

SHE THE CHANGE

January 2022

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Dear Readers,

HAQ: Centre for Child Rights brings you "She The Change - Jan 2022" - a compilation of inspiring stories from various villages where girls have taken a stand and fought against societal pressures and practices.

The COVID pandemic has thrown special challenges for our girls. This is the time to support them in their struggles more than ever before and celebrate the journey they travel. We hope such efforts will give inspiration, strength, and motivation to all who live these lives and want to see a change as well as those who want to support change.

If you have a story to share, do write in to info@haqcrc.org and help us amplify the cause.

Thank you and best wishes,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Bharti Ali' with a horizontal line underneath.

Bharti Ali
Co-Founder & Executive Director

Acknowledgements

1- Society for All Round Development, Reodar

Society for All Round Development (SARD) is an NGO located in Reodar, Rajasthan, and its key focus areas are education and literacy.

2- Samudaik Kalyan Evam Vikas Sansthan (SKVS)

Samudaik Kalyan Evam Vikas Sansthan (Community Welfare and Development Society), Kushinagar (SKVS) is a Dalit women headed voluntary organization, based at Kushinagar-one of the most backward districts in Uttar Pradesh (India). SKVS is experienced and involved in advocacy through community empowerment for the access and entitlement of the marginalized communities like Musahar (Rat catching community), Muslims, and Scheduled Caste etc. - in the District Kushinagar since its incorporation. The organization has advocated for Land Rights, Women Rights as well as Child Rights among these communities, as a result of which the women of these marginalized communities have a better understanding about various Government Schemes.

3- Kishori Balika Manch (SARD)

Kishori Balika Manch is an association/group of girls aged 13-21 years that has been set up in every gram panchayat level by the Society for All Round Development, Reodar. Girls who have joined belong to different backgrounds, some of them have been child brides, some have never been to school and some are school dropouts, while some have recently joined the school. Meetings are conducted every three months with these girls where various important topics are discussed and issues specific to these girls are identified and addressed. Awareness campaigns regarding child marriage are led by these adolescent girls on every Akshaya Tiritiya. Issues that are not resolved at the Panchayat level are further taken to block, district, and state-level with help of the organization.

4- Savitribai Phule Kishori Sangathan (SKVS)

For the better future of girls, a coalition called Savitribai Phule Kishori Group of Adolescent Girls has been formed by Samudaik Kalyan Evam Vikas Sansthan (SKVS). The main objective of the organization is to create awareness as well as dissemination of information among adolescent girls about physical changes in the body, education, and other areas like social responsibility, post-marriage responsibility, legal awareness, child marriage, child labour, sexual reproductive health, and sexual abuse, etc. The group meets regularly every month and discusses the relevant issues. This group is involved in advocacy and believes in taking collective action on all the issues mentioned above. Presently, the organization is focused on COVID awareness campaigns, immunization, enrolment, and retention of girls in schools. The present strength of Savitribai Phule Manch (forum) is 6523 in which 426 groups of girls have been formed.

5- Mahila Sangathan, Kushinagar District, Uttar Pradesh (SKVS)

Association of women formed by SKVS in Pipara village. These women are trained by SKVS to continue education and fight various social issues in the village. SKVS helps in the capacity building of these women so that they can advocate for their rights and services.



Name: Lovely
Gram Panchayat: Basan

Meri shaadi hai,
aap log zaroor aana

Solutions to problems are at times easy. They need not always be complex. A tiny but strategic action can often solve big problems. This story is an example of one such tiny but creative action, undertaken by a girl named Lovely, a member of Kishori Balika Manch formed under the initiative of Society For All Round Development, an NGO in Reodar.

Lovely was seen going around the village, inviting everyone to her marriage. This action of hers was noticed and became a discussion point with everybody in her village noting how she was enthusiastically inviting everyone to her marriage, be it her teachers at school, pandits, the village sarpanch, owner of sweet shops and confectioner, friends, by saying "Mera naam Lovely hai, main 15 saal ki hu, 18th ko meri shaadi hai, aap log zaroor aana". Whoever heard Lovely saying so were either shocked or taken aback by her candour. The elders in the village were offended by how openly excited she was about her marriage and broadcasting it herself. However, Lovely's friends knew exactly how she felt. Soon, the government officials/ local administration was intimidated about the news of her marriage.

Lovely is a part of Kishori Balika Manch and regularly attends its meetings. She knows child marriage is a social evil and adversely affects the future of young girls. At meetings, she spoke against the practice of child marriage and truly believed it to be harmful. However, she had no idea that one day she would be at the risk of child marriage and have to fight against it. Lovely was a student of class 10 when her father asked her to discontinue her studies. When she confronted him, her father informed that she would soon be married and therefore, there was no point in her going to school. The news came as a shock to Lovely. She shared the news with the other members of Kishori Balika Manch, but despite their intervention, her father did not budge. Lovely even threatened her father with legal consequences but he emotionally manipulated her into saying yes to the marriage. Lovely was perturbed with how things were turning out to be and spent a sleepless night. The next day Lovely woke up in a happy mood. She went around the village, broadcasting the news of her marriage to everyone. Her family thought she had finally reconciled and accepted her new future with enthusiasm. They did not see through Lovely's tiny but ingenious move. The news travelled to the Anganwadi workers, teachers, local panchayat officers and they immediately reached Lovely's residence to speak with her father. They made him understand that if he did not immediately stop the ceremony and marriage, they are under a legal obligation to inform the police officials. Not only would he suffer financial loss, it would also affect his reputation in the village. Lovely's father spoke to her would-be in-laws and immediately stalled the marriage. Lovely is extremely happy with how things turned out and it has made her confident and more resolute in her pursuits. Currently, she is studying in class 11 and dreams of becoming financially independent in the future.



Name - Kiran, Neha,
Sandhya, Tanya
Gram Panchayat - Sonela

Hum Kisi sein Kum Nahin

Kiran, Neha, Sandhya, and Tanya are four friends, who share a special bond and also live on the same street. These teenage girls from lower-middle-class families, dropped out of school due to financial constraints, to take care of the other children in the family. Kiran and Tanya could only study till the 8th, while Neha studied till the 9th. Sandhya somehow passed 10th, before she too got buried under domestic responsibilities. All four friends were working and earning wages plus balancing household chores.

When Kishori Balika Manch was formed in the village, Sarpanch Tilak included the girls in the group. After attending the meetings of the group, the girls came to know that they could continue their studies through distance education from open school. Kiran, Tanya, and Neha filled the form of class 10 while Sandhya filled out the form of class 12 and restarted their studies. Sarpanch Tilak also informed the girls about Gandhi Foundation, Mount Abu, and how this institute teaches sewing and handicraft work to girls. Armed with this information, Jyoti organized a group of 25 girls and all of them learned sewing and handicraft work for the next 2 months. However, they couldn't find work. That is when all four approached the government and private schools teachers in their village and requested them to get the school uniforms sewn from them. Thanks to their negotiation skills, the girls managed to get approval from the school authorities.

But there was another issue that needed solving. The girls did not have enough sewing machines. Kiran took a loan from SBI and started work by buying sewing machines. Slowly but steadily, they made a considerable profit. They further planned and succeeded in selling clothes to the local shopkeepers of the nearby store in the bigger markets. Today all four teenagers are helping their families financially and are also continuing their studies. The girls truly believed and proved that nothing can stop them from pursuing their goals with enthusiasm and motivation.

Name: Bindu

Gram Panchayat: Jeerawal District in Reodar, Rajasthan

Pehle padhai, baad mein shaadi

This is the story of Bindu, born in the Rabari community of Sirohi District, of Jeerawal Gram Panchayat (Reodar Panchayat Samiti). In this community, girls are married off the moment they are born. Bindu was also a victim of this customary practice and her marriage was fixed while she was just a child. Even though girls in her community were not allowed to go to school, Bindu loved studying and attended school regularly. She was only 15 years old when her in-laws demanded that she quit her studies and formalise the marriage.

Bindu was naturally very distressed with their demand. Being a member of Kishori Balika Manch (the community adolescent girl's group) in her panchayat, formed under the initiative of Society For All Round Development, an NGO in Reodar, she was aware of the detrimental effects of early marriage.

Though perturbed, once she met the other group members, Bindu felt a little relieved and hopeful. After discussing the issue with them, Bindu along with the rest of the girls at Kishori Balika Manch and Elected Women Representatives Ms. Monika & Ms. Kavita approached her parents to change their decision to get her married and discontinue her schooling. Bindu's parents initially agreed but soon came under societal pressure to continue with the marriage. That is when Bindu decided to take things into her own hands. She put up a fight against her parents single-handedly and stopped eating and speaking with everyone at home. She was relentless and argued and stood by her demand of continuing with her education. Finally, it bore results and her parents decided not to marry her against her wishes.

Bindu attended many meetings of Kishori Balika Manch and soon realized how prevalent the practice of child marriage is in her community. She soon channelized all her energy in working towards its elimination and started conducting awareness meetings with young girls and their parents on how child marriage can impact the lives of young girls negatively. She recently cleared class 10 and will be continuing with further studies. Meanwhile, she is continuing with her efforts and inspiring young girls to continue with their education and never give up on their dreams and aspirations.





Name: Manju

Panchayat of Kasya Block
in Kushinagar district,
Uttar Pradesh.


Beti padao, beti bachao

Manju lives in Pipara Village - Panchayat of Kasya Block in Kushinagar district, Uttar Pradesh. She is only 16 years old and had to drop out of school due to economic constraints. She started helping her mother in the fields, where she worked as a labourer. Manju has two twin sisters: Rumi and Devi. Both the twins had dropped out of school as well. She also has a brother Vijay who is a class 8 dropout.

Samudaik Kalyan Evam Vikas Sansthan (SKVS), which is a Dalit women headed voluntary organization, based at Kushinagar-one of the most backward districts in Uttar Pradesh (India), conducted a survey in Manju's village, and found that many children of village, especially girls, are dropouts. They organised a meeting with the women and children in the village and apprised them about the importance of educating girls. Manju's mother attended the meeting and became a member of the Mahila Sangathan and Manju became a member of Savitribai Phule Kishori Sangathan, both the groups formed by SKVS.

After joining the Sangathan, Manju shared her desire to resume studies. She used the money she had earned as a labourer to admit herself in school, situated at a distance of 4 kilometres from her home. She walks 8 kilometres daily to travel to and fro from school to home. Though she gets exhausted by the end of the day, it does not deter but only motivates her further to continue schooling.

Manju's story is an inspiration to other girls in her community. Her fighting spirit and hard work encouraged many other girls in her village to come forward and enrol themselves in school. Though she is struggling to pay her monthly fees, thanks to the school management committee, she is not facing any hindrance in her schooling. She aspires to be a police officer in future and is very committed to her dreams.



Name: Niharika
Gram Panchayat: Udvariya

Sapnon ki udaan

Eighteen-year-old Niharika is part of Kishori Balika Manch. She has an elder sister. Their father works in the field. As Niharika does not have a brother, her chacha has an eye on the properties owned by her father. Niharika recently took class 10 exams. Her elder sister could not complete her education and had studied till class 8. Though enthusiastic about Niharika's education, her father faced pressure from a society that does not believe in educating girls. In their community, people do not see any point in educating girls because ultimately they will be married and managing house and family. Niharika was well aware of this reality and such resistance from the community further strengthened her resolve to continue education. Due to the lack of teachers in her present school, she wanted to travel to the next town for tuition but her mother was hesitant and fearful of allowing her to travel. While attending meetings at Kishori Balika Manch, Niharika observed that the Sarpanch is a young woman and keeps travelling to places like Jaipur for work. She approached the Sarpanch and requested her to speak to her parents. The Sarpanch approached Niharika's parents to ask whether she can accompany her to Jaipur for a conference of female Sarpanchs, to which they agreed. Taking hold of this opportunity, Niharika further managed to convince her parents to let her travel to town for tuition as well. She also became the first young girl in her village who'd travelled to another town for studies.

Having gained confidence, Niharika started speaking to other girls in her community to empower them. She also initiated discussions with people in her community to change their outlook towards educating girls. She also explained to her parents that gender inequality is a social construct. Society enhances and sustains gender differences. In reality, girls and boys are equal and should not be discriminated against. To prove that girls can do everything that a boy does, she learned how to drive a motorcycle. She also helps her parents by driving to the fields and carrying the fodder back home by herself.

Niharika aspires to be a police officer in the future so that she can fight against child marriage in her society and eliminate it. She also convinced her parents to not marry off her elder sister who is only a few years older than her. Niharika is currently spreading awareness against child marriage in her own as well as neighbouring villages. She has also participated in a state-level discussion regarding an Action Plan against child marriages.



Name: Radha
Gram Panchayat: Jungle
Banveerpur

Badle gi soch-pade gi betiyan

Radha lives in a Dalit basti in the Kushinagar district of Uttar Pradesh's Jungle Banveerpur Gram Panchayat. The Dalits in this Gram Panchayat are extremely poor and depend on daily wages to get by. Radha's house sits at the beginning of the village, on the outskirts of the tola. Mahesh Kumar, her father, is a painter. Radha has 3 siblings, a brother, and two sisters. One sister is married and settled down, while the other is still in school.

Radha is 16 years old and presently studying in class 9th. She was enrolled in Krishna College of Basiya tola. Radha dropped out of school three years ago. If she had continued with her education, she would have graduated by now. The reason for dropping out was an incident that occurred in a nearby village. A boy stabbed a girl who was studying in the school of the village, resulting in several parents pulling their girls out of school, out of fear over their safety.

Radha's parents also stopped her from going to school. Her parents were already not interested in her education and this incident gave them the perfect excuse. Many girls in her village were made to drop out of school along with Radha. Radha tried reasoning with her parents to allow her to study further but to no avail. She, along with several other girls spent three years at home.

When Samudaik Kalyan Evam Vikas Sansthan (SKVS) did a survey of out of school children in this Dalit tola, it was acknowledged that Radha, as well as several other girl students, had been made to drop out of school due to the incident which occurred three years ago at a neighbouring village. After a discussion with the girl students, members of SKVS took up the issue with the parents and reasoned with them. As a result, Radha and her friends have enrolled again.

Radha is excited after getting enrolled in school after several years but her parents still take her education lightly. The biggest benefit in attending the school for Radha is that her friends are also going to the school along with her. Radha's sister is also studying. It was due to the active involvement and intervention of the Samudaik Kalyan Evam Vikas (SKVS) that this positive change came about, providing another opportunity for the girls to continue with their education.

All names have been changed to protect identities. All stories have been published with permission.

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