Sustaining Progressive Norm Changes in Times of Systemic Crises: A Case Study of the Ika Chaalu - Enough is Enough Project, India

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Abstract:

The Ika Chaalu (enough is enough) project started in 2014 with the objective of universalising education for adolescent girls in three districts of Telangana, India. It aims to do so by engaging with the social norms that obstruct girls from realizing universal education and gender equality, tackling issues like early marriage, security, violence, sexuality, masculinity and gender discrimination in the family, school, and society. The project takes a rights-based, inclusionary and universalist approach; it is an evolving process requiring an enormous amount of dedication and personal involvement from the field mobilisers, the girls themselves, indeed from the entire society, but it does result in a significant and sustainable shift in practices, and in lasting gender norm change. This was highlighted during the Covid-19 pandemic and the extended lockdowns and forms the theme of the paper.

The paper analyses the approaches used by the project to bring about successful norm change which is lasting and sustainable in times of massive crises when the structural inequities in the system get reinforced. It will document how adolescent girls have been able to resist attempts to reverse the positive norms that had been created, particularly resisting parental and community pressures to send them back to work and to force them into early marriage. Their success in this was thanks mainly to their own determination, to the alliances that have been built in the community and with local functionaries, and to the efforts of the project in building a social norm towards gender equality and girls' education. The norm change strategies that are used successfully, the factors that make change sustainable, and the adaptations that were made during lockdown will be analysed and discussed. While the focus of the project is on universalizing secondary education, positive spillover effects were witnessed in other sites of contestation like homes, communities, and schools and will be documented. The adolescent girls play a central role in the paper as they are the one who have actively resisted a reversal of the norms and supported each other. Patriarchy is a stubborn and default norm, but it is heartening to see that the efforts of the Ika Chaalu project in building a social norm towards gender equality and girls' education is not completely lost, nor totally reversed. With schools reopening and the lockdown over, the project has been able to bounce back and is now working hard to regain lost time.

The data has been collected by the authors between 2014-2021 through regular field visits, field observation, project reports, interviews and Zoom meetings during the lockdown.

This paper contributes to the ongoing debate in the literature on social norms by providing an example of a successful approach for achieving long-lasting and sustainable norm change. It will be of relevance to academics, practitioners, policy makers and donors.

Key Words: social norms change, gender, agency, covid-19, education

Sustaining Progressive Norm Changes in Times of Systemic Crises:

A Case Study of the Ika Chaalu - Enough is Enough Project, India

The Ika Chaalu project started in 2014 as a collaborative partnership between the MV Foundation (MVF) and Stichting Charity Fund Rijsholt (SCFR). "*Ika Chaalu*", which means "enough is enough" in Telugu, is a slogan coined by the girls themselves to say that they have had enough of all forms of gender-based violence and the rights-violations that they experience on a daily basis.[4] Ika chaalu has become the rallying cry of adolescent girls and is used as a shorthand term to refer to the project. The objective of this project is to universalise education for adolescent girls in three districts of Telangana, India. It aims to do so by engaging with the social norms that obstruct girls from realizing universal education and gender equality, tackling issues like early marriage, security, violence, sexuality, masculinity and gender discrimination in the family, school, and society. It takes a rights-based, inclusionary and universalist approach; it is an evolving process requiring an enormous amount of dedication and personal involvement from the field mobilisers, the girls themselves, indeed from the entire society. While the focus of the project is on universalizing secondary education i.e., ensuring that all adolescent girls are enabled to complete secondary education, positive spill over effects are witnessed in other sites of contestation like homes, communities, and schools. This painstaking approach has proven to be a worthwhile investment as it does result in a significant and sustainable shift in harmful practices, and in lasting gender norm changes. This was highlighted during the extended lockdowns that accompanied the Covid-19 pandemic and forms the theme of this paper. The adolescent girls played a central role in this as they are the ones who actively resisted a reversal of the positive gains made by the project.

This paper will contribute to the ongoing literature on social norms by providing an example of a successful NGO approach for achieving long-lasting and sustainable norm change. We

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[4] The complete slogan, as formulated by the adolescent girls, is:
Enough is Enough!
Physical violence: enough is enough
Mental violence: enough is enough
Sexual violence: enough is enough

will start in Section 1 by providing a brief description of the social norms approach as promoted by behavioural scientists in the North, and which is currently making inroads into development theory and practice. This will be followed in Section 2 by an analysis of social norms as conceptualized by MVF, the factors that hold harmful social norms in place, and the approaches that are used to operationalize successful social norm change in the field. Section 3 consist of a description of the Ika Chaalu project and the specific strategies that are used to bring about sustainable and lasting norm change. In Section 4, the adaptations that were made during the lockdown will be analysed and discussed. We will document how adolescent girls have been able to resist attempts to reverse the positive norms that had been created, in particular resisting parental and community pressures to send them back to work and to force them into early marriage. Their success in this was thanks mainly to their own determination, but this was bolstered by the efforts that had been made towards building a social norm towards gender equality and girls' education in the entire community and to the alliances that had been built in the community and with local institutions and their functionaries. Finally, Section 5 will conclude with some observations on whether successful norm change is possible and the factors that contribute to this.

1. The Social Norms Approach

The theoretical concept of social norms has been studied and defined in a variety of disciplines, ranging from philosophy to law, psychology, anthropology, and economics. However, it found practical application for the first time in the 1980's when it was used by behavioural psychologists as a strategy to influence alcohol consumption among university students in North American campuses (Dempsey et al, 2018). The assumption was that students overestimate alcohol consumption among their peers, with negative consequences for their own behaviour and changing these misconceptions would reduce their own alcohol intake. Later, this model was used to change other negative behaviours related to health and other societal issues in the North. There are several social norms theories emanating from different disciplines and theoretical traditions and using different terminologies. Mackie et al. (2015) list the three elements that are common to all social norm approaches (SNA): social norms are guided by social expectations or beliefs about what others do and what others think one should do; the reference group of individuals pays an important role; and norms

are maintained by the approval and disapproval of others. This implies that for the proponents of SNA, norms are held to exist primarily inside the mind, and changing them necessitates a shift in people's social expectations. The focus of this approach thus rests solely on the individual whose expectations need to be changed in order to bring about changes in harmful practices.

In recent years, the SNA has made consistent inroads into development theory and practice. This move was spearheaded by Cristina Bicchieri (2017) – a philosopher who draws on behavioural economics, behavioural psychology, game theory and the RCT methodology. She was motivated to adapt her work in the laboratory to the field of development practice based on her analysis that development projects of international agencies fail because they do not take account of the social norms that govern harmful collective behaviours. Bicchieri's work has spawned a range of researchers who are extending and adapting social norms approaches developed in the North for use in the South. The bulk of these researchers are associated with the Social Norms Learning Collaborative (www.alignplatform.org/learning-collaborative) which is a network of researchers and practitioners who aim to build and share knowledge on social norms theory, measurement, and going-to-scale. The SNA is now being promoted as the methodology of choice to tackle a variety of harmful social practices like female genital cutting, child marriage, open defecation, AIDS prevention, gender violence and breastfeeding in the context of international development. It is being supported and endorsed by international agencies like UNICEF and the World Bank, powerful corporate donors such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and several governmental agencies in the North. This is despite the absence of any systematic, robust, or long-term field evaluations that demonstrate the long-term effectiveness and sustainability of using the SNA, nor its superiority over other, pre-existing methods.[5]

The SNA as applied to behaviour change interventions in the North has been extensively critiqued on grounds of the evaluation methodology used – largely randomized controlled trials – and the excessive reliance on self-reporting by participants. According to Sniehotta et

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[5] For a comprehensive critique of the social norms approach as applied to development practice, see Wazir (forthcoming).

al. (2014: 1) there is ample evidence to suggest that this approach was 'considerably less predictive of behaviour when studies used a longitudinal rather than a "shortitudinal" design…and when outcome measures were taken objectively rather than as a self-report'. A second focus of criticism is the lack of contextualization in SNA theory and practice (Mackie et al. 2015).) On the basis of his interrogation of health communication campaigns, Dutta-Bergman (2005) concludes that this approach suffers from an individualistic bias, ignores the context within which meanings are constructed, and is cognitively oriented. These concerns about SNA in the North apply equally to its use as a strategy to change harmful social norms in developing economies. However, these pre-existing critiques appear not to have been taken into consideration, or have been blatantly disregarded, in its application in the South.

In striking contrast, MVF's position on social norm change has developed independently and organically in the course of its work in the field, first in relation to its child labour and education programme, and more recently as a result of its engagement with adolescent girls in the Ika Chaalu project.[6] MVF is not alone in this endeavour to change harmful social practices, even when the precise term social norm is not used. There are several examples of approaches and methods for challenging the structures and ingrained social behaviours that stand in the way of human rights, human and social development, and of large-scale transformations of problematic aspects of societies. For example, Socialist China is notable in bringing about mass changes in harmful practices like foot binding and female infanticide (Mackie 1996). In Kerala, India, progressive gendered norms about education and health emerged through a confluence of decades-long social and political movements, making it unique in India for exceptional achievements in health and literacy, well beyond national averages and far greater than what would be predicted based on their level of economic development (Chathukulam and Tharamangalam 2021:10). While such large-scale societal transformations are relatively rare, there are several movements, interventions and initiatives led by civil society organizations and NGOs at the community and local levels that have achieved success in transforming social norms. In the following section we will trace the genesis of MVF's social norms approach, outline the factors that hold harmful social norms in

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[6] For a detailed explanation see, Ika Chaalu Team (June 8, 2021).

place as conceptualized by MVF and describe the strategies that are used to operationalize successful social norm change.

2. MVF's Approach to Conceptualizing and Changing Social Norms

Challenging and changing social norms has been at the heart of MVF's work since 1991 when it started its programme on child labour and education in rural Andhra Pradesh, India.[7] Child labour was the norm among poor families at that time, and school attendance was low. Turning this situation around posed a challenge, given the organization's objective to universalize education and eradicate child labour in its entirety in its programme areas. This uncompromising stand was at odds with existing societal norms that condoned child labour on grounds that it was imperative for poor children to work to feed their families and that the formal education system had neither the quality, nor any relevance to their lives. The education policy of the State was in consonance with this regressive norm and prescribed non-formal education for working children so that they could "earn and learn". The schools also gave a clear message that they were not serious about enrolling and teaching poor children, and further, the legal and policy framework gave legitimacy to the existence of child labour by prohibiting only *some* forms of child labour. The view that child labour was "normal" and "inevitable" was deeply entrenched at all levels of society - rich and poor, elite and subalterns - as well as at the level of the State. Poor parents did exactly what was expected of them: they gave up on their children's education and put them to work. Changing that *status quo* for children required replacing the existing social norms with a new norm that all children had the right to education and protection from labour and that these rights had to be protected under all circumstances. This meant that the entire community had to transcend its political, cultural, class, caste, and other differences in favour of children's rights. The local community, civil society and the State were to be equal partners to bring about a change in the lives of children. The Ika Chaalu project builds on the experience gained in the child labour/education programme to engage with the social norms that get in the way of realizing universal education rights for all adolescent girls.

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[7] The erstwhile State of Andhra Pradesh was bifurcated into two States – Andhra Pradesh and Telangana – in 2014.

As conceptualized in the project, norms are accepted practices of behaviour in a community or society that are legitimised by the ascription of desirability, appropriateness, normality, or inevitability. Norms are embedded in and reflect economic, political, and social inequalities that characterise particular social settings. In the context of Telangana, this would apply to practices such as child labour/lack of education that are seen as normal and inevitable for poor children, or to child marriage that is seen as both desirable and appropriate for poor girls. Such regressive social norms legitimize and support inequality and exclusion in societies and this disparity is handed down through the generations, helping to maintain and entrench the status quo. Even those members of society who know these practices to be incorrect or unjust, reconcile to them as they see them as inevitable. It is important to note that norms do not apply equally, nor in the same manner, to all members of any given community or society. Thus, those at the top end of the pyramid might believe that their children should go to school while they consider this unnecessary or unfeasible for the children of families at the bottom end who should work to supplement family incomes i.e., there is one rule for the privileged and quite another for the disadvantaged. The values of the elite and better entitled get reflected as the values of the entire society. The reproduction of such harmful practices is condoned and supported by local institutions, including frequently by the State bureaucracies whose job it is to ensure school enrolments and prevent child labour and child marriage. Such deeply entrenched norms change when there is a rise in awareness at the bottom of the pyramid which triggers off a process of contestation and the instalment of new norms to which the entire society agrees.

In MVF's experience, social norms will change only when the entire community is in agreement with the new norm - not just employers of children or parents of child labour, out of schoolgirls, or those who arrange early marriages for their daughters. Consequently, changing norms is a multi-pronged activity that must take place simultaneously at several levels and in different arenas. It is not a sequential process. It requires social mobilisation that is affective, emotionally fuelled and a work of care, love, and empathy and which galvanises the support of the community, local institutions, and their functionaries. MVF field mobilisers expose practices, attitudes, habits, cultures, and institutions that reinforce child labour, child marriage or gender discrimination, as the case may be. These issues are not discussed in a

vacuum, instead they are brought up through campaigns, public meetings, posters, wall writings, street theatre and other modes that propel individual agency as well as collective action. Concrete instances of the release of children from the labour force and its impact on the child and the family, or of stopping a child marriage and its consequences for a girl's future health and wellbeing are taken up while engaging with the community and serve as examples to hesitant parents and hardened employers. Gradually, the mindsets of the community begin to change, they internalize the new norm and become partners in the process of eradicating harmful norms and replacing them with new ones. They are galvanized and prepared to engage with local officials, and thenceforth with district and state level functionaries, to make them accountable for protecting the rights of children.

The organization believes that the attitudes of individuals and functionaries of the State, and the roles of local institutions, are not static. Nor does it accept the stereotypical view that these functionaries have a vested interest in maintaining their own power and authority and would never work for the common good. It is in constantly engaging with local institutions as public institutions providing services, and with elected local functionaries as *public* representatives, and not as *individuals* belonging to a particular caste or community, that the possibility of changing institutional responses opens up.

MVF's field experience shows that changing long-held social norms is both arduous and slow, though not impossible. In every community there are examples of the poorest of parents supporting their children's education; there are individuals who support child rights and are outraged by the plight of children; there are poor boys and girls who have completed school and demonstrated the possibility of education; and there are poor parents who refuse to succumb to societal pressures to marry their girls young. These individuals and families can become role models for their communities. Then there are the constitutional values of equality and social justice that project staff can appeal to in their attempts to make the community aware of children's rights. Above everything else, there is a moral imperative that gives the energy and legitimation to raise the awareness of the entire community and ask questions such as: "Is it fair and just to have thousands of children in our villages working as child labourers? Should they not all be in schools? What about their rights? How does child

marriage impinge on the health and wellbeing of girls? Should girls not have the same rights as boys?".

Children's participation is seen as crucial by MVF in bringing about a transformation in their own lives and in building new norms in the community. When children begin to exercise agency and demand their rights, parents are forced to give in to their attempts to exercise control over their lives. Children also use other means of negotiation like refusing to eat or speak till the parents relent and allow them to attend school or avoid early marriage. Similarly, the functionaries of public institutions are compelled to address the urgent and practical challenges posed by children's determination to secure their rights. They can no longer hide behind arguments about the poverty of the parents, tradition and culture and structural constraints. Children's acts of defiance against existing social norms compels the officials to utilise the policy mandates and legal instruments at their disposal and respond to children's demands that their right to protection from labour and education should be secured. There are, however, limits to what local functionaries can do. Children's voice and agency thus also confronts, and lays bare, the overall norms that shape governmental policies. These seemingly micro and local acts expose the larger structures of the economy, the politics of development and the priorities of the State. Thus, the simple act of saying 'no' to one's past and charting a new path disturbs the equilibrium and has implications for radicalizing society (Sinha 2016:64). It can lead to fashioning a new set of traditions, cultures, values, and norms based on respect for dignity, equity, and justice for children. Exercising agency leads to shaping new destinies for the child, and hopefully galvanises the State and local society to embrace its responsibilities towards all children and their rights.

The sustainability of new norms is judged by the ability of the community and its institutions to take independent actions with regard to monitoring and ensuring the rights of all children to education and protection from labour. Widespread acceptance of the new norm means that the organization can reduce its role and presence over a period of time. Once the new norm takes hold, the old framework rapidly begins to lose credibility and it is rare for the community to slide back to the previous situation. In the villages where all children have been successfully enrolled in formal school, the discussion has gradually shifted from whether children should be at work or in school, to the quality of education, teachers, and school

infrastructure and to facilitating access to high school so that children can continue their education beyond the village school. A similar change is discernible in the Ika Chaalu project areas where parents are no longer focused on arranging marriages for their adolescent daughters and are instead more concerned about how and where they can complete their secondary education.

However, aspirations must lead to action, and action to outcomes. Any change in social norms regarding child labour and education should reflect in tangible increases in school attendance, reductions in child labour and an end to child marriages in the community. This is indeed the case in MVF's programme areas where a successful struggle/movement for change over three decades has resulted in dramatic and demonstrable changes. Over a million children have been withdrawn from labour and enrolled into full-time formal schools; 1500 villages are child labour free, and all children are in school. In addition, 25,000 adolescent girls have been retained in school and 8000 child marriages have been prevented or pre-empted. The standard processes of social reproduction have been challenged. There is a transformation in social norms; new imaginaries have been introduced into the lives of the excluded; and local institutions and their functionaries have been made partners in this process. Predictably, the Covid-19 pandemic and the extended lockdown, the closure of schools and residential hostels, and the loss of family income and livelihoods have put an enormous strain on families, potentially leading to a reversal in social norms. However, reports from the field offer some reassurance and confirm that the powerful alliances that were built between children, their families, the community, elected local representatives and functionaries of the State have gone a long way towards ensuring children's rights even in these difficult circumstances.

3. The Ika Chaalu Project: Underlying Perspectives and Strategies[8]

The Ika Chaalu project is rooted in the belief that it is possible to change the patriarchal values that rule society, and thus the actions undertaken in the project are based on the possibility of a change in the social norms that are associated with or are a reflection of patriarchy. The

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[8] For additional information see Ika Chaalu Team (1 July, 2021; 2, November 2021).

project has its foundation in a rights-based approach; it is based on principles of equality, universality, social justice and claims on the State to meet its obligations. Universality is not only an underlying principle but also an integral part of the entire project approach. This means that *every* adolescent girl in the designated project area is tracked and targeted, every girl is known, and data on them is collected and updated on a regular basis by the field mobilizers. Every girl is heard and motivated and the problems of each and every one of them are resolved. The project does not focus on specific target groups, like Dalits or Adivasis, victims of sexual abuse, child marriage, child labor or trafficked children. Every girl matters in the geographical area in which the project operates.

Gender discrimination is pervasive in Telangana, as in the rest of India, and there are several sites where that becomes evident. The first site is the home. Discrimination at home is found in the division of labour, the hierarchy in eating, the lack of leisure time for girls, the fact that they do not get new clothes when boys do, the pressure of work and marriage, the norms of behaviour, and the lack of time and space given to girls for homework and exams. Girls have generally no freedom and mobility to visit friends, a market, public spaces or to walk alone without an escort. Unfortunately, violence and verbal abuse, beatings, insults, and humiliation are considered "normal." Many girls suffer from emotional anxiety and trauma, and have to deal with insinuations and suspicions from the communities they live in. Furthermore, for most girls the threat of child marriage looms over their life, bringing an end to their dreams and aspirations.

The second site, which should in reality be a safe site, are schools. Schools should be safe spaces where all students are considered equal. However, practices of gender discrimination in schools include the uneven treatment of boys and girls, staff exercising controls over adolescent girls lest they have boyfriends, or even just friends who are boys. Girls are often given the tasks of cleaning the classrooms, school premises and toilets, while boys distribute textbooks, clean the blackboard, and assist the teachers in monitoring the class. While boys are encouraged to play games, participate in sports activity and given sports material to play volleyball, football or cricket, girls are ignored or confined to playing 'kho kho'. Seldom do boys and girls have mixed participation in games. Boys also take an active role staying after school hours to plan and take up some responsibilities in celebrations of school functions like

the Annual Day, Independence Day, or Republic Day. In general, teachers pay less attention to the education of girls and their performance and frequently don't use their names, calling them by nicknames instead which the girls find derogatory. In addition, girls who are married and/or separated are denied access to education. The third site of gender discrimination is the wider society. In society there is stigmatization of girls for being vocal, strong, for having and expressing leadership qualities, for having personal aspirations, ambitions, and goals. More often than not it is the girls that get stigmatized and punished, even when they are victims of violence and abuse, when they are married off at a young age, or when they elope and get married.

The activities under the Ika Chaalu project aim at transforming these sites of conflict to become sites for the resolution of conflicts in favour of girls' education, a more equal situation at home and within the family, and the elimination of gender discrimination in the neighbourhood, schools, residential hostels, and other institutions. Furthermore, the goal is to change the attitude of teachers, elected officials, and other government functionaries. Similarly, work is carried out to create awareness and transform sites of gender discrimination so that they become sites of gender equality. To do so, the project not only works with adolescent girls directly, but also with boys, parents, teachers, local institutions, functionaries of the state and community members. It is considered essential to build the capacities of *Gram Panchayats* (elected local bodies), School Management Committees, youth associations and women's groups, as they are the key institutions that give support to girls and make it possible for them to not only assert and exercise agency but also to fulfil their aspirations.

Yet another site of conflict is the gaps in the legal and policy framework wherein the principles of universality, social justice and equality are compromised resulting in exclusion of children from claiming their rights. Therefore, there is a constant effort to make claims on the State to meet its obligations. The actions on the ground in combatting gender discrimination and enabling girls' education gaps are identified in state and national laws and policies, like the Protection of Children from Sexual Offenses Act Child Marriage Act (POCSO), the Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, and the Right to Education Act (RTE). A specific example of a gap in or issue with the law is the fact that the right to secondary education is lacking in the RTE. A space opens for harmful practices when a gap in legal

protection occurs. The RTE Act contains provisions for education up to the age of 14, however, the age limits in the Child Marriage Act, the Child Labour Act and POCSO do not align with this. Another example is provided by POCSO which was enacted with a view to protecting children from different forms of sexual abuse and for making provisions for child-friendly procedures. Significantly, it raised the age of consent for sexual intercourse from 16 years to 18 years. However, a significant proportion of cases under the POCSO Act pertain to consensual relationships among or with children who fall under the middle adolescence category i.e., 15 – 18-year-olds (NCRB 2020). In the majority of these cases, the criminal justice system was invariably triggered by the parents of girls who lodged a complaint against their partners for kidnapping and rape. Another study (PLD 2020: 2) revealed that the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006 (PCMA) 'is used twice as much against elopements or self-arranged marriages, than it is used in relation to arranged marriages.' While Raha (2021) demonstrates that 'laws meant to protect children have become an instrument to induce fear, regulate and control normative expressions of sexuality, and to punish adolescents for engaging in relationships that families or societies do not approve of'.'

MVF's interventions had to start at a micro level with each family, beginning with addressing the family division of labour, access to food and other consumption, leisure, play and friendships. A girls' claim for equal space in the family was contentious; it disturbed the equations among family members and had to be resolved. The issue of stopping early marriage was also a contentious one. The MVF field staff had to contend with powerful Caste Panchayats which reinforced and justified patriarchal norms.[9] Defying such powerful caste elders, who often mediated on issues of marriage, was not easy. Even priests who solemnised and blessed marriages were instrumental in perpetuating discrimination against girls. They were significant barriers to adolescent girl's education and had to be won over so they would be in favour of girls and against gender discrimination. This meant contending with entrenched traditional forces that had a moral presence in the lives of the people.

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[9] Caste Panchayats are traditional bodies led by caste elders who adjudicate in marital, land, theft, and family disputes in their caste. Their decisions have no legal sanctity but have enormous authority over members of their caste

The role of traditional institutions could be contested only when more secular ones such as *Gram Panchayats*, schools and the law enforcement agencies were invoked to establish new values of gender equality and education of adolescent girls. In the beginning, even the functionaries of the system such as schoolteachers and the police were not ready to accept the idea of girls' mobility and they even questioned parents for giving so much liberty to their daughters. After repeated engagement with secular institutions, as well as with Caste Panchayats and religious leaders, and after seeking their support to be part of the solution and not the problem, they have also changed their stance. They, too, have been sensitised to take action in support of gender equality and girls' education. Changing social norms on sexuality required a new vocabulary as such issues were seldom openly debated or discussed. MVF field mobilisers enabled the community to regard instances of girls' elopement or falling in love as a natural process of adolescence and growing up and a matter of bodily integrity and autonomy. These issues are now being discussed at the *Gram Panchayat* level and girls raise the issue of sexual violence in the *Kishore Balika Sanghams* or adolescent girls' committees (KBS). From a position where sexuality was not a point of discussion at all, clear stands are being taken on the matter in favour of girls. At first, teachers would not acknowledge that gender discrimination was an issue in schools and resisted the idea of MVF field mobilisers advising them on girls' education. They construed it as a threat to their authority but thanks to constant interaction with them, there has been a change in their attitude towards adolescent girls. There is no longer policing or surveillance of children lest they 'fall in love' or elope. Friendships between boys and girls are seen as normal. In short, teachers have become more sensitized.

The girls get the strength to stand up for their rights when they know that they have persons in the community, among members of *Gram Panchayats*, women's groups and teachers who show concern for them and will support them. In turn, it is the innate strength and firm resolve of the girls that gives an impetus to the community and members of various forums to go the extra mile in favour of adolescent girls. The girls' struggle also strengthens the response of public institutions wherein the functionaries of the state are compelled to address urgent and concrete challenges posed by the girls. They can no longer hide behind convenient arguments about structural constraints, tradition, culture, or the poverty of the parents but are compelled to utilise the policies and legal instruments at their disposal to

protect children's rights in a rights-based perspective. Children's participation and exercise of agency thus becomes indispensable in bringing about a transformation in their own lives and in building new social norms in the community.

The role of MVF field mobilisers is key to changing social norms. In the case of child labour their stand was strong from the beginning as they themselves came from similar backgrounds. They needed no convincing on the matter. Likewise, they went ahead with mobilising communities for girls' education. However, when the issue of supporting adolescent girls' education opened up the debate on patriarchy and gender equality, MVF mobilisers - both male and female - had to contend with their personal practices in the family and it led to a process of introspection. The male mobilisers became acutely conscious that gender inequality is all pervasive and they were compelled to accept their own limitations and correct them. The female mobilisers too had to assert, and continue to do so, for equality in the family and in the workplace.

As is evident from the discussion in this section, the approach followed by the Ika Chaalu project is a gradually unfolding and painstaking process which requires an enormous amount of dedication and personal involvement from the field mobilisers, from the girls themselves, indeed from everyone involved, but it does result in a significant and sustainable shift in practices, and in lasting gender norm change, as was confirmed during the recent Pandemic.

4. Adolescent Girls Resisting a Reversal of Norms during the Lockdown: Examples from the Field[10]

As has been reported from various other locations, in Telangana too, the girls experienced enormous difficulties during the lockdown (Bahl et al., 2021; Briggs et al., 2020; Nagaraj et al., 2022). Girls and boys who should have been in school were pushed into exploitative conditions of work and child labour, experiencing drudgery, loss of health and anxiety. To compound their problems came the announcement of online classes which no child wanted to miss. Gender discrimination and precarity rebounded with girls finding it difficult to access

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[10] This section draws on Ika Chaalu Team (1 August, 2021).

and use mobile phones to go online. It was so much easier for their brothers to borrow the phone from their fathers to catch up with online lessons. Some parents invested in buying mobile phones for their children, especially boys. Girls could hardly get their hands on one. Many a girl worked overtime to buy a mobile phone for herself. Indeed, they carried their phones along with them to work and strained themselves to keep abreast of online classes while at work. At times they took screenshots of their class to reassure their families that they were using the phone for education. They did not want to miss the classes as they feared that they would end up getting married at the slightest hint that they had discontinued their education.

Changing community norms about child marriage is one of the key strategies of the Ika Chaalu project to ensure that adolescent girls can complete secondary education. Initial actions against child marriage in the project had led to tensions and resistance from the parents and families. Adolescent girls who were participating in the KBS or Girls' Committees set up by the project were fully aware of the consequences of child marriage and that it was against the law. Consequently, they felt empowered to share information with their friends if there was any talk in their families of their marriage being arranged. This would provide the cue to MVF field mobilisers to jump into action to stop the marriage with the involvement of *Gram Panchayats*, schoolteachers, women's groups, and whoever else was seen as an active supporter of girls in the village. If the issue escalated and girls were deemed to be at risk, Childline 1098 was contacted to rescue the girl and keep her in a safe place till the parents were convinced not to go ahead with the marriage. At times, the police registered cases against those who aided and abetted child marriage.

Gradually, determined to study further and dream of higher education and beyond, girls picked up courage and began to exercise agency, even as more and more people in the community came forward to support girls' education. By the beginning of 2020, all such practices of child marriage were part of history in the Ika Chaalu project area. Parents no longer forced their daughters to get married and their script changed in a seamless fashion. Questions such as: who will marry our daughter; can we afford the dowry; where will the venue be; who to borrow money from to cover the wedding expenses were erased from memory to be replaced by a new set of questions such as: what is a good high school for my

daughter; how far is it from our village; do we admit her in a hostel or seek admission for her in a good residential school; what is a good course for her to pursue after high school. There was no longer any pressure on the girls to get married, nor any debate on 'why education?' A remarkable change in norms indeed!

The lockdown due to Covid came as a big blow. With uncertainty about reopening of schools, precarity due to loss of livelihoods and income, a few stray incidents of girls' eloping, or just parental fears about their daughters being sexually abused, parents of adolescent girls started arranging marriages for their daughters. The weddings took place in stealth. These were the very same parents who were full of pride that their daughters were performing well in their studies and even encouraged their pursuit of higher education. There was resistance to the arrangement of such marriages by the girls. Members of the Girls' Committees made phone calls to the field mobilisers as well as to Childline to stop marriages. Local institutions such as the Gram Panchayats and Child Rights Protection Forums (CRPF)[11] took a clear stand against child marriage whenever they were alerted, as they had all been sensitized on this issue in the Ika Chaalu project. For example, a field mobiliser in Nutankal received a call from a member of KBS that a girl from Yedavelli was due to be married. She contacted a district official and the Child Development Project Officer and along with the *Anganwadi* (preschool worker) Worker and a member of the Child Rights Protection Forum, the officials counseled the girl and her parents and prevented the marriage.

In another instance in Pedanemila, Lalita – a field mobiliser - received a call about a proposed child marriage, but she could not make it to the venue in time. She rang Childline and persuaded a team of officials to stop the marriage. They visited the girl's house, but her grandparents denied any plans of marriage. Even the neighbors concealed information and questioned the officials about how they could possibly think that a wedding would be performed during the lockdown. The officials left and the girl was married after four days. This was a huge disappointment for the field mobiliser as she had had been instrumental in rescuing this girl earlier from child labour and had succeeded in enrolling her to formal school

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[11] Child Rights Protection Forums are local institutions set by the project in all villages in the project area.

in Class 9. Despite this setback, many a child marriage was stopped during the lockdown thanks to the power of the girls' determination and the alliances that had been built in the community and with local functionaries by the project. *Gram Panchayats* were asked by project staff to make announcements in the village about the law on child marriage and priests of all religions were instructed to verify dates of birth before solemnizing the marriage. During the last weeks of May 2021, while the lockdown was still on, field mobilisers held a campaign against child marriage in which they met all the members of CRPFs, School Management Committees, Gram Panchayats, as well as priests, caterers, cooks, and wedding venue decorators. They were all reminded about the Child Marriage Act and informed that they could be put in jail for aiding and abetting child marriage.

The following is an illustrative example of how Ika Chaalu field staff mobilized relevant functionaries to cooperate in stopping a child marriage in the times of the Covid lockdown:

Uma is a bold and gutsy girl who makes friends with boys easily and is fun to be with. She is quite a leader and her presence in the Girls' Committee meetings contributed hugely to the quality of the discussions held there. She gave confidence to all the girls to be open and speak out. Sometime in February 2020, her uncle complained to her parents that her behavior had to be checked as it was rumored that she had "loose morals". Uma was promptly reprimanded by her parents and she was stopped from attending the Girls' Committee meetings. Her parents began to control her mobility and put her under watch. In the meantime, the lockdown was announced, and she isolated herself. The field mobiliser – Dhanamma - noticed that Uma changed a lot, she was quiet, cried a lot and would not talk. With counselling and a great deal of probing, Uma revealed that she might not be able to continue with her studies after 10th grade. Dhanamma then met her parents a couple of times and convinced them that Uma was a fine girl, they should be proud of her, and she was good at her studies. She helped Uma to get admission in high school (11th grade) in Suryapet town. Through the lockdown in 2020, Uma went with her mother to work on cotton seed and chilli farms and at the same time attended online classes. It seems all was well till her aunt visited them with a proposal of marriage. Uma resisted fiercely and said that she had nothing against the boy but would like to get married only after completion of her graduation. Given the unpredictability of colleges or schools reopening in the near future, her arguments for pursuing education fell on deaf ears. Dhanamma got to know about the engagement from Uma's friends in the Girls Committee and found out that the wedding was going to be fixed for the second week of May 2021 and that the family were going to meet the priest to fix an auspicious date and time for the wedding.   Dhanamma contacted the Sarpanch, who in turn called the priest and warned him against fixing a date and solemnizing the marriage. When the girls' parents arrived in the

priest's house, he asked them to wait. He immediately called Dhanamma, who called Childline for help. In an hours' time all the relevant functionaries arrived in the priest's house. They warned the parents against printing invitation cards or going ahead with the wedding. The Supervisor of the Anganwadi (employed by the department of Women and Child Welfare and officially in charge of the well-being of adolescent girls in her village) was instructed to visit Uma's home every other day to ensure that she was safe and and has been made personally accountable should Uma be stealthily married.

The success of the project in preventing a large number of child marriages during the lockdown can be ascribed to the manner in which societal conflicts are resolved. Take the case above: exposing parents to public insult and humiliations could potentially lead to a backlash from the community and girls could be subjected to sanctions and punishment for exercising agency in defiance of power relations in the family. However, this does not happen as field staff are trained to follow up with the parents, have a continuous dialogue with them and help them to reconcile to the new reality. Gradually, parents come to be convinced that they made the right decision. Others in the community - those who took a stand in favor of the girl and those who opposed it - are also contacted and the discussion continues. This process eases the tensions and indeed helps in vocalizing the support for girls' education and their rights. The presence of functionaries and law enforcing institutions gives legitimacy and a stamp of authority to the entire process of stopping a child marriage. To get them to this stage of commitment is again a process of interface with project staff, the community, and the girls themselves. From initial indifference to the issue, the functionaries of the State begin to take pride in the transformation their actions make to the lives of girls. It is in this environment that girls get the courage to act without fear of reprisals, and the agency of the girls reinforces the rest of the community to take a stand.

In times of massive crises, as in the case of the pandemic lockdown, the structural inequities in the system get reinforced. Patriarchy is a stubborn and default norm. Yet, it is heartening to see that the efforts of the Ika Chaalu project in building a social norm towards gender equality and girls' education is not completely lost, nor totally reversed. With girl power and its voice, and the functionaries of the state acting in unison, there is hope.

5. Concluding Observations: Is Sustainable Norm Change Possible?

The structures that had been put in place by the Ika Chaalu project made it possible to have an adequate response to the needs of adolescent girls during the COVID-19 lockdown. While the situation was far from ideal, the adolescent girls' committees and the intricate networks created in the community did not disappear totally, they merely shifted online. The anxieties due to lack of cash for basic necessities of food, sanitary pads, soap, increasing work at home and on farms and lack of mobility and freedom pushed them to somehow maintain contacts with their peers and support persons in CRPF. They used mobile phones for this purpose, sometimes stealthily. Furthermore, since the adolescents in the project area were comfortable discussing gender injustice and sensitive issues, they not only had the means but also the vocabulary to continue to reach out and to address their plight. This allowed them to not only change the narrative but also to take control of that narrative, and thus of their future. Girls shared their difficulties whenever possible through phone calls and WhatsApp messages. They talked about the pressures on them within the family, the increase in domestic work, the hazards of child labour, and finding ways of keeping track of online lessons. They also shared information when they were at risk of their own marriage or that of their friends being fixed and made plans to prevent this by using their existing networks of support groups, Childline and MVF field mobilisers.

The long drawn-out Covid-19 lockdown was lifted in Telangana in the beginning of August 2021. Schools and colleges reopened and the adolescent girls in the Ika Chaalu project were finally able to resume their education, project activities could restart, and they started to meet again in the *Kishor Balika Sanghams* (KBS) or Adolescent Girls' Committees. The girls expressed their despair at what they had experienced during the lockdown and the pressures put on them to get married as the parents feared their daughters might elope. At the same time their conversations were so full of hope as well and they shared their yearning to get back to school and continue their education, no matter what. Girls who were part of the KBS and had been exposed to gender issues and the struggle against patriarchy could better resist pressures of marriage from the family. They said that participating in KBS meetings had helped them to understand gender issues and to stand their ground during the lockdown. They resorted to calling the MVF field mobilisers or Helpline 1098 to rescue them or their

friends from marriage (see Section 3). The Gender Committees set up in schools had helped to win over boys and they were keen for this activity to restart now that schools had reopened as they were acutely aware that girls and boys, in fact the entire village, would have to work together to change social norms in favour of girls. More importantly, the lockdown had made the girls realize that they would have to be in the forefront of leading the movement to change social norms in favour of girls. They would have to know more, be brave and strong.

Almost the first issue they decided to take up in the KBS meeting was to request the Gram Panchayats to give them a space where they could meet – a space that they could call their own.[12] This was triggered by an event in Ravulapalli, where the youth association which consists only of boys asked the girls to vacate the room in their club and carry out their activities elsewhere. The girls argued that if boys' youth clubs had a space that was exclusively for them, then they too must claim their space. In village after village, they started to meet the *Sarpanches* (elected heads of local government) to convince them of their need for a dedicated space where they could conduct meetings, start a library and reading room, plan for midday meals for all children and the distribution of KCR (hygiene) kits. It could also be a space where they could plan for the hoisting of the national flag on August 15th - Independence Day – an activity normally performed by boys.

Together with the *Gram Panchayats*, the girls began to look for accommodation in their villages and were successful in getting permission to use a variety of spaces. One *Sarpanch* went so far as to promise them a grant for the purchase of library books, another assured them that he would take action to stop child marriages, a third arranged for a room and library facilities and permitted them to borrow the daily newspaper that he subscribes to at home, and a fourth went further and counseled some youth after the girls complained that they were being harassed by them. With the renewed confidence that the girls gained from this success, they next sought to be invited to the *Gram Panchayat* meetings and at least two *Sarpanches* have started inviting two girls each by rotation to attend *Gram Panchayat* review meetings and *Gram Sabhas* (village general body meetings).

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[12] See Ika Chaalu Team (6 April, 2022) for details.

Significantly, several *Sarpanches* have started to participate in the KBS meetings and girls have started bringing up a diversity of issues to be resolved by the Gram Panchayat. These range from buses not plying to their village, forcing girls to take the auto rickshaw to school which they can ill afford, to the case of a girl dropping out of school after being sexually harassed by local youth on her way to college, and the complaint that there was no teacher for English in their school. The convincing manner in which the girls engaged with members of local bodies, put forth their demands for exclusive space and negotiated viable alternate accommodation in the village is indicative of the determination and courage they have gained in the Ika Chaalu project. They have gained this strength through their participation in the KBS meetings, and the Ika Chaalu conferences and they have learnt from each other as well. It is heartening to see that their resolve had not been dimmed by the lockdown, in fact they seem to have come out of it even more determined to stand up for their right to education and gender justice. Demanding space in the village was not just a routine activity for the girls, it had a symbolic value at several levels. It has filled them with energy and given the groups legitimacy and strength, it proves that they are visible and individuals in their own right, they are strong enough to take up issues for collective action, they are courageous and prepared to fight for justice, and are mature enough to be taken seriously. Girls who were hesitant and shy earlier and did not go out of their homes are now engaging with the Gram Panchayats. Witnessing the impact of their voices on the Gram Panchayats has filled them with pride, self-belief, and self-confidence. Even a symbolic activity like grabbing the leadership to hoist the flag in the middle of the village has had a profound impact on the girls. It was significant as it made them feel that they were equal citizens with rights as guaranteed by the Constitution of India and there was no stopping them!

"Ika Chaalu: enough is enough" is not just a slogan anymore for these girls, not just a rallying cry, but also the basis for action. Girls know it is their right to demand a better future, as well as a better today.

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