

Working with government to build safe communities for children



The Situation

Identified by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj as one of the most backward districts, the proximity of Murshidabad to the international border with Bangladesh, also increases the risk of children to trafficking.

Silk-weaving and *beedi*-making are the two major occupations, making child labour a major protection issue.

The Solution

PACT trains adults from communities to be informal child protection workers – to share information, spread awareness and activate government services for the safety and development of children. Armed with information about rights and entitlements, these adults are better able to approach appropriate stakeholders to ensure child protection officers become active, and that families have access to needed services, thus making formal systems responsive.

In Bhagwangola, a rural community in West Bengal's Murshidabad district, two PACT workers, a Shakti activator and peer leader are now members of the block level child protection committee (BLCPC, under the Integrated Child Protection Scheme), working to keep children safer.

The proximity of Bhagwangola to the international border with Bangladesh and the fact that silk-weaving and *beedi*-making are the two major occupations in Murshidabad means trafficking and child labour are major protection issues.

Through their work over the past year, PACT women and Shakti girls began engaging with the Block Development Officer (BDO) of Bhagwangola. They are supported in their work by partner organisation Srishty for Human Society, which works in West Bengal on children, women and youth affairs. The BDO has attended monthly parent meetings on protection issues and help desks in the community, and also worked with PACT to stop child marriages and helped linked families to social protection schemes.

In May, PACT workers met the public distribution officer regarding forms for ration card applications in their community. But the officer refused to work with them in facilitating the application process. However, when this incident came to the BDO's attention, he called a meeting of 16-18 officials, where he introduced PACT members. He spoke of his own experience of working with PACT, and how their knowledge of the community supports his work as a BDO. He asked officials to fully support them in their work.

Working with local government authorities and making formal systems responsive is a critical aspect of ensuring that families have access to key child protection services. Through efforts such as these, women who have otherwise never engaged with any government system are able to seek accountability. This recognition has also motivated PACT workers and Shakti activators to reach more children through their work, and make the community safe for them.

When adults are supported to work on child protection issues, their communities become safer spaces for children.