

Girl Child and Education

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Chapter 1 Introduction

Girls, even from the poor families must be like 'girls'. They must play, go to school, have friends, be happy and be children. They must look forward to a life with dignity, self-esteem and joy. They must not be subject to the drudgery of work and it must be within the realm of possibility to substitute their work by full-time formal day schooling. They must therefore see the act of going to school as an actuality, which they can take for granted.

However this is not that simple.

Girl children's access to school and their staying there is a story of every day struggle. This battle is against the socio-cultural practices they must endure even as they are unwittingly prepared to become mothers and also workers. It is also against the system of schools, which not only have woefully inadequate infrastructure but also are insensitive to poor children. The cycle of deprivation repeats itself and is passed on through generations. The only redemption from this situation is to act on a firm conviction that these children must go to schools. It is necessary to recognise the formal schools as the *only* institutions that protect the child (apart from the family) and give them their childhood, and keep them away from work.

The experience of MVF on abolition of child labour evidences the fact that in spite of the obstacles that confront them, girls are able to break the cycle of work and join schools in large numbers. This paper is an account of girl children's journey against all odds to become full-time students. It details the predicament of girl children in their endeavour to go to schools and remain there.

THE M. VENKATARANGAIYA FOUNDATION'S NON-NEGOTIABLES

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.

According to the 2001 Census data, there are approximately 253 million children in India aged 5–14 years; out of which, approximately 48% are girls. It is interesting to note that 81% of these children are “enrolled” in schools. However, the dropout rate is at an alarmingly high rate of 53%. Further, it is stated that in rural India only 37.7% of the total rural *girl child* population are students, 4.2 % are child labourers, 2.1% are marginal workers and 56.0% are ‘nowhere’ children [Chaudhri, 1997:495]. These ‘nowhere’ children are actually those who are engaged in domestic work, and a majority of them are girls. They are invisible and thus not in the reckoning of any estimates or calculations of domestic legislation and labour policies or international agendas for elimination of child labour. They are not covered under the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986, as their work is not considered as being ‘hazardous’ in nature.

The estimates of the Ministry of Labour indicate that there are 17 million child labourers, of which 2 million are engaged in hazardous occupations. These estimates leave out more than 80 million children who are out of school and mostly engaged in agriculture work, or supplementing family labour either on a full-time basis or helping in routine domestic work and /or assisting in income-generation activities [Wazir, 2000].

Furthermore, a considerable proportion of girl children are often found in ‘non-paid’ activities, domestic as well as non-domestic, like looking after siblings, cooking, cleaning, washing, fetching water, gathering dung, fodder and firewood, accompanying their mother to the market place, grazing cattle, and so on. Studies also show that rural girl children are found working for piece rate wages in the homes through the putting out system of certain industries which manufacture products like glass bangles, carpets, gem stones, beedi (local cigarettes), zari embroidery [Burra, 1987]. Household work is often mentioned as occupying most of the girl child’s time. Nieuwenhuys [1999] mentions in her study on children’s life worlds (in Kerala) that in accordance with the ILO’s assumption, these girl children work under parental guidance and are therefore protected from exploitation, thus presupposing that exploitation can only take place in a direct employer-child relation. Therefore, they are ignored by international agencies like the ILO as well, as they do not constitute ‘worst form of child labour’ working under ‘intolerable circumstances’.

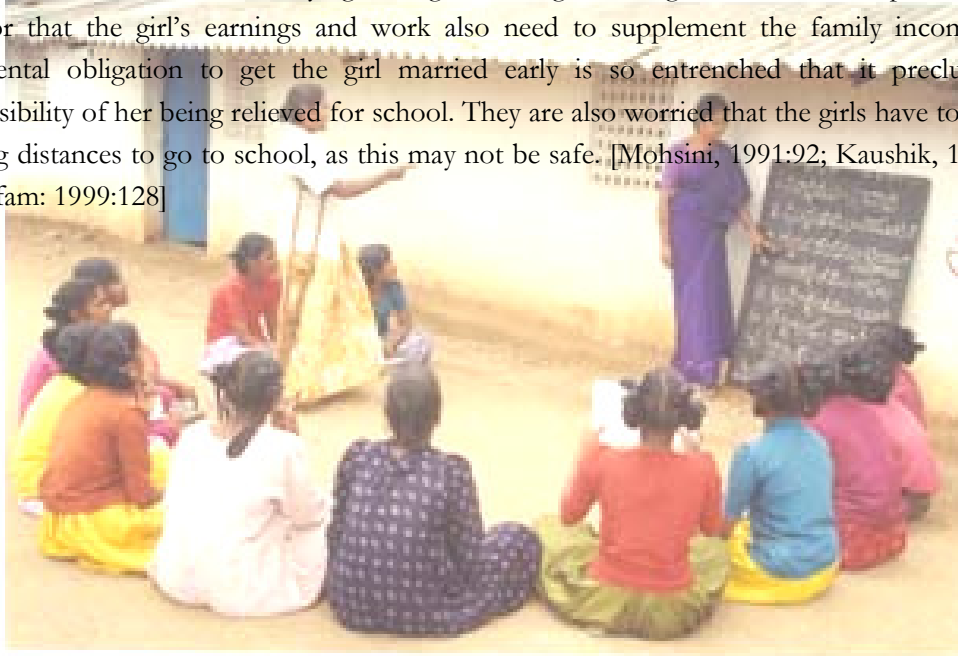
It is a well-documented fact that there is gender discrimination and that girl children are discriminated against. They are underfed, undernourished, often sexually abused, kept illiterate and burdened with work, pushed into early marriage and family life even before they are physically and mentally prepared to undertake such a burden [Parvathy, 1999: 2240]. Many studies reveal that socio-cultural factors underlie the unequal treatment meted out boy and girl children [Miller, 1997:14; Oxfam, 1999:128].

The major factors mentioned in literature, which affect girls’ access to school and their retention in school have been classified as pedagogical, institutional or familial/socio-

cultural/economic factors [Herz and others, 1991:25; Mohsini, 1991:92; Ramachandran, 1998: 90; Karlekar, 2000:81].

The pedagogical and institutional reasons given are that there does not exist adequate infrastructure (schools, teachers, water facilities, toilets etc.). Moreover, even where there are teachers, their level of commitment is low. The curriculum does not provide for any skill improvement and the kind of education that is offered is not gender based or even relevant. The school calendar is so rigid that it does not allow the girl to work during peak harvesting season.

The familial /socio –cultural /economic reasons given are that girls need to perform domestic chores such as carrying siblings, washing, cleaning and so on. The parents are so poor that the girl's earnings and work also need to supplement the family incomes. The parental obligation to get the girl married early is so entrenched that it precludes any possibility of her being relieved for school. They are also worried that the girls have to traverse long distances to go to school, as this may not be safe. [Mohsini, 1991:92; Kaushik, 1993:127; Oxfam: 1999:128]



Strategies for Intervention In Favour Of Girl Children

It is also universally acknowledged that education will extricate the girls out of the vicious cycle of misery. The other social benefits often cited in support of educating girls are that the more number of years spent in pursuing education, the later the marriage, fewer the children. Moreover, where girls are educated, there is greater likelihood that their own children will be sent to school, be better nourished, make use of health facilities, and lesser likelihood that there is child mortality.

Furthermore, an educated girl would be better empowered to resist being oppressed and exploited by her family or social situation, and finally, the more likely to play a role in political and economic decision-making at community, regional and national levels [UNICEF, 1999:52]. Broadly, education is recognised as a strategy to reduce discrimination against the girl child.

Girl Child and Non-Formal Education A Common Approach

Despite this, when schemes for providing education to girls are designed, they are based on the assumption that the children's work is an inevitable 'harsh reality' from which they cannot be withdrawn. As a consequence the following schemes are suggested:

- i. Provision of incentives to parents, which will increase their incomes and thus make it easy for the girl to join schools.
- ii. The more popular programme for girls is the scheme for non-formal education, which has been devised to enable the girls to combine (household) work with schooling. Therefore, schemes such as night schools, adjusting the school calendar for harvesting seasons, etc. are designed.

Especially with respect to older or adolescent out-of-school, working and illiterate girls, government as well as non-governmental organisations more often prefer providing non-formal education, thus implying that their childhood has virtually ended and that it is impossible to mainstream them into the formal education system.

As a consequence, and as per this view, elimination of child labour as well as universalisation of elementary education cannot be actually achieved.

- iii. Imparting training to improve their skills and eventually enhance their incomes.
- iv. Building awareness to help them question and bargain, enabling their empowerment.
- v. Providing health education and reproductive health care training to guide them to overcome at least the scourge of ill health sans the agenda of getting rid of work and getting into schools.

Most of these schemes are not only a barrier to girls' access to *full-time* schooling but also fail to address their problem of being implicated for work either in the role of a mother or wife, since the cultural norms continue to pull her into situations of (full-time) work. Furthermore, some of these strategies reinforce gender bias [Wazir.2000:262].

Even the suggestion of flexibility in school timings is merely aimed at making it more convenient for girls to continue their work rather than to help them out of exploitative work.

Gender And The Girl Child- MVF's Perspective

MVF perceives gender inequities as part of the larger problem of child labour. The fact that a girl is not in school automatically makes her a child labourer, whose right to education is violated. Hence, the problem of discrimination is perceived as a part of the larger child labour problem. Therefore, the fact that she is not in school is unacceptable primarily due to this reason and not because she is a girl.

The formal school is seen as the only means of withdrawing all children from work. Furthermore, in the case of girls, formal school prevents them from getting into child marriage. Schooling is recognised as playing a crucial role in the overall strategy for raising their status. Schools are essential (but not sufficient) in transcending gender inequality.

Education itself has an intrinsic value for all children irrespective of their gender. However, the impact is more significant for girl children because it successfully challenges existing socio-cultural norms. Hence, if a girl goes to school and remains there, her marriage is postponed; likewise, her early motherhood is also deferred, and she is sheltered from being inducted into the labour force. Schooling also provides a break in the habits and culture, which stultifies the growth of the girl child.

This paper attempts to provide some insights into the manner in which the irrefutable argument in favour of full-time formal education for every child has enabled children to join schools. Furthermore, this has allowed the public discourse to advance beyond '*why* children must continue to work' to include '*how* to get them out of work and into schools', in approximately 6000 villages across 13 districts of AP where MVF has intervened. This proves that a change in attitudes and approaches is instrumental in helping girls' desire and access schools. It narrates how in defiance of the conventional wisdom, many of the parents and the girls themselves took the initiative and with determination pursued their hope for education as an achievable goal.

Chapter 2

Campaign and Motivation

Girls belonging to poor families in the villages do enormous work - just as in most other rural areas - at home and at the fields. They carry water fetch by fetch, collect fuel wood, cook, clean, wash, take care of siblings and act like little mothers. They also work relentlessly, in all seasons, as agricultural labourers for others or on their own farms.

2.1 Girls and Their Work

This work, which seemingly looks harmless, carries the risks of these girls inhaling pesticides and chemicals, which are toxic and result in girls' vomiting, complaining of head aches and so on. Several hundreds of girls also work in stone and lime quarries in these areas. They carry head loads of earth and rubble from the pits at least fifty feet down the risky, narrow stairways. They have no spare time for play, or with friends. Any leisure is an indulgence and they are promptly reprimanded for being sluggish. They are nudged to accept their lot as given and constantly told to be responsible, for otherwise, they will not be eligible for marriage. This is predicated by a social milieu that does not abhor the concept of 'working children', especially working girls, and on the contrary is comfortable in encouraging it. There is nothing more hazardous than being out of schools for girls born of poor families in a backward society.

In a survey [Davaluri 1999] conducted regarding the families of girl children engaged as farm labourers in cotton seed farms in this area, it was found that while girls worked 29.4 days in a month on wage work, the women worked 22.2 days and the men 18.6 days. Furthermore, the contribution of the girl to the family income was 28.7%, of the women 28.3% and of the men 42.8% during that month. It has also been found that the girls are being engaged in new forms of exploitative relationship vis-à-vis the employers. Earlier, it was usually the boys who were pledged as bonded labourers against a loan taken. It is now quite common to see even girls employed as bonded labourers to clear off the advance taken by the parents.

2.2 Motivating Parents

It is against this background that MVF has attempted to intervene. It was amply clear that an atmosphere had to be created to make it possible for girls to abandon work and join schools.

The households with non-school going girls were identified through a survey conducted by village volunteers and teachers. The survey and motivation drives resulted in a public meeting in the same village which generated focused discussions on the struggle of girls and violation of their rights and the commitment of the village society to restore their rights,

especially the right to education. The survey also provided the first occasion for a contact with parents in a village. It helped in motivating them to participate in village meetings and public debates on girl children. The girl child activists in collaboration with the government teachers, youth and village officials played an important role in such campaigns. They often had to follow up with the 'hard core' child labour families who took more time to get used to the idea of being without their daughters' work at home.

During the motivation drives, the girl child activists gave the parents confidence that their decision to send their daughters to schools was fair to the child and acceptable to all. They were assured that their children would be given all the attention and care in schools. They were also faced with the mammoth task of responding to a volley of questions from them.

Frequently Asked Questions

For instance, they had to respond to the following apprehensions: Why should girls go to school? Eventually, girls get married and go away to their in-laws' house. Therefore, is it not better that they are taught to cook and trained to do the work at home and in the fields? If they get an education then the dowry demanded will increase. Who is going to bear these expenses? Moreover, educated girls will have scant respect for her elders.

In response to these queries, examples of girls who are in schools from the same village with a similar background, their enhanced status in the family and society were cited. Instances of girls who have been withdrawn from work and sent to schools were shared with them. Parents were also taken on exposure visits to the bridge course camps to actually see for themselves what difference it made to all those girls who were once at work and are now being prepared for schools. Some of the parents were also taken to formal schools where older girls from a similar socio-economic background were studying in large numbers. In these meetings, teachers talked about the importance of girls' education. Parents of working daughters drew inspiration from these accounts and decided to send their daughters to schools.

Parents were also impressed by the stubbornness of the girl youth activists working on the issue, who relentlessly pursued them. These activists are seldom treated with respect and spoken to as equals. On more than one occasion, parents found the commitment and seriousness of the volunteers so compelling that they agreed to send their daughters to school, after withdrawing them from work. In fact it was during these motivation drives that one learnt that most parents had an innate desire to send their daughters to schools. They needed the assurance that they were right in desiring that their daughters be sent to school. The parents were also provoked to think about their own deprivations since they had never been to schools.

Encouraged by the mood that was created, parents gradually opted to withdraw their daughters from work and send them to schools. They made adjustments in work practices of their daily lives. A consummation of such individuals' decisions enabled a change in the social norms. However, breaking social norms and changing daily life patterns is a slow and time-consuming process.

2.3 Girl Rights Protection Forum

Street plays, campaigns and rallies in the villages on the theme of girls and their early marriage, schools and so on have helped in building an atmosphere infused with militancy for the rights of the girl child. The village as a whole had to discuss the predicament of the girl child and the possibilities of liberating them from work.

Even as such a campaign was on, it inspired several girls who took courage, to meet the activists discretely. They sought help for cancellation of an engagement ceremony or marriage. They narrated stories of how their friends were nervous wrecks, unable to cope with the in-laws and the sexual abuse by the spouses. Sufficient pressure was thus built and girls demanded support and even protection especially when they were in a mood to question and be assertive. The issue of educating the girl child thus inevitably led to the agenda of child marriage. Initially, the girl youth activists relied on a few parents and youth to help in rescuing the girls from marriage. A lot of tact and determination was required on the part of the girl child youth activists to mediate with the parents

Street plays, campaigns and rallies in the villages on the theme of girls and their early marriage, schools and so on have helped in building an

The significance of community support structures

It was around 3 pm that the parents of 12 year old Suvarna from Gopularam village in Shankarpally Mandal, her husband and her husband's parents had decided to meet in her own village. The organisers of the MV Foundation followed up this case in order to start a dialogue with the concerned parents (in accordance with Suvarna's wish) to permit Suvarna to attend the educational bridge course camp instead of staying in her husband's house. The village elders, along with the Sarpanch, other influential people from the village and many relatives, village women and neighbours including their small children were present at the gathering. Suvarna hid her face in her skirt and cried.

A discussion started, which immediately turned into a crowd of shouting villagers. The organisers remained silent, as they knew that it was very difficult to go against the village hierarchy and that in their angry mood, dialogue with the villagers was extremely difficult. The village women started beating Suvarna asking her what she thought she was doing by refusing to live with her husband. Her husband was observing the crowd from a distance and was not allowed to speak. Some women wanted to remove the thread from her neck, which is the sign of her marriage. She received a few more blows with knuckles on her head. The girl was terrified and tried to hide behind the organisers whom she knew. Finally, after some tense moments it was decided to hold the meeting another time.

Subsequently, with the support of the Girl Rights Protection Committees (now called the Girl Rights Protection Forum), the organisers were able to come to an agreement with all the parents that Suvarna would stay in the camp to get some rest and finally study there for her 7th class examination.

These support structures in every village facilitated the process of creation of a social milieu, giving due place to the girl child and recognising her needs

concerned. In some cases, where the parents had proved to be extremely uncooperative, police intervention was called for and marriages were prevented by the police, citing child marriage as a violation of the law.

Subsequently, committees were formed to protect the rights of the girl child as it was soon realised that this agenda could not be pursued without institutional support structures from the community. Girl Rights Protection Forums (originally known as Girl Rights Protection Committees) comprising of representatives of women groups, (girl) youth activists, elected representatives of local bodies like Gram Panchayats, members of School Education

MVF Organisers In Pargi Forced By Parents to Withdraw Child Marriages Complaints

Addressing the issue of child marriage has never been problem free. Arrangements were being made to get Suguna of class 4 in Naskal village married. On hearing this, the girl youth activists in this village began the process of cancelling the marriage. Events quickly escalated with the entire village turning against them and the parents being adamant in refusing to cancel the marriage. Suguna was withdrawn from school and the organisers were asked to stay away from their village. Tensions ran so high in the village that the education volunteer's mother asked her to leave the village for a few days, as it had become dangerous for her. Suguna's case featured in the list of petitions submitted to the Mandal Revenue Officer (MRO) of Pargi, who directed the police to intervene in Naskal. The Village Administrative Officers (VAOs) were also asked to announce in all villages that child marriages are illegal. However, fearing the wrath of the villagers, neither the police nor the VAOs intervened. On the other hand, members of the Girl Rights Protection Committees (GRPC) were advised by the police not to intervene. Local MVF functionaries were threatened by the villagers and asked not to interfere.

Losing heart, the GRPC from Naskal sought the intervention of higher authorities - the Superintendent of Police and the District Collector. Following this, all the girls, including Suguna, who featured in the petitions, were brought and kept under police protection until the marriages were cancelled. Enraged villagers then forced the activists to withdraw the complaints in the police station. Some of them proved that their daughters were above 18 years of age. These girls were released but the younger children were detained in the police station until the date of marriage was over and the marriage stood cancelled. Out of the 19 cases involved in this dramatic intervention, 7 were cancelled. The local MLA was forced to take a stand in favour of the girls and that enabled quick action in support of the girls.

Committees and school headmasters, were formed.

In some villages these committees were formal and met regularly, whereas, in most other villages they were formed and operated on an ad hoc basis, when a specific case of protecting a girl against her marriage or abuse by the in-laws had to be taken up. While they were constituted mainly to protect a girl from getting married, in many villages they even took an active role in mobilising parents to send their daughters to schools. They also heard the appeals of girl children wanting to abandon work in favour of joining schools and took up problems faced by them either in school or in the social welfare hostels by bringing them to the notice of the concerned officials. In some areas, Mandal level committees were also constituted where an issue required large-scale pressure involving more than one village; for example, the drive for releasing bonded girl children

from their work in the case of girls employed in cotton fields.

With the setting up of committees, every section in the village was alerted that violating the rights of the girls would not be tolerated. The committees acted as watchdogs, and incidents of girl child abuses became more visible. There was an increased transmission of information about engagements, proposed child marriages, violence on older girl children and their dropping out of school. In addition, parents and village institutions began to frequently discuss the problem. The committees have helped the community internalise the idea that girl children need to go to schools. The issue of child marriage or abuse is no longer a private or a family issue.

Girl Rights Protection Committees in Basheerabad Mandal

In March 1999, a Mandal level meeting was held in Basheerabad Mandal that was attended by 600 women from all villages. This meeting sought to bring about awareness on girl child related issues. The Mandal level elected representatives along with members of the Forum for Liberation of Child Labour (a teachers' forum known popularly as the BKVV) and the girl child activists, were instrumental in bringing these women together on March 31st, International Women's Day. Following this meeting, the existing Mandal Child Rights Protection Committee, comprising of women who are part of the programme on Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA), visited all villages and identified active DWCRA women and mothers to form village level Girl Rights Protection Committees (GRPC). As a result, 14 GRPCs were formed. Each GRPC consisted of five members who are DWCRA women and mothers and as a follow up, a one-day workshop was organised for the active members of the village level GRPCs.

The Mandal committee, along with the girl child activists of Basheerabad and Tandur Mandal and BKVV teachers, have been instrumental in preventing a child marriage and releasing seven girls from labour and sending them to the girls' camp in Aloor. The GRPCs actively participated in the school enrolment drive in June 2000, as a result of which 438 boys and girls were enrolled in government schools. The GRPCs also gave petitions to the officials to provide more seats for girls in hostels in Basheerabad. As a result, the number allotted for girls was increased from 100 to 150. Also, due to the pressure exerted by them, the hostel has been upgraded to accommodate 9th and 10th class girls in school, thus facilitating continuation of education for those girls who have joined schools in 8th class in the previous years after going through the bridge course.

Chapter 3

Reaching Out to Girl Children

As is well known, it is not an easy task to contact girls who are out of schools, as they do not have a place where one can meet them even for a couple of minutes. Therefore, they have to be caught on their way to the fields, or in the farms during lunchtime.

They are also contacted while they are tending to cattle, fetching water or fuel wood. The best time is when they are in groups while on their way back home from work. These girls need a lot of persuasion, as their sense of moral responsibility towards their families is deeply ingrained. Their attachment to their mothers and concern for their well being in the eventuality of their not being around in times of need is cause for tremendous worry. The first step therefore was to bring them together to places, where they could interact with their peer groups and gain confidence. The important strategies adopted for bringing girls together and motivating them to abandon work and join schools are through organising short camps (one to three days), motivation centres and residential bridge camps, which help in their transition from workers to students.

3.1 Short-Term Camps (1 To 3 Days)

Girls gather in large numbers for one to three days' camps away from their own villages. Since the camp is for a brief spell, parents normally concede after some cajoling, to send their daughters. Initially, such camps were conducted solely by MVF. However, subsequently, the SECs or Gram Panchayat or even some local youth organisation have taken the initiative to conduct such camps.

In the camp, the children are introduced to some basics of the local language, simple mathematics, songs, games and dance. The volunteers impress upon them the importance of education and the possibility of abandoning work for education. Most importantly, they inform the children that in the event that the children should express a wish to be withdrawn from work and join schools, they can turn to the volunteers for support. Subsequently, they jointly decide upon the best strategy that may be employed in convincing the girls' parents and other family members against sending them to work. On some occasions, parents are also invited to oversee the programme. The camps often resulted in parents' decision to enrol their children in government schools (when the children are not that old) or to permit them to study for a few hours in the motivation centres set up in their villages or to enrol them in residential bridge course camps.

The time spent in these camps with their peers is a unique experience for these girls wherein for the first time they get special and exclusive attention. They realise their latent desire to go to school and to be among friends; they are able to shout aloud slogans to express that they want to be in schools. The impact of the camp is tremendous in that usually, as soon as the girls reach home, they begin to persuade their parents to allow them to study. The

youth activists also exert pressure on the parents, and try to convince them that their daughters' work is not indispensable to the family. While convincing the parents, the activists effectively make use of the evidence collected by them, of methods in which households manage to function without the girls' work, when the girls are away attending camps. The acceptance to send their daughters to schools has seldom been automatic. The girls have had to protest using the weapons they have. Thus, they have sulked, wept, stopped talking to their parents or have refused to eat till parents permitted them to go to schools. Some girls have even escaped the pressure at home and joined the MVF bridge course residential programmes without their parents' consent. Even such parents have subsequently changed their minds in favour of education upon witnessing the positive effect of the camps on their children. Very often, the parents were touched by the transformation of their daughters from workers to students. They were so convinced about the efficacy of the programme that they brought gifts and new sets of clothes for their daughters.

3.2 Motivation Centres

The two-day camps are often not sufficient to clinch the issue of emancipating girls from work. It takes a longer time for the parents to reorient themselves in favour of a different culture and attitude towards their daughters. Sometimes the parents themselves have the desire to educate their daughters. However, they are hesitant to send them to camps because they are unsure about whether their older daughters (11 years of age and above) have the ability to cope with the formal school system. Therefore, motivation centres are set up to help win over both the parents and the girl children in favour of formal education, at a pace that is comfortable to them.

The motivation centres are primarily for the older illiterate working girl children in the 12 to 14 years age group, who come together to a place where they can be on their own for a couple of hours in the village. Initially, the centres work from 7 to 9 in the morning. Gradually, the girls begin their interaction with each other and negotiate for more free time and longer hours away from home and the work place. Depending upon the demand from the girl children, the timings of the motivation centre are extended, and the centre is run up to 11

Two - day camp motivated 14 girl children to quit work and join school

The Headmaster of the school in Pulmaddi village along with education volunteers, teachers, MVF staff, SEC chairman, youth and mothers, went from door to door to motivate children and their parents to attend the short-term camp. They were able to mobilise 20 girls in the 9 to 14 years age group. The camp was held in the school building and the school provided living facilities and food was supplied by MVF. 10 education volunteers - 6 women and 4 men, conducted the camp. During the camp the children sang songs, danced and played games and were taught some basic Telugu with a letter identification game. On the last day of the camp, around 100 villagers including the parents of the participating children attended the closing ceremony. The parents were enthralled seeing all the girl children together almost like students. As a result, out of the 20 girl children from the village, 8 were sent to the residential bridge course camps where they would be prepared for the 7th class board exam and 6 girl children who were school drop outs rejoined in the 6th grade of the local government school. There the teacher volunteered to design a bridge course for them in order to make them catch up with others in their age group.

am or 12 in the noon. These centres are at times run under the auspices of the local school, thereby gaining greater legitimacy.

In the motivation centres, the girls discover the luxury of being among friends and understand that they are not alone in their secret yearnings of wanting to go to school. They slowly start opening up to their peers, who are illiterate, have similar working life and look forward to going to schools. The girl children in the motivation centres learn to be more assertive and start expressing their feelings about issues that interest them and start verbalising their problems. After having won over their trust, the volunteer at the centre invites them to open up more, and even starts counselling them in case of mental stress. She makes them aware of the gender-biased environment at homes and their rights, especially their right to education as a child. They are also made aware of the fact that the motivation centre has been set up with the objective of *completely* withdrawing the girls from work and enabling them to join formal schools. The girls are also encouraged to start persuading their parents for the same.

The girl children are also told about the adverse effects of child marriage, especially the negative impacts it has on their mental and physical well-being. The girls start sharing information about their own engagements or marriages that have been fixed and begin to use the motivation centre as a forum to seek help for prevention of these events. They inform the volunteer about other girls in the village who desire to quit work or whose marriages have been arranged. The centre also becomes a first contact point for mothers and women's groups for giving information about child marriage proposals, atrocities against girl children in the village or cases of girl children who have dropped out of school. Some of these girls in the centre, who have leadership qualities, become crucial opinion makers. They meet other parents, motivate them and convince their own friends to abandon work.

The centres last for a period of three to six months and are wound up after every child in the centre is withdrawn from work and is sent either to the local school or to the bridge course camps. Thus, a clear message is conveyed to the villagers that the centres are not permanent structures intended to function as substitutes for regular schools; on the contrary, they are temporary centres aimed at motivating children to join schools. This helps in pressuring parents into taking a more positive view about the future of their children. In case there are more girls who were unable to attend the centre and are yet to be withdrawn from work in the same village, another cycle of campaign is conducted. Furthermore, if there is an indication that some older girls wish to abandon work, then another motivation centre is set up. Thus, motivation centres are set up in villages wherever there is an enthusiasm from the youth or the GRPF for withdrawing girls from work.

3.3 Bridge Course Residential Camps

The bridge course residential camps primarily aim to build confidence in older children and facilitate a comparatively smooth transition from their status as labourers to that of full-time students. It is meant to demonstrate to children, their parents and the community at large that education and the formal school is within their reach. It also saves these children from the embarrassment of having to sit in classes with younger children.

The bridge course capitalises on the intense desire and motivation of the older children to get out of the drudgery of work and join formal schools. It builds on their existing knowledge and ability to grasp concepts, while introducing systems of rapid learning. The children are taught the basics of reading and writing in a manner and at a pace which ensures that within 3 to 4 months, the 9 to 11 year old girls are able to join their age group children in grades 4 to 5 of the government school. For the older girl children in the 12 to 14 years age group, a special residential programme of 12 to 16 months' coaching is conducted. This prepares them for the 7th grade middle school board examination following which they are enrolled in the 8th standard of the government high school and the social welfare hostel.

The camp provides them with space and leisure to unlearn previous roles and become children capable of joining formal schools. For many older girl children who reach the camp with severe psychological problems and fears, the camp functions as an 'escape route' where they can retreat temporarily and meet other girl children with similar experiences. Through interaction with their teachers and peers, they slowly overcome their pain and strengthen their desire to become students. In this congenial atmosphere, the girls' behaviour changes from that of prematurely responsible adults into one closer to normal childhood. To some extent, it is a restoration of their childhood. The camp makes no demand on them to work. Gradually, they acquire the discipline required to sustain them in a more formal atmosphere of the competitive school environment. If one visits the camp, one can see small groups of girls with books, studying and memorising the lessons, which are required to be learnt by heart. These classes are intercepted by intervals for eating, playing or singing.

The girls organise themselves into special committees and delegate responsibilities to each of these committees. The responsibilities include monitoring, serving food, cleaning the compound, fetching water to wash clothes and so on. These responsibilities give them a sense of ownership of the camp and impress upon them the importance of teamwork and hygiene. The different groups hold a review meeting with their respective teachers, where they learn to speak about their experiences for that day. Problems that are voiced are also solved at this group level. The girls are also given the freedom to criticise their teachers. As the children are divided into smaller groups as per levels of learning, questions related to subjects are discussed in these smaller groups with the respective subject teacher. Furthermore, the girls are made

aware of social issues like child labour and early child marriage and rights of children, especially the right to education. They are encouraged to become assertive in order to demand education as a right.

The girl youth camp teachers are highly committed and in addition to academic inputs, dedicate their time for counselling, affection and care of these girls. They perform the roles of teachers, tutors as well as mothers. They are instrumental in helping the girls become confident and strong. Furthermore, they support the girls in their effort to overcome their traumas of sexual and physical abuse, intimidation, and pain of having been neglected or overburdened with work. Moreover, their cleanliness and health is looked after; every month a team of doctors visits the camp for treatment of the girl children. In case of serious ailments, the girls are sent to the hospital in the city.

Through the bridge course and the formal text books, the gap between these girls and students in formal schools is bridged to a large extent. With pride, they write letters to their parents and ask them to visit the camp. They are inquisitive about the formal school. Their self-esteem improves and due to their enhanced learning capacity they feel confident about writing the 7th class exam, passing and studying further. Even if they do not pass in their very first attempt, they gain the confidence to persevere and try again.

The demonstrative effect of this transformation of the girl children, who stay together in a separate space that almost resembles a school, indeed a proto-school, has made the camp a crucial antidote against the way girls are generally viewed in the society. Upon being given exposure to the bridge course camp and the learning capacities of girl children, parents of non-school-going girl children change their views completely and become parents of students.

Many parents come to the camp with fruits etc in order to encourage their daughters to study well and have even vowed against making their daughters work again or getting them married before the legal age. When the girls go home for holidays, majority of the parents see to it that they have the time to enjoy, eat good food and not go to work. Many parents are so proud of their daughters as students that they have taken a family photograph with the children in school uniforms to display it in their houses

In order to make universalisation of primary education a reality, providing working children with a bridge course facility is an indispensable programme. This facility not only enables working children to become full-time students but also provides a channel for an entire society to accept formal education for all children. More importantly, the camps bring about a change in parents' attitude towards sending children to school - from one of 'indifference' to one of 'pride'.

Chapter 4

Retention of Girl Children: From Primary to High School

While motivating the community to withdraw children from work is a Herculean task in itself, their retention in schools is a greater every day struggle for the children. The journey of the girls to reach schools has been built upon the recognition of the intense desire of the parents to educate their children in defiance of the conventional wisdom that they should be sending their children to work. MVF has learnt that poor parents care for their children in spite of poverty and are willing to make enormous sacrifices. It drew inspiration from these poor parents who had faith in schools as institutions and stubbornly persisted in sending their children to schools even when there were no teachers, no classrooms and nothing ever happened in schools. It was felt that this urge of the parents to see their children educated must be respected and all efforts be made to make schools viable for poor children.

In order to do so, MVF realised that the parents' inability to send their children to schools is attributable more to the school as an institution, which is insensitive to the needs of poor children. Often, even the most benign rules and regulations appear deviously intractable and seem to have been formulated with the sole purpose of preventing any child from joining or continuing in school. MVF has continued to grapple with the intricacies and absurdities of the various formal and informal systems that have evolved, which push children out of schools. MVF has sought to modify some of these systems, in order to make them more accommodative of the specific circumstances from which the children come.

4.1 Admission Policies and Bridge Courses

First, schools had no policy to accommodate the late starters and thus they were not ready to accept older illiterate children or school drop outs, who desired to join schools. Therefore, children who have been left out for no fault of their own were condemned to join the labour force, never to aspire for a formal education. These schools have now been prepared to accept children withdrawn from work and seeking admission into schools at any time during the course of an academic year. They are not allowed to refuse admission on the ground that the last date for admissions is the 30th of August each year. Provision has also been made to save such children the embarrassment of joining in class I by introducing special coaching classes and bridge courses enabling their smooth transition into students and into classes according to their age.

4.2 Transfer of Children from Local Primary Schools to High Schools

In case of transfers of children from one school to another, especially after they complete class 5 or class 7, it is not uncommon that the parents' inability to procure a transfer certificate has deterred the child from continuing their education. The reasons for not being able to get a certificate are bizarre. The reasons range from a teacher delaying the issuance of a certificate

to the school having run out of forms for issuing certificates. This is a clear indication of the lack of seriousness of schools towards poor children. Alternatively, schools issue forms with incomplete details thus rendering it invalid by the next school. MVF has been successful in persuading schools to set up, amongst themselves, institutional arrangements for the transfer of children. Several meetings with the parents of 5th and 7th class students preceded the move to transfer them to the next school. This exercise has helped in retaining 99% of girl children in schools after they finished their education in primary schools.

4.3 Condoning Absenteeism

At times children may be absent from school due to the indisposition of family members. On several occasions, it has been found that girls have stayed back at home to keep the hearth going when one of their parents had fallen ill. These children have not been able to rejoin school because they were unable to document the cause of absence in a manner that is acceptable to the school. Alternatively, due to parents' misgivings about schools, they do not even attempt to send the girls back to school after their absence and thus, girls are forced to drop out. The older children face a peculiar problem of having to be absent for a long duration when they attain puberty for the first time. Due to social and cultural compulsions, many ceremonies follow the event, and the girl is in no position to come back to school almost immediately. At times, girl children have stayed back because they are unable to face eve teasing by local youth on the way to school. Alternatively, children are unwell and parents are unable to produce a medical certificate. These are only some examples that are indicative of the insensitivity of schools. Therefore, in ensuring access of children to schools, it is important to make the school system more sensitive and considerate towards the needs of the poor.

In this context, it is important to take note of the positive role played by the School Education Committees (SECs)¹ in making the schools less bureaucratic. The SECs have been instrumental in making schools more sensitive and encouraging girls to rejoin schools. They have also held discussions with the youth to be more responsible in case of eve teasing. Alternatively, they have spoken to the parents and assured them that a decision to condone the absence of their daughters from school has been taken after ascertaining the genuineness of the case. In cases where parents had withdrawn their daughters from school for purposes of work, the SECs have forcefully argued with the parents that they should make alternate arrangements for the same and send the girls to school. In cases of absence due to ill health, since the entire village is usually aware of the absence of a child due to ill health, the SECs

¹ The Andhra Pradesh School Education (People's Participation) Act, 1998 [SEPPA] provided for the formation of School Education Committees (SECs). These committees are set up in lieu of Parent-Teacher Associations at the school level. The SEC is comprised of four parents, whose children are in school and the Head Master of the concerned school. As per SEPPA, the SEC is assigned with the tasks of managing the school education fund for development, assisting the teachers in ensuring regular attendance to schools, ensuring the enrollment and retention of children in schools, hiring the services of local persons as teachers or instructors where there is a need for the same, convening meetings with parents of non-school-going children and reviewing the functioning of the school and so on.

have taken the responsibility to do away with medical certificates. Thus, the proactive role of the SECs in constantly monitoring the retention of children has enabled circumventing the bureaucratic and impersonal systems, which push children out of schools.

4.4 Poor Parents and Schools

As mentioned above, parents are required to procure many certificates for enrolment of children in schools, transfer of children from one school to another, or to go to a higher class,

School starts 8th class for 14 girl students

Meenapallykalan village has an upper primary school up to class VII and is 6 kilometres away from Nawabpet, which has a high school up to class X. There is no bus facility between Meenapallykalan and Nawabpet and the distance to other villages with high schools is also great. There is no high school in the surrounding 4 villages. Before the reopening of the schools, the girl child activists had visited the parents of 12 girls to motivate them to send their daughters to the 8th class of the high school in Nawabpet. The parents had objected because they didn't want their daughters to walk along with boys to Nawabpet.

The girl child activists then advised the parents to pressurise the SEC and Gram Panchayat to start class VIII in Meenapallykalan itself. This would prove to be a boon for not only their daughters but also the girls of the neighbouring villages. A meeting was held with the parents, SEC, the Headmaster of the upper primary school of Meenapallykalan, village elders, youth and the Mahila organisers and Mandal in-charge.

The school as well as the parents accepted the proposal and requested MVF to provide an education volunteer. There is now Class VIII in this school but hasn't been officially recognised by the Government. They plan to arrange for the 14 girls who are studying in this class to write the exams privately. The SEC is also planning to request the Government to officially upgrade their school and the community is willing to contribute Rs 2000 to Rs 4000 towards this.

atonement of absence due to ill health and so on. They are required to negotiate with more than one government department. Poor parents are easily intimidated when they are required to deal with so many unfamiliar institutions. In contrast, they are at ease while dealing with the employer of the child, as they are familiar with all the rules of the transaction and are aware of what they are required to do. Therefore, whereas all the rigid procedures are understood without any difficulty by parents of children coming from families with a long history of sending children to school, illiterate parents who are attempting to become parents of first generation literates are at a complete loss as to the procedures and formalities that need to be followed in order to send their children to school.

4.5 School Girls Committees

The pressures operating on girl children even after they are students are tremendous. They are not spared of household work before and after school hours. They seldom get time to study, do their homework, prepare for an examination or just browse through books after school hours. They have to bear the burden of work and school simultaneously. In addition, they are saddled with the threat of marriage when they are above eleven years of age. Therefore, they require support when they are subject to undue pressure at home.

The girls have regarded schools as the only legitimate institution that can save them from their impending marriage or the burden of work. In response to these specific appeals of girls in school, the school going girls have organised themselves into School Girl Committees. These committees operate under the supervision of the headmaster, who convenes its meetings. The headmasters of many schools have used this forum to talk to girl students about the importance of education for girls and have given them confidence to question gender discrimination. The discussions of these committees included topics such as work burden after school hours, which made it difficult for the students to study well, timidity of girl children who did not have enough courage to ask the teacher to clear doubts, lack of sports materials and books, abuse by teachers, irregularity of teachers, lack of subject teachers which often results in children falling behind in studies and thus dropping out. The committees also encourage girl children who live close by to study together. Many committees have been successful in bringing girl children back to school by talking to them and their parents since the committee members knew most of them. The committees met with families of such girls to prevent early marriage. They were also successful in motivating parents to withdraw their illiterate daughters from work and enrol them in bridge course camps.

When children reach higher classes, they are faced with a situation where there are not enough teachers. Therefore, hardly any subjects are taught at the middle and high school levels, resulting in woefully bad performance at students.

4.6 Coaching High School Students - Lack of Teachers and Infrastructure

This belies the hopes and dreams of the children and their parents for a good future. In order to retain girl children in higher classes, MVF conducts coaching for 8th, 9th and 10th grade students during vacations. The girl children who joined the formal school through the bridge course were extremely motivated and determined to study further and demanded this coaching programme. Furthermore, they received encouragement from their parents in this regard. MVF continues to work on involving the community and village institutions to put pressure on the government to supply the school with better infrastructure and more teachers. It continues to work on involving teachers to put pressure on their unions to make education a political issue.

4.7 Impact on Government Policies

In the process of mobilising girls, MVF had the opportunity to make use of several State departments for the benefit of girl children. There

have been instances where the police have intervened to stop early child marriages. The police

Formation of a School Girl Committee in Ravulapally village

Ravulapally village has a large number of girls who have dropped out of school or whose attendance is irregular. There are 13 girl child labourers in this village. The Headmasters of both the primary and the high school decided to do something about this. On November 12, 1999, the girls of both the schools and a few non school-going girls were asked to meet and MVF was invited to talk to them on the issue of dropouts and child marriage. Around 45 girls from the primary school and 30 girls from the high school attended this meeting.

One of the Headmasters inaugurated the meeting, explained its purpose and expressed concern about the problems. This was followed by a discussion initiated by a girl child activist of Marpally Mandal, who lived in Ravulapally. The participants responded to the various issues that she introduced. She induced the girls to think of those girls who do not come to school or who are irregular. Interestingly, a real life situation was introduced in this meeting when a woman looking for her missing daughter, disrupted the meeting and accused the girl child activist and the teacher of hiding her daughter in the school. This presented an opportunity to the girl child activist to emphasise the point that she had been trying to make - the fact that parents did not want their daughters in school.

The arguments commonly used by parents to avoid educating their daughters were discussed and their validity was examined. The girls were unanimous and vociferous in their objection to the marriage argument used by parents and quite plainly stated that girls should not get married before 18 years of age. This was accompanied by a discussion of the mental and physical consequences of early marriage and child bearing. Going to school was presented as the only way to prevent child marriage. Another argument used is that of sibling care - the girls were not as vociferous in their objection to this but the thinking process did start. This led to a discussion of the work commonly done by girls - cattle herding, household work, etc.

By the end of the meeting, the girls were all committed to continuing their education and had firmly resolved to oppose their parents if they were prevented from doing so. Girls, who were being forced into marriage, broke down in public and asked for assistance. The headmaster stepped in and assured the girls with warmth and confidence that they could come to him for assistance.

During the meeting, the girl child activist called for volunteers among the girls to bring non-school going girls to the programme on 14th November, on Children's Day. One girl who had spoken earlier about her father and her proposed early marriage volunteered. This sparked spontaneous applause from all the girls and a little leader was born. Of the total group of 10 volunteers, 8 were from the high school and 2 girls were from the primary school. They identified a number of non-school going girls who they would motivate for the 14th November programme. The girls also agreed to hold such meetings once every two weeks.

have also been pressured to register cases against employers who violated the Bonded Labour System Act [1986] or parents for not abiding by the Child Marriage Act. The labour officials have conducted enquiries in the villages when claims for back wages were made on behalf of children who had been employed. These claims were made with the aim of harassing the employer rather than ensuring better conditions of work for the girls. Furthermore, the elected representatives of the local bodies made these petitions and thus were also the votaries of the girls' right to education. The revenue department was galvanized to go into the cases of children engaged as bonded labourers and release them from bondage. The health department

and the doctors were approached to treat girls who were abused. The women and child welfare department was enlisted to run similar bridge course camps for girl children and bring the issue of the right of the girl child into their purview. Since some of the girls had to eventually join the hostels set up by the social welfare department, it was felt necessary to build community pressure for the effective functioning of these hostels.

The teachers play a very important role in the mobilisation process, as they are the key participants in campaigns and implore parents to send their girls to schools. They reassure parents about the well-being of the children at the camps. In effect, it became evident that a co-ordinated effort of all the departments at the local level on the issue of girl child could bring about effective results.

The Government, Mainly Drawing From The MV Foundation's Experiences, Has Taken Up The Following Policy Initiatives

1. The Department of Women and Child Welfare has established special residential bridge course camps for adolescent girls withdrawn from work in each district, since 1999.
2. The non-formal education centres were initially part-time schools, which were run either in the night or keeping in view flexibility in timings and seasonal variations to enable children to continue in work. This was subsequently changed. All non-formal education centres have been integrated into the formal school system and are no longer a parallel education system, since 1997.
3. The Social Welfare Department conducts bridge courses for children withdrawn from work during summer under the 'Back-to-School' programme in the entire State of Andhra Pradesh since 1997. So far over 300,000 children have been reached through this scheme.
4. In 15 districts of Andhra Pradesh, the District Primary Education Project (DPEP) has begun addressing the issue of elimination of child labour through education on a pilot basis, since 1998. Earlier, DPEP had no programme to reach out to non-school going (working) children. Under the same scheme, the Andhra Pradesh Government has recruited education volunteers in every district. In May 2000, a Government Order was issued in which the Government of A.P agreed to regularise the MVF's bridge course teachers, allowing education volunteers to sit for B.Ed. entrance exam after passing two Summer Vacation Courses. Earlier only regular (recognised) teachers could appear for the B.Ed entrance exam.
5. Since 1997, the National Child Labour Project (NCLP) in the Ranga Reddy district is being implemented in a modified form based entirely on MV Foundation's model of bridge courses. Thus, there are no incentives to parents, parallel special schools, vocational training, targeting children in hazardous work alone, as envisaged in the original scheme.
6. The Government of Andhra Pradesh initiated a programme of 'summer schools' for older children who have stagnated in class II, and I since 1998. The MV Foundation alone earlier undertook this programme.
7. The Government of Andhra Pradesh issued orders to admit children at anytime during the academic year unlike the earlier instance whereby admissions were closed by the end of August. These have facilitated the process of enrolling children in school as soon as they are withdrawn from work and not wait for the next academic year in order to be enrolled.
8. Government teachers have organised themselves into a forum against child labour called Balakarmika Vimochana Vedika (BKVV), and are regularly trained by the MV Foundation. The forum presently has around 2,400 members. Their involvement has greatly increased the retention of children in school and has empowered them to work out strategies, like the bridge course at the school level, relevant to working and slow-learning children.

Chapter 5

Role of Girl Youth Activists, Volunteers, *Mahila* Organisers

The role of the girl youth activists in bringing girls to schools cannot be understated. They are the anchors of the entire programme facing the wrath and anger of employers, stubbornness of parents, and the sluggishness of the unaccountable school system in an environment that is unsympathetic to children. Despite this, they orchestrate their activities unmindful of the odds, and with patience and ingenuity bring the entire village society to voice the rights of children. In all their endeavours they do not lose sight of the children, who are in fact waiting to be seen and heard by them. They meticulously plan for the children to be released from work and if a hundred thousand children have so far been emancipated, it is no exaggeration to state that a hundred thousand plans for the same have been drawn up by them.

Joining the Programme and the Role of the Activist

The very first entry of these activists in the programme is through their participation in the marches and rallies against child labour and also in conducting the surveys. Many of them are first generation literates in their villages and from a similar background as the children themselves. Initially, more male youth came forward to join the campaign and most of them were members of local youth clubs. Nevertheless, there were girl youth among them who joined the campaign against child labour. These girl youth activists happened to be the small minority of the literate girls in the village especially from the poor families. Subsequently, when MVF aimed to reach out to the older girl children in the village, these youth activists joined the MVF on a full time basis. It is pertinent to note that only those who attended schools were actively involved as education activists as they were the only persons who readily recognised the value of education and needed no further convincing on the efficacy of the programme. Many began work in MVF as education activists working as teachers in the motivation centre, or as bridge course camp teachers or even as teachers in the day schools. Based on this experience and also their aptitude, they became community organisers in charge of mobilising community support in a cluster of villages.

They were extremely important in demonstrating to girl children, their parents and to the village society at large, the intrinsic value of being educated. They became the agents of change as far as girl children's education was concerned and functioned as role models for girl children as well as their parents. Although male activists did the same work, the impact of educated girl youth on the community was crucial. They could give any number of instances of girls going to schools and narrate their own struggle in accessing schools and continuing studies despite a discriminative home front, poor school infrastructure and an indifferent community. They also had the ability to persistently argue, implore and cajole the mothers into accepting that sending girls to schools is only fair and just and that this opportunity cannot be

lost. They were directly confronted by the complexity of the problem of working girl children and the society's perception of such working girl children in the arguments of the parents. Since they could relate to these mothers and understand their deep-rooted fears and uncertainties, the girl youth activists were patient and enduring. They went back and forth to the homes of the girl children, as girl children reposed a lot of faith in them even as they faced resistance at home. The activists' strength to persist came from the girls themselves who firmly stood their ground to study or against getting married off. It was impossible for the activists to be oblivious to their brave little battles on the home front. They had to do all that was necessary to mobilise support to help such girls.

Girl Youth Activists – Peers

The struggle of these girls to join schools was a reminder to the activists themselves on how difficult it was for them to continue with their own studies. They were themselves extremely vulnerable and their perseverance to study at least till 10th standard was due to the encouragement and strong support they got from either the parents, an inspiring school teacher or a local benefactor. The activists shared their experiences of how each of them had been able to continue studies and in the process identified themselves with each other's struggles and this gave them a sense of solidarity. They also realised that they were better equipped to face the tribulations in all adversities than the girl children whom they sought to liberate because they were literate and went to schools. This not only increased their determination to bring all children to school but also increased their ability to withdraw older girl children from work or face counter arguments made by parents who defended the early marriage of their daughters. They felt more empowered, became more convincing and used examples of their own struggles for education to demonstrate to the parents that it was possible for their daughters to be withdrawn from work as well, and go to schools. Within the group, the senior girl child activists taught the juniors on the job. Nevertheless, they all learned from each other. Since juniors asked questions of their seniors, the latter were given an opportunity to conceptualise the work they were doing.

In due course, the girl youth activists' team in each Mandal level were articulate, vocal and also visible. Many of these youth were under pressure from their own family – the unmarried girls were pressurised by their parents, whereas, the married girls were under tremendous pressure from their respective husbands and in-laws. They were accused of 'roaming' in villages and having 'loose morals'. Being in a group gave them strength as well as poise, to face these allegations and accusations more dispassionately. They were able to win over their opponents by sharing their experiences of mobilisation. Furthermore, their consistency and sincerity in their work changed those who had apprehensions about their character. Therefore, the community gradually began to trust and respect them. Many members of the community began helping the youth activists by being more sympathetic. Their dedication to the cause won over many a parent and they were successful in convincing

these parents to withdraw their daughters from work. Subsequently, these parents showed their solidarity by contributing to strengthen the schools.

The teamwork also gave them confidence to talk to authorities, both officials and non-officials and convince them to involve the activists in their agenda. Some of them developed leadership qualities and emerged as local leaders and spokespersons in their own right. The fact that the girl child activists were taken seriously by the community-members increased their self-confidence and esteem.

All the components of the programme of bringing older girl children to schools are discussed at the mandal level and also the district level through monthly meetings. These meetings help in the review and monitoring of the programme. The girl youth activists learn from each other through systematic sharing of experiences and also arrive at policy decisions on the issue. Therefore, for instance, they have evolved a format for reviewing the status of every girl child in their respective villages. During the meetings and also the trainings given to them, these activists had expressed a desire to have legal literacy, which they felt would give teeth to their strategies of intervention. As a result, a woman legal activist interacted with them on a regular basis. This enabled them to tackle complex issues of child marriage and cases of rape of girl children. The lawyer also trained them to go to the police station and lodge a complaint under the correct legal provisions.

In Conclusion

The uniqueness of MVF's approach is that it has been able to establish links between 'culture', 'labour' and 'education' that are different from the causal connection between the three. The prevailing socio-cultural norms (culture) have a negative impact on the girl child necessitating her to become a child worker (labour). The comprehensive remedy lies in putting her to the formal (full-time) school (education). This is true not merely for children up to 11 years of age. The older girls in the 12 to 14 years age group are also included in the programme.

The strategies chalked out by MVF have therefore only one objective – of withdrawing the girl child completely from work and preparing her to join the formal school system. This is in stark contrast to the conventional approach of intervention for working girl children, amongst which, the most favoured option is providing non-formal education.

MVF has demonstrated that strategies other than education in formal schools cannot bring about significant change because the girl child's basic situation of work does not change. To help the girl child in her transition from the status of a labourer to that of a student, the MVF has set up short-term (one to three days) camps, motivation centres, bridge course residential camps and bridge course classes for younger children in schools.

In tune with the fast changing mood that encourages children to stay in schools, the schools too have become sensitive and dynamic institutions, accommodating the specific needs of poor children. The community has begun to take up responsibility for the most vulnerable children in the village, taking pride in the fact that all the children in their village are in schools. More significantly, parents become parents of students, and no longer exploit their children. Therefore, a simple act of sending children and especially girls to school has tremendous potential for transforming the culture of the village as a whole.

The issue of girl child and her education in formal schools has also brought to focus the issue of child marriage (although it would be difficult to establish the girls' right to education as a natural consequence of taking up issues of gender discrimination or early child marriage). MVF has learnt that attacking the problem of girl child labour inevitably leads to resolving the issue of child marriage as well. It would not have been possible to resolve this issue if MVF had taken up this issue without perceiving it as an aspect of the overarching child labour problem. In establishing this link, it has been able to focus on child rights and shift what is perceived as a family or private matter to the realm of public debate.

The issue of gender discrimination and gender bias in the division of work in the family has also been tackled as a component of the child labour problem. It has been found that there have been occasions when male family members have been exceptionally co-operative in sharing domestic work and encouraging the girl to pursue education.

Poverty Argument Contested

The MVF through its work has systematically contested the validity of the poverty argument. Given a well-orchestrated programme of community mobilisation and social support, it is found that even the poorest have shown remarkable resilience in ensuring that their children, even older girls are given an opportunity to go to schools. They aspire for the unfamiliar and hope for a future for their girl children, which they themselves were denied. The inability of the parents to articulate their demand for schools therefore cannot be construed as their indifference to their children's (both boys and girls) education. Their faith in the institution of the schools and capacities to make enormous sacrifices to see them in schools has put to rest the poverty argument, which forms the underlying basis of most schemes that are designed based on the insistence of poverty argument. The commitment of the poor parents in sending their children to schools has foreclosed the debate on the poverty argument.

The experience of MVF has also shown that the argument that government schools provide 'irrelevant education' and do not impart useful skills or training to equip the child to play a more useful role, has only brought in complacency in providing education to the poor. These are crucial questions and are relevant to the education of not only under-privileged children but also to the privileged ones. Nevertheless, it is unfair to use this argument to keep children out of schools and perpetuate illiteracy until these profound pedagogical issues are resolved.

Schools for the poor children are much more than institutions providing the three R's. They are the *only* institutions, which keep the children out of exploitation and the drudgery of work. The act of going to school opens up a plethora of options for the children and they escape being condemned to labour as illiterate marginalized adults. For the girls especially, schools are the only place they can call their 'own', where they have friends and the leisure to discover themselves and seek support in case of difficulties. The act of going to school is the first step towards a break with the tradition of backwardness and the intergenerational cycle of inequity and discrimination.

The journey of the older girls to school has not been automatic. There is little one could do if the girls themselves did not stand their ground firmly against all odds. Their courage and determination to withstand pressures are the seeds sown for the well being of the future generation of girls.

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