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[**RUN-AWAY BRIDES**]

Understanding Marriages of Choice by Young People in
Kolkata & Malda

TALASH

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WHY THIS MAPPING EXERCISE?

The Existing Context

Upheld and sanctioned by traditional customs, child marriage is still significantly practiced across India. A UNICEF Report prepared for state consultation on Child Marriage in West Bengal in November 2009 states that over 39.5% of Indian girls are married before they are 18 years and 25.4% of girls are married by the age of 15 and that West Bengal has the 7th highest percentage of underage marriages amongst all states. According to National Family Health Survey-3, 2005-2006 data, 56% of girls are married by the age of 18 in West Bengal. It has been discussed time and again that child marriage is a violation of child rights and that it has serious consequences on the well-being of the child. It denies a child her basic right to care and protection, good health, nutrition, education and freedom from violence, abuse and exploitation. In the article, *“At What Age...Are school-children employed, married, and taken to court? Second Edition” The Right to Education Project, U.S. Department of State (2005)*; it has been mentioned that *the International Convention on the Rights of the Child does not directly address the problem of child marriage, although it upholds the right of children to be protected from harmful traditional practices. The 1990 African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child prohibits marriage under age 18.* It results in children remaining illiterate and unskilled which in turn limits their opportunities for economic employment and economic independence as an adult. In the year 2000, Supreme Court of India handed down a decision requiring married couples to register their consent to be married and their age with local authorities, to better enforce the law establishing 18 as the minimum age of marriage. Child marriage also has serious health implications in forms of early and frequent pregnancies, abortion and early motherhood. It also makes them vulnerable to domestic violence and abuse. According to a survey by ICRW & its partners in states of Bihar & Jharkhand in 2004, named, *Child Marriage Violates Girls’ Human Rights, girls who were married before 18 were twice as likely to report being beaten, slapped or threatened by their husbands than girls who married later. They were three times as likely to report being forced to have sex without their consent.* Thus prevention of child marriage has remained a major issue in the development sector interventions.

Interventions & research studies on child marriage have primarily associated child marriage with education & poverty. Education and poverty have been seen as major causes for child marriage along with lack of proper implementation of the law & civil society actions. The study *Different Perspectives of Child Marriage, by ICRW in 2008* mentions that *child marriage is associated with lower levels of schooling for girls and that educating girls creates many positive outcomes for economic development and poverty reduction by improving a girl’s income-earning potential and socio-economic status.* Hussain, R. and A.H. Bittles (1999) in the article *“Consanguineous marriage and differentials in age at marriage, contraceptive use, and fertility in Pakistan”*; *Journal of Biosocial Science 31(1)* points that *in India and Pakistan, increased school enrollment has been associated with a decline in marriage among girls younger than 14 years.* In *Delaying Marriage for Girls in India: A Formative Research to Design Interventions for Changing Norms* by ICRW, March 2011, also mentions lack of public awareness and

weak enforcement of the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006 as a significant deterrent to prevention of child marriage.

The National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2005) in Growing Up Global: The Changing Transitions to Adulthood in Developing Countries mentions that in almost all developing countries, child marriage is more common among the poorest people than the wealthiest. Recent research shows that household economic status is a key factor in determining the timing of marriage for girls (along with education and urban-rural residence, with rural girls more likely to marry young). In fact, girls living in poor households are approximately twice as likely to marry before 18 than girls living in better-off households.

The interventions preventing child marriage have also focused on importance of education of the girl child, addressing poverty and also the proper enactment of law along with generating awareness about the law. Life Skills training has also been identified as a way to make the child aware of the ill-effects of child marriage and also empower her with information about the legal & other services available.

- UNFPA in partnership with UNICEF & WHO has adopted the strategy of providing life skills and counseling so that adolescent girls are aware of their rights and know about available services. They have also considered developing vocational training and income generation programs for adolescent girls to increase their status, independence and opportunities.
- The organization IHMP of Pune has initiated Life Skills program for adolescents focusing on school drop outs and working girls. The Life Skills program aims to promote social status of adolescent girls by developing their skills on gender, legal literacy and team building. It also works towards improving health status of adolescent girls through provision of cognitive & practical skills on nutrition and health. They also work towards increasing self-esteem & self-confidence of girls by involving them in community projects in arts & crafts.
- Nistha of West Bengal is also addressing child marriage by keeping girls in schools and initiating vocational training programs for adolescent girls, along with providing them necessary support to start a business.
- UNICEF is working towards proper enforcement of legislation preventing child marriage and raise public awareness about child marriage as a violation of girls' human rights. They are mobilize girls, boys, parents & leaders to change gender-adverse social norms, that includes gender discrimination, low value of girls, and religious and cultural justifications while also promoting girls' rights and life opportunities.

A bulk of interventions combatting child marriage is also focused on the reproductive & sexual health aspects.

- The project *Sanjivani* by Azad Foundation of India is under the ARSH program of National Foundation of India, New Delhi. The project is being implemented in different rural areas across India. The project mainly educates and provides information to adolescent girls on reproductive & sexual health issues. The project also addresses delaying early marriage & early pregnancy.
- The programme run by UNFPA in partnership with UNICEF & WHO also ensures meeting reproductive health needs of adolescent girls through youth friendly services. They are also

mobilizing support of decision makers at all levels to support programs aimed at improving adolescent sexual & reproductive health.

- Nistha in West Bengal runs health clinics for women & girls along with educating school children on their reproductive health & hygiene issues.

In the *New Insights for Preventing Child Marriage: A Global Analysis for Factors & Programs*, by USAID & ICRW in 2007, existing programs on child marriage were identified by web based research & analyzed for their contents. The report mentioned that the initiative is a *strong start*, but an expanded program scan is needed to better capture programs addressing child marriage and to evaluate their affectivity. Analyzing the programme scan the study suggested that

- Child marriage programs are few compared to the incidence and also the unique health, social, educational and economic needs of married girls are underserved by existing child marriage programs.
- Efforts to reduce child marriage span a range of sectors that include education, health, legal, policy and economic.
- The approaches include community sensitization, awareness-raising and life-skills education.
- Monitoring and evaluation, a valuable tool for determining best practices and identifying effective programs for scaling up, is rare among child marriage programs.

Talash's Context

Talash, an organization working on issues of personal safety, defining personal safety in an interconnected space of gender, sexuality, mental health & human rights started one of its interventions with adolescent girls from government aided schools in Dhakuria-Jadavpur-Santoshpur-Baghajatin-Patuli-Garia regions of South Kolkata in 2010. Personal Safety Trainings of Talash aims to equip children with perspectives, knowledge and skills for combating situations of abuse and violations with ease, efficiency and control.

Talash has been and is working with girls of classes VIII to X of these schools on issues of child marriage, with the aim of empowering girls with different personal safety tools. Among the other tools, Talash is particularly focusing on *Eleven Steps to Safer Decision Making* (a tool prepared by talash) to enable girls make safer decisions. Besides, sessions also include ways of dealing with fear, understanding one's own feelings/emotions and being able to deal with situations of crisis. The methodology implemented by Talash across its sessions is *learning by doing*, where these young girls are made to undergo different situations through role play and other games & exercises, designed by Talash.

Through this intervention, Talash has been witnessing an aspect of child marriage where adolescent girls are eloping with men/boys of their choice to marry, ignoring the fact that these marriages do not have sanctions of their parents/guardians. Such incidents are not few and far between as Talash encounters this across schools, the incidents starting as early as class V, when the girl is hardly 11-12 years old. Talash finds that the most number of occurrences of incidents of elopement is between the ages of 13-15 years. The boys with whom the relationships are formed are often underage themselves, but with

easy access to cash in some form or the other. These girls get dropped out from studies in the process. In certain cases (a major number) parents take initiative to get the child back and let her continue studies till she complete X/XII. In both situations, girls have been found to undergo immense emotional instability, lacking confidence and will to decide on any future course of action that would allow them take charge of their lives. Talash has also encountered cases where girls are resisting parent's initiatives & decisions to bring them back. This resistance is being expressed in different ways that include refusal to go back to school, to continue studies, attempting suicide/physical harms. To further understand the issue, Talash had several informal discussions with other NGOs working on adolescent issues who shared similar concerns.

Based on such experiential findings during interactions with girls in these government aided schools of Talash decided to understand the context, situations that are leading to increase in such occurrences. Thus the mapping process was planned as an explorative study aimed at developing a comprehensive understanding of the issue of adolescent girls entering marriage on their own much before 18 years as against being forced by the family. The mapping process was thus initiated in the government aided schools that Talash works in with the following objectives

Understand -

- Aspirations, desires, needs & situations of adolescent girls leading to early relationship formation & underage marriage
- Abuse and coercion within intimate relationship, elopement & early marriage, if any
- Responses of parents, teachers, education institutions to such behaviour and practices of adolescent girls
- Existing coping mechanisms in the different situations that arise out of such incidents
- Scopes & ways to position this issue within existing discourses & interventions on child marriage that focus on education of girl child, life skills training, creating income opportunity for through vocational trainings, empowering the girl with perspectives of gender, legal literacy & information on available services and reproductive & sexual needs of adolescent girls
- Advocacy areas to address this issue in the existing government schemes & programs, like Sarba Siksha Mission
- Effective ways & possibilities of combating such incidents through Talash's own interventions of personal safety trainings with adolescent girls

Part I: Experiences from Kolkata

THE PROCESS - METHODOLOGY

The mapping process aimed at developing an in-depth understanding of the issue through interactions with different stakeholders. As it was more of forming, formulating & understanding the issues, Talash organized different formal and informal discussions with stakeholders. These discussions were mostly semi-structured and in certain occasions even non-structured. The mapping study has not delved into any quantitative aspects at this stage. The mapping process was conducted in 20 government aided schools of South Kolkata within education circle of 12, 13, 14, 17 & Tollygaunge of Sarba Siksha Mission. Talash has conducted the mapping process in following ways

Interactions with -

- Girls of classes VII to X
- Teachers & headmistress of these schools
- Parents of these adolescent girls with support from the Mothers-Teachers Associations in the schools
- *Siksha-Bandhu* who are representatives of the Sarba Siksha Mission and are responsible for looking into drop-outs, getting girls enrolled in the schools

Talash also conducted a web-based literature review of existing researches and interventions to understand the different contexts of child marriage in order to be able to position this issue within existing discourses and interventions.

MAPPING AMONG WHOM? – THE PROFILES

The mapping process was conducted among adolescent girls from different government aided schools where Talash runs its interventions.

- Girls attending these schools are from the slums & urban squatter settlements of South Kolkata in the areas of Sahid Smriti Colony (off E.M.Bypass), Renia (near Tolly nala), Mukundapur and Dhakuria-Panchanantala areas beside the railway tracks. The families of these girls in most cases have migrated to Kolkata from the neighbouring districts in search of work. Thus they often have their ancestral homes in these districts, but interactions & their profiles reveal that in most cases they have remote linkages with these ancestral homes. Girls stay with their parents in rented rooms – usually in one room spaces, with no separate kitchen & a common toilet.
- They usually walk to schools as there are no direct bus routes from their homes to school. They are required to make break journeys by buses & autos to reach school & back home. This is expensive, often requiring Rs30-Rs40 per day. It takes an approximate time of 40 minutes to 1 hour for them to walk to school from their homes. This also makes them irregular to school as they cannot afford to

walk such distance if unwell or during rainy seasons. In one of the interactions, a father who is a rickshaw puller mentioned that *he drops his daughters to school as it takes them over an hour to walk the distance. He finds it difficult to do this on a regular basis as it hampers his daily earnings!* A section of girls commute by cycles, but this section is definitely not the majority. The girls having cycles are often found to double carry their friends to school and back home.

- There are also girls coming from Baruipur, Narendrapur & Sonarpur areas by train as these schools are mostly located at walking distance from the railway stations of Dhakuria, Jadavpur & Baghajatin.
- Girls are from low income group families with an average approximate earning of Rs3000-4000 per month. More than 25% of girls interacted with as a part of the mapping process have reported to have family income around Rs2000 per month.
- In most cases, mothers are principle bread-earners of the families working as domestic help, *Ayahs* or vendors. Majority of the girls Talash interacted with mentioned their mothers to be providing for their education. Fathers are mostly van & rickshaw pullers, vendors, milkman, masons or engaged in other works in the unorganized labour market. Girls & mothers also mentioned that fathers are not regular for work and in most cases contribute a minimum to the family.
- Girls also come from single parent families, where they stay with their mothers. There are also girls who stay with their relatives with father/mother providing for their expenses, but both married elsewhere.
- A formidable section of the girls interacted with (approximately 75%) are first generation learners. It is interesting to note that in cases where the girls have elder sisters, the elder sisters are the first in the family to complete X/XII. Elder brothers mostly leave studies by class VII/VIII and opt for earning in whatever ways possible.
- Girls interacted with reported of having to complete the daily household chores of washing dishes, cleaning the house and often cooking before coming to school as mothers go out for work early in the morning.
- Teachers & headmistresses reported that a small section (less than 5%) also assist their mothers in their economic activities. They would work in houses where their mothers work as domestic helps in situations when mothers are sick and cannot attend work for days together. Girls also assist their parents in cases where they run small shops or tea stalls in the locality by opening & looking after the shops/stalls in absence of parents. Interestingly however girls did not mention of this engagements in their interactions with Talash.

FINDINGS FROM THE PROCESS

Response & Attitude of Girls

Relationship Formation, Elopement & Marriage

In all the interactions, girls have unanimously agreed that incidents of elopement & marriage are largely prevalent in schools & community. Discussions have revealed that forming relationship is a very common place thing, happening to almost every girl. In fact girls with no relationship *are teased by friends and not considered worthy enough*. They add *boyfriends are for time pass* and speak overwhelmingly of the *different gifts that are given by boyfriends*. These gifts are mostly cosmetics, jewelry and mobile phones. It appeared from the discussions that these gifts are a prime attraction in a relationship, getting things that are otherwise inaccessible to them as parents will not oblige to such requests made by the girl. These relationships also allow them access to shopping malls, coffee shops, cinemas that are otherwise inaccessible to them. *It is a lot of fun, going to places where parents will never take us to they say*. These shopping malls, cinema halls are usually in a locality that is far away from their residential areas, such that they do not get caught. They shared different instances where girls bunk school to go to these places. Both parents being away since the morning, it is difficult for them to keep track of her daughter's whereabouts. That relationships are of great attraction to them was evident from all the interactions with girls. They fantasize their relationships as those seen in different films; their idea of love & romance almost entirely shaped by the Bengali films they have access to.

Speaking of elopement & marriage they said that *parents do not approve of our relationships...they think that these boys are 'bad'*. Discussing whether such thoughts of parents have any base, there was a mixed response. A section also remained absolutely silent faced with this query. A major section however said that there is a truth in what parents have to say as they have seen many cases where the girl had to suffer severe torture from her husband and in-laws and return to her natal family. But they were unable to articulate why girls elope even after knowing such incidents. The only response was that *when in love one does not think of all these*. There was also another response that said that *boy-friends will leave the girls if they do not pay heed to their requests of running away & getting married*. Though they were unable to articulate reasons behind such elopement, discussions made it evident that dreams of a different life, a life of gifts & pampering, going to places and enjoying a certain degree of freedom that is otherwise impossible while living with parents are major triggers that makes her elope & marry. Another factor that also surfaced from discussions was that these relationships are sharing spaces for these girls. They enjoy all the attention, care that they get from their boyfriends. To put in words of a girl Talash interacted with in the process, *he always remembers my likes and dislikes*. Positioned in the context of their families where parents are always hard pressed for time & money, busy to earn livelihood to meet the basic needs of life; the fact that they get a lot of attention from their boyfriends & they fulfill their desires for different things becomes overwhelming. Even being aware of

the different dire consequences that these relations often have, they find it difficult resist. It is there only avenue to a certain wish fulfillment that otherwise mostly remains out of their bounds.

About the boys

Boys they form relationships with are often school-going. Some of these boys are quite elder to them, have dropped out working in small factories, and owns tea-stalls, pan-stalls or working as wage earners or working as electricians, auto-drivers, conductors & drivers of buses. In most cases boys are from the same locality, who they meet with on their way to school & tuition. They also get acquainted with boys in tuition classes and while commuting in trains. Interactions and relationships are also formed when they attend different marriage parties and/or during the festive seasons. These boys are not necessarily from the same locality. From the interactions it becomes evident that these boys spend on the girls meeting their various demands. The fact remains that this cash is not of handsome amounts as most of them are working in the unorganized labour market. But as they themselves have very limited access to cash (maximum of Rs50 a month), the cash amount spent by the boys appears overwhelming to them. Discussions also revealed that many of these boys have different kind of addiction, alcohol being the commonest.

Elopement-Marriage & Drop-out

According to them relationships starts as early as 11 years, a fact that was also confirmed by parents in course of interactions with them. *Girls do not elope in class V but they definitely do have relationships*, they said. There were yet others who countered this statement saying that girls do elope and get married in class V also. They shared an incident that happened last year in their school where *a girl of class V eloped and married a man who was much elder to her. The man stayed in the same locality as the girl. He earns by supplying drinking water in the nearby localities. Her parents tried to bring her back but the man did not allow that and presently the girl is staying with him. She has dropped out of school.* Interestingly girls mentioned that the man married her at such a young age *because she had a very developed body, hinting at breasts!* It so appeared that incidents of elopement are predominantly among girls of class VII onwards. In another incident shared by girls, *a girl of class VIII eloped and married with her classmate's brother, who was studying in class IX. The girl's parents were initially resistant and wanted to take her back, but later accepted the marriage. They however urged her to continue studies from her in-laws house and were willing to provide for her education. They also spoke to the headmistress who was willing to take her back to school. The headmistress requested the girl to come to school without the signs of marriage (vermillion) as there might be opposition from other parents, if they came to know about it. The girl's parents had no objection to this, but the girl's husband resisted saying that removing the vermillion by the girl would cause harm to him as girls wear it for their husband's good health & life! Thus the girl had to drop out. The boy also dropped his studies and is presently working as daily labour. The girl's classmate who is presently her sister-in-law is however continuing her education, whereas the girl now has to do all the household chores.* Girls narrated several such stories of dropping out of studies. In most cases where the girl is staying with her husband in the in-laws house they have dropped-out; the ones who are pursuing studies are the ones who has been brought back by their parents.

How do parents react?

Faced with this, girls almost unanimously agreed that parents do not approve of such relationship. *They want to marry us to families that are economically better than us, where the boy has some sort of regular earning after we complete class X/XI/XII.* They also mentioned that in maximum cases of elopement, parents take a lot of initiative to get the girl back, getting her back to school. *Parents start thinking of marriage once the girl turns 17-18 years,* they mentioned. At the same time they pointed this non-acceptance by parents of their daughter's relationship as a major reason for girls choosing to elope and get married. *Once they come to know of our relationships they almost invariably restrict our movements, not allowing us to talk to anybody and remain at home.* Further discussions on this revealed that this restrictive attitude of parents is a major trigger to girls eloping.

In this context, girls have also mentioned that parents are not willing to accept their daughters talking to boys/men even out of friendship. *They think that whenever we are talking to any boy it is a relationship, which is always not the case. Can't we have simple boyfriends,* they asked. Parents do not approve of having any associated with boys/men – be it friends or relationships, *they are not willing to accept the logic from us that these boys are just our friends as we are friends with girls!*

Do parents force marriages?

There were very few instances where girls shared that parents force them to marry even before completing school. They shared one incident where the girl's parents sent her to her grandparents in the village after coming to know of her affair with a local boy. Whether the girl is continuing her education in the village is not known to them. In other cases, they have spoken of parents not allowing her to go out of the house for a certain period as punishment. There was only one more incident shared by them where the parents stopped education of their elder daughter after the younger one eloped and got married. Parents had stopped school for the elder sister as the younger sister had developed a relation on her way to & from school and also eloped on her way to school. But the major response was that parents do not pester about marriage till class X/XI/XII and they persuade daughters to go ahead with studies and not continue with such relationship. There was however a section of girls studying in the Higher Secondary schools (class XII) who mentioned that once girls have completed their secondary examinations, parents do not hesitate to marry their daughters off if their find a match that they think is suitable for her. Further discussions made it clear that there exists a trend among parents of being on the lookout for an appropriate match after the girl completes her secondary board exams.

Outcome of such marriages

That these marriages are most often not happy was a common refrain in all the discussions. They narrated incidents where the girl was severely tortured by her husband and in-laws. They reported of the girl having to do the entire household chores at such a young age. Girls narrated an incident where a friend of theirs eloped & married when she was in class VII. She was married in the same locality where she once stayed and thus had many of her school friends near her in-laws house. *Not even a year into the marriage the girl has talked about her bad luck to her school friends and expressed how she longed*

to return to school, which her in-laws would never allow. Incidents of the boy abandoning the girl after marriage & after she got pregnant also surfaced in the discussion. The girl was then forced to return to her parent's house, often with a child, as she has no other places to go to seeking food & shelter. They have shared incidents where the girl eloping to get married and her new-born child remained ill for major part. *The girl was so beautiful, but seeing her now one hardly gets to recognize her, she is suffering from many diseases,* they said. They also shared different incidents where the girl faced domestic violence but had to carry on as she had no other alternative at that point. Interestingly they were unable to share incident of a happy marriage from those they have seen around them, where girls have eloped & chosen to marry on their own.

Sexual Exposures

Initially girls were hesitant discussing sexual relationships. They mentioned that couples do hold hands, kiss but were not comfortable discussing beyond. From the bits & pieces that came across, formation of sexual relationship was common and it happened with girls from as early as class VI/VII (12-13 years). They shared 2-3 incidents where the girl got pregnant before marriage and her parents had to send her elsewhere (house of relatives) to get an abortion done. As there was a resistance discussing the issue, Talash did not probe much into the area.

Response & Attitude of Teachers & Headmistresses

Relationship Formation, Elopement & Marriage

Teachers & headmistresses in the interactions shared that Incidents of forced underage marriage by parents are decreasing as against girls eloping and getting married on their own. The trend has been steadily on the rise since past 4-5 years, starting as early as class VI. Such incidents were also there in the past, they said, but it happened among girls of classes IX, X & even higher classes. According to them these relationships are an escape route for girls from their hard reality. It is a promise to them to enter a better life with better conditions of living. *Our girls live in a dream world about these relationships, marriage; the dream shaped & reinforced by media, films etc.* Media and the reel life create aspirations that mismatch with their real life, yet there remains an indomitable desire to match up, to imitate. Headmistress of a school shared an incident where a girl of class V got her boyfriend's name written on her hand. When the class teacher interrogated her she said that she had got the name written as the boy loved her & the boyfriend was also reading in class VII. Following this, her parents were called. When the girl's father tried to discipline her, persuading her not to continue the relationship, the boyfriend along with his friends went and beat up the girl's father!

When in a relation it is almost impossible to make them see the flip side & moreover not that they do not know! They themselves know so many incidents where the girl has returned unable to bear torture of her husband and in-laws, or incidents where the boy has entered into another relation and abandoned her! Teachers & headmistresses have also attributed family situations of girls for such occurrences. According

to them, *most of the cases of relationship formation and elopement are with girls who are from broken or disturbed families.*

Teachers have also talked about a major change in aspirations of girls in recent years. In their words, *girls are seen to be carrying expensive mobile phones, hanging out at the near-by shopping malls after schools regularly. During parent-teachers meetings, increasing number of parents complain that girls demand expensive clothing and accessories.* This increasing demand has been identified by teachers as another reason for girls entering into relationship at an early age. According to the teachers, girls mostly enter into early relationships as it is perhaps their only way to fulfill their desires for commodities like mobile phone, fashion accessories & several other things that are otherwise inaccessible to them as their parents are not in a position to afford them.

Peer pressure has been attributed as another reason for such increase in relationship formation. There is also a growing tendency to think that not having a relationship is unfashionable and makes one less worthy among their friends.

Elopement, Marriage & Drop Outs

Teachers & headmistresses pointed out that financial adversity of families are seldom causing of drop out for girls in recent times. As per the Right to Education Act, education is absolutely free till class VIII, along with mid-day meal provided. *Sarba Siksha Mission* also provides with books and school dresses. Apart from this, often HM and teachers take initiative to create special funds from their own subscription to assist children who are in need of money to continue their education, be it buying copies, paying examination fees or any other needs. Presently, the main reason of drop outs is elopement and early marriages. They narrated several instances when the parents wanted to get the girl re-admitted even after she eloped, HMs making all attempts to take the girl back; but the girl refused to cooperate & continue education. Education is the least priority to girls, is what teachers feel. There have been only 3-4 cases in Talash's limited experience where the girl has successfully been reintegrated into the school and has continued with her education.

How do parents respond?

Even while admitting that parents do not have the time and capacity to deal with such situations yet they are pro-active and often go out of their ways to get the girl back from where she has eloped and get her back to school. One of the HM narrated an incident where *the girl was trafficked by her boyfriend. The father who owned a shop in the market place was also an active member of the shopkeepers union. He mobilized all his possible connections at the level of the union to reach the Chief Minister and got the police activated. Having gone this far, the father traced the daughter with the help of police in a brothel in Pune. She had to be put in a shelter home as a case was registered against her boyfriend & his friends for trafficking her. Once again the father mobilized all his connections to get her out of the shelter home, got her back home and also re-admitted her to the school. All this while, different groups to which the boyfriend belonged to threatened the father, threatening to cause harm to his younger daughter. However, the boys against whom the case was registered also got free through*

the connections that they had. On being released, the boy once again started meeting the girl and managed to convince her that he was not guilty and that it was his friends who were responsible. Thus once again the girl started interacting with the boy and the boy took this opportunity to re-traffic her. Her father once again left no stone unturned, used all his political connections to bring her back once again. He once again approached the HM who extended all support. The headmistress got her re-admitted to school and also played an important role to eventually convince her of the reality that it was the guy who got her trafficked on both occasions. Currently the girl is continuing her studies and doing well.

Parents are opposed to their daughters forming relationships at an early age and tries to bring them back even after they elope in most of the cases. They seek help from the school, particularly the HM in trying to convince their daughters about the mistakes they have made such that they can continue with their studies. In another such incident, *a girl got in relationship with a man much elder to her who worked in a local telephone shop where she used to regularly go to re-charge her cell phone. She eloped with him, got married. The man was not a local resident. He was from Howrah. He took the girl there. It was quite a remote village area of the Howrah district. He however continued his work in Calcutta while the girl stayed their alone with her in-laws. She became tired of all the household chores she had to do there and thus fled and returned home. Her family accepted her back, spoke to the boy with whom she got married and convinced him to allow her to stay with her parents and continue studies. The girl's family members then approached the HM who re-admitted the girl back to the school. The girl is presently attending school normally without any signs and symbols of her marriage.* Speaking about parents efforts to bring their daughters back even after they have eloped, another HM narrated an incident where *the father mobilized all his resources to get his daughter back from Tatanagar, after coming to know that she was taken there. Unable to adjust with the boy's family, the girl herself managed to get in touch with her father to tell him her situation. The family did never hesitate to get the daughter back. She is back in school now.*

Teachers and HMs mentioned that girls often do not cooperate with their parents in situations when they are forcefully brought back by parents after their elopement. They refuse to continue studies. Even after parents and teachers trying all ways to get her back to education, she resists by not coming to school, not studying. HM of a school have also shared an incident where *a girl caused several injuries on herself with a blade in the class because her parents had brought her back after her elopement and got her re-admitted to school.*

Once they come to know of the relationships parents also try rectifying their daughters through different punitive and restrictive measures. But in most cases these measures fail and the girls become all the more adamant and seek to free herself by eloping & getting married to her boyfriend.

Teachers have however expressed that there are a small section of parents who turn blind eye to incidents of their daughters roaming about with boys. Even when reported from the school about

certain activities and behaviours of the girls, the parents stand in complete denial and say that their daughters can never do such things.

Outcomes of such Marriages

Most of these marriages are unsuccessful, responded the teachers & HMs. Some of the girls face severe domestic violence. *Most of the boys are not involved in economic activity, why at all would the boy's family accept the girls, they say.* Speaking about violence, HM of a school has shared an incident where *the girl was thrown in a nearby pond by her in-laws as she was not performing the household chores well. The girl was however rescued by her parents and has been readmitted to school, but she keeps majorly ill!* They shared another incident where *after elopement the girl was sexually tortured by her boyfriend & his friends. The girl's mother brought her back, but is unable to keep her home as the boy and his friends are threatening the mother of kidnapping the girl! The mother had got the daughter re-admitted to school, but she cannot attend school anymore as the mother had to send her elsewhere to a relative's place to protect her from being kidnapped!*

Teachers & HMs also expressed that percentage of girls continuing education after returning from situations of elopement is low. Though parents are interested to get the child back to school, she resists in different ways. There was an incident where a girl being readmitted to school cut her hands and legs brutally with a blade while in class.

Combating the Situation

Teachers spoke of trying different informal ways to assist the girl & her family – provide financial assistance where needed, taking her back to school even after she elopes, makes it a point to keep the matter confidential such that the girl is not questioned, talking to her when required. *There is no stated formal ways that we can address this problem.* Almost all teachers and headmistresses in the interactions mentioned that they give utmost priority in maintaining confidentiality about the matter such that the girl once re-admitted can continue her studies without facing any sort of difficult questions from any corner of the school. However, HMs themselves regularly interact with the girl trying to motivate her in different ways. Besides, HMs have also spoken about organizing different scholarships to provide financial assistance for girls who are in very difficult situation. HMs of different secondary schools have also spoken about organizing scholarships for the girls even after they have completed their board exams to enable them continue their studies further.

Talking about Life Style Education as being a way to talk and generate awareness on these issues, they have mentioned that the existing Life Styles Education do not deal with such issues. Moreover, teachers are not capacitated to take these classes, as they feel inhibited to talk on these issues with girls. *There needs to be a demarcated line between a teacher & a student. Discussing such issues openly will blur that line creating difficulties teaching them.* HMs have expressed their opinions that there needs to be specific teachers who would have the skills & capacity to take such classes effectively.

Speaking about role SSM can play in combating such situations, headmistresses have mentioned that *SSM has been supportive, but its role has been limited to providing mid-day meal, uniform, text books. The complex issues of elopement of girls, underage marriages as being reasons of dropout has not found much importance with the SSM.* They also pointed to the need of SSM playing a more proactive role in the context of gender sensitive education.

Response & Attitude of Parents

Relation Formation, Elopement & Marriage

The interactions with parents were mostly with mothers with only 2-3 fathers being part of the process. Across discussions parents expressed their concerns in different ways about growing tendencies of their daughters' to get involved in relationships at an early age. In situations of opposition by parents, girls are taking help of friends to elope with the boy/man of their choice and get married in complete defiance of parents. Parents expressed their helplessness in controlling their daughters as *we remain busy throughout the day for livelihood. Girls stay alone at home for major parts of the day. How can we keep a regular watch on their activities?* Further discussions on this revealed that parents and children live in two different worlds that are almost incommensurable. Parents expressed at length their anxiety over not being able to understand their children's demands, their wants and desires. There is also no attempt towards conversation of any sort; all the conversation that seemed to happen is scolding the girl and holding her responsible for almost everything happening to her & her family. The absence of this dialogue is also explicitly expressed in conversations with the girls where they have spoken of not being understood by their parents and facing different levels of punishments from them.

Parents also pointed to the increasing demands by girls for different expensive dresses, cosmetics, jewelry, mobile phones; things that see their favourite heroines wearing. They are severely impacted by what they see in the television. *We are unable to meet this growing demand; it is beyond our economic capacities.* But girls are not willing to stop at the minimum that her parents capable of meeting. They constantly try finding ways to get access to such things. *The boys take advantage of this, they lure the girls with such gifts and girls get trapped* is what the parents have to say.

Parents also expressed their concern in growing disinterest of girls in studies & lack of motivation to perform well in schools. Even though economically not well off, parents are providing money for tuition support to the girl so that she can perform well. They have expressed their desire to get their girls complete X/XII and be in a better situation than they are in. But girls are often not going to the coaching classes or even if they go they are exchanging mobile numbers with boys, making friends and gradually developing relationships. Parents have identified mobile phones as a *real problem – we do not know how to control this...even when we are not allowing they are getting access in whatever ways...numbers get circulated almost instantly.*

About the boys

Parents also expressed their concern about profiles of boys with whom their daughters are getting involved. Most of them are of similar ages or slightly elder (in most cases they are less than 21 years), dropped out of education, with no proper income. The situation of the boy's family is equally dismal. The boys are mostly from the same area where the girls stay. These boys mostly work irregularly here and there managing to get some cash in hand which he then spends after girls to get them attracted towards him.

Elopement, Marriage & Drop Out

Parents pointed out that in most cases they try to be supportive. They by all means bring back the child from where she has eloped. The community is also supportive in most cases to help the parents to get back her daughter. *We speak to the school authority, particularly the headmistress, confess the situation and request her support to get our daughters back to school.* The school is also supportive in almost all cases. But it is the girl who does not cooperate and discontinue studies. *It is not possible for us to sit at home to see whether she is going to school, studying. Thus after a point of time we have no option but to give up. The girls discontinue their studies and remain at home. This is an added tension for us as we would not know if she elopes yet again.*

Discussing elopement, marriage and drop outs, parents expressed their helplessness. They mentioned *we are really at a loss to understand what we can do...we try whatever we can...we scold them, try and restrict their movements as much as possible...but these often do not provide any respite...and we cannot spend all our time on this...we have to go for work, else there will be no food at home & that is fundamental!*

Outcome of such Marriages

Girls are mostly unable to stay in these kinds of marriages, said the parents. They are tortured, beaten up often return to the natal family with a sick child. They are forced to do all the household chores, not given proper food. That is the reason why parents bring them back and try ways to convince her to complete class X/XI/XII, at least she would be in a better situation to negotiate since she can think of earning money with a certain education qualification.

It is interesting to note that the honour of the family being at stake in the event of the girl eloping did not surface in the interactions. In discussing reactions of community people to such incidents they responded saying *this happens in almost all houses – who would point finger?* Parents expressed no inhibitions in getting their daughters back from these marriages, removing the different signs of marriage and getting her back to school.

THE CHALLENGES & CONCERNS

Approach towards the issue

In all the interactions that Talash had with adults about the problem, the central approach remained disciplining the child in whatever ways possible. Both teachers and parents sought help from Talash in disciplining their children, getting them away from relationships and other such *bad* things. The focus was more on rectifying the child with varying degrees of punitive measures. It is the adults who have been deciding what remains best for her without her participation anywhere in the process. Except for a very few instances, the involvement & participation of the child in ways to deal with the issue is significantly absent.

Interestingly however, all interactions with teachers, headmistresses and parents have pointed fingers at and blamed adolescent girls for their behaviour, for being friendly & entering into relationship with boys, for developing desires & aspirations that is not in line with their economic status, for desiring expensive dresses & mobiles, for lacking motivation to study and so on.

There is perhaps a need to look beyond punishments and blaming the adolescent girl. There is an urgent need to understand and develop a much more nuanced and child centric approach to deal with the issue that would ensure that the child has her voice heard at every stage.

Absence of safe spaces

There exists no space where an adolescent girl can share her concerns, queries and anxieties. There are also no safe spaces where she can have access to information, where she can spend her leisure creatively. These absences further complicate the issue as they cannot seek support to deal with their problems/concerns. There is no support to guide her and facilitate a process that will enable her to see through the problem and work a possible way out. Left with no other options, adolescent girls find it easier to confide in friends, who are equally ill-informed & vulnerable. Such interactions with peers lead to her taking further unsafe decisions that have lasting impressions on her life and living. Interventions & researches also need to bring out the discussions on lack of safe environment and lack of protection mechanisms within the community. There is a need to understand the vulnerabilities created for the adolescent girls in the absence of such systems and spaces.

There is a need to create such spaces within institutions and community such that adolescent girls can have access to adolescent friendly services that includes services for both physical & mental health related issues. Such support services would in a way build her self-esteem, self-confidence, self-worth, whereby she could choose safer life options.

Lack of institutional capacities

Though schools are institutions that deal with adolescent girls and increased enrolment of girls in school is being seen as a way to combat early marriage, schools have not been capacitated to deal with child marriage in case they are faced with such problems. Linkages between the school and other child protection bodies operational in the state are absent. Thus the school has no information and lacks institutional capacity to deal with such issues. There is an urgent need to develop these linkages such that schools can play much more active role in combating early marriage as an institution working with education of adolescent girls. In its interactions with teachers, particularly headmistresses, Talash has faced various situations where the girl had to drop out of school as she had no proper place of stay and her parents preferred to put her as a 24-hour domestic help considering her safety. Connections of the school with Child Welfare Committees become very important in this regard. But schools have no information about the existence of any such institutions as well as no guidelines as to how to avail such services when in need.

Lack of access to existing services

There are a limited number of services that are offered to adolescent girls & their families compared to the gravity of situations they are in. But adolescent girls & their families do not have necessary information about these available services & ways of accessing them. That counseling services can be availed by adolescent girls & her families in the different *Anwasha* clinics is hardly known to the targeted population the service is meant for! Similarly there is lack of information on where to go, who to approach, where to seek support from if one wants to resist child marriage.

Need for a Gender, Sexuality, Mental Health & Human Rights Approach

The study titled *Knot Ready: Lesson from India on Delaying Marriage for Girls, ICRW, 2005-2008* mentions that programs with the goal of delaying girls' age at marriage can only be successful by addressing underlying social norms around sexuality and chastity, and reassuring parents about their daughters' safety.

The issue of resisting child marriage is complex with many cross-cutting issues shaping the understandings, perceptions & concerns. It is important to understand gender & sexuality are two major axes that would help one address the problem at its core & design any intervention and/or research. The gender stereotype works strong with the notion of marriage being the be-all & end-all in the life of a girl. Trying to understand the perspectives of adolescent girls on marriage, discussions were initiated. Without exception they agreed that marriage is the most important happening in a girl's life. They further shared that the social norm requires a girl to get married after a certain age; else it would be considered that there is some fault in her. There were also responses that revolve around the dreams of getting love, material benefits from husband – things that parents do not provide, having a family of her own. Similar refrain is found to exist in parents & adolescent girls about the notion of marriage. Along with dreams of marriage reinforcing the gender stereotypes, it is also interesting to note how sexuality complicates the situation. In order to combat a situation of child marriage through elopement by the girl

on her own, there is a dire need to address the aspirations that are being constructed within her as an adolescent girl, standing at the doorsteps of womanhood.

Child marriage is also a mental health issue. Counseling and similar services dealing with mental health aspects are essential to support adolescent girls in dealing with their desires and aspirations such that she does not look at relationship being the only way of her fulfillment. For girls returning from situations of elopement being forced by parents there is also a need for counseling that would look into her mental traumas and instability, facilitating the process of guiding her towards a constructive future. It is important for any intervention and/or research to understand how the mental health of an adolescent girl gets impacted in such situations.

It has already been mentioned that gendered understanding of roles & responsibilities of a girl largely shape the ideas of adolescent girls, their parents & the community about the issue of marriage. Ironically, the gender norms that shape the adolescent girl's dream of marriage makes her feel restricted & constrained when in her natal family, with limited mobility & no way in which to get her voice heard. She seeks a way out. She thinks that marrying a person of her choice would get her out of the situation. This idea gets further reinforced on seeing her friends roaming about with their boyfriends to fancy locations that is otherwise inaccessible to her; getting gifts that parents refuse to give. Thus there exists a peer pressure that lures her into it. The media in the globalized world also plays a role in shaping her aspirations & dreams, driving her away from her reality into a world of make-beliefs, shaping her ideas & ideals of love & romance.

Thus it would be rather difficult to address child marriage only from a legal perspective or as a public health issue. It requires to be understood at the intersectional space of gender sexuality mental health and human rights. There is a need to question the strong enforcement of the gender stereotype with marriage as be-all & end-all of a girl's life.

Education

Another major issue is the approach & attitude towards a girls' education. Education is not perceived as something that would give the girl an alternative life and living. It is rather seen as a means to keep her engaged till she attains the legal marriageable age. Additionally, education doesn't require much monetary involvement with the SSM. Education leading to the girl being able to earn and be independent has not surfaced in any of the interactions, be it the parents or the girls. Even when parents have expressed their desire to get their daughters educated till X/XI/XII, there were no options that they had for her beyond marriage. In all the different discussions, there were a few mothers (4-5) who spoke of wanting to educate her daughter & support her to the extent when she would in a position to earn a decent income to be independent. They had concrete ideas in terms of getting her admitted to nursing training or trainings on computer. But for most, marriage was the primary consideration as it was the norm to secure her sexuality.

This perhaps calls for re-viewing the curriculum, the life-style education also. Along with getting the girl enrolled in school, creating an atmosphere that enables her to continue her education, providing required financial and other assistances to help her complete her education; it is also important that education be linked to livelihood generation. Providing vocational trainings separately is definitely a way, but there is a need to integrate it within the education system, such that it can be accessed by all instead of being a privilege for a few.

Way Ahead

- **Developing & implementing programs** that would address child marriage from within the over-determined space of gender, sexuality, and mental health & child rights. Acknowledging the importance of seeing child marriage as a public health issue, it is equally important to look into other aspects as well. The programs developed also need to have proper evaluation and monitoring indicator to enable measuring success of the program. The study titled *Knot Ready: Lesson from India on Delaying Marriage for Girls, ICRW, 2005-2008* mentions that Lack of effective evaluations means that claims of program success in delaying age at marriage are at best tentative, with one or two exceptions. Investment in more rigorous evaluation is essential for pinpointing what works and developing best practices.
- **Advocacy initiatives** with the government on a range of issues that are part of child marriage. Report of the *National Consultation on Prevention of Child Marriage, New Delhi, 25th May 2012* stresses on the need to build a common understanding and framework on child marriage on one hand and also talks about promoting a national partnership/working group/think tank on child marriage. It is important that interventions/researches on child marriage that aims at understanding and addressing mental health impacts of child marriage needs to be part of the common understanding. Government interventions combating child marriage mostly focuses on getting the girl child enrolled to school, providing adolescent free reproductive & sexual health services. There is a need to advocate for the inclusion of mental health component such that adolescent girls get access to adolescent friendly counseling services to help them cope different situations.
- **Creating role models** / leaders through peer leadership programs. These peer leaders can spearhead the movement against child marriage in their respective areas by negotiating both with adolescent girls & their parents. The study *Delaying Marriage for Girls in India: A Formative Research to Design Interventions for Changing Norms* by ICRW in March 2011, has mentioned the importance of having role models by stating that *role model individuals value education and aspire for alternative roles for girls. Across the board, role model mothers, fathers and girls are driven by a desire to enable girls to achieve their potential. Consequently they do not hesitate to deviate from the customary practice of child marriage. They do face potential stigma and exclusion but articulate a resolve to educate their daughters and even allow them to pursue careers beyond completion of schooling.*

- **Developing community level support systems** such that they can be easily accessed by adolescent girls & her family in situations of crisis. It is also important to establish connection with existing support services. There needs to be greater awareness generation on what the available services are and ways to avail them. Running community centers in the community could be a possible way of developing community level support system. The centers can provide safe spaces for adolescent girls and also provide adults with information and other necessary support to combat incidents of early marriage within the community. These centers can launch, initiate and organize different awareness generation programs for adolescent girls and their parents.
- In line with *Chunauti* project implemented by CARE, Nepal there is a scope for creating **Anti-Gender Based Violence forums in schools**. The Mothers-Teachers Association along with interested students can be activated in forming such anti-Gender Based Violence forum in schools. There can be periodic meetings of these anti-GBV forums to identify potential children at risk for early marriage and offer requisite support to enable & empower her to handle the situation. Such forums can also organize regular campaigns on child marriage and other related issues within schools to generate greater awareness among adolescent girls.
- **Similar forums/child clubs** can also be set up at the community level with the objective of creating greater awareness on child marriage within a broader mass base.

Brief of Consultation Meet on Talash's Findings

To share the key findings of this mapping process and to discuss the emerging issues so as to collectively form a nuanced & deeper understanding of child marriage and learn possible strategies of dealing with the issue, Talash organized a day-long consultation meet with different stakeholders on December 28, 2012 at the Anita Banerjee Memorial Hall, Jadavpur University

Participants who were part of the consultation process included the Gender Coordinator & Community Coordinator of *Paschimbanga Sarba Siksha Mission*, Headmistress & teachers from different government aided girls' schools TALASH is working with and members of various NGOs & Funding Agencies working on similar issues.

The consultation was broadly divided into two segments – addressing the issue and exploring possible combative strategies. As part of addressing the issue Talash presented its key findings from the mapping exercise along with discussion by the key speaker Dr. Miratun Nahar, who is also the President of Talash. This was followed by an open discussion. In trying to explore the possible combative strategies, there was a panel discussion, comprising of members from SSM, representatives from schools, NGOs and Funding Agencies followed by an open discussion.

The Discussions

Dr. Miratun Nahar expressed following views on the issue

- She started with mentioning that the issue of child marriage has been seen from a very different perspective by TALASH in its mapping study. The peril of early marriage has existed since ancient times, but the nature has undergone gradual changes. Initially it was parents who used to get their daughters married at an early age due to different concerns of which her safety, the poverty of the family were significant. This trend continues till date but there has also been a shift where it is seen that girls themselves are getting involved in intimate relationship & marrying at an early age on their own. She attributed this phenomenon of girls entering into relationships to poverty & girls passing through hard life, feeling deprived of their parents' love & affection on one hand and unable to get access to all the consumer cultures of the present day on the other.
- Dr. Nahar also mentioned class difference as another significant reason for girls' elopement. They are running away with those boys who allure them of a better life, a life that has access to the different worlds of glitter that is all over in this globalized world. She mentioned that these girls get attracted to these just like any of us who are from middle & upper middle class families. She also blamed the commercial world for being responsible in enhancing the greed for commodities.
- Lack of role model in recent era also remains a significant factor in the present day world where the youth has none to look up to and replicate except those who are constantly being produced by the media as part of the entertainment industry.
- Dr. Nahar also urged upon the necessity to work up on re-building the environment of school to make it attractive enough to keep girls interest in studies. The environment as it stands now, according to Dr. Nahar is in no way conducive to creating interest of education within the child.

Discussion on Exploring Combative Strategies had the following panelist

1. Ms. Dolon Ganguly, Associate Director, Jeevika Development Society
- Dolon shared Jeevika's experience of working with adolescent girls. She mentioned that going by their experience, the attitude of the society to not accept even a friendly relation between a boy and a girl is one of the major reasons for girls eloping. She added that just when there a girl is seen talking to a boy there are rumors in the locality that there is a relationship; neighbours complain to the girl's parents. It reaches a point when the incident is treated at the level of a scandal. This makes the girl flee with the boy with the belief that she would at least be better off with this boy, instead of having to face all these difficult situations.
 - She added that culturally girls are habituated to listening to a 'No' everywhere – from parents at home, from teachers at schools. They are faced with this 'no' in almost every issue that ranges from

listening FM radio to returning home after a brief chat with friends to walking home through a way that is in front of a boy's school. She mentioned of a school where the girls have to buy their tiffin if they want to from within the window grills as there is a boy's school nearby. She tried to mention that such restrictions in almost all cases does not help in anyways, as like all individuals girls also require a certain degree of freedom, they also need their voices to be heard!

- Dolon shared that Jeevika conducts interactive session with girls, their parents, and teachers to turn these 'No' into 'Yes', trying to break the stereotypes in different ways. She also mentioned that it is necessary to work with parents to make them understand that they shouldn't restrict their girls' mobility in the fear of she being sexually harmed or she entering into a relationship with a boy. She highlighted the link with sexuality as the cultural & social construct around 'virginity' is such that girls are restricted with the objective of protecting their virginity.
2. Panelist: Ms Sanhita Sinha, Headmistress, Raipur Girls High School
 - She mentioned that the syllabus followed in the schools needs to be turned into joyful learning to attract students and keep them occupied in school. Interactive sessions need to be adopted as an alternative to the present day classroom teaching. Girls need to be part of all the processes within the school premises. One could try dividing responsibilities amongst girls to deal with discipline in school, to address the issue of drop out and so on. Mid-day meal has been effective in resisting drop outs in schools but there is much more that needs to be done.
 - In teacher's trainings on Life Style Education, it was mentioned that this subject would help to increase AIDS awareness. But she pointed to the need for a more holistic approach to be adopted by the Life Style Education. She questioned that as to why would a biology teacher only be responsible to conduct Life Style Education classes.
 3. Panelist: Ms. Saswati Ghosh, Gender Coordinator, Paschimbanga Sarba Siksha Mission
 - She mentioned that girls' enrollment is higher than boys in government aided schools. She also said that the incidents found by Talash in these schools are primarily because students come to these schools from transitional area of South 24 Parganas.
 - She mentioned of the Child Cabinet that is currently being formed in every primary school (Class I to IV). This cabinet comprises of five children as ministers & responsibilities are given like Health Minister, Environment Minister etc. SSM is exploring the possibility of introducing this concept to the upper primary schools.
 4. Panelist: Ms. Urba Chaudhury, Community Initiative, Paschimbanga Sarba Siksha Mission
 - Urba mentioned that presently SSM has tried to ensure that there is role of teacher, guardian, neighbour, ward councilor, Borough Chairperson in completion of Elementary Education for a child. The situation has improved. Earlier Councilors were involved only in macro issues like construction

of roads, arranging for street lights; but increasingly they are playing formidable role in preventing child marriage.

- She stressed on the need for *residential units* for children from registered slums along with that of street children. Mothers often request schools to keep their daughters in the *residential unit* despite the fact that the family income stands around INR7000 to INR8000.

5. Panelist: Ms. Paramita Chaudhury, Partnership Manager, Railway Children

- Paramita mentioned that adolescent girls have physical, social, emotional needs that remain grossly unaddressed. Lack of emotional bonding between children and grownups within families lead to increased vulnerability of the children. There is a need for a child to feel emotionally connected with the family. For this the child needs to be part of the different decision making process – in processes as insignificant as what would be cooked for lunch. She would then understand the different limitations faced by the family and would perhaps feel connected to collectively try and address the limitations.
- She stressed on the need for children network to create safer & enjoyable space where they can spend quality time and create connections with each other.

The open discussion that followed brought to surface following issues -

- *Representative from Bangla Natok dot com* shared their working experience in Malda, the difficulty they faced in breaking the ice in sessions of mixed group of adolescents. The restrictions are so very strong that the girls feel inhibited to start a normal friendly conversation with a boy.
- *Representative from Gana Unnayan Parshad* stated that girls are exposed to sexual relationship at an early age with relatives. This makes it all the more difficult for them to negotiate their sexuality in their adolescence.
- *Headmistress of Raipur Girls High School* shared that schools often take resolutions barring married girls getting admission to schools. The reason being that the married girl might share her experiences of married life with her friends that would adversely affect them. But Ms. Sinha said that she has over the year experienced many married girls wanting to take re-admission. She mentioned the need to encourage them to continue their education and provisions need to be made to get them back to school
- *Representative from CINI* highlighted the incident of Rekha Kalindi who had been rewarded by the government for her affirmative actions in preventing her marriage at an early age, but unfortunately she was married yet again.

- *Surajit Neogi from Action Aid* stated that elementary education is applicable upto class VIII according to RTE, 2010. There is a dire need to include the age group of 14 to 18 years. There needs to be greater advocacy on the issue because the reasons of financial limitation stated by the government needs to be questioned, as it also throws light on the government's attitude towards education.

The consultation ended with vote of thanks from Talash and all participants urged upon the need for many more such consultations to arrive at definitive combative strategies.

Part II: Experiences from Malda

METHODOLOGY - THE PROCESS

The mapping process has been conducted in 4 blocks of Old Malda (Bhabuk GP), Habibpur (Baidyapur GP), Ratua-II (Sripur II GP) and Gajol (Deotala GP). This process followed has been more of an exploratory study with the intention to understand issues, perceptions, and concerns about a certain form of child marriage, where girls are choosing to marry on their own much before 18 years, among different stakeholders, including adolescent girls, their parents and ICDS staffs, that include the ICDS supervisor, the workers & helpers of the different ICDS centers that these girls are part of.

Talash has conducted the mapping process in following ways

- Interactions with girls of age range 12-18 years - Group Discussions with adolescent girls of the mentioned age group. These girls are all part of different Sabala groups in their villages. The objective of these interactions has been to gather responses from girls on the different issues related to early marriage, relationship formation & elopement. A total of 154 girls were involved in different phases of the interaction. They were divided into smaller groups to ease out the process of interactions and discussions. The discussions were organized with these 154 girls in 12 small groups.
- Interactions with parents – Group Discussions with parents to understand their perspectives and response to incidents and situations of girl’s forming relationships, eloping for marriage at an early age. Interactions were organized with parents of adolescent girls who we interacted with. There were also a small section of parents whose daughters were not part of Talash’s interactions. Through the group discussions Talash interacted with almost 75 parents, mostly mothers. There were 6 fathers who attended the interactions, others were all mothers.
- Interactions with ICDS workers (define profile) – Interaction with ICDS workers to understand their perspectives and response to incidents and situations of girl’s forming relationships, eloping for marriage at an early age. As mentioned earlier, all the girls interacted with are part of Sabala groups under different ICDS centers. Talash interacted with ICDS workers associated with these centers. We also interacted with supervisors who are responsible for overseeing the functioning of these ICDS centers. Approximately 12-15 ICDS workers & 3 supervisors were interacted with.

Along with the above mentioned interactions, Talash has constantly being engaged in different informal conversations & discussions with different sections of the community who constantly interact with adolescent girls & their families. Talash had such interactions with the Panchayat Pradhan, Counselor (*Anwesh*a Clinic), CDPOs of the blocks. Yet again, the objective of these communications was to understand perceptions & observations of different concerned people on the issue on one hand and to make meanings of the discussions to articulate possible ways of combating on the other.

MAPPING AMONG WHOM? – THE PROFILES

The mapping process has been conducted primarily with adolescent girls who are part of different Sabala groups from four Gram Panchayats across four blocks. They are Baidyapur in Habibpur block, Sripur II in Ratua II block, Deotala in Gajol block & Bhabuk in Old Malda block. These adolescent girls are within the age range of 12 – 18 years. The adolescent girls interacted with are from those who are school going and also from those who have dropped out. A formidable section of the girls interacted with are from the SC & ST community. There were almost equal representations from Hindu & Muslim religions among the girls with whom we interacted as a part of this mapping process.

The following table intends to provide a glance at the socio-economic background of the girls we interacted with. *Please refer to Annexure 1 for detailed profile of the adolescent girls.*

| Name of GP | Age Range | Education Level | Drop Outs | SC | ST | OBC | Muslim | Hindu | BPL | Income (non-BPL families) | Girl Earns | Women Works |
|-----------------------------|-------------|-----------------------|-----------|----|----|-----|--------|-------|-----|---|------------|-------------|
| Baidyapur (43 participants) | 12-18 years | V – XII (4 schools) | 4 | 23 | 6 | 2 | 1 | 42 | 23 | 18 families 2K-5K 2 families 5K-8K | 6 | 8 families |
| Sripur II (35 participants) | 14-18 years | VII – XII (7 schools) | 8 | - | 1 | - | 33 | 2 | 7 | 18 families 2K-5K 3 families 5K-8K | 9 | 7 families |
| Deotala (36 participants) | 14-17 years | VII – XII (7 schools) | 2 | 7 | 5 | 2 | 17 | 19 | 11 | 14 families 2K-5K 2 families 5K-8K | - | 15 families |
| Bhabuk (40 participants) | 12-18 | VI – XII (6 schools) | 3 | 8 | 3 | 3 | 19 | 21 | 14 | 16 families 2K-5K 3 families 5K-8K | 5 | 12 families |

Vulnerability Quotient of Girls

The above table is also a representation of the vulnerability of these adolescent girls. 55 of the 154 adolescent girls we interacted with are from BPL families. There are another 20 girls whose family incomes stands at less than Rs.2000 per month but still have no BPL cards. Even for those adolescent girls who are from non-BPL families, average monthly family income for the most is between Rs.2000 to Rs.5000, with only a handful of 10 families (of the 154) having an average monthly income of Rs.5000 to Rs.8000. None of the girls had their family's average income above Rs.8000. It is thus evident that the girls come from resource constraint backgrounds, from families where the economic situation is bleak.

With the average family size between 5 & 7, even monthly earnings between Rs.2000 to Rs.5000 fall short with the increasing cost of necessary commodities.

Family Income & the Economy

In almost all families of the adolescent girls we interacted with, fathers and/or brothers are the principal earners. They are mostly farmers with small amounts of land holding (2-5 bighas). There is also a formidable landless section working as labours in other's lands. Another major way of income is the male member of the family (fathers, brothers) temporarily & seasonally migrating to another state to work as labour under a labour contractor, who is most often a man from neighbouring villages. This migration is particularly seen among families in the Sripur II GP. In the other GPs there is a mix of both farmers and men migrating out for work. These are the two primary occupations that men folk of the families are involved in. Of the 154 girls interacted with, approximately 25% have their mothers working. Mothers are mostly working as ICDS workers (helpers) or cooking mid-day meals in schools as part of some self-help groups. There is also a small section working in the fields assisting their husbands and sons. There are still others who bind *beedis* to earn whatever they can for their families.

Few of the girls (20 of 154) interacted with are also involved in economic activities to support their families. These girls are all from families that have an income of less than Rs.2000 per month. They earn from *beedi* binding, by working in the fields along with their families and from tailoring. Most of these 20 girls however earn from *beedi* binding.

Education of the girls

Education in the government & government aided schools is free and children are provided with books, school dresses, and mid-day meals up to class VIII under the Sarba Siksha Mission. The expenditure of getting a girl to continue education beyond class VIII is also a matter of minimal expenditure in the government & government aided schools. Thus in spite of severe economic crisis, it is seen that number of drop-outs are far lesser than the school going girls. Among the 154 adolescent girls we interacted with as part of the mapping process, there was only 17 drop-outs. Of these 17 cases of drop-outs poverty was cited as a reason in only 3 cases, for the remaining it was either marriage or disinterest on the part of the girl to continue education. It is also interesting to note that there is a sizeable section of the girls who have left studies after completion of the 10th standard board exams. Those who failed to qualify in the class 10th board exams, seldom took a second chance and left studies, there were yet others whose parents were not interested to allow the girl into further education for reasons of finance on one hand and to limit her mobility (as she has grown up) on the other. Another interesting thing to note was that none of the adolescent girls we interacted with were engaged in any other skill building process in anyways. Since economic consideration rarely exists, there is absolutely no effort on part of the families to engage girls in skills building in any form & capacitate them to earn money on their own. This also bears a reflection on their attitude towards education. It is almost a means to keep daughters engaged, in safe custody of the school premises for a formidable part of the day till they are married off. Thus the motivation – both among the girls & their families is very less. The attitude of the family gets instilled within the girl who knows & believes that marriage is the only & final option that awaits her; similar to what has happened to her sisters.

FINDINGS FROM THE PROCESS

Response & Attitude of Girls

Prevalence of Child Marriage

In all the interactions, girls have unanimously agreed to the existence of child marriage across their villages. Discussions have revealed that incidents of child marriages are not rare occurrences, instead they emphasized that girls are randomly married off before the legal marriageable age of 18 years. According to them the marriage starts as early as 13-14 years, a fact that was also confirmed by parents in course of interactions with them. The profile sheet of participants also corroborates this as it shows that almost 80% of the participants have sisters & sister-in-laws married well below 18 years. Thus child marriage exists as part and parcel of their lives and their responses reveal that they have in a way internalized it as *normal*, as *something that happens regularly*, as *something that is part of their living*. It is interesting to note in few of the group discussions, girls could not mention the legal marriageable age correctly, stating it to be 16 or 17 years for girls and 20 years for boys!

Understanding & Analyzing Prevalence from Incidents shared by Participants

Adolescent girls participating in the discussions shared several incidents of underage marriage of girls. Grouping these incidents in different categories reveal the following

- Of the 12 incidents of underage marriage shared by girls of Baidyapur GP, it was found that 3 cases were of elopement (14-16 years) and 4 cases (13-16 years) where parents forced their daughters into marriage after coming to know of their relationship. The remaining 5 cases were instances of girls being given into marriage by their parents on different considerations, finding a good match with minimal demands being a significant reason in these cases.
- Of the 6 incidents of underage marriage shared by girls of Bhabuk GP, it was found that 3 cases were of girls (13-17 years) eloping with their boyfriends to get married. The others were cases where parents got the daughters married on different considerations, poverty emerging as a significant reason.
- Of the 10 incidents of underage marriage shared by girls of Deotala GP, it was found that 4 cases were of girls (13-16 years) eloping with their boyfriends to get married and 3 cases where girls were forced into marriage by their parents after they came to know of their relationships. In the remaining 3 cases parents married their daughters as they had found a *good match* for her.

The reasons of underage marriage that gets revealed from analyzing the incidents shared by girls are highly reflective of the prevalence of adolescent girls entering relationship at an early age, elopement & marriage. The reasons of underage marriage that emerge from the incidents shared are the following

- Girls eloping & getting married with their boyfriends
- Parents getting them married to boy/man of their choice once they come to know of their relationships
- Parents finding a suitable match for their daughters

Talash tried to probe into the future of the underage marriages that happen because the girls choose to do so by eloping with the boy/man of their choice. Thus discussions were initiated on the outcomes of marriages that are done by the girls themselves against the consent of their families. Participants in the discussions expressed diverse opinions on this issue. The opinions are as follows

- Majority of the participants mentioned that these marriages are also like any other marriages & exist in the same way.
- Some participants (especially from Bhabuk GP) shared incidents where girls faced severe domestic violence after their marriages.
- Few participants noted that even if the girl elopes, parents accept it after a period of time, especially when a child is born

Effects of Child Marriage on lives of adolescent girls

To further delve into such normalized acceptance of early marriages in lives of adolescent girls, Talash tried to understand their opinions on whether & how child marriage impacts lives of adolescent girls. They were all aware of certain *ill-effects*, as they put it. They discussed the different physical & health impacts primarily as being the *ill-effects* of child marriage. There were a few voices in between, here & there trying to explain that *'small girls are not prepared to bear the burden & responsibility of a family life.'* But discussions predominantly revolved round different health issues, reproductive health issues being the most significant. They added that in order to prevent child marriage there is a need to spread awareness on how a girl's health gets impacted due to underage marriage. The fact that underage marriage impacts adolescent mind and is a deterrent to their mental well-being and overall growth remained significantly absent from their discussions. The aspects of violation of her rights did not surface at all.

Reasons for Child Marriage

In the above context, Talash tried to further the conversations on their understandings of the reasons of child marriage. Interestingly girls shifted major responsibilities on parents for such happenings. They shared views as to how *conservative & traditional thoughts* their parents belonged to caused such marriages. They spoke at length of the various situations in which parents marry off their daughters at a younger age. The situations mentioned across different discussions are listed below.

- Parents are not willing to wait till the girl attains the age of 18 years if they find a *good match* as they fear that they might not get such a suitable match once the girl grows up. Trying to unpack the term *good match* it so emerged that a boy with a certain level of earning & with a family that has some amount of land & other property is considered a *good match*. Often a *good match* is someone who & whose family has minimum demands in marriage from the girl's family. In such cases, the economic background of the boy is also not a prime consideration. Thus economic considerations and dowry demands have been unanimously identified as reasons for parents/guardians getting their daughters married.
- Poverty emerged as another significant point of discussions. Girls said, *'when the family has 3-4 girls, who have to be married off, parents tend to give them into marriage at the earliest available opportunity'*. Extreme poverty also leads families to get their daughters married in whatever means possible as they are unable to provide for basic food & education of the girls.

- There were also discussions on girls being considered a burden to the family. Thus the earlier she is married off parents feel relieved of their responsibilities as the husband and in-laws would then be responsible for her.

Adolescent Girls opting for Child Marriage, Elopement

Talash felt the need to probe further into the conversations to understand whether adolescent girls feel that they too have a role in their early marriages, as there was no mention in the initial discussions on this. It was seen solely as parental choice in getting the girl married off at their convenience. This probing led to further discussions on reasons others than being forced by parents. These reasons mostly focused on situations that forced parents to get their daughters married on one hand and the fact that adolescent girls are entering into relationship & early marriages on the other. Discussing situations when parents are forced to get their daughters married, honour of the family emerged as a primary reason as adolescent girls often let down the family honour by eloping with boys/men of their choice. Following are the key issues that surfaced across discussions with them in different groups -

- Parents are left with no other choice but to get their daughters married at an early age when girls perform badly in schools, unable to get promotion to the next class, not interested in education. These girls mostly remain at home, doing household chores, roaming around with friends within the village. Thus parents consider it wise to find a match for her and get her married as parents fear that she might enter into relationships with boys who are not suitable for her and cause a *bad* name for the family.
- Adolescent girls also expressed the tensions of parents when the girl is good looking as there is a constant fear of the girl being sexually harassed on her ways to school & tuition. They mentioned that boys want to befriend such good looking girls and often girls trapped through their conversations entering into relationships with them. Thus parents are bound to get their daughters married to a suitable match to *protect* her.
- The fear of girls getting involved with boys, eloping with them & getting married also prompts parents to get their daughters married at an early age. This opinion found resonance across all groups of adolescent girls. Thus they were probed into the fact as to whether this apprehension of parents has any base. The response in this regard was also unanimous with all of them agreeing to the fact. The common refrain was *'girls enter into relations with the opposite sex at an early age and often elope with these boys as they fear that parents will not agree to the match'*. When parents come to know of their daughters' relations with boys/men they immediately starts arrangements for her marriage. There is also the community that according to the girls, starts talking *'bad'* about the girl. This further complicates the situation as parents apprehend difficulty in finding a suitable match in case of this *'bad name'* spreads.
- Reputation & honour of the family being in question in case of a girl eloping with her boyfriend is also a matter of concern for the parents, expressed the girls. The discussions revealed that girls find it legitimate for their parents to have such concerns. They themselves narrated several situations where the family was faced with immense difficulty getting the other daughters married in the event of one of the daughters' elopement. *'It earns a bad name for the entire family and all girls of the family are then considered degraded by the community'*.

- There were also instances cited by the girls where adolescent girls themselves pressurize their parents to get them married to the boy/man of her choice by threatening them of suicide.

Adolescents' perceptions of combating child marriage

Trying to understand how adolescent girls perceive the idea of resisting underage marriage in the above contexts, Talash initiated discussions on possible ways of building up resistance. Girls were not sure about whether that would at all be possible with them involved in relationships on one hand and apprehensions & attitudes of parents on the other. *'It is difficult for a girl to resist when forced by parents as there is no one to support her'*, said the girls. They continued *'the entire community supports parents in marrying off their daughters. Her opinion is insignificant'*. The discussions also brought to surface the fact that resistance is viewed differently by the girls. They elope & marry with the boy/man of their choice to resist her parents getting her married to someone else once they know of the relation. Discussions reveal that they think this as being able to exercise their own choice rather than being forced.

Response & Attitude of Parents

The interactions with parents were mostly with mothers with only 6 fathers being part of the process. Across discussions parents expressed their concerns in different ways about growing tendencies of their daughters' to get involved in relationships at an early age. In situations of opposition by parents, girls are taking help of friends to elope with the boy/man of their choice and get married in complete defiance of parents and also disregarding family honour and prestige. The issue of family honour surfaced significantly in the discussions, parents sharing views that *'fear of family honour often prompts us to get them married early'*, adding that *'girls themselves will get married even if we do not get them married'*. Issues of sexual harassment faced by girls, early pregnancy, and sexual exploration figured across the different interactions. Following are the issues that came up in the interactions.

Fear of daughters entering relationship - The primary reason cited by parents to get their daughters married off early is the fear of their daughters entering into relationships and eloping with their boyfriends causing a *'bad'* repute to the families. Parents also shared their opinion that these boys are not suitable for their daughters as they do not have proper jobs and/or not from decent families. Often these boys are also from different caste and religion, a fact that parents find unacceptable as this would make them outcast in the community. Parents expressed a feeling of frustration, unable to control their daughters. *'We want them to study, but they are not interested, they are only interested in boys and mobile phones!'* is a common phrase that got echoed across the interactions with parents, especially mothers.

The mobile menace - Parents identified mobile phones as being a major communication channel through which girls are getting acquainted to boys & keeping the contacts alive. Parents mentioned that mobiles are being used to plan elopements. Parents in the interactions shared different incidents where the girl eloped late at night from the house in the name of going to the washroom that was just outside the house – after she eloped, parents came to know that everything was fixed and finalized over the mobile. They also shared that girls get introduced with boys mostly through mobile phones, friends keep circulating numbers. Girls keep receiving phone calls from different boys, who strike up different

conversations with them. Girls eventually get attracted to these conversations, start meeting them and eventually make plans of their elopements. Parents expressed their helplessness in being unable to convince their daughters not to use mobile phones. They consider mobiles to do the maximum damage to lives of adolescent girls as it has given them uncontrolled & unlimited access to the outside world.

Accessing mobile phones - The discussions further probed into how adolescent girls have access to mobile phones and how is it that they can use it extensively as there is a financial involvement in the process. A father present at the interactions shared an incident where he *'strictly forbade his daughter from using the mobile; one day I saw her using my mobile when I had gone out to the bathroom. I asked her whether she does that regularly & threatened to stop her school if she lied, she confessed that she used the phone occasionally & then deleted the number'*. Parents also mentioned of being pressurizing by their daughters to give them mobile phones. On being refused girls work out several ways to get access to phones. Parents shared incidents where girls secretly carried their friend's mobiles in their bags. Girls are also given mobiles by their boyfriends to keep contact & they pay for the regular conversations. For girls who are earning, they spend part of their money on buying mobiles & for regular expenses. Often parents give into pressures of girls wanting mobiles as they threaten their parents in different ways, often threatening to commit suicide if their demand is not met. Interactions also brought to surface the fact that peer pressure is another important aspect that leads adolescent girls aspire for things like mobile phones as they see many of their friends having easy access to these.

Elopement & Family Honour - Family honour and being pointed out within the community in case of elopement of the girl is a major reason that prompts parents to give their daughters married off at an early age. *'We also have other daughters to get married & so cannot risk keeping daughters at home once we know that they are going about with boys.'* There were even others who added that even when they do not know of any such engagements of their daughters, the apprehension that something might happen causes them to look for a match for her & get her married as early as possible. On discussing reasons of apprehensions, parents said that such incidents are so common across villages, that they have every reason to feel afraid. Talking about what exactly is the fear about the girl's elopement, parents came up with different opinions but the predominant was that of family honour & future of the child.

Profile of the boys - Parents also expressed concern about profiles of the boys with whom their daughters are getting involved. Most of them are of similar ages or slightly elder (in most cases they are also less than 21 years), dropped out of education, with no proper income. The situation of the boy's family is equally dismal. The boys are mostly from the same village or neighboring villages. There are boys who have migrated to a different state for work and thus have access to easy cash, which allures the girls even more. They gift the girls with mobile phones & these phones are then used to facilitate the process of elopement. Parents are also concerned that often these boys are from different caste, religion – a fact that is unacceptable to the families and the community.

Elopement leading to marriages that do not last, burden on natal family - The interactions revealed parents' concerns about future of their daughters once they elope & marry the man/boy of their choice. They have a fear & apprehension that they would have to bear all the burden of their daughter and her family. Parents have shared instances where girls who had eloped and married were forced to return to her natal family with children. On discussing acceptance of the girl by her in-laws family in case of elopement, most of the parents were of opinion that the situation is difficult.

Entrenched in poverty themselves, the boy's families in most cases is not willing to take on further responsibility. In these situations, it is either the girl's family who is in a way forced to accept the daughter along with her family or both the girl and boy migrate to other states in search of work. Most parents say that as parents they cannot refuse their daughters. All these concerns urge them to get their daughters married with a match that the family feels is suitable for her.

Fear of girls getting pregnant as they freely interact with boys - Parents in the interactions also expressed their fear of the girl getting pregnant before her marriage. Though such incidents are not random, they said, *'but things like this do happen'*. They have shared instances of girls being abandoned by the boys after the girl became pregnant before marriage. These incidents cause *'immense dishonor for the family and the family eventually finds it difficult to get the other daughters married'*. This concern of parents also finds voice in counselors based in the *'Anwasha Clinics'*. One such counselor shared that of 10 Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) conducted in a hospital, 1-2 cases are of unmarried pregnancies. The average age of these girls is between 15 to 17 years. The counselor also shared that parents try to maintain secrecy about such incidents for known reasons and thus in most cases these girls do not undergo any counseling. From her experience, the counselor shared her feeling that these girls are married off at the earliest available opportunity after the abortion has been done.

Threats of sexual harassment - Problem of sexual harassment also surfaced in the discussions. According to parents this is particularly true of girls who are *fair, good looking & attractive*. *'We cannot accompany our daughters everywhere – to schools, to tuitions. They are followed by boys, who harass them in different ways'*. Boys waiting in different places just outside the school are common across villages. It is a reality for almost all schools. *'We are in no situation to prevent these situations, often girls also start responding – developing relations. We then feel it safer to get the girl married off'*. Marriage is seen as a way to protect girls, is what parents had to share. But delving deeper to unpack the need for protection, one understands that it is mostly protecting the virginity of the girl. Thus the issue has deep underpinnings of sexuality – where the gendered notion of a girl's virginity is a prime concern for parents & the community. Though parents were hesitant to speak about it openly, a mother was straight enough to respond as follows – *'if someone has to touch my daughter, let it be her husband, why let other men touch her & make her impure?'*

Urge for sexual exploration in adolescents - The situation is further complicated with a section of parents sharing their opinions of the *natural sexual urge that comes in with adolescence*. Thus they fear that with boys around, adolescent girls might also get tempted into sexual exploration to meet their sexual urge. Though a major section of parents remained silent about the issue there seemed to be a sort of agreement with this issue when raised.

Being pressurized by children - Parents also shared their helplessness in instances where girls are pressurizing their parents to get her married to the boy/man of her choice by threatening to commit suicide. *'As parents what do we do in such situations'* was a major dilemma that emerged from the discussions. They also shared incidents where the boy along with his friends threatened the girl's family of dire consequences unless they married their daughter to him. *'With other daughters in the house, we cannot take risk, everything is possible, and they can spoil my other daughters too'*.

Poverty - Poverty, parents mentioned was not a significant reason for families to get daughters married. *'We are all poor, but we do want our girls to complete the 10th standard, after which we can think of her marriage, but our daughters are forcing us to take such steps'*. They however agreed that there are instances of poor families giving their daughters in marriage at an early age, if they get a suitable match, the prime consideration being that the demand put forward by the groom's family is low when the girl is younger. They also added that girls are considered older by groom and their families once they cross 18 years.

In the above context, Talash decided to understand that what other ways, if at all, parents adopt to *protect* their daughters, other than marrying her off. Interactions & discussions around this issue made it clear that parents take recourse to different punitive measures that include severely restricting her mobility, getting her out from schools, threatening to *'kill her if she dared to play with the family honour'*. Interactions revealed that there exists no space for discussions & dialogues between parents & the daughter. It is either of the two situations – either she submits to whatever her parents decide for her or she takes decision of making her own choice which is eloping with the boy/man of her choice.

Towards Developing a Comprehensive Understanding: Pointers

Gender & Sexuality

Though the issue is of child marriage & resisting child marriage, the problem is complex with many cross-cutting issues shaping the understandings, perceptions & concerns surrounding the issue. Gender & sexuality are the two major axes that need to be addressed to arrive at the core of the problem & design any intervention and/or research. The gender stereotype works strong with the notion of marriage being the ultimate in the life of a girl. Trying to understand the perspectives of adolescent girls on marriage, discussions were initiated. Without exception they agreed that marriage is the most important happening in a girl's life. They further shared that the social norm requires a girl to get married after a certain age; else it would be considered that there is some fault in her. There were also responses that revolve around the dreams of getting love, material benefits from husband – things that parents do not provide, having a family of her own. Thus similar refrain is found to exist in parents & adolescent girls about the notion of marriage.

For parents, marriage is seen as a means to *protect* the girl from possible fears/harms/dangers that she might face. It is the way to give her in the safe custody of a man who would be her husband and in the process not allowing scopes of her becoming *impure* (losing virginity), *protecting her sexuality*. Thus they are opting to choose marriage of girls at a younger age to deal with situations of girls developing relationship & marrying by eloping with the boy/man of her choice in complete defiance of the family. Thus underage marriage to parents is a way to protect the girl's sexuality and in the process also save the family from disgrace & dishonor. Thus it appears almost like a vicious cycle where early relationship formation, elopement & marriage of adolescent girls is being combatted by parents in the way of getting girls married to boys/men the family chooses at the earliest opportunity, as early as 13-14 years. And as a resistance to their parents' decision of marriage, girls are themselves eloping to get married to the boy/man of their choice. It thus becomes evident that parents, community lack the requisite knowledge, skill & information to deal with the situation. That there can be alternative solutions does not remotely exist in the thought process of the family & community. A possible reason for this lack could possibly be that there are no examples of such possible alternatives in their lived reality.

It has already been mentioned that gendered understanding of roles & responsibilities of a girl largely shape the ideas of adolescent girls, their parents & the community about the issue of marriage. Ironically, the gender norms that shape the adolescent girl's dream of marriage makes her feel restricted & constrained when in her natal family, with limited mobility & no way in which to get her voice heard. She seeks a way out. She thinks that marrying a person of her choice would get her out of the situation. This idea gets further reinforced on seeing her friends roaming about with their boyfriends to fancy locations that is otherwise inaccessible to her; getting gifts that parents refuse to give. Thus there exists a peer pressure that lures her into it. The media in the globalized world also plays a role in shaping her aspirations & dreams, driving her away from her reality into a world of make-beliefs, shaping her ideas & ideals of love & romance.

Education

Another major issue is the attitude towards education. Education is not perceived as something that would give the girl an alternative life and living. It is rather seen as a means to keep her engaged till she attains the legal marriageable age. Additionally, education doesn't require much monetary involvement with the SSM. Education for the girl is also considered important as that would keep her in a position where she would be able to teach her children. Education leading to the girl being able to earn and be independent has not surfaced in any of the interactions, be it the parents or the girls. In all the different discussions, there was only one mother who spoke of wanting to educate her daughter & support her to the extent when she would be in a position to earn a decent income to be independent. To this woman marriage was a secondary consideration that she would think of only after the girl had secured an independent position for herself. But this was the one rare exception that we encountered in all our conversations.

This perhaps also calls for re-viewing the education system, the curriculum, the life-style education that has already been introduced. That the education system is not much linked to livelihood options & opportunities might be a reason why the entire community does not give it much significance. Even in the discussions, parents have questioned the necessity & benefit of getting the girl educated. '*Can one guarantee that she will get a job once she completes X, XII or even graduation*' – they ask – '*anyways we will have to get them married however much she has studied, so what's the use!*'

Absence of safe spaces

There is absolutely no space where an adolescent girl can share her concerns, anxieties. This absence further complicates the issue as they do have no scopes of sharing her problems/concerns with someone who could help her see through the problem and work a possible way out. Left with no other options, she has to confide in friends, who are equally ill-informed & vulnerable. These lead her to take unsafe decisions that have lasting impressions on her life and living.

Lack of access to existing services

There is definitely limited services offered to adolescent girls & their families compared to the grave situations that they are in. Sadly however adolescent girls & their families do not have the necessary information on what are these services that are available & ways of accessing them. That counseling services can be availed by adolescent girls & her families in the different *Anwasha* clinics is hardly known to the targeted population the service is meant for! Similarly there is lack of information on where to go, who to approach, where to seek support from if one wants to resist child marriage.

Child Marriage is also a mental health issue

Child Marriage is essentially being seen as a public health issue. But there is a growing need to understand it within the over-determined space of gender, sexuality, mental health and violation of child rights. One of the counselor of an Anwasha clinic interacted with shared that the affectivity of counseling is seldom talked about and hence given least priority thereby remaining at margins of the services being offered. The fact that counseling can play a role in facilitating the process of building resilience in girls supporting them in resisting child marriage is completely ignored. There is an urgent need to develop understanding on how child marriage impacts the mental well-being & over-all growth of the child.

Way Ahead

- Developing & implementing programs that would address child marriage from within the over-determined space of gender, sexuality, and mental health & child rights. Acknowledging the importance of physical health impacts of child marriage it has become equally important to look into the other aspects as well. Else it would be difficult to address issues of adolescent girls entering relationships & eloping for marriage on one hand and parents getting their daughters married at an early age to save the family honour on the other.
- Men are still in major decision making positions within the families being the principle bread earner. Hence working with them is very important. Mothers also unanimously recommended that Talash organize meetings with men, as they are the ones who take major decisions regarding marriages of their daughters; often ignoring resistance put forward by women.
- Orienting parents to handle adolescent issues – marrying off girls after coming to know of their relationships will not provide a safe solution to the problem.
- Creating leaders – creating role models through peer leadership programs. These peer leaders can spearhead the movement against child marriage in their respective areas by negotiating both with adolescent girls & their parents.
- Developing village level support systems such that they can be easily accessed by adolescent girls & her family in situations of crisis. It is also important to establish connection with existing support services. There needs to be greater awareness generation on what the available services are and ways to avail them.
- Developing a body of knowledge and implementation programs that would enable us to holistically address the issue of child marriage from within an over-determined space of gender, sexuality, mental health & child rights.

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