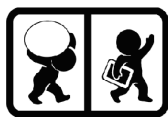


# Realising Child Rights

A Focus on the Girl Child

**Brittany Gleixner - Hayat**

**15 February 2007**



**MV FOUNDATION**

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*by*

**Brittany Gleixner - Hayat**

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# 1

## INTRODUCTION

India hosts the largest number of child labourers in the world. Most of these children are denied their right to education, their right to food, their right to healthcare and forced into lives of drudgery with little hope for a future that is any different than their current circumstances. Many of them remain unseen as their work is considered acceptable in their communities, in their country, and to the world. In India and numerous other countries most of these children are girls who live in rural areas. Most work their entire lives doing domestic chores, taking care of children, or working in fields or factories, while being told what to do, whom to marry, when to have sex, and where to live. Despite the widely accepted norm of human rights these girls stand testament to the fact that entire sections of society at the village, state, and international levels are ignorant of their plight. In fact, their situation is largely accepted whilst employing the logic of cultural relativism or arguments pertaining to the economy of poverty.

The persistence of child labour and the lack of adequate legislation to end child labour clearly identifies that there is no sufficient commitment on the part of most governments and international bodies to end this pervasive problem.<sup>1</sup> This is alarming because of the clear disjunction between promoting children's rights and failure to implement laws that prohibit all forms of child labour. How is universal primary education, for example, possible, if the law does not make all forms of child labour illegal?<sup>2</sup> A simplified answer is that there is no real consensus on the issue of child labour; particularly in the case of girls. What constitutes child labour? Why does it exist? What is the best way to end it? These questions will be addressed in this report.

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1 See section I: Profiling the Problem for further discussion on gap in legislation

2 The assumption here, that child labour must be abolished in all forms in order to have universal primary education, is a debated one. Opponents of this view often employ the Poverty Argument (see section 1.2)

This report is the result of four months of data collection and research on the activities of the Mamidipudi Venkatarangaiya Foundation (MV Foundation or MVF). MV Foundation is a charitable trust based in the state of Andhra Pradesh, India, which is working to end child labour for the past 15 years through a rights-based, non-negotiable approach. This report aims to answer the following question: How has the rights-based, non-negotiable approach of MV Foundation affected the ability of former girl child labourers to realise their rights? To this end three objectives have been set: first, to identify the challenges the girl child faces in securing her rights; second, to contextualise MV Foundation's rights-based approach (RBA); and third, to assess the impact of MV Foundation's rights-based approach on these challenges.

The findings of this study suggest that the greatest challenge that girls face in securing their rights are backward social norms that impose certain restrictions<sup>3</sup> on the girl child. India is a country where educational facilities are severely lacking, class size often exceeds 50 pupils per teacher, and infrastructure is largely insufficient. Despite this, girls highlight that their biggest challenges are not the conditions of the hostels or the schools, but the battles they must fight at home to get into or remain in school. The result is that many girls from poor rural sections of society in India are not in school and are instead engaged as child labourers. As case studies will illustrate, MV Foundation rights-based approach has been affective in raising awareness in communities about the rights of all children. This has given the girl child a renewed place in the community and there is a noticeable shift in social norms towards an understanding of girls as children instead of mothers-and-wives-in-training. The result is that more girls are confident enough to stand up for their rights and get out of work and into school.<sup>4</sup>

## 1.1 Research question and methodology

Data for this study was acquired through one-on-one interviews with 60 former girl child labourers, most of whom are currently pursuing their education. All of them have been through a MV Foundation Residential Bridge Course (RBC) or have been motivated by a MV Foundation volunteer or staff member. The study is also based on

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3 Please see section II: Profiling the Problem for elaboration of this point.

4 MVF annual reports from 2000 - 2005

interviews with government officials, MV Foundation staff, and interactions with members of local child rights groups which have been initiated by MV Foundation. Research was conducted in the districts of Ranga Reddy, Nalgonda, Kurnool and Adilabad in Andhra Pradesh; Panna and Chittarpur in Madhya Pradesh; and Samastipur in Bihar. A literature review of numerous annual reports, articles, and books also informed the research.

This report is divided into four main sections. The first section will provide an overview of the nature and causes of the problems girl children face in securing their rights. This section is intended to provide a clear understanding of the broad definition of child labour which this author and MV Foundation employ. This definition considers all children out of school to be child labourers. The second section discusses MV Foundation's non-negotiable, child rights- based approach. This section will put the rights-based approach into context. This is done by providing an overview of what it means both in theory and practise, using MV Foundation as an example. Third section outlines the success of the approach. This determination is based on both primary and secondary sources, but mostly draws on empirical data collected during field research. The fourth section provides concluding thoughts.





## 2

# PROFILING THE PROBLEM

## 2.1 Girls' work

The girls interviewed for this report are from the 12-21 age range, with 70% of interviewees being between the ages of 14-16 years. The girls were primarily engaged in agricultural work as day wage labourers, animal herding, and tailoring. Like many girls in rural India, they were forced to work in the scorching heat, with blistering sore feet dug into the marshy land for sowing, weeding, and harvesting of various agricultural products. When they are not working in the fields girls are burdened with the monotony of work at home: cooking, fetching water, carrying siblings and doing other household chores. Girls are also engaged in tending to cattle, sheep, goats, and contribute to producing milk and milk products, and other food items. Fifty six out of the sixty girls interviewed for this study said that they were engaged in heavy domestic chores, even in cases where they were in school.

In India, young girls, particularly pre-menstrual girls, may work in production of hybrid cotton seeds. It is considered to be bad luck to have a menstruating female amongst the crop. Furthermore, it is a well documented fact that landowners argue that girls are particularly fit for this work as their small fingers work faster and they are the appropriate height.<sup>5</sup> This labour intensive work also carries with it the risks associated with exposure to pesticides. It is a common experience amongst girls engaged in this work to have persistent headaches, nausea, and skin irritation. Girls interviewed, particularly from the Ranga Reddy district were engaged in the production of these cotton seeds.

In India girls also work in the cotton ginning mills, handloom weaving looms, as well as the spinning machines and power looms. The production of silk fabrics and the process of sericulture have an

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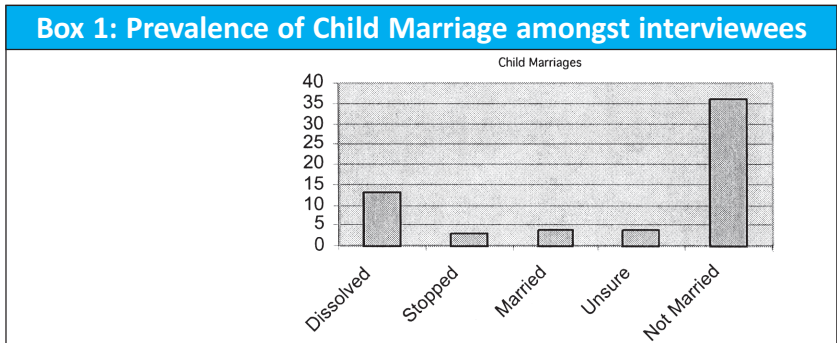
5 UNICEF 2002

abundance of children working in damp, dark, poorly ventilated shops that have loud, deafening music playing in the background. Girls are also engaged in construction work. With growing demand in the building and construction industry, children leave their villages to work on sites without water, sanitation, or shelter, around brick kilns lifting head loads, brick by brick, and piling clay moulds to bake under the heat and dust.

The homes of most middle and upper classes also depend on young girls working as domestic servants. They are either full time workers trafficked from their homes or part time workers living with their parents in the same village. Girls also work as domestic servants in the homes of their in-laws. Twenty one of the girls interviewed for this study worked as domestic labourers in the homes of their in-laws. There is an undercurrent of suspicion about the girls’ honesty, and they are often rebuked for being lax and untidy in their chores.

## 2.2 Child Marriage as Child Labour

Young girls also have to face the threat of child marriage which is a deep, pervasive issue steeped in gender discrimination. Girls engaged for marriage in their childhood are most likely to be forced to stop school thus pushing them, prematurely, into the world of work. For this reason child marriage can be understood as a child labour issue.<sup>6</sup> It also puts their health at risk with pregnancy complications as one of the prime causes of female mortality in the 15 to 19 age group.<sup>7</sup> The young age of marriage (as young as 8 years old) is normally attributed to the cost of dowry which increases with the girls’ age. However, this study makes it clear that the prevalence of backward socio-cultural



6 It is in this basis that MV Foundation has expanded its work to include the prevention and abolition of child marriage.

7 Human Rights Law Network (2005). *Child Marriages and the Law in India*.

**Not an Isolated Incident**

Narsamma was in 4<sup>th</sup> standard when her parents had her married. She was immediately sent to live with her husband at the young age of nine. Her in-laws forced her to stop school and to work in the cotton and maize fields. Upon seeing this treatment of their daughter, Narsamma's parents insisted she be returned home. At the same time, her husband fell ill with tuberculosis. Narsamma finally went home and her parents enrolled her in 5<sup>th</sup> standard. Her mother in-law frequently visited her home and school and would take her against her will back to her husband's home and force her to work in the fields for wages. After one year Narsamma had missed enough schooling that she was unable to enroll in 6<sup>th</sup> standard. It was at this point that MV Foundation came to know about Narsamma's position.

A MV Foundation staff person asked Narsamma's parents to allow her to attend the Residential Bridge Camp (RBC) at Alur. They agreed and after 12 months at the RBC she passed 7<sup>th</sup> standard. Narsamma then went on to finish 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 10<sup>th</sup> standards while staying at a social welfare hostel. While she was pursuing her education her ex-husband remarried. His new wife was unable to bear children and Narsamma's ex-mother in-law would come to the hostel and verbally abuse Narsamma claiming that she had a responsibility to bear his children.

With time the ex-mother in-law's demands waned and at the time of the interview Narsamma was 21 years old, had completed +2 and was enrolled in a nurse training program. She spent her free time accompanying sick persons from her village to the hospital and their doctor appointments. She felt strongly that many people now knew about child rights and the right of girls in particular. But she also expressed that they are unable to materialize them. In the case of girls, she felt that girls had specific 'circumstances' that made it harder for them to get their rights. For things to change, there should be more examples of girls who are getting educated and succeeding, she felt.

Sadly, just two days after the interview was conducted Narsamma died of ingestion of pesticides. Her death was said to be a suicide, however no autopsy was performed and no investigation ensued. She had well informed insights and had been through enormous challenges. The most frustrating aspect of Narsamma's case is that it is not an isolated incident.

norms is as salient a factor as the cost of dowry. Interviews revealed that it is common for neighbours and family members alike to pressurise the parents of a young girl about the urgency of arranging a marriage. Because of the norm of the wife moving in with the husband's family, girls are often looked at as a burden on their own family prior to marriage and as an extra pair of hands to work for the in-laws. Twenty four out of the sixty girls interviewed for this study were affected by child marriage. Thirteen of the marriages were dissolved, three were stopped, four of the girls were still married at the time of the interview, and four girls were unsure of the status of their marriage (See Box 1).

It is important to mention that these girls face constant pressure in their homes prior to marriage based on the pressures that the aforementioned social norms impose. Nearly 75% of girls interviewed expressed that they felt like a burden on their family and they were treated with little respect as it is assumed that the girl will not contribute anything to the family after her marriage. Most of all, child marriage results in the loss of childhood for the girl and perpetuates the cycle of embedded gender discrimination in society.

In India it is illegal for a girl under the age of 18 or a boy under the age of 21 to marry. However, poor enforcement of laws and lack of information about child marriage cases contribute to its prevalence. Though it is clear that the practise of child marriage is on the down swing, it is still a serious problem.

### 2.3 Other Backward Social Norms

The statistics on the girl child tell a story of deep rooted discrimination against girls and women that is far from waning. As of 2001, girls have a higher mortality rate than boys, particularly in the infant stage.<sup>8</sup> This can be attributed to the widespread preference for boys. Gender-based abortion is increasing amongst the more affluent sections of Indian society. UNICEF's annual report, *The State of the World's Children 2007*, cites that there are 7,000 fewer girls being born every day in India because of prenatal sex-determination. Boy preference in poorer sections of society primarily manifests itself in female infanticide given the high costs associated with abortion.

Girls receive less attention, food, and health care than boys across all classes and castes. Girls are also far more likely to drop out of school

<sup>8</sup> Government of India Census 2001

**Education – Now a Right**

Lalitha is from Peddemur mandal in Ranga Reddy district. She is the eldest of four children and her parents work in agriculture. When Lalitha was in 7<sup>th</sup> standard her parents had her married. Immediately after the marriage she was sent to live at her husband's home. She stayed there for two months and was forced to work in the agricultural fields and do domestic work. Because she had been to school she did not learn much about agricultural work and her in-laws declared her to be an inefficient worker. They often complained to her husband about the quality of her work both in the fields and at home. The husband, who was in his early twenties, was so frustrated by the situation that he committed suicide by burning. When asked how she felt about this she responded somewhat indifferently, and noted that she never really knew him that well and the only thing she wanted was to continue with her studies.

Lalitha was permitted to return to her maternal home after her husband's death. That was when a MV Foundation volunteer who lived in her village got to know about her situation. With encouragement of MV Foundation volunteer Lalitha stood up for herself against her parents who wanted her to return to work in the fields. After numerous conversations with MV Foundation volunteer the parents were convinced that Lalitha should return to school.

Now she is in 10<sup>th</sup> standard and her parents are ready to support her. After the marriage was broken, her parents see her education as a way to help her in attaining a livelihood, Lalitha noted. When asked why her parents had her married in the first place she pointed to the fact that there are three girls in her family and that her parents felt the pressure to marry her off.

Lalitha's main goals are to continue to +2. She appreciates the work of MV Foundation. Earlier going to school was not a right, it was just going to school. With MV Foundation's interventions she feels that this has changed for the better and even her family understands that girls have a right to education.

than boys. Girls are far more likely to be withdrawn from school to help in the household than boys. Particularly when there is a sick family member or a new baby, a girl's education quickly becomes secondary. When the girl attempts to return to school she finds her name has been struck from the books and she is not permitted to re-enter. In

## Box 2: Inhumane practise of female infanticide

"In some states, newborn girls have been killed by pouring sand or tobacco juice into their nostrils."

"The minute the child is born and she opens her mouth to cry, they put sand into her mouth and her nostrils so she chokes and dies," Renuka Chowdhury said, referring to cases in the desert state of Rajasthan.

"They put infants into pots alive and bury the pots. They put tobacco into her mouth. They hang them upside down like a bunch of flowers to dry," she said.

"We have more passion for tigers of this country. We have people fighting for stray dogs on the road. But you have a whole society that ruthlessly hunts down girl children."

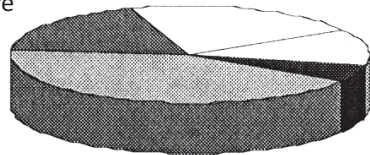
- Renuka Chowdhury, Minister for Women and Child Development, Government of India.

some cases the girl gets discouraged by the gap in her attendance and opts not to return to school because she has missed too much. In these cases there is limited encouragement on the part of family and friends. The schools do not have the capacity and are often not willing to help girls in this position. Data from this study suggests that dropouts can primarily be credited to pressures of dowry and subsequent marriage at an early age (see Case Study 3). Data from interviews also suggests that girls' dropout rate is higher given the assumption that a woman's work is at home, hence a girl has no need for education beyond 5<sup>th</sup> - 8<sup>th</sup> class. Of the sixty girls interviewed thirty three were dropouts (see Box 3).

## Box 3: Why do girls drop out?

In this study the following reasons were identified for drop-out:

- **Child Marriage**
- **Death/sickness in family or new baby**
- **Parents withdrew the girl because she "had enough education"**
- **Parents relocated and child unable to re-register in school (this was a problem especially for migrant workers in Madhya Pradesh)**
- **Financial**



- Marriage
- Health
- Parents Withdraw
- Relocation
- Financial

### Case Study 3

## Child Marriage Leads to Drop Outs

Sunanda is the eldest of six and is from the village of Agraharam in Ranga Reddy district. She studied in school until 5<sup>th</sup> standard when she was married. She was informed two days before the ceremony that she would be married. She protested but was unable to do anything about it. Her parents and in-laws *allowed* her to continue her studies until 7<sup>th</sup> standard. Then, her father, mother, grandmother, and neighbors insisted that she must go to live with her husband.

She was then forced to discontinue her studies and she began working in cotton fields and in her marital home. Sunanda was so unhappy with her situation that she wanted to commit suicide. Her friend encouraged her to give a statement to a local newspaper. MV Foundation learned of her story as a result of this article.

MV Foundation arranged for an intervention and her family agreed to allow her to enter into a three month camp. After the camp she passed the 10<sup>th</sup> class exam. Currently she is in +1 and staying in the government hostel. Sunanda says that many people in her village will not speak to her as she broke her marriage. However, her father is now making a small financial support to her education.

Girls also face significant restriction in their movement, particularly after they reach puberty. Parents claim that girls are not safe outside of the home on their own or even in groups. If a girl is permitted to venture beyond her doorstep, it is often only in the presence of a male family member – even if that family member is a younger brother. When respondents were asked about restriction on their movement they noted that it is primarily after puberty that their movement is restricted. As educational facilities in villages end at either class 5 or 7, the restriction on her movement directly affects the girl's ability to continue her education. This also influences the level of involvement the girl has in public arenas, such as youth groups. The consequence is an environment where the girl child, her life, her interests, and concerns are restricted to the private realm of her home.

Another issue that negatively affects the girl's ability to secure her rights is the lack of good role models in her home and community. Of the girls interviewed, only two of their mothers went to school. Fifty eight of them were the first girls in their family to go to school and forty were the

## Case Study 4

### Determination Despite Rejection

Rupa is from the Sirpur mandal in the district of Adilabad. Though her parents are not educated they own 20 acres of land. She is one of six children. Upon completion of 3<sup>rd</sup> standard, Rupa was forced to marry at just 9 years old. She was at her husband's house for one month before MV Foundation came to know about her situation. MV Foundation staff told Rupa about the RBC and she was determined to change her situation and return to school.

Her parents were completely against Rupa's decision to go to the RBC in Gudihatnoor. She relentlessly fought with her parents and in-laws. After talking to her parents and in-laws proved unsuccessful, she finally ran away from her husband's home. She then entered the RBC with the help of MV Foundation.

Because her parents would not allow her to return to her home she lived at the RBC and completed 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, and 7<sup>th</sup> standard. She was able to secure a seat in the SC Hostel for 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 10<sup>th</sup> standard.

At the time of the interview Rupa was 16 years old and attending +1 while living at a ST management hostel.

She has not been home in six years and has lost contact with all of her family members. Rupa would like to go back to visit her family but she fears the rejection that she is sure she would face. She also fears that she might be forced to return to her in-laws home. Despite her hardships Rupa has proven that she is made of enormous strength and determination. She spoke with unwavering confidence and was far from shy and reserved. She freely spoke of her problems and sees herself in the larger struggle that all girls have to face against discriminating social norms.

first child to do so. Girls who do succeed in pursuing their education are generally not adequately supported by the community, and are sometimes shunned (see Case Study 4). It is also damaging that most people consider the instrumental value of education, rather than its intrinsic value, when determining its worthiness. Parents and neighbours alike shrug off education as incidental for girls and point to cases of joblessness to justify their view.

## 2.4 The Legislative Gap

According to the 2001 Census there are approximately 253 million children in India between the ages of 5 and 14 years. Of these children,



the official estimate of non-school-going children is 65 million. Of these non-school-going children, 12 million are formally considered to be child labourers by the Government of India (GOI). Accordingly, the remaining 53 million children – the majority of whom are girls - are not in school and not officially considered to be engaged in labour.<sup>9</sup> These children are often referred to in the literature as ‘nowhere children’ as they do not appear in labour statistics or in schools. Most of these children work to supplement family income by performing domestic chores or working on the family farm. Most of the work of these ‘nowhere’ children is not covered under the 1986 Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act of 1986 because the work is not considered to be ‘hazardous’ and because they are not domestic help in dhabas, restaurants, hotels and the hospitality sectors.<sup>10</sup> These children are also ignored by the ILO as they do not fit the definition of the ‘worst form of child labour’ and are not considered to be working under ‘intolerable circumstances’. The fact that these definitions are limited to certain industries reflects the logic that certain works are deemed acceptable or tolerable. Despite these definitions, or perhaps because of them, there are millions of children who go to work every day and are denied their basic rights to education, to food, and to health care. All of the girls interviewed for this study were engaged in work that is not formally covered by existing legislation. A surprising number of government officials, particularly from Madhya Pradesh and Bihar, expressed that they did not feel the work the girls were engaged in should be considered labour.

## 2.5 Nature and Causes of Child Labour

Identifying the nature and causes of child labour is a controversial issue in itself. In this context there is contention over two main issues: first, the definition of child labour and, second, the causes of child labour as per the respective definition. Thus, an understanding of the competing views on these issues is necessary in order to determine what makes an effective and sustainable solution.

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9 Government of India Census 2001

10 The ban on employment of children who are domestic help in dhabas, restaurants, hotels and the hospitality sector just came into effect in early October 2006. This new legislation was undoubtedly the result of pressure from non-governmental groups including MV Foundation who are actively engaged in the fight for a ban on all forms of child labour.

One view, broadly termed as the 'Poverty Argument' holds that in certain economies poverty is a 'harsh reality'<sup>11</sup> and the income of a child is critical to the survival of the family. In essence, this view sees education to be a luxury that can only be attained if a family can afford it. This approach does little to address the cyclical aspect of poverty and the marginalization of disadvantaged groups. In this case, it is assumed that economic development will affect positive change and lead to the withdrawal of children from the workplace. In this sense, it is the market that is looked to for solutions. The state is assumed to only have the capacity of facilitator and legislative measures are generally directed towards amelioration of work conditions, rather than the elimination of child labour.<sup>12</sup>

Another argument is that formal education does not necessarily meet the needs of the poor, particularly in rural areas. Proponents of this view have held that the 'bookish' biases of Indian education do not equip the poor with the necessary tools of livelihood. In this case, vocational training is often proposed in lieu of formal education. As with the poverty argument, this view holds that 'the poor' have different needs and that formal education as a system is for a privileged class. Child labour is thus an acceptable practise insofar as it equips the child with the skills deemed appropriate for their assumed stationary position in life.

With respect to girls also, a similar argument is held that formal schooling is not conducive to the kind of work that girls, particularly poor girls, are expected to do in their lives. This argument assumes girls to simply be mothers-and-wives-in-training. It presupposes that girls' lives should be limited to the confines of their home and the home of their future husband. This concept perpetuates gender inequities by limiting the capabilities of the girl child to those roles deemed culturally appropriate to her sex. Accordingly, girls' work is not necessarily considered as child labour. Instead, it is assumed that she is learning her socially acceptable role of wife and mother.

Another view that has been gaining momentum is that children have the right to work and that the choice to do so should be open to the child. Proponents of this view argue that children should be offered the opportunity to work and they work towards legislations that

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11 GOI 1995

12 Sinha

advocate an end to “exploitative child labour”.<sup>13</sup> Such legislation essentially enables the persistence of child labour as it allows for its prevalence in certain sectors.

Yet another view is that the system of education in India is inadequate and that sending children to school is not worthwhile. Proponents of this view assert the inadequacy of the schools and institutions as justification for the absence of children in school. Unfortunately this view does little in the way of a constructive, positive approach to the problem. In fact, it only perpetuates it by relieving pressure on the State and maintaining the status quo.

Another view is that any argument in favour of children working, whatever the logic, is only an excuse for the perpetuation of child labour for the advantage of certain vested interests. This view holds that any form of work is bad for children and that there is little room for compromise on this. Child labour is thus broadly defined to include any and all forms of work a child is engaged in whilst they are not attending full-time formal day school. Thus, any child out of school is considered a child labour. It is argued that insistence on focusing legislation on the worst forms of child labour only gives legitimacy for government to ignore the majority of children who are out of schools and engaged in some form of work. This kind of narrow legislation would render a majority of child labour invisible and hidden and result in the persistence of child labour, even in the ‘hazardous sector.’<sup>14</sup>

According to this last view, the main reason child labour persists is because of a lack of consensus amongst all facets of society on child rights. There is no unanimity on the issue that children must not be subjected to exploitation or the drudgery of work. Proof of this is in the multitude of views, as expressed here, and the inadequate legislation that exists both domestically and internationally. In this vein, the general lack of information or illiteracy of the parents is a significant reason for the continuation of the cycle. In fact, the experience of MV Foundation has found that there are parents who wish to enroll their children but find the task of preparing documents and learning about a system they do not understand as daunting. With respect to girls, the

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13 For example, the Child Labour Coalition based in Washington D.C. provides a clear definition of exploitative child labour practises on its website: <http://www.stopchildlabor.org/aboutus/aboutclc.htm#mission>.

14 Sinha

underlying issue at play is the societal norm that girls do not need education for the kind of lives they are expected to lead. These factors, in turn, fuel the indifference of policy makers in the abolishment of all forms of child labour, and the problem persists, particularly in the informal sector where most girls are working.

An important conceptual link in this purview is that securing the right to education for all children is possible only in the absence of child labour. Therefore, any programme to increase literacy levels amongst children must also be a programme to reduce the incidence of child labour. According to this view the two objectives are contingent upon each other. In other words, it is inherently contradictory for any government to enact legislation that makes primary education free and compulsory to all and simultaneously pass a law that only prohibits certain forms of child labour.

# 3

## HOW DO WE SOLVE THIS?

### 3.1 MV Foundation

MV Foundation began working in Ranga Reddy district in 1991. As a result of initial efforts, MV Foundation was successful in releasing thirty children from bonded labour. From these beginnings, MV Foundation emerged a leader in the movement to establish a societal norm in favour of child rights. MV Foundation currently operates in more than 6,000 villages covering 137 mandals in thirteen districts in Andhra Pradesh. They provide support for government schemes in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, and Assam. The work of MV Foundation and their approach has also emerged as an inspiration and resource for international campaigns for the abolition of child labour such as the Stop Child Labour Campaign. MV Foundation is also looked to for technical assistance by the GOI and by international NGOs like Action Aid.

MV Foundation denies the popular view that poverty is the main determinant of child labour. Instead, the Foundation fights to contextualize and make reality the rights of children by challenging the status quo. Through their experience, the organization developed straightforward answers to the important questions regarding child labour, and their language boils it down to a one liner: No child should work and all children should go to school. Their philosophy regarding child labour can be understood in terms of their Charter of Basic Principles.

In their ever-evolving quest to create a consensus on the issue of child rights MV Foundation has developed a strategy in which it starts by creating awareness and demand for education amongst the poor. The demand is not restricted to the parents of poor children but includes all stakeholders: teachers, employers of children, youth groups, women's groups, elected local representatives, and district and state government officials. Considerable emphasis is put on creating a feeling

#### Box 4: Charter of Basic Principles The Non-Negotiables

- **All children must attend full-time formal day schools.**

Night schools or part-time education centres are unacceptable.

**Any child out of school is a child labourer.**

The definition of child labour encompasses every non-school going child, irrespective of whether the child is engaged in wage or non-wage work, or whether he/she is working for the family/others in a hazardous or non-hazardous occupation, employed on a daily wage or on contract basis or as bonded labour.

- **All labour is hazardous and harms the overall growth and development of the child.**

- **There must be total abolition of child labour.**

Any law regulating child work is unacceptable.

- **Any justification perpetuating the existence of child labour must be condemned.**

Arguments about the 'harsh reality of the family, poverty, necessity of children's earnings for the family, lack of interest among parents, poor quality of teachers and schools, irrelevance of education in providing employment, loss of relevant skills among educated children and so on...are all anti-children and go against their real development.

of ownership of the campaign for child rights amongst the village community. The success of this strategy manifests itself in many forms including, but not limited to the 320,000 children MV Foundation has helped place into formal schools. One might also consider success to be the hundreds of volunteers and employees of MV Foundation who have dedicated their lives to child rights and now work all over India to implement the program. The result is not just another program for the marginalised but the creation of a movement for child rights that puts pressure on those institutions responsible for protecting and promoting them. It is a process of transformation for an entire community which greatly contributes to the sustainability of the movement.

Through MV Foundation's programmes over 45,000 child labourers went through Residential Bridge Course camps (RBCs) and became students. These RBCs emerged within MV Foundation as a solution to the problem of children who were too old to be mainstreamed directly into school. The RBC fills the gap present due to the lack of institutional capacity of the state to provide for these children. The RBC represents the knowledge that these children require a special, accelerated education program specifically tailored to prime them for initial entry

## Case Study 5

### “Everyone at the camp are lively...”

Manemma is from Basheerabad Mandal in Ranga Reddy district. After completing 2<sup>nd</sup> standard Manemma’s parents forced her to get married. She was just eight years old. After marriage she went to live at the husband’s house where she performed various domestic chores and was made to adjust to the new family. After the second year of marriage her mother had an operation so Manemma returned to her parents’ home to assist her mother.

During her stay at her parents’ home Manemma fell ill with typhoid and malaria. Her mother in-law subsequently rejected her and claimed she did not want her back.

A local newspaper ran a story about Manemma’s plight and MV Foundation immediately came to find her.

Manemma’s parents feared that they would be put into jail and quickly agreed to allow her to enter the Residential Bridge Camp (RBC) at Alur. After one year she completed 7<sup>th</sup> standard. After years of being regarded as property and forced to take on countless responsibilities, Manemma was able to experience freedom at the RBC. She said she has always felt restricted, but at the camp changed her and gave her a space to be free.

“All the girls smile, sing, and speak freely at the camp”, said Manemma. She felt she could finally speak up, be alive, and think out loud. Now that she is out of the RBC she is facing many challenges, and said she is starting to feel restricted again. Her case is an example of the lack of places for girls to express themselves freely in society.

or re-entry into formal schools. The positive impact of the RBC on children, especially girls, cannot be emphasized enough. Particularly in the case of girls, the RBC becomes the one time in the girl’s life where she is given a space to freely express herself and grow as an individual.

MV Foundation has also mobilised over 30,000 child rights activists who formed themselves into a Child Rights Protection Forum (CRPF). The CRPF has been institutionalized into formal forums that take an active role in mobilizing parents to send their children to schools at the village level. They also hear the appeals of children wanting to abandon work in favour of joining schools, and they take up problems faced by children either in school or at home. The presence and action of the Forums alerts every section in the village that violating the rights of a child is not tolerated. The Forums help the community internalise the idea that children need to go to schools.

Issues that the CRPF addresses are: problems with school fees, school uniforms, transfer certificates, caste certificates, instances of corporal punishment, and child marriages. They also take up incidents of gross violations of child rights, such as employment of children in factories under exploitative working conditions, death of children due to pesticide inhalation in production of hybrid cotton seeds.

In March 2004, members of the village level CRPF from different parts of the States of Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa and Assam got together and formed a national level federation. Their membership is drawn from the entire society cutting across class, caste, religion, and other barriers to provide support and confidence to the poor families in their battles for their entitlement to education. They form the essential backbone of the movement for child rights, and their existence has expanded and deepened the work of MV Foundation. With respect to girls, the work of the CRPF has been instrumental specifically in identifying child marriages and ending them.

### 3.2 The Rights-Based Approach (RBA) in Theory

“A rights-based approach to development describes situations not simply in terms of human needs, developmental requirements, but in terms of society’s obligations to respond to the inalienable rights of individuals, empowers people to demand justice as a right, not as a charity, and gives communities a moral basis from which to claim international assistance when needed.”

– UN Secretary General, 1998

Over the last several years, various NGOs and multilateral institutions, such as UNICEF and UNDP, have begun to systematically apply a rights-based approach (RBA) to their programming. MV Foundation employs a rights-based approach to its work. This emerging trend in the development community moves towards setting objectives in terms of the achievement of human rights. Much of the literature on the integration of development and human rights exaggerates the formal differences between the two. In fact, the work of MV Foundation and other organizations have established that the struggle to improve the lives of children and achieve universal primary and secondary education is not only compatible with, but actually demands, a rights-based approach.



Justifications for the value of the RBA are largely based on normative and pragmatic grounds. With respect to normative justifications, the RBA sets out a vision of what ought to be by stipulating an internationally agreed set of norms. This, in turn, provides a strong basis for citizens to make their claims on states and for holding states accountable for their duties to protect the rights of its citizens and enhance their access to these rights. This is one of the most distinctive features of the RBA: it imposes non-negotiable legal obligations on the state, which is the primary duty-bearer. This argument is often reinforced by contrasting the rights-based approach with other approaches such as the needs-based approach. A needs-based approach emphasizes securing additional resources for marginalised groups, whereas the rights-based approach focuses on equal distribution of existing resources and assisting marginalised groups with asserting their rights to those resources, thus making the process explicitly political.<sup>15</sup>

The pragmatic justifications for the RBA often focus on rights as a vehicle for increasing the accountability of government organizations to their citizens.<sup>16</sup> The RBA also offers an expanded notion of accountability for rights to non-state actors and mobilizes marginalised groups. In essence, it disrupts existing political and power structures. The experience of MV Foundation has been that this disruption often manifests itself in a number of ways. Power structures in the family are disrupted when a young girl stands up against her parents and demands for the right to education. The power structure embodied in caste hierarchies is disrupted when a land-owner goes against his immediate interests of cheap labour and stands up for children's rights. Power structures are also disrupted when local leaders emerge and place pressure on government to provide vital services.

The RBA is also based on a set of principles that are largely irrefutable given their value. How one determines this value is an oft debated topic, but many human rights organizations and activists, MV Foundation being amongst them, would argue that the debate is an uncalled for one in the face of the violations of human dignity that they are fighting to end. In the same vein, the debate has merit for the questions it poses regarding the limitations, both favourable and

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15 Jonsson 2003

16 Jonsson 2003

unfavourable, of the state. With the case of child rights, however, the message is clearly articulated: no child should have to suffer.

In theory, there are a number of advantages to the RBA. One advantage is that it places the onus upon the state to act. This is important insofar as it provides a clear target for political processes that emerge as a result of mobilisation on the basis of rights. The political clarity of the approach is another factor that contributes greatly to its success. Marginalised groups are able to recognize and respond to the power of the language of rights which comes from its non-negotiability. Another advantage is that the approach is inclusive in nature and is steeped in secular, universal values. It also emphasizes the rights of the *individual* and is focused on the citizen. With respect to the situation of girls in India, the practical implications of development work in the terms of individual freedoms are great. Specifically, the girl child is referred to as an individual, which is itself a significant and positive step forward. Girls are too often understood as property, not individuals. They are either the responsibility of the parents or their husband.

Their individual choices and preferences are often considered inconsequential, and they are essentially made dependent upon family members.

### 3.3 The Rights-Based Approach in Practise

Amongst the most pervasive questions in current development work is: What is the rights-based approach in practise? In this context, the experience of MV Foundation has much to contribute. In the face of the cultural and institutional challenges outlined in this report, MV Foundation has boldly pressed its agenda of promoting and protecting child rights. They do this with the goal of building a societal norm in favour of child rights by mobilising communities to engage with local institutions. In this sense, MV Foundation fights on two fronts: to ensure that the rights of the child are accurately enshrined in the Constitution of India and to ensure that there is consensus amongst all facets of society on the issue of child rights to the end that they are accepted and put into practise. These are bold endeavours and MV Foundation has worked towards the former through processes of monitoring government and through providing input on current and proposed legislation. With regard to the latter, the work of MV Foundation on

the ground is aimed specifically to this end.

The principle ways through which the rights-based approach is implemented can be categorized into four main areas: as a set of principles, as a set of instruments, as an element of programming, and as the underlying justification for interventions aimed at strengthening institutions.<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that the pursuit of any one of these dimensions on its own is largely inadequate. Implementing the RBA approach requires implementation of all dimensions in order for rights to be truly mainstreamed. With respect to the first dimension, MV Foundation has established a set of normative principles embodied in the five “Non-Negotiables” as earlier outlined in this report. This provides an important basis to putting the RBA into practise. In terms of principles, MV Foundation also places emphasis on employing a secular, universal rhetoric that transcends other identities and focuses on children as a group. Accordingly, it is understood that allowing the debate on the children’s rights to be entangled in the web of caste conflicts would have damaging consequences for the issue. However, this approach does not involve ignoring specific issues that are faced by certain cohorts, such as girls. For example, MV Foundation does not deny that girls are placed differently in society, which leads to specific challenges. However, with respect to its approach, MV Foundation holds that placing emphasis on the fissures essentially reinforces them. In the case of child marriage, for example, MV Foundation focuses on the rights of the girl child to health and to education. Thus, the strategy is not to address and emphasize these fissures but to overcome them by focusing on children’s rights which cut across class, caste, religion and other barriers and put emphasis on coming together for a common, public cause.

With regard to the second dimension, MV Foundation relies heavily on instruments that are already in place in order to develop assessments and indicators against which interventions might be judged. Specifically, the Foundation makes use of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the rights encapsulated in the Constitution of India. On the same note, MV Foundation is not limited by these instruments in terms of its indicators for success and often looks to deeper, broader interpretations in order to achieve their goals. In this way, they are also fighting to contextualise these instruments.

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17 This framework was developed by Nyamu-Musembi & Cornwall 2004

With respect to programming, MV Foundation has completely integrated the concept of rights into its work. For example, the first step of the Foundations' programme is to raise awareness of rights and create demand. This is done by engaging with community members and leaders to expose the problems that exist in their own villages. MV Foundation has found that the best method for doing this is to identify those persons in the community who are interested in the concept and to mobilise them to run a survey of their village. Interest is spurred, meetings are held, and the problem of child labour is brought to the forefront in a very public way. MV Foundation also strictly adheres to an inclusive strategy. No one is left out of the discussion, as it would only result in shifting the issue from the agenda of child rights to issues of identities or class interests. Another objective of their programme is to promote engagement in the process of claiming rights. The support for processes such as the CRPF is an element of this aspect. Again, MV Foundation acts as a facilitator to these processes by enhancing the capabilities of these groups. They do this by regularly attending meetings, providing support (logistical and otherwise) for review meetings, and conducting trainings on issues that arise. MV Foundation also places emphasis on building the capacity of society to engage with local institutions by making vital society-state linkages. They do this through the creation of "moral spaces" where issues of rights can be discussed in an inclusive fashion. Town hall meetings, rallies, and mobilisation of local elected officials are examples of this. With respect to girls specifically, MV Foundation has recently begun to put emphasis on initiating Girl Youth Committees. These Committees are intended to be a space where girls can discuss issues that affect their rights. Girls who join these groups make a pact to not marry early and act as a support network for each other (see Case Study 9).

Finally, MV Foundation firmly understands rights as the underlying justification for the interventions aimed at the institutions with which it engages. The Foundation focuses on the utilisation and strengthening of the infrastructure already in place, rather than creating parallel institutions. In this sense, MV Foundation is not oppositional in its approach. It understands its role as that of a facilitator, infusing life into inert institutions set up by the government and strengthening civil society. The residential bridge camp, for example, is not intended to take the place of schools. Its first and only priority is readying children

to be mainstreamed into government schools. Through its interventions/ interactions with the state and its institutions, MV Foundation is able to identify and address the gaps in policy. This knowledge then feeds into the formation of strategies for further intervention.



# 4

## HAS THE RBA BEEN AFFECTIVE?

### 4.1 How do we measure success?

The first step in determining success is to understand the problems. In Section 2 of this report the main challenges identified were the backward social norms that impose restrictions of the girl's ability to secure her rights. We can understand success of MV Foundation's approach, specifically for girl children, in both qualitative and quantitative terms. For the purposes of this study, the quantifiable measures of success include: change in the number of girl child labourers in a village, enrollment and retention rates of girl children, the number of child marriages that have been ended, the number of child marriage cases that have been reported, and the record of girls' attendance at youth club meetings or other community events/ forums. Qualitative success can be determined in terms of the processes that have emerged for generating debate and discussion on the issue of the rights of the girl child. Indicators for this type of success can be determined in terms of the emergence of lateral or peer review processes that consider the rights of the girl child, availability of resources for girls, and changes in policies and conditions in the community in favour of the girl child. With regard to the latter, appropriate measures for success would include the participation of girls in public events/ debates, the appearance of girls' issues on political agenda, the sharing of experiences and emergence of community-based organizations, such as the girl youth committees.

Other indicators include the emergence of public dialogue on issues related to the girl child and cases of people who have stood up for the rights of the girl child and transcended their immediate interests for a universal value. Another qualitative indicator is the level of understanding a girl has of what rights are and her ability to articulate them.

## 4.2 Success of the approach

MV Foundation has had extraordinary success in making rights a reality for thousands of girls through its RBC. Through this study five areas of success have been identified: shift in child marriage from a private affair to a publicly discussed problem; redefinition of the position of girl child in her community; shift in the impression the girls have of their own situation from one of dependent to an individual; the emergence of opportunities and spaces for public engagement of girls; and the emergence of girls who serve as role models and leaders in their community.

The shift of the issue of child marriage from a private affair to a publicly discussed problem is a significant success. MV Foundation has succeeded in making child marriage a public issue by inciting public debate through its awareness campaigns. MV Foundation encourages the participation of elected officials in the fight against child marriage where there was initially resistance to involvement in what is assumed to be a private affair (see Case Study 6). In fact, MV Foundation has made clear that the issue of child marriage has been a public one all along. Members of the community serve as models for what is a suitable life for a girl, neighbours gossip, and extended family members make suggestions. Essentially, the child marriage is something that the entire village is responsible for. Clearly, the issue of child marriage cannot be separated from the social context which legitimizes it on many levels. By discussing it openly and framing it as a child rights issue, MV Foundation has been successful in changing the way people talk about it, which in turn has changed the way people think about it.

In a large number of cases MV Foundation volunteer or staff member must visit a family on a repeated basis to persuade the parents to end or prevent a child marriage. The volunteer or staff member will discuss the dangers the early marriage imposes on the girls' right to health and education. In this way they are able to frame the dialogue so that child rights are put into focus. Out of sixty cases taken for this study there were twenty-four instances of child marriage. In four cases the parents were convinced and have changed their minds about child marriage before allowing it to go through. In fourteen cases MV Foundation interjected post-marriage and the parents were convinced to allow the girl to return to school and the marriage was dissolved. Of the remaining six cases, four girls are still married and two girls are



**Child Marriage: From Private to Public**

Sathyabhama is 14 years old girl from the Indravelli Mandal in Adilabad district of Andhra Pradesh. Just one year prior to the interview her parents arranged for her to be married to a boy in the village. The parents knew the boy well and everyone considered it to be a very good match. Sathyabhama knew that getting married at such a young age would mean that she would be unable to continue with her studies. However, her protests fell on deaf ears.

Fortunately for Sathyabhama, the village Sarpanch (locally elected leader) is a strong supporter of child rights and understands child marriage as a violation of rights. The Sarpanch had known of MV Foundation's work for a number of years. Though he was initially sceptical of their intentions he began to appreciate MV Foundation staff and volunteers for their dedication and persistence. Later, he has made the fight for child rights as one of his primary objectives. To this end, he conducts a personal survey of all the households under his jurisdiction to ensure that there are no child marriages.

In the case of Sathyabhama, the Sarpanch and local MV Foundation staff member visited her home and spoke to her parents about the potential marriage. They told the parents that the marriage is not only a social problem but also puts Sathyabhama's health at risk. After persistence on the part of MV Foundation staff member and the Sarpanch the parents agreed to not go through with the marriage.

According to Sathyabhama there are no more child marriages in her village. However, in the neighbouring villages she knows that the practise is ongoing. Her father is now supportive of her education and Sathyabhama is confident about pursuing further studies.

estranged from their families primarily because they chose to leave the marriage.

As a result of the shift in understanding about child marriage the number of child marriages which were actively reported has also gone up. For example, according to MV Foundation annual reports on Ranga Reddy district in Andhra Pradesh the number of child marriage cases reported increased dramatically from just 4 reported cases in 1997 to 126 cases reported in 2002. The data also shows a dramatic increase in number of cases reported starting in 2000 when MV Foundation began a strong campaign towards reaching girl children. Through interviews

it became clear that where girls felt desperate and no one would listen to their claims, they felt it futile to voice their concerns for lack of a legitimate source to acknowledge the problem let alone do something about it. MV Foundation has assisted in filling that gap by building the capacity of the community to deal with these issues openly through the CRPF and Girl Youth Committees. They also invest in sensitization trainings for their staff on issues that are specific to girl children, like child marriage. Girls now feel more secure in speaking out because the environment is more conducive to absorbing their concerns. They know that there is someone there to support and investigate their claims.

The second important success is that the position of the girl inside the community is essentially redefined. By addressing children first and foremost as children MV Foundation goes beyond stereotyped concepts of the roles of men and women or of Dalit and Adivasi. MV Foundation has placed significant effort on girls because there is a significant need and demand for it. However, they do not have a programme that is specifically targeted at girls. Instead, they adhere to a strict child-based action agenda in order to ensure that the issue of gender does not supersede the larger battle for child rights. MV Foundation's approach has been successful insofar as it redefines the position of the girl in the context of her community and family from a mothers-and-wives-in-training to a child (see Case Study 7). The proof of this is in the increased attendance and retention rates amongst girl children and the decline in child marriages in MV Foundation programme areas.<sup>18</sup> Through this renewed understanding of the girl child, communities are more willing and capable to accept the idea of a girl getting married later, having children later, and receiving an education beyond the primary level. In nearly all of the case studies the girls responded that they felt the situation for girls was improving in their communities. They reported that the average age of marriage has gone up and in nearly all cases younger girl siblings were reportedly attending school from an early age. MV Foundation has been successful because it works to build an understanding that a girl child has rights too. Thus, it is not charity that is being handed out – it is rights that are being secured. Particularly in the case of girls, there is something empowering about understanding the phenomenon as having your rights fulfilled rather than needs addressed.

**From “little mother” to student**

Lakshmi is 14 years old and from Dhone mandal in Kurnool district of Andhra Pradesh. Neither of her parents received any education. Her two elder sisters, now 17 and 21, went to school until 7<sup>th</sup> standard and her younger sister is in 4<sup>th</sup> class and younger brother in 3<sup>rd</sup> class. Despite this, Lakshmi studied until 2<sup>nd</sup> standard at which point her parents withdrew her from school for reasons not known to her. Shortly thereafter her older sister gave birth to a baby and Lakshmi was charged with taking care of the baby while her sister went to work. For the next three years Lakshmi alternated between working in fields, domestic chores, and taking care of her sister’s child.

Finally, Lakshmi’s uncle who is also an MVF staff in a nearby village, told her and her parents about MVF residential bridge camp. Her mother and elder sister were supportive of her but her father opposed in asserting that it is better that she work. Through continued motivation Lakshmi was able to leave home and attend the camp despite her father’s disapproval.

After completing her exams for 7<sup>th</sup> standard in just one year at the camp Lakshmi went on to Krishnamgiri hostel for 8<sup>th</sup> standard. Sadly, that spring her mother passed away. Lakshmi’s father said that she must return home because there is no one to attend to the domestic chores. Lakshmi stood her ground and refused and she was supported by her grandmother and uncles who even offered to help with school fees.

During the interview Lakshmi expressed that her uncles and grandmother were supportive because MV Foundation staff had “changed the way they think.” Lakshmi feels that further change will come and more girls will get educated in the entire community when one girl comes forward and continues her studies beyond 10<sup>th</sup> standard.

She feels the biggest struggle in her community for girls is that parents are very quick to withdraw girls once they enter into puberty. Because of MV Foundation parents are learning that all children must go to school, says Lakshmi. She further noted that “in this society the treatment of educated versus uneducated is vast – one gets respect, the other none. If I did not go to MV Foundation camp I would still be working.” She intends to finish 10<sup>th</sup> standard and go on to become a teacher. However, if she does not pass 10<sup>th</sup> standard she wants to learn tailoring so that, as she put it, “I can support myself.”

Lakshmi’s case is one that exemplifies the changes that are taking place around and within her. That she feels strongly about possibilities beyond marriage is an example a girl who sees a role for herself independent of the limiting societal expectations she has been raised with.

## Against the Odds

*“They tattooed the name of my future husband on my arm ...”*

G. Pramila is 16 years old and from Atmakur mandal in Nalgonda. She has four younger sisters and one baby brother. Neither of her parents is educated. She never attended school and used to be a day labourer in agricultural fields. At the age of 13 an MV Foundation volunteer approached her and asked if she wanted to go to school. She talked to her parents about it and they told her that she is already a “big girl” so she doesn’t need any education. After one month of consistent visits by MV Foundation volunteers to G. Pramila’s home her parents were finally convinced. She attended the RBC at Chandupatla and finished her 7<sup>th</sup> standard. G. Pramila then entered a ST girl’s hostel where she completed 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 10<sup>th</sup> standards.

Currently, she is in +1 at a government junior college. She rents a room in Suryapet with her four younger sisters who no longer have a seat in the government hostel where they were previously enrolled. She supports herself and her sisters with wages she earns from working part time as a domestic helper in three homes in the neighborhood. She says she is working very hard but it is worth it because she and her sisters are all attending school.

During the interview with G. Pramila she was asked what her goals were. She responded by displaying a tattoo on her forearm that was the name of her future husband who is also her maternal uncle. Dowry has already been paid and she expressed that there is little chance that the marriage will be stopped.

With the help of MV Foundation she was able to negotiate with her parents the issue of marriage. Every month she remains in school is the result of a battle against the impending marriage.

She only wants to continue her studies.

Her story is an example of the typical challenges that girls are facing in many of the rural areas of India.

Despite the difficult reality of her future she has bravely worked towards establishing herself and achieving her goals. Because of MV Foundation she has the ability to think of herself as an individual and make the best out of a circumstance that many might consider to be a dead-end.

This leads to a third success: shift in the impression the girls have of their own situation from one of a dependent to an individual. One of the biggest challenges that girls identified was that they were too

dependent on their parents and/ or families. This is primarily the consequence of the socio-cultural constructs in which they are living. Though things are changing, it is still not widely accepted for a girl to go unmarried beyond a certain age or to work outside the home, particularly if she has a family. Despite these realities, a large number of respondents openly discussed their future plans in terms of themselves as individuals. The significance of this can be understood if one takes into consideration the fact that girls are more often than not treated as property. They often have no place to call their own. In their homes they tend to be treated like a second class citizen and then they are required to live in the home of their in-laws after marriage. Girls more often than not have the will of others imposed upon them in nearly every aspect of their lives. Examples of this type of discrimination have been pointed out in this report (Case Studies 1-4). In all of the cases examined for this study the girls who were establishing their individuality were doing so against significant odds (Case Study 8).

The fourth success has been the establishment of Girl Youth Committees. The CRPF of Ranga Reddy describes the Girl Youth Committees as “an environment that respects girls as equal citizens and gives them the opportunity to realise their potential.” Their emergence and existence is an important step forward in increasing the influence of girl youth in the community and towards ensuring lasting positive change. In the Committees the girls discuss issues ranging from women health to strategies for ending a child marriage in their village/ mandal. See Case Study 9 for discussion on activities of the Girl Youth Committees from K. Buchamma, a former child labourer and current President of the Committee in Shankarpally mandal.

The potential impact of the Girl Youth Committees is immense and efforts to increase the number of these Committees in MV Foundation programme areas are still in the initial stages. Most of the girls interviewed did not have a Girl Youth Committee in their village or mandal, or they were unaware of its existence. MV Foundation staff is now working on establishing the Committees and recruiting girls to initiate and participate in regular meetings. The task is often tedious because of the restrictions most parents place on girls’ movement, but

## Case Study 9

### From Child Labourer to Girl Youth Committee President

K. Buchamma is from Shankarpally mandal in Ranga Reddy District. Her mother passed away when she was young and her father when she was in 10<sup>th</sup> standard. After the death of her father she came into the care of her three uncles. The uncles divided K. Buchamma's father's property amongst them and decided that it would be too expensive for any one of them to take her on their own. They decided to share the expense of dowry collectively and have her married. According to K. Buchamma they never consulted her.

After the marriage she was made to quit school and sent to live in her husband's home. After just three months the husband died for reasons unknown to her. When asked if it made her sad she replied that she barely knew her 21-year-old husband and she was more happy that she could go home than worried about him. When she returned home she took the exam for 10<sup>th</sup> standard and passed. For the next one and a half years she was working in her home and in the fields until MV Foundation started a Girl Youth Committee in her village.

After Buchamma became active in the group and with help from MV Foundation staff and volunteers her uncles agreed to allow her to return to school. Currently she is 20 years old and in +2 and the President of the Girl Youth Committee. According to K. Buchamma biggest challenges that girls have to face are early marriage and the attitude that girls do not need education beyond 10<sup>th</sup> standard. In her personal case she noted that the marriage disturbed her studies and also changed the way her friends looked at her and interacted with her. She feels that as more girls know of their rights there will be positive change because they will be able to put pressure on their parents. According to her, girl's rights are primarily in the hands of their parents.

In the Girl Youth Committee that K. Buchamma leads all of the girls make a pact to not get married early and to continue school beyond 10<sup>th</sup> standard. They provide each other with support through regular discussions and activities. The main topics for discussion in the group are girl's health issues, prevention of dropouts, and child marriage. If they hear of a potential child marriage they discuss it with MV Foundation volunteers and to the potential bride (if possible).

K Buchamma is a true leader and has continued her fight for education against a backdrop of the loss of both her parents and the challenges she has faced as a result of child marriage.

### **Box 5: Girl Youth Committees in Action On Republic Day 2006 Girl Youth Strengthen Their Movement for Assertion of Rights**

A silent movement is being built by young girls in more than 300 villages in Ranga Reddy District, where they have formed youth associations. Each youth group has a membership of 20-30 girls. While most villages have existing youth groups for young men, it is for the first time that girls have a forum for themselves where they can share their anxieties, plan for themselves and assert their views as a collective.

Young girls in the age group 14-20 have, through these youth groups, stopped child marriages, brought girls back into schools, convinced parents to allow them to continue studying, and so on. They have also given petitions to gram panchayats asking for a place to conduct their meetings, a space to play etc.

In about 200 villages, these girls have decided that this year [2006] on the Republic Day they would also hoist the national flag in the village. This is indeed a significant event in the true spirit of the Indian Constitution. By hoisting the flag, girls are asserting that they cannot be ignored any longer. They too have rights and it is time these rights are protected. The entire village takes pride in the girls with the gram panchayats, the youth associations and women's groups contributing towards the expenses for hoisting the flag.

Let us all support the cause of these young girls, by joining their movement for assertion of social rights.

**- CRPF of Ranga Reddy**

progress is being made. A clear example of this progress is the activities of Girls Youth Committees in Ranga Reddy on Republic Day 2006 (see Box 5).

Finally, the emergence of girls who serve as role models and leaders has been an important success. MV Foundation's first step in any mobilisation campaign is to get those girls (and boys) who have been through the struggle to share their experiences publicly. Girls who have gone to MV Foundation camps and were mainstreamed to school often speak at village meetings or during rallies. Several respondents noted that a young girl, in similar position as to theirs, speaking at a meeting or rally inspired them.

When asked if they knew what their rights are an amazing 87% of the girls responded that they did know their rights and they were capable of explaining what they are. A large majority of the girls interviewed also responded that they had motivated or tried to motivate other girls and boys to go to school or an RBC. Despite the difficulties that these girls encountered and continue to encounter, they are pursuing their studies and they have made it a point to encourage others also. This makes them leaders of the highest calibre.



# 5

## CONCLUSION

The battle is far from over for girls. MV Foundation does not claim to be the only hand in the scheme – there are many factors that need to be addressed in order to overcome centuries of discrimination and structural inequities. However, those girl’s whose lives have been touched by MV Foundation have education to their benefit, a childhood reclaimed, and a network of people who are championing their rights. MV Foundation has worked as a facilitator to the process of ending child labour and promoting these girl’s rights. Mobilizing the community through the RBC to take up these issues on their own and without sustained direct intervention has been the key to a successful process.

Inevitably the strength of the programme strongly relies on the strength of the girls themselves. If every girl interviewed was not willing to make an effort to improve her own situation it would be impossible to realise the successes that MV Foundation has. It is their spirit and strength that makes the process possible and rights a reality.

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