

Free/affordable higher education

No pressure to marry early

Restrictions will increase, rapes will increase, stricter monitoring.

Include Rights education as part of school education

No violence on streets & No sexual harassment at school

If age increases, child marriage will increase. Families wait till 18 years with great difficulty- if this increases to 21 years, they will not wait.

We wish girls and boys could meet openly, talk openly, live together if they wish to, get married if they wish to, young people should have these rights, just now we have nothing

If we don't want to become mothers we should be able to discuss this with our partners

Allow us to explore relationships and our sexuality safely and with dignity

More options in higher education in rural areas

Access enabled through safe transport

My control over my body and without being ashamed about it

Society needs to value girls and ask us about our opinions

Run a mass awareness campaign against gender discrimination

YOUNG VOICES- NATIONAL REPORT

15 STATES, OVER 2000 YOUNG PEOPLE

**Submission to the Task Force examining Age of Marriage and other concerns
July 2020**

Right now at age 18 only there is a lot of difficulty for young people. When there are relationships of self-choice, boys are being criminalised under POCSO.

We should be able to talk to our family, be able to share our likes and choices on marriage. We can only do this when there is an open environment in our family.

The capacity to form/act on decisions is built over time with different experiments, not overnight. We need to start this practice from childhood, otherwise the person who is unable to take decisions at age 18 cannot do so at 21 either.

Consultations must be held with girls (worst affected) and their parents.

Address violence against women and create more safety for girls without controlling their opportunities

Options of studying alongside working

Parents will worry more for their daughters with law and society running differently; there is no check and balance of laws and its implementation at ground level

I want to take all decisions about my marriage and my life

Bringing a child into the world is the responsibility of both parents and hence both should be ready for it. Need to work with families and with boys to make them understand this

Safe spaces for girls to talk and learn together

Access to education and real work options

Ask us what we need and want

Whenever a boy and girl form a relationship of their own choice, society does not accept it and hence they are forced to elope

Access to SRH services with dignity and confidentiality

Foreword

On June 23rd, 2020, it was learnt that the Ministry of Women and Child Development of Government of India had set up a Task Force to examine matters pertaining to the age of motherhood, particularly maternal mortality rate (MMR) and nutritional levels, with a mandate to provide recommendations for legislative response by July 31, 2020.

Considering the remit of the Task Force to examine the correlation between age of marriage and motherhood with key health, medical, wellbeing and nutritional status as well as higher education of girls and young women, 54 civil society organisations that uphold rights of young people, including their right to be heard on all matters that affect their lives, collectively initiated the 'Young Voices' process on June 26th, 2020. Within the three weeks that followed its commencement, 'Young Voices' was able to involve over 2000 children, adolescents and youth in rural, peri-urban and urban areas, predominantly from the most marginalised communities across 15 States. A significant number of them are involved in individual and collective activism. The facilitating organisations of 'Young Voices' work with issues such as child rights, human rights, gender equity, sustainable development, democratic governance and social justice, in different states and include state and national alliances.

The principles and process

Young people's Right to be heard in all matters concerning them is a Fundamental Right in any democracy. It empowers them to negotiate with duty bearers to determine the quality and nature of the provisions and protections they are entitled to. This also means that young people have the Right to participate in the formulation of policy and programmes affecting their lives; the Right to represent themselves or be represented in all judicial proceedings; and have the Right to take decisions regarding their present and future.

However, currently there are hardly any mainstream structures or processes in India, set up by the State for young people to exercise their Right to participation. In the present instance, the '**Young Voices**' team was not aware if the Task Force had scheduled any consultations with young people. This made it necessary for the '**Young Voices**' National Working Group to design a process that would optimise the reach of the facilitating organisations to have consultations with young people regarding the issues being looked into by the Task Force, as extensively as possible and to establish a platform for the '**Young Voices**' to be heard by the Task Force. This was to be achieved, to the best of abilities, within the very limited time frame, dodging the numerous challenges posed by COVID 19.

Within the three weeks that followed its commencement, 'Young Voices' was able to consult over 2000 young people from 15 States, namely Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttarakhand, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala, Telangana, Punjab and Haryana. Young people from West Bengal and parts of Karnataka could not take part as they were severely affected by Cyclone Amphan and floods. They are in the age group of 12 to 22 years with a few older youth, from varied backgrounds.

While participation Rights are universal, the '**Young Voices**' process prioritised young persons from marginalised communities who are systemically distanced from all decision-making processes. Hence the emphasis was to reach young people from socially, economically and politically vulnerable situations. A large number of them are girls and youth from impoverished rural areas and urban slums; from ST, SC, OBC and minority communities.

Passionate about the matters under discussion, the young people took part in the consultations against severe odds. Despite Covid, despite lack of appropriate technologies for remote

participation, despite losing their daily wages - they contributed their time, their experiences and their thoughts with remarkable courage, honesty and insight.

For their participation to be meaningful, it had to be informed and carried out in a safe and non-judgemental environment which ensured their dignity and security. Article 12 of UNCRC closely relates to these: Article 13 - right to seek, receive and impart information; Article 14 - freedom of thought, conscience and religion; and Article 15 - freedom of association which together form the 'participatory rights'.

The young people who were part of the '**Young Voices**' process were informed in detail about the Task Force, its TOR and its mandate. A background note was collectively prepared (Annexure I) to arrive at a shared frame of reference along with the set of questions (Annexure II) that touched upon the main areas of inquiry. These were translated into multiple languages for ease of use.

The young persons were facilitated to share their views through interviews, focus group discussions, google surveys, life stories and spoken messages. Some organisations hosted state level webinars where young people spoke with and listened to each other across districts. The methods were chosen on the basis of what was most suitable to the young people as well as what they had access to, in different settings. The facilitating organisations, despite the very limited time frame, drew on all available resources and mechanisms to reach out to as many as possible, amidst the tremendous constraints placed by Covid-19.

To ensure age appropriate and context specific facilitation, considerations regarding the implications of increase in age of marriage for different groups of young people - by age, back-ground, gender, social and economic marginalisation were built into the process. For instance we noted that for those in the age group of 15-18, age of marriage pertains to how even now, with the legislation, there is rampant child marriage - directly as a result of lack of other better options/opportunities; This also related to how, right now the law criminalised rather than protected them. For those in the age group of 18-21, all the considerations listed above were relevant along with the question of their agency as adults, to make decisions about matrimony.

It is significant that many of the young people in this process have been part of *sanghas*, peer-led groups, collective mobilisation. They have personal and organisational histories of having braved many challenges in their own lives and in their communities. Many of them spoke up on behalf of their entire groups, in solidarity. Their views were respected and understood as set in their own unique contexts, eco-systems and aspirations.

They also discussed if gender parity was only about 'age of marriage' and 'reproduction' as far as girls are concerned and why girls were considered a liability to be transferred from one household to another. There were also discussions about how a move to increase the age of marriage may relate to 'age of consent' - if it further criminalised their sexuality; and if it increased restrictions to young people's access to knowledge about sexuality, support and guidance.

It was also recognised that importance given to marriage and practices related to it are embedded in the community. Some of the community members who support under age marriage may have vested interests (like money lenders and some religious leaders). So how legislation might or might not address opinion leaders in a community also came up for discussions.

There were extensive discussions about ensuring security of lives of girls and women and what such security entails. They looked at how their personal well-being was intrinsically linked to that of their families and communities. The impact of Covid on challenges faced and how it may bear upon the situation of young people, their security and incidences of under-age marriages were also

discussed. They talked about the responsibility of the government to respond to all of their concerns, including the security entitlements of all irrespective of whether or not they chose to marry and whom they chose to marry or when.

They have also reviewed alternatives like vocational education, safe work experiences along with opportunities to study, making institutes like National Institute of Open School effective under the gamut of 'higher education' being considered by the Task Force as a means to provide viable alternatives to girls and women.

The consent of young persons were taken, for reporting the outcome of the consultations, (with or without their identities withheld), for recording their presentations and their interest/willingness to take part in meetings and consultations with other young persons, the members of the Task Force and other decision makers, provided there were opportunities to do so.

With their consent, a letter was sent to the Chairperson of your Task Force, with an introduction to the '**Young Voices**' process, requesting an opportunity for young representatives to interact directly with the members of the Task Force. The letter was acknowledged and we were informed our written submission was welcome. Subsequently, four young persons from '**Young Voices**' were invited by the Director of Niti Aayog, on behalf of the secretariat of the Task Force, to depose before the members.

Executive Summary

In consultation with the Task Force

On July 17th, 2020, 4 representatives of the 'Young Voices' process spoke to your Task Force in a webinar. They were Damini, Hardoi, (North Zone), P. Fathimabi, Bellary, (South Zone), Mamta Jangid, Ajmer, (West Zone) and Priyanka Murmu, Saraikela (East Zone). (Their brief profiles are Annexed III) Each one of them fulfilled the criteria that were collectively set, of being from marginalised communities, with a history of activism and engagement with social movements.

During the consultation, the young persons were extremely vocal, articulate and made their points related to all causal issues forcefully. They pointed out how poverty, lack of options, agency, educational opportunities and employment opportunities affects them most. They spoke of girls being seen as a burden, a liability and how that affects their lives. They referred to criminalisation of consensual sexual relationships of young people, the impact Covid is having on their lives - and what needs to be done to support them at these times was also shared. The negative experience from Karnataka where Child Marriage has been made void and how it has led to more harm than good was also shared. All of them were vocal about the challenges they face in their own lives to exert their agency and realise their aspirations. In all, they covered a host of issues to explain how increasing the age of marriage will either harm; or have no impact by itself unless the root causes of women's disempowerment are addressed.

The testimonies shared by the four zonal representatives mirrored the conversations and recommendations shared by more than 2000 young people from 15 states of India. We have grouped the key findings under four sections :

Key Findings:

1. The Age of Marriage and what is the role of Law in determining it? What are Young People's Recommendations?

"If a girl has voting rights at 18 years then why can't she get married at 18 years if she wants to? Why increase the age to 21 years?" (Jharkhand)

“Child marriages will increase if an amendment is made to the law without bringing about a change in the reality. Amending the law is not the same as changing our realities, realities are very different from one family to the other. All girls should have equal access to education and this will ensure the reduction in child marriages. Girls do not have access to the opportunities that boys enjoy” (Karnataka).

‘Sessions on self-awareness with both boys and girls so they are aware about their own dreams. If as a young person they are able to see dreams, they will work hard to do anything including the confrontation with parents if needed. But for that the young people should be clear about their own dreams. If they don’t know, they will do what their parents tell them to do without thinking much about their own lives.’ (Gujarat)

- Two major reasons reported for early and child marriage were limited opportunities for girls to study (28%) and fear among families of girls developing relationships of their choice (27%) both underscoring the low value given to girls’ aspirations within the family and society.
- Young people observed that where law goes against community norms, it is not effective in decreasing child marriage and indeed is only invoked when communities find ways to use the law to sustain social norms. They were uncertain how a change in law would translate for girls as they have seen boys being criminalized. They were clear that there would also be negative repercussions from families and society in terms of increased control and watchfulness over girls *‘Ladkiyon par nigrani badh jaayegi’*.

2. How can Girls access/continue education till they desire?

“Though Right to Education Act tries to ensure rights to education at primary and secondary level but still girls are dropping out for various reasons which has to be taken into consideration with appropriate measures in place to address the issue. It is not only to increase the age of marriage but important to give proper attention for continuation of her study, personality development, access to services and job-oriented training.” (Odisha)

“Now higher education is highly privatized...an exorbitant fee is a big hindrance for achieving our dreams. Girls belonging to poor families cannot access higher education, it should be made free and accessible to girls from poorer communities. Hostel facilities must be made available to young girls to pursue education” (Tamil Nadu)

- Many young people felt that if marriages were delayed, it may give an expanded window for girls to pursue education and arrest drop-out that happens due to early marriage. However, a large number of young people reflected that in absence of an enabling environment, lack of opportunities and abysmal quality of higher/vocational education, a mandatory increase in age of marriage would not convert into a gainful situation for girls who might still be kept back in domestic work and household roles.
- In the rapid google survey, 27% participants said the reasons for marrying daughters young was because ‘girls did not have opportunities to study further’, followed closely by the fear of girls getting into intimate relationships of choice (26%) and sexual harassment of girls in public spaces (13%)
- In the multistate survey, young people from marginalised communities emphasised that opportunities for girls to become economically independent should be prioritised along with efforts to delay marriage.

- Most young people have shown a desire for a later marriage in life but recognise that gaps in education or high costs or low access, particularly for girls become critical points for parents to turn away from education and choose marriage.

3. Young People's Experiences of Gender, Sexuality and Life-Choices

There is a committee at the village level so if a girl gets pregnant without marriage then that committee takes the decision and at second level the local police stations does counselling of both parties for marriage and if not then they register a case against the boy. (Jharkhand)

"Just getting married does not mean we have to bear children. This decision is between the 2 partners, which can be delayed also, this decision should be based on choice and maturity not just age. The question also is- who is going to decide 'maturity'. We need to discuss more on this" (Rajasthan)

- 75% respondents in Jharkhand strongly disagreed that young girls can be protected from sexual violence/ resolve financial problems if they are married at a later age due to a lack of bargaining power in the marital household.
- Many girls and young women also shared that there is a serious lack of autonomy in making decisions about their own reproductive health and rights, and there is a lot of pressure from community norms, families, and partners.
- 30% girls and boys both shared that girls needed nutrition, care and access to quality health services during pregnancy to deliver and stay healthy while 27% felt they required full information related to sex and pregnancy. Raising minimum age for marriage was the third option opted by only 18%.

4. How can girls live their lives with equality, rights, choice and confidence?

"Girls can be happy without marriage also, they can stand on their own feet, stay safe and happy too." (Uttar Pradesh)

"There are some girls who speak against social norms and want to always take leadership too. but they feel afraid due to the environment around them and do not speak up. Isn't it democracy to speak against wrong rules and norms? Isn't it the responsibility of the Government to protect such leaders?" (Rajasthan)

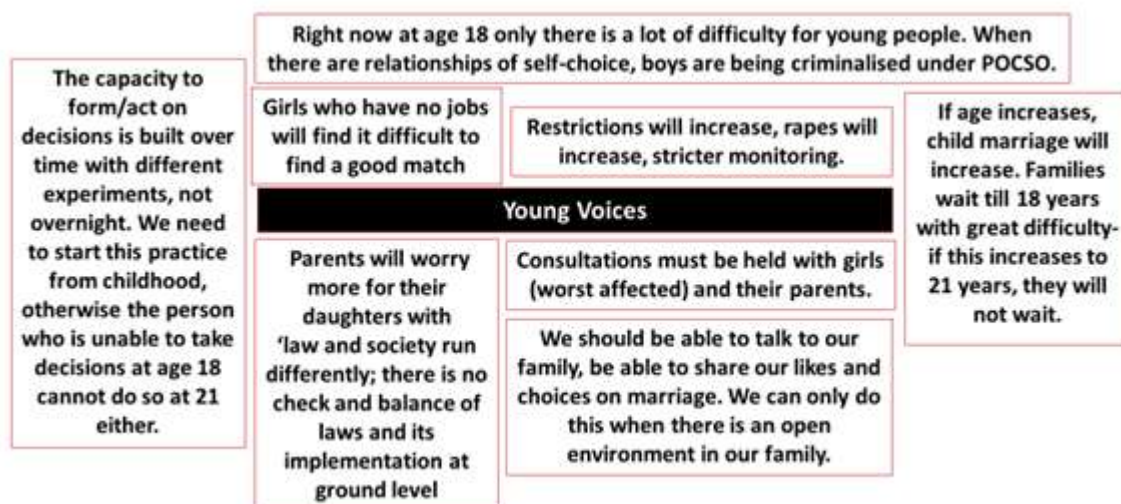
- In the Urban Youth survey 75% young people said that marriage is not the only way by which girls can feel secure. They said the other main aspects that ensure security for girls are good education and job opportunities, financial stability and freedom to decide about her own body and life, freedom and safety in society, respect and a harassment-free environment.
- Many young people shared that there was violence and pressure in sexual relationships of choice including pre-marital relationships. There was also limited understanding of and access to contraceptives for practicing safe sex.
- Across states in discussions a strong concern has been expressed around criminalization of adolescent sexuality. Intimate relationships do not have social sanction or (legal protection)- young people may want to marry later but use the time to explore relationships.
- Girls point out to the social conditioning that comes from sustained patriarchal norms and the need for strong and consistent change efforts at the community level to reverse this.

YOUNG PEOPLE DEMAND

1. We must be **mandatorily consulted**. **Include us** when you initiate discussions on **issues that will affect us the most**. Use channels like schools, colleges, gram sabhas, whatsapp, radio to reach out to us and initiate a **two-way dialogue**.

2. Our **right to choice and self-determination must be acknowledged and enabled** in Policy and legal frameworks.
3. **We recognise the root causes of early and child marriage** as poverty, norms around centrality of marriage, patriarchy and control over girls' sexuality. A law to change the age of marriage does not address all these causes. We urge the task force to **recommend comprehensive interventions**.
4. Our **personhood and agency** should be respected and valued.
5. **Create Incentives** (quality education, secure jobs, information and access to sanitary napkins, contraceptives and safe abortions) that enable us to **realise our aspirations** (including delay in our age of marriage).
6. Conduct **mass awareness drives** with our parents and community leaders to encourage them to discuss our issues and respect our decisions.
7. Increase the **Right to Education from Grade 8 to Grade 12 upto 18 years**, and give us free, compulsory and quality education, especially for girls.
8. Expand our **opportunities for higher education** (with free education or scholarships), vocational education, close to our house, which are also responsive to our diversity and marginalized contexts.
9. Create **viable work opportunities** that are safe, and provide decent and stable income near our homes and villages.
10. Give us **life skills** and opportunities to **practice decision making** from childhood.
11. Ensure our access to **Comprehensive Sexuality Education**. Acknowledge and empower our **sexual and reproductive health and rights**.
12. Ensure **non-judgemental community-based and institutional protection mechanisms**, which do not criminalize us.
13. Provide **social and financial support for our parents** so that those of us who are vulnerable to child marriage may get more years of school and automatically increase our age of marriage.
14. Create **empowering spaces for us, with us**.
15. **Increase our mobility**, especially for girls, with safe and free public transportation.
16. Inform us about all our **rights & entitlements, and laws** that are related to us and how they impact us.
17. Build our **capacities to enhance our confidence, skill sets, education levels and employability**.
18. Our **entitlements should be available to all of us without conditionality and judgement** whenever or whenever we choose to marry, whether or not we choose to marry.

1. The Age of Marriage and what is the role of Law in determining it?



1.1 What is awareness of Law on ground and its implementation?

"If a girl has voting rights at 18 years then why can't she get married at 18 years if she wants to? Why increase the age to 21 years?" Youth Worker, Jharkhand

Survey data from 5 states¹ mirrors (sample size 850 young people 16-20 years in rural India) the trend observed from NFHS data that child marriage now primarily occurs in the 16-18 years category (29%). Indeed, it is also heartening to see that 62% of respondents shared that the average age of girls getting married is above 18 years. In states like Rajasthan, where the custom of *gauna* (proxy for consummation of the marriage) prevails, 75% respondents said that *gauna* happens after 18 years.

At present more than 98% young people that took part in discussions and surveys in rural and urban India knew that the minimum legal age of marriage for girls was 18 years. In a survey² with 280 peri-urban and urban respondents in 8 States, 50% said they were aware of child marriage taking place in their area, raising questions about the efficacy of legal implementation. In rural areas, this was even starker with young people highlighting that *"law and society run differently; there is no check and balance of laws and its implementation at ground level,"* (Young Person from Rajasthan).

Young people from across the country shared that 'gatekeepers' were complicit: *"What will happen if the age is increased? It is the Pradhan's role to stop marriage but s/he looks on as underage marriages take place in front of his nose, the Anganwadi worker also looks on. What is happening in 18 years will continue in 21 years."* In Odisha³ 62% of respondents (314 young people from 25 districts) shared that they were aware of underage marriages taking place and 59% said parents supported this practice. Parents are also pressured by community leaders (30%) and religious leaders (23%) to get their children married early. It emerged from Odisha and Jharkhand that in rural areas people think older girls are not suitable to get married. Across all states, there was a consensus that underage marriages

¹ Rapid Google Survey: 850 participants, including 679 girls and 171 boys between 16-25 years from 5 states, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Maharashtra and UP and Uttar Pradesh (June 2020)

² Multistate Survey: This data is collated via survey, FGD with young people across rural and urban India in 12 States: Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Odisha, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Telangana, Uttarakhand. (July 2020)

³ Odisha State Survey: 314 participants between 15-21 years from 25 districts of Odisha. (June 2020)

would continue to happen on the sly or with forgery of documents, even after the proposed increase in age of marriage.

Young people observed that where law goes against community norms, it is not effective in decreasing child marriage and indeed is only invoked when communities find ways to use the law to sustain social norms. *“If a girl gets pregnant without marriage, the village committee counsels both to marry, next it is the local police station. In case the boy still does not want to marry, a case is registered against him”*, Young person, Jharkhand.

Young people were uncertain how a change in law would translate for girls as they have seen boys being criminalized. They were clear that there would also be negative repercussions from families and society in terms of increased control and watchfulness over girls *‘Ladkiyon par nigrani badh jaayegi’*.

Across all States, young people shared that they must be consulted in the process of amendment of laws concerning their lives. They wanted to understand implications of proposed changes in laws and suggested different ways in which they should be consulted (discussions in schools/colleges/WhatsApp/radio programmes/in Gram Sabha meetings). They were also willing to appear before the Task Force and recommend a representative of young people in the Task Force composition. Inclusion of young female parliamentarians was also suggested.

1.2 Who and What Determines the Age of Marriage?

‘As soon as a girl is born people start talking about her marriage. Girls are seen as a burden or “another’s wealth” – in other words a commodity that is to be utilized in her in-laws’ home’
-young person, Bareilly district, Uttar Pradesh.

An overwhelming response from boys and girls from 5 states (65%) was that the decision of age of marriage is by their family based on their condition and also as per social norms (11%). Only 8% respondents felt this was keeping the minimum age of 18 years in mind while 8% felt the decision was made as per the girl’s good health and education status and only 4% felt it was as per the girl’s decision. With the COVID pandemic and reduction in income, there is an advantage of being able to call few guests and conduct ceremonies behind closed doors, as a result of which, young people are reporting an increase in early marriages. This is also a way to reduce the number of mouths to feed in the home.

It is interesting to know that only 5% young people reported non-existence of laws against child marriage as a reason behind girls marrying at early age, meaning that the remaining, though aware of the Laws believe that they are not capable of curbing child marriage. Major 2 reasons reported for early and child marriage were limited opportunities for girls to study (28%) and fear among families of girls developing relationships of their choice (27%) both underscoring the low value given to girls’ aspirations within the family and society. Another factor (not quantified) was that once a girl attains menarche and she starts ‘looking mature’ - gained height, weight and puberty, people feel she is ‘ready for marriage’. Mental capacities and decision making abilities are never taken into consideration.

1.3 What do Young People feel is a Desirable Age for Marriage?

“Girls can be happy without marriage also, they can stand on their own feet, stay safe and be happy too”, Young Person, Uttar Pradesh.

The majority of the respondents shared that it is important for both boys and girls to be educated, be mature physically and emotionally and have jobs before they marry. Thus, young people were keen to marry later than the minimum age of 18 years but did not feel supported to make and follow their decisions. Across the spectrum, it emerged that independent and responsible decision making, awareness of sexual and reproductive health and understanding of relationships is important for

young people to negotiate before and after marriage on important decisions like when to have the first child, number of children and spacing between child birth.

83% of young people from Odisha agreed that marriage is not the only way to make a girl secure. From the options presented, the majority of young people wanted government support to enable their families to overcome poverty (27%), the next demand was for quality school, college facilities (19%) close to their home (3-5 km radius from the village). Another important factor was that discussions in safe spaces from childhood via girls' collective which would enable them to understand their rights and start practicing incremental decision making from childhood (18%). Only 13% opted for the minimum legal age of marriage for girls to be 21 years so as to enable girls to decide whether to marry, when and whom to marry.

75% of respondents in a primarily urban and peri-urban sample ratified the qualitative responses coming from across different states that young people are looking for varied capacities (confidence to make and share their decisions, enhanced skills, jobs and income) before they enter the complex institution of marriage.

1.4 What will happen if legal minimum age of marriage for girls is increased from 18 to 21 years? What will be the impact on girls?

Child marriages will increase if an amendment is made to the law without bringing about a change in the reality. Amending the law is not the same as changing our realities, realities are very different from one family to the other. All girls should have equal access to education and this will ensure the reduction in child marriages. Girls do not have access to the opportunities that boys enjoy" (Karnataka)

From rapid google survey data, about 36% girls and boys felt that this will enable girls to bargain for more time to get education but this will only be effective if infrastructure and quality services are available along with freedom to avail the same. From rural Rajasthan, *"In places where schools are far and safe transport facilities are not available, neither are jobs, just increasing the age of marriage will not suffice"*. Voices collected from South India felt that girls will get more years of education and opportunities, will have more confidence to make decisions and be able to enhance skills to get jobs. From Uttar Pradesh, in a small sample size of 300 girls from marginalised lower income Dalit and Muslim households viewed this change of law as a potential tool with which to bargain with their parents. They realise that their negotiations will not hold water with parents and further depend on the government to 'create awareness' to make elders and parents recognize that marriage should not be done before 21 years. Whether they are pro or against the change in age, they view marriage as an institution that (usually) gives them less freedom, more pressure, lack of choices and the addition of even a few more years is being seen as a chance to become more 'mature'.

Another 36% young people in the Rapid Google survey felt nothing much will change as girls will still be married off at a younger age (26%) and quality education and decent work opportunities will still not be available to them (10%).

10% of the respondents from Odisha said that girls will be more assertive if the age is increased and might fight back the sexual abuse they face (indicating violence within marriage). At the same time, they highlighted the need for strong response mechanisms from the government as unless girls have the confidence and support system they are unlikely to report abuse, regardless of age. Almost an equal number (11%) respondents felt it might cause increase in unsafe abortions which indicates unprotected sexual activities of young people, demanding comprehensive sexual education and services for young people.

The young people also felt that attraction and developing sexual relationships is part of young people's development, but, the family uses this as a bargaining tool against boys as well as girls: *"Whenever a boy and girl form a relationship of their own choice, society does not accept it and hence they are forced to elope."*

25% of the young people (Odisha) and many more young people during group discussions in Jharkhand very clearly mentioned that it will create more problems for girls and they might get into a life with more violence (she might have to undergo unsafe abortion or face violence even from her partner as both of them would be under pressure to keep the relationship secret). In many cases, if they failed to abort the child, the responsibility to take care of the child came on the girls' shoulder as boys usually left such relationships when complications occurred.

"Girls will be seen as a bigger burden. Parents will say 'why did we have to give birth to girls!" From Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, it emerged that *"female foeticide might increase."*

2.How can Girls access/ continue education till they desire?



2.1. Why do Girls/ young people desire education

"Education is an opportunity for girls to step out of home, make friends and learn. It helps to gain knowledge and acquire qualification", " education expands opportunity, if I am educated and working, even if my marriage goes bad, I can stand on my own feet" and " education should also include topics on rights, equality so we can become more confident" (select quotes from discussions across 16 states)

Young people, particularly girls are extremely vocal about their desire to pursue education- complete school education and access higher education/ employable skills training of choice.

"Education is the key and through enhancing opportunities for education, girls can feel secure about their future. Free and Compulsory quality education should be extended up to 12th standard and they would reach 17 years of age. After that more opportunities for higher education or technical education would enable them towards a secured future. There should be constant follow up to ensure that every child attends school" (Karnataka)

As the majority of the participants in the discussions and survey were from marginalized communities living in challenging socio-economic situations, they saw education as the chief asset they could acquire and possess to live a life they aspired for. More than half (55.29 %) of the respondents in the rapid google survey reported on girls having no choice /option to study till the levels they desired. More girls (56.9%) than boys (48.5 %) felt so.

2.2.Primary Challenges in pursuing secondary/ higher education:

52% young people in the Rapid google survey said the main reason for girls in their communities lagging/ dropping out of education was Due to poverty of families, girls needing to drop out of school and also do domestic work.

“My friend dropped out from std 11th as her family did not have money to give her fees. There are also many other costs of education, books, notebooks, transport, clothes” (Rajasthan). “Secondary school study is costly” (Jharkhand)

“Now higher education is highly privatized...an exorbitant fee is a big hindrance for achieving our dreams. Girls belonging to poor families cannot access higher education, it should be made free and accessible to girls from poorer communities. Hostel facilities must be made available to young girls to pursue education” (Tamil Nadu)

In the Rapid google survey, 17% participants pointed to the ‘unavailability of Secondary schools/ colleges in their neighbourhoods’ for girls not being able to study till as far as they desire. More than half (55.29 %) of the respondents reported on girls having no choice /option to study till the levels they desired. More females (56.9%) than males (48.5 %) felt so. In the Odisha survey⁴ majority respondents said they have only a facility upto High School level and they have to travel 15-20 km to access the higher secondary or even graduation college. Only 9% of the people have access to technical education. Distance adds to anxieties of girls’ safety, physical challenges of daily mobility, it adds to the overall costs of education and makes it impossible for young people who have to work at home and study.

In the detailed discussions young people offered many recommendations *“Schools till standard 12th should be within 5-10 kms at all the places. If the schools are up to 5th or 8th or 10th or 12th, we study that much. Parents are not willing to send us outside to far off places or cities for further education.” “Safe and free transportation is also much needed.” “For us to study they should also provide some more facilities like transport, scholarships, and someone to talk to our parents” (all quotes from discussions in Gujarat). “Free education must be provided up to Pre-University Education to us young girls and boys.” (Karnataka). “I want to study along with doing work to earn for my family, but it is not easy” (Rajasthan). “MGNREGA should provide safe work for adolescents and youth. The wages of the MGNREGA have to be increased so we can support our education.” (Tamil Nadu). “There is rampant corruption in accessing educational and other schemes, this should be ended and access be made easy and youth friendly.” (Rajasthan)*

Girls also spoke about the infrastructure and culture of schools needing to be girl-friendly. *“our teacher asks us to not come to school during our periods and tells others that she is not well, hence absent”.*(Rajasthan) *“compulsory distribution of sanitary napkins and clean functional toilets is necessary for girls to attend school during menstruation” (Tamil Nadu).* Many girls have also raised the issue of school safety, stating that there are many cases of teachers abusing and exploiting girls.

More recently, Schools are closed owing to the COVID pandemic. While children in private institutions are able to continue online classes, those in government run institutions especially adolescent girls are not able to access education. No access to the internet and mobile phone is one reason behind it.(Jharkhand survey) Burden of domestic work which is disproportionately falling on girls has also left them with no time to study. Discontinuation of education for such a long period is likely to lead to drop-out from school itself, which in turn heightens vulnerability to early marriage.

⁴The Odisha Survey:314 participants between 15-21 years from 25 districts of Odisha. (June 2020)

This connects significantly to what young people across states shared, about the digital divide that exists between the rich and the poor and between boys and girls.

2.3. Can an increase in the age of marriage to 21 impact girls' opportunities for higher education?

Many young people felt that if marriages were delayed, it would give an expanded window for girls to pursue education and arrest drop out that happens due to early marriage. It could enable an access to higher education and opportunities to work, thereby adding crucial years of preparation for a better life. 16% respondents in the rapid google survey felt a change in age of marriage could lead to improvement in girls' access to education. *"If marriages are postponed to 21 years, some of us may have the opportunity to complete our degree, take up a job, become independent and then get married. It will enhance our support. Many girls would graduate and go for a job and contribute to the family's earning."* *"Positive thing is that we can get more opportunities for higher education and gain recognition in society"* (Tamil Nadu). *"Extension of marriage age is a buffer for us to avoid early marriage. Along with the change in law, change in schemes for supporting or studies should be introduced."* (Karnataka)

But a large number of young people reflected that in absence of an enabling environment, lack of opportunities and abysmal quality of higher/ vocational education, a mandatory increase in age of marriage may not necessarily convert into a gainful situation for girls who might still be kept back in domestic work and household roles. *"In families where there is no value of girls' education, why will parents invest money in her study for another 3 years, it is not as if school is coming to my doorstep."* (Rajasthan)

A voluminous 42.9% young people in the survey said having educational facilities closer home and accessible can help girls' study till as far as they desire while 12.3% focused on quality of education in government schools and colleges as an enabling factor. The other key options chosen were cost free higher education (9.3%), cash transfers to support higher education (9%), availability of better work options for girls after completion of education (9%). And it is here that the key impediments to higher education became clearer.

"What advantage is studying till 12th, if I have to go to a faraway city to study what I want?" (Rajasthan). *"Options in secondary and higher education should be increased, everybody only ends up doing a BA."* (Gujarat). *"Doing graduation does not give any new work near my area; I have to do wage work only."* *"Though Right to Education Act tries to ensure rights to education at primary and secondary level but still girls are dropping out for various reasons which has to be taken into consideration with appropriate measures in place to address the issue. It is not only to increase the age of marriage but important to give proper attention for continuation of her study, personality development, access to services and job-oriented training."* (Odisha)

In the rapid google survey, 27% participants said the reasons for marrying daughters young was because 'girls did not have opportunities to study further', followed closely by the fear of girls getting into intimate relationships of choice (26%) and sexual harassment of girls in public spaces (13%)

Findings from a study in Jharkhand⁵ found that drop-out of girls from school tends to precede marriage. Once out of school, girls face heightened vulnerability to marriage as they begin to receive proposals from prospective grooms' families and matchmakers, and given the lack of alternatives, are likely to be married off. The study also highlighted the shifting trend in the state where the majority of parents prioritize education of their daughters over marriage but are constrained by conditions of

⁵ Jharkhand study findings: *Agency and Aspirations of Adolescent Girls on Marriage*

poverty and low quality of education that push girls out of school and heighten their vulnerability to marriage.

Many girls pointed to the large number of girls already married and living around them, or girls who have had early separations/ divorce etc. and also have single parent responsibilities at a very young age and highlighted how it's absolutely important that educational systems make space for including them. *"the situation related to marriage will keep changing; but who will support the girls who are married, or those who have got chhutchitthi(divorce by community processes) or whom parents brought back home to be able to go to school; who will pay their fees, or take care of their children ?"* (Rajasthan). Reconnecting to education is also not easy for girls who have dropped out for some reason including early marriage or failing an exam. Reducing bias, Remedial education and additional support for subjects young people find difficult is crucial. *"if you fail, parents think you are not good at studies and just stop sending you to school"* (Rajasthan).*"there is nobody to support in studies for big exams"*(Jharkhand)

2.4. Does Education support better employability ?

In the Odisha survey, majority of the respondents (87%) said that at least a graduate degree is required but may not ensure a job always. An awareness about services and facilities would also help them in accessing education and skills for earning (8%). Special training courses are required like skill training, vocational training etc. (22%). In the rapid google survey a whopping 73% respondents said that girls engage in shifting seasonal labour in areas around them. This includes working in MNREGA, crop harvest, sewing, quarry work etc. In urban areas this emerged as informal sector work like domestic work, beautician, packing, shop work etc. Only 2% people said they see girls around them employed in decently paying full time contractual work. *"Even small earnings are important, but only if girls get a good job, can they negotiate better for taking independent decisions"* (Rajasthan). In the same survey, 48% young people said low cost and accessible training in employable skills supplementing their education is crucial for girls to be better employed. Young people also pointed out the need for education to be more broad based and inclusive, covering diverse domains of work. *"In rural areas girls should get training on agricultural activities and opportunities to earn income from this. Sports and Music and art can also be domains of work"* (Odisha).

In the multistate survey, young people from marginalised communities emphasised that opportunities for girls to become economically independent should be prioritised along with efforts to delay marriage. One of the key problems stated was limited options to pursue careers. Current courses available for girls are- computer training, tailoring, nursing, call center, beautician courses, arts, home science, dance but these do not transform into jobs for girls due to discrimination-not being allowed to work night shifts, move to a different city, apply to a job at all due to perceptions about unsafe treatment at the workplace, lack of benefits like maternity leave and fixed pay. Majority shared that lack of freedom, safe transportation, workplace harassment, unequal pay, and less scope of promotion are the difficulties faced by women at the workplace. Most of the YP from these marginalized communities end up in unorganized and casual work.

Work related options need urgent expansion, for girls and their families to be attracted to invest resources and time in education. A group discussion in Tamil Nadu highlighted how courses in higher education carry a deep urban bias and a gender bias. Remote districts, smaller cities and towns have fewer options for higher education and Women's colleges have further limited options. It is crucial that this gap be addressed. *"Parents do not want to send me to college and also spend money on my wedding and dowry when they don't see that I will get any jobs. Why waste time, when they can just marry me off with my cousin"* (Rajasthan)

2.5 How can education be transformative and empowering?

“Government should enhance educational opportunities for girls. At school girls should be empowered to exercise their agency. There should be programmes and activities for empowerment of girls other than formal study.” *“The education system must ensure that children receive the required awareness regarding child marriage and how children can exercise their rights. It is essential to create awareness regarding sexuality in schools and colleges to ensure that children make informed choices”.* (Karnataka).

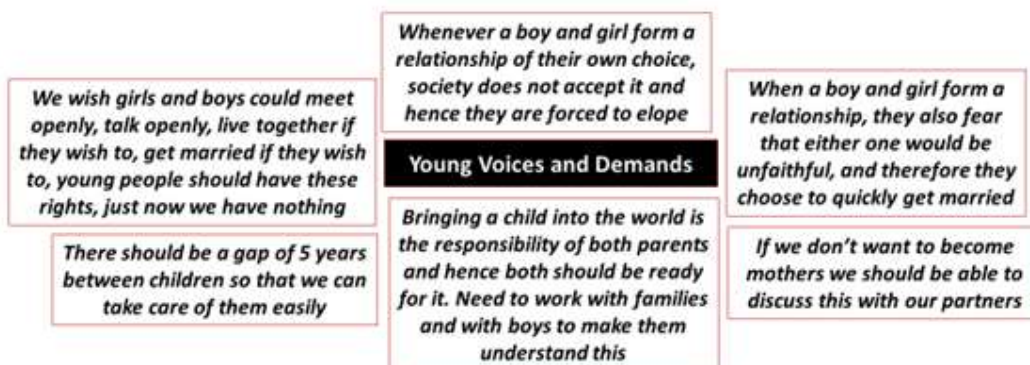
“Empowerment of girls through education, health care and personality development at school only.” (Tamil Nadu). *“Increasing educational and employment opportunities can help women to be self-reliant, if girls learn to value themselves”*(Gujarat) *“ my college does not teach me to feel confident to challenge violence or say no to dowry.. I learnt this here”* (Rajasthan)

If a better life for girls is desired with equality, dignity and choice, it is important that formal education include rights education and a transformative agenda for changing/ addressing how gender, caste and poverty impacts lives of girls and boys. In the Odisha survey, 95% felt that all the boys and girls should be made aware about the gender discrimination and learn how to challenge it.

Majority of young people have spoken about the need for inclusion of comprehensive sexuality education as part of formal education. This will empower them to overcome shame and taboo associated with accessing sexual and reproductive health services. *“Compulsory Sexuality education in all schools and colleges..(Gujarat).”* *“ Schools should teach about body and sex and family planning”* (Tamil nadu) . *“there is a need to understand our experiences and how they impact us when looking at relationships/ friendships. attraction is natural and so we want more understanding and guidance on it not control and punishment.”* (Rajasthan)

It is overwhelmingly clear that young people desire to pursue education and see access to and participation in higher education as a key tool to not only postpone marriage but have greater agency in all decisions related to marriage. When asked what are the best enablers for girls to decide ‘ if, when, who and how to marry’ 19% youth said access to secondary and higher education, only second to ‘support to girls families to overcome poverty’ (28%). Most young people have shown a desire for a later marriage in life but recognise that gaps in education or high costs or low access, particularly for girls become critical points for parents to turn away from education and choose marriage. Formal education also needs to become an equalising and equality enhancing space. This will support girls to be equal partners, parents and citizens.

3. Young people’s experiences of gender, sexuality and lifechoices



3.1 What do young people think about understanding and expressing Sexuality?

'Attraction towards opposite sex and developing sexual relationships are part of our development. There will be greater challenges to manage this. Love affair and elopement after 18 will be brought under the penal provisions of the law. Parents may misuse this law to forbid the agency of the girl to choose her partner'

'What happens to the child if the marriage becomes void and the child that she bears is not the legal heir of the family?'

'When a boy and girl form a relationship they also fear that either one would be unfaithful, and therefore they choose to quickly get married.'

'Parents feel, "marry early so they (girls) are not spoiled!! They may start thinking independently, become friends with boys, etc.'

'Whenever a boy and girl form a relationship of their own choice, society does not accept it and hence they are forced to elope.'

'If we face sexual harassment, or are in a relationship and this gets to be known publically, the information becomes widespread and brings dishonour to us and our family. To avoid this, our parents marry us off early.'

'A girl had fallen in love with a boy and ran away. She was brought back by her parents and married to someone else. After the marriage, her husband deserted her and she came back to her parents' home. She started talking to another boy, they fought and she committed suicide.'

'Girls and boys themselves wish to be married because of attraction and romantic idea of marriage through films and media. If they are in love then they try to marry early with the fear that their parents won't allow them otherwise.'

'Many unmarried couples had consensual sex between the ages of 15-18 but against wishes of parents-while the boys were jailed, the girls endured tremendous violence and were hastily married to others.' (select quotes of young people from Karnataka, Tamil Nadu Odisha, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, Delhi, Gujarat)

The young voices from across 15 States amplified the fact that sexual attraction is a natural phenomenon but when young people start exploring/expressing their sexuality outside the ambit of parental wishes, there are severe repercussions. Violence (both emotional and physical) is a common experience outside and within the marital institution. Young people across rural and urban India shared the stigma around openly discussing sexuality. This is reflected in the behaviours of teachers, parents and the discomfort of everyone around and within young people themselves. They expressed a complete lack of access to information regarding the same and lack of safe spaces where they can talk about it. They also shared that sources like the internet and talking with friends is resulting in misinformation and unsafe practices. In a Odisha State Survey 11% felt that increasing the minimum age of marriage for girls to 21 years might further hinder their right to safe abortions, given the already existing stigma around abortions. Girls in Gujarat shared, *"Though the age of consent is 18 years, if the age of marriage is increased, if we are unmarried and get pregnant, we will not know what to do. We will have to resort to home remedies/quacks for quick abortions and this will be unsafe."*

For girls, who face the brunt of the digital divide, there are even fewer platforms to discuss/ know about sexuality, safe sex, pregnancy complications and other health-related issues. Girls who are members of girls' groups have found these to be safe spaces to share their thoughts and feelings and get support as well as information, as was evident from discussions in Rajasthan. Young people from Karnataka and Tamil Nadu shared that awareness and open discussions are very important so that boys do not only view girls as objects but also see them as friends and treat each other equally. They

demanding that schools should provide a Sexual Health Intervention Programme and a separate period should be allotted for this. Age appropriate information on sex and sexuality and knowledge on safe touch and unsafe touch should be disseminated in schools. 31% young people from Odisha opined that rigorous awareness for girls and young women on their sexual and reproductive health has to be resumed after its cessation during COVID 19 lockdown and products of menstruation and contraceptives need to be made available at the community level. This need was mirrored in other states like Jharkhand and Rajasthan. Girls in rural Jharkhand, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu shared that they are also not getting all services at Anganwadi centres like iron tablets, nutritional food etc. which have implications for their overall development and create complications during pregnancy. Young people in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu demanded Child Protection Policies across schools till Class 12. From Karnataka, a key demand of young people was to revive the 'Kishori' support programmes that used to be part of the ICDS and have been closed down in the past two years.

The low value/status of girls is mirrored even in romantic relationships of their choice. Boys dictate the rules to girls around who they can/cannot talk with on the phone, meeting other friends, physical contact and sexual relationships. Boys also pressurise girls to marry them, threaten them that they will form a relationship with another girl and sometimes hit and abuse them. Girls are upset but are unable to discuss this openly with others as the relationship is taboo.

3.2 What have girls experienced after marriage?

"After marriage we face different types of pressures- we have to do the bulk of household chores, conceive and bear children, not form a friendship or relationship with others (even girls) outside the house."

"Just getting married does not mean we have to bear children. This decision is between the 2 partners, which can be delayed also, this decision should be based on choice and maturity not just age. The question also is- who is going to decide 'maturity'. We need to discuss more on this"

"If there are health issues it's not necessary that we have a child as soon as we get married. We should wait, plan the child later."

"I am 20 years just now and have friends who got married 4 years ago at age 16. There is a lot of difference in their situation and mine- I am able to speak my mind, they are not."

"What will girls do even if they study further? Once they go to their in-laws house, their fate is in their hands- if they wish to they make her study more, she will study, if they don't her studies will cease"

(select quotes of young people from Karnataka, Tamil Nadu Odisha, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, Delhi)

10% of respondents from Odisha said that if marriages happen when the girls are a little older (about 20 years) they can be more assertive and fight back the sexual abuse they face in marriage, including marital rape. However, 75% respondents in Jharkhand strongly disagreed that young girls can be protected from sexual violence/ resolve financial problems if they are married at a later age due to a lack of bargaining power in the marital household.

In West India, girls gave many examples from their villages where girls get married at 18 and bear children within a year. If there is a delay in this, there is an automatic assumption that there is some physical lack in the girl.

3.3 When should the first child be conceived and under what conditions?

What girls wish for	What they experience
<p><i>"After 2 years of marriage"</i></p> <p><i>"I want that children should only be born when my partner and I wish it"</i></p> <p><i>"I only want one child."</i></p> <p><i>"I believe that couples should have children only after 5 years of marriage, this would allow girls like me to live their life, enjoy their life and then bear children when both partners are willing to take care of it."</i></p> <p><i>"If I become capable I will only have 2 children, no matter if they are boys or girls. I will do this regardless of who I have to battle with. I am already working hard towards my goal of working, earning my own money and becoming independent so that I can also negotiate these other decisions."</i></p> <p><i>"There should be a gap of 5 years between children so that we can take care of them easily."</i></p> <p><i>"If we don't want to become mothers we should be able to discuss this with our partners"</i></p> <p><i>"We should use contraceptives"</i></p> <p><i>"We should have the knowledge on how to become healthy mothers, have time to rest, get good nutritious food, have peace of mind"</i></p> <p><i>"Bringing a child into the world is the responsibility of both parents and hence both should be ready for it. Need to work with families and with boys to make them understand this"</i></p> <p><i>"To become healthy mothers- have support of family and benefits of schemes"</i></p>	<p><i>"The community starts the pressure to bear a child and that too a 'boy' almost immediately after marriage. Even the blessing at the wedding conveys the same. Even if our family members don't want it they start getting influenced by others' comments"</i></p> <p><i>"This decision is taken by mother-in-law, father-in-law and husband. We (girls) have no say in it".</i></p> <p><i>"When my brother and his wife decided not to have a child immediately after marriage my mother had to bear the brunt of neighbour's taunts. Later she started saying, 'this is between the young couple'. When there was no conception within a year, neighbours started saying that the daughter-in-law must be 'defective'"</i></p> <p><i>"Until a boy is born, we have to keep having babies."</i></p> <p><i>"The thought is 'ansh nahi vansh chahiye'. Girls are the 'ansh' or part of our bodies but boys are the 'vansh'- they will carry forward the line of the family"</i></p>

The rapid google survey showed that only 2% boys and girls reported that the wife is the one who decides about conception. 60% of the respondents mentioned both husband and wife as the major decision makers for deciding on when to conceive, while 24% believed that the family of the husband decides. In response to the question about when the first child should be conceived, the response from young people (9%) was within a year of marriage (contrasting with what parents and community wanted). 46% said this should be when both husband and wife were ready and 23% favoured between 1-3 years of marriage. However only 10% said this should be when the girl is ready- taking into account the low bargaining power of young married girls in marginalised communities- the combined decision of husband and wife would probably favour the wishes of the former.

Young people also favoured a small family size with 82% wishing for a couple to have at most two children and 12% opting for only 1 child. 66% young people wanted a spacing of more than 2 years between children while 27% wanted a 2 year gap. Only 7% wanted a gap of one year. In response to the question on what would be needed, if girls do not wish to become pregnant immediately after getting married 40% felt girls needed information about how to have safe sex while 30% felt girls needed the ability to discuss and place decisions before partner/ husband on this issue.

30% girls and boys both shared that girls needed Nutrition, Care and access to quality health services during pregnancy to deliver and stay healthy while 27% felt they required full information related to sex and pregnancy. Raising minimum age for marriage was the 3rd option opted by only 18% .

3.4 What Do Young People want?

Young people *en masse* wanted to choose their age of marriage rather than have this decision forced upon them by parents. That this is a constant tussle is exemplified in the young voices and also results of a rapid google survey in 5 states (850 young people) that revealed that both boys and girls thought that the top 2 reasons for early marriage were lack of opportunities for education for girl (28%) followed by the fear of parents that they would form relationships of their own choice (27%).

From Jharkhand it was shared, *“we want to explore different aspirations (mostly possible in the same caste community) but we do not have that freedom”*.

Young people in Odisha, Rajasthan, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, expressed the desire to exercise the right to choose their partner and also did not want to equate sex with marriage:

“Why is marriage the only option for physical relations, why not without it, as it is a matter of choice.”

“As we grow, we get attracted to others and get into relationships but the solution to this is not marriage, but society always shows this to us as the only remedy/natural culmination of a relationship”

“During Lockdown, a boy came to the village to meet a girl who was his friend. The family members saw them together and pressurised the boy to marry the girl, when he refused he was mercilessly beaten up.”

“We wish girls and boys could meet openly, talk openly, live together if they wish to, get married if they wish to, young people should have these rights, just now we have nothing.”

4. How can girls live their lives with equity, rights, choice and self-confidence?



In the rapid google survey when asked ‘what will enable girls to lead their life with equality, rights and self-confidence, an overwhelming 53% said ‘being able to live without fear and have opportunities for free movement for learning, exploring and going around’ and another 17% said ‘if there were no

pressures on girls to marry and bear children but they had freedom to choose the direction of their own lives' and 12.3 % said 'if they had accessible opportunities for education and play' only 12% said 'if their age of marriage went up to 21 years'. In a discussion around the same issue a group of Dalit girls from Telangana said 'create a mass awareness campaign to challenge gender discrimination'.

4.1 Seeing girls beyond marriage and motherhood:

In the Urban Youth survey 75% young people said that marriage is not the only way by which girls can feel secure. They said the other main aspects that ensure security for girls are good education and job opportunities, financial stability and freedom to decide about her own body and life, freedom and safety in society, respect and a harassment-free environment.

" We may want to marry, we may not want to marry, this is our decision. Why is marriage always the focus? Maybe I need support to establish my work instead" (Rajasthan)

Girls aspire for agency and control over their own lives and are examining ways by which they can feel supported to break the dominant norms of being married as the end all or even living marriage in a traditionally mandated way. *"I want to complete my education before getting married. Want to be self- reliant and have a job and continue working after marriage too. I want to marry according to my choice. My mother is a single woman. I am expected to go to my in-laws house but would prefer to stay and look after my mother"*. (Telangana)

"the government can keep engaged in these discussions about making the age of marriage x or y.. but who is asking the girls? The government must leave this decision upto girls. She is capable of taking this decision wisely. The government just needs to create good opportunities and support services for her, the rest will all fall in place. Much more important than changing age is to make girls empowered and informed- they be quite happy to take decisions for themselves" (Rajasthan)

Girls openly speak about their reproductive rights and seek reproductive agency and highlight the social pressures of bearing children. In the rapid Google survey 80% young people say it is desirable to have 2 children and 66% said with a gap of at least 2 years and that decisions about child bearing should be led by the woman and man together (62%). 54% young people said 'girls should have access to full information' and 'the right to make decisions about planning pregnancies.' They question why the government does not initiate programmes to enable this; *"It is almost like my social duty to bear children and that too sons. I want to have children to enjoy them, they are part of me and not their lineage'. ' Girls should have the first right to decide whether to have children, when and how many'. ' women should not be ashamed to say I don't want this pregnancy. we have a right to abortion too.'* (from discussions in Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan)

4.1 Strengthening girls' opportunities, options and assets

In the Odisha survey 67.1% young people said that there should be employment and income of a person before s/he marries.

"if girls are allowed to be educated and Self-employed it will help them to be secure. Give a lot of emphasis to the economic empowerment of the girls, which will help them in their life, instead of becoming dependent on others" (Tamil Nadu)

Girls in particular do see education and options for work as excellent ways of minimising their dependence on the natal and marital families and being independent and accessing their relationships from that space to claim equality and greater share in decision making. Enabling support for education

and employability are their key demands. In the rapid google survey 19% young people said quality and continuous education can be a strong enabler for girls to take if, when, whom and how to marry.

“Scholarships and other schemes which provide incentives for higher education should be in place to encourage girls to study.” (Karnataka). ‘Government needs to plan to provide scholarships to girls and reservations in jobs for them to engage well in income generation activities. It is good if the girls are encouraged to take part in sports or other skills linked to career options. So it is important to emphasise education and all round development of girls. Increasing the age of marriage of girls is not the only solution to address early marriages’. (Odisha)

Besides being self-reliant women need to have a share in family property to live a life of security and dignity. *“In our village there is a 24-year-old young woman, she has two sons, sometime back there was a conflict in the family and her husband committed suicide. The in-laws threw her out. she lives with her parents who spend on her and her children, why can't she get a share in property”* (Rajasthan)

4.3 Enabling sexual, reproductive and mental health & rights

The Odisha survey highlights how 71% young people believe that Empowering girls and young people about their growth, development, gender orientation, and knowledge on SRHR are basics and should be made accessible to each youth with robust schematic implementation. Elaborating further they share, 55.8% of them still depend on their parents to get any SRH information and 48.7% still depend on their friends, school, media for any kind of information. *“when my older sister got married, she knew nothing about sex”, “teachers try to skip the reproduction chapters at school”* (Rajasthan)

Many young people shared that there was violence and pressure in sexual relationships of choice including pre-marital relationships. There was also limited understanding of and access to contraceptives for practicing safe sex. Across states in discussions a strong concern has been expressed around criminalization of adolescent sexuality *“Raising age of marriage might also raise the criminalization of youth engaged with love, sex and consensual sex”*. Intimate relationships do not have social sanction or (legal protection)- young people may want to marry later but use the time to explore relationships.

Hence, many have pointed to the need for Recognition of young people’s dating/ love relationships and support for negotiating Dignity & equality therein. In a culture where young people have little agency, sexuality is taboo and criminalized and marriage is so central to life, Exploring sexuality and intimate relationships and leading decisions for marriage is not easy; *“A girl had fallen in love with a boy and ran away. She was brought back by her parents and married to someone else. After the marriage, her husband deserted her and she came back to her parents’ home. She started talking to another boy, they fought and she committed suicide.”* (Rajasthan)

To build this agency and enable healthy equal and violence free sexual and intimate relationships, it is crucial that institutions do not live in denial or judgement but actually create safe spaces for information, support, dialogue and guidance where needed; legal frameworks recognise evolving capacities. *“Boys and girls (and all genders) should be able to meet each other, spend time and live with each other, and can marry if they so desire. such rights of young people must be protected. currently these are not considered rights”*(Rajasthan)

4.2 Addressing violence against women & girls and supporting a healthy life

53% of young people said 'being able to live without fear and have opportunities for free movement for learning, exploring and going around' is crucial for girls to live a life of equality and choice. *"I have seen that even women who are older and doing jobs are facing violence. they are in jobs but not able to make their own decisions. Therefore, I don't feel that increasing the age of marriage can make girls safe or empowered" "whenever there is domestic violence girls get almost no support from the marital family. Girls are not prepared for this. In fact, during violence their dependence on others increases, further disempowering them to make decisions" (from discussions in Gujarat & Rajasthan).* The need to In response to a question about conducive conditions for planning a pregnancy girls say *"we want peace, and no violence or pressure in that time" (Rajasthan)*

The Multistate Survey and discussions across South India in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka have pointed to making public spaces safer, schools violence free and safe transport as critical to enable girls mobility and opportunity. As a proactive measure, girls in Gujarat and Jharkhand and Odisha have also recommended mandatory self-defence training for girls to empower them. The threat of violence emerges as a very real one and that needs multipronged engagement.

Girls also desire support and protection in situations of violence in relationships of choice. *"There is a lot of violence and pressure in romantic relationships, to meet, to speak on the phone and to share sexual relationships. boys (partners) scrutinise and object to our going out and/or talking to other men. They either threaten to leave the relationship or to get married elsewhere. They feel free to use abusive language and sometimes even to beat up... but we don't have anybody to share these matters with. Who will guide us on these matters?" (Rajasthan)*

Another notable point is many young people have demanded mental health care to be prioritised and made accessible for girls and boys from all socioeconomic backgrounds.

4.3 Investing in Social Norm change and enabling protection mechanisms:

Parents and community leaders continue to remain the decision-makers for their children, especially girls. These decisions around mobility, education and marriage are imposed on the girls at the cost of their choices, decision making and consent. This robs her off any agency she has over her life.

Young people in Jharkhand who contributed their suggestions through short videos said that parents, communities, neighbourhoods all need to be intervened because the prevailing gender norms and traditional mindset has created this vicious cycle which no one is willing to change. Wherever girls have been able to complete higher education it has always been the parents who have stood by them. Similarly, the Odisha survey states that a large number of young people desire to marry late but also realise that this may not take place through changing the law but by changing the social norms and parental attitude. *"if they don't spare us when it is 18 how do you think they are going to allow us to stay so late! Unless the mindset is changed, changing age will hardly impact". (Rajasthan)* *"As parents see young girls as a responsibility to be taken care of, they opt for early marriage so that they can fulfill their responsibilities as early as possible. Girl children are mostly viewed as a 'responsibility' which is transferred from the girl's family to the groom's family. They also choose to get their girls married for money. Some child marriages also take place within close family relatives too. Discrimination is also seen in the manner in which young girls and boys have towards accessing opportunities for a better life." (Karnataka)*

In the Odisha survey nearly 40.8% young people felt *"couples in intimate relationships had to elope in apprehension of family interference as they did not get any support rather faced opposition and violence."*

Young people share the need for norm change work led by the government. *“State must invest in social norm change through transformative processes and creation of enabling environment, and incentivization and assistance to changed behaviours, rather than through legal control and /or criminalization”.*

“The Government must work on changing community and family mindsets rather than bringing a new law on the age of marriage. they should talk about ways through which expenses of weddings are reduced so that daughters are not married together or dowry is not the burden. Whatever be the age of marriage it's important to educate the boy and the families and change mindsets. there is no problem with the age of 18, if communities treated girls as decision makers”. (Rajasthan)

Girls point out to the social conditioning that comes from sustained patriarchal norms and the need for strong and consistent change efforts at the community level to reverse this *“when it comes to taking decisions, we have grown up seeing that our mother or our aunts never speak up, so we should also not speak. So, it takes a lot of effort to stand in opposition. We feel the need for support. we will need to be so strong that we recognise the pressures and challenge them and not bend.. we need lots of skills for this negotiation. Instead of increasing the age of marriage, the Government should work on strengthening such skills for girls through school and out of school programmes.”*

Young people also recommended a protection mechanism that is not ‘protectionist’ rather, enabling and supportive of young people’s voices and choices *‘Child protection Policy and committees in all (government, grant-aid, private, residential) schools till 12th standard. ’* (Odisha).

‘There are some girls who speak against social norms and want to always take leadership too. but they feel afraid due to the environment around them and do not speak up. Isn't it democracy to speak against wrong rules and norms? isn't it the responsibility of the Government to protect such leaders?’ (Rajasthan)

4.5 Creating Girls Empowerment programmes

Participants in the Urban Survey said Increasing safe spaces for girls & young people in the education institutions, family, workplace and society will create a sense of safety and security. 19% participants of the Rapid Google Survey said ‘discussions on equality and rights in Girls collectives’ is critical to support girls to grow up to lead a life of equality, rights and choice.

‘It should be the decision of the young people when they want to get married. It is their right and all should be made aware of such rights. Let the girls decide when they want to marry.’ (Odisha)

In the discussions held in Tamil Nadu, participants listed enablers that supported girls to challenge underage and forced marriage: efforts and support of children clubs and Village Development committees (CBOs), information and access to services like ChildLine - a child responsive helpline across India and others.

In Gujarat, girls listed rights education, life skills training, self-defence training and body awareness as critical inputs for girl’s empowerment. *‘Sessions on self-awareness with both boys and girls so they are aware about their own dreams. If as a young person, they are able to see dreams, they will work hard to do anything including the confrontation with parents if needed. But for that the young people should be clear about their own dreams. If they don’t know, they will do what their parents tell them to do without thinking much about their own lives.’* (Gujarat)

One of the participants in a discussion in Odisha noted *‘Youth’s especially girls feel pressure like pressure cookers and are forced to shut up’.* So, Efforts should be made to increase the capacity, knowledge, understanding, building of consent instead of focus on age. In discussions in Rajasthan Girls said *‘it is very important to have safe spaces for girls. Even in a small village we found through this mapping that girls are living in such adverse circumstances; there are so many factors that influence a girl’s life and she keeps coping with them all with no place to share or discuss. We need a*

multidimensional support system to work with girls. Just increasing the age of marriage will short change this.'

In Karnataka, young people recognised the power of young people's organizations as key support structures *'Some of the child marriages have been stopped by the Sanghas of young people like Bhima Sangha. So, it is important for the government to help young people get organised and to be strong to resist child marriages from taking place.'*

CONCLUSION

Empowerment as the canvas

This submission is an amalgamation of the views of over 2000 young people. They lay out, with the clarity of their lived realities, all the issues the Task Force must take into serious consideration - the causal and systemic issues surrounding early marriages of girls, maternal and infant malnutrition - in order to fulfil its *raison d'etre*. Anything short of these, they strongly argue, will not make any dent on the issue at best and at worst, gravely harm and criminalise them, whom the state is supposed to protect.

The framework of this submission is empowerment of girls, youth and women. Core issues discussed by the young persons examine the status of girls and women - as individuals, as members of communities and citizens of India. They delve into the matters of their identity, their opportunities, their agency and their entitlements. The issue of the age of marriage clearly emerges only as a subset of this larger canvas as young people clearly do not think that the 'quality of life' is limited to marriage and parenting.

"Marriage is not everything" was a sentiment expressed by many of them, across states, categorically.

The young girls and youth have spoken scathingly about how their personhood is denied, at every step of their lives, in every arena of their existence. They describe how they are governed by gender equations, expected to unquestioningly follow the diktats of the men, the elders and the powerful decision makers in their communities. Even among their peers, they are acutely aware of the discriminations they face and the preferential treatment given to the boys within their homes, in schools, in workplaces and in making decisions.

They reeled out examples of how patriarchal, exploitative patterns repeat themselves through generations within their own families and all around them. They do not hold any illusions about marital homes being safer than their natal homes. They explain, with examples, how the autonomy of girls is very limited and it almost vanishes after marriage - and they are not in a position to assert their views on family planning and pregnancy among other issues. Even with something as basic as food, they often have the smallest share. They talk of how their births are mourned as they are considered a 'burden' to be transferred, at the earliest.

There is no mincing of words. *"As it is, they are not interested in taking care of us, girls until we are 18 years of age. If our age of marriage is made 21 years, female foeticide will shoot up in numbers"*.

Delayed marriage and motherhood are seen as desirable by several young persons. However, they challenge the validity of the increase of age of marriage as a means to this end. They have drawn out, with their examples, the main differences between 'penal action' and 'incentivising' later marriages. They highlight the importance of creating opportunities for young girls and point out that they do not automatically present themselves just with increase in the legal age of marriage. For instance, they have elaborated how poverty compels many families to turn to early marriages - to reduce their core responsibility with regard to their daughters; to combine weddings to cut down costs, to protect them from abuse by wrapping them up in marital status.

Most of the young people are in dire straits due to Covid. It is aggravating their families' insecurity manifold - and hurtling them into hurried alliances and engagements. Covid has pushed many girls out of schools; distress reverse migration has brought back many girls to the villages, they are all now potential brides, overnight. Many young people are vocal about lack of safety nets for impoverished families - and they urge the government to address these first - *'If that is not done, what is the use of increasing the age of marriage on paper?'* they ask.

Challenging many gender stereotypes and notions related to protection, they speak out about widespread violence in the communities and institutional violence, including those faced by them from police, from health services, from schools and at workplaces by those in power - inside and outside of their homes. They draw out correlations and join the dots - for example how undeterred sale of unlicensed liquor leads to abuse of alcohol, which in turn leads to domestic violence, which then leads to mothers choosing to get their daughters married speedily to save them from a circle of violence they themselves cannot escape from.

They have many considered views about sexuality as a part of their developmental milestone. Lacking access to inputs, awareness, guidance, they are struggling with both relational issues as well as lack of agency to make decisions about their own body and wellbeing. The support structures that are meant to provide them succour and health services are highly judgmental and prejudiced, making their vulnerability even more pronounced. Sometimes the young opt for early marriages, as in their society, romantic and sexual relationships are legitimised only within the boundaries of marriage.

The few Peri-urban/ college going youth and those from economically stable families who are unlikely to marry before 21 years in the consultation empathised with young people who are bearing the brunt of early and forced marriages. For themselves, they view the age of marriage as a question of autonomy and agency, to be exercised after they turn 18. If they proactively choose their own partner, they face the brunt of the communities. They are very concerned that if their age of marriage is increased to 21, then those who wish to marry earlier will be further criminalised.

They are very vocal about their aspirations related to education - both academic and vocational - and detail all the hurdles they face right now to access them. They want to have jobs which give them security, growth opportunities with all their labour rights intact. They would like their contributions to be acknowledged and valued.

In summary, they wish to assert their personhood, be secure, have unconditional access to their entitlements and be empowered to make their own informed decisions about all aspects of their lives, including whether or not to marry, whom to marry and when to marry.

The core of this submission is the next section which records faithfully, words and views of young people. Their views are not only directed to the Task Force. Collectively, the 'Young Voices' process will continue to engage with the issues raised by young people, going forward.

On reading this submission, it will become apparent, yet again, how young people demonstrate their inclination to challenge status quo, counter negative social practises and re-image equity. They are testimony to how they are and can be powerful agents of change, leading to sustainable, generational transformations.

Annexure I

Guidance for collecting Young people's voices: Background

1. The framework of this discussion is actually 'empowerment of girls, youth and women' - To expand opportunities and freedoms for girls and boys. The issue of age of marriage is a subset. Therefore there is a need to approach the discussions with young persons and their recommendations in that frame. We must ensure that their participation is informed and meaningful to them.
2. This proposed amendment will affect different age groups in two different ways.
 - a. For those in the age group of 15-18 - it pertains to how even now, with the legislation, there is rampant child marriage - directly as a result of lack other better options/opportunities; This also relates to how, right now the law criminalises rather than protect. It will also be relevant to them, post 18.
 - b. For those in the age group of 18-21, it may be all of the above - along with the question of their agency as adults.
3. Important to frame questions in a way that even peri-urban/ college going youth or those from better off families (who may not be getting married before 21 years) are able to see it as a question of autonomy and right to choice and hopefully therefore able to empathise with young people who are bearing the brunt of this and respond accordingly.
4. With those who may respond saying that 21 is better or 16/17, important understand why they feel so as often the reasons may underscore reasons like - to escape unhappiness in the natal home (due to poverty/neglect) or lack of educational opportunities/other things to do/ inevitability of marriage and the fact that a sexual relationship is only legitimised within the boundaries of marriage.
5. The intent of safe motherhood, delayed marriage of girls etc are acceptable to us - but is this the means to that end? What are the main differences between 'penal action' versus 'incentivising' later marriages? What are the elements that may constitute the 'incentivisation'?
6. Community's views are backed by community practices. Some of the community members may also be those with vested interests (like money lenders and some religious leaders) - how does legislation of this kind relate to actually making the lives of children better?
7. Children and youngsters who have been able to negotiate for a later marriage - what has helped them to do that? What made their agency work? Is it awareness? Is it a real option to move on in life? Is it sangathan? Is it law and penal action?
8. How may a move related to increase in age of marriage be related to 'age of consent'? It is true that the age of consent is usually lower than the age of marriage in most countries. Does a move like this proceed further restrictions to young people's access to knowledge, support and guidance for responsible sexuality, with restrictions on those beyond 18 - as is now being restricted to those below 18? The POCSO has many examples of brutal criminalisation on this count that we are all aware of.
9. Is gender parity only about 'age of marriage' and 'reproduction' as far as girls are concerned? Are they only a liability to be shifting hands? Where does that core lie? What do young people think?

10. Are alternatives like vocational education, safe work experiences along with opportunities to study, making institutes like NIOS effective also being considered under 'higher education' gamut? If not, most children in schools are not able to even read or write - what sense will they make of 'higher' education - if their base is not strong?

11. How is Covid determining/going to determine the situation of girls - over all - not only related to marriage and sexual abuse.

12. How to make the lives of girls secure - so that they can 'choose' a later marriage? What does this security consist of? How is it linked to the security of their families and their communities? What is the role of the governments to ensure these.

13. Which are the power centers the youngsters are aware of - to whom they may wish to speak out to - including the Task Force - but not limited to it? Would they like to speak out to the media

Process related considerations:

- Background information to be provided to them about the Task Force; its framework and also about our Young Voices Working Group and its plans.
- Choice to work with different age cohorts separately or together – explained.
- To indicate how we may reach the young persons – through their peers, directly or through partner organisations.
- To indicate organisations/groups other than those on this core Working Group, who we are reaching out to bring them on board and to also encourage them to get in touch with the Task Force directly as well.
- Documenting the youth voices verbatim. May also need to synthesis the views for sharing – along with verbatim responses as annexures.
- How do we address the need for translations? Would we not require a document in English along with documents in the languages which young persons use?
- To indicate the choice of means/methodologies and how they were most accessible and suitable to the concerned young persons/group.
- Ensuring consent of young persons:
 - For use of their recommendations, with their identities indicated/or concealed.
 - To be audio recorded, videographed etc – and guidelines for their use.
 - Interest and consent to take part in other meetings/discussions – with other young persons as well as adults (civil society groups and decision makers)

Annexure II

Guidance for collecting Young people's voices: Suggested questions/areas of inquiry

1. Does marriage of children below 18 years exist in your community? If yes, why do you think this practise exists? If not, why not?
 - If young people chose to marry (girls below 18 and boys below 21) why are they doing so?
 - If parents support child marriages, why do they do that?
 - Who else supports child marriages (for example money lenders, religious leaders, relatives etc.) and why do they do that?
2. You may know of some girls/boys or families who have managed to avoid child marriage. How did they manage to do that? What helped them to do that? What were the challenges?
3. There is a law now that children below 18(girls) and 21(boys) should not get married.
 - a. Has the law brought about a change in the practice of child marriages? If yes, what changes? How did that change come about?
 - b. If not, why not? What would have brought about a change, in that case?
 - c. What do you think the government needs to do, to bring this change?
4. What do you think is a good age (boys and girls) to get married, if they wish to marry?
5. Under what kinds of circumstances (other than age) is a good time for girls and boys to marry, if they wish to?
6. It is known that some young persons are sexually active, what kind of support, guidance or information is useful to them?
 - a. Do they get these now? If yes, where? From who? How?
 - b. If not, why not?
7. There is now a proposal to increase the age of marriage of girls to 21.
 - a. When considering a change in law, such as this one, do you think there should be consultations or not?
 - b. If yes, why? If not, why not?
 - c. If yes, who do you think should be consulted? Why?
8. What would increasing the legal minimum age of marriage of girls to 21 do? Will it create more supportive situations or create new challenges for girls? (How does it help girls who desire to marry only after 21 and challenge those who desire to marry earlier?)

9. Is marriage the only way girls can feel secure?
 - a. Why?
 - b. If not, what are all the other requirements for girls to feel secure about their future?
10. What are the difficulties faced by girls/youth in the facing and living with the threat of Covid?
11. There is also a discussion about supporting health and safety of girls and young women. What kind of support would be useful for that – also keeping in mind Covid?
12. There is a discussion about providing 'higher education to girls'.
 - a. What kind of higher education is available now? What would be useful?
 - b. What kind of vocational education is available for you now? What would be useful?
13. There is a discussion about making young girls economically secure.
 - a. What kinds of jobs are available to you now?
 - b. What kinds of benefits do they include?
 - c. What are the difficulties related to work you face?
 - d. What would be useful to have?
14. The issues you have raised, and recommendations you have given – who do you wish to share them with?
15. The Task Force set up by the government to review maternal health, age of marriage, higher education of girls etc?
 - a. Your gram panchayat?
 - b. Your District/state government?
 - c. Young persons in other districts? Other states?
 - d. NGOs?
 - e. Media persons?
 - f. Any others?

Brief profile of zonal representatives who attended the Youth Consultation held by the Task Force on July 17th 2020

From North Zone:

Name: Damini, Age : 19 years, District : Hardoi

Brief: Damini lives in a small village of Hardoi. She is one of the 5 children of a family, living below the poverty line and totally dependent on agriculture income. Damini is an undergraduate student, takes tuitions in her village to support her education cost. She is a Girl Icon Fellow where she works with a peer group of 20 girls in her community to engage, learn, and act. Over the last 18 months of her fellowship, she has saved 4 children from getting married and is an advocate for equal opportunity for girls. She believes that girls should have access to quality education, us-skilling facilities, and jobs to be able to lead a life of dignity and independence.

From South Zone:

Name: P Fathimabi, Age: 17 years, District: Bellary district, Karnataka (Nandihalli GP, Huvinahadagali taluk)

Fathima is a member of Bhima Sangha, a union of working children and adolescents, which has been active since 1990. She works as a helper in a garments store. Fathima has actively taken part in the discussions held with local authorities and elected representatives during children's and women's Gram Sabhas to raise their issues and has taken part in the capacity building programmes conducted for the members of Bhima Sangha. She has represented Bhima Sangha in several forums such as: the sessions related to Youth Policy, convened by the Rajiv Gandhi National Institute of Youth Development (RGNIYD), the International Forum and International Meeting at La Paz, Bolivia on approaches to work and the first Taluk level Child Rights Task Force meetings convened in North Karnataka to raise issues faced by working children and their redressal.

From West Zone:

Name: Mamta Jangid, Age : 19 years, District : Kekdi Block, Ajmer, Rajasthan

Mamta has been active in the Bal Samuuh of her village since childhood; as she grew up she became a member of the Adolescent group. She has represented the state playing school volleyball. She challenged child marriage in her family and was also successful in stopping her own marriage. Since the last two years she works in a Health project alongside studying for her graduation. She has trained as a grassroots Football coach and also trains adolescent girls in football. She has also been undertaking tracking and monitoring of young mothers who have delivered for the first or second time.

From East Zone:

Name : Priyanka Murmu, Age : 19 years, Saraikela, Jharkhand

Priyanka Murmu resides in Samanpur village in Nimdih block of Saraikela district of Jharkhand. She is studying in class XII and is a Peer Educator of adolescent group. She is a very active participant in her group activities and also popular among her friends for her leadership skills and interpersonal relationships. A very good artist in herself, she has created few artworks depicting social messages.

She has actively participated in the "Ab Meri Baari" campaign led by Dasra in the year 2019. She has a good understanding of Sexual, Reproductive and Health issues, education etc. She is one of the Girl

Champions who led this campaign in Saraikela and presented their charter of demand before District Administration. Priyanka is known in her village and many times, she has raised her voice for their rights, girls' education and demanded for quality education. She is very concerned about the status of girls in her village and has advocated their issues to village level institutions like VLCPC, SMC etc. She has also taken the lead role in addressing menstrual hygiene practices and awareness / sensitization among communities about critical issue like child marriage. She strongly believes that girls should be provided equal opportunities and have access to quality education, health services and livelihood opportunities to improve the quality of their lives.