TOGETHER WE CAN

Collective social action by Baisari Village Organisation has stopped child/early marriages in the village for the last two years and supported school dropout girls with re-enrolments, thus bringing them back into the education system

Baisari is a small village with a population of 652 comprising 142 households in Godda district of Jharkhand. Located near Bihar state border, it is around 5 kms from Godda Bus Stand and some 300 kms from state capital, Ranchi. There is a primary school in the village that imparts education up to 5th grade, and a high school till 12th grade that is nearly 1 km from the village.

For a community that largely comprises agricultural labourers and migrant workers, a general practice has been to send children to the village primary school till grade 5, beyond which parents do not prioritise pursuing admission in nearby higher schools, thus bringing in learning gaps and, in many cases, even discontinuation of education. The situation is even worse for girls as social norms place a stronger emphasis on their training in domesticity vis-à-vis schooling and on child/early marriage. This leaves girls with slim chances to continue their education or take up studies seriously beyond a certain grade and age.

Sweta Devi, President of Baisari Village Organisation[1] wasn't oblivious of this. Being a school dropout and a survivor of child marriage herself, the 30-year-old mother of two had decided to give an alternative future to her daughter. Hence, she had been raising both her son and daughter with equal opportunities.

However, beyond this, she hadn't fully realised the potential of Baisari VO (comprising 119 members) and the larger role it could play shaping the lives of adolescent girls unless Umang sessions started being held at the VO. A gradual attitudinal shift began in her and among other members as the sessions stressed

on the significance of girls' education and on the leadership role that VOs can play in taking up social issue of child marriage.

Project Umang is being implemented jointly by JSLPS and PCI India to reduce prevalence of child/early marriage by 15-20% in high-prevalence districts in Jharkhand and empower adolescent girls. Currently, it is active in 2 districts of Jharkhand – Jamtara and Godda – and is working on the principle of 'Inter-generational Transmission of Empowerment from Mother to Daughter'.

Turning Point

With the implementation of Umang since 2019, Baisari VO has taken up an active role in averting child/early marriages. Members are constantly on the lookout for potential cases. "While child marriage was highly prevalent earlier, I am proud to claim that we have been able to successfully stop it now. For almost two years, not a single case of child/early marriage has been reported in our village," says Sweta Devi.

Part of this achievement can also be attributed to an incident that happened in the village last year. In July 2021, the VO got to know about a case of early marriage. It tried to intervene, called child helpline 1098, following which police came in the village. Despite such pressure, the girl's parents succumbed to their commitment to the groom's family and got her married by producing fake age proof documents. However, this incident shook up the entire community as villagers realised the extent to

which the VO could go in averting such marriages. It was also a testimony of the VO's high level of vigilance and dedication towards the cause. Post that marriage, not a single such case has recurred.

Paving an Alternative Path

Baisari VO has also been working towards promotion of education among girls. So, when active woman Sapna Devi approached the VO with her concern regarding school dropouts, Baisari VO took charge of the situation.

"We found that most girls had discontinued their education after 5th grade with a gap of 1-2 years," informs Sweta Devi. These were girls mostly aged 11-13 years. There was a strong reservation against education, particularly girls' education, among community members. The VO overcame this with regular home visits, counselling of mothers, follow-ups, etc.
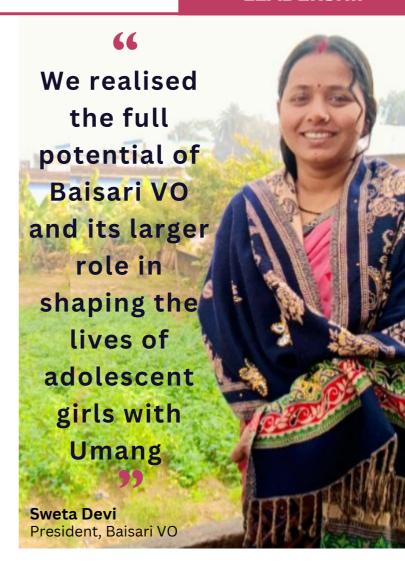
Some SHG members had also complained of facing problems in getting their daughters re-enrolled. "Many parents were confused about admission process, or which class they should seek admission for. Others didn't have supporting documents, address proof, and some had even misplaced 5th grade passing certificate of their daughters," recalls Sweta Devi.

ON RECORD

Other VOs in Godda where no incident of child/early marriage has occurred in the last two years

- Rampur
- Amarpur
- Chilauna
- Sarkanda Tiyodih
- Diyara *(in the last 6 months)*

So, the VO members accompanied those girls and their parents to Malini High School (which is about 1 km from Baisari) and offered handholding support in filling forms, producing documents, and other admission formalities. During this academic year, Baisari VO has successfully placed 12 school dropout girls under the ambit of education by helping them in getting admissions in 6th grade in Malini High School. There are around 6-8 more school dropout girls whom the VO has identified for admissions in the next academic year.

> " We realised the full potential of Baisari VO and its larger role in shaping the lives of adolescent girls with Umang "

Sweta Devi
President, Baisari VO

Extra Mile

"However, our role doesn't end here. We do constant follow-ups with schools to ensure regular attendance of those girls and with their mothers to ensure that they are studying at home," says Sweta Devi.

She mentions that making community members realise the importance of education is the bigger challenge. "Girls are mostly involved with domestic chores at home, leaving them with little interest or energy for academics," she says. Lack of supportive supervision from parents and a conducive atmosphere further drift girls apart from studies.

As a step ahead, VO has offered to support such girls. "We have decided to provide tuition to girls in VO office. These will be provided free of cost and classes will be conducted by 4-5 VO members themselves. Any girl who has discontinued school or wants support in academics is welcome to join the classes," says Devi.