

## Girl gangs with a noble cause



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There is no power like girl power. This can't ring more true when it comes to empowering young adolescent girls in rural India.

What began as self help girl group, a unique concept taken up by UNICEF Lucknow, today is one of the most powerful tools young adolescent girls are using to protect themselves against exploitation and fight for their rights.

Called 'Kishori Sabhas' or 'Samuhs' these groups are so popular that they have even managed to do away with practices like child labor and child marriage in the villages.

How was this possible?

According to experts at UNICEF and the NGOs working to promote the concept, they had just decided to launch it as an initiative to combat girl child exploitation . But little did they realize that it would turn out to be more than that.

Not only has Kishori Sabhas managed to empower young village lasses who were forced to live a life of subjugation by their male dominated societies but it has also turned into a role model to be replicated in most villages needing to be shaken out of the orthodox social system they are living by.

Sample this: When Aarti and Ranu took the lead in forming adolescent girls group in the village Reechpura Birdha, a small district in Uttar Pradesh they pledged that they would not allow any girl to be married before she is 18 years of age. So when 16 years old Rajbai, a fellow student of theirs was being forced into marriage at an early age the Kishori Samuh girls intervened. The girls decided to meet Rajbai's parents and urge them to postpone the marriage. As a back up plan if the parents did not pay heed to their request then the girls decided they would lodge a complaint in the nearest police station. A step that was never taken till now by anyone in their village until now. The girls mustered enough courage and met Rajbai's parents and told them that their daughter is not ready for the marriage and she would like to study instead. They further argued that child marriage is illegal and Rajbai is only 16 years old, she can get pregnant and early pregnancy will endanger the life of both the mother and the child. The argument the girls gave to their parents was so strong that they were forced to give in and call off the wedding.

While that may have sounded easy to do, things are not so always for the feisty girls who have come together to form such adolescent groups. Committed to their cause they not only campaign and educate each about their rights but take a stand against the family and the village social system aswell which does not always meet with success. But do the girls groups give up? Read on.

A ten member group of the Ambe Kishori Samuh, at Lalitpur UP was up against all odds when they tried to call off the wedding of their underage

friend. 16 year old Angoori, the official secretary of the group, announced that her family has fixed up her marriage and the groom's side had also printed invitation cards for the ceremony. The girls reached Angoori's house and met her father, but the meeting failed to draw any positive response from the family. But they tried again approached Angoori's house and so forceful were these girls that despite being a difficult decision the bride's father called off the wedding.

But what makes these Kishori Sabhas unique is the fact that after they campaign against the marriage of the underage girls they also provide monetary backup to those families who cannot afford to send their daughters to school.

Explains Sanjay Sharma of Sarathi Development Foundation a NGO working with these groups, "The girls are taught the importance of a savings and are motivated to open up accounts in which they save as little as Rs 10 per member. This money is then used to support the education of any underprivileged girls in the village. The Kishori Samuhs have been facilitated from within the community it has gradually built up their analytical skills, knowledge and capabilities to communicate effectively with their parents, community and service providers . The 735 Adolescent girl groups have proven their capabilities not only in integrated village planning but have also mobilised their families for behavior change in prevention of early child marriages, exclusive breastfeeding, adequate nutrition to girl child, enrollment and retention of girls in schools and their mainstreaming for further education, accurate knowledge on HIV/AIDS and hand wash practice."

Adds Vasudev, Block Coordinator of the Bal Bandhu Programme which selects and trains the girls to form Kishori Samuhs, "In 2007 when we started the forming Kishori Samuhs we knew that the problems to be addressed ranged from lack of education in the villages, iodine deficiency, child marriage, infant mortality etc. So we were on the look out for girls who were confident, believed in changing the existing the system and had good convincing powers. Once the groups were formed the change they brought in the system is unbelievable."

The added plus of such a community initiative has been its utilisation in Meerut, a city which has grown to acquire a dubious reputation as a

flourishing hub for child trafficking. The only fool proof way to combat this trend, the NGOs working to prevent child trafficking feel has been setting up of Kishoris Sabhas in villages.

Explains Atul Sharma, Director Sankalp, an NGO working to bring down child trafficking for use in sex trade in Meerut, “Since children are the easiest to target the traffickers are making the most of the limited enforcement to develop a flourishing business of buying and selling children in Meerut due to its strategic location.”

But Atul maintains that they have been able to manage the situation owing to the adolescent girl groups that are functioning in Meerut and its surrounding areas. “ The Kishori Sabhas was developed as a target group of young girls for whom it would serve as a platform of information sharing or discussions both on personal and educational issues. As these girls have been taught to make healthier choices and resist negative pressures to avoid risk behavior, now even if a known person encourages them to indulge in anything that they know is wrong the young girls resist it. They also serve as a bank of informers to us if a girl has been bought or sold by traffickers thus enabling us to rescue her immediately.”

Organised every fortnight the Kishoris Sabhas has been running successfully in 32 villages in Meerut, Hastinapur, Mawana and other villages vulnerable to child trafficking. It has also helped educate girls about their legal rights and laws that exist to protect them.

Indra, a 65 year old group coordinator who was among the 64 coordinators selected in 32 villages in villages around Meerut district, calls it a ‘god sent’ initiative. She runs a Kishori sabha from her home and has empowered many young girls through it.

“I have seen how girls are treated like a piece of land here in Hastinapur, even if we wanted we could not raise our voice against it. Our daughters were forced into mis-matched marriages, forced for feoticide against their wishes and some were even sold off for money and we could do nothing but silently watch them suffer. But when I was contacted by a NGO in Meerut and they expressed their wish to start a Kishori sabha in villages to help women bond and get empowered, I instantly applied for the post of group coordinator.

Since then my home is used as a sabha meeting place and the results are phenomenal. I am glad young girls are being made aware of their rights and no longer can be exploited.”

Agrees Rekha, a group coordinator who works with Indira and is responsible for answering queries through the little girl talk that most girls are curious about as adolescents.

“I have been rebel my self and married my brother-in-law against my parents wishes due to which I have had to face a lot of harassment by my own family and the village society. So I understand what a young girl has go through if she speaks her mind or expresses her wish in matters related to marriage and education. Through the Kishori Sabhas I now counsel them about these matters and help them make decisions that will benefit them, instead of falling prey to unscrupulous people out to exploit them.”

Among one of the favorite group coordinators, Rekha is sought out by girls ready to make the transition into adulthood as well. “Through the Kishori Sabhas sex education is also provided which has made it powerful knowledge forum in making the adolescent girls more self reliant when they step into adulthood. The girls in the villages are no longer vulnerable as they are aware of risk involved, sexual exploitation and harassment at home or outside and speak up against it. The sabhas have also helped us sensitise women about AIDS and STDs apart from other health hazards as well.”

Adds Rajib Ghosal, Child Protection Specialist, UNICEF UP, “The best way to target a issue and prevent a problem is to motivate the community to turn into vigilant groups based on voluntary action. These self help groups not only have a higher success rate in achieving the desired aim where projects and schemes been launched for the welfare of the community have failed. In fact the Kishori Sabha s have been able to bring almost a 80% reduction in child marriages in the villages they have been launched in. In Meerut too the initiative worked when it came to child protection and that too with no financial strings attached. A completely voluntary effort the response the girl groups have elicited is way beyond our expectations which has fortified my belief in community being the real harbingers of change both in attitudes and mindsets.”

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