Lost Childhood: Role of the Youth In Advocacy for Change to Prohibit Child Marriage in India

Child marriage has adverse effects on children, particularly girls and on the society as a whole. For both girls and boys, early marriage has a strong physical, intellectual, psychological and emotional impact, cutting off educational opportunities and chances of personal growth. While boys are affected by child marriage, this is an issue that impacts upon girls in far larger numbers and with more intensity (Source: Early Marriage: Child Spouses. Innocenti Digest No. 7. UNICEF, 2001).

Working in Bihar, Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh, WomenPowerConnect, a national level organization working on women’s rights, found that child marriage continues to thrive in India because of lack of awareness about effects of child marriage on family and society among parents, social leaders and communities as a whole; pre-dominance of the practice of dowry in marriages; non-recognition of rights of women and children; religious myths; traditional beliefs; strong influence of patriarchy; and poor access to education for girls. The states of Bihar, Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh report most child marriages in the country; however almost all backward, remote and rural communities report child marriages in the country.

WPC Baseline Research Study (2013) indicates that in Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Jharkhand most rural families do not send girls out of the village for education that leads to lower levels of education among women. Girls have been found to be regular drop outs from school, when they reach the age of 14-18 years. According to District Level Household Survey (DLHS)3 2007-08, 22.1% of women are married before they attain the legal age of marriage i.e. 18 years.

Government of India is Committed to Stop Child Marriages by

- Prohibition of Child Marriage (PCM) Act, 2006
- Compulsory Registration of Marriages Act, 2006
- The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961
- Eleventh Five-Year Plan 2007-2012 calls for the ‘compulsory registration of marriages and verification of age at the time of marriage’.
- National Plan of Action for Children 2005 sets the goal of eliminating child marriages by 2010 (Sections 6.1.4 and 7.1.3

SNAPSHOT OF A VILLAGE

Bishanpura, a small village at Deoghar district in Jharkhand, includes only 53 household and a population of around 1000 people. There is no Anganwadi (ICDS) Centre and primary school in the village. Only few boys go to the nearest high school, but no girls are allowed to attend the high school. Girls in the village are married early and have no right to determine their future.

More than 60 million girls and women are affected by Child Marriage Globally. India ranks 13th in the world among countries with the highest prevalence of child marriage. International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) 2007
The youth of India can help the Government and the society to prohibit child marriage. The youth can strengthen existing efforts to prohibit child marriage in the country by:

- Reporting incidents of child marriage to the police, panchayat and Block Development Offices and other authorities at the village and community level.
- Make parents and community leaders understand the impact of child marriage on women, family and country.
- Organize, participate and support efforts towards awareness generation and prohibition of child marriage at the community level.
- Be aware of, respect, protect and promote rights of children and women as laid down in the Constitution of India, various Acts, Provisions and Instruments.
- Learn and promote sensitization on the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006 and encourage girls and women in their families to value their rights towards Self-Determination, Education, Empowerment and Marriage.

**PROHIBITION OF CHILD MARRIAGE ACT 2006 - A SNAPSHOT**

- The legal age for marriage is 18 years for females and 21 years for males;
- Child marriage is an offence punishable with rigorous imprisonment, which may extend to 2 years, or with fine up to Rs. 1 Lakh, or both;
- Child marriage is a cognizable and non-bailable offence;
- Child marriages are voidable and can be annulled;
- Persons who can be punished - those performing child marriages; male adults above 18 years marrying a child; and persons responsible for the child (i.e. parent, guardian promoting, permitting, participating or failing to prevent a child from getting married).

**Some National and State Policies for Women and Girls**

Government of India has adopted major policies and programmes such as the National Policy for Children, 2013, National Strategy on Child Marriage and National Plan of Action specifically looking into the prevention of Child Marriage. Besides launching the nationwide campaign of 'Beti Bachao Beti Padhao', the central and state governments have also launched many schemes, among which some significant ones are: Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls (RGSEAG), Balika Samriddhi Yojana (BSY), National Programme for Adolescent Girls (Kishori Shakti Yojana), Conditional Cash Transfer Scheme for the Girl Child, Ujjawala Scheme, Mukhya Mantri Kanya Suraksha Yojana in Bihar, Mukhya Mantri Mantra Balak & Balika Cycle Yojana in Bihar, Nandadevi Kanya Yojana in Uttarakhand, and many more.

**Impact of Child Marriage in India**

Child marriage restricts freedom; cuts off space for self-determination; restricts choices, aspirations and ambition; and has impacts on health and security by exposing children and adolescents to early parenthood. Early marriages mean early pregnancy and greater chances of having more children. One of the major reasons behind high incidence of maternal mortality, infant mortality, child mortality, poor nutritional status among children, high dropout rate at the school level among adolescent girls, large family size and poverty at the family level in India is child marriage.

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