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Adolescent groups triggering change in communities

Providing school level platforms

Schools can provide platforms which help build conversations and promote values that propagate child rights, with a specific focus on the girl child. **Meena Manchs**[1] for students in upper primary schools and **Gargi Manchs**[2] for secondary level students are such platforms which help in building awareness on social norms and engage adolescents in dialogues around the constraints that keep girls out of school. They also provide platforms for adolescents to understand the causes behind the perpetuation of child marriage. Another important platform for children and adolescents in schools is the **Child Rights Club** introduced in schools by the Government of Rajasthan (GoR), to further strengthen the voice of school children on child rights and adolescent empowerment related issues.

The Meena Manch unpacks issues of child rights and builds young girls' understanding of the rights of a child, especially the right to education and its impact on tackling social norms and building one's own life skills. The Gargi Manch focuses on building conversations on enrolment and retention of girls in schools and how restricting social norms adversely impact the education of girls, especially in higher classes. Both the Manchs create the space to initiate dialogue and participation for adolescent girls. The Child Rights Clubs on the other hand, with participation from both boys and girls, take this conversation forward in mixed group settings.

Alongside, **Bal Sabhas** are platforms which help provide a bridge for structured communication and engagement between children and community members on social malaises around gender norms. This platform is often leveraged for the

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[1] The Meena Manch is a school level peer group for girls in upper primary schools (Classes 6–8).
[2] The Gargi Manch operates at the secondary school level (Classes 9–12), with the main objective of ensuring enrolment and retention of girls in schools

performance of plays and skits to highlight the social evils of child marriage and discontinuing education.

A *sugamkarta* (facilitator) has been appointed in schools whose responsibility is to ensure the effective functioning of the Manchs. Their role is to work towards the Manchs having adequate and age-appropriate enrolment, conducting timely meetings, dissemination of relevant messaging and working with children on taking these messages forward among their peers.

There are also community level adolescent groups called *kishori* groups. They are a mixed group of adolescent girls from both private and government schools, out-of-school girls and dropout girls and are facilitated by frontline workers such as Saathins, Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) and Anganwadi Workers (AWWs). These *kishori* groups are engaged with on issues of health, nutrition, education, protection and violence to be able to make informed choices and influence those of the household as well.

There have been numerous instances of how these platforms helped empower adolescent girls to make informed decisions about their lives and those of their peers and family members.

" Earlier I was not aware that child marriage is wrong and harmful for young girls. After joining the Meena Manch and later the Gargi Manch, I have realised that child marriage is a punishable offense with many adverse consequences on a girls' life. I started speaking up about my rights as a girl with my parents. Previously, my family would never allow me to go out. They would say that girls are meant to remain inside the home. Being a part of these Manchs, I have found courage within and now turn around to tell them that being a girl does not mean that I have to be confined to the house. I am more assertive and confidently tell them that I will not get married until I complete my studies and achieve my goal. Through constant dialogues with my parents, I have been able to convince them that I too have ambitions and would like to fulfil them. Today they have accepted this and have faith that I would do them proud. "

Maya Prajapati, Class 10
Government Senior Secondary School
Bharni gram panchayat, Tonk block and district

> 66 We were a group of 30-40 members in our school Child Rights Club with 10-12 boys and 20-25 girls, in the age group of 12 to 17. We would discuss issues in our age-wise group meetings. The issues were centred on child marriage, child labour, violence against children and creating a secure environment en route to and from school. We also discussed when to call CHILDLINE for assistance. Though I have passed out from school, I am still voluntarily linked to the Club. My parents were keen that I leave my studies and work at the family shop. The knowledge that I gained in the Club enabled me to convince my parents to allow me to finish my studies. I also told them that child labour is against the law. 99
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> **Vinod Panchal, ex-member of Child Rights Club**
> **Darda Hind gram panchayat, Tonk block and district**

Continued adolescent engagement through community platforms

The *kishori* groups reach out to those girls and boys who do not have access to formal Manchs in schools. In some instances, *kishori* group members make door-to-door visits and convince community members to educate their children and refrain from child marriage and child labour. Group members also participate in Bal Sabhas and spread messages on child rights and the right to education for every child in the community.

Members of the Jai Bharti Kishori Group in Bharupara village, Bhadrasar gram panchayat in Bikaner block have not just been spreading awareness among community members, but they themselves have been motivated by the staff of Urmul Trust, UNICEF's implementing partner in the adolescent empowerment programme to continue their education through Open School. Most group members had dropped out of school after Class 5 for lack of a senior school in the village. Once they became a part of the *kishori* group, and the link between dropping out of school and early marriage was explained to them, they eagerly opted to continue their education through Open School.

> 66 Whatever these girls learn in the group meetings and sessions, they share in their communities and even make door-to-door visits. They counsel girls who are not enrolled to join the senior secondary school and complete their education. Many girls who drop out of school after Class 8 come back to school for re-admission due to these visits. 99
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> **Manoj Bhendia, Facilitator**
> **Rajkriya Utkrisht Vidyalaya**
> **Nagasar gram panchayat, Bikaner block and district**

Conclusion

These Manchs and groups have provided adolescent girls with the opportunity to participate with local leaders and gram sabhas and exchange information and knowledge about their rights and other issues of relevance. These adolescent groups have become platforms at the institutional and community levels to help adolescents transition and to empower them. Wherever these groups are active and functional, they have showcased positive outcomes. Hence, their functionality is critical for empowering adolescents. The adolescent groups are gradually building a cadre of young and enthusiastic voices who are spreading positive messages of empowering adolescents and their right to education and a quality life.

UNICEF's adolescent empowerment programming in Rajasthan focuses on increasing opportunities for education to reduce the vulnerability of girls and building their life skills to empower them with an enhanced ability to speak against early marriage and for child rights.

To this end, UNICEF is providing technical assistance to the Department of Women and Child Development, Department of Education and Department of Social Justice and Empowerment to build awareness, sensitisation and capacities among frontline workers and mobilise communities to make them active partners in planning and decision making. UNICEF is also strengthening the alliance of civil society organisations towards ending all forms of violence against children and women.

In its adolescent empowerment efforts, UNICEF has also actively worked for inclusion of child protection programming in schools of Rajasthan and for out-of-school children, with components such as strengthening of adolescent forums in and outside schools, self-defence trainings in schools and by giving an impetus to the enrolment of dropout girls in Open Schools. UNICEF's programming is facilitating access to various government schemes and programmes influencing children's education, among economically weaker sections, to ensure that entitlements reach all children and they can continue their education.

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