



PACT:

Building Bridges, Transforming lives

A report on how Aangan's Parents and Children Against Trafficking and Harm (PACT) Program is making communities safer for children and altering the lives of the women who participate | June 2016



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A. Overview



A vast institutional and legal framework has been set up to protect children in our country, but the statistics of crimes against children remain grim. To make matters worse, not only are the majority of adults and children unaware of their rights and the protections they can seek under the law, they also view the State with suspicion and fear. This exacerbates their sense of isolation and puts children in more danger of being harmed. There is a critical need for grassroots initiatives to empower children and communities to build mechanisms to overcome their isolation and powerlessness.

This paper describes the Parents and Children Against Trafficking and Harm (PACT) program run by Aangan for the last two years. Working in marginalised communities where children are endangered by the high occurrence and risk of trafficking, early marriage, hazardous work or other exploitation, Aangan trains cohorts of local women to become community child protection volunteers who proactively promote their children's safety.

Since 2002, Aangan has worked to strengthen India's child protection systems focusing on safety and the prevention of harm. What started out as support to traumatised children who had been trafficked, abandoned, run away, harmed or in conflict with the law and were now confined in state-run rescue and shelter homes, led to a deep engagement with the complex factors that lead to child harm and an urgent concern for its prevention. In 2009, Aangan expanded its work to include a preventative grassroots approach that identified and supported adolescent girls and boys living in situations of grave risk in urban slums, and till date 60,000 young girls and boys have participated in Aangan's *Shakti* and *Chauraha* safety networks. Two years ago, the PACT program emerged out of Aangan's realization that for the work of prevention to be both transformative and sustainable it needed to include parents, families and community in meaningful ways. Fueled by the interest and insistence of mothers whose children were part of Aangan youth groups that they should also be included in the organisation's work, Aangan devised a program to mobilise and train these groups of mothers into becoming 'barefoot' child protection workers. Currently Aangan simultaneously focuses on protecting children in vulnerable communities from serious harm as well as supporting and enabling the recovery of children who have already suffered serious harm.

How PACT works

Drawing upon the success of in-house curriculum developed for *Shakti* and *Chauraha* safety networks where adolescent girls and boys meet to learn about, discuss and address child protection issues, the PACT program also has a comprehensive and specifically tailored weekly curriculum developed by Aangan. Conducted over the course of a year, it aims to do several things simultaneously. It introduces a group of women to the various laws, schemes, agencies and programs established by the central and state government to protect children. It helps the group to use its knowledge to identify and employ informal and formal strategies to protect vulnerable children in their community. Finally, it creates a collective identity and platform for them to negotiate on behalf of children both within their communities and for their communities with child protection agencies and social welfare departments.

In each community where Aangan works, a group of 8-12 women is brought together with the explicit aim of keeping children safe in their communities. As they participate in an intensive year-long training, their lives and the lives of their communities are slowly transformed. While they are closely guided and supported through the year by an Aangan social worker, their sense of personal and collective agency steadily grows. Small successes, such as enrolling a child in school, are thrilling for the group and breed confidence and larger successes, such as preventing a child marriage. The women's motivations as well as their thoughts and feelings as members of the group are discussed in the paper. Across the board, PACT members, describing their participation in this program said, "Hum jagruk hue, aur humne logon ko jagruk kiya (We became aware and in turn have made others so)."

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This increased awareness and agency is the first step in altering the way the PACT group interacts with the state. A core component of the PACT training is regular meetings with government functionaries. When officials begin to respond to PACT's concerns and requests for assistance, and in turn, seek the group's help in solving individual cases or participating in various public work campaigns, stereotypes are broken on both sides. Communities begin to see the state working for the benefit of the group, at the behest of the group, and both the officials and the community see each other as a reliable partner in a larger and joint project of child and family protection.

Much of PACT's community work does not immediately appear to be child protection work focusing as it does on bringing large numbers of previously marginalised and isolated families into the mainstream. A great deal of time and effort is spent on identifying and linking families to schemes that strengthen their long-term economic and financial positions. Everywhere, mothers reiterated their belief that child safety is deeply embedded in overall social security. So while all groups across the board have worked intensely on enrolling and keeping kids in school, they are equally concerned with making sure families have bank accounts and health insurance. It is important to note that unlike the law which is punitive and supposedly



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prohibitive in nature, only getting involved when rights have been violated, PACT’s focus on social security is a proactive step that fundamentally believes that families are doing the best for their children and therefore supports parents to build the firm foundations they need to make healthy choices. In the past two years, nearly 80,000 adults and children were linked to 26 different government social protection schemes.

PACT groups have overcome myriad obstacles to make their neighbourhoods safer for children and it is remarkable how much a small group of enthusiastic and empowered women have been able to achieve in so short a time. The experience of the PACT program over the past two years clearly demonstrates the importance of making investments at the grassroots to train poor women to be alert and aware ‘barefoot child protection workers.’ These groups become crucial links between the state and the poor communities they represent.



B. Introduction to the PACT Program

a. The national context

The situation for children in India is deplorable. Every year, one lakh children go missing¹ and more than a million children are trafficked for prostitution.² Of the three million sex workers in the country, nearly 40% are below eighteen.³ There are 5.8 million child labourers in India - the highest in absolute terms in South Asia.⁴ Almost half of all girls in the country are married before they are eighteen.⁵

¹ Ministry of Home Affairs, 2014, as shared in Parliament

² U.S. Department of State (2013), 'Human Rights Reports: India', Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2013/sca/220392.htm>

³ Status of Children in 14-18 years. Review of Policy, Program and Legislative Framework. 2012-13. GOI and NCPCR. Pg 29. Cited from India Country Report: To Prevent and Combat Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation of Children and Women, World Congress III Against Sexual Exploitation of Women and Adolescents (Rio De Janeiro, Brazil, 2008)

⁴ ILO and UCW, 2015, 'Measuring children's work in South Asia: Perspectives from National Household Surveys'

⁵ UNICEF State of the World's Children, 2013 - data from UNICEF Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2013/sca/220392.htm> <http://www.icrw.org/child-marriage-facts-and-figures>

India ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992. Currently there are numerous domestic laws, policies and schemes that govern child protection such as the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection) Act (2015), the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006), Immoral Traffic Prevention Act (1986), the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (2012), the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009), Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act (2016). In 2009, to bring together multiple schemes under one comprehensive child protection program, the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) adopted the Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS) to protect children living in difficult circumstances. The scheme envisions Child Protection Societies/Units at the regional, state, district, block and village level who are tasked with the implementation of child protection laws and schemes and most importantly the coordination of the various functionaries and authorities such as Child Welfare Committees, police protection officials and institutional staff. Currently there are about 10,000 functionaries such as Probation Officers, Case Workers, Superintendents, Counsellors, administrative and field staff for a population of 170 million children in need of care and protection, a ratio of 1:17000.⁶ Clearly, there is much that needs to be achieved before children are safe in this country.

b. The Structure and Reach of PACT

Thus far, Aangan has worked in forty locations in six states and over the next three years plan to expand this number to seventy-five. Their work is in the states of Bihar, Odisha, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Rajasthan. The organisation identifies and works with vulnerable communities that live along railway tracks, highways and dumping grounds, and in rural hamlets and illegal slums that have poor or no access to water, electricity, sanitation or any basic amenities. These communities

⁶ Status of Children in 14-18 years. Review of Policy, Program and Legislative Framework. 2012-13. GOI and NCPCR. pg. 71

are predominantly scheduled castes and tribes, daily wage labourers, migrants and extremely poor and marginalised. These locations have been chosen based on the areas the central government has selected to focus its Backward Region's Grant Fund, after consultation with state officials and on reviewing national and international data on child marriage, trafficking, hazardous work and violence and abuse. By mid 2016, 509 PACT members had been trained and worked with around 25,000 families, impacting over 50,000 children (Aangan Impact Report 2015-16).

The structure of the program is simple. In the first year, a group of 5-6 women get together to learn about how to keep their children safe. They are each responsible for about fifty to sixty households and spend a couple of hours a day visiting the families that they have chosen to support. In the second year, they are joined by another 5-6 women. Every week for a year, the group, led by an Aangan community worker, is introduced to various schemes, laws and policies that aim to protect children and their families from harm. They meet with a range of authorities that oversee these schemes and programs. A comprehensive curriculum developed by Aangan covers a range of topics such as how to create a protective environment, the right to education, community mapping and surveys, communication and listening skills, and creating linkages with the state. The idea is for the women to develop skills to proactively support children in their communities. Most groups usually decide to first work on ensuring that the maximum number of children go to school. The next section discusses the complex formal and informal negotiations involved in this seemingly straightforward and noncontroversial task.

Through the year, local residents are invited to monthly 'Parent's Circles.' At these information-sharing meetings, PACT group members discuss what they have learnt with the larger group or invite a local NGO representative to introduce their work or invite a state functionary such as the local constable, a Child Protection Officer, or an ICDS (*Anganwadi*) supervisor, among many others, to talk about the various schemes available for vulnerable children and their families. For many who attend,

this is usually the first time they become aware of a particular program being run in the community or a government scheme meant the benefit them, and certainly this is the first time they are able to interact with a government official in such an informal manner. PACT subsequently holds 'Community Help Desks' where parents are assisted to fill out the necessary paperwork to benefit from the programs and schemes discussed at the Parent's Circles. Over the last two years, over 10,000 people have attended nearly 1500 Parents Circles and Community Help Desks.

Inviting local and state representatives to attend Parent Circles and Community Help Desks requires that the group invests considerable time in getting to know which department is in charge of what aspect of child protection and meeting officials several times. Initially hesitant and scared to interact with these authorities, the group practices how they will approach various departments and what they will say. Early successes, such as when a particular official responds positively (of which there are many examples presented in the next section) go a long way towards building the group's confidence. It is commendable to note that while Aangan coordinators accompany the group to their first few meetings, in the first year alone groups across the country had formed independent relationships with 414 officials. By the end of the next year, they had connected with another 109 officials. This list includes the District Child Protection Unit (DCPUs), the police, Child Welfare Committee officials, Anti-Human Trafficking Units, health and labour officials, Education Officers and Child Marriage Prohibition Officers. How this transforms the way poor communities see the state and, in particular, how they start responding to PACT mothers, is examined later.

As the training progresses, each woman becomes increasingly able to identify children at risk. They bring back cases to the group, and, along with their Aangan coordinator, discuss how to address each individual problem. Depending on the nature of the issue (a child who has dropped out of school and is all alone at home or a case of child marriage) they work with families to address specific vulnerabilities, first trying to address a problem

Table 1: PACT Impact

PACT Impact	2014 - 15	2015 - 16
Number of PACT members trained	309	509
Number of families covered by PACT (Each PACT member is in charge of about 50 families and sometimes their work includes more families as well)	15450	16233
Number of Parent's Circles and Community Help Desks held	636	810
Number of adults who attended Parent's Circles and Community Help Desks and are now aware of child protection risks	-	10522
Number of families members (adults and children) accessing schemes and services because of PACT's work	40333	38985
Number of children accessing schemes and services because of PACT's work	-	14011
Number of government officials activated	414	109

informally, and, if and when required, connecting them with various protection agencies. As residents see evidence of how PACT group members are deeply invested in protecting children, they reach out to them for assistance and counsel. In fact, a few cases of potential child trafficking were averted when, after a Parent's Circle on the issue, mothers themselves approached PACT members suddenly unsure of whether their daughters were being legitimately married or were in fact being trafficked. Aangan follows a strict policy that individual and group safety is paramount, and cautions PACT group members from directly engaging with any potentially dangerous groups and issues, instead encouraging them to focus on building stronger alliances within the community.

While the next section discusses how PACT groups have taken up child protection issues, with varying degrees of success, in their communities, what is clear is that this program is changing the way women feel about themselves and the state.

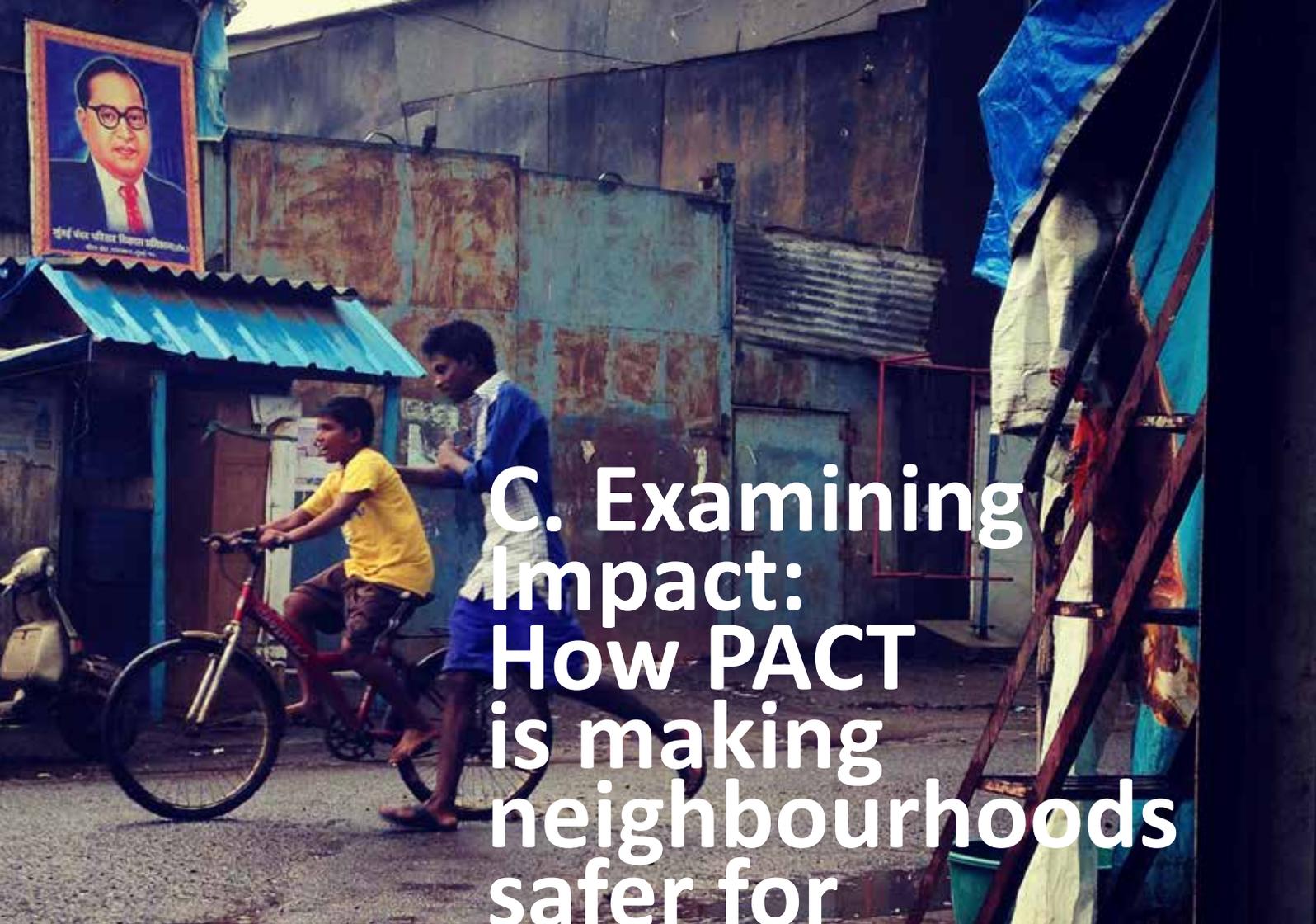
The significant increases in awareness and self-perception revealed in both these studies are certainly related to the strength of their curriculums. Whether it is the PACT or Shakti, or indeed the *Chauraha* curriculum, there is a specific agenda for each meeting, the group is expected to create and execute concrete action plans to address community-level issues and much time and energy is given to preparation whether through data collection or role playing. This creates a collective and proactive protective force for children at the grassroots, making their neighbourhoods much safer for all.





A qualitative survey by Aangan of 117 women that compared how they felt before and after their involvement in PACT revealed some very interesting insights. Before they joined the group, only about a fourth of the women said they had done something or had the ability to do something to keep children in their communities safe, less than a fifth said that they knew of laws, schemes and officials meant to ensure children's safety, and about a fourth said that they had important information to share on behalf of their communities. After they joined the group, all the respondents felt that they had and could do something, 95% of them said that they knew of laws, schemes and officials meant to ensure children's safety and 71% said that they had important information to share with the government or police on behalf of their community. Before joining the group, while only 39% believed that laws and policies actually reduced child trafficking, abuse and child marriage, after joining the group, this figure had changed to 98%. The number who felt that government officials wanted to help children had doubled (from 42% to 90%) and 99% (as opposed to 17%) were confident about approaching a government official and had reported cases. Clearly, the PACT program has significantly increased women's self confidence, their willingness to engage with the state in cases of child harm and their belief that the state would respond positively.

These results are similar to another qualitative study by Aangan in 2013 which looked at it how nearly 4000 adolescent girls felt before and after their involvement in Shakti circles. In Varanasi and Bhopal, while only 28% and 31% of girls respectively felt they could identify unsafe persons or situations before they joined Shakti, these numbers had risen to 95% and 100% of girls respectively after they completed the Shakti program. Across Shakti groups, 60% of girls felt supported to cope with situations of harm, 70% of girls were able to articulate their educational and vocational aspirations, and 55% of girls felt capable of negotiating for their rights in cases of child marriage, pressure to drop out of school or get involved in hazardous work. 55% of girls were aware and able to create safeguards and strategies to prevent dangerous situations and stay safe.



C. Examining Impact: How PACT is making neighbourhoods safer for children

a. Creating safe spaces: Individual and Collective agency

Amina is a soft-spoken 38-year old woman who lives in a shack in Rajghat, Varanasi with her husband and three children. Married at sixteen, she has spent most of her life in this neighbourhood. Her first project with the PACT group was to try and address a practice called *vasool* in which gangs of young boys stopped cars along an adjacent main road demanding a toll. Not only was this illegal, very dangerous, and highly lucrative, rumour had it, that it was done with the assistance of the local police, who then gave a certain portion of the profits to the young boys. Since Amina's own son had dropped out of school to be part of the gang, the PACT group member felt that she should take the lead. The group first gathered details of each child involved - where they lived, their ages, what their parents did and what part of the day they spent in *vasool*. They held several



meetings with the children's parents, shared their plans to meet the local Child Welfare Officer and got most parents to sign a petition to try and put an end to this practice. Fortunately, the Child Welfare Officer turned out to be very responsive and even attended a Parent's Circle. Within two months, the group managed, in an entirely non-confrontational manner, to stop children from collecting *vasool* and go to school instead. While *vasool* unfortunately continues, there are no longer any children involved.

How a PACT group worked with government authorities to address harassment in Varanasi

Amina, a PACT group member in Rajghat, Varanasi, decided to try to repair a boundary wall which ran around her settlement that had been broken for several months, which adjoined the local school. Groups of men from different localities now gathered here to play cards and drink. They were loud and rowdy, bullying residents and harassing young girls. Girls were dissuaded from going to school because of the threat of sexual harassment. A young girl, on her back home from fetching water, had been accosted by some men who threw the bucket of water on her, leaving her soaked and humiliated. It had become a daily occurrence and people felt increasingly unsafe but powerless to do anything. Assisted by the PACT group, Amina met the ward councillor several times and spent the next four months writing letters, visiting the local ward office and garnering help from other women in her community. Within four months, the wall was repaired and a new gate installed at the entrance to the settlement. Amina became well known throughout her community.

In Deegha, Patna a PACT group member said, 'It's not like I hadn't noticed the fact that so many children were out of school. I just didn't know what I could do about it. Now when we walk around in the community, people say - *Didi aa rahi hai* (Didi is here)."

Amina's story is just one example of how important it is to empower and mobilise a cadre of grassroots child protection workers who can identify, prioritise and address their community's most pressing concerns. Rebuilding the wall did not just make the area safer for everyone; it was also symbolic of what was possible when Amina, assisted by the PACT group, took a proactive role in protecting her *basti*. The response of the ward office and the Child Welfare Officer, even when the police were complicit in *vasool*, only encouraged the group to take on more challenging issues.

The support of a network, especially for marginalised and poor women, has been well documented, and this was often reflected in conversations with the PACT groups. In Deegha, Patna a PACT group member said, 'It's not like I hadn't noticed the fact that so many children were out of school. I just didn't know what I could do about it. Now when we walk around in the community, people say - *Didi aa rahi hai* (Didi is here)". Almost all the women talked about how, as they began to feel more confident because they were part of a larger body, their families, neighbours and communities saw them differently. Many women talked about how being part of a larger group had emboldened them to stand up to their husbands and reduced domestic violence within their homes. "If the beatings get too much, the group comes and talks to my husband and threatens him. He feels scared that I have so many people supporting me." (Koniya, Varanasi). "My husband used to say I was *pagal*. He didn't even think I was capable to buying vegetables on my own. Now that I've travelled all over the city, he says - yes, she's become *hoshiyar*." (Wadala, Mumbai). Said another, "Whenever there is some paperwork to fill up, my husband now gives it to me. He says I'm the only one who can get things done. He jokes and says - *tum Mayawati bun gayi ho* (You've become like Mayawati)" (Koniya, Varanasi). "*Hum jagruk ho gaye*" was a common refrain as was Aangan being referred to as a supportive force, a hand that held them together and gave them strength. "I didn't know anything, rarely left the house, was scared to speak to anyone. But now I have '*dum*.' *Aangan ka saath aa gaya*."

Women across the board talked about the violence, exclusion, and discrimination they had faced, and how their work with PACT gave them a great sense of pride and accomplishment, and the opportunity to provide for other children what they themselves had been denied.

PACT groups regularly attend meetings to understand state bureaucracy, policies and commitments to child protection. In Bhopal, 90 adults attended a meeting with a host of authorities including officials from the Labour Department, the State Child Protection Commission, the Police, and the Department for Women and Children. The purpose of the interaction was to understand the role and responsibilities of the State Commission for Protection of Child Rights (SCPCR), and how community workers can access these officials. In Bhubaneswar, 117 children and adults from nine communities and fifteen institutions across Odisha met to discuss various issues pertaining to the education system. The District Child Protection Officer, District Social Welfare Officer, the DCP of the Special Juvenile Police Unit and a member of the Child Welfare Committee also participated. While education was the main topic of discussion, girls also spoke about the sexual harassment they faced, and how it was difficult to register cases with the police as they would not file complaints. The girls were taught how to report cases under the Protection of Children against Sexual Offences Act (POCSO). The DCP also asked the people to contact him directly in case they faced any problems in their community.

As news of PACT's work and their access to information and resources spreads through the community, parents (and children) in the community begin to recognise PACT as a legitimate group working for their collective welfare. Parents Circles become safe forums for community members to share their concerns, seek counsel and ask for specific help. In Deegha, Patna, a mother told the group that her daughter had run away with a young man from the neighbourhood and had now been missing for three days. PACT assisted her in filing an FIR and the police helped track the girl down. She was finally found, unhurt, but scared because the man, initially promising her marriage, had refused to marry her and instead invited several strange men to stay with them. A potentially dangerous situation had been avoided.

What emerged, time and again, was that while the Aangan training had certainly given PACT members a greater sense of their own agency and self worth, it also fulfilled a very deep

personal need. Women across the board talked about the violence, exclusion, discrimination and disappointment they had faced, and how their work with PACT gave them a great sense of pride and accomplishment, and the opportunity to provide for other children what they themselves had been denied. PACT mothers run youth groups for girls in their community known as Shakti groups. “I know what’s in their heart and it feels good to know that I’m trying to do something to help them realise their dreams.” (Veena, Deegha, Patna). In Kazzakpura, Varanasi, children begin working on power looms from as early as 5 and 6 years old. A young woman, Meena, was so convinced of the importance of *Shakti* and *Chauraha* circles to create safety networks that she overcame her extreme hesitation and fear to go door-to-door convincing parents to let their children join these youth groups. Married off before she was eighteen and deeply disappointed by her own lack of education, she was driven by her need to see that other girls didn’t suffer the same fate. Her passion got her invited to the local PACT group.



Why women join PACT

Each PACT mother has a poignant story that inspired her to join, and which she often uses to appeal to other mothers while negotiating for a child's rights. Whether this was the isolation she felt at being compelled to stay home and care for the house, the dreams and ambitions she had to let go off because of her family's poverty, the helplessness she felt when she didn't know how to help her young handicapped son, or the beatings and abuse she had endured at the hands of her husband's or her in-laws, PACT gives each woman a platform to feel engaged with something meaningful, to step out, however briefly, from the confines of her home and have a chance to reinvent herself. Said Shanta, a PACT member from Wadala, after a picnic for the three PACT groups in the city "After 19 years, I've got a chance to go out on my own. From the time I got married, this is the first time I am doing something for myself." Seeing how their friends and neighbours have been changed by their participation in PACT or attending Parents Circles and being impressed by PACT's work, more women are drawn to become members.

In Koniya, Varanasi, a PACT mother mused, "*Chulhe se uthna aur chulhe se sona, ye kya zindagi hai?* (Living and dying by the cooking fire, what kind of life is that?)." - PACT group member, Koniya, Varanasi

"The collective is heard, even if the individual is not. When we say, we are members of the Sangharsh group, we're taken seriously. We are made to sit down and given a cup of tea." - Kajal, Rajghat, Varanasi

The importance of working as a collective on child protection issues cannot be emphasised enough. "The collective is heard, even if the individual is not," said Kajal from Rajghat. "When we say, we are members of the Sangharsh group, we're taken seriously. We are made to sit down and given a cup of tea." Not only are women seen differently when they are associated with a structured group, this association reduces individual risk and diminishes the possibility of retaliation and threat from disgruntled groups.

One mother described how, during her rounds, she noticed a young boy who was regularly being taken on outings and given sweets and chocolates by an unfamiliar adult. Her alarm bells went off, and realising that the child was at risk of being trafficked, or of violence and abuse, she shared this with the group. After much discussion, the group decided to talk



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to the boy and his parents and caution them. The stranger disappeared and the group felt very relieved. While this is one example where PACT was able to successfully avert a potential catastrophe, the PACT group is regularly confronted with cases of very serious harm and abuse including rape, trafficking and abandonment. Even with handholding from Aangan, this is very difficult and emotionally taxing work, requiring a host of skills and involving constant negotiation and frequent setbacks. Sharing the responsibility for success and failure makes the latter easier to bear and is less likely to dishearten future efforts.

b. Formal and informal engagements for child protection

Education, and especially the education of girls, is an essential child protection mechanism. Improvements in women's education explained half of the reduction in child deaths between 1990 and 2009.⁷ A single year of primary school has been shown to increase women's wages later in life by 10-20% and each additional year of schooling provides improved opportunities and outcomes for girls and women.⁸ Moreover, a child who is in school, actually sitting in the classroom, is a child who is accounted for. We know who she is and where she is, and we know that she is not at work, or married off, or locked up at home or in a dangerous situation.

While statistics show that about 95% of the 252 million child between 6-14 years old enrol in school, 25.09% drop out before completing class 5, 42.8% drop out by class 8 and 56.71% before completing class 10 (Status of Children in 14-18, 2012-13, NCPCR). It is no surprise that the first community project PACT mothers typically choose to work on is to ensure that children from their community go to school and stay in school. Mina from Deegha's words were echoed widely across the groups. "Both parents are working here and are very busy. So the first

⁷ George Psacharopoulos and Harry Anthony Patrinos, "Returns to Investment in Education: A Further Update," *Education Economics* 12, no. 2 (2004): 111-34.

⁸ International Centre for Research on Women. 2005. p. 2

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step in child safety is making sure a child goes to school. When the children start going to school, they start learning so many things. How to be on time, wear neat clothes, how to read and write, they become *jagruk* (aware) and they start thinking of their future and what they want to be.”

The group begins by conducting a survey of out of school children to assess the scale of the issue. In some communities, like the Nat community in Kaushal Nagar, Patna, before PACT began to work on this issue, not a single child was going to school. As they go door-to-door, gathering numbers and organising education rallies, PACT members get an in-depth understanding of the complex and varied reasons that prevent children from going to school. While they are collecting community-level information, the PACT group makes contact with local school principals and teachers. A responsive administrator is immediately invited to a Parent’s Circle to talk about the many benefits of education. Information on mid-day meals, scholarships, free books and uniforms is given. Through these efforts 144 children were linked to school in Kaushal Nagar. District Child Marriage Prohibition Officers, Police officers and Child Protection Officers who are also invited to these meetings reiterate the need for formal identity proof, not only to enrol in school, but also crucial in case a child runs away or goes missing. Parent’s concerns about missing documents is addressed, and Community Help Desks are organised to help parents make birth certificates and Aadhaar cards for their children to register in school and set up bank accounts for them to receive financial assistance. For many, this is the very first time they or their children have any proof of their identity. At these Parent’s Circles and Help Desks, many issues, sometimes not related to school enrolment are discussed.

When the local school administration is not immediately responsive or initially evasive, the PACT women make several trips to the school until they are finally received. In Chunokoli, Odisha, when the local school inexplicably refused to admit some children from their community, PACT women involved the Child Welfare Committee to intervene on their behalf and enrol the children. In Preetpur, Chandauli,⁹ where school enrolment is

In Rajghat, Varanasi, where parents were afraid to send their younger children to school because they had to cross a busy main road, PACT women convinced the parents to jointly contribute and hire a woman to help their children get across safely.

seen as an essential protection against potential trafficking, PACT women learnt that many children from the *vanvasi* scheduled tribe were dropping out because they were being bullied by upper-caste children. The PACT group had to engage both the Principal and the Block Education Officer to address this issue.

But it is not just the school administration that PACT women have to engage. With both parents working, babies and toddlers are left in the care of their (slightly) older brothers and sisters, and PACT group members work hard to activate the local *anganwadi* or, as in the case of Khurda in Odisha, invite a local NGO to set up a creche, freeing the older children to attend school. In Reay Road and Wadala, Mumbai, children who have lost one or both parents and are at risk of being abandoned by their relatives are connected to the Indian Association for Promotion of Adoption and Child Welfare (IAPA), an agency that runs the state government's foster care program. The children receive a stipend that helps them stay in school, and in some cases, PACT has also contacted the CWC (Child Welfare Committee) to place vulnerable or abandoned children in local orphanages or homes. In Koniya, Varanasi, incessant flooding of the main road because of poor drainage not only posed a health hazard but meant that families didn't send their children to school. The PACT team applied to the District Magistrate to get the road repaired. In Rajghat, Varanasi, where parents were afraid to send their younger children to school because they had to cross a busy main road, PACT mothers convinced the parents to jointly contribute and hire a woman to help their children get across safely.

Once children are enrolled in school, the PACT team regularly follows up with each family to ensure that their children do not drop out. The next step for the group is to activate School Management Committees (SMC) which are forums set up by the state with the explicit purpose of involving parents in the functioning of the local school. The SMC plays a critical role in monitoring the functioning of the school, the utilisation of the various grants the school receives from the State government and the regular provision of mid-day meals. It is meant to

⁹ Aangan works in collaboration with Manav Sansadhan Evam Mahila Vikas Sansthan (MSEMVS) in Chandauli, Uttar Pradesh

bring any child rights violations to the attention of the local authorities. In Lahartara and Bharlai, Varanasi some PACT members were surprised to learn that they were members of the local, but defunct, SMC, and that they had been, inadvertently, signing an attendance form, without once having attended a meeting. In Kazzakpura, the PACT group realised that the members of the SMC were unaware of their roles and responsibilities. In all three of these cases, SMC meetings were consequently activated. Similarly, in Murshidabad, West Bengal, the PACT group's consistent campaigning with the local SMC ensured that the 195 children who were attending the local school finally started receiving a mid-day meal. In fact, after 14 PACT members across five communities in Odisha realised that they were all part of local SMCs, they approached the Education Officer and convinced him to hold an SMC training session. Subsequently, 38 SMC members from six schools were trained.

Finding community-level solutions to protect children

As they work on school enrolment, PACT groups are confronted by the complex issue of child labour that frequently prevent parents from sending their children to school. They hold education and anti-child labour meetings, invite authorities including the labour department to Parent's Circles, identify working children and link them and their parents to education and social welfare schemes. On one hand, the PACT team has to activate the formal state bureaucracy to bring children into the mainstream. On the other hand, they are forced to think of creative solutions. Rita from Rajghat talked about children who were involved in collecting and selling coal that had fallen off goods trains. An extremely dangerous vocation - since the coal lay near the tracks or had to be snatched off from moving trains - it was also fairly lucrative. In the end, the group managed to convince many parents to stop the youngest children from working at all, enrol them in the local *anganwadi* and to allow the older children a few hours off from work to attend school (where they would also get a nutritious meal). While there was little they could do to stop children from working, they did manage to convince some parents to involve their children in safer, preferably home-based work, to supplement the family income. "I had to go back repeatedly. The working children's mothers would say - 'what do I do? How do I feed my family? My husband doesn't earn or whatever he does, he drinks away'. I would say: 'Do you want your children to be illiterate like you?' Slowly some mothers did listen. And when one child started attending school, other children followed."

“Earlier, I’d see children in trouble but wouldn’t know what to do about it. Now if I see any child in distress, abandoned or in any difficulty, I cannot watch in silence. I will find solutions...”

- Ankita, a PACT member from Chhola, Bhopal

Many PACT groups have invited governmental and non governmental agencies that provide skill-based training to work in their communities so that poor families can improve their financial position, reduce their dependence on child labour, and send their children to school. In Bharlai, Varanasi, they connected adults and adolescent children who were working to the Literacy Mission which is aimed to provide function literacy. Kiran from Koniya talked about how, when parents simply refuse to send their children to school because they feel their children have to earn a living, PACT tries to involve other organisations like Pratham that run informal classes for children within the area so that the children will at least be literate. In Deegha, Patna, when a local NGO refused to accept any children from the brick-kiln into their informal classes because the children’s attendance was so irregular, a couple of PACT mothers independently set up a class a few days a week for the children. “Earlier, I’d see children in trouble but wouldn’t know what to do about it. Now if I see any child in distress, abandoned or in any difficulty, I cannot watch in silence. I will find solutions,” said Ankita, a PACT member from Chhola, Bhopal.

In the last two years, PACT mothers have enrolled 3800 previously out of school children in school. “It is wonderful to see children going to school,” said every PACT group with pride and for many of these children, it was their very first time. This success emboldens PACT to take on more challenging cases. In Koniya, adolescent girls are forced to drop out since there is no middle school close by. Apart from their schooling being interrupted, they are isolated at home and face the risk of being married early. PACT has filed an application with the Block Level Education Officer to get a local private school to enrol these girls.

While PACT women felt that to enrol children in school one undoubtedly has to formally engage with the state, issues such as child marriage and trafficking need much more sensitive handling. “Now nothing happens in my area without me knowing about it,” said Krishna with pride.

Practicing negotiation to stop child marriage

Describing the detailed process of negotiation with family members that PACT members go through, to stop a child marriage, Sangeeta from Rajghat, Varanasi describes how she approached the family of a 16-year old girl: “I told her mother: *Look at your sister-in-law. She got married early, had three children and she’s always ill. Is this what you want for your daughter?* When I realised that she actually was concerned for her daughter’s immediate safety because both she and her husband worked, I spoke to her, encouraging her to let the child continue her education. The girl had dropped out of school in the ninth standard but I told her to put her into vocational classes. I also told her that if expenses were an issue, our group would link her to a government scheme that gives families Rs. 20000 towards marriage expenses - as long as the girl is above eighteen - along with a host of other things like a cycle, utensils and clothes. I had to go back many many times, take various members of the PACT group and talk to various family members. And finally they agreed. But instead, if we had informed the authorities, it would have been disastrous.” As mentioned earlier, preventing a child marriage is a particularly powerful and personal victory for PACT member since almost all of them have suffered from being child brides. They described their sense of joy when they were able to stop a child marriage. “It’s a very hidden thing, and when we find out about it we have to spend a lot of time negotiating and talking and convincing, but when we are able to save a girl from marriage and allow her to study some more, it’s just wonderful.” (Rajghat, Varanasi)

As women start becoming aware of how marriage is often a cover for trafficking, they relate stories of girls from their communities, who were surreptitiously married off and disappeared, never to be seen again. PACT members are particularly alert to trafficking during specific times of the year. In Rajghat, Varanasi, a mother who had attended many parents’ circles told the PACT mother in her area about how she had been approached by an unfamiliar woman who proposed marriage between their children. The stranger talked about how beautiful this mother’s daughter was and how not to worry about any marriage expenses. After much discussion with the PACT group, she decided to reject the marriage offer on grounds of it seeming risky.

“People in our area now know that this is a safe space for women, and the police even call us for assistance. No one will openly bring any young girl here. They know that we are watching.”

- PACT women, Kaushal Nagar, Patna

In Kaushal Nagar, Patna, although the PACT group might not have been able to prevent any child marriages, it has achieved some success in making its neighbourhood safer for girls. A closely knit scheduled caste community that traditionally worked as street performers at local fairs, the community is infamous for being petty thieves, professional beggars and gypsies who travel across the country. The group defers in all matters to the *Panchpratha*, its own panchayat. The *Nats* have traditionally practiced marrying off children as soon as they hit adolescence.¹⁰ One of the few castes that receives a bride price rather than pays dowry, girl children are highly valued assets, so much so that girls are frequently kidnapped to be raised by *Nat* families so that they can be sold off in marriage when they are older. Not surprisingly, the *Nats* are viewed with suspicion, particularly by the police. In this context, the relationship that the PACT group has been able to establish with the local police is astonishing. In fact, the first individual case the group successfully supervised was of an unfamiliar young girl who was found lost and wandering around their neighbourhood. Further enquiries revealed that she was mentally unstable and the group knew she that was in certain danger of being kidnapped. Together with their Aangan coordinator, they took the girl to the police and sat at the station for eight hours until they ensured that the girl had been taken to a shelter home. This experience was an important one because it broke stereotypes for both the women and the police. The group subsequently rescued two more young women with the help of the police and removed a young girl from a potentially very dangerous home environment. “People in our area now know that this is a safe space for women, and the police even call us for assistance. No one will openly bring any young girl here. They know that we are watching,” said the group with pride. “We will keep working on child marriage. We are working on changing mindsets. It will take time, but we will keep at it,” said Garima, a PACT member.

Formal and informal strategies are constantly employed while engaging with officials. The majority of the time, PACT visits officials such as the police, Child Welfare Committee, Childline,

¹⁰ MacKinnon, Catherine A. (2011), ‘Trafficking, Prostitution and Inequality’, Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review, Vol 46 <http://harvardcrcl.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/MacKinnon.pdf>

District Child Protection officers, ICDS supervisors and ward officers to discuss concerns or cases in their community. They are not always satisfied with the response they receive, and interspersed between these formal meetings are a number of visits which attempt to build a personal bond with the concerned officers. This is especially the case with the police. PACT groups regularly tie *rakhis* on the local officers, wish them for the new year, plant trees outside the station or invite them to celebrate festivals and important holidays with them. While at Reay Road, Mumbai and Koniya, Varanasi, the police has not responded with much enthusiasm, in Deegha, Patna, the women talked about their excellent relationship with the local police station - "At the women's day celebration, the officers said - we are so happy you have invited us, and we are always here to help all of you in any way you need. We have celebrated New Year and *Raksha Bandhan* with them, and now when we go visit them, they say: *What's wrong? Has anything happened? And we usually say: No, no, we've just come to meet you.*"

...after a year of working in PACT, 98% of respondents felt that laws/government programs actually reduced child trafficking, abuse, child labour and child marriage - an increase of 58% prior to joining the program.

c. Family entitlements and social security key for child protection

This final section highlights three things. First, that PACT groups across the country see access to social security schemes as crucial to child protection. Second, as people attend Parent's Circles and Community Help Desks, their fear of officials and authorities reduces and they become more aware of their rights and entitlements. As a result, they begin to exert pressure on a variety of government agencies to deliver on their commitments. Slowly, this changes the way that PACT and their communities and the state view each other. And thirdly, officials begin to reach out to PACT for help with various public work campaigns and programs. Throughout the country, groups have worked with health departments on camps to promote immunisations and reduce anaemia and malnourishment. For a committed state officer, partnering with enthusiastic grassroots groups not only makes his or her job easier, but also wins him or her recognition for performing well.

As Aangan's research has shown, after a year of working in PACT, 98% of respondents felt that laws/government programs actually reduced child trafficking, abuse, child labour and child marriage (40% before). PACT groups regularly refer to the many schemes that provide financial assistance to the girl child which they believe reduces the risk of her being pulled out of school, married off young or being trafficked. At a PACT meeting in Kaushal Nagar to discuss strategies on preventing child marriage in their community, the group felt that the total financial contribution from various grants, scholarships and government bonds and financial instruments was significant enough (almost two lakhs) to discourage some families from child marriage. They felt that they could use this figure in their negotiations and organise a Community Help Desk that would link families to many of the schemes.

What is immediately apparent from PACT's work is the number of government schemes that exist for the poor. In the last two years, close to 80,000 adults and children have been linked to 26 different government programs and schemes. Krishna poignantly says, "When they start accessing their rights, then they become more aware, and they are able to raise their voices for their rights. If people don't understand their right and get their entitlements, how will they understand their children's rights and entitlements?" When asked why so much emphasis was placed on registering identity documents, she continued, "How will they ever join the mainstream? Without any proof of identity, without an Aadhaar card, they can't access anything. If a child gets lost and doesn't have any proof - no Aadhaar or birth certificate - how will the family find him? Without a ration card, they can't get any help even when they are so poor. If they want to open a bank account, they need documents. If they want to access a government scheme, they need documents." The table below lists some of the most popular services, programs and schemes accessed in the last year alone.

Table 2: Accessing government schemes for increased protection

Type of linkage with government programs and schemes	Numbers who benefitted
Out of school children enrolled in school/vocational training courses	2768
Birth certificates	1001
Basic food and health security services	3600
Sukanya Samridhi Yojana (Bank account for the girl child)	328
Kanya Vivah Yojana (Government Bond of Rs. 2000 for the girl child before she turns two which can be accessed either for education or marriage expenses for the girl once she is 18 as long as she is unmarried)	80
Foster care scheme	75
National Digital Literacy Mission	500
Various government scholarships	451
Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MNREGA)	60
Insurance and Savings schemes	3844
Jan Dhan Yojana (Zero balance accounts)	1809
Labour Department Schemes for working children	500
Labour Department schemes for adults	397
Health camps and basic vaccination drives	3425

Armed with information about rights and entitlements community PACT members and community adults are better able to seek accountability from local authorities. In Chandauli, Uttar Pradesh, PACT members and Shakti activators flagged the issue of erratic service provision at the *anganwadi* center. They held consultations with the *gram panchayat* and *anganwadi* supervisor. After repeated follow-ups, the *anganwadi* worker began to conduct health check-ups, provide regular meals to the children, and distribute nutrition supplements to adolescent girls and mothers. 90 children were registered, of which 37 were found to be malnourished and began to receive treatment.

“We visited fourteen different agencies in the last year including the police, the Child Welfare Committee, the Integrated Child Development Scheme, Childline, the Skill Development Board, our local bank, the District Child Protection Unit and the local school and court. And we have made the ward councillor responsive,” said the PACT group in Deegha, as they proudly

displayed all the mobile numbers they had been given by various authorities with the promise of assistance whenever required. PACT often uses the relationships it develops with particularly helpful officials to open doors with other departments. For instance, when a public distribution officer in Bhagwangola refused to work with the local PACT group, they appealed to the Block Development Officer with whom they had worked closely. He called an inter-departmental meeting of 16-18 officials, introduced the PACT group and praised their efforts. In Koniya, the PACT group talked about how they had come up against some officials when they refused to give bribes to have their ASHA applications accepted. Not disheartened, the group was in the midst of creating a strategy to involve other departments and officials to assist with this situation.

Across communities, PACT - and indeed *Chauraha* and *Shakti* circles - see a very clear link between physical improvements of civic amenities in their neighbourhoods and child safety. This was highlighted several times in a comprehensive study by Aangan of children's experiences in slums. One respondent said, "accidents are quite common here. A few months ago, a two-year old boy fell into the sewage drain and died. He was by himself because his parents were at work at the time. Then there was this family who were sleeping outside their home at night. They had a small two-month old baby. While they were sleeping, a dog... or at least we think it's a dog...dragged this baby and dropped him into an open drain a few meters away. When the parents woke up in the morning, they found their dead baby there floating inside."¹¹ What is very heartening to note is that whether it is working on specific child protection issues like ensuring the local *anganwadi* is functioning every day and actually provides healthy meals for the children or more general community safety concerns like putting in applications in the ward office for repairing walls, fixing water pipes and hand pumps, covering drains or building toilets, PACT groups are better able to approach appropriate stakeholders and make formal systems responsive.

¹¹ Neeti Daftari (2015) Minor Issues in Major Cities: Child Vulnerabilities in Urban Slums. Aangan Report. Pg 28

“What is better than if our ideas of child protection are internalised and adopted by the community?”

- Nirupma Singh, Child Protection Officer, Varanasi

Nirupma Singh, the Child Protection Officer in Varanasi, talked admiringly about how PACT mothers from five different communities had visited her office to learn about various child protection issues. “They also regularly call me about a particular issue and have given my number to other community members who call me for clarifications,” she smiled.

PACT groups are regularly contacted by various departments and also non governmental organizations to assist with social work campaigns. When Adalatganj, Patna was hit with severe flooding, relief efforts to distribute food and medicine was routed through PACT and *Chauraha*, Aangan’s youth group for boys. In Uttar Pradesh, four PACT groups worked closely with the district Anti-Human Trafficking Unit (AHTU) during Operation Smile, the agency’s month-long targeted effort to identify missing children. As a result, it was reported that 19 children were missing. When the Madhya Pradesh government decided to set up a Village Legal Services Clinic under the National Legal Services Authority, it chose Jehangipura village in Sehore district because the district’s legal officer had attended a Parent’s Circle here and was impressed with the group. In Kaushal Nagar in Patna, Bihar, PACT mothers worked with the district health department to organise a three-day camp to support community members register for a health card under the National Health Insurance Scheme. Each electronic health card entitled a family to free health check-ups and Rs. 30,000 in medical support for operations or treatments. A total of 150 health cards were issued, benefitting around 600 children. In Deegha, Patna, PACT worked with the ICDS on their adolescent girl campaign to ensure menstrual safety and health. In Bhagwangola, West Bengal, two PACT members, a Shakti activator and a peer leader have been invited to be part of the block level child protection committee.



Conclusion

Aangan has been working on child protection issues for nearly fifteen years. While its work began with counselling programs in rescue and shelter homes for children who had been rescued, abandoned, trafficked or run away from home, Aangan's work has expanded a great deal since. Today, the organisation runs direct grassroots programs with children who live in urban and rural areas who are at risk of being harmed, creates groups of alert and empowered adults who volunteer as child protection workers in these same neighbourhoods, and it also works with the state to ensure that children who are rescued from harm are supported and rehabilitated back into their communities. In each program, children's safety is paramount.

Although this report focuses on the work and impact of the PACT program, PACT as well as Shakti and *Chauraha* circles are all aimed at creating a safety network for children on the ground. A large number of PACT mothers run Shakti circles and are privy to the thoughts, fears and desires of children in their community.

“If each of us stands up for a child, then all children will be safe.” In fact, what PACT’s work demonstrates is that even a small but committed group of people who listen to and stand up for children can make a tremendous difference.

Just belonging to these circles, breaks the sense of isolation that children feel, and motivates PACT women to create change. A fourteen year old talking about her life lamented, “When I come across a newspaper or magazine, I can only look at the pictures. I feel terrible because I cannot even identify a single alphabet. I have been wanting to go to school for a long time, but I’m not allowed to.”¹¹ As mentioned earlier in the report, women and adolescent girls have reported significant increase in their sense of agency, awareness and connection to safety networks, as well as their confidence and ability to access government services and support after participating in the PACT and Shakti programs.

Clearly PACT is bringing together women who are keen to make a change in their communities, who want to give their children a better life than they have had, and who are eager to be part of a larger cause and a world outside their homes. With Aangan’s support, they are educating themselves on child rights, sharing this information with their communities, trying to change mindsets and cultural practices that disempower children, and engaging and often partnering with the government to ensure that it delivers on its commitments to poor communities and to vulnerable children. *Shakti* and *Chauraha* groups have linked and supported around 60,000 adolescent girls and boys and another 80,000 people over the last two years alone have been linked to various forms of government assistance. This is no small number.

Child protection is hard work, sometimes secured through long and painstaking negotiation, sometimes through the intervention of the state, and not always successful. But it is always emotionally charged work. Each time the group manages to save a child from marriage, trafficking, harm or abuse, each time a child is enrolled and stays in school, the group feels a great sense of achievement and pride, and is motivated to take on more challenging issues. As Smriti, an Aangan field coordinator said, “I had thought all these issues were so complicated, but even I am amazed at how much the groups have managed to accomplish.” It is critical to expand

¹¹ Neeti Daftari (2015) Minor Issues in Major Cities: Child Vulnerabilities in Urban Slums. Aangan Report. pg 102
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such programs so that many more grassroots collectives can be established. Aangan plans to reach 75 locations in the next three years.

In November 2015, twelve PACT members from Wadala won the Mumbai Mirror's 'Mumbai Heroes' award for their dedication to protecting children in their community. As she accepted the award on behalf of the group, Vasanti, a member from the group said, "If each of us stands up for a child, then all children will be safe." In fact, what PACT's work demonstrates is that even a small but committed group of people who listen to and stand up for children can make a tremendous difference. |

** The names of the PACT women have been changed to protect their identity.*

