Meera

"Hurdles are a test. Cross them and you become stronger."

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.

As Meera, 54, walked towards Priyanka's house, she prepared herself for the conversation she was about to have with the 15-year-old's family. What opposition would she face? What would convince the family to suspend marriage plans for Priyanka?

Over 30 years ago, Meera had run away from home in similar circumstances. At 17, her family was forcing her to get married. Meera was in love with a boy from a different caste – out of bounds in the rigid caste system she had grown up in. Afraid of being locked up at home, she had quietly left. When she returned two weeks later, she married the boy and was disowned by both families. Cut off from family and friends, restricted to the house by her new husband, Meera felt helpless. "That's why I want to build courage in other girls, so they are not alone."

Meera is part of PACT (Parents and Children Against Trafficking and Harm), a group of volunteer community child protection workers. She also facilitates Aangan's Shakti program, where young girls are empowered to overcome personal challenges and negotiate for themselves. "When I read the Shakti curriculum, I could see my life in its pages. It helps girls talk about their problems. If I had someone to go to at that age, I would have made different choices."

Priyanka turned to Meera when she heard that her marriage was being arranged. "I didn't know anything about it – my cousin told me I was to be married. I was scared of what might happen, so I went to Meera Dadi," she said. Forced to drop out of school at 14, Priyanka was confined to spending her day doing household chores, until she joined Shakti.

Having lived in the same community, Meera knew and understood Priyanka's family dynamics – her grandmother and uncle were the key decision makers who would have to be convinced not to go ahead with wedding plans. Over multiple meetings, Meera spoke to them about the risks of child marriage and the government schemes they could access instead, such as the Kanya Vivah Yojana. She cited her own example, sharing how she had supported her three daughters to complete their education and then to make a decision about getting married.

By supporting Priyanka to talk to her family about her hopes and aspirations, and advocating directly with her family members, the wedding was stopped.

"Hurdles are a test. Cross them and you become stronger," said Meera.