

# Aarti

*Aarti found support from PACT workers in her community, who helped her negotiate with her mother to stop her early marriage*



Aarti, 14, lives in a *basti* 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, nor 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.

## The Situation

47% of girls in India are married before the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2013). As a girl approaches adolescence, she is pressured to drop out of school, and confined to her home or sent out to work, putting her at grave risk of early marriage, hazardous work, physical and sexual violence, and trafficking. The longer a girl stays in school, the lesser the threat of early marriage, which gives her access to opportunities for personal empowerment, which in turn positively impacts her family and community.

## 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.