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.

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.

Building Bridges, empowering communities

PACT empowers adult women to be alert and aware of child protection issues, and to act to keep children in their community safe from harm. Working with government authorities to access rights and services is a key aspect of creating a safety network for children.

In Bhagwangola, West Bengal

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 in the community. The district has also been identified by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj as one of the most backward districts.

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.

In Hasnabad, South 24 Parganas district, PACT workers have approached the Child Development Project Officer (CDPO) so that they too can be part of their BLCPC – thus ensuring that this body is fulfilling its envisioned role of making children safer.

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

In May, 95 PACT core group meetings were held in 39 communities across the six states where the program has been implemented. In addition, 104 activation meetings were conducted, where PACT workers met with government officials to activate government schemes and services.

Preventing Child Marriage

According to the Unicef 2012 report on child marriage in India, Bihar has the highest incidence of child marriage in the country at over 68%. By increasing alertness to the issue, and taking action to prevent harm, PACT members are working to change this staggeringly high number.

In Motihari, Bihar

an alert and resourceful PACT worker prevented the early marriages of two teenage girls in the community.

The district of Champaran East has been identified by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj as one of the most backward districts. Sharing a border with Nepal in the north, it has also been identified as a hotspot for trafficking. In the Kotwa community in Motihari, one of the poorest and most remote districts in north-western Bihar, girls are traditionally married before they turn 18.

Aware of the dangers that child marriage poses for young girls, including the consequent risks of violence and sexual abuse at the hands of their partner and the threat of being trafficked under the guise of marriage, PACT workers in Kotwa have been having discussions focusing on child marriage at parents circles in the past few months.

They also took the opportunity provided by community help desks for birth certificates and other important documents to determine the correct ages of girls in their community, and identify those aged 12 and above who are vulnerable to early marriage. Informal meetings and discussions were held with their families to get a sense of the girls’ situation at home and to determine whether they were at risk of being married.

When PACT worker Pramila Devi learned that the marriages of 17-year-old Chuni and 15-year-old Anjali were being arranged, she immediately contacted their families. With the support of I.D.E.A. (Institute for Developmental Education and Action), our partner organisation in the community, Pramila spoke to the families about the risks of early marriage for their girls. She also gave them details about the government schemes they could access instead, such as the Kanya Vivah Yojana.

After advocating with the families at several meetings and discussions, preparations for both marriages were stopped.

149 new girls who joined the Shakti program and 9 new boys who joined Chauraha across 6 states in May have been identified as being at risk of child marriage, based on our vulnerability assessment tool. Child marriage is a major protection risk, and was discussed in many of the 39 parents circles held in May across the six states that Aangan works in.
WORK WITH CHILDREN
Programs: SHAKTI and CHAURAHA

Stopping child marriage with help from a Shakti support system

Often locked up at home ‘for their safety’, and strongly under pressure to marry, adolescent girls face extreme isolation, which only serves to exacerbate risk. Through Shakti, girls are connected to a supportive group of peers, start articulating their fears and aspirations and are supported to make personal safety plans, taking them in the direction of a safer future.

In Chaudauli, Uttar Pradesh,

Alert and resourceful Shakti activators prevented 15-year-old Lalita’s father from marrying her off.

Chaudauli has been identified as one of the country’s most backward districts by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj. Due to severe poverty and the entrenched caste system, trafficking for child labour including bonded labour, is a common phenomenon. The prevalence of child marriage is also a serious issue, with nearly a quarter of the female population (24.1%) married before 18, according to the Annual Health Survey (2010-11).

Entrenched poverty and no employment opportunities were compelling Lalita’s father to arrange her marriage and reduce the financial pressure on the household.

Through Shakti circles, bi-weekly meetings of adolescent girls, to support them to recognize risk, identify support persons and make personal safety plans, Lalita shared that she not ready to marry, but had no say in the decision.

With the support of the community’s PACT workers and Aangan facilitators, the Shakti group began negotiating with Lalita’s father and family through multiple conversations to call off her marriage plans. After 15 days of tireless negotiations, their determination won out. Lalita’s father agreed not to marry her off.

Further negotiation and efforts resulted in convincing her father to send Lalita to the Kasturba Gandhi residential school, a government run scheme aiming to provide educational facilities for girls from SC, ST, OBC, minority and marginalised communities, and families below the poverty line in educationally backward blocks of India. Here, her education, nutrition, and day-to-day living will be taken care of.

Through the Shakti group’s efforts, Lalita is safe from the risks of early marriage, trafficking, violence and abuse. She will also be able to continue her education and make plans for a safer future.

In May, 462 new girls aged between 12 and 18 years joined the Shakti program across 37 communities in 6 states. 116 Shakti circles were conducted, and 418 girls completed their personal safety plan books. 190 hours were also spent in training and meeting Shakti activators to support them in working with adolescent girls.

Making plans for a safer future

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. At bimonthly Chauraha circles, over 300 new boys who joined the program across six states last month will be encouraged to articulate their aspirations, and make plans for a safer future.

In May 2015, the Chauraha program was launched in three new communities – Rajghat and Bharlai in Uttar Pradesh, and Kaushal Nagar in Bihar.
In Deegha, Bihar,

the session on “Padhai aur Dheya” (education and goals), deeply impacted 15-year-old Rahul.

The youngest of four siblings, Rahul failed his matriculation examination last year, and dejected, decided to work instead of continuing his education. He was already working on and off in wedding celebrations and other events held in areas nearby. He began spending time with new friends, often using drugs, gambling and getting involved in fights. He became distant from his family, who began worrying about the negative peer group he was associating with.

In January, Rahul joined Chauraha, where he was encouraged to articulate his interests and goals. Through discussions at bimonthly group circles, he became alert to the risks of work, and found the support to again pursue his educational aspirations. He also learnt of government schemes he could access.

Rahul began to think of going back to school to resume his studies, something his peers and mentors encouraged. With his facilitators, Rahul charted a life plan and decided to give his matriculation exam again this year. He decided to take help from his friends and peers who had already successfully passed their exams, and also began to open up to his family once again.

By being supported in his aspirations to study, Rahul now has a chance for a better future.

Across 6 states, 302 new boys joined Chauraha in May. 43 sessions were conducted, and 160 boys completed the Chauraha Go Book.

WORK WITH GOVERNMENT

Programs: PACT, SHAKTI and CHAURAHA

Activating services to address safety issues

As part of their Shakti and Chauraha journey, girls and boys take up issues that affect their community, and negotiate with government authorities to access services that can address the problem. This helps them develop the confidence to engage with local government authorities (such as the police, ward officers, etc.) and community leaders to drive change for themselves and their communities. Working as a collective, they reach out to people they would previously find it unthinkable to have the courage to speak to.

With the country in the grip of a blistering heat wave, Shakti girls in Bharlai, UP, decided to tackle their community’s chronic water problem as their community project.

Bharlai is an urban basti in Varanasi. It adjoins the Shivpuri railway station on one side and is located just off the highway from the airport to Varanasi. There is also a truckers’ stop, where goods are loaded and unloaded. The community’s proximity to these places puts its inhabitants, especially girls and women, at risk of being trafficked.

Bharlai has two hand-pumps, but these often stop working, or break down. The lack of a proper water supply is a child safety issue because it means children, especially young girls, are usually sent to collect water, often at a considerable distance from their homes. This leaves them unsupervised for long periods of time, putting their safety at risk.
Moreover, they cannot go to school regularly, and many children drop out. In fact, through our work, we have found that nearly 40% of children in the community are not in school.

Most importantly, the lack of a proper water supply renders the toilets in the community unusable, forcing girls and women to go to the fields or other open areas, putting them at high risk of sexual harassment.

Recognising the manifold risks and problems arising from the lack of a proper water supply, girls from the Bharlai Shakti group wrote an application to the ward member, asking for new hand-pumps or to have the existing hand-pumps re-bored. They collected signatures of over 100 people and met the ward member, presenting the letter to him.

When the ward member learnt of their community’s situation, he immediately informed the municipal corporation of this. Within four-five days, the hand-pumps in the community were re-bored.

Across 6 states, 302 new boys joined Chauraha in May. 43 sessions were conducted, and 160 boys completed the Chauraha Go Book.

Linking children to school

In May, efforts to enrol children who are unsupervised, dropouts, or those who have never had any form of education into school, continued in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

Through parents circles (monthly meetings where PACT workers share information and spread awareness on community issues with community adults, especially those regarding child safety), community projects and help desks (held once a month so that community members can directly interface with government authorities to facilitate access to services), PACT workers, Shakti girls and Chauraha boys enrolled 369 children from five communities in Bihar and four communities in Uttar Pradesh.

Children who have dropped out of school or never attended are usually unsupervised. Many are confined to their homes and responsible for taking care of their house and younger siblings, or are sent out by their parents to work to supplement their family’s meagre incomes. As a result, they are vulnerable to child marriage, hazardous work, violence and abuse, and being trafficked.

The longer a child stays in school, the lower these risks. Education gives children access to opportunities for personal empowerment and financial independence, enabling them to plan for a safer future. This in turn positively impacts their family and community. A network of peers, teachers and mentors makes them better equipped to negotiate for themselves.

Accessing social protection schemes

Through parents circles and help desks, PACT supports community members in accessing correct information and linking vulnerable families to government social protection schemes and services. In the process, they ensure government mechanisms regarding child safety and protection issues are in place and properly functioning.

Domestic Workers Welfare Scheme

In Reay Road, Mumbai, at a parents circle, where PACT workers meet community adults to discuss issues affecting their basti, one of the major problems identified was that many children were left unsupervised because both their parents had to work to support the household. This left the children at major risk of dropping out of school, becoming involved in substance abuse and violence with their peers, or starting work at an early age. These factors further put such children at increased risk of hazardous or exploitative work and being trafficked.

PACT workers identified domestic workers – both men and women who work in other households, cooking, washing utensils, cleaning, etc. – as the group most in need of support and assistance from the government. Through their Aangan facilitator, they identified the Domestic Workers Welfare Scheme of the Labour Department that would provide financial support to these families.

Accompanied by the Aangan facilitator, PACT worker Shraddha Singh met the Assistant Labour Officer, who shared details and information on the schemes.
In Aishbag, Anna Nagar, Chhola, Ishwar Nagar, PC Nagar and Jahangirpura communities, Madhya Pradesh, 138 children and around 100 families registered for ID cards under the Samagra Samajik Suraksha Mission.

PACT workers from these four communities invited their ward members to attend community help desks, where officials shared information about this project and the available schemes.

Many people in these communities don't have key identification documents, like a birth certificate, Aadhar card, voter ID, labour ID and a ration card, which are vital in accessing government social protection schemes. Apart from being proof of a person's existence, the birth certificate is also crucial in safeguarding children from trafficking and abduction, as it is a critical document in filing a missing complaint. Proof of age is essential to ensure that a child is not prematurely deprived of the protection s/he is entitled to by law in areas such as marriage, sexual exploitation, work and criminal justice. Proper documentation is also an important form of government recognition, and vulnerable families and children are no longer invisible.

Through the Samagra ID, obtaining these important documents will become easier. Most importantly, community members will be able to identify which of the 16 schemes of the municipal corporation (for education, ration, pensions, marriage, etc.) their family and individual members are eligible to apply for. For instance, it can determine which education scheme will provide the maximum funds as scholarship for a child’s education. Community members can use the database as a record of information on the schemes they have applied for and the benefits due to them.

**Sukanya Samridhi Yojana**

Poverty is one of the main reasons families in the community are forced to stop sending their children to school. Isolated and confined to their homes, girls are forced to take responsibility for the house and younger siblings at an early age, and are highly vulnerable to early marriage.

The longer a girl stays in school, the lesser the threat of early marriage as she is connected to a network. In addition, it offers access to opportunities for personal empowerment and financial independence, which positively impact her family and community.

Recognising this, PACT mothers in five communities across three states – Bihar, Maharashtra and Odisha – activated the Sukanya Samridhi Yojana, a special deposit scheme for the girl child, where funds can be accessed for higher education or marriage when she turns 18.

A total of 38 girls were registered under this scheme in Kaushal Nagar and Kothiya in Bihar, Wadala in Mumbai, and Niladri Vihar and Patharbandha in Odisha.

18 girls from Mumbai’s Reay Road community already registered for the Sukanya Samridhi Yojana last month.

**Jan Dhan Yojana**

In Bauri Shahi, Odisha, at a community help desk organised by PACT workers, 460 families registered for a zero balance savings account under the Jan Dhan Yojana.

For families living in bastis – urban or rural – a bank account has several crucial benefits, the foremost being government recognition. A bank account is identification and proof that these families live in the communities. They are no longer invisible.

A bank account makes it easier and safer to save money. Funds from government social protection schemes are directly linked to this account. In addition, the Jan Dhan Yojana also provides the account holder life and accident cover.

When vulnerable families are linked to government social protection schemes, children become safer.