



“Bal Vivah aur Dahej Mukta Hamara Bihar”

State campaign from 2017-18 building momentum to eliminate child marriage and dowry

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A year-long campaign, under the leadership of the Chief Minister has brought child marriage and dowry-related issues to the forefront of public discourse in Bihar. The campaign has helped people acknowledge both child marriage and dowry practice as harmful social norms. It has enhanced awareness on laws and penalties as also steps that can be taken to halt such practices by reaching gram panchayats, district officials, health workers, the police and accessing helplines.

Key facts about child marriage & dowry in Bihar



In 2015-16, as many as **42%** of 20–24-year-old women were married before the age of 18



91% married girls in the 15–19 years age group reported that their families had paid dowry



31% married girls in the 15-19 years age group reported dowry-related harassment in their marital home

Source: Santhya et al., 2017

Background

Child marriage and the dowry custom are social norms that are fuelled by the intergenerational web of poverty, low literacy and superstition. Since the year 2000, the Government of Bihar (GoB) has been working consistently to improve the overall status of women. Enhanced educational status coupled with women's empowerment and effective implementation of social protection measures have resulted in a sharp decline of 26.5% in child marriage over the last 10 years*. State schemes and policies such as Mukhyamantri Cycle Yojana, Mukhyamantri Kanya Suraksha Yojana and Mukhyamantri Kanya Vivah Yojana have helped to address issues of enrolment and retention.

On 2 October 2017, the Hon'ble Chief Minister of Bihar, Shri Nitish Kumar, launched a year-long state-wide campaign called 'Campaign against Child Marriage and Dowry' (*Bal Vivah Aur Dahej Mukht Hamara Bihar*). It aimed to promote the value of girls in society, ensure their education and prevent child marriage as well as create and sustain an environment against dowry. The campaign entailed a collaboration between government departments and civil society partners, with the Women Development Corporation (WDC) as the nodal agency with technical and budgetary support from UNICEF. The campaign had the highest political endorsement with the Chief Minister issuing a letter to all members of the

*As per NFHS-3 and NFHS-4





Bihar Legislative Council, Bihar Legislative Assembly and Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) for their support and commitment to the state's ongoing efforts to eliminate child marriage and dowry. The campaign was implemented in two phases:



Phase 1

Building public opinion, garnering support/commitment from stakeholders and raising awareness on adverse effects of child marriage and dowry practices; capacity building of government functionaries; strengthening legislative and governance measures and implementation of legislation



Phase 2

Strengthening capacities of task forces and forming adolescent groups

COMMISSIONING OF A RAPID ASSESSMENT

Ten months into the campaign, the GoB commissioned UNICEF to undertake a rapid assessment to study its effectiveness. The study was conducted by Neerman, Mumbai, with support from UNICEF and data was analysed by Population Council, New Delhi.

The objectives of the rapid assessment were to:



Examine multiple stakeholders' awareness of/recall and participation in the campaign



Assess their perceptions regarding effectiveness of the campaign



Gauge their attitudes, knowledge and practices on aspects related to the two social practices

Methodology: A cross-sectional survey was conducted in August 2018 in rural areas. Samples of adolescents and community members were drawn from all 38 districts of the state (4,564 respondents). Respondents included adolescents in 10–19 years age group; community members, namely parents, gram panchayat sarpanches, mukhiyas or pradhans, ASHAs, AWWs, Vikas Mitras, self help group (SHG) members, religious leaders, teachers and doctors.



Key campaign results

A majority of the respondents felt that the campaign had been effective in highlighting child marriage issues, especially in the public domain, had put healthy pressure on communities to delay child marriages and clarified reporting mechanisms.

a) Awareness level and participation: The campaign's success was encouraging and enjoyed maximum involvement of frontline workers (Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs), Anganwadi Workers (AWWs) and Vikas Mitras) and teachers and doctors, adolescents and community leaders. The most popular campaign activities included rallies and human chain, followed by meetings and street plays.

b) Perceptions regarding campaign effectiveness: Respondents found the campaign to be effective especially when it came to getting community members to acknowledge the importance of eliminating child marriage and the need for greater dialogue on the issue. They realised that child marriage was a harmful social norm that needed systematic elimination and the legal aspects were also emphasised in the campaign. They also felt better empowered with knowledge on who to approach in case they wanted to report such cases.

SHAPING PUBLIC AWARENESS AND RESPONSE

89-99% respondents had heard of the campaign

84-95% respondents had witnessed street plays, rallies, lectures, video vans, wall paintings and hoardings with messages on prevention of child marriage and dowry

Child marriage

87-93% respondents found the campaign to be effective in highlighting the issue of child marriage

Most frequently recalled messages included: "Stop marriage at a young age, stop waste of life"; "Let daughters study and let's not sacrifice their studies to child marriage".



Dowry

62-77% respondents reported the campaign's effectiveness in reducing cases related to dowry demand

67-82% respondents felt more aware about provisions of the Dowry Prevention Act and officers they could approach to address cases on dowry harassment



c) Effect on prevailing attitudes regarding child marriage and dowry: An overwhelming majority of respondents believed that girls should not marry before the age of 18 and boys should not marry before 21. Most respondents also took a stand against the dowry custom and disagreed with the statement that dowry should be given to reduce the burden of a girl's expenses or that it was an age-old custom and must therefore be continued.



INFORMING POPULAR PERCEPTIONS ABOUT CHILD MARRIAGE AND DOWRY

89-98% adolescents, community leaders, religious leaders, frontline workers, teachers and doctors acknowledging 18 as the legal minimum age of marriage for girls

9 out of 10 respondents disagreed with the dowry custom

46-65% respondents felt that they could approach the gram panchayat/block/district administration to intervene in a dowry-related case

51-63% respondents reported knowledge of the Dowry Prohibition Act

d) Perceptions about roles in preventing child marriage and dowry:

Majority of respondents, especially community leaders, frontline workers, teachers and doctors, felt that they could prevent child marriage and dowry practices in their homes and communities by taking the following steps:

- Educating others about the ill effects of child marriage and dowry practices
- Taking on active roles like counselling at-risk girls/parents/relatives, reporting to police and protesting against child marriage and dowry





Recommendations to strengthen the resolve

- **Enforcement of law:** 66-74% respondents felt that laws must be made more stringent and they must be enforced with respect to elimination of child marriage.
- **Raise awareness about child marriage and dowry-related issues:** 54-73% respondents were of the view that regular activities should be conducted to raise awareness about child marriage issues while 52-64% felt dowry-related issues must be made more visible.
- **Investment in girls' education:** 23-47% respondents felt that the government should invest in educating girls and improving access to schools and quality of education. They also felt that the government should provide safe transportation to bring down the incidence of child marriage while 20-43% felt that these steps would have a favourable impact on reducing dowry practices.
- **Financial security:** 6-10% respondents suggested that financial support must be provided to vulnerable populations to eliminate child marriage and 9-17% respondents felt that this would discourage the dowry practice.

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UNICEF Bihar

No. 8, Pataliputra Colony
Patna 800 013, Bihar, India
Tel: +91 0612 3984600
Fax: +91 0612 3984636
Email: patna@unicef.org

