

Combating Barriers to Adolescent Girls' Education
A Case Study of M V Foundation (2017)

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Introduction

M V Foundation (MVF) has been working on the protection of the rights of children in partnership with communities for over two decades. Using a rights-based approach, MVF took a position that all children must attend full-time formal day schools and that any child out of school is considered to be subject to child labour. So far, MVF has withdrawn over one million children from work and enrolled them into formal schools. These children, both boys and girls, have been from the most backward districts in India.

With the belief that full-time formal education is intrinsically valuable for children in the context of adolescents too, secondary education is a non-negotiable right; MVF has extended its activities to specifically address children in the 14 – 18 age group across five districts of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana since 2012. Their intervention tracked 126,020 children including 60,664 girls in this age group. They identified girls and boys who had dropped out of school for a longer period than 1 year (long-term drop-outs), those who had dropped out more recently (short-term drop-outs) or those who were potential drop-outs.

Although the broad contours of the strategies to reach out to adolescent children remained the same as those targeting children under the age of 14, MVF had to contend with certain specificities. Adolescent girls' access to formal education is mediated by a range of factors in India including a paucity of schools at the secondary and senior secondary levels, no extension and support services for those who have dropped out, and lack of commitment to formal education in the form of law or policy. At this age, they are also entrenched into the informal workforce. Girls' access is additionally restricted by social and cultural factors including control over their sexuality and their mobility.

This case study initially reflects upon the evolution of MVF's programme strategy in three phases: working with bonded labour children in the early '90s, expanding the mandate to all out-of-school children from the mid '90's onwards, and evolving strategies to address adolescent children from 2011. It then sets the context of the MVF adolescent girls' education programme, by examining access to secondary education, adolescent participation in the workforce and control over sexuality and mobility. It then describes the programme intervention that MVF undertook between 2011 and 2015 in girls' education by stopping early marriages, facilitating retention in schools, enabling girls and boys to take 10th standard examinations and preventing them from dropping out.

I. PROGRAMME STRATEGY

MVF's programme strategy is primarily informed by a set of non-negotiable principles for the emancipation from child labour and children's right to education. These are:

1. All children must attend full-time formal day schools.
2. Any child out of school is a child labourer.
3. All work/labour is hazardous and harms the overall growth of the child.
4. There must be total abolition of child labour. Laws regulating child labour are unacceptable.
5. Any justification perpetuating the existence of child labour must be condemned.

Phase 1: Bonded Labour

These non-negotiable principles evolved over the initial phase of MVF's work with children who were in bonded labour in the early '90s. Their approach was through confrontation of upper-caste and landowning employers, and creating conflict within the community. However, the organization found that its approach strongly antagonized employers, and found no support amongst parents or the community. They also found that one set of bonded labour children simply got replaced with another set – not creating a sustainable or lasting impact. Girl children were totally ignored. In addition, other children in the same areas who were either working in their family enterprises or in agriculture and allied sectors but not as bonded labourers put pressure on MVF volunteers to be withdrawn from work too. This forced MVF to reflect upon such a strategy. Instead, MVF sought to build support for children's rights by “invoking the liberal and humanistic tendencies of all involved”¹ towards child rights.

Phase 2: Child Labour

At the end of this phase, by the mid-'90s MVF widened its scope to all children and not restricted only to children in bonded labour. This raised several important questions. If children should not be at work, where should they be? The only acceptable answer to this is full-time, formal day schools. If all out-of-school children are child labourers, this automatically also meant that a distinction cannot be drawn between 'hazardous' and 'non-hazardous' work, since all work affects the overall development and growth of a child. Such an emphasis drew from making universal education a social norm through a rights-based approach. MVF's approach sought to build social consensus for the right to education for all children while being fully cognizant of and resolving caste, class and gender-based conflicts through debate and discussion at local levels.

¹ Sinha S (2005) Emphasizing Universal Principles towards Deepening of Democracy in India, Economic and Political Weekly .

Central to a rights-based approach is engagement with the state, making it accountable for children's rights. In all its activities, MVF was conscious to not set up its own institutions parallel to those of the state. Recognizing that it is the state's role to guarantee rights, the organization engaged at many levels with public institutions. At the local level, this meant working with public schools, Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) centres, primary and secondary healthcare, local self-governance institutions, the police, block and district administrative and revenue officials and members of the legislative assembly to create an environment where children and their rights are a central political issue. In the process of engaging with the state, MVF identified the gaps in law and policies. At the state and national level, MVF then lobbied for change in law, budgeting and planning for children's education and creating enabling policies for children's rights. More importantly, it worked towards ensuring that state institutions worked proactively for children.

Phase 3: Adolescents' Education

MVF sought to adopt a similar strategy to children between ages 14 – 18 on issues of education and early marriage, with a few key departures. Seeking to build a universal principle on the right to education even for adolescents through a rights-based approach, the organization focused specifically on enrolling out-of-school adolescent children into formal education – either through the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) or by enabling them, in various ways, to take Class 10 examinations. They also provided extension and support services to all children, allowing them to focus on preparing for examinations without the hassle of engaging with the school administration for numerous certificates and documents.

II. SETTING THE CONTEXT

IIA. Access to Secondary Education

Through its interventions, MVF has seen that the completion of elementary school education itself is a herculean task for poor children, more so for girls. Only 41% of children in the 15-17 age group attend school. Within this group, only 34.5% of girls attend school, whereas the same figure for boys is markedly higher at 49%. There is also an urban-rural differential in the attainment of education. The gender disparity is higher in rural areas, with only 23 percent of girls attending school, compared with 46 percent of boys. For the ages 15-19, the overall literacy rate is 15 percentage points behind that of boys.²

There are several supply-side factors that impede access to higher education for both

² Department of Health. (2010). National Family Health Survey – III

boys and girls, including presence of schools, their geographical location, distance from the village, regularity of teachers and availability of physical infrastructure. As opposed to 790,640 primary schools in India, there are only 401,079 upper primary schools, 131,287 secondary schools and 102,558 senior secondary schools. The drastic drop in the number of schools for adolescents is telling. They are simply not adequate to accommodate the out-of-school children and the increasing demand for the expansion of secondary education. Consequentially, the number of children enrolled in secondary and senior secondary schools is much lower than those up to the 8th standard.³

IIB. Adolescents' Entry into the Informal Workforce

Participation in the workforce increases for both boys and girls at adolescence. Nationally, the workforce participation (WPR) for adolescents in the age group 15 – 19 years is 14.7%. The male WPR for this age group is 19.9% (main workers) while female WPR is 8.81% (main workers). 10.4% adolescents are marginal workers. Such an increase can easily be attributed to poor access to secondary school education. Padmini Swaminathan finds that “While at one level, the gender gap (females per 1,000 males) increased significantly when data were computed for different levels of literacy, what the data also corroborated was the fact that districts with higher levels of adolescent girls in employment were also the ones where significant proportions of adolescent girls were ‘not attending schools’.”⁴

The entry of adolescent girls into productive work such as agricultural labour, wage work or even skilled work happens seamlessly as she is in any case absorbed into domestic work right from her childhood in informal ways, with her assuming smaller responsibilities. At adolescence, she is expected to take the lead in performing these roles, no longer as an assistant to her mother or her older siblings, but on her own. As part of the workforce both boys and girls are forced into “a routine of drudgery and suffering at the cost of realizing their fullest potential. They are gradually edged out of any economic activity that involves skilled labour. They have no claim to any system of security or insurance; thus, they are unable to take advantage of state programs and policies as well as market interventions. Ultimately, their fate is sealed by their lack of access to education.”⁵ Additionally, the lack of secondary schooling also prevents their access to university, vocational and professional schools, and makes them ineligible for a range of jobs.

A large number of poor adolescent girls and boys are forced to join the agricultural workforce for want of free and compulsory education at the secondary school level,

³ Government of India (2014). Educational Statistics at a Glance.
http://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/statistics/EAG2014.pdf

⁴ Swaminathan P. (2008). Exclusions From and Inclusions In Development: Implications for Engendering Development. Economic and Political Weekly.

⁵ Sinha S. (2014) Beginning in the Middle-Ending the Exploitation of Adolescents in India in Bhabha Jacqueline (ed), Human Rights and Education, University of Pennsylvania. pp.293-308

reinforcing gender discrimination, with exclusion of Dalits adding to the axis of marginalization and class distinction. All of these combined factors operate as systemic barriers to access to education.

II.C. Combating Control over Sexuality and Mobility

At adolescence, there is an intensified compulsion to enter the workforce as earning members of the family on the one hand, and on the other, the perception of adolescent girls as sexual beings. Exercising control over mobility and bodily integrity becomes explicit through arguments such as safety and security of girls, or the fear of sexual harassment in and on the way to schools. MVF found that these arguments only come into play in the context of girls' pursuance of higher education. The safety argument does not seem to deter parents from getting girls married at an early age, forcing them to walk miles to fetch water or firewood, migrate for work as agricultural labourers or trafficked for child labour and sex work; exposing a double standard.

Control over sexuality also operates within the context of marriage. Around 40% of girls aged between 15 and 19 in the country are married, 12% have become mothers and 4% are expecting their first child. Girls between ages 15 – 19 also report the highest incidence of emotional, physical and sexual violence.⁶ Early marriage leaves the adolescent girl in her marital home with a heavier burden of work, an education that has been abandoned mid-way, hardly any decision-making abilities, constrained access to healthcare and a higher risk of facing violence.

Such control is reinforced by the fact that the state does not reach out to adolescent girls and boys. MVF's programmatic intervention chose to address these issues by demanding adequate infrastructure and support for girls and boys to reach and be retained in schools at this age, so that such issues of control over mobility and sexuality through marriage and restricted access to public spaces could be tackled systematically.

III. PROGRAMMATIC INTERVENTION

MVF's program for 14-18 year olds addressed out-of-school adolescent children's re-entry into formal education. Specifically, it made visible the specific challenges faced by girls through forced marriages and pressures operating at every sphere of life from the family, neighbourhood, and community. In the face of such gendered obstacles to education for girls, MVF initiated its program with an explicit focus on girls between ages 14 – 18 enabling their exercise of agency to pursue higher education. MVF also galvanized support of the community and the various functionaries of the system to give girls the courage to access education. A consequence of this program was the impact it had on adolescent boys, enabling them to go to school as well.

⁶Note 38 above.

In doing so, MVF viewed the 14-18 year olds as adolescent children, as opposed to viewing them as young adults who are in a transitional phase to be prepared for adulthood. A view of 'young adults' promotes a policy towards skill-based or vocational training which can help adolescents generate an income, precluding them from pursuing higher education in mainstream schools. MVF found it imperative to question such an acceptance of vocational education in place of secondary education, and "oppose the adoption of relativist arguments prioritizing teen work over learning."⁷ Instead, MVF's view is that adolescent children have to be guaranteed their right to education until completion of secondary school.

Step 1: Survey and Mobilization

MVF started by mobilizing communities to build support for girls' education. This included carrying out a door-to-door survey of all children in the age group of 0-18 years, with a special focus on the educational, marital and employment status of adolescent children in the 14-18 year age group. Through this process, volunteers transformed numbers into faces and built a relationship with each family in their villages.

Through a dynamic 'tracking' process, MVF constantly followed up on three kinds of children: those who go to private schools, those who go to government schools and those who have dropped out of school. MVF's tracking strategy works at two levels, once in a quarter for private schools and once in a month for government schools. In government schools, they follow up on children who are absent for several days in a row without a reason. MVF also continuously tracks children's transition between academic years, between primary and secondary school, between secondary school and junior college and between intermediate college and undergraduate college.

Through the survey process, the organization identified two groups of adolescent children for intervention: the first was potential and short-term drop-outs who had been out of school for less than a year; and the second was long-term drop-outs who had been out of school for longer than a year.

In the three blocks of Shankarpally, Marpally and Vikarabad, MVF identified 620 girl drop-outs in between the ages 11 – 18. 373 of them were married girls – 173 were forced to marry in the 10th standard, even before they completed the school leaving examination. The rest were forced to marry between the 5th and 9th standards.

Step 2: Institutionalizing Local Support

Once the organization collected data from the villages, they started reaching out to the community through street plays, marches and rallies. At the same time, they worked towards institutionalizing local support through existing forums such as women's Self Help Groups and School Management Committees, and by creating forums such as Child Rights Protection Forums and Girl Child Protection Forums. These forums

⁷ Bhabha, J. (2014). Introduction. Human Rights and Education, University of Pennsylvania, pp.1-19

partnered with elected local self-governance institutions (Gram Panchayats) and local political leaders to actively prevent child labor, child marriage and drop out from schools. They also worked to strengthen the Integrated Child Development Services, Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (residential schools for girls from Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, Other Backward Classes and minority communities) and other institutions.

With the help of the village-level Child Rights Protection Forum, MVF visited children's homes to motivate parents to send their children to school. Often, they found that children absent themselves from school to take care of their siblings, the elderly or relatives at home, or to assist in agricultural labour. At the end of each academic year, the risk of children dropping out of mainstream education is high for many reasons. Parents have to be motivated to send their children to the next year or level of schooling. These forums reached out to parents to give them the confidence to support their daughters' education, and helped them secure admissions for their children into schools and hostels. The members of these forums were also given training on laws and policies regarding child labour, child marriage, the right to education and other child rights, and their role in addressing these issues.

The organization worked with village-level governance institutions including the Gram Panchayats and School Management Committees (SMCs, set up under the Right to Education Act) to place an emphasis on girl child retention in schools. SMCs worked with school headmasters, parents of girl children, single mothers and migrant labourers to ensure adolescent girls did not drop out of school. Gram Panchayats took up issues of lack of infrastructure in schools, teacher shortages, corporal punishment, transportation to secondary schools and stopping early marriages. School headmasters, Anganwadi workers and Auxilliary Nurse Midwives (ANMs) regularly attended Gram Panchayat meetings to monitor and review their progress.

MVF also worked towards mobilizing young people in villages through youth clubs for both boys and girls. The clubs held regular meetings to articulate their own concerns in their relationships, access to reproductive healthcare, sexual harassment, violence, lack of educational and recreational facilities and toilets. MVF conducted exposure visits for youth to local police stations to build relationships and familiarize youth with these institutions. Through these youth clubs, which were non gender-segregated, MVF sought to build girls' mobility and access to public spaces. These youth clubs also monitored child marriages in their villages, put pressure on the Gram Panchayats to register all marriages and ensured that no one in their families or communities were married before the minimum legal age. Members of these clubs collected scholarships for the needy, interacted with government officers about providing infrastructure facilities and volunteered to teach in state-run non-residential special training centres.

Step 3: Working with District and State-Level Administration

MVF worked with administrative institutions including the revenue, labor, health, women's and children's departments, District Collectors and the police at the state- and district-levels to ensure accountability and action on child rights. It worked towards efficient collaboration and convergence between these departments to release them from child labor, stop early marriages, support poor children in applying for examinations by waiving fees and streamlining documentation processes, open residential schools, hostels and training centres, improve public transportation and make nutritional supplements and reproductive healthcare available at the village.

Between 2012 and 2015, MVF worked extensively with the police to stop child marriage. Police officials made religious leaders and priests demand proof of age documents before solemnizing any marriage, and warned them against abetting child marriage with punitive consequences. Many priests put up boards in front of their homes and in temples announcing that they would not perform underage marriages. They ensured that Gram Panchayats insisted upon registering every marriage in their villages. MVF also put pressure on local political leaders to stop attending and supporting child marriages. MVF also lobbied for a mandate from the state government, which ensured the formation of sub-district Child Marriage Protection Committees (CMPCs). These Committees became responsible for identifying and preventing underage marriages.

Working to make the state responsive to violence against children remains a challenge for the organization, especially in cases of sexual violence. In 2015, MVF took up the implementation of Childline in 600 villages. Childline is a helpline that facilitates response to various children's issues including child labour, trafficking, physical and sexual violence, sexual harassment and child marriage. However, it has been difficult to convince the police to respond to sexual violence against children by registering a First Information Report (FIR) and investigate such cases. It has also been difficult to secure medical care with any urgency for children who have faced such violence. On the other hand, the extreme vulnerability of children to violence from within and without their families is becoming increasingly visible. The organization is currently dealing with many such cases where the perpetrators are fathers, grandfathers or uncles.

Step 4: Working With Children

4.1 Providing Extension and Support Services

At the heart of MVF's programmatic intervention is the work it does with children.

MVF volunteers identified all children who had registered for secondary and senior secondary examinations through regular schools, and contacted each student to ensure that they wrote the exam. Tutorial classes after school were arranged for children to help them prepare. Parents were asked to accompany their children to the Examination Centre on the day of the first exam to support them. They also identified short and long-

term drop-out children, enrolled them into open schools and helped them apply for their examinations. Tedious work went into contacting each one of them (girls and boys), giving them the confidence that they can take examinations conducted by the state government, applying for and obtaining innumerable certificates and documents from the government.

Children who had dropped out of school were prepared to take the 10th standard examination through open schools (through the government-run National Institute of Open Schooling), which is the only available source for formal education for such children. These schools required children to attend classes on weekends. MVF required training and tuition centres, and had to build support amongst headmasters and Gram Panchayats to provide the space for coaching and transport for girls to reach the classes. They were given support to take classes two days a week, and time off to prepare for those two hours of class. They also worked with several district administrative institutions to facilitate the provision of free bus services for girls to reach the centres. If children have to appear as private candidates for the 10th standard examination, they have to pay a fee. MVF negotiated with the state government and Commissioner of School Education for waiving these fees.

Children who were prepared to take the examinations faced further challenges in obtaining certificates that enabled them to write examinations. There is no transparency or information provided on the protocols and documentation required for application. Children face endless difficulties in getting forms signed by many officials in many different offices, obtaining birth, caste, income, transfer, character and migration certificates, getting the details on their examination hall tickets right. All of these procedures faze children who are interested in writing the exam. Each such banal detail is a battle for children, pushing them out of mainstream public education. Children are told that their role is only to write the exam – MVF volunteers acted as a support system to handle everything else. The lack of such support systems to support adolescent children in writing examinations and study further discourages children from going back to school. Such support systems also have to address questions of control over labor, mobility and sexuality; and work with boys on issues related to masculinity.

Nedimenti Devendrappa of Nerniki, Holagunda mandal had registered for 10th Standard examinations in 2015. By mistake, Urdu language was mentioned as the Second Language in his Hall Ticket, although he had chosen Telugu language. Devendrappa was denied admission to the Telugu exam, and asked to write the Urdu paper. The MVF volunteer explained the error to the Invigilator. The volunteer ran to the Education Officer in the block, who changed the entry in the hall ticket. He then got an affidavit signed and notarized by the student. Devendrappa was finally allowed to write the Telugu language exam after all of these efforts.

At the end of this process, some students fail their examinations – and these students need to be motivated to write it again. The students who pass have to be supported to

move to the next level of education, whether the 11th standard or undergraduate, professional and vocational degrees. Each year, MVF volunteers compiled a list of all children studying in the highest class available in the school they were enrolled in, and matched to the best possible schools at the next level of schooling where they had to be admitted in the following year. The headmasters of those schools were contacted, hostels and residential facilities were identified each year for each student. Also, meetings were conducted with parents by the Gram Panchayat and ICDS centres where volunteers and elected representatives counselled girls and their parents to continue their education. They were given detailed information about the choices available to them, both in terms of vocations and degrees, and hostels and scholarships. At these meetings, college lecturers shared their personal experiences, and gave confidence to the girls to pursue their education. Volunteers negotiated with private colleges for fee concessions to poor students, and arranged bus facilities in remote villages through the RTC.

4.2 Working with Girls: Individual and Collective Action

Girls only remain in educational institutions as long as they have the strength to defy existing relations of power within their families and communities, and their parents and communities make way for them. MVF worked towards creating an enabling environment for girls to exercise agency towards their right to education. Through a process of social mobilization and sustained engagement with relevant government functionaries, MVF devised various strategies to address socially entrenched institutions of child marriage and child labour. MVF had a two-pronged approach to early marriage. The first was to stop marriages that were taking place. Between 2012-16 MVF identified 3,564 child marriages in the villages where they are based of which 566 were stopped. The second was to deter marriages from taking place at all, by supporting girls in their pursuit of education instrumentally to stall early marriage.

In order to enable girls to take action towards their rights, they were collectivized through Balika Sanghas (girl child committees). Girls were initially hesitant to trust these committees and open up. But with the efforts of MVF volunteers to reach out to them, they built up the courage to discuss the gender and caste based discrimination they faced in homes, schools and public spaces. They gradually gathered the strength to identify, oppose and take action against child marriage. They contacted girls who were not in schools and encouraged them to join their forums.

These committees were used as training forums where workshops were conducted on gender discrimination, sexual and reproductive issues, laws on child marriage, juvenile justice, the right to education, child labour and sexual offences against women and children. The committees also interacted regularly with community health workers such as Auxiliary Nurse Midwives (ANMs) and leaders of women's Self Help Groups in their villages for resources and support. Balika Sanghas from different villages also met regularly to learn from each other and share their concerns. The girls also visited the local police station. They wanted to know how FIRs were filed, especially in cases of

sexual and domestic violence, and child marriage. It gave them the courage to work against marriage and in support of their education.

A consequence of the social mobilization and action on adolescent girls' enrolment was the enrolment of boys too. Consequently, even though the program was focused on adolescent girls, more boys were able to access formal education at secondary school level than girls. However, it would not have been possible to enrol as many girl children into school without focusing specifically on the gendered obstacles girls face.

CONCLUSION

Over the past five years, MVF has been working towards a new strategy taking into consideration the complexity of gender relations in bringing about equal access to education for all children. In this period of time, MVF has evolved a set of non-negotiable principles for working with adolescent children in this context, which are:

- All children must be in a full time school or any full time education stream until completion of 18 years.
- Girls and boys must enjoy equal opportunities to pursue education and build their capabilities.
- The discourse on gender equality must be introduced into the school curriculum from Class 1 onwards.
- Presence in an educational institution should be a pre-condition for building awareness on reproductive health care, sex education and life skills for both boys and girls.
- Arguments that control girls' bodily integrity and deny them autonomy such as domestic work, distance to schools, lack of safety for girls, eve teasing, increases in dowry, sibling care, poverty, and pressure of marriage are unacceptable.
- Youth clubs must be non-gender segregated, secular spaces where all members are equal, without distinctions of gender, caste, religion, disability or any other forms of discrimination.
- No girl shall marry before attainment of 18 years of age. Child Marriage laws must be amended to nullify the marriage of all girls until 18 years of age.
- Even after the age of 18 years, the girl's decision and choice for her marriage has to be given full support.

MVF's work with adolescent girls has been based on the belief that working on education alone does not bring about gender equality. Through these principles, MVF's explicit focus is on making the right to education a political issue, resolving gender, caste and class-based conflicts locally through community action with the support of state functionaries.