Pathways to Transformation

A Photo Essay on Empowering Adolescent Girls and Ending Child Marriage in India
UNFPA is the United Nations sexual and reproductive health agency. Our mission is to deliver a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every childbirth is safe and every young person's potential is fulfilled.

UNFPA's efforts focus on three transformative results • ending unmet need for family planning • ending preventable maternal death and • ending gender-based violence and harmful practices such as child marriage and gender biased sex selection.

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United Nations Population Fund
55 Lodi Estate
New Delhi 110003
India
Tel: +91-11-46532333
Email: india.office@unfpa.org

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Empowering Adolescent Girls and Ending Child Marriage in India
- a programme priority for UNFPA India

UNFPA’s programme in India accords high priority to ending harmful practices such as child marriage and gender biased sex selection. Our work on harmful practices is firmly located within the context of advancing women’s rights, promoting gender equality and supporting girls’ empowerment.

We collaborate with a range of stakeholders including the Government, civil society, private sector, academic and research institutions, medical community, media, judiciary, and most importantly, community members themselves to address child marriage. Many of these efforts, such as the Action for Adolescent Girls programme and the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage, empower girls to know and exercise their rights, including their right to choose, as adults, when and whom to marry.

UNFPA’s programming on other harmful practices, is informed by the ecological approach that emphasizes engagement with the issue at multiple levels- focusing on girls, their families, and communities including men and boys to question and redefine internalized beliefs, attitudes and practices that are unequal and discriminatory. Through the Government’s national and state programmes for promoting survival and empowerment of girls, UNFPA supports evidence-based interventions that empower girls with the information, skills and services they need to make healthy and safe transitions into adulthood.

We also engage with systems and services, and legal and policy frameworks- all of which play a critical role in countering harmful practices and ensuring gender equality. As one of the lead Government partners on Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child & Adolescent Health (RMNCH+A), UNFPA works to build capacities of health care providers in ensuring gender sensitive and client friendly health services with a special focus on meeting the health needs of adolescent girls and boys. UNFPA also works closely with the Government in using demographic data to understand population dynamics, and to inform public policy especially in the context of promoting gender equality and addressing harmful practices.
Collectivize-Enable-Empower

Building girls’ agency through supportive peer networks, information and skills
I had dropped out of school when I was 16 years old. I began working in nearby farms to add to the family income. When I joined the girls’ group in my village, I met other girls of my age going to school. I felt left out and yearned to go back to school.

Together with other girls from the group, I was able to persuade my mother to send me back to school. I was able to complete my higher secondary education and am now attending college. As a member of the girls’ group I learned to use computer applications and I now operate the adolescent girls’ resource centre in our Panchayat. The money I earn at the resource centre helps me cover my travel expenses for college.  

22 year old Sabita Sabar, member of girls’ group supported by UNFPA, Odisha
“My parents, especially my father, made it very clear that this course is the only opportunity they were willing to consider before planning my marriage. I was able to come to this training course because of my friend Godavari. She and her mother came home and spoke to my parents. I am the eldest daughter and have three younger siblings. My father is the only earning member and worries about settling all of us. Godavari and her mother convinced my father that this course will enable me to be independent and stand on my feet.”

18 year old Sukeshini, member of an adolescent girls’ group supported by UNFPA, Maharashtra
“When I joined the girls’ group I was apprehensive about being accepted by the other girls. Most of the other girls are unmarried. I had been married at age 17, and am now divorced. I had faced a lot of violence within my marriage and my self-esteem was very low. When I walked out of my marriage and returned to my natal family I confined myself to my house and refused to step out for days on end.

When members of the girls group approached me to enroll me in the group, I refused. I just felt very inhibited to be around people. I thought my peers would reject me and make stories about me. However they kept coming back, and eventually I began going to their meetings.

I am now so happy to be proved wrong. I feel accepted in the group. No one judged me. I feel supported and respected. I can now speak freely before others and do not fear stepping out of the house.”

19 year old Bobby Paiko, member of girls’ group supported by UNFPA, Odisha
Mobilize Families and Communities

Questioning and redefining rigid gender roles and norms
“When my granddaughter Sneha turned 15, I was keen to get her married as that is how it has always been in our community. I love my grand daughter as much as I love my grandsons. I consider her security to be my responsibility. I thought early marriage would protect her.

When I initially attended the community dialogues on child marriage, supported by the local NGO, I was very resistant. The messages against child marriage transmitted through the natak (plays) and films kept playing in my mind. During this time, I interacted with many young activists, and also became more keenly aware about how young girls experience child marriage by observing the practice in my own village and community. I gradually realized that marriage wasn’t the answer to my biggest fear—my granddaughter’s safety and security. Marriage wasn’t a guarantee for her security— but education was. So I reversed my decision to marry my granddaughter in the face of opposition from my community.

I know by refusing to have my grand daughter married so young, I have broken a custom. But I believe that norms should be changed for the right cause.

My happiness lies in her wellbeing”

Grand father of 15 year old Sneha Mannar, member of girls’ group supported by UNFPA, Maharashtra
Many families in our village still do not welcome daughters. They prefer sons, since they think sons will support them in old age. But if we look around us, we see so many examples where it is daughters rather than sons who have come to their parents aid in their old age.

Together we need to acknowledge that harmful practices like child marriage and gender biased sex selection are still prevalent in our society- that is a first step in addressing the problem. We need to also be more aware about the changing times and keep step with it. I am certain that when all of us apply our collective will, we will be able to overcome these problems.

Sarpanch in Madhya Pradesh in a community led campaign against child marriage supported by UNFPA
Saudamini Behera age 18, considers herself fortunate to have parents who actively support her education. Many girls in her community dropped out of school after the eighth grade as the high school is at some distance from their village.

Saudamini is currently enrolled in grade 10. Since it gets dark by the time Saudamini returns home from school and tuitions, and the route to her house is very deserted, her father accompanies her for part of the way, holding a torch to light her path.
Vitalize Systems & Services

Reversing gender inequalities and mainstreaming gender across sectors
“I wasn’t able to delay my marriage...I got married at age 16. But the only way I could delay my first pregnancy till the first three years of marriage was because of the ANM in our village. And that made a world of difference for me. Today I am an ASHA. Frontline workers and community health activists play such a key role in enabling women and girls to access services. The training on gender sensitive youth friendly counseling helped me understand how to communicate with young girls and boys in my community. I also counsel families to continue educating their daughters and not to marry their sons and daughters at a young age”

35 year old ASHA, Maharashtra
Breaking the silence around sexual abuse

15 year old Sukanti (name changed) attends grade 9, in a residential school.

Sukanti has survived sexual abuse perpetrated by a member of her community. The Child Welfare committee and the District Welfare Office rehabilitated her here. She is now under the care and guidance of her life skills teacher.

"Residential schools for girls and life skills education have helped many girls like Sukanti find necessary support and move forward."

Headmaster of the girls' higher secondary school, Odisha
“The training on life-skills has enabled teachers like me to understand young people’s issues better; it has helped us to communicate more clearly and bond strongly with students. We are able to better understand why a girl is not performing well or why she remains sad or unhappy. Accordingly we try and take corrective steps including talking to parents to identify and resolve issues at home”.

*Teacher conducting life-skills sessions with girls, Madhya Pradesh*
Strengthen Legal & Policy Environment

Ensuring systemic change to advance the rights of women and girls
UNFPA’s study on financial incentive schemes for girls informed the formulation of conditional cash transfer schemes and policies for women and girls in a number of states such as Rajasthan, Odisha and West Bengal.

“The Odisha State Policy for Girls and Women was based on an intensive review of the evidence on policies and schemes for women and girls in India. In this regards, UNFPA’s study on special financial incentive schemes for girls was particularly informative and insightful as it indicated the potential conceptual and operational aspects of such schemes that can be changed and leveraged to ensure that families value daughters and are supportive towards them.”

Arti Ahuja, IAS, Principal Secretary, Health and Family Welfare Department, Government of Odisha

The strategy outlines a multi-sectoral framework for action and establishes mechanisms for ensuring close monitoring and follow up on the implementation of the action plan.
In Madhya Pradesh UNFPA in close partnership with the Government demonstrated innovations for successful implementation of different components of the National Adolescent Health Programme (Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram-RKSK) that promotes adolescent health and wellbeing. The community based peer-led, innovative job aids for peer educators, e-training of counsellors, and real time monitoring are some of the innovations that are gaining popularity and are likely to be adapted to other geographies.
UNFPA acknowledges the kind support of the Governments of Canada and the United Kingdom for contributing to our programme on empowering adolescent girls and ending child marriage in India.