

Shifting Norms and Developing Agency with UMANG

*Exploring empowerment journeys through the lens of
mother-daughter relationship*



Umang

Umang is an initiative that leverages the incredible bond between mothers and daughters for enhancing the value of the girl child in the society. It emphasises on education of adolescent girls that can help them become economically independent as adults and delay age at marriage. Umang is a proven concept and a scalable model to prevent CEFM (child, early, and forced marriage).

PCI India has partnered with the Jharkhand State Livelihood Promotion Society (JSLPS) under the Dept of Rural Development, Govt of Jharkhand, for its implementation and scale-up in the state.



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Acknowledgement

PCI India brings this document to narrate the empowerment and norms shifting model of Umang through the lived experiences of women and girls at Godda and Jamtara in Jharkhand under Project Umang.

We express our humble gratitude to the members of women's collectives – mothers and their daughters – who allowed us to delve deep into their lives and into their transformative journey over the last four years.

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List of Abbreviation

AW	Active Woman
B.Ed.	Bachelor of Education
CEFM	Child, Early, Forced Marriage
CLF	Cluster Level Federation
CRP	Community Resource Person
CSC	Common Service Centre
DDU-GKY	Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana
GBV	Gender Based Violence
IDI	In-Depth Interview
IRB	Institutional Review Board
JSLPS	Jharkhand State Livelihood Promotion Society
KGBV	Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya
MBK	Master Bookkeeper
MEA	Medical Equipment Assistant
MGNREGA	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005
MHM	Menstrual Hygiene Management
MoRD	Ministry of Rural Development
NEP	National Education Policy 2020
NFHS	National Family Health Survey
POCSO	Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012
RIASEC	Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional
SAC	Social Action Committee
SHG	Self-Help Group
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
VO	Village Organisation

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Executive Summary

Project Umang is an empowerment-integrated and norms-shifting model that is working with women's collectives (federated 3-tier institutional structure) to advance empowerment of adolescent girls in Jharkhand. PCI India has partnered with the Jharkhand State Livelihood Promotion Society (JSLPS) to implement Project Umang in Godda and Jamtara districts with aim of reducing the prevalence of child/early marriage of girls. Umang model was piloted in Nala block (Jamtara district) and Godda Sadar block (Godda district) during Oct 2019-Mar 2023 and thereafter it has been scaled up in the same two districts by saturating all SHGs.

The purpose of this document is to understand the empowerment and norms shifting model of Umang through the lived experiences of women and girls in the pilot geographies. Through the stories of SHG (self-help group) mothers and their daughters, PCI India has tried to explore the strengths of 'intergenerational transmission of empowerment from mothers to daughters' and realised its richness within the socio-cultural context of the intervention area.

PCI India presents a collection of ten stories of grit, perseverance, and determination of women and girls who are bringing change in their lives and of those around them. It is divided into two parts:

1. 'Empowered' – stories highlighting the empowerment pathways of SHG mothers
2. 'Rising Star' – stories of the daughters of Godda & Jamtara who hold promise for the future.

Considering that the evolution of women's empowerment and norm shift goes through a set of stages and processes, 'Empowered' (Part I of the document) gives us a rich understanding of the unique pathways that mothers have taken to reach a common goal – of shaping a better future for their daughters. For a deeper insight into what empowerment means to SHG mothers and how it evolves within themselves, in their relational spaces, and gradually transmits to their daughters, this part of the document has attempted to approach the subject through some critical elements of empowerment including Consent, Agency, Mobility, Negotiation and Gender Norms.

We have used stories that are simple, yet courageous, talks about the steps taken by mothers within their households backed by the collective strength to elicit a shift in social norms and transform the lives of the next generation.

'Rising Star' (Part II of the document) has tried to capture the aspirations of adolescent girls for a better tomorrow and how girls are able to overcome challenges & set on productive pathways with the trust & support of their mothers. These are stories of hope.

There is a growing realisation that interventions working against child/early marriage should focus on offering alternatives to girls and their parents that enable them to shift from regressive practices and embrace alternative pathways. Umang has laid emphasis on the promotion of education and economic independence as sustainable, feasible alternatives to child/early marriage. While the project has successfully averted 100s of child/early marriages, it has also offered avenues to these girls to change the course of their lives. It is fascinating to explore the different alternatives girls have chosen after rejecting their child/early marriage.

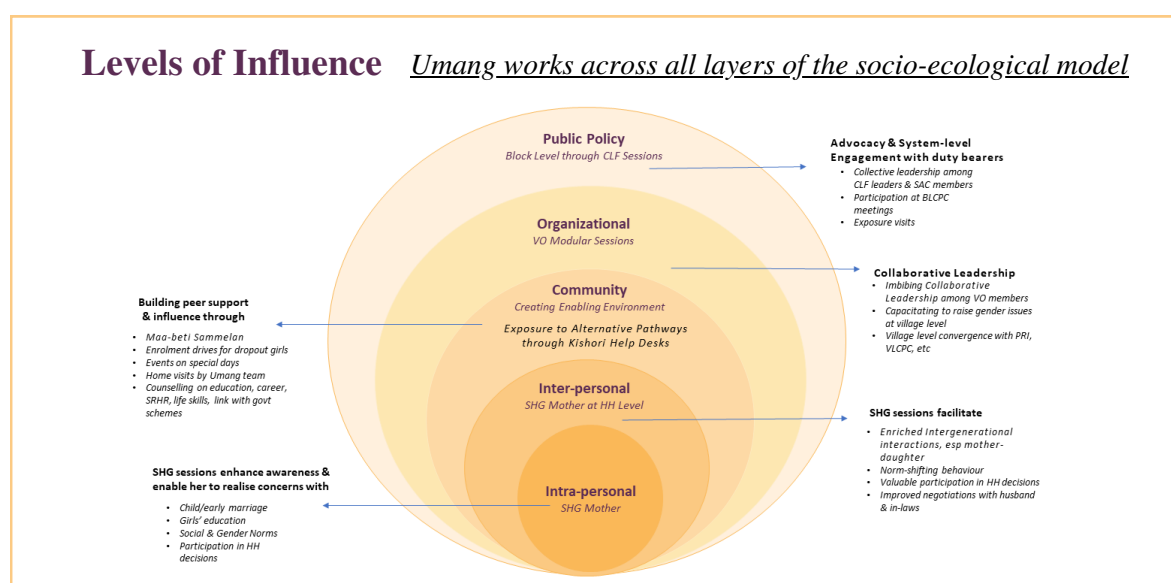
Girls in Godda and Jamtara are now expressing their aspirations and seeking counselling at Kishori Help Desk for their queries on career, education, health, and skills, with the support of their mothers.

Stories of these girls are incredible and inspiring. They have proven that alternative life is possible for girls, they can set life goals that are independent of marriage, and become productive human resources for themselves, their families, communities and the larger nation.

Introduction

Child, early, forced marriage (CEFM) is a harmful practice – a violation of human rights – that denies millions of girls their childhood and the opportunity to realise their full potential. When a girl child is married, she loses her opportunities of education & employment which increases her vulnerabilities of violence and poor health. This has raised concerns across the world and a plethora of interventions by various stakeholders from development sector are underway to address the issue. Although these efforts have reduced the prevalence, it hasn't been eliminated completely. There are still over 650 million girls and women in the world who were married before attaining 18 years of age[1].

In India, consistent efforts by successive governments at the centre and states, and enactment of laws such as the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006 & Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO) have shown gradual decline in the prevalence of child marriage from 54% in 1992-93 (NFHS-1) to 23.3% in 2019-21 (NFHS-5). However, this is still a concern as the current figure implies that one out of every 5 women in India is being married before she attains 18 years of her age. Some states need closer attention, including Jharkhand, where one out of every three girls are married before the age of 18.



With the aim of shifting norms across the fabric of communities and societies, bringing a change in the mindset of people, and encouraging them to do away with child/early marriage, PCI India partnered with the Jharkhand State Livelihood Promotion Society (JSLPS) to implement Project Umang. The uniqueness of the project lies in its approach of 'intergenerational transmission of empowerment from mothers to daughters', whereby it is harnessing mother-daughter relationship and building capacities of women collectives (3-tier federated SHG structure) members, who in turn, can nurture the aspirations of their daughters & protect them from child/early marriage.

Pilot of the Umang model was implemented in Nala block (Jamtara district) and Godda Sadar block (Godda district) during Oct 2019-Mar 2023 and thereafter scaled up across all other blocks in these two districts. This empowerment-focussed and norms-shifting model identifies educational and economic aspirations as critical elements that can make significant improvements in the lives of adolescent girls, enabling them to grow up as productive human resources, thus leading them towards pathways of empowerment. However, the project design acknowledges that empowerment cannot be attained by standalone, self-improvement initiatives for women and girls without addressing the restrictive social norms (specifically gender norms) that are intricately woven into their lives and the social context they exist in and the

involvement of different stakeholders who play different roles – from inter-personal to systemic levels – to influence the societal and gender norms. This requires negotiating a normative shift across all levels of the socio-ecological model. Hence, the Umang model has adopted a holistic approach for addressing the issue at all levels. It emphasises on collective leadership of women, enriched mother-daughter relationship and a mother's role in creating an enabling environment – within households and in communities – for girls to nurture their aspirations.

Umang has strengthened the voices & secured spaces for mothers and daughters to successfully delay the age at marriage & shift norms. It has enabled SHG members to realise the incredible role they can play in influencing & shaping future of the daughters or the girls in their communities.

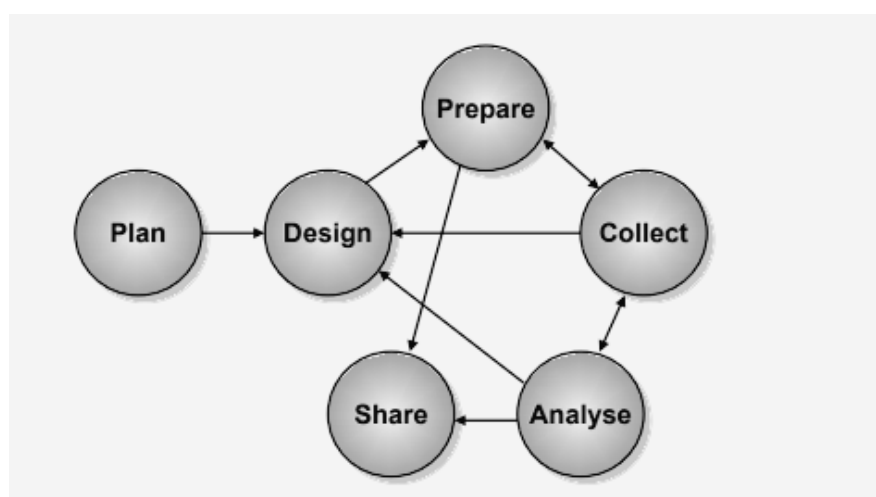
Umang harnessed these dynamics with the following approach:

- **Enriched mother-daughter communication** – Umang mentored mothers to be the source of all sets of information and discussions for their daughters. It enriched mothers' confidence by creating awareness among them around effective communication, menstruation & hygiene, food & nutrition along with processes and pathways for setting realistic goals & career aspirations, thus transforming them into meaningful & trustworthy conversations.
- **Increased participation** – of mothers in daughters' education and school activities essentially through regular monitoring, tracking and conversations.
- **Enabling quality day's schedule at home** – It encouraged mothers to develop a day schedule for girls containing a mix of time for quality study, recreation, household chores, interaction with family members, peers, and physical agility etc.
- **Resolving issues together** – Regular & open discussions around daughters' academic performance, health issues, education, career, etc enabled mothers to identify and resolve issues early. Umang built the capacities and confidence of the women (mothers) to sort out their daughters' problems with external stakeholders.
- **Protecting against child/early marriage** – Through modular sessions at SHG, VO and CLF meetings, it enhanced communication & negotiation skills of mothers, making them aware on forms of violation of child rights and the laws/policies and/or social entitlements available for protection of children. These mothers are better equipped to negotiate/convince their husbands and families against child/early marriage. Women are now keeping a watch on girls in their neighbourhood and pushing for regular school education and avoid any incidence of child/early marriage.
- **Pathways to realise aspirations** – With enhanced awareness, skills and agency (acquired through Umang modular sessions) mothers started participating in counselling and mentoring sessions to understand about their daughter's aspirations and the support they should provide for them to pursue their goals.

Methodology

This booklet presents ten stories studied through Qualitative Case Study Methodology approach[1]. The method is based on Robert Yin's[2] concept that offers scope for exploring individuals, organisations, interventions, relationships, communities, or programmes; and supports the deconstruction and the subsequent reconstruction of various phenomena. We have deconstructed empowerment into five critical components and norms shifting pathways into two distinct domains while also looking them jointly to get a holistic view to understand the intergenerational transmission of empowerment from mothers to daughters as demonstrated through Project Umang.

Yin's case study process comprising six interdependent stages[3]:



While 'Plan' includes selecting case study method, identifying research questions and the asks, 'Design' is about defining the likely cases to be studied, identifying the case study design (multiple/collective case study has been selected for this document). Subsequently, 'Prepare' focuses on developing skills, getting approvals, developing case study protocol (such as informed consent); and 'Collect' involves acquiring and managing database of case studies, getting information,. These are followed by analysis and finally sharing the findings.

Selection of Case Studies: The selection criteria included the matrix (Annexure A and B) including focus area and suggested questions against each element. This has been used as the guiding reference throughout the documentation process. Detailed in-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted during the period June – October 2023. Most of these have been face-to-face interviews. Some follow-up interviews were also conducted for a deeper insight.

Appropriate consenting process was undertaken during interaction with each of the individuals including minors. All identifiers were dis-connected from the main data, prior to setting into analysis stage.

[1] *Qualitative Case Study Methodology – Study Design and Implementation*

[2] Robert K Yin is an American social scientist. His book, 'Case Study Research: Design and Methods' and other work on qualitative research are globally acknowledged and cited in research work.

[3] *Case Study Process*



Part I: Empowered

Tracing the pathway of empowerment of self-help group mothers

AGENCY

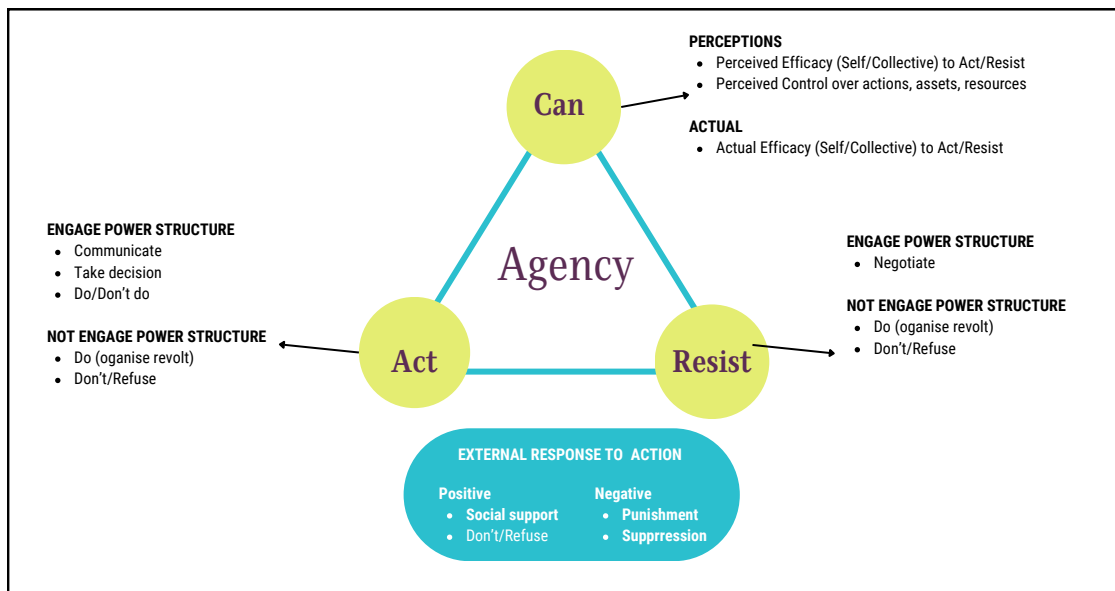
Raising daughters to be independent decision-makers

Agency is defined as the ability to make decisions about one’s own life and act on them to achieve a desired outcome, free of violence, retribution, or fear.[1] It can be expressed as decision-making at individual level, as collective action at group level, or as leadership at policy level. This section focusses on agency at individual level – through autonomy in decision-making at household and personal relationships. The attempt is to understand how mothers from women collectives are gaining choice and voice under Project Umang; how they are building agency among their daughters, and ultimately, how this is facilitating intergenerational transmission of empowerment from mothers to daughters.

Making decisions independently at individual level reflects courage, self-conviction, and self-confidence. It implies gaining rightful control over one’s own life and resources, or certain aspects of it, thus attaining a sense of liberation. For communities where women and girls have been denied the basic right to make decisions for themselves and their families over generations – the development of agency is perceived as a primary indicator of empowerment.

It is among the most critical components of various empowerment theories and leadership frameworks for women that have been adapted across different socio-cultural, economic, and demographic contexts.

More recently, agency is being defined and measured as the triad of Can-Act-Resist. The Center on Gender Health and Equity (GEH), University of California San Diego School of Medicine published ‘A Roadmap for Measuring Agency and Social Norms in Women’s Economic Empowerment’ in 2020[2]. The conceptual framework developed for measuring empowerment describes agency through its three integral elements of can, act, and resist.



Can is the capacity or efficacy of an individual or a collective, to take action. This efficacy can be either actual or perceived and includes access/control over resources. Act comprises the actions of individuals or collectives that are aligned to their choices and goals and may or may not be against those defined by the power structure for them. The Empowerment Process acknowledges the likelihood of External Response or Backlash that these actions generate. These can be either negative (violence or suppression) or positive (support or encouragement). Resist is the ability of individuals and collectives to continue progressing towards their goals despite the negative backlash. Negotiation is a part of the element of Resist – when resistance is against backlash from the power structure.

The Conceptual Model for Women and Girls' Empowerment[3] by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has placed agency 'at its core'. It mentions that agency can be expressed in the dimensions of decision-making, leadership, and collective action. It refers to the capacity of women and girls to take purposeful action and pursue goals, free from the threat of violence or retribution.

Naila Kabeer's Women Empowerment Framework (1999) [4]has placed agency as 'central to the concept of empowerment' along with the dimensions of resources, and achievements around it. The framework defines agency as "the processes by which choices are made and put into effect". Resources are the means through which agency is expressed; and achievements are the outcomes of agency. It further explains that apart from decision-making, agency can be exercised in the "form of bargaining and negotiation, subversion and resistance, and reflection and analysis" as well.[5]

More than the measurable actions, agency includes the meaning, motivation, and purpose that individuals bring to those actions – which together lead to their sense of agency, also known as 'the power within'. When a woman starts making small decisions at her household and in her personal relationships, they have a bearing on her sense of self-worth, which ripples into a change in how others perceive her.

Agency also has an element of intergenerational advantages. Greater agency among mothers is known to benefit their children.[6]Endline survey of 400 mothers in pilot blocks conducted under Project Umang in 2023 has revealed that the agency among SHG mothers has increased in terms of their higher participation in household decision-making, especially for selecting life partners of their children. Nearly 61% mothers claimed that they now had a say in deciding matrimonial match for her children as against 45% mothers who had mentioned this in baseline survey.

This acquired agency among mothers is also getting transmitted to their daughters. Project Umang is making these mothers realise the need to build this sense of agency among daughters in their growing years. It is helping them prepare the next generation of girls as independent decision makers who can set their goals and take purposeful decisions to fulfil them, keeping all aspects into consideration.

[1] *Voice and Agency: Empowering Women and Girls for Shared Prosperity*, by the World Bank, 2014

[2] *A Roadmap for Measuring Agency and Social Norms in Women's Economic Empowerment*, GEH UCSD, 2020

[3] *Conceptual Model for Women and Girls' Empowerment by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation*

[4] *The Conditions and Consequences of Choice: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment*, by Naila Kabeer, 1999

[5] *Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment*, Naila Kabeer, 2005

[6] *Voice and Agency - Empowering Women and Girls for Shared Prosperity*, by the World Bank, 2014



Ambabali Ghosh from Jamtara has raised her daughter Banalata into a responsible young adult who can take purposeful decisions to meet her life goals. Banalata's conviction & confidence are an outcome of her upbringing, where Ambabali gave her ample space to take decisions, and learn from her mistakes

Banalata Ghosh lives as a paying guest in Dumka, around 70 km away from her home in Saraskunda village, Jamtara. Pursuing MA in Political Science from Sido Kanhu Murmu University, Dumka, 21-year-old Banalata aspires to become a professor and is preparing for UGC-NET[1]. She is the first girl from her community to do masters and to step out this far for education.

“It hasn’t been an easy journey though,” says Banalata. She comes from a very humble background. Her father, Rohit Ghosh, works as a farm labourer and struggles to make ends meet for the family of four that comprises her parents, and her younger brother Krishnakant (19 years old). Moreover, the community to which she belongs to doesn’t place much value to girls’ education. In fact, girls are mostly withdrawn from schools after grade 8th or 10th. “Some are married off early, while others wait to turn 18 – the eligible age for marriage,” she points out. Considering the family’s economic environment and the socio-cultural context they live in; Banalata’s qualification is no mean feat.

Unconditional Support

Interestingly, her academic pursuit & decisions have largely been hers, with unconditional support of her parents, especially her mother, Ambabali Ghosh. “Maa (mother) has been my best friend. She has always encouraged me to decide for my future and has built my confidence,” says Banalata.

From early years, Ambabali has created space for her daughter to express her opinion and choice at home. After Banalata

completed grade 8th from village school, Ambabali asked about her plans, following which she got her enrolled with Utkramit Uchh Vidyalaya (high school) in Devjor, which is 4 km away from her village. Banalata was 13 years old then.

Being a school dropout, the forty-year-old mother understands the significance of decisions at such crucial junctures. “My education was discontinued around the same age, and I was married off. Both the decisions were not mine. In fact, most major decisions of my life have been imposed on me by others,” informs Ambabali. This had a bearing on her self-confidence. “For many years I hesitated in taking independent decisions. I would fear consequences – what if my decision goes wrong,” recalls Ambabali.

Setting Goals

As the president of Jai Maa Durga Ajeevika Sakhi Mandal – the self-help group in her village – Ambabali was exposed to the idea of ‘agency’ at Umang modular sessions that began in 2021. “In the session on Hamari Zindagi, Hamara Nirnay (our life, our decision), we realised that decision-making was a skill that is acquired over the years,” says Ambabali. Further, the interactive session revealed that other women too were poor decision-makers as their agency wasn’t developed in their growing years.

So, Ambabali decided to prepare her daughter to be an independent thinker who could set her goals and progress

[1] Three-tier SHG structure includes SHGs, Village Organisations (VOs) and Cluster Level Federations (CLFs). [2] KGBVs are residential girls’ secondary schools run by the Government of India for the socio-economically weaker sections in the country.

“

Maa has been my best friend. She has always encouraged me to decide for my future and has boosted my self-confidence.

”

*-Banalata Ghosh (21), Ambabali's daughter
Post Graduation student, Dumka*



towards achieving them. “I always tell her that you need to be clear what you want to do in life. I am your backup – I will convince your father, I will try to arrange resources – but it is you who needs to decide how you must go ahead,” says Ambabali.

Taking Bold Steps

After completing grade 10th from Devjor High School, Banalata took admission at Nala Inter College for intermediate and subsequently at Nala Degree College to pursue graduation in political science. “I am grateful to my teachers who guided me about courses available. But the selection of stream and subject were entirely mine in consideration with my areas of interest and calibre,” recalls Banalata.

It would take her around 1 hour one way to commute to college that was 10 km away from her village. However, the girl was determined. “I had decided to improve the financial condition of my family for which I needed to prioritise my education and career,” she says. Today, Banalata travels independently from Dumka to Nala by bus. She says she will be appearing for various entrance exams next year and plans to travel alone. “Cycling has brought me this far,” she says with a smile.

“At Umang sessions, we are told to encourage decision-making among our daughters. The sessions have gradually made us realise how our trust & support can enhance their confidence. By allowing them to take decisions, we help them become responsible individuals too,” says Ambabali.

Apart from educational decisions, Banalata's parents also involve her in family & financial matters and seek her opinion on land disputes, govt schemes, etc. “We respect her analytical abilities and know that she won't make impulsive choices,” says the mother. In 2022, Banalata completed her graduation

and insisted on doing MA as she wanted to stand out in the competitive world. “She had a detailed plan of action for the next three years, the costs involved and explained us about UGC-NET, and other exams she aspires to take after post-graduation,” she adds.

Maintaining Caution

Many times, the mother discusses these ideas with educated people such as Active Woman, Bobby Mishra. “I am unaware on many issues, but I need to ensure that my daughter is making the right choices. So, me and my husband seek advice from others too and so far, we have mostly found her to be correct,” says Ambabali.

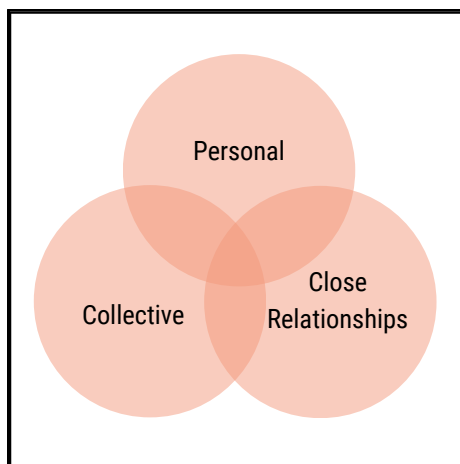
However, there have been occasions when Banalata's decision dint fetch the desired result. She recalls one such incident a few years ago when the family was in a major crunch and her financial advice to her father had backfired. She gets emotional about it. “I still live with regret, but my parents have never criticised or scolded me for it,” she says. “Why should we blame her? We all make mistakes. We just need to learn from them and support each other,” adds Ambabali.

After completing her education, Banalata aspires to secure a job and start supporting her family at the earliest. She is aware of the loans her parents have taken for her education and wants to settle them. Taking cue from her pathway, a few more families have been encouraging girls to pursue their aspirations. “People who would pass snide remarks at me for spoiling my daughter, now value us as role model,” says Ambabali. She is particularly upbeat about the Kishori Help Desk that has started at their nearest Morbasa CLF office last December. “The counselling centre is mentoring girls & their parents who want to do something meaningful out of their lives. This is incredible as it will help many girls to make purposeful decisions,” she says.

CONSENT

Respecting daughter's consent in marriage

Seeking consent from an individual is one of the most basic and initial steps towards acknowledging individual identity and autonomy. Consent is also a form of respecting choice of an individual, thus leading her towards pathway of self-realisation and empowerment. As Jo Rowlands' Definition of Empowerment (1995)[1] mentions that empowerment operates within personal, relational, and collective dimensions.



At personal dimension, it is mostly about self-realisation and undoing the effects of internalised oppression. She stated that 'empowerment is more than participation in decision-making; it must also include the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to make decisions.' The other definitions of empowerment give similar intent around individuals' agency.

Consent in marriage decisions is a crucial determinant that has a direct bearing on marriage outcomes and the future of the couple's married life. A study titled 'Marriage Without Meaningful Consent and Compromised Agency in Married Life: Evidence from Married Girls in Jharkhand, India' [2] has

explored how consent in marriage decisions affects married life, specifically, agency, gender attitudes, spousal communication, contraception, and marital violence outcomes.

However, in authoritarian patriarchal settings, marriage is perceived as an alliance of families and is largely determined by socio-economical, caste and cultural factors rather than the consent of bride and groom. Further, in communities with higher prevalence of child, early, forced marriages, seeking girl's permission in marriage is almost unthinkable. Considering the deep-rooted social norms around child marriage, a 'good girl' is expected to silently abide by family decision of when and whom to marry. A girl's silence is often considered as her consent. Gender norms mostly entitle the father (or any other elder man in the family) as the privileged decision-maker on behalf of his daughter (or the girl in the family).

In an endline survey conducted under Project Umang (Pilot phase), 82% of the 400 women (mothers of adolescent daughters) surveyed have revealed that they had no say in deciding their marriage, their fathers had taken the decision instead. These are the women whose median age at marriage was 16 years and who are now mothers of adolescent girls (10-17 years).

Project Umang has shown the pathway for the mothers to shift their mindset/value system as they are gradually realising the value of consent as a means of agency building and empowerment. They are creating spaces and voices at household level for their daughters' choice to be considered, especially during the critical milestone of her marriage. The project design acknowledges 'consent' as an integral step towards empowerment of adolescent girls and their mothers and hence it has adopted two approaches to implement this.

First, by enriching mother-daughter communication around education and career, Project Umang ensures that mothers are aware of their daughters' aspirations and support them. Secondly, it also builds communication & negotiation skills among these mothers through modular sessions at SHG meetings. These skills further enable mothers to participate meaningfully & actively during household decisions and speak for their daughters' interests.

[1]Jo Rowlands was a development professional who worked in London and Latin America. Her extensive studies on power and empowerment have been used as reference material globally over the decades. *Jo Rowlands Empowerment Examined* (1995)

[2]Marriage Without Meaningful Consent and Compromised Agency in Married Life: Evidence from Married Girls in Jharkhand, India, *The Journal of Adolescent Health* (March 2022 issue)



HER LIFE, HER CHOICE

Archana Devi has come a long way from being a submissive wife who succumbed to societal pressures & got her two elder daughters married in their teens to an assertive mother who has ensured that her youngest daughter, Prachi, will have a say in when and whom to marry

If you walk by the narrow lanes of Diyara village in Godda district, there are slim chances of skipping the mention of Archana Devi, who has acquired fame of the woman advocating for girls' economic independence and inclusion of girls' consent in marriage decisions. It all started two years ago when her husband, Hari Kishor Singh, had found a suitable match for their youngest daughter, Prachi (18 years old then) and her family had started preparations for the wedding. However, Archana felt the need to seek Prachi's consent before moving ahead – something that was unthinkable for her family then.

“Owing to financial challenges, I had got both my elder daughters, Viki and Trisha, married early (in 2016 and 2018 respectively) without taking their permission. Both were good in studies and could have excelled, had we not rushed with their marriages,” recalls 43 years old Archana, who regrets being silent over the issue earlier. Over the years she has seen her daughters suffer silently in their marriages owing to lop-sided power dynamics, large age gap with their husbands and poor agency.

The Value of ‘Asking’

“I now feel, given a choice, my daughters would have opted for alternative pathways instead of early marriage, but nobody ever asked them. I wish I had stood by them earlier and valued their consent,” says Archana.

Her daughter, Trisha agrees: “I had aspired to have a career but was married off when I was only in intermediate.” Trisha was

married early, at the age of 17 years, to a man who was almost double her age. At 22, she is already a mother of two (aged 4 and 3). This had a bearing on her health, education, and career aspirations.

So, when it came to Prachi, Archana Devi didn't want to repeat her mistake. She asked her daughter whether she was happy with the marriage proposal. “On being asked, Prachi confided that she wasn't ready for marriage yet. Rather, she wanted to study further and be financially independent before getting married,” says Archana. That was the turning point for the mother, who went against her family and community to avert the marriage.

As a member of Self-Help Group (SHG) – Maa Yogini Ajeevika Sakhi Mandal under Nepura cluster, Godda – Archana Devi had been introduced to Project Umang in 2019 and since then she has learnt the significance of having a say in household decisions. “Umang sessions, held at our SHG meetings, have been an eyeopener for women. They have not only made us aware & sensitised about the issue of child/early marriage but have also built our capacities to address the ill-practice at household & community level,” says Archana.

The Value of being ‘Heard’

With improved communication skills, acquired through Umang sessions, Archana was able to negotiate with her husband, Hari, and convince him to reject Prachi's marriage



Archana Devi's elder daughter, Trisha had aspired for having a career, but she was married early, at 17 years of age. At 22, she has become a mother of two (aged 4 and 3) who couldn't continue her education. So, when it came to Prachi, Archana didn't want to repeat the mistake.



proposal. "Earlier, I would hesitate in reasoning with my husband as I feared confronting him," says Archana who herself is a survivor of child marriage. After passing 10th grade, Archana was forced into matrimony at a young age of 13 with a husband who was much older than her. Hence, she remained mostly submissive in the initial years of her marriage.

"Things started changing as Umang sessions motivated us to speak up at homes and speak in the right manner to be heard," says Archana. It has been an empowering, bold step for a generation that has grown old without being heard.

"I have seen a gradual shift in my husband's attitude towards me. While earlier, he wouldn't care for my opinion, now he listens and agrees as well. Probably this shift can also be attributed to the self-realisation he underwent after seeing our daughters' challenges post marriage," says Archana.

However, convincing in-laws was a greater challenge for her. "They insisted we were making a mistake by delaying Prachi's age of marriage. However, I was determined to support my daughter's will. My in-laws boycott us for almost a year before they could accept our decision," says Archana with a smile.

On Pathways of Liberation

With her mother's support, Prachi is pursuing graduation (Hindi honours) from Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Godda, that is 5 km away from her village. She aspires to be a teacher and already takes home tuition to bear her personal expenses. "I want to support my parents and be financially independent before getting married," says Prachi. "After witnessing the helplessness of my elder sisters & mother, I strongly feel that if I have a job at hand, I won't be dominated by my future husband and in-laws. Being economically independent will also secure my position in marriage as an equal partner," says Prachi.

Meanwhile, Trisha has also applied for online graduation course and is upbeat about resuming her education after a gap of 5 years. Archana Devi is happy to welcome this change. "It is important for girls to be financially independent as it reduces their dependence levels, helps them contribute to the family income and have a say in household decisions," says Archana.

She has no rush to get Prachi married. "We will marry her off only when she thinks she is ready," says Archana who also motivates other mothers to respect their daughter's consent. "We need to count our daughters' opinion to secure their future. Asking for their consent is a small but significant step in making them independent," she says.

MOBILITY

Helping daughters with enhanced mobility

The freedom to move independently – unrestricted and unaccompanied – to spaces outside of households can play an important role in enhancing a sense of autonomy among girls and women. It is a steppingstone in the evolution of women empowerment. As Nalia Kabeer mentions mobility in public domain as a measure of women’s agency. According to her, “space is a continuum of locations ranging from ‘acceptable’ to ‘unacceptable’ places for unaccompanied women to be.”[1] The way women and girls access public spaces for learning, work, and recreation is contextual that is largely dictated by socio-cultural factors and gender norms.

Some of these spaces included public institutions (such as schools, colleges & universities), local markets, healthcare facilities, neighbourhoods, village fields, community water collection areas like borewell or hand pump, homes of relatives & friends, and further extend to local fairs, cinema, neighbouring villages, financial institutions (such as banks), and public utility areas (such as electricity board office, water board office, post office, police stations, municipal corporation, government departments) and the like.

Evidence from various studies have shown that mobility is an enabler of increased participation of individuals in the economy and civic life as it helps them build and maintain social and professional networks. [2]

However, restrictive social norms are known to inhibit freedom of movement for women and girls. Also, concerns regarding safety in public spaces & transportation facilities further add to the restrictions. In her article titled ‘Disciplinary Mobility and Women’s Empowerment: A Complicated Connection’[3], Dr Annabel Dulhunty[4] mentions that “women’s mobility is disciplined by patriarchal control in three domains, namely – through actively restricting women’s mobility; through surveillance & monitoring; and through women self-regulating their own behaviour.” Moreover, mobility restrictions and social distancing imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic have had gendered impact, which have altered the way women and girls access public spaces.[5]

Restricted female public mobility has a direct bearing on girls’ education, employability, access to healthcare (especially antenatal care and safe institutional deliveries), and women’s participation in leadership roles & public life.

Distance of school often becomes a reason for discontinuing education of girls and leads to gender gap in secondary school enrolment.[6] ***Restricted mobility during girls’ education can lead to loss of learning and employability opportunities among girls, hence jeopardising their prospects of growing up to be productive human resources.***

On the contrary, enhancing mobility among girls not only helps mitigate the gender gap in school enrolments, but also enables girls to gain self-confidence and take a step towards autonomy. It is an enabler for their agency building too. In this section we explore how a mother’s trust is integral for allowing daughters to move independently, and how improved mobility paves way for opportunities that can shape a better future for girls.

[1] *Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment*, Naila Kabeer, 1999

[2] *Voice and Agency - Empowering Women and Girls for Shared Prosperity* by the World Bank, 2014

[3] *Disciplinary Mobility and Women's Empowerment: A Complicated Connection*, Dr Annabel Dulhunty, 2022

[4] Dr Annabel Dulhunty is a Lecturer at the Crawford School of Public Policy, Australia. She is a development studies and social policy scholar whose research work has a strong focus on gender, women empowerment, feminist foreign policy agenda and marginalised communities in India.

[5] *Imperatives of Recognising the Complexities: Gendered Impacts and Responses to COVID-19 in India*

[6] *Cycling to School: Increasing Secondary School Enrollment for Girls in India*



As a mother of three daughters, Jamuna Rai from Natundih village believes that protecting girls within the confines of home doesn't teach them how to protect themselves in the real world. Her eldest daughter, Riya Rai, is pursuing a course in Chhattisgarh and is capable of traveling long distances all by herself

It is Sunday morning and the lanes of Natundih village, Jamtara, are echoing with sounds of children playing and household noises of mundane activities. Jamuna Rai, like other women, is busy with domestic chores. Every now and then, she wipes her hand in her saree and checks her phone while washing clothes – for she is eagerly awaiting a phone call. It is the day her daughter, Riya Rai, makes a call from Rajnandgaon, Chhattisgarh, and the mother-daughter duo talk at length. This has been their weekly affair since January 2023, when 18-year-old Riya moved to Rajnandgaon – around 900 km away from Natundih – to pursue a 10-month course in Dresser/Medical Equipment Assistant (MEA) by DDU-GKY[1].

This is the first time that Riya has stepped out this far. “She is the first girl from our village and community to go so far for training and studies,” the 35-year-old mother says with pride. She also adds that her daughter is confident of travelling alone and doesn't need to be accompanied by her father or any other elder for her home visits.

No Second Thoughts

“Being a mother, I do get worried for her safety at times. However, I tell myself that my fears shouldn't stop her from being independent. After all, how will she progress if we impose our doubts and restrictions on her,” she says. “I just ask her to keep me informed wherever she is,” she adds.

Riya's confidence to move independently at a young age is an outcome of the unrestricted mobility she received from her mother for years. Being the eldest among her sisters – Ganga and Bishti (14 and 10 respectively), Riya learnt to be independent at a young age.

“Both me and my husband work hard to make a living and we teach our daughters to be self-reliant too,” says Jamuna. Her husband, Sanjay Rai, works as a driver, whereas she works in the fields, and runs a small tea shop in the village.

“I would often allow her to walk up to the village market or neighbourhood places. If you keep girls protected within the confines of home, how will they learn to protect themselves in the real world,” says Jamuna. “Their understanding of safe and unsafe spaces develops only if you allow them a chance. In recent years, I have even allowed her to visit her aunt, who lives in a nearby village, a few times. But I do insist her to be cautious,” she adds.

A Mother's Support for Education

Jamuna & her husband have always been supportive of their daughters' education. Two years ago, after completion of grade 10th, Riya needed to take admission in R.K +2 High School in Nala, which is more than 2 km away from her village. Distance was a common concern among parents because of which some

[1] DDU-GKY (Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana) is a youth employment scheme under the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) that focusses on adding diversity to the incomes of rural poor families and catering to the career aspirations of rural youth.

e of them had discontinued their daughters' education. However, Jamuna encouraged her daughter to form a group of friends and cycle together to school.

“My schooling was stopped after grade 9th owing to some tough circumstances. But I will not allow distance, lack of resources, etc, to act as barriers to my daughters' education. If they are determined to pursue education, I will support them,” she says.

Her words echo the key messages that Project Umang emphasises on during its modular sessions. Jamuna has been attending Umang sessions for the last four years as a member of SHG – Saraswati Ajeevika Sakhi Mandal – in Natundih. In 2022, she was chosen as the President of Village Organisation – Lakshmi Ajeevika Mahila Gram Sangathan. Fifteen SHGs spread across six villages (including Natundih) come under Lakshmi VO. “Umang sessions talk about mothers' support in girls' education and the significance of making our daughters economically independent,” says Jamuna.

It was during a VO session last December when Jamuna became aware of DDU-GKY. “I mentioned it at home and Riya became curious as she was aspiring to take up nursing course after her

12th. We went to our nearest Kishori Help Desk (located in Nala CLF office) to seek further guidance,” says Jamuna. Counsellor informed the mother-daughter duo about 10-month course on Dresser/Medical Equipment Assistant (MEA) by DDU-GKY that offers free training & accommodation to students. After Riya cleared her entrance exam (conducted online) in January 2023, Jamuna sent her to from Rajnandgaon to pursue the course. “People would say I have spoilt my daughter, that I will regret the day she brings shame on us, what if something happens to her, and so on,” says Jamuna. However, Jamuna accustomed to ignoring such comments.

“Had I listened to them, my daughters would be school dropouts today,” she says with a smile. Her younger daughter, Ganga Rai, is at grade 10th in R.K +2 High School in Nala. She cycles 20 minutes to commute to school just like the elder sister. The youngest one, Bishti Rai, is in grade 5 in village school.

Jamuna says the snide remarks of community members are fading out since she told them about Riya's selection at a care facility in Hyderabad. “I often tell other SHG women and VO members to allow their daughters to go out & explore their world. Our daughters will never be independent if we don't set them free,” she says.

TAKING BOLD STEPS



After completing grade 10th from Devjor High School, Banalata Ghosh (from Saraskunda village, Jamtara) took admission at Nala Inter College for intermediate and subsequently at Nala Degree College to pursue graduation in political science.

It would take her around 1 hour one way to commute to college that was 10 km away from her village. However, the girl was determined. “I had decided to prioritise my education and career,” she says.

Initially, her mother Ambabali Ghosh was apprehensive about the distance and Banalata's safety. However, her confidence in her daughter overpowered all her fears. “That was a bold decision for us. I told Banalata to be extra careful and raise alarm if in trouble. Every day on her return, I would enquire about her studies and commutation. Along with Banalata, I have also learnt to take some decisions and take ownership of them,” she says with a smile.

Today, Banalata is pursuing MA in Political Science from Dumka, and travels independently to her home in Nala by bus. She says she will be appearing for various entrance exams next year and plans to travel alone. “Cycling has brought me this far,” she says with a smile.

NEGOTIATION

Enhancing capacities among members of women's collectives to negotiate challenges as well as negotiate with their husbands & in-laws for the interests of their daughters

Tracing the empowerment journey of SHG mothers has given us the realisation that the true essence of empowerment lies in small, yet significant changes that these women are bringing in their daily lives, the different & unique pathways they have chosen to progress towards a better future. It is interesting to see how they are negotiating barriers through enhanced communication skills and awareness levels rather than breaking barriers altogether. While the latter may present compelling empowerment narratives (one-off success stories that appear attention-worthy but short-lived), the former offers hope for subtle but long-term, sustainable positive outcomes that may transform into collective actions.

The intersection between negotiation and empowerment have found references in various literature, especially in discourse of empowerment within the dimension of relationships (gender, spousal and household relations).

In context of relational spaces, Jo Rowlands [1] defines empowerment as “developing the ability to negotiate and influence the nature of a relationship and decisions made within it”[2]. In her book titled, ‘Questioning Empowerment: Working with Women in Honduras’ [3], she mentions that while the sense of empowerment (in close relationships) is deeply associated with development of self-confidence, self-esteem & agency, it also depends on acquiring abilities to negotiate, communicate, and defend one’s rights. Such skills also represent ‘changes’ demonstrating personal empowerment.

This finds resonance in Naila Kabeer’s [4] Women Empowerment Framework (1999) [5] that mentions empowerment as the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability. In doing so, Kabeer has explained the processes to acquire abilities of agency, voice and negotiation in decision-making that ultimately lead towards meaningful improvements in life.

She further explains how subtle negotiations that initiate in inter-personal & close relationships can transcend into intrahousehold negotiations and to public re-negotiations of gender norms, thus paving way for an empowered position of women.

Negotiation is the skill of putting forth one’s views and facilitating a meaningful dialogue without challenging the authority of the other person (or party). It is not about getting what one wants by force, coercion, or appeals, but making the other person realise the value associated with the argument. It often involves finding a middle path that serves the larger good for all stakeholders.

This is especially relevant to the lived experiences of SHG women in Godda and Jamtara districts under Project Umang, who are trying to negotiate small changes in their household dynamics to make space for their daughters’ interests & aspirations in the contextual framework of existing gender norms. As Andrea Cornwall and Jenny Edwards have rightly mentioned in their article, Negotiating Empowerment [6]: “these negotiations can pave way for women to achieve the most positive outcomes that they can from their existing situations. Afterall, it is often necessary to work within existing strictures to achieve some positive gains, with the hope that these may eventually ripple out and bring about wider changes.”

[1] Jo Rowlands was a development professional who worked in London and Latin America. Her extensive studies on power and empowerment have been used as reference material globally over the decades.

[2] *Development and Social Diversity* by Mary B. Anderson; Chapter: *Empowerment Examined* by Jo Rowlands, Oxfam

[3] *Questioning Empowerment: Working with Women in Honduras* by Jo Rowlands (Oxfam Publication, 1997)

[4] Naila Kabeer is a Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, UK. She is a socio-economist with research interests in gender, poverty, population & household economics.

[5] Naila Kabeer 1999 - *Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment*

[6] *Negotiating Empowerment*, Andrea Cornwall and Jenny Edwards, IDS Bulletin, 2010



Jyoti Kumari would have been a school dropout had it not been for the resilience & negotiation skills of her mother, Veena Devi, who dealt with all arguments & convinced her husband in favour of the daughter's interests

Veena Devi and her husband Dayanand Bharti live with limited resources in Rampur village – a small hamlet, which is around 10 km away from district headquarter, Godda, Jharkhand. With the humble income of Dayanand, who works as data entry operator at Pragya Kendra (Common Service Centre) Pachrukhi panchayat, Veena meets expenses of her family of four, including her two children – son, Bhanu, and daughter, Jyoti (aged 19 and 18 respectively). “It gets difficult at times, but we manage somehow,” says 38-year-old Veena with a smile.

Her own marriage at the young age of 13 was an outcome of financial constraints of her parents. In her 25 years of marriage, she has learnt to overlook her hardships and focus on the positives, her children's education being one of them.

“My education was discontinued after 8th grade as my parents succumbed to the circumstances. But I don't want my children, especially my daughter, to suffer this way,” says Veena. Despite their tough circumstances,

Veena has ensured that her children receive elementary education. When Jyoti was in grade 6th, Veena got her enrolled at Godda branch of Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV)[1] that took care of her educational expenses.

The Dilemma

However, challenges surfaced after Jyoti's completion of 12th grade in 2020. “Jyoti wanted to pursue higher studies, but we didn't have the means to support her education, especially after the pandemic. So, my husband decided to discontinue her education. Also, suggestions started pouring in for Jyoti's marriage,” recalls Veena.

It was a big blow to Veena who was aware of her daughter's aspiration of having a career in medicals,” says Veena. As a member of Gulaab Ajeevika Sakhi Mandal in Rampur, Veena had been attending Umang sessions since 2019. Over the years she had realised the significance of girls' education and the ill-effects of early marriage. She would often discuss key learnings from Umang sessions at home, especially with Jyoti.

It was also the Umang learnings that emphasised on including education & career in regular mother-daughter communications, which had made Veena aware of Jyoti's career aspirations. “Jyoti reminded me of Umang sessions and asked how I could allow this to happen despite all the awareness and exposure I had received from Umang,” recalls Veena. But at the same time, she was aware of her circumstances too.

Umang promotes the idea of negotiation among SHG women with the intent of not challenging anyone's authority or alter household dynamics, but for creating space and voice for women in the existing ecosystem.



The 'Courage' to Speak

"I raised my concern during Umang session and realised that I had the option of taking loan from SHG for my daughter's higher studies," she says with a relief. Her next bigger challenge was convincing her husband for it.

She slowly started mentioning the idea to her husband. "My initial talks were around Jyoti's calibre as a bright student and her prospects of a better future if we support her a little now. Gradually, I started citing examples of our neighbours and relatives whose adolescent daughters had suffered miserably due to their early marriage," says Veena.

It was a bold step for a woman who was earlier too scared to share opinion with her husband. "We are usually not allowed to speak much. At times when we do, we don't articulate our thoughts well. Umang has not only given us the courage to speak, but also enhanced our abilities of presenting the right arguments in the right manner.

It has improved our communication skills and awareness (on girls' education and child marriage) that enable us to put forth our arguments effectively," points out Veena.

Further, Veena took her husband to a few Umang sessions to convince him for averting Jyoti's early marriage and for realising the value of higher studies of girls. These efforts paid off when Dayanand agreed to the idea. The couple took a loan of INR 1 lakh from SHG, part of which was utilised for getting Jyoti enrolled in B.Sc. in Pathargama College, Godda, which is around 10 km from Rampur village.

Veena is a relieved woman now. She is hopeful that something good will come out of Jyoti's degree. The latter has appeared for nursing exam too. "Whatever happens, at least she won't suffer my way, she will have a better life. Yes, we have a loan to pay back, but that's an easy trade-off for the life she will have," says Veena.

[1] KGBVs are residential girls' secondary schools run by the Government of India for the socio-economically weaker sections in the country. They provide education, accommodation, and food to students.

GENDER NORMS

Shifting gender norms by raising sons and daughters with equal opportunities & responsibilities, and bringing normative shift in decision-making at household & intra-household levels

Gender norms are a part of social norms that govern how men and women – as gender identities – should be and act.[1] These include pervasive and widely held beliefs on gender roles, relations, division of labor and power dynamics, that set standards and expectations for gender identities to adhere to in a social context at a given time. Humans often internalise and learn these ‘rules’ early in life which influence their behavior & practices for the rest of their lives.

There have been evidences across societies, cultures, and communities on how gender norms informally create a lifecycle of stereotyping that often favours men and boys over women, girls, and gender minorities; prohibits rights & privileges for women; and restricts opportunities for individuals to express their personal preferences[2]. It is these underlying gender norms that give rise to gender inequalities and influence many harmful practices, such as child, early marriages. Moreover, restrictive gender norms act as one of the many barriers that deny girls equal opportunities of education and economic aspirations[3].

Hence, Project Umang adopted socio-ecological model that takes into consideration the gender norms that interplay at various levels of influence including personal spaces, interpersonal relationships, household dynamics, communities, and system levels. The project design acknowledges that empowerment cannot be attained by standalone, self-improvement initiatives for women and girls without addressing the restrictive social norms (specifically gender norms) that are intricately woven into their lives and the social context they exist in.

Having said that, the project also respects the fact that norm-shift and behaviour changes are organic processes that involve consistent, context-specific initiatives over a long span of time. Hence, the Umang model adopted a measurable and scalable approach for facilitating normative shift in alignment with Cristina Bicchieri’s[4]Five-Stage process for creation of social norms[5]. She mentions that while creation of a norm, requires creation of normative expectations (beliefs about what others think we should do) followed by empirical expectations (beliefs about what we expect others to do)[6], the elimination of a norm follows the reverse route.

Umang modular sessions, held at SHGs, VOs and CLFs, emphasise on the value of the girl child. While these are primarily creating awareness among SHG mothers around the issue of child/early marriage they are also, in a way, giving perspective where these women can identify themselves as survivors of child marriage and understand how gender norms played a powerful role in it. Women are gradually understanding why certain gender norms are harmful or restrictive for their daughters’ prospects and need to be shifted.

Further, the sessions re-iterate the significance of education, health & nutrition, and agency building as critical components of growth, thus making women realise how girls are often denied these basic rights, but certainly deserve them.

Inspired by these, there are some mothers who are taking initial, bold steps towards shifting gender norms within their households. These mothers are raising their daughters and sons with equal opportunities and responsibilities; raising them as individuals who are not restricted within the confines of gender roles, rather they are prepared to take on more gender egalitarian roles in the future.

[1] *UN Women Training Centre, Gender Equality Glossary.*

[2] *Technical Note on Gender Norms, by UNFPA and UNICEF*

[3] *World Bank – Girls Education*

[4] *Cristina Bicchieri is a philosopher and a Professor at the University of Pennsylvania, USA.*

[5] *A Handbook for Social Change: Bicchieri’s Norms in the Wild*

[6] *Measuring Social Norms, by Cristina Bicchieri*



Geeta Rai has emerged as a role model within her community by raising her son and daughter with equal learning opportunities and by ensuring that both grow up as individuals with basic life skills irrespective of their gender identity

Thirty-four-year-old Geeta Rai lives with her family of four in a small kuccha-pucca house (partly made up of mud) at Kewaljodiya village, Jamtara. But this little house is home to a big social change. Within the four walls, Geeta has created her own egalitarian world where responsibilities and opportunities are not restricted within the hard boundaries of gender norms. Rather they seem to merge as all four members contribute with their individual capacities & skills instead of their pre-determined gender roles.

Geeta Rai has been a member of Shivguru Ajeevika Sakhi Mandal in Kewaljodiya, Morbasa cluster, since 2019. Her husband, Om Dikar Rai, works under MGNREGA[1] while she works as a farm labourer in her village. Married at a young age of 14, today she is a mother of two – 19-year-old daughter, Mamuni Rai (who is a student of grade 12 at Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya, Nala) and 16-year-old son, Maheshwar Rai (who has recently taken admission at grade 11 in R.K +2 High School, Nala). As a student at residential school, Mamuni visits home only during vacations.

Merging Roles

Despite belonging to a community where gender norms associate domesticity and care roles with women & girls, Geeta takes pride in her son's great cooking skills and never misses an opportunity to mention it. She has trained

both her children in domestic chores. In fact, her son manages the house well in her absence when she is away for work. "Cooking and cleaning are basic life skills that every individual must possess. I wonder why we have demarcated them based on gender," she asks. In fact, she perceives conventional gender roles as tools of disempowerment for boys in many ways. "By not teaching our sons domestic chores, we make them handicap and dependent on their female counterparts. How will they survive when they move out for studies or job? Look at the girls who go to cities and manage everything so well," she adds.

At the same hand, she also encourages her daughter, Mamuni, to step out independently and make regular groceries purchases from village market whenever she comes home during vacations. "Usually, boys do these rounds in our village, but why not girls too? How will our daughters gain confidence of doing things independently if we never allow them a chance," she says.

Offering Equal Opportunities

She is a living example of offering equal opportunities of education to her son and daughter. Mamuni, being the elder child, was the first one to step out. Geeta recalls of facing criticism from her community when she got Mamuni enrolled at residential KGBV in Nala which is around 8 km

“

My mother always prioritized our education and I never felt discriminated against my brother. This is unique as many girls of my age are school dropouts in our neighbourhood

”

-Mamuni Rai, daughter of Geeta Rai



away from her village. “People taunted that I was giving preference to daughter over son. I would answer that I will send my son too when he grows up. However, if the government is facilitating free education & schemes for girls from poor families like ours, why not avail them,” she says.

In her growing up years, Mamuni felt that her home environment was different from that of her neighbours, friends, and relatives. “My mother always prioritized our education and I never felt discriminated against my brother. This is unique as many girls of my age are school dropouts in our neighbourhood,” says Mamuni.

Geeta mentions that Umang sessions have further enhanced her awareness on issues regarding the significance of nutritious food for adolescent girls, menstrual hygiene management (MHM), the value of mother-daughter communication and supporting daughters’ career aspirations.

“In recent years, my mother has started taking more interest in our studies – she constantly asks us about school. She ensures that I eat nutritious food, especially green veggies, she talks about things like anaemia and menstrual hygiene management – things she learns from Umang sessions,” says Mamuni.

This conducive environment at home has shaped Mamuni’s aspirations. She wants to be a teacher and is planning to enroll with B.Ed (Hindi honours) course at Nala college. She is confident that her parents will support her.

In this regard, Geeta is planning to take her daughter to Kishori Help Desk[2] (located at Morbasa CLF office) during her next vacation for further guidance. “I have heard Kishori Help Desk offers counselling to adolescents and their parents on career and education. It can give us better guidance on the next steps,” says Geeta.

When asked about marriage, Geeta says she will get her children married only after they have a career. Whenever that happens, she will ensure not to have an age gap of more than 2-3 years. “Equality in marriage is crucial and age plays a big role in that. At our time, girls were married to men who were much older, which gave them authority. I tell my children to treat their spouses as equal partners, who are jointly responsible for running the household & family,” she says.

[1] Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005 (MGNREGA) is an Indian social welfare Act that aims to guarantee the 'right to work', enhancement of livelihood security of households in rural areas by offering at least one hundred days of guaranteed wage employment in every financial year to every household

[2] Kishori (adolescent) Help Desk is an initiative under Umang that offers counselling to adolescent girls on educational pathways, career choices, SRHR, and life skills trainings. It is located at CLF offices and managed by trained counsellors.



Part II: Rising Star

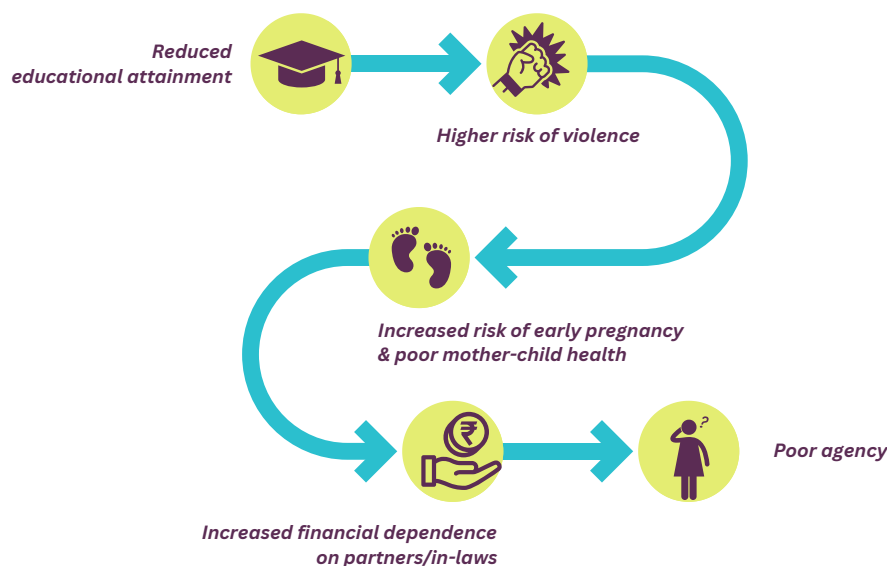
Daughters of Godda & Jamtara who hold promise for the future

ALTERNATIVES TO CHILD/EARLY MARRIAGE

Opting for education or skills training and attaining economic independence as productive alternatives to child/early marriage

Child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) is a deeply engrained harmful practice that is considered as violation of human rights and an impediment to girls' development and national progress. When a girl is married young, she is denied her childhood and her right to grow up to her full potential. It implies lost educational and employment opportunities and increased vulnerabilities to violence and health issues.

The negative impact of child/early marriage on a girl's life encompasses:



These dangerous outcomes have raised collective concerns among the global community towards ending child marriage. The Sustainable Development Goal 5 on Gender Equality is committed to the elimination of child marriage by 2030. Although the prevalence of child, early marriage is gradually reducing over the years, there are still over 650 million girls and women in the world who were married before attaining 18 years of age. In fact, one in three of the world's child brides live in India[1].

India has shown remarkable decline in the prevalence of child marriage from 47.4% in NFHS-3 to 26.8% in NFHS-4, and further down to 23.3% in NFHS-5. Some of the states need closer attention, including Jharkhand where one out of every three girls is married before the age of 18[2].

Interventions to end child, early marriage require addressing the factors that enable it and offering alternatives to girls and their parents that enable them to avoid child marriage. Ensuring that girls are continuing their education, that their aspirations are being nurtured, that they have a developed agency (especially decision-making) and that they are developing their employability skills, that they are receiving guidance and counselling – are some of the solutions that can significantly reduce the need and prevalence of child marriage.

As UNICEF report mentions: “Ending child marriage will help break the intergenerational cycle of poverty by allowing girls and women to participate more fully in society. Empowered and educated girls are better able to nourish and care for their children, leading to healthier, smaller families.”[3]

In this section, we bring you stories of girls whose child/early marriages were averted due to Umang intervention. These girls also took this as an opportunity to change the course of their lives. They chose different alternatives to early marriage for improving their circumstances and creating a better future for themselves.

We have Aaina Rai, a school dropout, who opted for a skill training course in sewing to gain economic independence. Today she works at a garment manufacturing unit in Kolkata. At the same hand, we have Sweety Das, who chose educational pathway, pursued a diploma in computer science, to become an IT professional and be financially independent.

These girls are an inspiration to other girls with hidden aspirations and desire to have a life better than their mothers. These girls also remind us that while marriage is a significant, sacrosanct institution, it isn't the end all – that girls can opt for alternatives too, set life goals that are independent of marriage, and become productive human resources for themselves, their families, and communities.

[1] *Towards Ending Child Marriage 2021 - Global Trends and Profiles of Progress, UNICEF*

[2] *NFHS-5 (2019-21), Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Govt of India*

[3] *Ending Child Marriage-Progress and Prospects UNICEF*

THE ALTERNATIVE OF SKILLS TRAINING



At the young age of 17, she had the courage to say no to her early marriage. Aaina Rai from Patulia village, Jamtara, not only stood for herself, but also carved out a pathway of economic independence

It is Sunday afternoon and the working women's hostel in Ramchandrapur, Kolkata, is abuzz with laughter, gossips, and activities. It is the day for small outings and a weekly break for the young women who live here and work 6 days a week in 110 Clothing – an apparel company that manufactures men's t-shirts. Among them is Aaina Rai who is particularly excited today as she has planned a visit to Sonarpur Market with her friends. She loves visiting the market as the shimmer and lights of the place brighten up her spirits. This 18-year-old girl has come a long way – both internally and externally – from Patulia village, Jamtara in Jharkhand, to the City of Joy.

Looking into the past – from a school dropout adolescent girl who was being forced into early marriage to a young adult who is taking initial steps of economic independence – Aaina has been through a transformative journey in the last one year.

Life in Patulia

Aaina belongs to Patulia village at Nala block in Jamtara, which is around 250 km away from Kolkata. Her family includes her parents and her three siblings – two brothers and a sister. Her elder brother, Gangadhar Rai, works as a migrant labourer in Gujarat and is the sole income earner for the family. Her elder sister, Mangali is a school dropout who was married off early (at the age of 17 years) to a man who was almost double her age a few years ago. Today Mangali is a young mother of a two-year-old son. Four years ago, when Aaina completed grade 8, she was withdrawn from school too, owing to the financial

circumstances of her family that wasn't supportive of her education. Her parents also cited distance of school and safety concerns as reasons for the withdrawal. Continuing her education meant seeking admission in Nala school which is 3 km away from home, as the village school is only up to grade 8. "My parents were against the idea of me commuting the long distance all alone as most of my friends had either been married off or had discontinued their education," says Aaina.

"Life as a school dropout was dull," recalls Aaina. "I had nothing interesting to do at home except domestic chores. The whole day would go by in cooking and cleaning. It was tiring but without any meaningful purpose. I didn't even have the liberty of going independently anywhere. It was always parents or younger brother who accompanied me," she adds. She felt as if everyone was waiting for her to turn 18 years before she could be married off.

The Fear of Early Marriage

While this was discouraging for the girl, the final blow came last year when she realised that her father, Gouru Rai, had found a matrimonial match for her. She was only 17 years old then, "I couldn't take it anymore. I didn't want to end up as a teen bride and mother like my elder sister just because we were poor," she says. So, she decided to put her foot down against this life altering decision.

"I had heard of Project Umang and how it helps in averting child marriage of girls," she says. Aaina's mother, Shadoli Rai,

is a member of self-help group - Maa Durga Ajeevika Sakhi Mandal – in her village. Her mother would often mention about Umang sessions that talked about girls' education and delaying age of marriage of girls till the latter is fully prepared for it. However, Shadoli had succumbed to circumstances in the case of Aaina's marriage. "I felt helpless as we are totally dependent on our elder son. How much burden should we impose on him. So, I remained silent on the issue," says Shadoli.

It was SAC (Social Action Committee) member, Chanchala Kumari Rai, who came for the rescue. As SAC member of her CLF - Jamdehi Ajeevika Mahila Sankul Sangathan – Chanchala addresses issues of adolescent girls in her area and is responsible for SHGs in Patulia and Barageriya villages, including Maa Durga SHG to which Shadoli belongs to. A resident of the same village, 27-year-old Chanchala is familiar with Aaina and her family.

"When Aaina confided in me, I counselled her mother about the ill-effects of child/early marriage, reminded her of the key messages received from Umang sessions and prepared her to negotiate with her family for averting the marriage," recalls Chanchala. Next, she also visited Aaina's home and spoke to her father on the issue. After repeated interactions, the parents finally agreed to step back from the marriage.

Setting on an Alternative Path

However, Aaina had realised that averting the marriage was not a long-term solution to her situation. She approached Chanchala again for further guidance about their future and career as she knew that the latter also worked as a counsellor in Kishori Help Desk under Project Umang. In October 2022, Kishori Help Desk was inaugurated in Jamdehi CLF office and Chanchala had filled in the role of help desk counsellor for the initial five months. "It was during this period when I would counsel

adolescent girls and encouraged them to be valuable human resource instead of being a liability at home while waiting to attain marriageable age," says Chanchala.

"I visited the help desk with my sister in January 2023. Since I was a school dropout and resuming education wasn't feasible considering our finances, the counselor advised me to undertake skill training instead," says Aaina. After understanding Aaina's areas of interest and her capabilities, the sisters were informed about Sewing Training Centre at Bankura in West Bengal that offered 3-months sewing course under DDU-GKY[1]. "The option appeared feasible as training and accommodation were free," says Aaina. Her only challenge remained was to convince her parents for allowing her to step out – the training centre was more than 100 kms away from Patulia.

For a girl who had never been allowed to step out of the house was seeking permission to go to another state. It was unthinkable for the family and community that doesn't encourage girls' mobility. But Aaina and her sister insisted. Fortunately, her elder brother supported them too. "My parents listen to Dada (elder brother). Once he gave a go ahead, my father allowed me to go," she says with a smile.

Moving out wasn't easy though. There were initial hiccups. After reaching Bankura, Aaina found that she had to live in a big dormitory in the hostel, sharing space with many girls. "There were girls from Jamtara, Dhanbad, and Dumka districts of Jharkhand. There were also girls from parts of West Bengal. Most of us were around similar age, but our dialect and family background were a little different," says Aaina who adjusted to the new life within a few days.

"The training was interesting. It gave me a purpose as I was learning something new. There was a schedule to be followed and we had the goal of securing placement after completion of the course, which made those three months very exciting and challenging," says Aaina.

Some Dreams – Lived and Unlived

On completion of her training in April 2023, she found placement at a garment manufacturing unit in Kolkata – 110 Clothing. "So, I moved to Kolkata which is further 170 km away from Bankura," she says. Having a job and living independently in a strange city has been a liberating experience for the young woman. Every month she sends a portion of her salary home to support her parents. "It feels good to contribute and support them," she says.

She likes visiting nearby park and markets with her friends on weekly offs, such as today. "The haats (markets) in Kolkata are very different from that of our village. I have made friends in the hostel, and we enjoy each other's company," she says.

When asked the one thing she misses the most, she takes a pause and says, "My studies - I really loved studying, Hindi was my favourite subject." However, Aaina is happy that she could choose an alternative path that didn't ruin her prospects altogether. She dreads at the thought of how her life would have shaped had she not resisted early marriage. On being asked about her marriage plans, she smiles: "Of course I do wish to get married and settle down in life. But not so soon. Probably after a few years."

For now, she wants to focus on her career and enjoy the shimmer and glam of the big city and her liberated life.

[1] DDU-GKY (Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana) is a youth employment scheme under the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) that focusses on adding diversity to the incomes of rural poor families and catering to the career aspirations of rural youth.

THE ALTERNATIVE OF EDUCATION AND CAREER



Lead Me
From Darkness
TO LIGHT

A young girl's aspirations were about to get trampled under child/early marriage, just when Umang came as a ray of hope and strengthened her mother to avert the social evil. The girl opted to complete her education and make a career in the IT sector

Sweety Das comes across as a bright, ambitious girl with a promising future. At a young age of 20, she is already financially independent, working with an IT company in Ranchi, Jharkhand. She holds a diploma in computer science engineering and aspires to study B-Tech with her own hard-earned money. Along with being self-reliant, she is also supporting her family, comprising her parents and a younger sister, who live in Kundangal village in Jamtara district.

However, this was not the case three years ago when Sweety was being forced into an early marriage by her family. Her father Porimal Das, who runs a small grocery shop in the village had succumbed to societal pressure, where child/early marriage of daughters is a social norm and had started looking for matrimonial match for his eldest daughter. Subsequently, Sweety was forced to discontinue her schooling in Grade 11. This was especially heart-breaking for the girl who had always been a meritorious student and had dreamed of having a career.

Umang Brings Hope

Sweety had been a school topper in her 10th boards exams (Deoleshwar High School, Bhandarbera village, Jamtara) and was preparing dedicatedly to score well in Grade 12 as well when her education was suddenly stopped. "That was the lowest point for me. It seemed as if my life was over," recalls Sweety. Just then, as a ray of hope, her aunt who had recently got associated with Project Umang as a Master Book Keeper (MBK) resisted the idea of Sweety's marriage.

It was this aunt who explained Sweety's mother, Jharna Das, about the ill-impact of child marriage on Sweety's health and future. She also encouraged Jharna to start attending Umang sessions during SHG meetings (Jharna was member of Jai Maa Kali SHG, Kundangal). The sessions made the mother aware about the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006 and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012. They also made her realise the significance of girls' education and the power and influence she possessed as a mother in shaping the future of her daughters.

Apart from imparting awareness, Umang sessions also capacitated the mother with communication and negotiation skills offering alternative narratives against child marriage, which empowered her to convince her husband to delay Sweety's marriage for the time being and focus on her education instead.

Jharna Das says: "Convincing my in-laws against child marriage wasn't easy initially. This is because child marriage is deeply engrained in our community. We have all grown up witnessing this practice as a social norm, so much so that many of us could never question it or realise its ill-effects despite being victims of it ourselves." Jharna had been a child bride too as she had been married off at 14 years of age, owing to poverty in her maternal home. "However, things are changing now. Umang sessions were an eye-opener for me. They also helped me gather courage to speak against the system," adds the 35-year-old mother of two daughters.



“

I owe my success to Project Umang that instilled courage & skills in my mother to go against societal norms. Had she not stood up for me, I would have ended up as a young bride & probably as an adolescent mother too

”

Road to Liberation

It took Jharna many rounds of discussions with her husband before the latter got thoroughly convinced in averting Sweety’s early marriage. The next challenge was arranging finances for Sweety’s higher education who had competed entrance exam for diploma in computer science engineering and wanted to pursue the course from polytechnic in Dumka, which is 80-90 km away from their village. Jharna was barely able to make ends meet with the dismal income from their shop. Hence, she took loan of around INR 50,000 from the SHG (in two instalments of INR 17,000 and INR 30,000) to pay for Sweety’s fee. “Luckily, accommodation was free for Sweety at the polytechnic,” says Jharna.

“We faced a lot of resistance from family and community against the idea of me going out to study. As my parents didn’t have a male child and we had a poor financial status, my mother’s bold steps that were challenging social norms triggered hostility from community. However, I am immensely grateful that she trusted me thoroughly and stood by me throughout,” says Sweety.

Counselling Service

Maintaining her good academic record, Sweety completed her diploma as a top ranker among girls and secured a job with an IT company in Ranchi during campus placement. She has been working since August 2022 and is now paying back the loan that her mother had taken for her education.

Meanwhile, during one of her holidays Sweety also received career counselling from Kishori Help Desk – a component introduced under Project Umang that offers counselling to adolescent girls on education, career, life skills and SRHR.

“The counselling gave me clarity on how to grow further after my diploma. Based on the guidance from help desk, I have decided to pursue B-tech,” informs Sweety. She has also recently secured a job as computer science teacher at Jharkhand Aawasiya Balika Vidyalaya under Jharkhand Education Project Council.

Ripple Effect

Sweety’s journey of empowerment has started to show a ripple effect in the form of an attitudinal shift among community members towards child marriage and girls’ education. “There has been a big difference in the mindset of people in the last three years. The very same people who would taunt my parents now consider me as a role model for other adolescent girls in my village,” says Sweety. This has also paved an educational pathway for her younger sister, Suman Das, who is now in 11th grade and is free from the pressure of CEFM.

Simultaneously, Jharna Das has grown in her own capacity under Project Umang from an SHG member to VO (Village Organisation) member and now as a SAC (Social Action Committee) member of her CLF (Kundangal Ajeevika Mahila Sankul Sangathan) where she has been working since June 2022. She now helps strengthen capacities of other mothers in nurturing their daughters’ aspirations at household level and addresses social issues such as gender-based violence, child marriage, etc at community level.

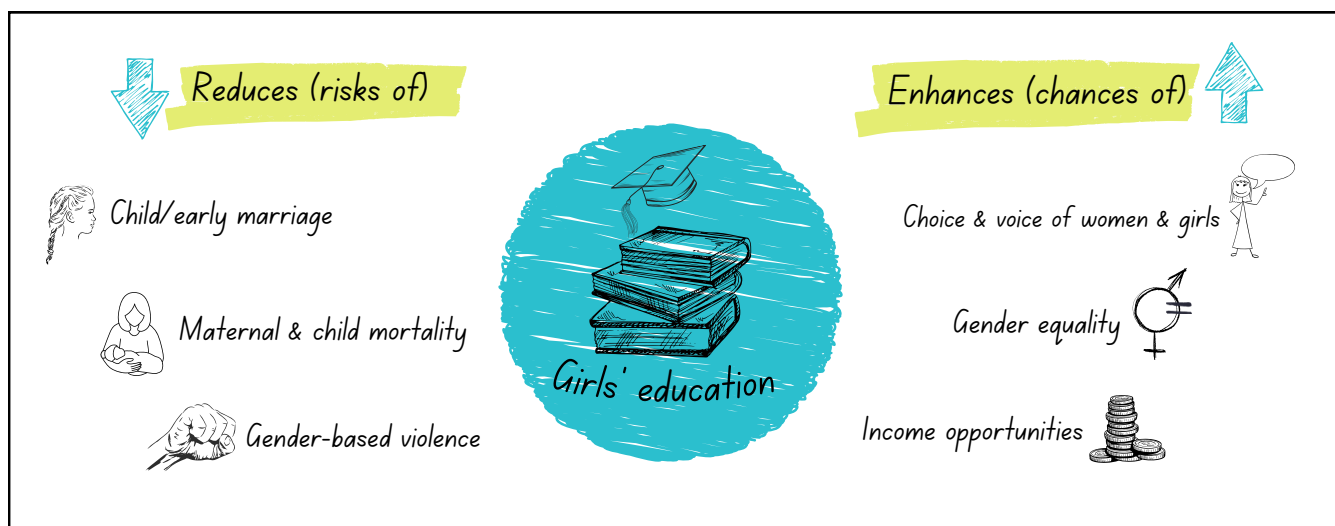
The mother-daughter duo is now an inspiration in Kundangal. “I owe all my independence and success to Project Umang that instilled courage and skills in my mother to confront the social evil of child marriage. Had she not stood up for me, I would have been married off at 17 and ended up as a young bride and probably as an adolescent mother too,” says Sweety.

THE VALUE OF EDUCATION

Bringing girls back on educational pathway through re-enrolments in schools

Education lays the foundation of a life that has better prospects of health, income, social upliftment, and opportunities for an individual. When a girl is educated, she is likely to be a productive human resource for her family and community and contribute towards the socio-economic development of her nation. Education can empower girls with choice and voice, thus helping them lead healthier lives, free of discriminations and violence.

Investing in the education of girls can help reduce incidences of child/early marriage as educated girls are likely to marry late. It also helps improve maternal and child health as educated women tend to exercise their reproductive rights, have planned pregnancies, and adopt health-seeking behaviours. An educated mother can make informed decisions for her children, especially on issues of their health, nutrition, and career. She has a say in household decisions and can contribute meaningfully to caregiving as well as income generating roles, thus blurring the lines of gender inequalities.



Despite the many advantages, education of girls continues to remain a challenge and a global concern. A host of systemic, socio-cultural, and economic factors act as barriers to girls enrolling in schools or completing their education[1]. According to a [UNICEF report](#), nearly 129 million girls are out of schools globally. Out of these, 75% (97 million girls) are of secondary school age, indicating at the massive dropouts that occur after primary education.

Lack of resources and poverty are the primary reasons for depriving girls from formal education. Other reasons include – distance of schools / educational institutions, lack of a safe environment, infrastructural gaps such as absence of safe drinking water, sanitation, toilets, etc, and gender stereotyping – that demotivate parents from sending their daughters to school, especially after primary classes. In India, primary schools are available in most villages, but for secondary education, students need to seek admission at block level or in neighbouring villages, implying daily commutation of a few kms. This has a direct bearing on girls dropping out of the education system after primary education and consequently middle school[2].

Moreover, gender disparities and harmful social norms associate lesser value to girls' education. Although the proportion of educated women (with 10 or more years of schooling) has gradually increased from 36% in NFHS-4 to 41% in NFHS-5, it is lesser as against men at 50%.

Families and communities in low economic circumstances prefer to invest their limited resources in educating boys (who are meant for income generating roles) rather than girls (who are meant for caregiving roles). This has a much deeper intergenerational impact as parental neglect and absence of enabling environment at home and community often result in low academic self-esteem, and poor interest and motivation among girls to study[3]. Years of conditioning often make young girls believe that education is not their right or purpose.

Project Umang has been addressing this complex issue through a two-way approach. First, it is capacitating women of village organisations (of the federated self-help group structure) to lead and ensure that all girls in their area are in schools. This involves extensive enrolment initiatives, enquiring with schools, extending handholding support to parents during admission processes, identifying school dropout girls through home visits of cadre, and bringing them back on educational pathway.

Secondly, the project is making SHG women realise the importance of creating an enabling environment at home for girls to study and building neighbourhood support at community level. It is enriching mother-daughter relationship by encouraging mothers to actively engage with their daughters' academic performance, nurture their aspirations and resolve issues together.

So far, the project has successfully brought 250 girls back on educational track with re-enrolments. These are not just numbers as each one of them carry stories of resilience, of negotiating barriers and of ushering hope for a better future for the next generation. These 250 girls (and counting) hold promise to transform the lives of their families and communities with the power of education.

[1] *Women Education in India: An Analysis*

[2] *Cycling to School -Increasing Secondary School Enrollment for Girls in India* Muralidharan and Nishith Prakash, 2017

[3] *The distance to school is not only about the distance you walk*, Brookings, 2016



Gauri Kumari from Redi Madhaiya village, Godda district, has returned to school after a gap of almost two years, thanks to the efforts of Active Woman, Nirjala Devi

Seventeen years old Gauri Kumari lives with her parents and three siblings in Redi Madhaiya village in Godda district. Her father, Vijay Yadav, is a milk seller in the village and the sole earning member of the family, while her mother Baby Devi, is a homemaker. Gauri is the eldest among her siblings including a brother (in grade 10) and two sisters (in grades 5 and 3 respectively).

Gauri had always been a meritorious student who enjoyed academics and was a regular at school. She had received primary education from primary school in her village, following which she studied up to grade 8 at middle school in Dubrajpur (around 2 km away from Redi Madhaiya) and then at Ramla High School for grades 9 and 10, which was farther (around 4-5 km away). Gauri would cover the distance by foot, every day. “We were a group of five girls who would walk up to Ramla High School,” says Gauri. “It would take us around 30 minutes of walk one-way. However, I never felt the distance as commuting with friends was so much fun and we had such interesting things to learn at school,” she recalls.

The Pandemic

Her parents were supportive of her education until the pandemic shook the world. Nationwide lockdown introduced the concept of online classrooms, and this meant loss of education for low-resource communities such as Gauri’s where smartphones and internet connectivity were not available to all students at every household. “Schools

were closed, that was the year of my 10th board exams,” she says. “My father’s business suffered, and our family priorities changed drastically,” she adds. She remembers spending maximum time doing domestic chores. At times she would revise her lessons, but it was mostly self-study without any guidance. That was a challenging year for her and her family.

However, when her board exams were finally held in March 2021, to her disbelief, her friends didn’t turn up. “They were all gone. Some girls had been married off during the lockdown, while others had lost track of studies and interest in academics. There were a few who had migrated to their relatives’ places owing to loss of livelihood in the pandemic. That is when Gauri felt completely isolated indeed.

Away from School

Despite the lockdown challenges, Gauri scored well in her board exams (73%) and was looking forward to resume schooling. But things were no longer the same. In the absence of friends who would accompany Gauri to school, her parents were not willing to send her alone or allow her to commute the long distance daily all by herself. It was demoralising for the girl who had always studied hard. “I had become a 10th pass school dropout because of the distance,” she says.

At home Gauri had nothing to do except domestic chores. “It became frustrating as I was losing interest in things.

“

I am happy to be back to school. I remember the frustration I felt as a dropout and thank Umang to help me get another chance. I have decided to complete my education and not let distance come in my way ever.

”

- **Gauri Kumari, Grade 11 student**
Ramla High School, Godda



It had been more than a year and I could sense that slowly I had started forgetting my learnings,” she says. “Had my friends continued their education, I wouldn’t have ended up like this,” she adds.

Support of Umang

Gauri’s condition caught the attention of Active Woman, Nirjala Devi, during a meeting of her VO (village organisation) – Redi Madhaiya Ajeevika Mahila Gram Sangathan – in January 2022. “Her case was discussed at the VO when I realised that I had to help the girl,” says Nirjala Devi. As an Active Woman,

Nirjala Devi has been associated with Project Umang since its inception in 2019. She is a strong advocate of girls’ education and is responsible for the functioning of all nine SHGs (self-help groups) that come under Redi Madhaiya VO, including Bajrangi Ajeevika Sakhi Mandal – the SHG of which Gauri’s mother, Baby Devi, is a member.

“I raised the issue at the SHG meeting and re-iterated the ill effects of child/early marriage and the benefits of girls’ education. Baby Devi listened intently and later told me that she wanted to send Gauri to school but the deserted roads and safety concerns stopped her,” says Nirjala Devi.

So, the Active Woman decided to visit their home. Gauri remembers Nirjala Devi visiting and counselling the mother-daughter duo. “I explained them that in the absence of education, Gauri’s early marriage will be the next step

that they won’t be able to resist,” says Nirjala. She also explained how the girl’s health and future will suffer.

Academic Self-Esteem

“Gauri had almost given up on education and needed motivation that she could still resume her studies,” says Nirjala. On the issue of distance, the active woman suggested the mother to shed away her apprehensions that can be detrimental to her daughter’s future and explore solutions instead. After repeated counselling by Nirjala Devi, Gauri’s parents agreed and got her re-enrolled in Ramla High School at grade 11 in April 2022. New students from junior batch had joined by then and Gauri found company in a girl from her village who would walk to school with her.

Her initial days of returning to school were a bit difficult though. “I was nervous as I had forgotten my subjects. I also felt awkward as my new classmates were my juniors,” says Gauri. But she didn’t give up and worked very hard for the opportunity she had got. She picked up gradually on academics. Gauri has promoted to grade 12 now and has made new friends in school.

“I am happy to be back to school,” she says. The girl aspires to pursue graduation from Godda college after completing grade 12 next year. That would imply commuting 8 km daily, but Gauri seems determined to cover the distance. “I know what it means to be a dropout. I have decided to complete my education. Thankfully, my mother supports me. I won’t let distance come in my way anymore,” says Gauri.



THE CHALLENGE OF
Educational
EXPENSES

Lalita Kumari from Amarpur village, Godda, had surrendered to financial constraints of her family and given up her desire for studies until self-help group came up in her support and the girl got a second chance with education

Rita Mohali is a member of self-help group – Shiv Sakhi Mandal – at Amarpur village in Godda Sadar block, Godda. She sells daliya (handmade bamboo baskets) for a living. Since the demise of her husband in 2017, she has been managing her family alone that includes her four children – three daughters and a son. She got her eldest daughter, Vimla, married few years ago. The elder son has started supporting her business recently. “It has been very challenging for my mother to manage things alone,” says her daughter, Lalita Kumari (16 years old).

Lalita was barely 10 years old, when her father – who worked as a labourer – passed away. She has grown up watching her mother’s daily struggles. “Despite the odds, my mother tried her best to ensure that all four of us continue our education,” recalls Lalita.

Tough Circumstances

As an SHG member in Amarpur, Rita was introduced to Project Umang through its modular sessions at SHG meetings. Over the years, she had learnt the significance of delaying age at marriage of girls and the value of girls’ education.

Hence, she resisted societal pressure of getting her daughters married in their teens, especially her eldest daughter Vimla. In the community where Rita lives,

child/early marriage of daughters is the socially accepted survival mechanism for families struggling with financial constraints. But Rita withstood the pressure.

However, things worsened after the pandemic when survival became the biggest concern. In her struggles to make ends meet, education of her daughters lost its priority. After Lalita completed grade 8 at Amarpur Madhya Vidyalaya (Middle School) in 2022, Rita couldn’t bear her educational expenses anymore. Owing to lack of resources, Lalita became a school dropout.

The Dropout Year

The abrupt discontinuation of her education was disappointing for the girl “I used to like studies, I really liked going to school,” recalls Lalita. She tried to raise the concern with her mother a couple of times but realised that the latter was helpless and struggling with her own limitations. “The future seemed dark to me,” says Lalita.

Unlike her school days that would have a schedule, Lalita’s days at home were dull and lacked purpose other than mundane things. “I didn’t find anything interesting to share with my family,” says Lalita who started withdrawing from things.

“

Nobody talks about the sense of isolation and lack of purpose girls undergo when they are abruptly withdrawn from schools.

This has a profound impact on their emotional and mental health

”

-Parmila Devi, Active Woman

Amarpur Mahila Ajeevika Mahila Gram Sangathan, Godda



“Nobody talks about the sense of isolation and lack of purpose girls undergo when they are abruptly withdrawn from schools. This has a profound impact on their emotional and mental health,” says Parmila Devi, the Active Woman from JSLPS who stepped up in support of Lalita. Her case was first discussed at the VO – Amarpur Mahila Ajeevika Mahila Gram Sangathan. A total of 18 SHGs come under Amarpur VO. As an Active Woman associated with Project Umang, Parmila is responsible for 11 SHGs out of them, including Shiv Sakhi Mandal – Rita’s collective.

“I enquired the matter with Rita during SHG meeting and informed her about the provision of taking loan from the women’s collective, if required,” says Parmila (36 years old). Rita was hesitant. Considering the sensitivity of the matter, Parmila also visited Rita’s home for counselling. It took her repeated visits and follow-ups before Rita agreed to take monetary help for Lalita’s admission.

“During her home visits, Parmila didi would often motivate me not to lose hope. She would assure me that I will be back to school soon. Her words were truly encouraging during that dark phase,” says Lalita.

A Second Chance

The Active Woman was also willing to offer handholding support to the mother-daughter duo during admission process, but that wasn’t required. With the help received from her SHG, Rita was able to get Lalita re-enrolled at grade 9 in Amarpur Madhya Vidyalaya in April 2023.

Lalita is excited to return to the school after a gap of a year. “I hadn’t thought I will ever get a second chance. It was difficult to adjust initially, but now things have settled well,” informs Lalita. Hindi continues to be her favourite subject.

When asked about her career aspirations, Lalita goes silent. The last year has been overwhelming for the girl. “I had stopped thinking of career when my education stopped. I need time to process things,” she says. However, the girl is determined not to discontinue her education this time. “It got interrupted once, I won’t let it happen again,” she says. She aspires to pursue higher studies from Godda after completing grade 10 from Amarpur school.

GUIDED PATHWAYS

Girls seeking counselling from Kishori Help Desk

The empowerment journey of women and girls is incomplete if they are not given the right guidance of pathways to choose from. As empowerment is not only about strengthening voice but more importantly about exercising choice and developing agency. Capacitating girls – the women of tomorrow – to make informed decisions about their life choices (especially on education, career, and health) is integral for an empowerment model to be successful in a given socio-cultural context.

While Project Umang is capacitating mothers – for strengthening voice and space within households and shifting norms to place their daughters’ concerns; for protecting daughters from child/early marriage; for supporting their education and aspirations – it is equally important that the girls get the right guidance at the right age.

The ultimate purpose of educating girls is not only about school enrolments, but ensuring that meaningful outcomes are derived from it, that girls are transforming into productive human resources and utilising their education to improve their lives and contribute to the progress of their communities.

Counselling plays a crucial role in shaping the educational pathways girls take and career choices they make. Counselling in the early years of secondary education can be beneficial in setting life goals early, thus enabling girls to take purposeful decisions towards those goals in succeeding years. Adolescents who undergo counselling prove to grow up into better career decision makers and empowered adults[1]. On the contrary, pursuing education aimlessly cannot elicit long-term commitment and interest, resulting in low academic self-esteem and dropouts.

Baseline Study conducted by PCI India under Project Umang in 2021 identified a major gap in educational and career aspirations among with 373 adolescent girls surveyed. A key reason for this mismatch was lack of information and career guidance, leading to the requirement of regular education guidance and meaningful career counselling for adolescent girls.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 reveals a gradual decline in enrolment ratio with higher grades. This emphasizes on the need for counselling that can help in identifying reasons for school dropouts and bring such students back on educational pathways.

These concerns have led to the inception of Kishori (adolescent) Help Desk as a significant component under Project Umang. These are located at CLF offices and offer a safe space to adolescent girls and their parents to get their queries resolved. These provide counselling services on educational pathways, career choice, skills trainings, and on issues of SRHR (sexual and reproductive health and rights). Trained counsellors offer complete guidance and career counselling to adolescent girls with a scientific approach using John Holland’s RIASEC Test (psychometric analysis of understanding aptitude and personality types as Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising and Conventional)[2]. Moreover, girls are guided and linked to various schemes and scholarship and guided about available courses with the help of a detailed compendium, especially designed for the project.

Initiated in July 2022, a total of 12 Kishori Help Desks have been institutionalised so far in Godda Sadar and Nala blocks, that have together offered counselling to more than 650 adolescent girls.

[1] *Research on the effect of career counselling on career decision making of young adolescents*

[2] *Holland Code and RIASEC*



Punam's aspiration to become a nurse has got validation after she underwent RIASEC test at Kishori Help Desk at Chakanyapara CLF that confirmed her personality type to have the trait. Post counselling, Punam is better equipped for the next steps - about the entrance exam and the preparation required

Since the age of 12, Punam Paul, has nurtured the desire to become a nurse. The last six years have not deterred the aspiration of this girl from Radhaballavpur village in Jamtara. Punam is now 18 and is pursuing B.Sc. in Zoology and Botany from Nala Degree College, which is around 11 km away from her village. She aspires to take B.Sc. Nursing Entrance Exam next year as she missed it this year.

"I have always wanted to be a nurse. Hence, I opted for science stream after 10th grade," says Punam. Her inspiration is driven from her father, Nadiyanand Paul, who works as a pathologist in Nala. "I grew up listening to my father talk about lab tests, medicines, diseases, and treatments. Many people in my village would seek my father's medical advice for common ailments, for consulting doctors, for visiting hospitals, etc. I felt great that my father was able to guide others and the admiration and respect he received from people," she says. Luckily, her desire to follow her father's footsteps was valued by her family.

Enabling Environment

In a community where strict gender roles nurture the capacities of girls/women for care and domestic responsibilities and associate income-generating and career-oriented roles with boys/men, the kind of parental support Punam has received for her career aspiration is unusual.

Punam says she grew up in an enabling environment without any gender discriminations. "My elder brother and I have received equal learning opportunities. He is currently working

at a nursing home in Asansol and guides me about my choice of subjects, studies, etc," she says.

After completing her primary education from village school, Punam pursued secondary education till grade 8 from Debalkunda Middle School (1.5 km away – she would walk to school) and further studies from grade 9-12 from RK+2 High School, Nala (she cycled the distance).

Her mother, Kaushalya Paul, is an SHG member of Jai Maa Saraswati Ajeevika Sakhi Mandal. For the last four years, Kaushalya has been attending modular sessions at her SHG meetings that emphasise on the value of girls' education and the ill-effects of child/early marriage. "My mother mentions these topics at home. She had once attended a session on the significance of nutritional diet during adolescence after which she started paying more attention to our daily intake. Also, she had a session on menstrual hygiene and told me about some do's and don'ts during periods," says Punam.

Realisation of Gap

It was one such Umang session in January 2023 when adolescent girls from Radhaballavpur had accompanied their mothers to the event, and Umang team members had facilitated open discussions on health, education, career, and other issues related to adolescence. "It was such an interesting session that the girls demanded the organisers to conduct it for one more day," recalls Punam. It was during this event that Punam realised she needed guidance for her career aspiration.

ANNEXURE A - Selection Criteria for SHG Women

Sl No	Case Study Topic	Focus Area	Suggested Questions
1	Agency - Raising daughter to be an independent decision-maker	An SHG mother who acknowledges that girls need to develop agency & have decision-making ability for leading a fulfilled life (whether they choose to have a career or manage household) and prepares her daughter to grow up into a decision-maker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you have a say in daily household expenses & bigger purchases, or do you simply follow your husband's order? Is your opinion counted in academic decisions for your kids – whether and which school should they attend, till what grade should they study, are they also studying at home, etc? Are you involved in major decision-making for your daughter's future? Did you always have authority in the areas mentioned above, or did your decision-making abilities enhance with Project Umang? How are you helping your daughter develop decision-making abilities? Do you allow her to take decisions for small, daily activities and boost her confidence? Do you let your daughter learn to accept failures of her decisions positively?
2	Respecting daughter's consent in marriage	An SHG mother who was forced into early marriage but she will get her daughter married only when the latter wants. Within her own capacity, the mother has ensured that her daughter has a say in when and whom to marry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> At the time of your marriage, did you want to get married or want to marry later? Did your parents count your opinion while deciding whom you'll marry or the characteristics of the person you wanted to marry? Do you think this had an impact on the power dynamics of your marital life? Do you think you would have enjoyed more freedom and authority if you had a say at the time of your marriage? When and why did you decide to change this for your daughter? What steps did you take to ensure that your daughter has a say in her marriage? How has Umang helped you in this transformation? Have your husband's/in-laws' opinion also undergone a change? Is this change solely factored by your negotiations, or by other external influences as well? If yes, what are those influences? Do you think other women in community have taken (will take) inspiration from you?
3	Helping daughters with enhanced mobility	An SHG mother who understands that the confidence of stepping out alone and visiting places independently is crucial indicator of empowerment. She helps her daughter to grow up into an individual who is not dependent on anyone for going anywhere.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you seek permission from husband/in-laws in going to - nearby market, Anganwadi centre, Anganwadi centre, Panchayat meeting, acquaintances/relatives' homes, maternal home, etc? Do you need someone's company to visit the above-mentioned places or can you go out independently? How are you helping your daughter to be independent with an enhanced mobility? Have you purchased her a cycle (if yes, who taught her cycling?) or do allow her to walk up to school on her own? How do you train her to handle situations if she feels unsafe while commuting alone or commuting with friends? How to raise alarm, what to do? Did you face resistance from family or neighbourhood for allowing your daughter to go to school and other places unaccompanied? How did you overcome such criticism and your own fears? Why do you think it is important for daughters to have enhanced mobility (or the ability & confidence of stepping out of home alone)?
4	Negotiation skills - Nurturing daughter's aspirations with improved negotiation skills	A mother who benefitted from Project Umang in improving her negotiation & communication skills within households and successfully convinced her husband/ in-laws to allow their daughter to pursue her aspirations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are the general topics of regular talks with your husband – about food, household expenses, neighbours, relatives, community events, etc? Are your children's education & their future a part of your daily discussions? Does your husband seek your opinion in major decision-making of household? If yes, was the scenario always like this, or did the dynamics change after you were introduced to Project Umang? If your husband had decided to discontinue your daughter's education, how did you convince him? What was his major concerns/arguments and how did you find a solutions/answers to them? How did you overcome your hesitation of arguing with your husband or your fear of upsetting him? Was it easy to convince him? What was his initial reaction? How many days or rounds of discussions did it take to finally change his mind? Why do you think your husband now listens to your advice? Is it solely because of your improved negotiation/communication skills or are there other influences that have factored an attitudinal shift in your husband's outlook? Can you identify those influences?
5	Shifting gender norms	A mother who is bringing an attitudinal shift in gender norms by raising her sons & daughters equally. A mother who is challenging gender norms at household decision-making level & intra-household decisions - by delaying marriage of her daughter and promoting her education.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are you raising your children in areas beyond gender-defined roles? Do you train your sons in household chores and your daughters in making regular groceries purchases from village market? Do you tell your children that men and women are equal entities and should have equal say in household decisions? Do your children also see this as a practice in your home? Do you tell your children that leadership roles (like village head) are not limited to just men and that women too can take up leadership roles? Do your children know that both men and women have same right/responsibility to work outside home and that women should not step out for work only during a financial crisis but otherwise too? Are you raising your children in a manner that they do not believe in gender norms such as: men are stronger than women; men are violent by nature; men need more care; women should be tolerant & submissive; wife should obey husbands; etc. do you tell them rather that as adults, mutual respect must exist between spouses to have a happy family? Do your children know that it is not correct to hit a woman and no girl/woman deserves to be beaten? Do your children know that girls are not the sole custodians of family honour? Do your children know that both boys and girls have equal right to defend their self-esteem and take a stand if a situation arises?

ANNEXURE B: Selection Criteria for Adolescent Girls

Sl No	Case Study Topic	Focus Area	Suggested Questions
1	Alternatives to child/early marriage	<p>A girl whose child/early marriage was averted by active vigilance & intervention of Project Umang and who was encouraged to opt for productive alternatives to attain economic independence: Through Skills Training</p> <p>A girl whose child/early marriage was averted by Project Umang and who attained economic independence: Through Education</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why were your parents/family about to get you married early? What were their reasons? • Who had arranged the matrimonial match? • Did any family member ask for your consent before fixing the marriage? • What were your inner thoughts at that time? Did you want to get married then? • Were you continuing schooling when your marriage was fixed? If you were withdrawn from school, how did you feel about it? • How did Team Umang get to know that you were about to get married at an early age? • How did they help? How did your parents react? • Were you happy after your marriage was averted? • Who encouraged you turn your situation into an opportunity and opt for a productive alternative? • Were you given counselling on the options available for you? Who provided that counselling? • Why did they choose your pathway - skills / education to attain economic independence? • How difficult it was to convince family? Did anyone support your aspiration? • What were some challenges you faced when you opted for an alternative pathway? • What do you think about your circumstance now? Is it better than what it was earlier? • What does your family and community think of your achievements? Is there any shift in their attitude? In what ways?
2	The Value of Education	<p>Girls returning to educational pathway through re-enrolments. Overcoming barrier of distance</p> <p>Overcoming lack of resources</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why was your education discontinued? Barriers • Did you also want to discontinue your studies or was the decision imposed on you? • How did your daily schedule and life change after this? What did you do when you were home? • Did you miss anything about school? If yes, what were they? • Did you ask your parents to allow you to continue studies? What did they say? • How did Team Umang get to know about your status? • How did they help? How did your parents react to the idea of re-enrolment? • Did you have a desire to resume your education? If yes, did you think it could be possible? If no, why? • How did your parents get convinced? What solutions were suggested? • How long did the process of negotiation and re-enrolment take? • Did you receive counseling too? • How were your initial days of returning to school? Did you face learning gap? • How had things changed? How did you cope up? • How do you feel now about your situation? • What does your family and community think of your situation now? Is there any shift in their attitude? In what ways?
3	Guided Pathways	Girls seeking counselling from Kishori Help Desk - An adolescent girl who took counselling on career education guidance at Kishori Help Desk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you get to know about Kishori Help Desk? • What/who motivated you to visit the help desk? • Did your parents support your desire to visit there or did you have to negotiate with them? • If you had to negotiate, how did you convince them? Did you take support of someone (a friend, elder sibling, neighbour, SHG mother, active woman, teacher, etc) in convincing your family? • What services did you avail from the help desk? • In what ways has help desk counselling helped you? • Would you encourage other girls to visit there? Why?



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UMANG



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