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.

Raising awareness on child protection issues

In October, in the Deegha and Lohanipur communities in Patna, Bihar, PACT workers conducted parent circles where they discussed and shared information on the four major child protection issues – early marriage, child labour and hazardous work, violence and abuse, and trafficking – with around 50 adults, mostly women, in each of their communities. They also spoke about how these safety risks affect their children’s dreams and hopes.
Parent circles are monthly meetings where PACT volunteer child protection workers share information and spread awareness on community issues with adults, especially those regarding child safety. Many adults living in the bastis are often unaware of these child protection risks, or of the laws relating to them.

At the meeting, many of the women spoke of how the decision-making process rested almost exclusively with the men of the household, including on issues such as when to marry off girl children and when the children must be sent out to work to help the family’s finances.

Many of the women at the parents meeting shared that they themselves had been married off well before the age of 18 years, and that they did not know that child marriage was a criminal offence. Others spoke of how they would try and ensure that henceforth, no child is married before the age of 18 years, or shared stories of early marriage or child labour situations they had prevented.

Many of the adults also agreed that educating their children would help them realise their dreams and ensure a secure future for them. They praised the Shakti and Chauraha programs (for adolescent girls and boys respectively) for supporting their children through safety networks.

When community adults become alert and aware of the threats to children’s safety, the bastis become safer spaces for children.

In October, PACT workers conducted 29 parent circles across 39 communities in 6 states, which were attended by 1,156 community adults
WORK WITH CHILDREN

Programs: Shakti and Chauraha

Promoting equal opportunities for girls’ education

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.

In Odisha’s Kerandatangi community, Shakti activators helped 15-year-old Reshma* acquire textbooks so that she could regularly go to school.

Reshma is the youngest child of a large family and her parents work as daily wage labourers. She loves going to school and does very well at her studies. She and one of her brothers both study in Class 10.

However, Reshma’s parents are very poor, and cannot afford to buy the textbooks. So, they requested the teacher at the Naupada school, where the siblings study, for books for their children. But the teacher only arranged for one set of books and gave them to Reshma’s brother, who is not as interested in his studies as Reshma is.

Since Reshma had no textbooks, her parents made her stay at home and do the housework while they were out. She could only attend school on the days that her brother didn’t.

When Shakti activators from the community learnt about Reshma’s situation, they reached out to alumni from the school, and procured a set of textbooks for her. Now, Reshma attends school everyday and is able to diligently continue with her studies.

Through Shakti, Reshma found support in her safety network to work towards a safer future for herself.

In October, 488 girls aged between 12 and 18 years joined the Shakti program in communities and schools across 6 states. 205 hours were spent in training 174 Shakti activators to support them in their work with young and adolescent girls. 169 Shakti circles were conducted, and 312 girls completed their safety plan books.
Addressing child marriage at the community level

As part of their Shakti and Chauraha journey, adolescent girls and boys take up community projects to tackle issues that affect their safety or their community as a whole. They engage and negotiate with local government authorities, such as the police and ward officers, to access the services that can address the problem. This not only helps them develop the confidence to reach out to authorities, but also allows them to mobilise the community and bring about positive change.

In the Koniya basti in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, child marriage is a major protection risk for children, especially for adolescent girls. By the time they are 15 or 16 years old, most of the girls in this community who should be in school are instead engaged. And the parents of the girls who aren't engaged begin to look for suitable grooms for their daughters. Moreover, marriage season starts soon after the Navratri festival in October, and many adolescent girls in this community are married off during this time.

Not only are these girls highly vulnerable to domestic violence and health complications from early pregnancy, they are also at high risk of trafficking under the guise of marriage. Many parents don’t hesitate to marry their daughters off to older men from outside the community simply because the groom’s family offers to bear all expenses for the wedding, and don’t ask for dowry. In such cases, the parents very rarely hear from their daughter once she is married and has left with her husband.

Keeping this in mind, Shakti girls in Koniya, with the support of the PACT volunteer child protection workers, took up the task of spreading awareness about child marriage as their community project. They created a core group of 15 people, including the five PACT workers, six Shakti girls, three women from
Encouraging communication to strengthen support networks

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 the Deegha and Lohanipur communities in Patna, Bihar, Chauraha boys discussed the importance of communication with family members as a vital step in their journey to self-empowerment.

Afraid of being seen as weak, adolescent boys are often unable to share their problems and issues with family members. Repressing their feelings and being unable to articulate or communicate makes them highly vulnerable to child protection risks such as child labour, violence and abuse because they are unlikely to share and seek support for experiences that negatively impact them, for instance bullying or being coerced into actions due to peer pressure.

In this session, boys identified three people in their families: one who supported them, one who remained neutral, and one who not only never supported them, but also held them back and discouraged them from achieving their hopes and dreams. They then wrote letters to these family members, conveying their feelings towards them. They appreciated the support they had received so far, and requested that other family members also be understanding and encouraging.
This session aimed at making young boys realise the value of communication, but also of the importance of support persons in their lives. After the conclusion of this session, the boys have decided to work on improving their communications and relations with all their family members and friends.

In October, 175 new boys joined the Chauraha program across 6 states. 49 Chauraha circles were conducted, and 203 boys completed the Chauraha Go books. 7 Chauraha community projects were initiated, in which 103 boys participated. 141 boys also graduated from the Chauraha program in October.

WORK WITH GOVERNMENT

Programs: PACT, Shakti and Chauraha

Empowered communities, safer children

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 Mumbai’s Wadala community, PACT workers, Shakti girls, Chauraha boys and other community adults negotiated with the corporator not to change the timings of the nearby Pratiksha Nagar school so that children don’t drop out.

The principal of the Pratiksha Nagar school, Sujata Valwe, had received an order from the Beat Officer in the Education department to change the school timings for Classes 6th, 7th and 8th (10 to 14 year olds) from the morning to the afternoon.

However, this would severely affect children attending school there because most of them are dropped off by their parents in the morning on the way to work, and picked up on the way back in the afternoon.

If there is no one to take these children to school in the afternoons, most of them would drop out. They would be forced to stay back without adult supervision, which would result in them either being locked up at home and isolated for their safety or they would end up roaming around unsupervised in the basti. This would put them at increased risk of early marriage, child labour, trafficking, violence and abuse.
The community adults and children first approached the principal, who directed them to the corporator. They met the corporator and explained their concerns about how the education of the children in the community would be affected if the school timings were changed. They also submitted a letter to him, requesting him not to change the timings.

When the corporator understood how the change in timings would impact the 10 to 14 year olds in the community, he held separate meetings with the principal and the beat officer, and then gave the order to shift the timings back to what they were.

When adults and children are empowered to negotiate with the government in order to tackle the issues affecting their community, children become safer.

**In October, 132 PACT core group meetings were held across 6 states. PACT workers also organised 23 community help desks, which were attended by 678 community adults. 1,249 children benefitted from government social protection schemes.**

### Collaborating on child protection in institutions

On October 7th and 8th, representatives of 10 children’s homes and institutions, the secretary and director of the department of Women and Child Development (WCD), members of the Child Welfare Committee (CWC) and the District Child Protection Unit (DCPU) from 12 districts of West Bengal, partner organisations, the Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS) consultant, and other experts on child protection met for a workshop in Kolkata.

Titled "Moner Kotha", the workshop aimed at identifying resources and partner organisations, building alliances and finding strength in collaboration by listening to the voices of the institution staff and caregivers. It aspired to identify the gaps in the care planning process and understand the ways in which these gaps can be bridged by introducing partners and resources in the institution.

The representatives shared their experiences while working with children in the institutions and recognised the importance of the wellbeing of the institution staff, since the overall development and wellbeing of the children in the institutions depends directly on them. They also identified that every child needs to be aligned and linked with all available resources, (education, health, recreation, wellness,
vocational and life skills training), which would contribute to his/her overall development.

They discussed the formulation of detailed care plans, and how it is important for the staff and caregivers to identify the real needs behind the institutionalization of a child. This would help them analyze and assess the needs of the child and understand the risks. All aspects of the child should be taken into consideration while making his/her care plan.

The representatives also talked about how to identify potential partner organisations for working in an institution, keeping in mind the partner organisation's background in what way it can contribute to the specific needs of the institution. Security, safety and confidentiality were identified as the most crucial aspects to consider while narrowing on a partner.

The institution staff and caregivers were also given letters of appreciation by the secretary of the WCD department for their indispensable work in the institutions.

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