

# CONFERENCE REPORT

## PERSPECTIVE BUILDING ON

### ADOLESCENT GIRLS' EDUCATION

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5<sup>TH</sup> AND 6<sup>TH</sup> APRIL 2016

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### ADOLESCENT GIRLS' EDUCATION

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#### **INTRODUCTION**

M V Foundation (MVF) has been working on the protection of rights of children between the age group 5 – 14 in partnership with the community for more than two decades. From within the rights framework, MVF took a position that all children must attend full-time formal day schools and that any child out of school is a child laborer or a potential child labour. MVF worked with multiple stakeholders including families, communities, Gram Panchayats, landowners, the police, the administration, government schools, local, state and national governments towards ensuring that children are enrolled into mainstream government schools. So far MVF has withdrawn about one million children from work and mainstreamed them into formal schools. These children were from the most backward districts that included both boys and girls.

Since 2012 M V Foundation extended its activities to cover children in the 14-18 years age group in 133 Gram Panchayats across five districts. Between 2014-15, it followed up with 3,620 children, including 1,753 girls, to take the class 10 Board examination and mainstreamed 2,354 children, including 589 girls, through the Open School system and repeat exams to complete Class 10 from 2011-15. While 3,564 child marriages were identified from 2012-16, 566 were stopped, and there is a gradual reduction in the instances of child marriage.

M V Foundation conducted a national conference on 'Perspective Building-Adolescent Girls' Education' on the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> of April 2016 at Hyderabad in collaboration with Stichting Charity Fund Rijsholt (Netherlands).

The conference report is presented in two parts. The first part is the background note to the conference highlighting MVF's perspective on adolescent girls' education and law and policy for adolescents in India. The second part of the report provides the proceedings and details of the conference conducted on 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> of April, 2016.

## BACKGROUND NOTE

### Adolescent Children (14 – 18 Years): Access to Secondary School Education

Through its interventions, MVF has seen that the completion of elementary school education itself is a herculean task for poor children, and this is more so for girls. This trend is also reflected in the NFHS-3 data of undivided Andhra Pradesh (disaggregated data for AP and Telangana is not available). It shows that only 41% children in the 15-17 age group attend school of whom only 34.5% girls attend school, whereas the same figure for boys is markedly higher at 49%. NFHS-3 data also shows an urban-rural differential in the attainment of education. The gender disparity is higher in rural areas, with only 23 percent of girls attending school, compared with 46 percent of boys. For the ages 15-19, overall literacy rate is 15 percentage points behind that of boys.

The primary challenge of access to schools is due to the non-availability of enough schools at the secondary school level. Both girls and boys found their access to affected by supply side factors such as presence of schools and its geographical location, regularity of teachers and availability of physical infrastructure. The number of high schools is not adequate to accommodate the out-of-school children and the increasing demand for the expansion of secondary education. As the tables below show, the number of schools with secondary and senior secondary level education (9<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> standard) is much lower than those at the primary and upper primary school levels. Similarly, the number of children enrolled in secondary and senior secondary schools is drastically lower than those till the 8<sup>th</sup> standard.

Table 1: Total number of government schools in India by level of schooling

Type of Schools	Number of Schools
Primary	790640
Upper Primary	401079
Secondary	131287
Senior Secondary	102558

Source: [http://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload\\_files/mhrd/files/statistics/EAG2014.pdf](http://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/statistics/EAG2014.pdf)

Table 2: Enrolment in schools by level of schooling

Type of Schools	Enrolment (In '000's)		
	Boys	Girls	Total
Primary (I - V)	67223	62769	129992
Upper Primary (VI - VIII)	33746	32035	65780
Elementary (I-VIII)	100969	94804	195773
I - X	120453	112281	232734
Secondary (IX - X)	19484	17477	36961
Senior Secondary (XI-XII)	11747	10406	22153

Source: [http://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload\\_files/mhrd/files/statistics/EAG2014.pdf](http://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/statistics/EAG2014.pdf)

Lack of investments in secondary school education reinforces gender discrimination and exclusion on the basis of caste and class which operate as systemic barriers to access to education by establishing control over adolescents' labour, sexuality and mobility.

### **State deficit in Secondary School Education and Work Participation**

Participation in the workforce increases for both boys and girls at adolescence. Nationally, the workforce participation (WPR) for adolescents in the age group 15 – 19 years is 14.7%. The male WPR for this age group is 19.9% (main workers) while female WPR is 8.81% (main workers). 10.4% adolescents are marginal workers. (It is crucial to note that many feminist economists estimate that female workforce participation is grossly underestimated in most surveys.) Such an increase can easily be attributed to poor access to secondary school education. Padmini Swaminathan finds that “While at one level, the gender gap (females per 1,000 males) increased significantly when data were computed for different levels of literacy, what data also corroborated was the fact that districts with higher levels of adolescent girls in employment were also the ones where significant proportions of adolescent girls were ‘not attending schools’.” (Swaminathan, 2008) In inference, adolescent children who are out of school because of lack of schools and education infrastructure after primary levels are forced to enter the workforce.

The entry of adolescent girls into productive work such as agricultural labour, wage work or even skilled work happens seamlessly as she is in any case absorbed into domestic work right from her childhood in informal ways, with her assuming smaller responsibilities. At adolescence, she is expected to take the lead in performing these roles, no longer as an assistant to her mother or her older siblings, but on her own. As part of the workforce both boys and girls are forced into “a routine of drudgery and suffering at the cost of realizing their fullest potential. They are gradually edged out of any economic activity that involves skilled labour. They have no claim to any system of security or insurance; thus, they are unable to take advantage of state programs and policies as well as market interventions. Ultimately, their fate is sealed by their lack of access to education.” (Sinha 2014 pp. 294). Additionally, the lack of secondary schooling also prevents their access to university, vocational and professional schools, and also makes them ineligible for a range of jobs.

A large number of poor adolescent girls and boys are forced to join the agricultural workforce for want of free and compulsory education at the secondary school level reinforcing gender discrimination, exclusion of dalits adding to the axis of marginalization and class distinction. All these combined operate as systemic barriers to access to education.

### **Control over Adolescent Girls' Sexuality and Mobility**

Control over girls' mobility and sexuality intensifies after they start to menstruate.

Control over sexuality operates within the context of marriage. Girls are considered as potential wives and mothers within the context of a natal/marital family. Most girls who are

sexually active by their adolescence are so within the context of marriage (Jejeebhoy, 1996). Around 40% of girls aged between 15 and 19 in the country are married. Marriage also leads to pregnancy, which means early childbearing leading to complications. Apart from the fact that an early start to childbearing greatly reduces the educational and employment opportunities of women, it also creates problems for sexual and reproductive health and well-being. NFHS-3 shows that overall, 12 percent of women age 15-19 have become mothers and 4 percent of women age 15-19 are currently pregnant with their first child. This means that one in six women age 15-19 have begun childbearing. Early marriage leaves the adolescent girl in her marital home with a heavier burden of work, an education that has been abandoned mid-way, hardly any decision-making abilities and constrained access to healthcare. NFHS-3 also finds that girls between ages 15 – 19 report the highest incidence of emotional, physical and sexual violence.

Exercising control over mobility and bodily integrity becomes explicit through arguments such as safety and security of the girl. These arguments only come into play in the context of girls' pursuance of higher education. Somehow, it is okay for girls at this age to be married at an early age, walk miles to fetch water or firewood, migrate for labour or work as agricultural labourers, trafficked for child labour and sex work; exposing a double standard.

Even boys are often forced to drop out of school in order to enter the workforce at a young age. There is pressure on them to be breadwinners and earning members of the family. While there is not as much control over their mobility, they give in to peer pressure to 'loiter' in public spaces with friends and spend the money they earn on gambling, tobacco or alcohol without accounting for it. This is also an aspect of patriarchy. Many boys also start to perpetrate violence at this age, including verbal abuse, stalking, beating, slapping, sexual harassment of girls in public spaces. NFHS-3 finds that 56.8% boys between ages 15 – 19 agree that a husband is justified in hitting or beating his wife for specific reasons. This is the highest percentage amongst all age quintiles. However, there is not enough literature on masculinity and adolescence in rural India.

Such control is reinforced by the fact that the state does not reach out to adolescent girls and boys. If only there was adequate infrastructure and support for girls and boys to reach schools at this age, such issues of control over mobility and sexuality through marriage and restricted access to public spaces could be tackled more systematically.

### **MVF-Focus on Adolescent Girls and Children for Access to Secondary School Education**

MVF believes that fulltime formal education is intrinsically valuable for poor children. This is significant in the context of adolescents too – secondary education, not only elementary education is a non-negotiable right.

MVF's program for 14-18 year olds addresses all out-of-school adolescent children's re-entry into formal education. Specifically, it visibilised the specific challenges faced by girls through forced marriages and pressures operating on her at every sphere of life from the family,

neighborhood, and community. In the face of such gendered obstacles to education for girls, MVF initiated its program with an explicit focus on girls between ages 14 – 18 enabling their exercise of agency to pursue higher education. MVF also galvanized support of the community and the various functionaries of the system to give girls the courage to access education. A consequence of this program was the impact it had on adolescent boys too.

In doing so MVF viewed the 14-18 year olds as adolescent children, as opposed to viewing them as young adults who are in a transitional phase to be prepared for adulthood. A view of 'young adults' promotes a policy towards skill-based or vocational training which can help adolescents generate an income, precluding them from pursuing higher education in mainstream schools. MVF found it imperative to question such an acceptance of vocational education in place of secondary education, and 'oppose the adoption of relativist arguments prioritizing teen work over learning' (Bhabha, 2014 p.10). Instead, MVF's view is that adolescent children have to be guaranteed their right to education until completion of secondary schools.

### **What is MVF's program strategy?**

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

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

These evolved over the initial phase of MVF's work with children who were in bonded labour. The organization found that its approach strongly antagonized employers, and found no support amongst parents or the community. They also found that one set of bonded labour children simply kept getting replaced with another set – not creating a sustainable or lasting impact. Also, girl children were totally ignored. In addition, other children in the same areas who were either working for their families or in agriculture and allied sectors but not as bonded labourers put pressure MVF volunteers to be withdrawn from work too. This forced MVF to reflect upon such a strategy.

Instead, MVF sought to build support for children's rights by "invoking the liberal and humanistic tendencies of all involved" (Sinha 2005) towards child rights, for which universal acceptance and a minimum common understanding could be evolved. At the end of this phase, MVF widened its scope to *all children*, not only children in bonded labour. This raised several important questions. If children should not be at work, where should they be? The only answer to this is full-time, formal day schools. If all out of school children are child

labourers, this automatically also meant that a distinction cannot be drawn between 'hazardous' and 'non-hazardous' work, since all work affects the overall development and growth of a child.

Such an emphasis drew from making universal education a social norm through a rights-based approach. MVF's approach sought to build social consensus for the right to education for all children while being fully cognizant of and resolving caste, class and gender-based conflicts through debate and discussion at local levels.

Shantha Sinha summarizes this process:

"In a local context, when children's rights are discussed they are not abstract notions or statistical data for analysis. These are actual lives and real children whose misery and despair is an appeal to all in the locality to take a stand on their predicament. At the village level, initiating such a debate is in itself a political act, taking the issue of children out of the private domain to the realm of public action and responsibility. The poor gain confidence even as they are being discussed and they take the courage to fight existing stereotypes about them and are encouraged to stop their children from working and send them to schools. Dialogue and debate imply mutual respect that cuts across power relations, inequalities, classes and social hierarchies. This dialogue process is inclusive, enables the voice of the weak to be heard and is inherently democratic. (...)

This arduous process of debate and discussion at the local level aimed at building a consensus to support poor children and their right to education develops slowly and incrementally in an organic fashion. In the existing caste structures at the village level, the employers are usually the landed class and a culturally dominant upper caste group. The children at work are inevitably from the scheduled caste or scheduled tribe communities or the backward castes/classes. The challenge is to resolve conflicts between the different groups, especially in the case of release of bonded labour children without causing confrontation or widening divisions, while at the same time establishing a consensus for children's right to education." (Sinha 2005)

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



The organization sought to adopt a similar strategy to children between ages 15 – 18 on issues of education as well as child marriage, with a few key departures.

Still seeking to build a universalistic principle on the right to education even for adolescents through a rights-based approach, the organization focused specifically on enrolling out-of-school adolescent children into formal education – either through the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) or by enabling them in various ways to take Class 10 examinations.

Even so, bringing girls to school required different strategies combating gender discrimination. At the adolescence stage, as mentioned earlier, the barriers set up by patriarchy only intensify. The compulsion to enter the workforce as earning members of the family on the one hand, and on the other, the perception of adolescent girls as sexual beings (whose sexuality must be controlled, whose mobility must be restricted because it is “unsafe” and “insecure” for them to be outside the home) work together to restrict girls’ access to education. These were the tangible obstacles placed in front of the organization.

MVF started by mobilizing communities to build support for girls’ education. This included carrying out a survey of all children in the age group of 0-18 years; constituting local groups such as the child rights/girl child rights protection committees with those who express support for girls; strengthening School Management Committees( SMCs) and Gram Panchayats to perform their roles as mandatory institutions in favour of children and their right to education; identifying local youth clubs, and forming more youth clubs that include girls; and forming girls’ committees to take collective action. This process of social mobilisation and sustained engagement with relevant government functionaries enabled MVF to devise strategies to eradicate socially entrenched institutions of child marriage and child labour. (See MVF document ‘From Education to Gender Equality’2016).

The organization intervened towards creating an enabling environment for girls to exercise agency towards her right to education. A study conducted by MVF on adolescent girls who overcame barriers to reach high school and college says: “At every level of education, there are tangible goals to be achieved for a girl student to reach to the next level. In this journey for education, there is a discovery of self at every stage, even as she withstands social as well as familial pressures to conform to patriarchal norms, being in an education institution gives her strength to defy existing power structures, in exercising agency step by step as she goes up the ladder of education, she discovers herself even as the roles and attitudes of her family members towards her gets defined. In a way there is a subtle change that occurs in the girl who pursues education and it is this that gives her the confidence to aspire for more.” (M V Foundation, 2015)

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

focusing specifically on the gendered obstacles girls face.

### **How has law and policy accounted for adolescents?**

MVF's strategy has explicitly focused on making the right to education a political issue, resolving gender, caste and class-based conflicts locally through community action with the support of state functionaries. At the same time, the organization recognizes that there are huge gaps in laws and policies towards adolescents, both boys and girls.

**In the first place, there are very few specific laws governing or protecting children between the ages 14 – 18.** As a signatory of UNCRC India has acceded to define a child as a person up to 18 years who would need care and protection. However, most laws do not take adolescents into account.

The Child Labour Prohibition and Regulation Act 1986 (CLPRA) only covers children up to the age of 14. The law is also limited in its scope, only prohibiting child labour in certain identified processes and occupations. The CLPRA significantly leaves out child labour in agriculture and in home-based work, rendering their work invisible and allowing millions of children to be legally exploited as wage earners. Even the little that gets covered under the National Child Labour Program of the Ministry of Labour and Employment is half-hearted. Between 1988 and 2011, only 8 lakh children were withdrawn from work and enrolled in school under this programme across 266 districts. (To put this in perspective, MVF in the same time period withdrew 10 lakh children from work during this period).

Adolescents between ages 14 – 18 are also covered under the Minimum Wages Act 1948 which entitles them to a fair share of wages for a normal day's employment. Considering that children up to 18 years of age must not be in labor force and it is a non-negotiable, it is improper to argue for bettering conditions of work and promotion of livelihoods for raising the incomes of youth who are below 18 years of age.

The Child Marriage Prohibition Act 2006 makes 18 years the permissible age of marriage for girls and 21 years for boys. A child marriage is void if the child is taken away from his or her lawful guardian by enticement, force or use of deceitful means, or is sold or trafficked for the purpose of marriage. It makes parents' approval of child marriage a cognizable and non-bailable offence. However, the Act is limited in that it refuses to make all child marriages voidable, instead only making those marriages for which annulment is sought by the guardian voidable. The Act also makes the faulty presumption that the child will be able to exercise her agency and say "no" to child marriage, in spite of the state not providing any support to enable her to defy marriage or for rehabilitation.

The Juvenile Justice Act 2016 provides for care and protection of all children up to 18 years. The institutions such as the Child Welfare Committee, schemes such as Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS) 2009 and shelter homes and other forms of institutional support to

those rescued from child labour, trafficking, street children, victims of abuse and violence run on a shoe string budget. There are not enough homes, and in what little homes there are, the quality of care is grossly inadequate. In fact the homes themselves see cases of sexual abuse and violence within them, rendering the processes of institutionalizing as one of disempowerment, labeling the child as a victim.

Even as the state provides such negligible protection for adolescent children, the Juvenile Justice Act 2015 was recently amended lowering culpable age from 18 years to 16 years. Under Section 15 of the new law, special provisions have been made to tackle child offenders in the age group of 16-18 years who commit heinous crimes. The Juvenile Justice Board is given the option to transfer cases of heinous offences by such children to a children's court (court of sessions) after conducting preliminary assessment. The Act provides for placing such offender children in a 'place of safety' both during and after the trial till they attain the age of 21, after which his/her evaluation shall be conducted by the children's court. After the evaluation, the child is either released on probation and if not reformed, he/she will be sent to a jail for the remaining term.

It is felt that there needs to be greater sensitivity to the adolescents as their actions may impulsive and irrational. It has also been stated that before a 16 year old is punished for criminal action there has to be an onus of responsibility on the State to mentor, guide and prevent them for getting into situations of risk.

**Secondly, very little policy is drafted or implemented for adolescents. Even the few policies that address adolescents are limited in their scope and understanding.**

The Right to Education Act does not delineate a constitutional obligation to provide education for children between the ages 14 – 18. This leaves out-of-school girls and boys over the age of 14 with no recourse for their poor access to education. Even well-drafted policies such as the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya scheme (KGBV) only provide schooling up to class 8. Any girl who wishes to pursue her education beyond class 8 has very little support from the state. Adolescents are covered under the adult education program Sakshar Bharat – National Literacy Mission and the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS). There are no special efforts made by the state to enable adolescents' access to these schemes. Of potentially 100 million children in this age group in the country, merely 1% is covered by the NIOS.

The Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) aims to correct this somewhat, by planning to increase access to secondary and higher secondary education by improving quality of education. Its focus so far has been limited to ICT at schools, building girls' hostels, improving access to disabled children and vocational training, not on bringing about a significant increase in the number of schools overall. Even the progress in its focus areas has been limited.

Under a scheme called Ujjwala, the Ministry of Women and Child Development of the Government of India funds NGOs to prevent sexual exploitation of adolescents. It is estimated that there are about 30 lakh women in the country who are engaged in prostitution,

of which 40% are below the age of 18, but only 73 rehabilitation centers in 16 states of the country under this scheme.

The Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls (SABLA) is implemented in 200 districts. It addresses the nutrition and health of girls age 11 – 18. It also encourages children below the age of 14 to go to school, while equipping older girls with ‘vocational skills’. However, as Sucheta Mahajan argues, “vocational education does not enhance the prospects of the child in a long term sense of the widening of choices; it reflects a class bias in that lower caste children were encouraged to join institutes for technical education on the assumption that this was appropriate to their position in society”.

Interventions that link financial incentives with raising the age of marriage (such as Apni Beti Apni Dhan of the Haryana government or Balika Samridhhi Yojana of the GoI), conditional cash transfers, vouchers and scholarships which aim to enable girls to transition from primary to secondary and higher education are linked to girls’ continuing their education without getting married. They assume that such incentives are enough to enable girls to assert themselves and access education. They don’t address “barriers of power and authority within the family, gender and caste discrimination, patriarchy and the nexus of economic exploitation” (Kelly and Newnham in Sinha 2014). Nor do they “provide spaces, support structures and the shelter required to enable girls to defy traditions and cultures of domination, to exercise their agency and say no to child labour, early marriage, servitude, abuse and violence. None of the interventions for the protection of children weave education in as an indispensable component of empowering adolescents.” (Sinha 2014). Such interventions have to be strongly accompanied by strong institutional arrangements.

**Thirdly, as mentioned earlier, state investment in education and infrastructure for secondary school education is negligible.** The state does not even plan for or factor in adolescents’ entry into formal education. By default, it assumes that adolescents’ entry into the workforce or marriage precludes them from joining schools.

No law on children, especially in the 14 – 18 years age group has taken a categorical position in favor of their rights. The state dithers from taking responsibility for children and justifies it in the name of ‘practicality’. For example, it refuses to see girls in their own right as individuals, instead only making space for them as members of either the natal or marital family under the Child Marriage Act. It sees no role for itself in providing protection and safeguarding girls from violence and abuse. This is also true for secondary education. The state does not plan for all children to study beyond class 8, nor does it adequately support those willing to go the extra mile to study further. It always lays the responsibility on the poor and their inability to send children to school.

MV Foundation believes that we should first put pressure on all the institutions of the state to wholeheartedly work towards adolescents’ rights in both the legal and policy framework, and provide secondary schools as a matter of right.

## **Aim of the Conference**

MV Foundation finds that working for adolescent children and their right to education is intertwined with issues of gender equality. Education by itself does not bring about gender equality. MVF finds a need to learn from the perspectives and strategies of organizations in the country that address adolescent children their rights and especially right to education and gender equality. The questions MVF asked through the conference are:

1. There are caste, gender and class barriers that come in the way of adolescent girls' education. Does focus on girls' education help in resolving systemic barriers to education at all levels? Or do we broaden /universalize the agenda of expanding the access of both boys and girls to secondary education as a fundamental right.
2. Does this dilute the cause of girls' education and gender equality? How can we focus on girls with a greater emphasis on gender equality what are the issues and strategies that we could take up additionally in this regard?
3. How can we focus on boys, masculinity as well and at what level?
4. How can we create shared public spaces for boys and girls together in the form of youth clubs?
5. How do we campaign and start a debate on child labour in 14-18 years? What should our stand be?
6. What is our stand on skill education and vocational education? Must it be discussed in the context of giving opportunities and choices to all children and not to poor children alone?
7. Do we look at curriculum from class 1 onwards with a gender lens?
8. How do we generate a public debate on gender equality with all its stakeholders/
9. How and what should be the content?

To this end, the conference aimed to

- Consolidate the experiences of various grassroots interventions for adolescent girls across the country,
- Build a gendered perspective on adolescent girls' education, labour, mobility and sexuality, and
- Evolve strategies and a way forward for MV Foundation's work with adolescent girls.

The inaugural session set the tone of the conference, raising issues such as the gender gap in secondary education, control over girls' bodies, child marriage, migration, unemployment and lack of vision and state investment in adolescents' education. It also pointed to strategies for addressing these issues, including an integrated approach across sectors (such as education, health, skill development), working with boys as well as girls, networking and lobbying.

Mr. M R Vikram, Secretary Trustee MVF chaired this session. Mr. Muralikrishna, Child Protection Officer and Ms. Kameshwari Jandhyala spoke about the scale of the problem from their experiences of working with the constituency at the grassroots. Ms. Vasanth Kannabiran delivered the inaugural speech.

The second and third sessions of the conference discussed the work of Jagori Grameen (Uttarakhand), Y P Foundation (Delhi), Ankuram (Telangana), Rishta (Jharkhand), Doosra Dashak (Rajasthan), CREA (Delhi) and HAQ (Rajasthan).

In the fourth session, Ms. Shobhita Rajagopal presented ‘Champions,’ a study conducted by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) in Rajasthan in collaboration with the Harvard Francois-Xavier Bagnoud (FXB) Center for Health and Human Rights. The study looked at the support required by first-generation learners (girls) who are now in college.

The fifth and sixth sessions focused on MVF’s strategies and the way forward.

In the fifth session, Ms. Sita Mamidipudi, Mr. Venkat Reddy and Mr. Rajendra Prasad discussed the perspective with which MVF has been working on the issue, their strategy and work with adolescent girls and education since 2012. The sixth session was chaired by Ms. Rekha Wazir and invited Ms. Abha Bhaiya, Ms. Vasanth Kannabiran, Ms. Kameshwari Jandhyala and Ms. Shantha Sinha to make suggestions to MVF to take their work forward with a gender and justice perspective.

### Highlights

- The conference focused on research and interventions on various issues related to adolescence, including secondary school education, violence, migration, control over mobility and sexual and reproductive health rights.
- ‘Adolescent girls’ is a complex and problematic category. Children at this age are not passive or recipient – they are intelligent and energetic
- Representatives from various organizations discussed their programme strategies for working with adolescents. Each organization had a different entry point to address the issue including open schooling, youth clubs, comprehensive sexuality education, professional sports training, adventure sports and lifeskills education. Programme strategies include collectivization through youth clubs and sports teams, mobilization of youth for championing adolescent rights and peer education.
- Through the discussions, participants raised the challenges they are facing as organizations. These include the content and strategies of working with boys and masculinity; how to engage and work with communities and simultaneously challenge patriarchal norms and values they espouse; and how to sustainably engage with adolescent girls in the community.
- MV Foundation presented their perspective and work on adolescent girls’ education. Arguing that control over labour, sexuality and mobility restrict girls’ access to secondary school education, the organization presented their work to bring adolescent girls into mainstream education either through open schooling or mainstream public schools.

- MV Foundation discussed their strategy of engaging with the state to enable action on children's rights by working in partnership with multiple stakeholders including Gram Panchayats, police, anganwadis, ASHA workers, ANMs, Childline, various levels of the administration from the District Collector to the Mandal Revenue Officer, politicians, youth and women's groups, ministers, MPs and MLAs.
- Several strategies were suggested by discussants for MVF to consider in their way forward. These include perspective building conferences on citizenship, justice and democracy with staff, working with an inclusive approach with a focus on all forms of oppression and marginalization, focusing on multiple institutions to respond to adolescents' needs and mobilizing youth to act for adolescents' rights and collectivizing adolescents by forming youth clubs.
- The non-negotiables proposed by MV Foundation were discussed and ratified.
- Participants also raised the need for a comprehensive, integrated approach to working with a range of issues that adolescent children in the country face. Gaps in policy to address the educational needs of adolescents were flagged including the inadequacy of the Integrated Child Development Services, the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan and the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. These programmes neither have extension services to meet the needs of adolescents who are being left out of the system, nor do they address the emotional or psychological needs of adolescents.
- Existing laws are also inadequate to address adolescents' issues. Participants discussed the flaws in the Apprentice Act 2016, Child Labour Prohibition and Regulation Act 1986 (CLPRA), the Minimum Wages Act 1948, the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act 2012, the Child Marriage Prohibition Act 2006 and the Juvenile Justice Act 2016.

## CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

### Day 1: Inaugural Session

The inaugural session set the tone of the conference, raising issues such as the gender gap in secondary education, control over girls' bodies, child marriage, migration, unemployment and lack of vision and state investment in adolescents' education. It also pointed to strategies for addressing these issues, including an integrated approach across sectors (such as education, health, skill development), working with boys as well as girls, networking and lobbying.

Ms. Linda van der Wijk and Mr. R. Venkat Reddy welcomed the participants and introduced the conference.

Mr. M R Vikram, Secretary Trustee MVF chaired the first session. Mr. Muralikrishna, Child Protection Officer and Ms. Kameshwari Jandhyala spoke about the scale of the problem from their experiences of working with the constituency at the grassroots. Ms. Vasanth Kannabiran delivered the key note speech.

### *Ms. Linda van der Wijk, Stichting Charities Fund*

Ms. Linda, on behalf of Stichting Charities Fund founded in 2011 to support projects on education, inaugurated the conference and welcomed the participants.

Education, she said, is the ultimate key to better life, better standards of living-not just financially, but emotionally, and holistically. It offers a better life. She spoke about her grandmother's journey 100 years ago. She was born in 1911 and at the age of 11 or 12 she was taken out of school because her family was poor and her parents thought she was 'lucky' to work in a 'rich' family in a kitchen. Her grandmother did not think she was lucky. She could no longer play with her friends, she was alone. She could see her family only once in two weeks, that too only for 2-3 hours. She did not think she was lucky because she was robbed of her education. That is what taking adolescent girls out of school does. Not only does it rob them of their present and future but the future of the entire family.

India has no doubt made great strides in education. But given the fact that only 58% of boys and only 43% of girls have been able to complete secondary school education. There is still some work to do.

Ms. Linda hoped that we put our collective brains together so that secondary education for all children becomes a norm, and adolescent girls and boys are given a voice. Whether it is vocational training or the way to university education, girls should have a freedom to choose their future and develop themselves.



*Mr. R. Venkat Reddy, MV Foundation*

On behalf of M V Foundation, Mr. Venkat Reddy welcomed the participants to this National Conference on 'Perspective Building on Adolescent Girls' Education'.

Welcoming all the participants, he said that all present at the conference have been relentlessly striving for assertion of child rights in general and girl child rights in particular. Researchers and social scientists amplify the voices of the girls, critically evaluate the policies and their implementation and are the watchdogs of the implementation of girls' rights.

He extended a welcome to social activists, who are never deterred by failures in their journey and always move forward drawing inspiration from small successes, seeing a bigger victory ahead.

MVF has been chalking out programmes to eradicate child labour and carrying out initiatives for the last 25 years. Today MVF can confidently say that they have succeeded in bringing about a social change.

He recalled the historic moment in 1992, when civil society organizations all sat together at Gandipet to formulate the non-negotiable principles to end child labour. This was at a time when theories accepting the inevitability of child labour were in existence. It was after this meeting that MVF put forward the logic behind the Non Negotiables and derived the strength to take forward and implement these principles at field level and succeed.

He hoped that the current conference will help us to formulate ideological principles to realise the educational and other rights of the 15 to 18 age group girls with the same spirit.

Mr. Venkat Reddy said that we are meeting here at a time when girls have been carrying on a silent revolution at their individual level to assert their right to education, for their respect at home and outside home, self-control over her movements and decisions related to her and denying the right to make decisions on their future by others in their society and also across the country.

He, on behalf of MVF and all the participants wished the girls all success in their endeavour. We hope the decisions and directions we initiate from this platform will help support the girls in their struggle for self respect and self determination.

He hoped that the conference will help bring together the isolated and unorganized movements of and for the girls and organize them into a concerted movement, besides formulating an action plan to ensure that the civil society would respect the basic principle of the Constitution of India that all citizens are equal before the law.

Hoping that we all play our roles in helping the crores of girls of this age group realise their rights, he extended a very warm welcome again to everyone who have come here to share their experiences and views.

*Mr. M. R. Vikram, M V Foundation*

The journey of MVF in more than two decades of our work has been very rewarding. When MVF started work on issues of child labor there were very few institutions in this country working on this area. This had its own advantages but more handicaps. The advantages are few and mostly related to finding path-breaking ways to counter the many hydra-headed dragon issues of child labor and get noticed easily.

But definitely, pioneering has multiple problems. Chiefly, building a consensus amongst the stakeholders and breaking societal norms is much easier when an ethos is built. Surely, some of the questions which are not being asked now like “Should I send my child to work or to school” in most parts of the country were questions many people thought had no answers. Today, the landscape has changed significantly thanks to building of this ethos across the country by many NGOs, parents, government and other stakeholders. Many questions for which it was thought that there are no solutions in the society are being easily asked. The solutions, too have reached a level of standardization which makes the job much easier than it was two decades ago. Across the country many NGOs and even governments are employing similar strategies to mobilise children out of work and into schools. When we started our work, though, building consensus was a big mountain to climb.

MVF always believed that each child needs a unique solution. Every solution to a child has to be thought through a plan and implemented to ensure that the child is in school throughout its schooling tenure and out of work.

Part of the MVF’s plans to ensure that children were in full time schools and not taken to the labour market was to raise the consciousness of the society to work against child marriages. Sometimes, Mr.Vikram felt, this is a more difficult agenda to pursue than it seems to be. MVF has been successful in many ways in preventing child marriages in the areas where it worked on intense mobilization campaigns. However, very soon we realized that there are many more issues which need to be tackled in the constituency of adolescent children, especially girl children. At a micro level these include follow-up on school dropouts after class 8 or class 10 to ensure that they are back in the schooling system. There has to be active involvement of youth of a higher degree than in tackling the issue of child labour.

At a larger level, the issue once again demands fundamental changes in the attitudes of parents, community, police, law and the government. This needs institutional support of a higher degree and we need to discuss the nature of support in some detail. In this context, he said there would be a discussion on the role of balika sanghas over the next two days.

There has to be a sustained campaign for higher education for girls. The changes that are demanded are also not unique and straight jacketed. Every geography and every community needs a different approach to tackle the many issues of adolescent girl children. The problems of adolescent girl children are also very different from adolescent boys and these differences are widened by as they age.

Our solutions must be sensitive to this.

Our survey results on the issues of adolescent girls have given us very important insights into this issue and also helped us to understand the concerns of the girl children. Many conclusions are startling and highlight issues of equality, sexuality and even modernity. The demand to stay in the education system at least till the age 18 is universal, though.

MVF always reveled in developing a theory. While it is true that solutions need to be unique, the principles of defining the problem and the theory of finding the solution still needs a framework and a set of principles which the stakeholders should adhere to. The Non-Negotiables on the issues of child labor of MVF opens many doors easily. It makes the work of the volunteer more meaningful and guided in a way. Yet, he remains the master of the solution. It is his perspective of the non-negotiables that is respected and to modify the solution suited to each child. We have seen this happen a million times in our work with children.

We are introducing in this two day conference introducing a framework of Non-Negotiable principles concerning adolescent girls.

We hope that in the discussions of the next two days we could change, modify add or even remove some of these. However, we believe that each one of the non-negotiable principles needs to be debated. Each one of them addresses the problems of the adolescent girls and gives a direction to the solution. However, as I said earlier, the solutions are unique and will be found by the volunteer.

Once again, he welcomed each of the participants to this two-day event and expressed confidence that the deliberations will be fruitful.

### *Mr. Muralikrishna, UNICEF*

Mr. Muralikrishna, Child Protection Officer, UNICEF flagged some critical issues on adolescents. Adolescents face a range of problems from child marriage to migration and trafficking, and the scale of the problem has not been fully explored or defined yet. Research presents contradictory evidence relating to adolescence. For instance, child marriage is said to be high both in areas with rich kharif and drought. Mr. Muralikrishna said that the conference presents opportunity for all those involved to think together regarding the strategies and approach to working with adolescents. He asked if the sectoral approach is adequate, or there is a need for an integrated approach to address the problem of adolescence.

Mr. Muralikrishna argued that there is no organized, informed approach to adolescence by the state. The population in the 0-6 age group has been slowly decreasing, but the adolescent population is growing. He approximated that close to 70% children in the age group 11 - 18 remain outside the reach of the state. He highlighted the following issues:

- The Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) system, which is currently reaching out to adolescent girls, is neither adequately equipped nor dynamic enough to address the emerging needs of adolescents.
- The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan doesn't yet pay attention to secondary school education, or covering adolescent children.
- The Apprentice Act 2014 has enhanced the number of children eligible for scholarship for apprentices from 2.4 million children to 24 million, and the eligible age for apprenticeship has been reduced from 16 years to 14 years. At the same time, there has been no effort made to build skills of adolescent children.
- Adolescent children also have emotional needs and need counseling, for which the state makes no effort.
- Another completely neglected problem is that of adolescent girls and boys inter-state migration and rural to urban migration. There is neither recognition of this problem, nor any answers to how to integrate or rehabilitate children who are migrating.
- There is a need to work with both adolescent boys and girls. There is a 'grey area' where work with boys is concerned. Working with girls alone does not necessarily address the range of issues that poor adolescent children face.

*Ms. Kameshwari Jandhyala, Education Resource Unit*

Ms. Kameshwari Jandhyala drew attention to some issues regarding adolescents based on her work with them. Adolescents constitute 21% of the country's population, forming a substantive proportion of it. Significantly, she argued that the Government of India's perspective and policies for adolescents are underpinned by adolescent girls' reproductive role alone. She said that those working at the grassroots realize that the issues are far deeper, and that the approach to working with them has to be dynamic. She proposed that there are 4 levels at which we need to work simultaneously for adolescent girls' education:

- Girls
- Community
- Institutional Framework
- Curriculum and Pedagogy

The debate within the institutional framework and at the community level, she argued, has to be about gender issues in education. It is not enough to just bring girls to school, but also take a critical look at curriculum and pedagogy to create a gender sensitive environment.

Ms. Jandhyala pointed to the work of grassroots and civil society organizations across the country during the early 1990 s to bring the issues of child labour and child work into public discourse through networking and lobbying. We need to reflect upon and replicate these strategies for adolescents' education.

#### *Key Note Speech, Ms. Vasanth Kannabiran*

Ms. Vasanth Kannabiran spoke about adolescent girls as a category. Arguing that “adolescent girls are not the problem, *we* are the problem”, she said that adolescent girls are a complicated category, with their blooming sexuality and limited opportunities. The social response to adolescence for girls has been to repress her sexuality, never giving her an opportunity to explore her body and sexuality. Control over adolescent girls' sexuality is justified by the fear of boys and it is also the rationale for marriage. “I have watched girl after girl stopped from moving forward because of boys,” she said. Girls are sent away to another home where her sexuality is not the responsibility of the natal family anymore.

She argued that we can't make an inroad into working with adolescents if we don't engage with boys and masculinity, creating spaces where boys and girls come together and work together. Speaking from her experience of working with adolescents in Hyderabad, she said that adolescent boys are mobilized from an early age by political parties into the use of violence and killing. The use of violence is normalized, and in fact, adolescent boys perpetuate it with a sense of impunity.

She spoke of the need to look critically at the politics of NGO engagement in the gender and adolescence. “Gender,” she said, “has become totally devoid of meaning.” She said that organizations should have the ability to lay down the terms of their work, and not only work within the requirements set to them.

Ms. Kannabiran also cautioned the participants against seeing the adolescent girl as a reform issue instead of a political issue. The enormity of the problem of adolescent girlhood is highlighted by the fact that today, their eggs are being stolen from them. They are being reduced to nothing but reproducing bodies.

#### **DAY 1, SESSION 2: Presentations**

This and the next session discussed the work of various non-governmental and civil society organizations across the country with adolescent children.

The second session was chaired by Ms. Abha from Jagori Grameen. Presentations were made by Ms. Vineetha Sahasranamam from YP Foundation, Ms. M.Sumitra from Ankuram, Mr. Subrat Mahapatra from Rishta and Ms. Neelu Choudhury from Doosra Dashak on their work with adolescent children and youth groups. The discussion after the presentation focused on various themes including working on gender equality, working with men and boys on gender and sexuality and working with the community on challenging patriarchal norms and values.

#### *Opening Remarks, Ms. Abha, JAGORI Grameen*

Ms. Abha set the stage for this discussion with her opening remarks. She said that the category 'adolescent girls' is a problematic one. In her opinion, adolescent girls are standing at a crossroads and complex and cannot be viewed in isolation. "Our (grassroots organizations') feminist politics have always been concerned with girl children," she said. 'Adolescent girls' is not a passive or recipient category. Girls at this age have dreams and aspirations. The denials and violations they face are extremely powerful, but they have to be supported in their struggles to achieve their dreams and move on.

Speaking of violence against women, she recalled the gangrape in New Delhi in December 2012, and the social movement after that incident. She said that the articulation of violence against women has changed after this incident. She also said that education is not a panacea for women. Women who are doctors, engineers and lawyers continue to face violence and discrimination. In this context, she said that there is a need to look at education critically and ask what kind of social citizenship women have today.

### *Ms. Vineetha, YP Foundation: 'Know your Body, Know your Rights'*

Ms. Vineetha presented the YP Foundation, New Delhi's work with adolescent girls. Their programme 'Know Your Body, Know Your Rights' works on comprehensive sexual education with girls through a peer education model. The programme works with adolescent and youth communities to increase their access to and understanding of information on gender, sexuality and rights. It first trained young peer educators to enable them to facilitate conferences and discussion groups on sexual and reproductive health rights, and then conducted conferences in the community with adolescent children where they were provided a space to understand their body and ask questions.

The YP Foundation is a youth-led, youth-run organization based in Delhi, India. It was started in the early 2000's after the communal riots in Godhra, Gujarat. A group of students in Delhi University founded the organization as a space to come together, discuss and work on such issues. They found that any such space had been gate-kept young people didn't really have a voice before this. She argued that this has changed over the past decade. Citing various youth-led movements against violence against women such as the protests after the gangrape in December 2012, the more recent #Pinjra tod which is a student-led movement against restrictions on women's mobility in the name of safety in educational institutions, Pads Against Sexism which is a form of protest in several colleges and universities to break the silence on menstruation. Using mockery as a 'vignette of protest', youth-led movements have also taken on moral policing. She acknowledged that these protests are only happening in universities and cities, but has surely begun a conversation on control over mobility and sexuality.

*Ms. Sumitra, Ankuram, Telangana*

Ms. Sumitra presented Ankuram's challenges of engaging with adolescents. She said women and girls face violence even in the most progressive households. While the organization has been talking about these issues for so long, they have not made any major breakthrough. She said that 'gender mainstreaming' has become a vague term, but we have to think about how best to address gender equality into our work with adolescents. How best can we bring men and boys into the discussion on gender equality? In addressing gender equality, we need to understand why boys are becoming so violent and misogynist, and act on it. She also spoke about the heterogeneity of adolescents in terms of class, and the need to address the gap between the rich and the poor. She also said that we have to think critically on working with systems of governance and introduce gender sensitivity into policy.

*Mr. Subrat Mahapatra, Rishta, Tata Steel, Jharkhand*

Mr. Subrat presented the work of Rishta, the CSR outfit of Tata Steel in Jharkhand. The very nature of Tata Steel's work in minerals and mining permanently changes the fabric of the region, not only ecologically but socially and culturally too. Rishta, sponsored by Tata Trust recognizes the impetus to work with the community. Rishta's work with adolescents in the community may be characterized into three phases. The first phase, between 2004 - '08 focused on reproductive health of adolescents. At the end of this phase, the organization found that its focus was too narrow, and that their engagement was repetitive. The second phase of their engagement with adolescents (between 2009 - 12) worked on building confidence of girls and boys. Tribal children in Jharkhand were trained to go on mountaineering expeditions in the Himalayas, camel riding in the deserts of Rajasthan, hiking trips etc. These trips and visits were preceded by months of training and mobilization in the community. Towards the end of this phase, the organization recognized that there is a need to bring about a more permanent and sustainable change in their lives.

Mr. Subrat also articulated the issues of Rishta as an organization. They are part of a corporate body and a profit-making company which does not see Rishta's work as an integral part. Since Tata Steel's engagement in the same set of villages spans a century, the community sees the company as an alternative government and looks to them for jobs, health and education. Rishta's engagement has been within this framework, wherein they saw it as Tata Steel's responsibility to give the community a better life. Now, Rishta is looking to radically redefine this project as they feel they are losing relevance.

*Ms. Neelu Choudhary, Doosra Dashak, Rajasthan*

Ms. Neelu spoke of adolescence presented the work of Doosra Dashak, Rajasthan with adolescent girls between the ages and boys 11 - 20. Seeing adolescence as a chaotic but energetic category with heterogeneous needs, Doosra Dashak works on basic learning needs of



adolescents, sexuality education of girls, creating forums for community learning and 'continuous education'. They also collaborate with the YP foundation on comprehensive sexuality education.

Doosra Dashak's initial work with adolescents was through 4 month-long residential camps catering to the majority of adolescents' basic learning needs for those who drop out of school by the 8th standard. However, their work through bridge course camps has been stagnated for many reasons including their being very expensive and they can only cover the very "needy" population. Ms. Neelu also spoke of the need to critically review curriculum, pedagogy and content of these residential camps.

To overcome these issues, Doosra Dashak's strategy then shifted to working with community-based youth and women forums and 'continuous learning centers' where they attempted to move beyond the educational programme of the government and look towards 'comprehensive learning'. These centers have libraries, forums for community learning, life-skill sessions, platform for youth groups and need-based training.

Through all their work, DD works towards critical awareness of participants in gender equality. They believe that any programme rooted in the community with a focus on gender has shown results. Their work has also been successful where larger numbers of villages have been targeted than smaller. Adolescence is a group with heterogeneous needs. They work with both boys and girls, and find that isolation them does not work.

### **Day 1, SESSION 3: Presentations**

#### *Ms. Sanjana, CREA*

Ms. Sanjana presented 'It's My Body', a project on adolescent health and sexuality through sports. Sports was used as a medium to mobilize and collectivize girls. As girls grow up, they experience control over their sexuality and mobility. Their access to spaces such as parks and playgrounds is contested, and very few girls are given formal sports training.

Initially, this project mobilized girls into sports collectives which negotiated the use of space with others in the community. Then, using these spaces and the strength that collectivization provides, girls have been able to negotiate age at marriage, education and body image. Girls started by fighting small battles at home - how to do their hair, what kind of clothes to wear; and eventually started to assert their rights to education and age at marriage.

CREA also used these forums to build a dialogue between health service providers and adolescent girls. They found that the health service providers were initially lost e providers were initially reluctant to interact with adolescent girls as they were unmarried. Their view of reproductive health was restricted to sex within marriage. With consistent engagement, girls started to ask about menstruation, sanitary napkins, urinary tract infections, iron deficiencies, expanding their own horizons as well as that of the health service providers'.



For CREA, training girls in sports in itself was also an outcome of the project. Collectivization through sports was a strong political strategy to take up issues of gender, body, sexuality and violence and challenge them in the community. Their challenges were to not fall into the conversation with adolescent girls from a protectionist view, to not keep marriage at the center of the conversation, to measure autonomy of girls not only by whether they delayed marriage but also by how they are interacting with the community.

*Ms. Mamta Raghuveer, Taruni, Telangana*

Ms. Mamta Raghuveer presented Taruni's work on adolescents' sexual and health rights in Warangal district, Telangana. Their strategy was to work with Balika Sanghas (girl child clubs) through training and consistent engagement. The organization started working in government schools with girls on sexual and reproductive health rights.

Their entry point into working with adolescents was on the idea of 'beauty'. Moving away from ideas of beauty as fairness or thin-ness, they promoted the idea that if girls want to be beautiful, they have to be healthy. After working with around 1000 girls, they started working on child marriage too. Quoting a recent study by Center for Economic and Social Studies (CESS Hyderabad), Ms. Raghuveer said that 28% of women in the state are married before the age of 18. In her own experience, however, she feels that 45% is probably a more accurate figure. Through their engagement in schools, Taruni started to receive information and phone calls about girls who were about to drop out of school because of child marriage. The organization was working with the police commissioner and local police to stop these marriage. Soon enough, they realized the need for a more systematic approach to stopping child marriage.

They then started to work on child marriage through Balika Sanghas (girl child clubs). Balika Sanghas meet regularly (daily or weekly) at Anganwadi centers to talk about their issues and find solutions to their problems. Through Balika Sanghas, girls also started to receive training and information about jobs, life skills, sexual and reproductive health etc. Taruni also started to work on child marriage and child labour through these groups. The members of the group informed the volunteers about the marriages at the very initial stages, before the wedding was fixed and dowry exchanged.

They also worked on child labour through these groups. Girls started to assert their right to education in their families. Taruni worked with girls who were being exploited in ginning mills for 12 hours a day. The organization filed a case in the State Human Rights Commission (SHRC) to bring back the girls to their home and send them to school. This case was also referred to the National Human Rights Commission in order to lobby for a change in the law. Taruni worked simultaneously with the community and the state for the rights of the adolescent girl.

The organization also conducted sports competitions with girls to build confidence. They gave livelihood and household entrepreneurship training in candle making and tailoring. Now the content of such training focuses on spoken English and computer usage.

They also started an SMS helpline ‘Tarunopayam’ to reach out to girls beyond Warangal district. Girls texted their query to the helpline, and the volunteers would respond by phone call. To maintain confidentiality, the number and name would not be shared with the volunteers and experts unless explicitly asked for. Many girls were rescued from suicide, given legal counseling and legal aid.

The organization runs a newsletter with inspiring stories, the law, job and training opportunities and beauty tips. The organization conducts bike-a-thons with girls to encourage them and build self-confidence. They also were trained in the UNICEF Child Media Producers project. 6 films were made, out of which 5 were screened at international film festivals.

The challenges including bringing girls together at the Anganwadi centers, convincing them to leave behind their household chores to participate in the group meetings. Now, most of these girls are in different fields including engineering and medicine. Wherever there are Balika Sanghas, there are no child marriages or dropping out from schools.

### *Ms. Indira Pancholi, HAQ, Rajasthan*

Ms. Indira Pancholi spoke about her engagement with adolescent girls in Rajasthan over the past ten years. She has seen a sea change in adolescent girls in the villages she has been working in over the decade – from not being allowed out of the home to now going to colleges and getting jobs. In the past two years, her engagement has been with villages that have faced development-induced displacement too.

She spoke about the challenges of engaging with young girls as feminists. The women’s movement largely worked with adult women and their issues, invisibilizing the issues of girls. At the village, girls have no visibility. Their mobility is restricted. The number of girls in upper-primary and secondary schools is very low. The outreach to adolescent girls is very limited, since even meeting them and building a rapport with them in public spaces is very difficult. At the same time, even the few girls who are entering the public sphere and going to schools and colleges require support. They receive very little support from fathers and brothers. They are restricted using protectionist arguments of safety and security.

Ms. Pancholi argued that the only way to support adolescent girls in their struggle against patriarchy is by strengthening women’s groups. At the same time, she said that if girls are assertive, there is a backlash. The same methods that work to support women challenging patriarchy tend not to work for adolescent girls. She hoped that the conference will be able to throw up methods and strategies to support adolescent girls.

She raised the question of whether education can be transformative. How is education linked to girls' rights and security? How can we strengthen the public school infrastructure in the context of privatization of education? We have to critically look at curriculum and pedagogy for first generation learners. Are children dropping out of school because of poverty, or because of lack of support for their learning? She also spoke about sustainable engagement with adolescent girls. If we work within the category of adolescence, what happens to the girls when they become older?

Ms.Pancholi raised the question of livelihoods and employment for girls. She said that the education system is not geared towards skill development for adolescent girls. Only having education or saying no to child marriage does not imply success for girl children. We also have to support their struggle against control over sexuality and mobility. How are girls able to express their interests, likes, dreams and aspirations; are they able to negotiate relationships and life choices; and what kind of support do they need in doing so?

### *Ms. Kameshwari Jandhyala, Concluding Remarks*

Ms.Kameshwari spoke about the common threads underpinning the three very interesting presentations. Ms.Pancholi gave us a political and ideological framework with which we can approach the issue. Ms.Sanjana and Ms.Mamta highlighted different entrypoints and strategies with which we can approach the issues, sports and beauty. Ms.Kameshwari expressed reservations about using beauty as an entry point, and flagged it for discussion. All of these presentations were underpinned by the importance of collectivization as a support system for the girls. The point Ms. Indira made about bringing together the feminist perspective and the child rights perspective is worth pursuing.

## **Discussion**

Questions Raised:

1. What is Doosra Dashak's experience of working on the issue of gender equality from the perspective of education? Specifically, what were the issues; what was the role of the youth in the community to address and resolve these issues; what the backlash was within the community; and what kind of support was required to address the backlash?
2. What are the dynamics in bringing boys and girls together? Specifically, what were the difficulties faced by the panelists in their work to bring boys and girls together in a single space?
3. How do various organizations deal with community response to working on gender? Often, families of girls are ready to send the girls to schools or colleges, but their neighbours or communities shame and stop them from doing so. How can this be understood and acted upon?
4. How is sustainability of engagement with adolescent girls ensured?
5. What are the challenges of including girls in sports activities, especially considering the resistance in the community to these activities? At what point and how can one start to discuss other issues such as sexual and reproductive rights through sports?

### *Working on Gender Equality*

- The panelists discussed the importance of building a rapport with the community while working on gender. It is difficult to work on gender equality at the very outset without doing so. Such a rapport building exercise includes a door-to-door survey of the community and social mapping.

### *Working with Boys and Men*

- The socio-economic context of the community determines the strategy of the organization on working with both boys and girls. Muslim or tribal dominated areas are more difficult to mobilize in this regard than other communities.
- The strategy on gender inclusion has to be well thought out from the start. For most rural communities, sending adolescent girls to school is a sensitive topic. Families may not be willing to send girls to school immediately within the first few weeks of working in the area. This can be done by working with women's groups and conducting meetings with the community to build their trust and address their other concerns.
- There was a debate on the issue of working with boys and men. Feminist activists have always been confronted with the dilemma of working with men. On the one hand, women have unequal access to opportunities and services for their growth, development and wellbeing. Also, given the inequitable distribution of resources between men and women, some felt that the limited resources and funds available for feminist NGOs should be made available to girls and women. At the same time, it was acknowledged that working with girls in isolation would not go very far in challenging social relations and building an environment in which gender equality may be achieved.

### *Addressing Community Response*

- The community has to be understood in a dual manner. On the one hand, it provides support and security to those who adhere to values that reinforce gender, caste and class. On the other, it is something that disciplines through violence and abuse when members step out of the boundaries laid by the same structures. Any interventions, therefore, that challenge gender and patriarchy to bring adolescent girls to school will be opposed by others in the community. The only way forward is to build a supportive environment for the girls and their families using which they can move forward.

### *Sustainability of Engagement with Adolescents:*

- Most organizations engaging with adolescent children work with different age-groups. These age groups include 11 – 19, 15 – 18 and 15 – 25 (youth). Given that the age group is limited for most organizations, they struggle with the question of sustaining their engagement with the children as they grow out of these age groups.

- The NGO Taruni has started resource centers in spaces provided by the community at the village level supported where possible by the Panchayat. They are meant for all in the community. Girls from Balika Sanghas run these centers often as spaces to meet, or as libraries. Programmes such as computer training are also run from these centers. The Sarpanch or local leaders support the programme locally. These centers have been running for five years now.
- On the other hand, the question of ‘sustainability’ in civil society engagement with the rural poor is problematic.

### *Sports for Girls*

- **CREA’s** initiative, as mentioned earlier, focuses on sexuality and reproductive health rights through sports for girls. The initiative began with small games like Kabaddi and cycle racing but eventually moved into professional football training for girls. Girls in the community said they were interested in playing football, but had no training or access to a ground to play football. The initial challenge for CREA was to identify women coaches from the area, but that was very difficult. Presently they identify sports coaching organizations and organize three-day coaching camps. Doing so through a professional organization gave girls playing sports a kind of seriousness. Girls faced a lot of resistance from the community – boys would puncture cycle tires, throw stones at the girls or taunt them while playing. Girls would also feel shy about running since they were not used to being so free with their bodies. In order to build trust and support, CREA did a lot of activities in the community including meetings with families which keeps them engaged and informed. While the main focus of the camps was sports itself, but a two hour training sessions were conducted after the sports session to talk about body, sexuality, reproductive health and other issues.

### **SESSION 4: CHAMPIONS**

Ms. Shobhita Rajagopal presented ‘Champions,’ a study conducted by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) in Rajasthan in collaboration with the Harvard Francois-Xavier Bagnoud (FXB) Center for Health and Human Rights. The study looked at the support required by first-generation learners (girls) who are now in college. The study found that parents and adolescent girls aspire for higher education for girl children. Whether elementary school, secondary school or college, girls are asserting their right to education and parents also are willing to send their daughters to school. At the community level, concerns of safety and security restrict the mobility of girls to school. At the systemic level, there are very few secondary schools in Rajasthan, and even fewer girls from marginalized communities in these secondary schools. At these schools, there are also few women teachers and a lack of a support system for girls in education, especially first generation learners.

Ms. Rajagopal began with the voices of three girls who were participants in the study.

- The first girl was a member of an active Meena Manch (or a girls forum). Her family had arranged her marriage when she was in the 8<sup>th</sup> standard. The other

girls in the Meena Manch met her family and convinced them to cancel the marriage and send her to school.

- The second girl is from Ajmer. She had completed Class 5 from a private school, and then went on to Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya, a residential school. Her brother decided to withdraw her from school, brought her back to their village and enrolled her in a local school. In the following months, she raised her voice in an altercation with her brother. Her brother got offended and completely stopped her from going to school, threatening to kill himself if she did. A local NGO and her extended family then negotiated with her family and sent her back to school. She has now completed 10<sup>th</sup> standard.
- The third girl completed 12<sup>th</sup> standard and aspired to go to college. She narrated how she had to negotiate with her family, neighbours and community even to send her to school beyond the 10<sup>th</sup> standard. She fought with her family, refused to do household chores or any work if she wasn't sent to school. Her family finally relented and sent her. Her neighbours and others in the community continued to taunt her and tease her even as she continued to go to school.

#### Methodology:

- The study was conducted through a quantitative survey with more than 413 Champions who are 1<sup>st</sup> generation learners (girls) in 13 government colleges from 5 districts; and 223 Non-Champions (NCs) who are a comparison group of young women from a similar age, geographical location and parental education level but dropped out at Class X. During the survey, all respondents were in 2<sup>nd</sup> year of their under-graduation in government colleges.

The result of the study are in 5 domains: individual, family, school, social support and policy.

- Individual: In terms of personal agency, there is a difference between girls who had come to college and those who had dropped out. The study found that Champions were able to negotiate and make decisions at the household level, which the Non Champions were not able to do. However, both sets of girls didn't have the autonomy to make decisions such as wearing jeans to college. Many Champions felt that they had some control over their future, especially regarding working or getting a job. All the girls in the study watch television, and that this is a source of information. But a large number of girls didn't have the freedom to use other kinds of technology, including mobile phones and the internet. All girls, whether Champions or non-Champions are involved in unpaid work at the household level. Girls who had dropped out of school as well as Champions' attitude to domestic violence was that it is not to be tolerated. All the girls had dreams and aspirations of pursuing a professional path such as teacher, police, banker.

- Family: Most of the girls saw their parents struggle in some way, and wanted to support their parents in some way. Champions' parents were found to be more educated than non-Champion parents. Even so, 71% Champions' mothers and 23% fathers have absolutely no formal education. The role of the father to motivate the girls was also quite high for Champions. Ms. Rajagopal said that the study assumed mothers' support, but fathers were extremely supportive too.
- School: Champions reported schools having basic infrastructure such as a functional girls' toilet. They also had to travel for less time than non-Champions. Teacher violence was reported but not as much by Champions as much as non-Champions.
- Social Support: Champions received a lot of support and inspiration from their teachers. Most Champions reported having a teacher who motivated them to study further. They also had a lot of moral support from friends. Friends also helped them with accessing documents, supporting them in their negotiation with family and community.
- All the girls faced some kind of sexual harassment on their way to college including derogatory remarks, molestation, stalking, acid attacks and sexual abuse. They said that while getting educated gives them a sense of freedom, but if they raise such sexual harassment with their family they would not be allowed to attend educational institutions anymore. There are no forums or youth groups for discussion on any issues. Girls also lack forums where they can gain information about sexual and reproductive health, menstruation, discuss their bodies and sexuality.
- There is a lot of insecurity within girls' families about building friendships and relationships between girls and boys.
- Policy: Many of the girls were receiving scholarships and textbooks or benefitting from government programmes. However, many respondents spoke about how difficult it is to access these scholarships, filling forms and providing supporting documents. 22% respondents reported that their parents had to take loans to support their college education. Also, most of the girls in college were pursuing Arts subjects. This is because girls schools don't offer science in school. This reduces girls' opportunities professionally. Academic guidance and career counseling is also quite poor in most colleges.

In summary, Ms. Rajagopal spoke about quality of teaching and learning, teacher attitudes, safe environment in schools, forums for discussion, programmes for leadership, gender training for teachers as gaps in schooling institutions.

## **DAY 2, SESSION 1: MV FOUNDATION'S PERSPECTIVE AND EXPERIENCE**

This session was chaired by Ms. Shantha Sinha (Former Chairperson, NCPCR). Ms. Sita Mamidipudi presented the perspective of MV Foundation on adolescent girls' education. Mr. R.Venkat Reddy presented M V Foundation's programme strategy and Mr. Rajendra Prasad presented the project on adolescent girls' education.

### ***Ms. Sita Mamidipudi, 'MVF Perspective on Gender and Access to Higher Education'***

Ms. Sita presented the perspective with which MVF has been working on adolescent girls' education in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. She argued that most programmes for adolescent girls work on reproductive and sexual health or adolescent sexuality. However, adolescent labour in addition to sexuality is key in the transition from childhood to adulthood if adolescent is seen as a social and cultural phenomenon. She looked at the state deficit in secondary school education in the context of control over adolescent girls' labour, sexuality and mobility. She asked how law and policy have accounted for adolescents. Finally, she mapped M V Foundation's program strategy since its inception, with a specific focus on its work on adolescents.

M V Foundation (MVF) has been working on the protection of rights of children between the age group 5 – 14 in partnership with the community for more than two decades. From within the rights framework, MVF believes that fulltime formal education is intrinsically valuable for poor children. This is significant in the context of adolescents too – secondary education, not only elementary education is a non-negotiable right.

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

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

These evolved over the initial phase of MVF's work with children who were in bonded labour. The organization found that its approach strongly antagonized employers, and found no support amongst parents or the community. They also found that one set of bonded labour children simply kept getting replaced with another set – not creating a sustainable or lasting impact. Also, girl children were totally ignored. In addition, other children in the same areas who were either working for their families or in agriculture and allied sectors but not as bonded labourers put pressure MVF volunteers to be withdrawn from work too. This forced MVF to reflect upon such a strategy.



Instead, MVF sought to build support for children's rights by "invoking the liberal and humanistic tendencies of all involved" (Sinha 2005) towards child rights, for which universal acceptance and a minimum common understanding could be evolved. At the end of this phase, MVF widened its scope to *all children*, not only children in bonded labour. This raised several important questions. If children should not be at work, where should they be? The only answer to this is full-time, formal day schools. If all out of school children are child labourers, this automatically also meant that a distinction cannot be drawn between 'hazardous' and 'non-hazardous' work, since all work affects the overall development and growth of a child.

Such an emphasis drew from making universal education a social norm through a rights-based approach. MVF's approach sought to build social consensus for the right to education for all children while being fully cognizant of and resolving caste, class and gender-based conflicts through debate and discussion at local levels.

In the context of adolescents' right to education, MVF has seen that the completion of elementary school education itself is a herculean task for poor children, and this is more so for girls. The primary challenge of access to schools is due to the non-availability of enough schools at the secondary school level. Both girls and boys found their access to affected by supply side factors such as presence of schools and its geographical location, regularity of teachers and availability of physical infrastructure.

In terms of policy, in the first place, there are very few specific laws governing or protecting children between the ages 14 – 18. She discussed the Child Labour Prohibition and Regulation Act 1986 (CLPRA), the Minimum Wages Act 1948, the Child Marriage Prohibition Act 2006 and the Juvenile Justice Act 2016. Secondly, very little policy is drafted or implemented for adolescents. Even the few policies that address adolescents are limited in their scope and understanding. Ms. Sita discussed the limitations of the Kasturba Gandhi BalikaVidyalaya scheme (KGBV), Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA), Ujjwala, Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls (SABLA) and interventions that link financial incentives with raising the age of marriage (such as Apni Beti Apni Dhan of the Haryana government or Balika Samridhdhi Yojana of the GoI). Thirdly state investment in education and infrastructure for secondary school education is negligible.

### ***Mr. Venkat Reddy, National Convenor, MV Foundation***

Mr. Venkat Reddy presented an overview MVF's programme strategy. Leveraging upon MVF's strong social mobilization strategies from their work on child labour and education, the organization started their work with adolescent girls (age group 14 – 18) 2012. The project was based in five districts of Rangareddy, Nalgonda, Warangal, Mahboobnagar and Kurnool. The project focused on the adolescent girl child in 133 Gram Panchayats across five districts of Ranga Reddy, Nalgonda, Warangal and Mahboobnagar in the state of Telangana and Kurnool district in Andhra Pradesh as they faced additional challenges of gender

discrimination. 3,564 child marriages were identified from 2012-16, 566 were stopped, and there is a gradual reduction in the instances of child marriage. In the last month alone 96 child marriages were stopped through MVF's Childline.

In the year 2014-15, 3,620 children, including 1,753 girls, were followed up to take the class 10 Board examination. Children who failed in a subject or two were encouraged to repeat exams to complete Class 10. It mainstreamed 2,354 children, including 589 girls, through the Open School system.

Mr.Venkat Reddy began his presentation with the voices of adolescent girls who were enabled to study and go to secondary school through the adolescent girls' education programme.. The girls spoke of their struggles with schools, their family and community, their dreams, aspirations, where they are at present, and how they were able to gather support from their family to to continue their education.

MVF found that the entire school system was full of bureaucratic and administrative challenges that excluded adolescent children from schools. Taking examples of the long procedures involved in examination fee payment, transfer and migration certificate procurement, especially for children who were trying to re-enter the system.

In the first phase of social mobilization, MVF worked towards transforming numbers to faces. Their volunteers conducted a door-to-door survey on the status of adolescent girls in their target villages. Using the data from the survey as a baseline, they then started reaching out to people through street plays, marches and rallies.

They worked towards institutionalizing local support cutting across all age groups and professions. Forums such as Child Rights Protection Forums (CRPFs), Girl Child Protection Forums (GCPFs), were formed with members of the community who were keen on protection of child rights. Whoever was taking a public stand against child labour and child marriage were included in these groups.

They asked all stakeholders including women's groups, school management committees, gram panchayats and local political leaders to take a public stance against child marriage and for education. They also explained the data from the door-to-door survey and macro data on school-dropouts to Gram Panchayats. Through Gram Panchayats, they worked proactively for adolescent girls' rights. Training and Orientation Programs were conducted to Youth associations, CBOs, Women Groups, Kishori Balika Sanghas, Religious Persons, Representatives of Political Parties, and Panchayat members on child rights and the legal frame work on child marriage.

MVF mobilized support from Gram Panchayats (GP) to support children going to school. On a large scale, GPs are tracking school attendance, regularity of teachers, school dropouts and quality of education. They are also providing facilities such as autos for transport to schools.

They worked actively with organizing girls into collectives called Balika Sanghas (girls' youth clubs) to mobilize support for adolescent girls who aspire to study and assert their right against marriage. Through these Sanghas, girls were taken on exposure visits to police stations where they interacted with the Superintendent of Police (SP). The results of these visits were twofold: Girls became familiar with the police and comfortable enough to approach them with their issues; and the police recognized the girls and became sensitive to their needs. Girls' youth clubs also insisted on hoisting the national flag in their village on Independence Day and Ambedkar Jayanti.

*Mr. Rajendra Prasad, Chief Coordinator, MV Foundation*

Mr. Rajendra Prasad presented MV Foundation's work with adolescent girls on education.

MVF began to intensify its focus on older girls and their education since 2012 in the districts of Ranga Reddy, Nalgonda, Warangal and Mahboobnagar in the state of Telangana, and Kurnool district in Andhra Pradesh. MVF's intervention touched 1,26,020 children, including 60,664 girls, in 133 Gram Panchayats across five districts. Between 2014-15, it followed up with 3,620 children, including 1,753 girls, to take the class 10 Board examination and mainstreamed 2,354 children, including 589 girls, through the Open School system and repeat exams to complete Class 10 from 2011-15. While 3,564 child marriages were identified from 2012-16, 566 were stopped, and there is a gradual reduction in the instances of child marriage. Married girls, too, have re-joined schools. The number of children in the workforce has come down by 63%. In some areas where large numbers of girls were involved in cotton seed farming, girl child labour has become scarce, and adult workers have gradually replaced them. Consequently, there has been a sharp decline in the number of out-of-school children.

Mr. Rajendra Prasad spoke about the importance of mainstream education in stopping child marriage and tackling violence against women. He said that girls in schools have a way to bargain with the family and community and assert their right to continuing their education over getting married.

MVF volunteers contacted school drop outs as well as girl students in upper, primary and high schools, and spoke to them about the need to complete their education. Volunteers monitored their attendance, arranged for additional academic support and followed their progress. They arranged for contact classes to be conducted on weekends in the nearest high schools for the Open School stream. In some villages, NRSTC instructors and youth were also involved in this program when the contact classes were held at far-off places.

Initially, girls were organized at the village level into youth groups at the Anganwadi centers. Their engagement was on sexual harassment, division of labour and unpaid work, child marriage and reproductive health. However, they soon found that most girls aspired to go to school. They also found that if MVF's interaction is limited to girls, they weren't able to address these issues. The organization changed its strategy to also work with boys. Even this

intervention was initially gender segregated, but then MVF found that mixed youth groups are more effective in addressing violence against girls and changing discriminatory practices against girls.

Girls who are attending colleges face many hurdles. They are forced to work to support themselves – for their fees, transport, text books and clothes. Girls sometimes attend classes three days a week and work as agricultural labourers to support themselves three days a week.

Ms. Shantha Sinha added to Mr. Rajendra Prasad's presentation. She spoke about the tedious work that MV Foundation does in identifying drop-out children, contacting each one of them (girls and boys), giving them the confidence that they can take the exams. Long drop-outs are prepared for 10<sup>th</sup> standard examination through open schools. But this is not easy – tuition centers, coaching classes, building support from headmasters and gram panchayats to provide the space for coaching and transport for girls to reach the classes. They were given support to take classes two days a week, and time off to prepare for those two hours of class. She said that open schooling is not the ideal way to bring these girls to school, but it is the only way available to us at the moment. She said that thought needs to go into other strategies to bring such girls and boys into mainstream education.

She also spoke about the struggle in getting hall tickets for writing the examination. Innumerable certificates and documentation is required, information about where to go, how to apply is required. If children have to appear as private candidates for the 10<sup>th</sup> standard examination, they have to pay a fee. MVF negotiated with the state government and Commissioner of School Education for waiving these fees. All of these things faze children who are interested in writing the exam. At the end of this process, some students fail – and these students need to be motivated to write it again. Some students who pass have to be supported to join junior colleges. Children are told that their role is only to write the exam – MVF acted as extension and support system to handle everything else. All of these factors highlighted by Ms. Sinha though tedious, detailed and banal are ways in which children are pushed out of the mainstream education. Each such detail is a battle for children.

Ms. Sinha concluded by saying that there has to be a policy to cover adolescent girls' education. This policy has to address not only the question of infrastructure and increasing the number of secondary schools, it has to create an extension and support system for adolescent children who are intending to write examinations and study further. It also has to address questions of control over labour, mobility and sexuality; and work with boys on masculinity. She said that bringing up these questions opens up a Pandora's box and asked the participants for their suggestions and strategies of dealing with such issues.

## **DISCUSSION: SESSION 5**

### ***Engaging with Gram Panchayats:***

#### **Questions**

1. What is the scale and extent of MVF's engagement with Gram Panchayats' on children's education?
  2. What are the dynamics of MV Foundation's work with the Panchayat system as partners, given that it might be inefficient, corrupt or demotivated to work with children?
- MVF's engagement with Gram Panchayats has been build over two decades. Many of the members of the Gram Panchayats in the project villages were activists in the campaign against child labour since the mid-90's. This is the first group of Panchayat members who have been working intensively on child rights. The second group of Panchayats that have been working on child rights have been doing so in response to pressure from local groups and volunteers.
  - As to the scale, MVF engages with nearly 100 GPs in Rangareddy, and similar numbers in Warangal and Mahboobnagar.
  - MVF has developed tools to evaluate the quality of education in schools. There are some examples of Sarpanchs taking initiative on their own to use the MVF tools to evaluate quality education in schools. However, this process has not been institutionalized yet. It is the role of the MVF activist to regularly interface with the GP and ensure they take up children's rights issues.
  - MVF, as a strategy, never worked on corruption as an issue. They strategically practiced "optimism and faith in the system" wherein they believed that working and interacting with the Panchayat in order to get them to respond to children. They had a single-point agenda of bringing children to school, and all their other engagement fell under this agenda. In every mandal (block), MVF activists participated in planning for schools and applied for "Special Status" in some mandals.
  - MVF believes it has to work with all functionaries of the state towards child rights. The program has to strengthen and work with the system as a non-negotiable. This is an obsessive and infectious political strategy, wherein the organization works with multiple stakeholders including police, Gram Panchayats and Anganwadis. MVF places such a trust in the system even in regions of conflict such as Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand where there is an actual state deficit. Secondly, they also don't stereotype anyone and work with the best that is available. Ms. Shantha Sinha called it 'politics of trust' and finds that such trust enables the system to respond.

### *MVF's "Tracking" Strategy:*

#### ***Questions:***

1. What is the content and method of "tracking" at the village level?
  2. Who does the tracking?
- MVF tracks three kinds of children – those who go to private schools, those who go to government schools and those who have dropped out of school.
  - MVF's tracking strategy works at two levels: once in a quarter for private schools and once in a month for government schools. In government schools, they follow up on children who are absent for several days in a row without a reason. With the help of

the Child Rights Protection Forum, they visit the children's homes to motivate the parents to go to school. Often, they find that children are absent to take care of their siblings or relatives at home or to assist in agricultural labour.

- During tracking, they come across several kinds of issues which they work on separately. At one instance, they found three or four children in the same village who were dropping out of school because they had single mothers. MVF then immediately did a survey of the number of single women in all their villages (including widowed, separated or divorced women). They found 4000 women living in a single block. For these women, they resolved issues such as land and property disputes with the help of Gram Panchayats, health-related issues with the help of ANMs, ASHA workers and primary health care centers.
- MVF also tracks children's transition between academic years, between primary and secondary school, between secondary school and junior college, between intermediate college and undergraduate college. At all these levels, the risk of children dropping out of mainstream education is high for many reasons. At the completion of one level of schooling or an academic year, parents have to be motivated to send their children to the next. Often, parents lack the resources or information to negotiate with school headmasters for certificates and documents to make the transition.

## **DAY 2, SESSION 2: WAY FORWARD**

### *Opening Remarks, Rekha Wazir*

In **Ms. Rekha Wazir's** opening remarks, she spoke about the intention of the conference and the questions it has thrown up for the organization. MV Foundation is a very strong organization with its strengths. It has grown over the past two decades, and now has reached a crucial stage where it is graduating from primary school to secondary school. Summarizing some of the key issues that came up at the conference, she said,

- There is a need for a clear gender perspective within which strategies have to be developed. MVF has always had a very clear ideological perspective on child rights. A similar approach has to be taken to gender.
- It is very important to locate girls in the community and focus on adolescent girls, but also include boys. Whether MVF has to work on adolescent girls' education and include boys in the programme; or it works on universal secondary education for all is a dilemma the organization has to think through.
- Youth is a dynamic, chaotic and energetic group. This energy has to be harnessed. The constituency whose issue it is has to lead the movement. MVF's work has always been led by the youth, especially in the campaign against child labour. Similarly, such energy has to be tapped for adolescent girls' education. New strategies for engaging the youth have to be developed.
- The needs of adolescents are ever changing. Any strategy addressing their needs has to keep up with these changing dreams and aspirations. Ms. Wazir spoke about her own research into the influence of media on adolescents' body and sexuality, and she spoke about how such issues have to be addressed as well.

- Another issue that came up during the conference was the need for safe spaces. Girls need to have safe spaces to discuss their questions such as sexual harassment and deal with them. The organization also needs staff that is adequately trained to respond.
- There is a need to energise curriculum and pedagogy. It is also important make science education available for girls.
- How do we work on gender quality and justice when working on education?
- The participants in the conference are all working creatively in their own areas on a variety of issues. It is important to build these together into a network and campaign on adolescent girls' issues.

### *Ms. Abha Bhaiya: 'Bringing the Margin to the Center'*

**Ms. Abha Bhaiya** compared MVF to a building, and said that the foundation of M V Foundation is very strong. MVF is trying to build a new floor with new bricks and mortar. She suggested that the organization not only look at gender, but a whole range of oppression and domination including physical disability, caste, tribe and sexual identity. It is a question of bringing the margin to the center. Inclusive education, she said, has to be the aim, not just gender.

She also said that we have to think about non-formal education as a complement to formal education. She gave the example of Jagori's scholarship programme – Girls were given scholarships and supported to go back to school either formally or through Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU); but such support was conditional on the recipients of the scholarship also training to be feminist activists. Over fifteen years, these girls have been actively involved in their villages on violence against women. Ms. Abha emphasized the significance of building people's institutions and strengthening their work in the community. Justice, she said, has to be at the center stage of their movements.

### *MVF's Perspective of Universality*

- Ms.Dhanamma (MVF volunteer) spoke about MVF strategy of universality. She emphasized the organization's belief that all children must go to school and no child must be left behind. In saying 'all children', the organization works with a whole range of children including physically disabled, lower caste and tribal children. If a girl is not going to school, it is not only the girl or her family's issue – it is the entire community issue. If we separate castes or political parties in our engagement, it is impossible to mobilize the entire community towards education. In our motivation, we refuse to look at children as belonging to a single caste or community. We look at the act of dropping out of school as more crucial than the caste. She also said that whether a child is dropping out of school or being sent back to school, it has to be the community's responsibility. If a child is disabled, we strategise to ensure that neighbours, Gram Panchayat, political leaders to support that child to be in a school that is common for all.



- MVF also recognizes adolescents' sexuality and multiple sexual identities but is in a dilemma with regard to dealing with these issues. On the one hand, it informally provides support for homosexual children to continue their education. On the other, the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO 2012) criminalises any sexual interaction between children below the age of 18. Much of the cadre and staff is grappling with how to respond to sexual relationships between adolescents in such a context.

### *Ms. Vasanth Kannabiran: Perspective Building on Citizenship, Justice and Democracy*

**Ms. Vasanth Kannabiran** spoke about the need for perspective building with MVF cadre on principles of citizenship, justice and democracy for MVF cadre. She said that there is a difference between working with children and working with adolescents at the threshold of adulthood. It is not enough to work with all children with a universal approach. The organization's work has to take in the political context of the dangerous times we are living in. "Culture" is bringing in divisions between communities through symbols, slogans, rituals and practices. She cautioned the participants into being aware of the politics of the language, words or practices they engage in. The injustices that divisions such as caste or religion cause are still pervasive. It would not be prudent to wait for these divisions to amount to violence or riots and then start to work on it. Instead, since MVF has a widespread presence, it must use this presence systematically to conduct conferences and perspective building for their own teams to understand the principles of justice, democracy and diversity and act as a 'watchdog of democracy' in the community.

**Ms. Abha** also spoke about adopting a 'justice' framework instead of a 'rights' framework. She said that the justice framework is a collective one as against the rights framework, which focuses on individuals. The justice framework is more suitable to understand prejudices against religion, caste, sexual identities, or other minority identities which are deeply entrenched in society. Referring to the charged political context today, she said that today if Baba Ramdev asserts that homosexuality is against our 'culture', it would lead to large-scale persecution of homosexual individuals. As grassroots organizations, we have to approach these issues both as movements and with service-oriented approaches, and link these to the learnings from the women's movement. She asserted the importance of talking about justice with adolescents as a group.

### *Mr. M R Vikram: Evolving an Ideology for MV Foundation*

**Mr. Vikram's** intervention spelt out MVF's need for direction. MVF's earlier work on child labour and education was informed by a well-developed child rights framework. Informed by their non-negotiables, schools were made the center of the solution to child labour. The momentum of their work built a veritable movement against child labour and for all children to go to school. He said that the adolescent girls' issue has no such locus. There can be no



single-point focus when it comes to adolescent girls. He also highlighted the changing dynamics of donors. Earlier, the agenda was developed on the field and those who were developing the agenda knew the theory behind it. Funding was unfettered. Today, funding determines the work we do. Within this context, we have to find creative solutions to work differently but achieve the same objective.

**In the discussion,** it was said that programs need to involve adolescents and youth in developing the agenda for them. Today, most adult women are in self-help groups which only replicate deeply entrenched systems of caste and class. The power to determine the agenda of the groups has to be navigated within these constructs. Similarly, there is a need to see adolescents within such larger social constructs. Acknowledging that limited funding is indeed a reality, it forces us (the participants) to question what our starting point ought to be in thinking and strategizing for adolescent girls. In this context, we have to think about the kind of solidarity spaces can be designed for adolescent girls and boys.

### *Mainstream Secondary Education for Adolescent Children*

The intrinsic importance of mainstream formal education for adolescents was discussed. In the context of many skill development and vocational education programmes planned for adolescents both by the state and NGOs, the relevance of these for poor and vulnerable adolescents at the margins is questionable. In the Netherlands, for example, all children have to compulsorily be in educational institutions till the age of 18. After completion of middle school, they have an option of choosing their subjects or vocational education, but in either case, they have to be enrolled in full time educational institutions. In India, the Right to Education Act only guarantees rights of children upto the age of 14. Children in the workforce face highly exploitative and tenuous situations on a daily basis. Their formal and full time education in formal schools cannot be replaced by part time or skill development courses, and advocacy and efforts at the grassroots should be aimed at making the state respond to children of this age group through formal education.

### **DAY 2, SESSION 3: NON-NEGOTIABLES**

At the end of the conference, MVF presented the following non-negotiables for working with adolescent children:

- All children must be in a full time school or any full time education stream until completion of 18 years.
- Girls and boys must enjoy equal opportunities to pursue education and build their capabilities.
- The discourse on gender equality must be introduced into the school curriculum from Class 1 onwards.
- Presence in an education institution should be a pre-condition for building awareness on reproductive health care, sex education and life skills for both boys and girls.

- Arguments that control girls' bodily integrity and deny them autonomy such as domestic work, distance to schools, lack of safety for girls, eve teasing, and increase in dowry, sibling care, poverty, and pressure of marriage are unacceptable.
- Youth clubs must be non-gender segregated, secular spaces where all members are equal, without distinctions of gender, caste, religion, disability or any other forms of discrimination.
- No girl shall marry before attainment of 18 years of age. Child Marriage law must be amended to nullify marriage of all girls until 18 years of age.
- Even after attainment of 18 years, the girl's decision and choice for her marriage is to be given full support.

These non-negotiables were discussed and ratified by all participants.

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