



BREAKING SILENCE OVER CHILD MARRIAGE

Active vigilance of resource person and timely intervention by village organisation in Sujankitta village, Godda, collectively rescued a 12-year-old girl from ending up as a child bride

It was a passing remark of a group of adolescent boys at roadside this month that alerted Resource Person, Lata Jha, regarding child marriage of a little girl that was probably going to be held in Sujankitta village, Godda district, Jharkhand. As a Resource Person associated with Project Umang, Sujankitta falls under her area of vigilance. She immediately enquired the matter with respective Active Woman of that village, who was unaware about it. However, Lata couldn't find peace as those boys' remark kept haunting her. So, the next day she herself visited Sujankitta, which is about 7 km from her village, Sanhauli.

On visiting there too, nobody admitted of knowing about such a marriage. Lata didn't give up though. She had sensed that the girls' parents had kept the matter confidential. Silence of community members compelled Lata to make consecutive visits to the village for the next three days, knocking at every door to find the truth.

"Then a village woman informed me that she had seen parents of a 12-year-old girl, Jitni Kumari, buying clothes in bulk last week. Such bulk shopping is generally associated with marriage preparations. However, she too wasn't aware about the date of marriage," says 28-year-old Lata Jha.

Lata then visited Jitni's home and tried to counsel her mother, Habo Devi, who is also a member of self-help group (SHG) Lakshmi Ajeevika Sakhi Mandal. "I tried to remind Habo Devi about the ill-effects of child marriage and our learnings from Umang sessions at SHG meetings that emphasise on how detrimental child marriage is to a girl's future," says Lata. But to

her dismay, Lata was turned away by Jitni's father, Shaligram Yadav, who works as a wage labourer.

CEFM – a Grave Concern

By then Lata had found that the groom was from another state, Uttar Pradesh, and was much older than Jitni. Child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) is a deep-seated social norm in this region, where parents often marry off their young girls either out of poverty or with the fear that the girl may grow up and enter relationships with other boys, thus disgracing the family. Huge age gap between bride and groom is very common in such marriages.

At times, money is involved too, where groom's family pay the bride's side. This makes the child bride vulnerable to domestic abuse (physical, mental and sexual), intimate partner violence, teen pregnancy, unsafe abortions/deliveries, and a future of complete dependence on her spouse with incomplete education and under-developed agency of her own. Such child brides are also at the risk of child trafficking in the garb of marriage.

Realising that Jitni's marriage was likely to be held just after two days, Lata immediately informed Rinku Devi, President of Ganga Village Organisation. "I called 5-6 VO members and together we visited Jitni's home along with Lata Jha. Meanwhile, she had also called CLF cadre," says 36-year-old Rinku Devi, who has been President of Ganga VO since 2018, and is a resident of the same village.

16 VOs in Godda have claimed zero incidence of CEFM in the last two years. Umang has successfully averted 69 cases of CEFM and facilitated school enrolments & re-admissions of 152 girls in Godda so far



Facing Resistance

The team faced strong resistance from Jitni's parents who were initially in complete denial of such a marriage, and later, when the team tried to counsel the family against child marriage, they retaliated instead of understanding. "Shaligram Yadav was in no mood to listen to us. He accused us of interfering in their family matter," says Lata. Gradually, he grew aggressive. By then community members had assembled at his doorstep too. "Most villagers were mute spectators. A few elders tried to mediate, but Shaligram didn't pay heed," she recalls.

"We reminded the parents about the ill-effects of this marriage on Jitni's future. We also informed them about Child Marriage Act and legal repercussions involved, but it was of no avail. In fact, Shaligram grew violent," recalls Rinku Devi. At last, the team had to involve local authorities. The police took in writing that Shaligram won't get his daughter married early. It was only after that the marriage could be averted. As this was the first incidence of child marriage that was being opposed by VO since implementation of Umang, it took greater efforts and involvement of authorities.

Collective Efforts Pay Off

"It has been such a relief that with collective efforts of community members, VO members and local authority, and with guidance & support from team Umang, we were able to save a girl's future. I am glad that Jitni's education wasn't interrupted, and she is continuing her studies at grade 5 in village government school," says Lata.

As a Resource Person under Project Umang, Lata Jha is regularly in touch with 37 Active Women who report to her. She oversees functioning of 2 CLFs in Godda district – Chanda CLF (with 20 VOs & 283 SHGs) and Beniyadi CLF (14 VO & 214 SHGs). Ganga VO falls under the former. Project Umang is being implemented by JSLPS in partnership with PCI India at Jamtara & Godda districts in Jharkhand for working against prevalence of CEFM in the region since 2019. It capacitates members of women

collectives that enables them to support their daughters' education & aspirations and protect them from CEFM.

Gradual Change

Through a cadre of Active Women and Resource Persons, the programme has been mobilising community women with modular sessions at SHG meetings that generate awareness among them & improve their communication/negotiation skills. With enhanced knowledge, confidence and self-efficacy, these women are better equipped to confront the social evil of CEFM at intra-household level and participate at household decision-making. Further, these capacitated women have shown to offer peer support at community level and also exhibit leadership through VOs and CLFs that are increasingly taking up issues of child marriage, girls' education and gender-based violence. These women leaders have also shown system level engagement for social cause.

"Umang has been an eye-opener for us. I have been President of Ganga VO since 2018. But it was only after Umang sessions were held at our VO, did we realise the gravity of CEFM and started our work against it," says Rinku Devi, who herself was married at a young age of 16, yet never stood against it earlier. "Umang sessions have also made us realise the power of unity. Together, women can bring a positive change for the next generation," she adds.

It is this positive influence of the programme that 16 VOs in Godda district have claimed zero incidence of CEFM in the last two years. The programme has successfully reached out to 1,03,490 SHG women, averted 69 incidents of CEFM and facilitated school enrolments & re-admissions of 152 girls in Godda so far.

"At times some community members pass snide remarks at us. But we don't pay heed to that. For we know, change is a slow process, and these very critics will start supporting us once they see a difference," says Lata

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