

Preventing child marriage

through personal safety training
& skill building



Setting the context

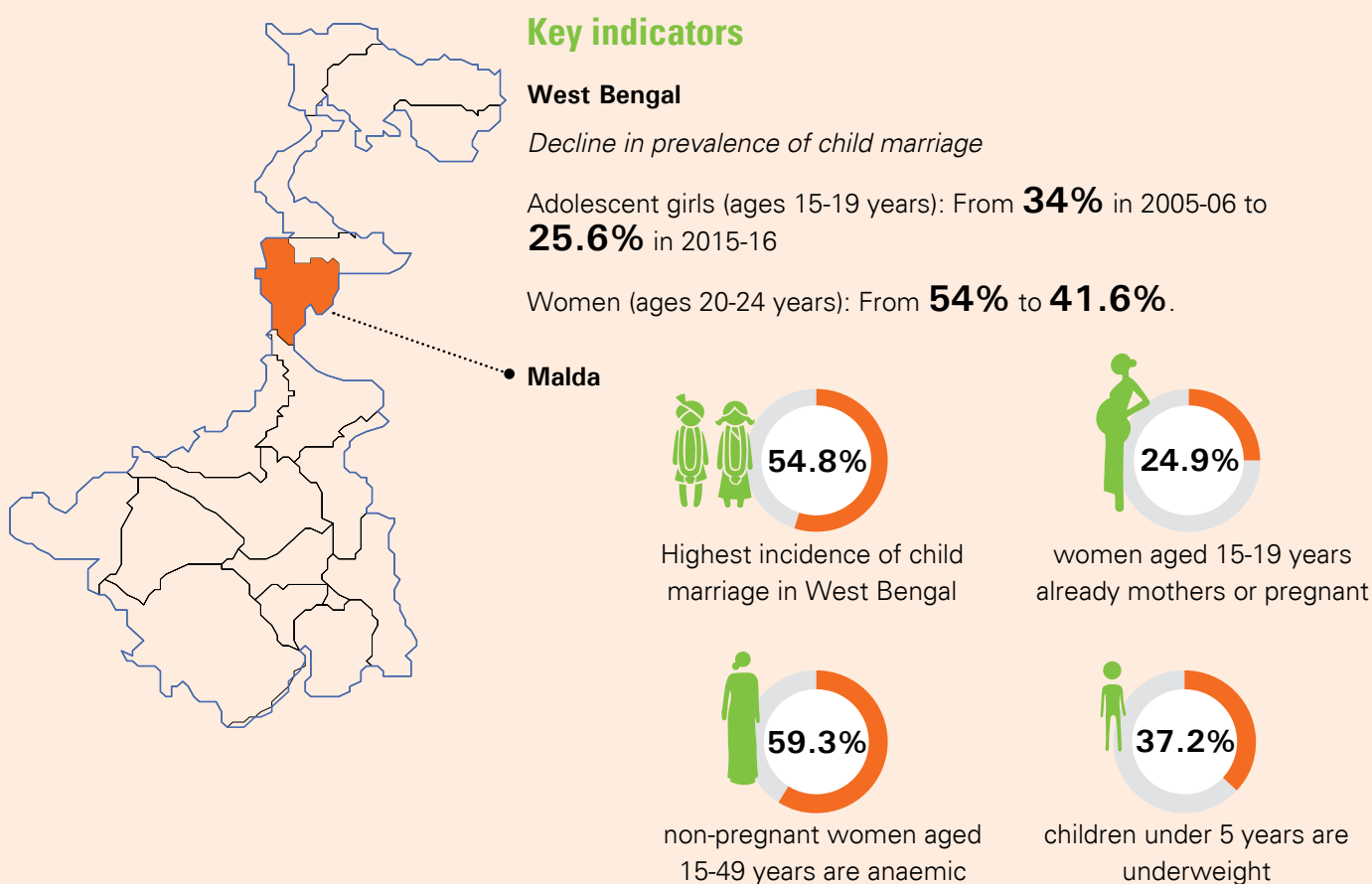
West Bengal is one of the states with the highest prevalence of child marriage in India. Child marriage is one of the key reasons for the high rates of early pregnancy, anaemia among women and underweight among children under five. Malda district has the highest incidence of child marriage in West Bengal.

The Government of West Bengal (GoWB) is consolidating efforts to bring together multiple stakeholders to enhance the coverage of child protection interventions. Building on the work initiated in 2007 by the Department of Women & Child Development and Social Welfare (DWCD&SW), the spotlight has been brought on adolescents and their most pressing issues, namely education and health. These critical indicators have lagged behind due to several reasons, the most significant being childhood marriages and school drops outs.

A joint effort initiated by UNICEF in Malda district with implementing partner Talash, concerned government departments and their frontline workers to implement innovative methods of engaging with adolescents produced overwhelming results. An environment of increased community awareness and rejection of child marriage, child trafficking and discontinuation of education has been created.

Geographical coverage

The programme was operational in nine blocks of Malda – Ratua 1, Ratua 2, Chanchal 1, Harischandrapur 1, Kaliachak 3, Old Malda, Habibpur, Gazole and English Bazar.



A district-based implementation strategy: Need of the hour

Adolescents are being empowered through participation in peer groups, self-defence trainings and legal literacy sessions in the adolescent empowerment programme in Malda district of West Bengal

In 2016, a multi-pronged initiative for adolescent empowerment called “Preventing Early Marriage through Personal Safety Trainings” was launched in Malda in collaboration with the implementing partner, Talash, the district administration, Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Cell and the District Social Welfare Officer (DSWO). The programme included training on person safety and wellbeing education for adolescent girls*, school-level legal literacy sessions and awareness activities through innovations like ‘games for change’ and inter-generational dialogue sessions with parents and community members.

District level stakeholders, frontline workers and community members and key influencers alike were galvanised to generate interest against child marriage and violence against young girls. Focusing on the role of the Village Level Child Protection Committee (VLCPC) in creating an enabling environment for adolescents was also a strategic move since it brought together key community level stakeholders for coordinated action.

* Personal safety tools developed by Talash encompass three aspects – self-defence particularly designed for girls; non-violent communication to understand, explore and connect with selves; and mindfulness practices to stay present in the moment.

Personal safety and wellbeing education is a unique pedagogy aimed at transforming individuals from powerlessness to empowerment, thus supporting them to connect with their inner power and regain control over their own lives. Personal safety and wellbeing education is imparted through three trainings modules viz. Staying safe, making safer choices; Our bodies, ourselves and the Leadership development process combined as Taleem.

Challenges

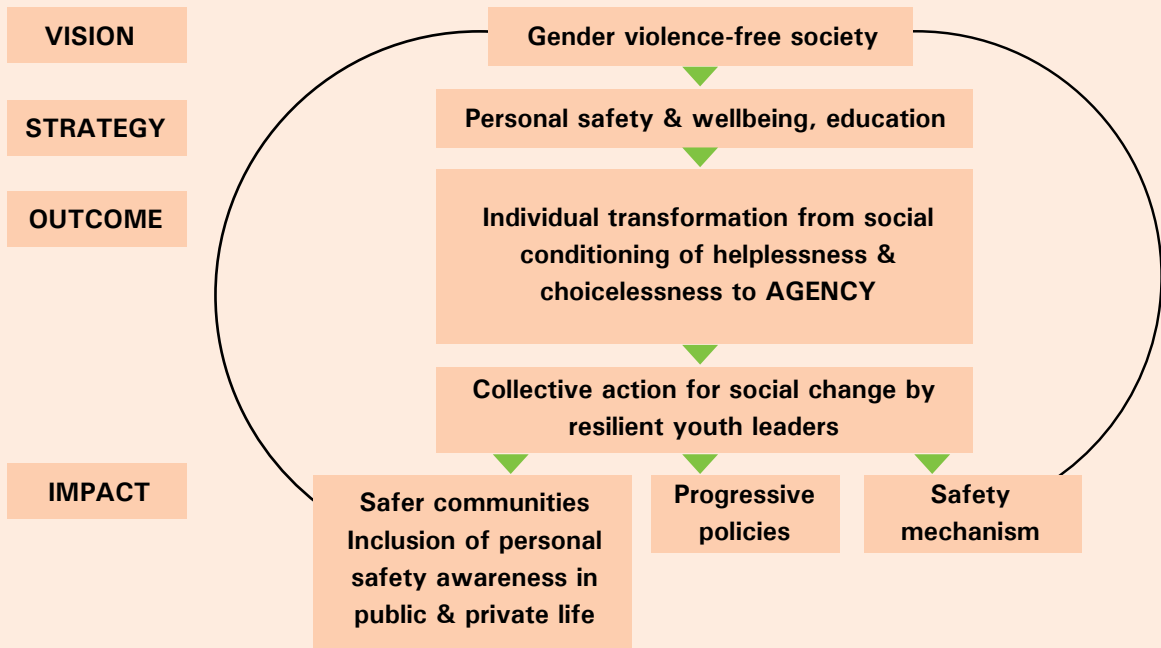
Deep-rooted belief systems about gender roles and social responsibilities

Lack of trust in agency of children and adolescents to take responsibility for their actions and make decisions

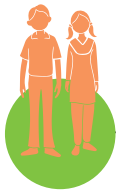
Lack of open dialogue with adolescent girls and denying them equal status



THEORY OF CHANGE



Key stakeholders



Adolescent girls and boys



Parents and teachers



Community members



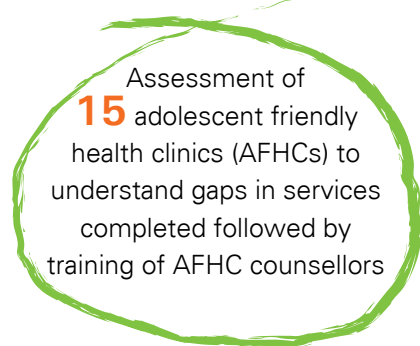
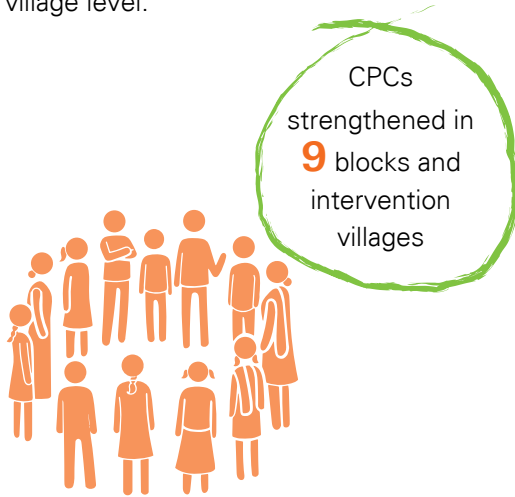
Service providers



Key activities

Adolescent related

Understanding current child protection issues using mapping exercises: VLCPCs mapped their villages to identify the most vulnerable children and also prepare village needs assessment reports on the status of children in difficult circumstances. They maintained records of children who had dropped out of school, migrated or had gone missing. Their monitoring and vigilance helped create awareness about child protection issues at the village level.



Ensuring administrative support

Regular review meetings were held with block and Panchayat level officials to ensure coherence and information sharing between departments. Exposure visits were also held with adolescents at block and district levels.

Unleashing inner strength through trainings: Trainings on personal safety and wellbeing education were held for adolescent girls so that they could defend themselves in potential situations of violence or abuse. They were also trained to recognise danger and differentiate between good touch and bad touch. The ten-hour training module called "Our Bodies, Our Selves" was imparted over two consecutive days for each batch of adolescent girls by certified trainers. Girls began to feel empowered to speak up and protect their interests.

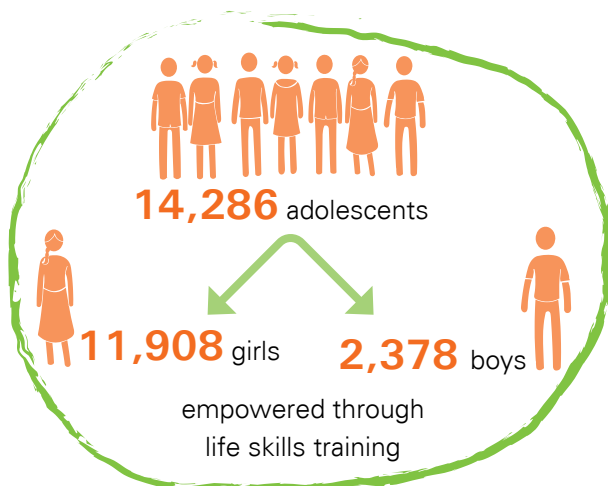


Photo Credit: © UNICEF/2019

Leaders in every way!

Deepika Paul is a bright and confident Class 9 student from RN Roy school, Habibpur block, Malda district. Now a trained group leader, she confidently leads girls' groups in her village and takes action for social change. As the leader, she initiates campaigns on child marriage and imparts knowledge and perspectives to her peers. Recently, Deepika along with her group has intervened in a child marriage of a girl in her neighborhood and also helped the girl to get admission in school. In future, Deepika wants to become a teacher and continue to be of service to her community.

Strengthening adolescent groups and building a cadre of group leaders:

Adolescents were collectivised into groups so as to formalise their presence at the community level and enhance their abilities to participate and raise their voice to become agents of social change. Both girls' and boys' groups were created and participated in VLCPC and Gram Sabha meetings where they negotiated for addressing their needs, kept track of vulnerable adolescents, raised awareness about child marriage and engaged in creative pursuits like theatre, singing, dancing and puppet shows.

Leadership qualities were also enhanced in the group life. Group leaders were selected and trained at the Gram Panchayat level in the 'Staying Safe, Making Safer Choices' module and subsequently imparted the knowledge to their fellow group members. Adolescent girls were thus enabled to take a stand and act as change makers in combating child marriage. Further, those group leaders with significant potential were trained in a dedicated round (two phases of three days each at the district level) on becoming grassroots change makers and full-time professional trainers on facilitating the life skills modules.



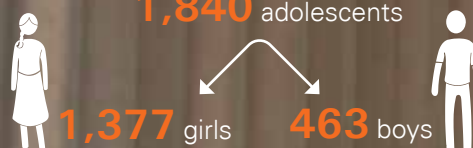
99 adolescent groups formed

1,751 members in adolescent groups

162 trainings held on 'Staying Safe, Making Safer Choices' module

92 trainings held on leadership development for

1,840 adolescents



Creating legal awareness through literacy clubs and exposure

visits: Schools established fully functional Legal Literacy Clubs and the members and nodal teachers underwent multiple trainings on constitutional rights and other legal issues related to children (against child marriage and violence against young girls) and vital skills such as facilitation and leadership skills. The trainings were conducted by UNICEF in collaboration with the district administration and the District Legal Services Authority (DLSA). The primary role of the Legal Literacy Club was to spread legal literacy and awareness in their schools and neighborhoods and act as a bridge between legal service providers and persons in need of legal services. Legal literacy games on the JJ Act, POCSO Act, PCMA and CLPRA* were developed and used in legal literacy trainings in schools.

Innovative legal awareness games (called 'games for change') were facilitated by peer leaders during the day long sessions in schools. Adolescent girls and boys were also taken on exposure visits to interact directly with government officials and learn about the legal system and existing schemes. This enhanced their awareness and confidence to counsel and provide information to community members.

Organizing community-based events

- Cycle rally organized on March 8, International Women's Day and led by Lipika Biswas, the first Indian solo cyclist to travel across 8 European countries in 2018. 170 adolescents participated in the rally.
- World Environment Day, World Day against Child Labour, Disability Day, Mental Health Day, Children's Day, National Legal Services Day, Anti-Tobacco Day were used as advocacy and mobilisation platforms.

3-phase TOTs on games for change reaching **480** adolescents

3,916 legal awareness sessions conducted in schools

Child Welfare Police Officers (CWPOs), Juvenile Justice Board (JJB) panel lawyers and Para-legal Volunteers (PLVs) trained on child protection related laws

No. of school through legal literacy reachout **4,694** adolescents

Increasing awareness about child marriage: Volunteers and peer leaders conducted awareness sessions about child marriage with adolescents at the village level in Anganwadi Centres (AWCs). Organizing and mobilising for these events was done by ICDS Supervisors and Anganwadi Workers (AWWs). These sessions helped adolescents become aware of the various aspects of child marriage.

6,769 awareness sessions conducted covering **2,03,070** people

Campaign for improving attendance and preventing dropouts initiated by the district administration

Around **1,000** religious leaders, including *qazis* and *purohits* (who officiate marriages in their respective religions) engaged and sensitised

* **JJ Act** - Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015
POCSO Act - Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012
PCMA - Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006
CLPRA - Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation Amendment) Act, 2016

924

parent-teacher awareness sessions conducted on child marriage

444

intergenerational dialogue sessions conducted

Parents as key stakeholders

Actively engaging parents and teachers: Awareness sessions (three hours each) were held for parents and teachers at village and school levels. Topics such as delaying marriage, child rights, and the negative effects of early marriage and childbirth were discussed in the sessions.

Starting intergenerational dialogue: Adolescents initiated dialogue with community members about pressing issues such as child marriage, girls dropping out of school, safety of girls etc. through participatory activities such as theatre, games and film screenings. Community members were thus motivated to become members of VLPCs while contributing their voice to promoting safety of girls and against child marriage.



I feel that my daughter has opened up because of the group meetings and we have a much deeper and special bond. I am very happy about this. She also receives self-defence training. I feel at ease now even if she goes somewhere alone as I feel assured that she can take good care of herself. I don't want to marry off my daughter. I want her to study as much as she wants and will do my best to support her.

Deepthi Paul

Mother of girl who participated in self-defence sessions
Habibpur block, Malda district



A game changer: The International Children's Film Festival

The International Children's Film Festival was the first of its kind entirely organized by adolescents in Malda. With guidance, a group of 30 adolescents took up the event management responsibilities including planning, invitation, anchoring, registration, logistical arrangements, documentation and meeting with the press. Their initiative and leadership was commendable!

The children who were organizers in the first two years underwent training on digital media and film-making and produced short films on various social issues themselves which were shown in the 2020 film festival and appreciated by all.



2017

4 blocks covered
1,133 adolescents



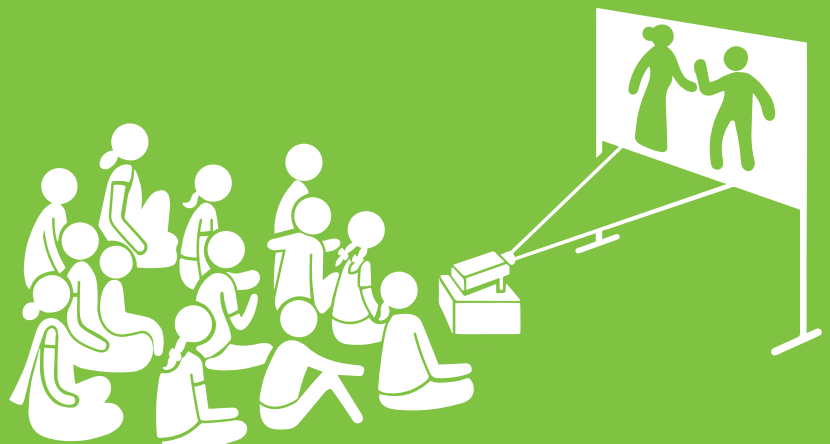
2018

9 blocks covered
2,275 adolescents



2019-20

At district level
310 adolescents



Sustainability measures

Five kinds of leadership skills have been developed in Malda for sustaining the efforts

- **Personal Safety Trainers:** enabled to facilitate self-defence trainings
- **Legal Literacy Leaders:** capable of facilitating sessions on child protection related laws through Games for Change
- **Creative & Communication Leaders:** capacitated in making communication materials and films
- **Performing Leaders:** skilled to perform plays and puppet shows
- **Community Leaders:** trained to take action for social change.

Way forward

The effectiveness of the adolescent empowerment programme has been acknowledged by stakeholders across the district, including government and community levels. Creating platforms and safe spaces for adolescents to express themselves and voice their concerns, equipping them with self-defence and life skills to become change makers, and enhancing their knowledge of child protection related laws have been the mainstays of the programme. Deeply entrenched community mindsets have begun to change and parents, teachers and key influencers are gradually understanding the negative impact of child marriage. The programme complements and strengthens the government's mandate and provides useful strategies to protect adolescent girls from violence and abuse and end child marriage.







for every child

UNICEF West Bengal

L&T Chambers, Fourth Floor 16

Camac Street, Kolkata 700017

West Bengal, India

Tel: +91 033 4015600

Fax: +91 033 4015601

Email: kolkata@unicef.org