

Before, Not After

Highlights from the Evaluation of Aangan's preventative approach to child protection by Harvard FXB Centre for Health and Human Rights

"The prevailing focus on reactive response to children's rights violations urgently needs supplementing by creative, bottom up strategies that prioritize early engagement with known risky situations before, not after devastating harm occurs. Aangan's harm prevention work is a powerful example of interventions with potential to yield significant benefits to at risk children."

Education

Children in Aangan's intervention site were 30 percent less likely to be out of school: a crucial initial step to keeping children safe. This is true even for older, secondary school age children.

At Aangan's intervention location, 12.4 percent of primary school age children were not in school compared to 17.8 percent at the comparison site. These numbers more than double at the secondary school level, to 24.4 percent and 35.7 percent, respectively.

Unsafe routes to school and the lack of identity documents, particularly in migrant families, remain challenging issues.

Child Labor

Where Aangan intervened, 17.5 percent more children were able to combine school with work and child laborers worked 30 hours fewer per month than in the comparison site.

Aangan's approach to child labor prevention is to first aim for achievable marginal benefits: get working children to also study, reduce the number of hours they work and connect as many as possible to skill training that may make less exploitative work an option. In this endeavor, data suggested they have had success. In Aangan's intervention location, 76.5 percent of working children combined work with studies and spent 16.5 hours at work a week on average, whereas 59.0 percent of working children in the comparison site also studied while working 24 hours a week on average. In addition to working 7.5 fewer hours per week outside the house, children in Aangan's site also work an average of 12.5 fewer hours on household chores.

If assessed by international human rights standards, this would be considered an unacceptable compromise on children's right to be free of child labor. However, results indicate that an absolutist approach just does not appear realistic to local volunteers or families desperately trying to make ends meet.

Child Marriage

Aangan’s model has had a significant preventative effect on child marriage; and local women child protection volunteers were found to be particularly effective advocates against child marriage. In Aangan’s intervention location, 17 cases of impending child marriage were prevented over a two-year period (Aangan works in 500 such locations).

Results also indicate that Aangan’s program has significantly expanded knowledge of child marriage prevention resources and strategies and positively influenced social norms around this issue, particularly among children. In contrast, there was no discussion of prevention mechanisms and significantly lower levels of awareness of available resources at the comparison site. Those surveyed in Aangan’s intervention site also showed much higher awareness about the knock-on effects of child marriage on health and child protection.

Child Trafficking

In Aangan’s intervention site there was recognition of “paid-bride marriages” as a form of sex trafficking by officials, children and families.

While paid-bride marriage was not understood or articulated by officials or service providers previously, four surveyed officials in Aangan’s intervention site discussed “paid-bride marriages,” as instances of sex trafficking - a form of structural and sexual violence. Community women and girls in Aangan’s intervention also raised this as an issue in qualitative interviews, whereas nobody in the comparison site recognized or discussed this at all.

According to one of Aangan’s child protection volunteers:

“A Shakti (Aangan program) girl shared all this with me because in the past I have informed her about such marriages and brokers. She informed me that some people approached her family for marriage and said that they will give all these gifts. But the girl said that she refused... she said that on the basis of my information that I shared with her, she took the decision”

Personal Safety

Children in Aangan’s Safety Circles learn safety strategies recognize and have knowledge about risks. Girls are attending approximately half of the 12-session module on girl safety and show knowledge about risks and learn basic techniques for keeping safe, but there is no significant difference in self esteem among girls when measured using the General Self-Efficacy Scale and Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. Aangan’s most successful risk mapping mechanisms are the children’s safety circles where children feel safe to share stories and where women volunteers appear to hear of most potential cases of child harm. The children in these circles also create a physical map of their community, which led to identification of physical areas of high risk where men drink and gamble and where girls without toilets experience harassment and violence while walking to the public toilet. These maps are shared with the police with the result, as a teacher put it, that “the police now are patrolling around the area – eve-teasing and molestation cases are down as a result...”

Access to Social Protection

Enrollment to obtain free identity documents is higher and easier in Aangan’s intervention

site than in the comparison site. Families and service providers are also more aware of the role ID can play in child protection.

Quantitative results confirm that a larger proportion of residents in Aangan’s location had each of the identity documents of interest. The difference is statistically significant in the case of ration cards (20 percent difference) and PAN cards (16 percent difference). Activities undertaken by Aangan’s volunteers have also raised awareness around Aadhaar’s child protection benefits. For example, service providers and children discussed the system’s benefit for identifying and returning missing children.

Aangan’s volunteers were also found to be a useful resource in raising general appreciation for the importance of government schemes as a protective option among community members as well as for streamlining the enrollment process.

Results however show that even when successfully enrolled, the benefits of welfare schemes often do not reach eligible enrollees. This creates disillusionment among residents.

Strengthening Systems

Service providers in Aangan’s intervention site were found to be more effective and engaged in keeping children safe from harm than those in the comparison site. The work by Aangan’s volunteers relieved overburdened local providers, reduced ignorance of and indifference to child protection issues and reduced some instances of corruption.

The rate of use of the *anganwadi* was almost double in the Aangan location where volunteers did substantial work on the theme of health and risks of leaving children unsupervised.

Reporting to police remains low across locations, but is significantly higher where Aangan intervened. (7.4 percent compared to 2.1 percent where there was no Aangan intervention). Awareness about the function of emergency helpline *Childline* was also considerably higher in Aangan’s intervention site: 21.1 percent in contrast to 8.6 percent in the comparison site.)

Distrust between community members and service providers is much more acute in locations where Aangan did not intervene: in 21 qualitative interviews, respondents in the comparison site mentioned corruption, unreliability or malice by service providers a total of 38 times. Meanwhile, in Aangan’s intervention location, only 6 interviewees mentioned these issues a total of 10 times.

Priorities for Aangan: Key Challenges & Recommendations

Giving Women Child Protection Volunteers a Public Identity

To ensure local ownership and sustainability, Aangan encourages the women child protection volunteers to devise names for themselves and not be formally affiliated with Aangan but rather be “anchored” in local communities and perceived as local resources. This is true across locations. Data, however, suggests that more consistent “branding” of the volunteer women could make the residents of their communities more likely to hear about their efforts, and therefore more willing to reach out or refer their neighbors. An association with a recognizable group may also increase authority and bargaining power of the women child protection volunteers.

Working with Boys

Study results show that the girls' *Shakti* program is more discussed and better attended than the boys' *Chauraha* program. This could be because girls are more enthusiastic to learn from women than boys are, or because people assume that the volunteers who name their groups female-friendly names such as *Udaan Mahila Sanghatan* work only for women/girls. This gender imbalance is not just true of program attendance: of the 13 children that reported they had asked a volunteer for help, only one was male.

Improving Volunteers' Skills to Support Child Victims of Abuse

Data indicate that volunteer women's efforts make a significant difference for select children in the intervention site who have suffered instances of child abuse. Nevertheless, the strength of the taboo around these instances of violence and the fact that community members do not associate the volunteers with any outside authority (Aangan or otherwise), limits their ability to raise awareness about these serious rights violations or prevent them before they happen. There is scope for Aangan to help improve the volunteer women's technical skills to address these difficult cases of child abuse, and provide support in individual cases. In particular, the women volunteers need to increase engagement in intervening on child abuse, especially incidents happening in and around the home.

Removing Children from Work

Results point to a prevalent social norm among both the volunteers and residents against child labor that precludes schooling entirely, but not against child labor per se. In both the intervention site and the comparison site there is almost no awareness around the legal age limit for child work and little discussion of the health implications of child labor. Children in both locations are engaged in work that is potentially hazardous. Aangan could focus on improving community understanding about the long-term health risks to children so that despite economic need, child work is less normalized.

Limitations of Volunteerism

The evaluation raised questions about volunteerism and the sustainability of local organizing approaches. While there are substantial non-material benefits of participation for the women volunteers, whose activism and leadership make them role models, they are poor women who have considerable financial and time commitments of their own, so these benefits often do not outweigh the opportunity costs of this time-intensive and difficult work. In the long run, Aangan aims for these trained volunteer women to be absorbed into existing government services. The potential of this powerful idea – that state employees working in underprivileged communities should be drawn from the ranks of engaged residents – is underscored by the fact that the most popular of the women volunteers also hold positions as paid government healthcare workers.