

Saira

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As 14-year-old Saira walked back from school in her *basti* in Mumbai, she was plagued with worry for her friend Rubina. That morning, Rubina had told her she would be engaged in a few days to a man from a village in Uttar Pradesh. His family did not want dowry, relieving her mother, a single parent, of the financial burden.

The Situation

47% of girls in India are married off before the age of 18. Maharashtra, one of the worst states with regard to child marriage, is concealing the true number of child marriage cases, a Government of India audit has found. Maharashtra reported only 45 cases of child marriages between 2010 and 2013. In reality, more than 1,000 girls between 10 and 14 years, and 23,000 boys and girls between 15 and 19 years, got married between 2012 and 2014.

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.

Saira was worried – for her friend, her safety and what the future would hold. She was also afraid of what people in the *basti* would say about her, and that her father, an alcoholic, would get into a rage. "I came home and thought: *Should I do anything at all?* Then I decided that I must. I felt that just like I was looking out for her, someone else would be there for me," she said.

Saira mobilised a support group – nine girls from school and her Shakti circle, and one of the girls' mothers – and went to Rubina's house. There, they spoke to Rubina's mother, urging her not to get her daughter engaged, to be alert to the dangers of trafficking and the risks to her safety. Facing resistance, they also spoke of how it was against the law.

Rubina's mother said she was concerned for her safety – that when she went to work in a *karkhana*, Rubina remained unsupervised. The girls asked her to send Rubina to Shakti circles, to help her make safety plans and be better aware of risks.

The girls determinedly remained in Rubina's house until her mother agreed. They now plan to visit Rubina every few days, and to continue to urge her mother to allow her to join Shakti.

"I have the strength to go up and talk to people now. I know that I am not alone," said Saira, who, until a few months ago, was confined to her house and caring for her four younger siblings. After joining Shakti, she was supported to negotiate with her father, join afternoon school, and is now actively taking steps to ensure that other girls are safer in her community.

"Apne jaise umar ki ladki hain, toh maine socha kuch karna hain. Bahut saare friends bhi hain, toh mein akele nahin rahi (She is a girl like me, my age. So I thought I must do something. And I have many friends now, so I'm not alone anymore)," she said.