

Radha

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– Seema, PACT worker



The Situation

Married off before the age of 18 years, young girls are denied a childhood, education, and opportunities for development. Instead, they often become socially isolated, and vulnerable to physical and sexual violence.

The Solution

Through Shakti, adolescent girls are connected to a peer network; supported and empowered to recognise risk and develop strategies to resist pressures of child marriage, dangerous work, and being pulled out of school; to access services; negotiate for themselves; and take steps towards achieving their goals.

Three years ago, at 13, Radha's parents got her engaged to a boy from a village near Jahangirpura, Madhya Pradesh. By 16, the boy's family began pressuring her to get married.

Radha did not want to marry at such a young age. She knew that if she did, she would bear the brunt of household chores in her husband's house. Moreover, she was not prepared to have children, something her in-laws would compel her to do. Despite having quit school, she wanted to resume her studies.

Radha had joined Shakti a few months ago, where, for the first time, she was encouraged to articulate her dreams and aspirations. With her Shakti group, she began engaging in conversations on rights and entitlements.

However, Radha's parents also began to pressure her to get married. On the advice of her Shakti group, Radha approached Seema, a community adult trained as a volunteer child protection worker through the PACT (Parents and Children against Trafficking and Harm) program, for help.

"I saw her determination to study," Seema said. "Marriage shouldn't be everything for a girl. Girls have dreams and aspirations too. Education makes you more aware, and if a girl is educated, she will be able to take better care of her family."

Distantly related to Radha's family, Seema could speak to Radha's parents and her fiancé's family, knowing they wouldn't accuse her of being an outsider meddling in their affairs. By explaining the risks early marriage posed for Radha, she was able to convince Radha's parents to wait until she turned 18 before they married her off.

But the boy's family refused to agree to this. When Seema spoke about Radha's wish to study, they promised to educate her once she was married to their son. But Seema knew it would be risky to allow this – the possibility that the in-laws would renege on their promise was very high.

Meanwhile, Radha worked up the courage to speak to her fiancé. When she explained her reasons for wanting to wait before they married, he accepted her wishes. They decided to wait until Radha turned 18 before they married.

Working together with a support person, Radha realised her strength, and the importance of raising her voice and standing up for herself.