

AUGUST 2015: STORIES FROM THE FIELD

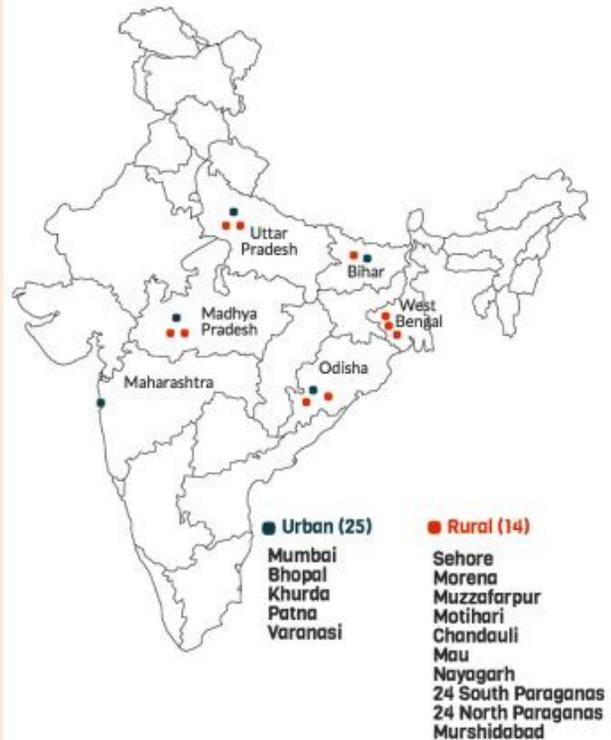
Aangan does prevention and response work in 6 states to promote safe communities for children. Across 300 households each in 39 communities, Aangan works with children who are vulnerable to hazardous or exploitative work, trafficking, early marriage, violence and abuse. They live in migrant communities, by garbage dumping grounds, railway tracks, and have little or no access to services like education and health. Aangan also works in 57 government shelter homes across these 6 states with children who have been rescued from serious harm.

Through its PACT program, Aangan trains volunteer barefoot community child protection workers to recognize, prevent and respond to harm. They work on issues such as early marriage, trafficking, violence and abuse, and hazardous work. They share information with adults in their community and mobilize support for action, and activate government systems and services to promote children's safety and protection.

Shakti is Aangan's program for adolescent girls. It aims to build resilience and knowledge, improve negotiation skills and link these girls to community and government.

Chauraha, Aangan's program for adolescent boys, aims to build their resilience, challenge perceptions of manhood, create and implement life plans, and strengthen their relationships with adults, community and government.

39 HOTSPOTS IN 6 STATES



International Youth Day – Celebrating the potential of the drivers of change

The United Nations' International Youth Day, celebrated every year on August 12, is an opportunity to highlight issues faced by young people around the world, and to recognise and promote the participation of young people in the development of society.

This year's theme – "Youth Civic Engagement" – was particularly relevant for children in the communities Aangan works in. Most of these children live in *bastis* which have little by way of access to basic services such as water supply, electricity, schools, hospitals or toilets. However, even in adverse circumstances, it is the youth who are the drivers of development and change, and play a vital role in shaping our society.

In August, over 500 children in 10 communities across Bihar, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal came together to discuss the issues pertaining to their community that they would like to tackle. Through role-plays, songs and debate, they spoke of the changes they would like to bring about in their neighbourhoods, and how they can use their skills and talents to do so.



Raghav*, 15, said his community would be much improved “if everyone kept their own homes clean”, and did not throw garbage everywhere. “It spreads diseases,” he explained. “If we stopped littering and made sure the water supply is not contaminated, a lesser number of people will fall ill, and we won’t be spending so much money on hospitals and medicines.”

Apart from issues such as cleanliness, hygiene and open defecation, children also spoke about the sexual harassment girls faced in their *basti*, gender equality, child marriage and the dowry system, and why education is of vital importance.

“A mother, a wife, and a sister are all first and foremost girls. No society can function without girls and women. Then, why are we so oppressed and considered lesser than men?” 15-year-old Pooja* argued.

Santosh*, 14, a youth representative on his school management committee, stressed on the importance of educating every child, regardless of gender. “Boys who don’t go to school end up loitering around and whiling away their time. Many of them start doing drugs. Education is important, most definitely for girls, but equally so for boys.”

Aangan’s Shakti and Chauraha programs aim to empower adolescent girls and boys, respectively, so that they can negotiate with adults and the government on issues that impact them and their communities. In the communities that Aangan works in, children have already negotiated to get streetlights installed, hand pumps repaired, out-of-school children enrolled in school, negotiated with government officials to improve sanitation services, and helped families gain access to government services and schemes.

Entire communities have benefitted through their actions. Initiatives such as these most effectively demonstrate the power of youth, and the change they are capable of.

WORK WITH PARENTS

Program: PACT

As primary caregivers, parents are best placed to support their children. If they are trained to be alert to the risks posed to children, and are able to access government schemes and services, communities become safer. Moreover, because of their own experiences, they are highly motivated to work on child protection issues. Those who have faced early marriage, worked in hazardous conditions, or been through abuse and violence feel strongly about ensuring that their children don’t have the same experiences.

Dreams for daughters

In the **Kothiya community in Patna, Bihar**, PACT workers conducted a parent circle (a monthly meeting where PACT workers share information and spread awareness on community issues with community adults) called Dreams for Daughters with 50 mothers from their community. The aim of this session was to focus on the factors that hinder girls’ development, and how mothers can be the bringers of powerful positive change in their daughters’ lives.

In communities such as Kothiya, adolescent girls are often forced to drop out of school in order to stay at home to take care of the house and their younger siblings while their parents go to work, or have to go out to work themselves to help support their families. As a result, these girls become isolated, making them vulnerable to early marriage, violence, abuse and trafficking.

This session aimed to discuss three main points: what were the mothers’ dreams when they were 11-15 years old, what dreams they have for their daughters now, and how they plan to accomplish these dreams.



Most of the mothers said that, as young girls, they had dreamt of marrying into good families where there was no domestic violence, fighting or discord, or going to school, but admitted that they had been unable to fulfil their dreams.

“I know what it is like to have broken dreams. What happened to me should not happen to my daughters,” one of the mothers at the circle said.

At the session, many of these women said they wanted to educate their daughters at least up to Class 10, so that they have better employment opportunities when they grow up, and are self-reliant, and not dependent on anyone. They also want their daughters to marry into good families so that they will not experience the hardships the mothers themselves faced.

The mothers discussed various ways of planning and ensuring that their hopes for their daughters came true. They agreed that opening a bank account and saving money for their daughters’ education was one of the surest ways to ensure a secure future for their girls. They also decided to work towards acquiring documents so that they can access government social protection schemes, like the Kanya Samridhi Yojana and the Kanya Vivaan Yojana, and strengthen their daughters’ futures.

Recognising risk and promoting children’s safety

According to a 2012 survey by the Health and Family Welfare Ministry, 28.6% boys aged between 15 and 19 years reported tobacco use and 15% were addicted to alcohol. Among girls in the same age group, 5.5% used tobacco while 4% were addicted to alcohol¹.

In **Mumbai’s Reay Road** community, PACT workers and Shakti and Chauraha activators, through their conversations with community adults, identified drug and substance abuse as major child safety issues in their community.

The high prevalence of substance abuse in the community results in certain areas of the *basti* becoming extremely unsafe for women and children due to the presence of “*addas*”. Moreover, it severely impacts the education of children involved in drug and substance abuse as their attendance at school is affected, with many eventually dropping out. They also begin associating with high risk peers, and become vulnerable to getting involved in criminal activities.



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Recognising the need to tackle this issue, the community’s PACT workers organised a parent circle where they invited Kripa Foundation, an NGO that works to rehabilitate people suffering from alcohol, drug and substance abuse. 40 adults from the community attended this circle.

1. Substance abuse rising amongst Indian children, dnaindia.com, October 20, 2014

The resource person from Kripa Foundation described the various types of addiction and the risks and vulnerabilities associated with them. He shared the details of the organisation's de-addiction services, including counselling, medication and residential treatment. Two people who had previously been addicted also shared their stories of how they had successfully become rehabilitated through this programme.

Community adults were also informed of other organisations that provide treatment for substance abuse like Don Bosco and KEM, both of which provide treatment free of cost or at a nominal fee, and would be more affordable options for the people from the community.

Across 6 states in August, PACT workers conducted 32 parent circles, which were attended by 1,384 community adults

WORK WITH CHILDREN

Programs: Shakti and Chauraha

Negotiating for rights and entitlements

Through the Shakti program, adolescent girls are connected to girl safety networks, and are encouraged to articulate their aspirations, supported to recognise risk, empowered to negotiate for their rights and entitlements, and chart steps for a secure future.



Aarti*, 14, lives in a community in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh. Her family belongs to the backward and marginalised Musahar community, and is quite poor. Though both her parents work, Aarti too has to work, sorting coal at the nearby railway station to support her family's meagre income.

Neither Aarti nor her three younger siblings have ever been to school, and her older sister was married off early, before she turned 18 years old. With their poor financial background, her mother Munni Devi was now looking to marry off her

daughters soon to ease the family's straitened circumstances, and had begun looking for matches for Aarti.

Aarti did not want to marry at such a young age, aware of the difficulties her older sister was facing. However, she knew her mother would not listen to her objections.

When PACT worker Kalavati found out that Munni Devi had begun looking for potential husbands for Aarti, she and Shakti activator Suman visited Aarti's house to negotiate with Aarti's mother. They reminded her of the difficulties her eldest daughter was facing, and also spoke about the health risks from early pregnancy for girls like Aarti if they were married off early.

Aarti too spoke about how she did not want to marry early, or work sorting coal at the station, which she was doing because she had no choice. Instead, she wanted to take vocational training in sewing and tailoring so that she could learn a useful skill and become independent, and support herself and her family more effectively.

Gradually, Munni Devi was convinced and agreed not to marry off Aarti or her other daughters before they

turned 18 years old. PACT workers then helped Aarti gain admission for the vocational training in the nearby school. Aarti also joined the Shakti program in her community, where she is now interacting with other girls and creating safety and support networks for herself.

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

In August, 709 girls aged between 12 and 18 years joined the Shakti program in communities and schools across 6 states. 245 hours were spent in training 165 Shakti activators to support them in their work with young and adolescent girls. 153 Shakti circles were conducted, and 169 girls completed their safety plan books.

Conversations on care-giving

Chauraha aims to build resilience in adolescent boys, connect them to mentors and a positive peer group, help them challenge traditional notions of masculinity, and support them to identify protection risks such as violence, abuse and hazardous work.

In August, adolescent boys from the Chauraha program in three communities in **West Bengal – Bhagwangola, Domkal, and Hasnabad** – discussed the theme of care-giving in a session entitled “Caring for the family”. For this activity, each boy was given a balloon on which he was asked to draw a face, and then treat the balloon as a child in his care for a week.

At first, the boys resisted the idea of having to take care of a ‘child’, saying the role of the caregiver was the domain of women and girls, and not boys. However, they agreed to do the activity.



At their next Chauraha session a week later, the boys shared their experiences of having to take care and be responsible for a child in the form of the balloon. Most of them said that they had been constantly preoccupied by thoughts of the balloon, and wondered if the balloon was safe. They correctly correlated this to how parents are constantly thinking of their children and their welfare. They realised the magnitude of the responsibility of taking care of another person.

Some of the boys said that when they had to leave the house to go to school, they entrusted the balloon to their mothers, whom they identified as the person most capable of taking care of it. Through this, they also realised that taking care of a child was not an easy job, and neither should it be a woman-centric job because both parents had equal responsibility towards their children.

Adolescent boys living in such communities are expected to live up to traditional notions of masculinity, which see boys and men as providers for their families, while the role of the caregiver is consigned to the women. Activities such as this help them perceive the prevalent gender disparity and challenge these perceptions.

In August, 250 new boys joined the Chauraha program across 6 states. 44 Chauraha circles were held, and 92 boys completed their Chauraha Go books.

WORK WITH GOVERNMENT

Programs: PACT, Shakti and Chauraha

Empowering adolescent girls by linking them to vocational training

The Musahar community, one of the lowest groups among the Dalits, is one of the most backward and segregated communities in the country. Considered outcastes, they are a closed community, rarely interacting with anyone from outside. As a result, they are also extremely marginalised.



In August, after two months of meetings, negotiations and exposure visits, PACT workers in the **Bharlai basti** in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, linked five girls from the Musahar community to vocational training courses in the nearby missionary school. These girls, aged between 13 and 16 years, have never been to school or had any access to formal education. Instead, they worked as child labour at the nearby railway station, sorting coal for a meagre daily wage. Consequently, they are extremely vulnerable to early marriage, violence and abuse, and the threat of being trafficked.

These girls will receive vocational training in sewing and tailoring, which will improve their employment prospects and also give them the means to become independent.

Additionally, PACT workers have also linked three other PACT workers, who belong to and worked exclusively within the Musahar community, to the local government hospital, so that they can access reliable medical services for the people of their community.

Over the past two months, PACT workers have done much work with the Musahars. Five children have been linked to school, and four early marriages have been prevented so far. As a result, the three Musahar community PACT workers are gradually becoming aware of the benefits of working with the other PACT mothers in Bharlai to tackle issues affecting their *basti*. With increased interaction, the PACT workers hope to access government social protection schemes and services for the people of this community.

Recognising and addressing the needs of children with disabilities

PACT workers from the **Adalatgunj community in Patna, Bihar**, who also work in the adjoining Kamla Nagar community, visited the government hospital and learnt of the disability pension scheme, a government social protection scheme for disabled people. Under this scheme, individuals aged up to 65 years who have a disability of more than 40% and hold a disabled person's certificate are entitled to receive benefits of Rs. 300 per month from the government.

Recognising the invaluable support such a scheme would provide for people from the community, they discussed it at their parent circle. Thereafter, eight disabled adults and children were assisted in applying for their disability certificate. These included three orthopaedic-handicapped adults, two orthopaedic-handicapped children, two children with speech impairment, and one adult with visual impairment.

They will start receiving their benefits from September.

Through integrative, inclusive approaches and by building the capacity of families, parents can be supported to meet the care and protection needs of their children.

Strengthening networks with government

In August, PACT workers from five communities in Odisha: Baaurishahi, Niladri Vihar, Saliasahi, Chunokoli, and Patharbandha, held meetings with various stakeholders such as the District Child Protection Officer (DCPO), the Child Welfare Committee (CWC), the police, and Childline to introduce and update them about their work as a group of voluntary barefoot child protection workers in their communities.

These stakeholders form a vital part of the child protection network. Through regular and sustained interaction with these stakeholders, PACT members can hold authorities accountable for ensuring that child protection mechanisms are functioning, and also ensure that proper government systems and services are activated.

The stakeholders recognised the work done by the PACT members, acknowledging that since they live in the communities, they are best placed to highlight and address child safety issues. They also assured the PACT workers their full support in tackling these issues and working on individual cases.

In August, 159 PACT core group meetings were held across 6 states. Through PACT workers' efforts, 1,655 children benefitted from various government social protection schemes

**The names of children have been changed to protect their identity.*