doubt that Information, Education and Communication (IEC) and Behavioural Change Communication by Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) to prevent child marriage at multiple levels is **singularly responsible** for generating awareness about child marriage and, in turn, **creating tremendous social pressure** amongst communities against child marriage. These efforts span across stakeholders, and include parents, relatives, *panchayat* members, police, NGOs, social workers, district magistrates, Community Based Organisations (CBOs), school teachers, *Aganwadi* workers and Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHAs).

Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) adopted four communication approaches for awareness raising:

- a. Strengthening individual knowledge and awareness
- b. Promotion of community awareness
- c. Use of mass media/folk media
- d. Leveraging the media's influence on community perceptions of child marriage

The first level of communication involves **strengthening individual knowledge and awareness** in order to increase individuals' capacity to prevent or avoid child marriage. Emphasis is on bringing about greater awareness and enhancing children's life skills, knowledge and participation as actors in their own protection through use of knowledge of their protection and ways of avoiding and responding to practices like child marriage. The communications effort is also directed at *those in contact with the child*, and includes knowledge and motivation messages needed by families and by

community members, teachers, health and social workers for effective protection of children against child marriage. This takes place through sharing of positive messages by teachers, PRI representatives or healthcare workers, or simply through school mentoring programmes. Central to the communication effort is acknowledgement of the children's own role as agents of change in **promoting meaningful participation** in strengthening their protective environment.

"I know my rights and I often speak about it in public... Children's voices have to be heard... There is wisdom in what we say. While earlier we were very shy because as girls, we were always told to keep our feelings to ourselves, today, given the opportunities we now have to express ourselves and participate on issues that affect us, we are confident about bringing hope and transformation in our communities."- **Member of Bal Panchayat (Children's Council) and passionate about encouraging more girls to study.**

The second level of communication is **promotion of community awareness**. A strong body of anecdotal evidence at the community level demonstrates that this has had a positive impact on people's - especially male - attitudes and behaviours on child marriage. The campaign by Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) and its partners, notably Kisan Vikas Trust, has been intensive, sustained and uses a variety of pedagogical approaches to achieve positive and lasting change.

For example, Kisan Vikas Trust, a non-governmental organization working in Khagaria, has formed *Bal Panchayat's* (Children's Council) to inculcate heightened awareness and knowledge, through peer education and mentoring, against child marriage. This led to a **demonstrated increase** in more gender-equitable attitudes and is a significant bulwark against child violence, exploitation and abuse. More significantly, it has succeeded in making children recognize that the issue of child marriage affects both boys and girls, who all have a stake in ending the practice.

IEC and Behavioural Change Communication (BCC) interventions also place particular emphasis on reaching children who have witnessed or experienced child marriage in their own families, and further focus on addressing associations between child marriage and social factors such as poverty and low education attainment.

The third level of communication uses mass media/folk media to conduct puppet shows, street plays, street theatre and wall writings on child marriage and other child-centric issues. Other creative approaches include involvement of local All India Radio and local FM channels to initiate campaigns, conduct discussions in public fora, and meetings/training programmes at all levels (state, district, block and community).

“One day my friend, Kishan, 14, came to me while we were playing in the field outside the village. He told me that he was being married by his parents, even though he was against it. I went to Kishan’s house and spoke to his father, Satpal, who told me “your song and drama will not work on me”. But I was adamant to help, so I told the Bal Panchayat about the impending child marriage. Together, we went to Kishan’s house to again meet his parents, but we were chased away by his parents. Finally, seeing no way out of it, we approached our Child Protection Committee (CPC). All of us went to Kishan’s house, and again appealed to his father. His father was adamant in getting Kishan married because the tilak (engagement) ceremony was long over and the girls’ family had given a cycle, watch and clothes as dowry. The Child Protection Committee then threatened Kishan’s father with police action in case he insisted on going ahead with the marriage. Kishan’s father had no choice but to reluctantly agree to call off the marriage...”- member of Bal Panchayat (Children’s Council).

The **fourth level of communication** is directed at leveraging the media’s influence on community perceptions of child marriage. These include better news reporting - or a “media advocacy” approach - to identify and use opportunities to speak out on specific violations of children’s rights, especially when doing so can help make an immediate difference, or contribute to positive changes in attitudes, practices or policies in the medium or long term. The media has been a strong ally in this effort. To help, Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) has regularly oriented and interfaced with local journalists on issues that often go unreported, such as child marriage, maternal mortality, girls’ education and trafficking of children.

“It was sometime during 2007-8 when I was traveling on my motorcycle along with a colleague to do a story in village Aloli, district Khagaria, I was struck by the disproportionately large number of school girls walking along the road with sindoor ¹⁰(vermillion) on the middle parting of their hair. Finding it odd, we drove to the school during lunch break and spoke to the children and the school Principal. It was then that it dawned on us that the girls in our district were being married off before they had attained even the legal age of marriage, and it was not just a problem of one family, but the entire district...I still remember the banner headline on my newspaper’s front page which said “Aloli Ki Ladkiyan Kam Umar Mein Ban Jaati Hain Shrimati (The Girls of Aloli Come To Be Called ‘Mrs’ At a Young Age)! Since then, we have particularly urged all prominent media establishments to step up their coverage of this (child marriage) issue. Leading journalists have agreed to write feature articles. Today, we will not let the District Collector sleep in the night if we come to know that a child marriage is being solemnized anywhere in the district...” says a **Local Correspondent, Dainik Jagran, Khagaria.***

b. Ensuring Child Participation: Bal Panchayats (Children’s Council), Agents of Social Change

Children like elsewhere are not considered as rights holders or allowed to make decisions without the approval of their parents/guardians. . One of the most innovative features of Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) intervention is the child’s right to participate and to be heard at all levels and to have their views considered. Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) felt that it was necessary to involve children as child marriage directly affects them, and their participation would not only increase their

¹⁰ Sindoor is a symbol of marriage for married Hindu girls.

awareness towards the issue but also empower them to prevent child marriages in the community.

Bal Panchayats

Children, especially from Musahar¹¹ community, in Khagaria's numerous villages are making their presence felt – and how! It is now commonplace to hear them debate issues like immunization and school enrollment with their families, take up cudgels against child marriage and child trafficking, and all the while keeping an eye on children seen working in fields, small roadside *dhabas* (eateries) or factories to get them back into school.



Bal Panchayat members in a meeting in village Nimmihi Par, district Khagaria.

¹¹ The **Musahar** are a scheduled caste found in the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in India. The Musahar were once rat catchers, but this activity has been abandoned. They are now mainly landless agricultural labourers. They are one of the most marginalized groups in India.

Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) is piloting the concept of Bal Panchayat's (children's council) in 85 out of 200 villages in Khagaria. Bal Panchayat's have their root in the traditional gram panchayat¹², where each Indian village has its own Panchayat (group of elected village elders) responsible for village matters.

Each Bal Panchayat comprises 15 members in the age group of 9-16, a president and a secretary elected by the children of the village, and takes its work very seriously.

14-year-old Santi plainly refused to be married off and wanted to attend school instead. Raised in Khagaria district, one of Bihar's poorest; Santi has worked for most of her short life, helping her parents in the fields to support her family.

Santi is a slight girl - maybe 4 feet tall - with long dark hair loosely braided. A shy smile appears when talks about school. She loves to go to school, and excelled in studies, which is why she was devastated when her parents told her last year at the age of 13 that it was time for her to get married.

Santi's village, is an hour from Khagaria town and has a one of the lowest female literacy rates in the state. As is the fate of many girls here, Santi's mother wanted to pulled her from school after she began arrangements for the wedding, even though her father, away in distant city as a carpenter to earn a measly Rs 250 per day, was not in favour of his daughter getting married. "I felt very sad because my best friends were going to school," said Santi. "I was feeling very sad because I was feeling lonely and helpless in my own home."

So Santi did the unthinkable. She said "no".

Her mother and her relatives were shocked. Santi remained defiant and enlisted the help of the Bal Panchayat. Child Protection Committee and Bal Panchayat members walked down the small dusty path to her parent's home, persuading them to reconsider. Recognizing her child's desire and the external pressure she (and her relatives) had never previously experienced, her mother finally conceded: Santi would not marry. More importantly, she would attend school.

"Coming from the Musahar community and being from such a poor family, a tiny girl is thinking of setting her own future by her own will. That is unthinkable previously," says Prabhat Kumar, Managing Trustee, Kissan Vikas Trust, partner NGO working with Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) in Khagaria. "The percentage of girls marrying before completing 18 years in Khagaria district is 49.3, while in rural areas, it is as high as 50.7 (DLHS 3). This is where the real danger lies", says Kumar.

¹² "Panchayat" literally means assembly of five (*panch*) wise and respected elders chosen and accepted by the village community. Traditionally, these assemblies settled disputes between individuals and villages. The Indian government has empowered elected Gram panchayats, which are local governments at the village or small town level in India.

Neatly turned out, well groomed and confident, the children welcome you with a chorus of 'Jai Hind'! Sitting around in a circle, the boys and girls are eager to tell you about their achievements; more importantly, the children are excited about the skit they have written and directed themselves on social issues like child marriage, importance of education or child rights. "The one single achievement of our Bal Panchayat we are immensely proud of is that not a single child marriage has been held in our village this year. We regularly took out rallies, conducted numerous *nukkad natak's* (street theatre) and told the villagers that they should not get their children married because it would only make them more miserable, poor and helpless. Instead, they should educate them so that they get good jobs in the city and are no longer living in poverty," says Secretary of a Bal Panchayat (Children's Council), district Khagaria.

Formation of Bal Panchayats

The first step in forming Bal Panchayat's is establishing rapport with the village community by a local NGO. Thus, villages chosen by Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) were where Kisan Vikas Trust (KVT), the principal NGO involved, was already working. Kisan Vikas Trust is a well placed local organization and had the experience of working on child protection issues with 66 trained staff on child protection.

Once a relationship is established with the community, public awareness campaigns promoting child rights are launched. Community level campaigns, including street theatre, plays, song and dance, etc. are used to pique interest in children's rights and motivate young people in the community. Facilitated by a full-time Kisan Vikas Trust functionary, the children of the village come together to elect a Bal Panchayat. The elected (fifteen) Bal Panchayat members then take up 'portfolios' or 'ministries' according to individual strengths or interest in an issue. So, while some prefer to lead by becoming the *Adhyaksh* (President), other Bal Panchayat 'ministers' include education, health, sports, child rights, information, etc. These 'ministers' are accountable for the well-being of all children in the village by bringing to the notice of the elders specific problems and concerns of the children.

Continuous capacity building of Bal Panchayat members is key: Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) and Kisan Vikas Trust organised three-day training for children's groups and CPC members on child rights and child protection issues; Master training of 25 key NGOs and two trainings of 50 children's groups on child protection (2 day training) was held. This resulted in capacity building of 750 children and 750 adult members to monitor report and respond on child protection issues, and provided common ground for dialogue and prioritization of children's issue in programming.

Bal Panchayat agenda is driven by children's concerns in the village, and these children are Bal Panchayat's 'eyes and ears'. "Other children in the village tell us which families are planning to marry a child. Then all members of the Bal Panchayat go as a group to the parents of the child whose marriage is planned and plead with them not to conduct the marriage," says a Member of the Bal Panchayat, district Khagaria.

One can imagine the shock of adults listening to these children's lectures on the evils of child marriage and the need to give their child a decent education. In case parents of prospective bride/groom do not take them seriously, Bal Panchayat members can then take the matter to the village Child Protection Committee, which comprises of the village *Sarpanch* (headman), teachers, and other influential community members. The Child Protection Committee also has the option of exercising the legal option of registering a formal police complaint in case a family is adamant.

On the objective of setting up Bal Panchayats, says, Programme Coordinator, Child Protection, Save the Children, Bihar: "The agenda is to involve children in decision-making on issues concerning them. Children are often voiceless, with little opportunity to participate in decisions about their life. Bal Panchayats are beginning to give children that 'voice' in rural communities."

"We children now face our parents and talk to them freely because we are confident about ourselves and the issues that affect us. Children often have no time to play – boys go to graze cattle and girls do all the housework. Yet it is nice to know that we are there for each other. Bal Panchayats have gives us that cocoon of confidence". Says Secretary of a Bal Panchayat, district Khagaria:

c. Involving Community Members: Child Protection Committees

"The Children's Panchayat helps identify their concerns, like child marriages or lack of teachers in schools. When children cannot solve an issue by themselves, they can ask for support from the village Child Protection Committee, which is a village-level watch dog formed with representatives including representatives from the Bal Panchayat, village panchayat representatives and teachers. It is a forum to address issues concerning children and work out feasible solutions. The Child Protection Committee in our village was formed during the 2008 floods when there was genuine concern about trafficking of children and women, who are more vulnerable in an emergency situation. Child rights abuse, whatever form it took, denied children of the opportunity to enjoy their rights to education, health and proper care among others. That is why all members are initiated on aspects like looking for early signs of child abuse, and to curb trafficking"- President of a Child Protection Committee, district Khagaria.

Establishing a community-based child protection system/mechanism was one of the initial and key objectives of Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat)'s work in the aftermath of Bagmati floods, 2007 and Kosi floods, 2008 and has generally served as a key best practice across Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat)'s programmes.

Child Protection Committees are formed at the village level and have, typically, fifteen members, including PRI members, teachers, ASHA workers, Anganwadi (grassroot community workers) workers, community leaders, Bal Panchayat members, Self-Help Group (SHG) members and parents.

Committee members meet twice a month with Bal Panchayat members to understand their problems and concerns, and take their opinion on protection of their rights. The Committee also works on issues like enrollment and retention of children in schools. In fact, Child Protection Committee organises regular village-level meetings with school teachers and education committees to raise awareness on the importance of enrolling all children in school, and shares lists of children to be enrolled in the forthcoming school session.



CPC members in village Raytai Tola Musahari, district.Khagaria.

The rationale for establishing Child Protection Committees (CPC) is to empower community groups tasked with child protection to play a key role in monitoring, responding to and preventing child rights violations. The Child Protection Committees is village level committee which jointly take decisions in preventing child marriages in villages, with the consent of the village community. As soon as a marriage is reported, Bal Panchayat children and Child Protection Committees members visit the bride/bridegroom's family to persuade them to call off the marriage.

Because it has the consent, and involvement of, the community at-large, going against the Child Protection Committees is also construed as going against the wishes of the community. This, coupled with the Government having made PRI representative accountable for stopping child marriage, makes it incumbent on Child Protection Committees members to stop any child marriage reported in their village.

All Child Protection Committees are constituted of at least 50% female members, in some cases more, and have at least three child representatives. Girls have typically been very strong and vocal members of children groups and have had a very positive role in encouraging more women to take up CPC membership.

As an illustration, girls and female Child Protection Committees members were instrumental in one village for brainstorming on a "school accompaniment service" for girls that significantly reduced their vulnerability. This was because children had to

travel long distances to school, including crossing a river by boat. Many parents worried about the risks for girls, who had to travel without adult supervision. It was the Child Protection Committees of a village in Khagaria that proposed - with women and girls leading the movement - to start an escort service for girls, with women from the village volunteering to participate.

"Suresh, 50, and his wife, Vinla Devi, 45, have seven children – three sons and four daughters. Being illiterate, both work as farm labour to eke out a living. Suresh migrates to Punjab for 8-9-months a year to work loading rice bags at a rice mill. He saves Rs 2500-3000 which he sends home to his family.

One day, some relatives came visiting and Suresh's son-in-law introduced Gopal, 14, to them as a prospective bridegroom. Gopal was aghast when he came to know, and told his brother, Shiv, who was also President of the village Bal Panchayat. All the Bal Panchayat children came to Gopal's house when the guests were still there, and tried to convince them to call off the engagement. But, their plea fell on deaf ears.

This was when the children came to me for support. I heard the entire story and told them that I would be happy to speak to Suresh's father to call off the engagement. But I also cautioned the children against creating any embarrassment for Suresh or his parents.

I went to meet the family along with other members of the Child Protection Committee, and we had a very amiable discussion. The prospective kutumb (family) told us that they did not have any male heir in the family, and wanted to thus bequeath all their land and property to Suresh. We spoke to them in details, and suggested that since Suresh was a child, they wait till he was at least 18 before discussing the issue with the family. We also told them about the legal implications for the family in case they went ahead with the engagement, and the role of Child Protection Committee in helping resolve issues like child marriage.

*The family went back convinced. More importantly, they have agreed to wait till Suresh is 18," says **President, Child protection Committee district Khagaria.***

Regular Capacity Building

Child Protection Committee members are continually supported by Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) and Kissan Vikas Trust to be effective in their communities. This is because while Child Protection Committee members and children groups have great enthusiasm and passion to make a difference, most have limited background in child protection.

Thus, regular support at the village level and informal capacity building programmes of Child Protection Committee members are organized on a regular basis, followed by shorter sessions focusing on practical tools that help analyse and assess child protection in their communities. This ensures sustained participation of Child Protection Committee members.

That this has helped is evident when Child Protection Committee members of village Raytai Tola Musahari, block Beldaur, district Khagaria, were quick to point out the agenda of the day, which included ensuring their village was child labour and child marriage free.

*“Child Protection Committee meets twice a month and we facilitate community-wide discussions on child marriage and child labour; we have also intervened directly with families that continue to send their children to work as manual labour. Members have even organized village level events like skits, cultural programmes and children’s consultation on social evils like dowry, child marriage and child labour,” says **Child Protection Committee President, village Raytai Tola Musahari, block Beldaur.***

One initiative sets apart Child Protection Committee members of this village (village Raytai Tola Musahari) from others: since the village does not have regular electricity supply, children find it very hard to complete their lessons after dark. When this was discussed at a Child Protection Committee meeting, the members decided to take things in their own hands instead of wasting precious resources on cajoling the Electricity Department. Since there was no generator in their village, some members decided to hire a generator in the next village. Tough it was a difficult proposition to string out the electricity cable from the neighbouring village to theirs, it was done successfully.

The Child Protection Committee members initiated a collection drive in the village, and managed to raise enough funds to buy and electricity bulb and pay for the electricity. Today, about 50 children gather everyday at the Child Friendly Space (CFS) in the village every evening between 6-10pm with their books to study under the light. The cost to the village is Rs 200 per month for four hours of uninterrupted electricity supply everyday for the children, which is contributed by the villagers themselves!

*“Child Protection Committee support helps children to build on their talent, strength and perseverance in planning, decision making, organizing things and as protagonists to protect their own rights. We even organize village and block level events like sports, games, cultural programmes, children’s festivals and children’s consultation on different issues to sensitise communities on child rights. Inevitably, the events attract large crowds; a special draw is experience sharing by children who were earlier engaged in child labour or child marriage, but who now advocate on behalf of working children or those at risk,” says **Ratan, CPC President, Village Siswah Tola, Panchayat Pirnagra, block Beldaur, district Khagaria.***

d. Child Friendly Spaces (CFS)

*“In the wake of the Kosi floods in 2008, the ‘child-friendly space’ was the only place where children could take part in recreational and educational activities. To assist children in the months after the floods, Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) worked with KVT to set up child-friendly spaces throughout the hardest hit-areas – many in very remote communities. The spaces give children a chance to “get together and play, and have some normalcy in their lives,” explains **District Community Mobiliser, Kisan Vikas Trust, Khagaria.** “About fifty planned child-friendly spaces already exist in as many villages, and most have been looked after by the community so well that they continue to function even today”.*

Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) has supplemented its emergency aid during the Bihar floods in 2007 and 2008 by constructing or designating buildings or shelters made of bamboo and tarp for children. In these safe zones, called Child-Friendly Spaces, children and adolescents can make new friends, re-establish lines of trust with grown-ups and once again find a sense of security and routine in their daily lives - things that will help them grow up to be healthy, self-sustaining adults. In many communities, these spaces are the only recreational spaces available.



A flex poster announces a Child Friendly Space in village Raytai Tola Musahari, district Khagaria.

Child Friendly Spaces in Khagaria attempt to integrate basic services in health, primary education, child care and psychosocial development into a protective environment that is both family and community-centric. Most spaces have been established in existing community centers/multipurpose structures with open ground, or in rented/loaned rooms.

They provide a safe, caring space where children engage in structured recreational and educational activities, and also have access to basic primary health and nutrition services. Importantly, minimum standards are established to ensure that sufficient space and equipment is provided for each out-reach service, the cornerstone of which is non-discriminatory access to the “space”.

Today, these child-friendly spaces serve as a convenient place to restart or continue programs for children. Because a lot of these structures are still functional and in good shape, staff has been able to operationalise child-friendly spaces quickly. In partnership with Kissan Vikas Trust, Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) has trained children from Bal Panchayats as well as students, youth workers and teachers to run the activities in the spaces.

"After the floods, we were very depressed," says Ramesh, 15. "Then Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) opened a child friendly space and asked all children to participate. As the days flowed into each other, word started to spread across our village that a child-friendly space had opened. Slowly children began to trickle in. Now, this is the most sought-after space by the children of our village, and there's always something or the other happening here."

Inside the Child Friendly Space at village Rukhminiya, Beldaur block, laughter and music echo in the large room as the children rehearse a drama on child marriage they have written and directed.

"Child-Friendly Spaces allow us to express concerns to community members but there are issues we cannot speak to them directly about; Child Friendly Space allows us to express our feelings through posters, paintings and discussions. Even people from the community organize events in Child Friendly Space with our help," says Bal Panchayat President, village Rukhminiya, Mali panchayat, district Khagaria.

3. Multi-Sectoral Programme Approaches and Partnerships

Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat)'s success in being able to dent the issue of child marriage in Khagaria district of Bihar is a **cumulative impact of multiple levels of intervention with different stakeholders**. The interventions are part of a comprehensive development approach, which includes building sturdy processes at all levels of the government, especially Departments of Women and Child Welfare, Panchayat Raj, Police and Education to constantly review the issue of child marriage and send a message that child marriage is against the law and unacceptable.

Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) has increasingly moved towards systems strengthening, including policy and institutional reforms and capacity-building of social welfare ministries and local government, in tandem with other agencies/Civil Society Organizations in the state. This has helped to ensure that child protection services are integrated into state development plans and reform of juvenile justice systems.

Towards this, Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) has developed enhanced and sustained partnerships at all levels of government - block, district and state - in Bihar as part of its work during emergencies, which it has leveraged successfully in the operationalisation of child protection initiatives. This significant and diverse range of partnership include international and regional organizations like the United Nations (UNICEF), INGOs and NGOs. This is true at the level of practical delivery and coordination on the ground, in advocacy and in influencing policy. Sustained consultation mechanisms to engage key NGOs more systematically as strategic partners in projects like child marriage and child labour mitigation, NGO capacity-building to strengthen service delivery and reporting/communication have been enhanced at state, district and block levels.



Staff of Kissan Vikas Trust, Khagaria, facilitate a discussion of Bal Panchayat and other children in village Nimmihi Par, district Khagaria.

Various capacity building programmes with partners helped strengthen community mobilization efforts, developing simplified programme guidelines, developing and rolling out monitoring and reporting mechanisms, improving staff efficiencies and programme delivery, continue expanding standby partners, increasing logistics capacity and innovative programming to tackle myriad local issues.

It is more than working together. The convergent approach to partnerships has helped Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) explore new opportunities and a continued exchange of ideas and views. It is also helped in developing a reciprocal appreciation of what partners - and potential partners - are influenced by and why, so that all can better strategize to impact programming.

Implementing Partners

Key partner NGOs are Nidan in Madhepura and Kissan Vikas Trust in Khagaria district, respectively. They have been instrumental in mobilising communities to participate, plan and execute child marriage interventions, supported by Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) field staff in capacity building. Crucial to interventions in preventing child marriage in Khagaria district has been the sustained commitment of Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) and Kisan Vikas Trust to the value of active and full involvement of communities at all levels to ensure the success of the multi-sectoral approach in a meaningful and practical sense. This has helped Save the Children (Bal

Raksha Bharat) develop a keener understanding and appreciation of the mind set of partners it is working with, to better anticipate potential barriers and replicate successes.

Kissan Vikas Trust and Nidan support programme implementation, human resource, training of community workers, networking at local level, liaise with local self government institutions and local administration line departments, and technical expertise.

Government & Local Agencies

Panchayat Raj Institution (PRI) members actively support Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) and its partners in the implementation of child marriage initiatives (amongst others), especially in ensuring information dissemination on various government schemes and programmes for the community. Referral services, Back to School Campaign, interaction between community members and government functionaries, and effectively addressing cases of child marriage are some key support areas of PRI's.

*“Education is considered as one of the most potent instruments of peaceful social change, but there is apprehension in teachers that speaking about issues like child marriage will tarnish their “image” amongst students. Wherever teachers are responsive to the needs of students and provide guidance to them, I have seen that the teacher-pupil relation has become better and the school environment has improved. Implementing agencies hesitate to challenge social norms that underlie early marriage, and few programs focus on keeping girls in school to delay marriage. Similarly, physical distance to schools influences the drop-out rate of girls from schools, coupled with inadequate facilities and teaching standards in government schools, dearth of vocational training programs and lack of awareness and enforcement of Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, says, **Middle School teacher, Akha, block Beldaur, district Khagaria.**”*

The Department of Labour has involved Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) and other civil society organisations in a significant way in the design and roll-out of the State Plan of Action on Child Labour, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child report and training of District Child Protection Unit (DCPU) members and exposure on linkages between Child Protection Committees and District Child Protection Units, (Department of Social Welfare), Disaster preparedness guidelines (Department of Disaster Management), reviewing the Government Relief Code (Department of Disaster Management), and capacity building of almost 2,073 Sub Inspectors of Police (Department of Homes) on child-related legal provisions and provisions under Indian Penal Code.

The local (Government) administration at the village level has regularly collaborated with Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) and its partners in trainings, Child Protection Committee meetings and other sensitisation activities, showing great willingness to learn and change current practices for the betterment of rights of children. The administration has been particularly quick to respond to issues of child protection, education and disaster risk reduction.

Media

The media – especially at the block and district level- has been a key ally of Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) and its partners in once again focusing public attention on the reduction and ultimate abolition of child marriages, that public officials feel the pressure of accountability and act accordingly. About 150 media persons’ trainings have been carried out to sensitise local media on child protection issues like child marriage and child labour. The media has covered stories of the project almost on a weekly basis in Khagaria district, and has always supported any event, launch, workshop or campaign on child rights and child protection by giving it a prominent place, whether in newspapers, magazines, tabloids or electronic format.

“You might think, given the powerful evidence of the damage caused to individuals and societies, that the practice of child marriage would be high on everyone’s agenda. But what is striking is the discrepancy between the scale and seriousness of the problem and the attention it has been given. We in the media understand, of course, the reluctance to intervene in what is traditionally considered a family matter. But we recognise that child marriage is embedded deep in the traditions of our society. Change will not be easy.

*There is some evidence that, because of grassroots campaigns and role of media, child marriage is on the decline in some parts of the district. The challenge is how we can help communities accelerate change. This is why we and my fellow media persons are committed to drawing attention to the damage that child marriage is causing and to supporting those working towards ending it. This means a new emphasis on debate and education – especially at the community level– as elsewhere,” says **Modem In-charge, Dainik Jagran, Khagaria.***

5. Impact & Achievement

The child marriage project is being implemented to address high rates of child marriage in rural communities in Khagaria (and Madhepura) districts of Bihar. The program is one of the first of its kind in the state to explicitly address child marriage and include a mechanism to rigorously evaluate the project. The intervention uses a combination of social mobilization to combat isolation of girls, promotion of school attendance, whether formal or non-formal, incentives for school attendance and delaying marriage, and participatory community conversations on early marriage.

The design of the intervention acknowledges that reasons for child marriage are complex and thus **simultaneously address** girls’ low status and isolation, educational and livelihood opportunities, economic drivers of the practice, and societal norms and pressures. It is, thus, a **package of interventions** at the community and individual levels. Though high levels of exposure to all project components makes it difficult to ascertain if specific program components were more influential in bringing about change than other components, **changes associated with the program are reflected in all outcomes of interest, including Bal Panchayat networks, increased school attendance, quantitative decline in child marriage, and heightened awareness levels in parents, teachers, children and the community-at large on child protection issues.** In particular, girls in their early adolescence (age 10 to 14) experienced significant increases in school attendance and delayed marriage, associated with the project.



Children in village Rukhminiya, district Khagaria, make the most of the space that the project has given them- to laugh, play and rejoice in a secure childhood.

Marriage during adolescence is part of a cultural tradition where the father's status in the community is partly defined by the marriage of his daughter. In most cases of child marriage, marriages of girls seemed to be delayed to later adolescence, so while child marriage may still be common in the area, the youngest girls were no longer affected by the practice to the extent they had been before. In effect, girls' early adolescence was preserved, giving them a few, critical, extra years to become physically and mentally more mature, attend school, and develop as individuals.

Achievements

- 21,000 children now regularly use 50 Child Friendly Spaces. 26,000 children in 50 villages now are aware of child protection issues.
- With three field staff each from 50 villages, a total of 166 field level staff has been oriented on psycho-social support. Further 50 Bal Panchayat's and Child Protection Committees have been trained on psycho-social support, which comes to a total of 750 children and 600 adult community members.
- 150 local village volunteers have been trained on working with children. These volunteers involve all the children in a village keeping in mind the principle of social inclusion.

- Children's Groups have been formed in 50 villages. All children in the village are now members of these groups. Each Bal Panchayat has 15 members, elected by all the children in the village. These 15 children are called a Bal Panchayat.
- As a result, there are now 750 Bal Panchayat members representing children across 50 villages. Trained on child rights, these children identify, monitor, report and respond to child protection issues.
- 95% school children in 50 villages now attend child friendly schools regularly; 17,000 children now study in inclusive primary schools in a child-friendly environment.
- 4,500 children have been rescued from child labour, largely due to better awareness levels of the community as well as children's efforts through the Back to School Campaign.

The positive impacts suggest that programs that are well-designed and effectively implemented can, indeed, significantly impact early/child marriage in a relatively short time period.

5. Lessons Learnt

Child marriage is an issue that cannot be solved in isolation as it is results from a complexity of social, cultural and economic dimensions and widespread gender discrimination. The causes and consequences of child marriage are intrinsically linked, including girl's lack of autonomy and low levels of education, poor health status, poverty and overall low socio-economic status.

A major challenge has been recruiting local staff (including partners) who have an appropriate background to working in child protection and psychosocial activities. Often local NGO staff has little or no background in child protection, requiring Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) to provide intensive on the job training whilst also ensuring that the role and tasks are kept simple.

Early planning for community hand-over of selected child protection initiatives requires multilevel engagement, including development of partnerships with local organisations and government agencies for a sustainable legacy. This is still a drawn-out process, and is stymied more often than not by mismatch in capacities of Save the Children's vis-à-vis those of its partners/local agencies on the ground.

Behavior Change Communication (BCC) is an important strategy which has contributed to rapid normative change in the selected communities. For it to be effective, Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) will need to compliment its communications strategy with regular knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAP) assessments. Findings from this should be basis for a well-designed segmentation of the BCC audience, developing of district-specific BCC strategy, and participatory development of messages and communication products. While the project already has a multi-channel communication approach with equal emphasis on mass media, local and other types of media (including traditional and modern communication aids) and inter-personal communication, the key is regular monitoring and analysis based on clear indicators to ensure relevance and taking communications to the next level.

While advocating for laws and policies at the state has paid dividend, it is their enforcement that Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) will have to make concerted efforts by further leveraging its national level presence and existing relationships with the Government and other international and national development agencies to highlight issues and hold practical, evidence-based discussions on child marriage at critical levels.

Programs to enable poor children to combine family work demands with schooling – more flexible school hours and non-formal education will have to go hand-in-hand with existing programming to ensure that few – if any – children are out of school and thus vulnerable to early marriages. This is also where the multi-level partnership with the state Education department can be leveraged to enhance the effectiveness and reach of the BCC strategy that motivate families and communities to educate girls, as also in organizing communication campaigns, school based competitions and reward-recognition forums across schools in Khagaria.

6. Way Forward

Since 2003, Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) has contributed significantly to advancing understanding of community dynamics in child protection programming. However, much ground to be remains covered in understanding long-term child protection issues, both in emergencies and routine programming, thus making further research, data collection and analysis essential.

Conducting pilots and support scaling-up of social and behavioural change initiatives in rural communities will go a long way in avoiding duplicating initiatives/models that often occur with programmes developed in isolation and help replicate good practices in other regions/districts or states, and contribute to efforts to promote increasing ownership and understanding of child protection concerns into the work of all relevant actors.

Evidence-based policy advocacy that informs decisions requires both qualitative and quantitative information on child marriage. Data should be up to date, reliable, and reflect the voices and of child brides. The current challenges of inadequate data must nonetheless be acknowledged. Greater emphasis needs to be given to prioritization of disaggregated data pertaining to various protection-related social norms and practices. While child protection indicators and basic data compilation are in place, baseline, mid and end line data is not yet universally available, especially related to local child marriage and child protection interventions. This is important because insufficiently disaggregated data, like children with disability or socially excluded groups, cannot be leveraged to identify, plan and advocate for appropriate policies and services for those who are most at risk, excluded or underserved.

More systematic evaluation of child protection initiatives will improve learning within and beyond Save the Children. Evidence of programme impact is increasingly being captured across different sectors by various actors, and Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) should do more to seek out, document and disseminate such evidence

and to draw attention to successful interventions to the larger child protection research agenda.

Strengthening state level child protection systems as a whole continues to present some challenges, particularly regarding the contribution and capacity of government departments and other institutions. Social Welfare ministry, commonly the cornerstone for protection, is generally poorly resourced, often lacking the human resources to carry out even statutory responsibilities. Departments like Police and Social Welfare tend to give scant attention to children given other pressing priorities and lack of adequately sensitized manpower. Continuous engagement with these departments and their capacity building/strengthening is the only way Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) can promote the child protection agenda in the state.

8. Conclusion

Child marriage is bound to tradition; families and communities in rural Bihar continue to hold steadfast to the practice because of unquestioning belief in 'tradition' and cultural dogma's.

While Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) interventions at the state and national level aim to change policies and legislation, it is at the local and community level, where traditions and customs reinforce child marriage that interventions aim to change attitudes and behaviour towards the practice.

Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) has been leveraging its strengths in networking, building partnerships and strengthening state, district and community level systems with increased efforts and sustainable initiatives. The focus continues to be in ensuring that the rights of children, especially girls, are ensured and protected, with gender discrimination at the forefront of the agenda. However, the root cause continues to be the cycle of abuse and poverty which continues to fuel child marriages.

Interventions by Save the Children (Bal Raksha Bharat) and its partners - across a canvass of both civil society and government departments - focus on bringing about convergence of ideas and approaches to ensure that communities are adequately educated on the long-term effects of child marriage while exploring sustainable solutions to put in place. It is these solutions - making education a priority and ensuring access for girls, strengthening the role of community-based organizations - especially women's and young people's organizations, strengthening participation of key stakeholders like children, parents, religious/community leaders and opinion makers, teachers etc., and strengthening integration of child marriage /child protection programmes into government sector initiatives, and train key government officials, judiciary and policy makers at all levels on laws related to child protection/child marriage to bolster implementation and enforcement are some steps that will progressively help in changing the landscape against the scourge of child marriage in the state.