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# 140 GRAM PANCHAYATS IN RAJASTHAN PLEDGE TO BE CHILD MARRIAGE FREE



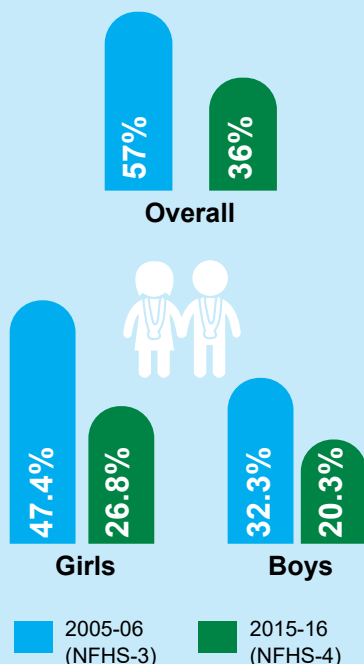
## Child marriage in Rajasthan

Social norms rooted in the caste system and feudal and patriarchal family structures have a strong hold on the practices that communities adopt. Since there are multiple layers to behaviours sustained through generations, people rarely question them. In Rajasthan, along with economic reasons, this social normative influence is seen in positive sanction to child marriage. The sanction is given greater importance by communities than the government ban on child marriage and it largely remains a sensitive subject.

Over the years, several government programmes have been launched to end child marriage and give adolescent girls and boys opportunities to improve their lives. While child marriage has declined over the years, the prevalence is still high as compared to the national average rate of decline in child marriage. The majority of government programmes launched in the state with respect to ending child marriage have targeted the household level or specific socio-economic groups, castes and age bands.

Rajasthan's deep rooted socio-cultural norms have granted sanction to child marriage.

### PREVALENCE OF CHILD MARRIAGE



## Gram panchayats as focal points

The Panchayati Raj system as envisaged by the Indian Constitution is mandated to ensure local economic development and social justice. Panchayats play an important role in planning and implementing functions related to 29 subjects listed in the 11<sup>th</sup> Schedule of the Indian Constitution. Child protection and development are part of that agenda.

Panchayats as the unit of local self government exert considerable influence at the community level. What they say is heard and what they mandate is usually adhered to as they have the advantage of a rapport with community members and can reach out to and engage with them. In order to leverage this influence, from 2015 onwards, gram panchayats were given the responsibility of being the focal point/unit anchoring the government's child marriage elimination plan. The Government of Rajasthan launched a State Strategic Action Plan (SSAP) in March 2017 to prevent child marriage, placing gram panchayats at the centre of the narrative. The aim was to make the state child marriage free by preventing incidents of child marriage, empowering girls and providing socio-economic, legal, education and health services to those affected by the problem. As the impetus grew, it anchored interventions and activities that helped address the drivers and consequences of child marriage.



## The “Child Marriage Free Gram Panchayat” model



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### HOW CAN A GRAM PANCHAYAT BECOME CHILD MARRIAGE FREE?

A gram panchayat which encourages empowerment opportunities for all children and delays marriage for girls (after 18 years) and boys (after 21 years) for three consecutive years is declared a “Child Marriage Free Gram Panchayat.”

As many as 140 gram panchayats across three districts of Rajasthan were selected to develop a demonstrable model of establishing Child Marriage Free Gram Panchayats using a community-led approach. These gram panchayats now synchronise their development plans with the goal of eliminating child marriage. They are motivating and inspiring social change and when required, enforcing their decision with legal and police intervention. The Sarpanch as the head of the local self-governance unit of the gram panchayat, rallies panchayat members together, places adolescent empowerment as a regular agenda point in panchayat meetings and actively advocates with community members to delay the age of marriage of their children. The panchayat’s consistent leadership in the campaign builds a spirit of community ownership in dealing with the issue.

Since the goal of ending child marriage cannot be the sole purview of any one institution, meaningful partnerships and alliances have been formed with UN donors, international community based organisations like SAVE, PLAN, Girls Not Brides and ActionAid and Government of India programmes like Dasham and Sanjha Abhiyan. To the state government budget of INR 4.9 million allocated per annum for ending child marriage, partners and donors have committed an additional INR 200 million per annum which is commendable.



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# BUILDING OWNERSHIP

## PHASE 1

**The gram panchayat prepares to take up the challenge**

Once the Sarpanch is convinced about the importance and benefits of ending child marriage and has brought panchayat members and key influencers in the gram panchayat on board, it is important for them to develop a shared vision and common goal. The key steps in this process are:

- Outlining a costed plan of action for preventing child marriage
- Mapping vulnerable children and linking them to social protection schemes
- Planning awareness generation activities across the panchayat on special occasions and commemorative days, festivals and other mass events such as:
  - a. Creating more dialogue and visibility with school students and others participating in street plays, music and other creative and art forms
  - b. Reaching young people with a specially developed toolkit of IEC materials like posters, cartoon strips, story books; involving families and shopkeepers with campaigns, posters, banners and wall paintings ('Sapnon ka Mandna'), sharing phone numbers of key contacts such as the Child Marriage Prohibition Officer (CMPO) and police in the Atal Seva Kendra and ICDS buildings so that adolescents and other community members can report immediately and seek help
  - c. Conducting mass mobilisation activities like folk-based mid media and *chaupal* meetings.

## PHASE 2

**Celebrating and commemorating success**



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Successful cases of preventing child marriage are showcased to demonstrate the fact that it is possible to stand against social pressure to delay child marriage and the benefits to the girl/ boy in having delayed her/his marriage. Each positive step is amplified so that it can resonate and become part of a larger movement through steps such as:

## PHASE 3

**Monitoring and following-up**

This is the most critical phase in ensuring that child marriage has indeed been stalled and the young girl and/or boy are not being harassed or coerced by parents and family members in any way.

- Strengthening Child Protection Committees and child tracking mechanisms
- Facilitating community-based tracking of out-of-school children and developing dashboards for monitoring
- Undertaking capacity building of CMPOs, Sarpanchs, frontline workers, police and teachers
- Orienting MLAs, MPs and members of Standing Committee on Welfare of Women and Children
- Empowering Lok Adalats run by state/district legal services and mandating them to look into 'Ending Child Marriage' and providing free paralegal support
- Mainstreaming child protection in plans/budgets of local self-governance bodies

# THREE PHASE PROCESS

- Conducting school-level activities such as orientations in school during parent-teacher meetings, organising competitions and discussions in morning assemblies, forming Child Rights Clubs and integrating messages in popular forums like the Meena Manch and adolescent group meetings.

In this phase, there is gradual creation of an environment wherein community members begin to realise the demerits of child marriage and start placing negative sanctions on it. This can be described as the introduction of a social normative shift and this critical shift needs to be sustained through consistent advocacy and follow up by panchayat members and frontline workers such as the Saathin, AWW and ASHA.

Once panchayat members owned the goal of making their gram panchayat child marriage free, they could initiate “pressure points” depending on how community members responded to the shared vision. At their level, they began rewarding those who contributed to fulfilling the goal and conversely criticising those who went against it.



- Awarding those who stilled a child marriage or provided timely help and support
- Creating overall readiness in the panchayat to say ‘no’ to child marriage and organising large public ceremonies such as oath taking and declaring the panchayat child marriage free
- Felicitating girls who did well in school and encouraging them to continue with their studies
- Taking up the cause at the state level by adopting the Garima Samman Award and facilitating champions of adolescent empowerment



## Sustainability

Guidelines for verification of Child Marriage Free Gram Panchayats have been prepared and monitoring and follow up will be done during the year to enforce ending child marriage at the institutional level. In order to achieve a lasting Child Marriage Free Gram Panchayat, sustained and internalised action by decision makers, householders and target groups is important. Therefore, the ward panch, panchayat members, frontline workers and schools are being encouraged to self-declare that they are not party to child marriage. At the individual level, Sarpanchs are placing this agenda point on the monthly gram sabha meeting.

**At the government level:** Government departments have begun to prioritise the issue.

- The Department of Education introduced the indicator of 'ending child marriage' in the Ujjari Panchayat scheme so that all girls could attend school. While the Ujjari Panchayat is one where no child is out of school, this outcome of "all children in school" has a direct and powerful correlation with ending child marriage and hence this linkage is vital.
- In another government strategy, Saathins are frontline counsellors or "friends of the community" who have knowledge of adolescent issues in the gram panchayat and play a key role in identifying potential child marriage cases and advocating to reduce these cases. Deputing Saathins as a dedicated cadre for adolescent empowerment and ending child marriage has given the issue importance and established them as focal points for dialogue with adolescent girls and their mothers and the larger community as well as follow up.



**At the community level:** At the heart of the child marriage dialogue is the community.

- Community members must be convinced about how child marriage impacts not just the adolescent girl/boy but the entire family.
- To stall intergenerational ill-effects of child marriage, the entire community of women, children, PRI members and opinion makers must be sensitised. They must be given the confidence to speak up and seek support to stop child marriage. This will bring about a social normative shift in which child marriage will begin to be seen as a negative practice to be avoided rather than being a foreordained custom.
- Involving Saathins and getting them to interact with households on the subject has been a sound step in this direction.

**At the school level:** School-based interventions bring direct outreach to the primary stakeholders.

- They make young people aware of their rights as well as the long-term consequences of such a decision while disseminating messages to parents as well.
- By conducting school-based interventions, the subject is being brought out in the open.
- Schools can go a step forward by creating help line numbers and encouraging youth to report cases and reach out for support. The government CHILDLINE 1098 must be popularised in districts where it is available.

**At the donor level:** As momentum picks up, there must be increased commitment on part of donor agencies, NGOs and panchayats to support the cause.





**UNICEF Rajasthan**

B-9 Bhawani Singh Lane, C-Scheme

Opp. Nehru Sahkar Bhawan, Jaipur 302 001

Rajasthan, India

Tel: +91 0141 222-2694, 222-2636, 409-0500

Email: [jaipur@unicef.org](mailto:jaipur@unicef.org)