COUNTRY PROFILE 2021: UNFPA-UNICEF GLOBAL PROGRAMME TO END CHILD MARRIAGE

INDIA
Child marriage context

There are 226.3 million child brides in India\(^2\) which accounts for a third of the global total. While it is illegal for girls under the age of 18 to marry in India, estimates suggest that at least 1.5 million girls under the age of 18 get married in the country each year and around 16 per cent of all adolescent girls aged 15–19 are currently married. Recent evidence, though sparse, highlights the persistence of family-arranged marriages without meaningful consent and there is little evidence to suggest that India will be capable of ending the practice by 2030 as set out in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Programming context

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly affected the everyday lives of girls for a second year in 2021, including their physical and mental health, education and the economic circumstances of their families and communities. Globally, up to 10 million more girls are estimated to become child brides by 2030 as a result of the pandemic.\(^3\)

UNFPA and UNICEF Evaluation Offices conducted a joint assessment of Global Programme adaptations to the COVID-19 crisis in 2021.\(^4\) The COVID-19 assessment aimed to:

- Assess relevant contingency planning and implementation and alternative delivery and

\(^2\) UNICEF, 2022, Child marriage country profiles: India, \url{https://data.unicef.org/resources/child-marriage-country-profiles/}


management arrangements for the Global Programme due to the COVID-19 pandemic, taking into account the views of vulnerable adolescent girls, their families, communities and key implementing partners.

- Make recommendations for the immediate to mid-term improvement of the Global Programme response to COVID-19, identify ongoing programme changes and recommending any additional support required to implement those programme changes and shifting priorities.

- Make any recommendations required to adjust the Global Programme Phase II to the new context, including its theory of change and the targets established before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The results of the assessment indicate that:

- It is critical to keep the focus and efforts in reaching the most vulnerable and marginalized adolescents, including those in remote areas.

- Lessons could be taken from experiences using multi-channel and two-way communication approaches, while also being attentive to the digital divide.

- Vulnerable adolescents must continue to have access to education (especially if provided remotely), health and social welfare services.

- It is key to overcome drivers of poverty by leveraging existing social protection schemes.

- Ensuring the use of evidence led programming is important and so too is advocating with governments to keep child marriage prevention and responses on national agendas while continuing to develop legal and operational frameworks to help accelerate the end of child marriage.

**TABLE. Conclusions and recommendations from the COVID-19 assessment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONCLUSION</th>
<th>RECOMMENDATION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Programme advocacy and engagement efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic kept child marriage on national agendas</td>
<td>Advocate with governments to continue developing legal and operational frameworks contributing to ending child marriage with a rights-based and multisectoral focus</td>
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<tr>
<td>The COVID-19 crisis underscored the vulnerability of adolescent girls in rural and remote areas</td>
<td>Reinforce efforts to reach the most vulnerable and marginalized adolescent girls, boys and their families</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adoption of digital and mass media approaches demonstrated a high potential for sustaining engagement of adolescent girls at scale, although the digital divide should be considered</td>
<td>Develop complementary multi-channel approaches to reach target populations, ensuring that they foster two-way communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COVID-19 restrictions limited adolescent girls’ access to health and social welfare services</td>
<td>Continue technical support and explore the most effective approaches to ensure adolescent girls have access to essential services</td>
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<tr>
<td>The programme theory of change remains valid but poverty and economic drivers need to be stressed further in operational strategies</td>
<td>Further articulate the strategy to leverage social protection schemes such as cash transfers and income generation opportunities for adolescent girls and their families</td>
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<tr>
<td>COVID-19 programme adjustments created a high demand on data and evidence for adopted approaches</td>
<td>Continue adjusting monitoring, data generation and analysis in order to reinforce evidence-based programming</td>
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These results will inform future adjustments and refinements to the programme. They will help continue delivering in changing contexts and accelerating the pace, during the Decade of Action, of eliminating child marriage to achieve the SDGs by 2030.

**Key highlights**

- Over 2 million girls actively participated in life skills and comprehensive sexuality education interventions
- Close to 85,000 adolescent girls at risk of child marriage were supported to enrol and/or remain in school
- Close to 20 million community members have been equipped with information and galvanized to take action against child marriage and promote adolescent empowerment
- 131 district action plans to end child marriage are presently approved for implementation in 175 districts across ten states
- A roadmap and recommendations from the Gender-Transformative Accelerator (GTA) tool roll-out in India have been developed/identified and are now being implemented with earmarked resources and specified timelines.

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Programme performance

TABLE. Summary of output indicator performance (2021)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INDICATOR</th>
<th>TARGET</th>
<th>RESULT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indicator 1111: Number of adolescent girls (aged 10-19) who actively participated in life skills or comprehensive sexuality education interventions in programme areas</td>
<td>3,413,602</td>
<td>2,041,980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicator 1121: Number of girls (aged 10-19) supported by the programme to enrol and/or remain in primary or secondary school</td>
<td>325,000</td>
<td>84,983</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicator 1211: Number of boys and men actively participating in group education/dialogues that address harmful masculinities and gender norms</td>
<td>1,000,000</td>
<td>951,126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicator 1221: Number of individuals (boys, girls, women and men) who participate in group education/dialogue sessions on consequences of and alternatives to child marriage, the rights of adolescent girls and gender equality</td>
<td>8,293,000</td>
<td>9,328,524</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicator 1222: Number of individuals (boys, girls, women and men) reached by mass media (traditional and social media) messaging on child marriage, the rights of adolescent girls and gender equality</td>
<td>23,600,000</td>
<td>19,833,878</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicator 1223: Number of local actors (e.g., traditional, religious and community leaders) with meaningful participation in dialogues and consensus-building to end child marriage</td>
<td>17,745</td>
<td>67,634</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicator 1231: Number of civil society organizations newly mobilized in support of challenging social norms and promoting gender equality by the Global Programme</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicator 2121: Number of primary/secondary/non-formal schools in programme areas providing quality gender-friendly education that meets minimum standards</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicator 2131: Number of service delivery points in programme areas providing quality adolescent-responsive services (health, child protection/ gender-based violence) that meet minimum standards</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>438</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicator 2211: Number of partnerships (both formal and informal) established to deliver adolescent-responsive social protection, poverty reduction, and economic empowerment programmes and services</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicator 3111: Number of policies or legal instruments addressing child marriage drafted, proposed or adopted at national and subnational level with Global Programme support</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicator 3211: Number of generated evidence and knowledge that focus on what works to end child marriage</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicator 3212: Number of generated evidence and knowledge that apply a gender analysis</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicator 3221: Number of South-to-South cooperation (conferences, expert visits, peer consultations, study tours, communities of practice) supported</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NA = Not applicable (the country programme does not work on or report on this indicator)
Providing intensive support to marginalized girls

Multiple approaches were employed to reach adolescent girls with information and life skills training, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when schools were closed, such as working with teams of volunteers and civil society organizations to facilitate continuity of learning and use of digital platforms for life skills education. However, due to second and third waves of the pandemic affecting all states in the country, the prolonged school closures and a gender digital divide, the Global Programme only reached 2 million adolescent girls with life skills training during the year (compared to the target of 3.4 million).

UNFPA implemented the Umang (life skills curriculum) in 9,228 state board schools and 2,520 private schools covering all 52 districts of Madhya Pradesh in 2021. Life skills education was institutionalized in the education system for approximately 1.8 million students (years 9-11) in the state. During the lockdown the initiative adapted to an innovative approach by using an online medium to host virtual talk shows, videos and animations, which received nearly 2.6 million views on YouTube and generated more than 600,000 responses from students through feedback forms. The Umang life skills curriculum was converted into episodes that were telecast on the state-run TV channel and received more than 400,000 responses from students and nearly 53,000 responses from teachers during the year. In the state of Assam, WhatsApp groups created by teachers during the pandemic engaged 1,149 adolescents (848 girls and 301 boys) and were used to disseminate information regarding COVID-19 safety measures, as well as reporting child rights violations from their communities, particularly violence against children and child marriage.

In Chhattisgarh, UNICEF in partnership with the Bharat Scouts and Guides launched the Tarunya Varta (adolescent talk) programme which aims at improving awareness and behaviours around health, nutrition, life skills and protection of adolescents in the state. Close to 400 guides have been trained as facilitators or trainers with a target of reaching 3 million adolescents in the first phase. UNICEF also set up community learning centres and safe spaces with trained young volunteers from the neighbourhoods in the states of Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, providing children with an opportunity to continue their studies during the school closures.

A digital platform called Seekh was initiated as part of the interventions, which helped reach around 12,500 girls with education support, particularly during the peak of the pandemic. Support was also provided to develop a special training package to improve the quality of classroom practices in special training centres for out-of-school children in the states of Odisha, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. Furthermore, technical assistance was extended by engaging multiple stakeholders in identifying and tracking out-of-school children and bolstering community mobilization in several states to reduce the number of out-of-school children and prevent dropouts from the most disadvantaged communities. Overall, 84,983 out-of-school children were mainstreamed back into education by providing access to formal and alternative education and engaging with families and community members across eight states.

Special emphasis was put on reaching those left furthest behind with life skills education. To enable the engagement of adolescents living with disabilities, UNFPA leveraged funding to develop user-friendly learning tools and training manuals, braille and tactile books and models (allowing for people with visual impairment to read), video files with sign language interpretation and scrolling text, as well as other communication materials to impart life skills education in 155 special schools in the state of Odisha. Life skills education was also extended to 1,157 tribal residential schools (reaching 52,081 adolescent girls) to ensure engagement of marginalized communities.

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36 The Unified Mobile Application for New-age Governance is a mobile app, a digital India initiative of the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, by the Government of India for access to central and state government services.
CHALLENGES, LESSONS LEARNED AND NEXT STEPS

The digital divide has left marginalized communities and girls from low-income households with a lack of access to digital technology which continues to be a serious impediment to equitable outreach. To this end, a gender digital divide campaign which will have tailored resources and engagement with gatekeepers in families, communities and schools to proactively address this issue will be launched soon. Advocacy around the issue of the gender gap in digital spaces has also been undertaken.

Key learning from the year includes using digital platforms for amplifying outreach and leveraging adolescents’ abilities as digital natives. It has also highlighted the need to continue to develop and disseminate content in accessible formats to increase outreach to adolescents living with disabilities.

Enhancing the family and community environment

To advance the agenda of gender-transformative programming capacity building and curriculums on positive masculinities are being rolled out in several states across the country (including Assam, Rajasthan, Gujarat and West Bengal). In addition, UNFPA advocacy on the ADVIKA (I am unique programme), which is an adolescent empowerment programme in the Odisha state, has led to the inclusion of boys as a key target group in ensuring the shift of social norms and break gender stereotypes that prevent girls from reaching their full potential.

In Rajasthan UNICEF supported the development of a resource kit on promoting positive masculinities among adolescents and advocated for the inclusion of boys and men as a key target group in the draft state strategy for the prevention of gender-based violence and harmful practices.

In Gujarat and the West Bengal states, UNFPA and UNICEF leveraged partnerships with adolescent and youth networks (like the Kanyashree clubs, Seekh Mitras, the National Service Scheme (NSS), Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan (NYKS), Bharat Scouts and Guides) and district platforms to mobilize out-of-school boys and engage them in discussions on gender and positive masculinities, including defining their role in child marriage prevention.

In Assam state UNICEF advocacy led to the implementation of a multi-layered approach on positive masculinities programming in tea garden communities to target men and boys and engage them in reducing child marriage and school dropouts.

UNFPA and UNICEF were able to ensure that a significant number of community members were reached through multiple platforms despite most face-to-face interactions being hampered by the multiple outbreaks of COVID-19 throughout the country. To actively respond to sexual and reproductive health needs among community members during COVID-19 pilot initiatives were supported, conducting training of grassroots cadres and young people for sharing information related to sexual and reproductive health and rights and COVID-19 during home visits at Ratri Chaupal (evening sessions in village common places using an audio-visual mode) and Nav Dampatti Samaroh (felicitations of newly married couples).

In Odisha over 13,000 individuals, including parent-teacher association members and school management committee members, representing over 1,650 tribal residential schools, joined virtual workshops about ensuring the safety and well-being of students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The workshops were designed to push for the prevention of child marriages, teenage pregnancies and school dropouts in their communities.

In Assam, 888 edutainment shows, folklore performances and social and behaviour change campaigns were carried out on issues like child marriage, reaching close to 200,000 adolescents (77,052 boys and 122,907 girls).

New communication packages and platforms were leveraged to promote adolescent issues 2021. For instance, in Uttar Pradesh, mobile episodes of Tara Hai Tayyar, which are disability-friendly, were widely used by child protection actors across the state. Through Naubat Baja, a missed call-based edutainment channel and an
initiative launched by UNFPA in collaboration with the state of Rajasthan, technical support was provided to develop communication materials such as radio jingles and advertisements especially during local festivals when a large number of child marriages are likely to be solemnized. Over 32,000 calls were registered on the edutainment channel during the launch.

In the state of Jharkhand, more than 53,500 families, communities, traditional and religious leaders, self-help group members, front line workers, Panchatayati Raj institutions (village-level governance institution) and members of legislative assemblies were engaged in dialogues. This was done as a capacity building exercise in order to better inform the people about the harms of child marriage and what are alternatives could be promoted as alternatives.

Traditional and religious leaders, local leaders, including frontline workers, and self-help groups were leveraged through training, community discussions and collaboration, community events and mentorship and networking opportunities to address the issue of child marriage. This ensured enrolment and retention of girls in schools, reduced dropouts and set up Meena Manch in schools (platforms for girls to speak up) for girls’ empowerment through life skills education, sending congratulatory messages on behalf of the Panchayats to families where daughters were born. This also helped with creating awareness about schemes to help and the entitlements for girls, while mobilizing communities for supporting girls’ education, health and nutrition.

In Madhya Pradesh state, 9,040 members of community organizations (Mahila Shakti Samuh, Mahila Mudda Chaupals and Gram Panchayat coordination committees) were engaged in creating platforms to address issues related to gender inequality. Of this number, 1,817 traditional and religious leaders and other influencers were engaged in dialogues and consensus-building on alternatives to child marriage, including education, skills development and the rights of adolescent girls.

In West Bengal state, a partnership between UNICEF and the Amanat Foundation helped with engaging 56,266 religious leaders and other community influencers in dialogues. These dialogues were set up to encourage participation in addressing child marriage, promote positive social norms and influence parenting practices in a positive way.

**CHALLENGES, LESSONS LEARNED AND NEXT STEPS**

Several learning points and recommendations have come from the roll-out of the Gender-Transformative Accelerator (GTA) tool in India, as well as the country-level gender programme review which UNICEF conducted in 2021. One concrete recommendation from the GTA process is the development of a checklist for curriculum development for partners and stakeholders, which will be useful to build and roll-out gender-transformative resources and training.

States like Assam, Rajasthan, West Bengal, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra have initiated or streamlined programmes focusing on gender-transformative interventions, such as mainstreaming positive masculinities and gender sensitization in schools and communities. Partnerships with women’s collectives and youth-led organizations to mobilize the voices of adolescents and communities, challenge harmful social norms and promote gender equality have also been established and have been useful tools to reach the most marginalized communities.

Working on positive masculinities requires technical expertise, is resource intensive and is not easily replicable without initial investment in capacity building. Hence the requirement to scale up these approaches is a challenge. Socio-cultural contexts across communities and states also influence strategies for engagement with men and boys in different localities.
Community engagement activities were affected during the outbreak of COVID-19 as they often require face-to-face interactions with the adolescents and community groups. Given the restrictions related to physical interactions and the issue of the digital divide, blended approaches of engagement involving digital platforms, community radios and physical interactions (where and when possible) were needed to support programme implementation. For example, UNICEF leveraged a partnership with 19 community radio stations to broadcast interactive programmes on child marriage, reaching out to more than two million people. WhatsApp groups were also leveraged to effectively reach adolescents and their parents. Radio campaigns and weekly sessions on child marriage were amplified. Initiatives like peer group phone check-ins were also useful for reaching those without access to smartphones.

Partnerships and programmes in collaboration with civil society organizations that work in humanitarian settings have been useful to widen programme reach in the context of COVID-19. UNFPA and UNICEF mobilized 60 women- and youth-led organizations to build their capacities for preventing and responding to gender-based violence and harmful practices and challenge discriminatory social norms. Through the collaboration with Partners in Law and the Centre for Women’s Development Studies, 13 feminist research and advocacy organizations were mobilized to advocate for a rights-based approach to address harmful practices against women and girls, including child marriage during the year.

Mobilizing adolescents and youths and enabling their agency as change makers is a powerful tool towards empowerment. It is critical to review and do course corrections to support adolescent and youth participation and to mainstream this as a systemic strategy. In some states, like Madhya Pradesh, the programme has been successful with this model to a large extent, including participation of adolescents and youth in mainstream structures. Collaboration with non-traditional partners such as networks of faith-based organizations, small scale factory and informal sector workers, workers

Gender-Transformative Accelerator: India Report

More often than not, an instrumental approach has been adopted for engaging men and boys and addressing toxic masculinities in almost all government programmes. One clear indication emphasizes the need to look for more opportunities to work with men and boys with the largest focus on the core areas of the content, approaches and methodologies. Areas that emerged from the further reflection that are currently missing include:

- Questioning patriarchy power and privilege at all levels
- Demystify gender construct and need to understand gender equality within such a framework
- Sharing power and dismantling it at all levels of the relationship.

I wish we could have done this face-to-face. It would have been so much more impactful, but having said that it is quite good what we have arrived at eventually.

Thank you so much everyone for the engaging workshop. Great learning.

India GTA workshop participants

associations (e.g., domestic workers associations) and cooperatives etc. also needs to be tapped into along with the traditional stakeholders.

**Strengthening systems**

As part of UNFPA’s efforts to improve young people’s access to sexual and reproductive health services, 3,072 nursing faculty workers, doctors and nurses were trained at the national level in providing adolescent-friendly health services. UNFPA also provided technical support to strengthen the implementation of the School Health Programme through inclusion of gender-sensitive life skills education components.

A 22-module capacity enhancement e-learning course was developed to provide accessible quality training to counsellors of the National Adolescent Health Programme (Rashtriya Kishore Swaasthya Karyakram (RKS)), with 428 medical doctors taking the course and improving their capacity to provide comprehensive adolescent-friendly health services in 314 Ujala (an adolescent-friendly health programme) clinics, with 147,788 adolescent girls and boys seeking services from these clinics in Rajasthan state.

In Madhya Pradesh, mentoring and technical support was provided to 832 service providers from 102 Umang (an adolescent sexual and reproductive health programme) clinics for the provision of comprehensive adolescent-friendly health services, with 152,965 adolescent boys and girls seeking services from these clinics. In Odisha, 22 adolescent-friendly health clinics were set up in the Gajapati and Rayagada districts, rising significantly from just three in 2018. Over 6,000 adolescents visited these clinics in 2021, accessing services such as clinical check-ups, group counselling and free medicines. In addition, the attendance of adolescents in village health and nutrition days improved outreach to 50 per cent of all adolescents in the villages that participated (approximately 2,000 adolescents) in 2021, up from 13 per cent in 2018 in the same districts.

Technical support was provided by the Global Programme to states in designing, implementing, reviewing and monitoring social protection schemes, like Mukhyamantri Rajshree Yojana, Shiksha Setu, Mukhyamantri Kanya Utthan Yojana and Kaushal Saamarthya Yojana Mukhyamantri Sukanya Yojana, to ensure access to education and employment opportunities for marginalized adolescent girls at risk of child marriage.

The programme also supported efforts to mitigate the risk of child marriage during the pandemic by facilitating access to cash transfer and social protection schemes for girls. 3.8 million girls have been linked with various cash transfer and social protection schemes using flagship programmes such as the Mukhyamantri Kanya Sumangla Yojana scheme, Kanyashree Prakalpa and private sector scholarships (Hindustan Aeronautics Limited paid for 450 girls’ beautician training) in Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, West Bengal and Assam. Furthermore, policy recommendations were provided to the government (e.g., to increase the number of instalments in cash transfers for every girl, single registry to improve delivery and outreach of schemes especially in vulnerable communities) for horizontal and vertical expansion of existing cash transfer schemes to respond to the pandemic and support vulnerable families.

**LESSONS LEARNED**

Working with self-help groups, Panchayat Raj Institutions, teachers and frontline workers helped to prevent adolescents, particularly girls, from discontinuing education and getting married. Partnerships with women’s collectives, Vikas Mitra, and other government programmes helped to reach adolescents especially from marginalized communities. Adolescent empowerment and participation issues were enhanced and successfully advocated in many states through YuWaah’s programmes and campaigns.

UNICEF continues to work to bring synergy among flagship programmes and departments such as Mahila Shakti Kendra, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, the police, the 181 helpline and other child protection structures and services. To further develop the work on gender-transformative programming, partnerships with civil society organizations with expertise on positive masculinities and on gender-based violence...
“I have seen the difficulties they face now because of the lack of education. I do not want other girls to fall into this trap,” says 20-year-old Shreya, who witnessed her two elder sisters being married off when they were minors.

Shreya is a student based in Jaipur, Rajasthan, the largest state in India by area. She is a part-time volunteer with Jeevan Ashram Sansthan (JAS), a non-governmental organization. JAS is the implementing agency of Naubat Baja Missed Call Radio, a cloud telephony-based radio channel that addresses issues of adolescents’ well-being, empowerment and health. The Naubat Baja project, conceived by UNFPA, is a joint initiative of the Directorate of Women Empowerment, Government of Rajasthan, the Rural Electrification Corporation (REC) Foundation and UNFPA.

As a social volunteer, Shreya knew about the Naubat Baja’s mission and the number of a child helplines that it relayed. In June 2021, she got to hear that Sapna*, a minor, was to be wed to a 30-year-old man. Sapna’s father had taken a loan from the man’s family. When he could not repay it, the lender – the would-be groom’s father – said he would write off the loan if Sapna married his son.

Shreya called the helpline and the police swung into action, stopping the wedding. Sapna was taken to a shelter for two months but is now back home and has re-joined school.

According to the National Family Health Survey (2019-21), underage marriage in India accounted for 23.3 per cent of marriages. Though prohibited, the practice continues in many states in India, including Rajasthan. Launched on International Women’s Day in 2019, Naubat Baja relies largely on the strength of mobile phones, which have penetrated the most remote corners of India. The initiative banks on the fact that the cell phone is the youth’s favourite mode of communication, particularly in areas where people have little access to television, cable connections or the internet.

On giving a missed call to the number 7733959595, the user gets a call back with a 15-minute capsule of free infotainment, peppered with Hindi film songs and short stories and plays themed around social issues including child marriage narrated through comedy or satire. There is news about employment opportunities, general knowledge facts and information about government welfare schemes aimed at youth.

“The initiative is one of the innovative strategies employed by UNFPA and partners involved to ensure young people are aware of their rights and the opportunities available to them, have access to accurate information and services regarding their health and well-being and are able to participate and contribute to addressing social issues that affect them,” says Sriram Haridass, UNFPA Representative India at the time.

The Naubat Baja programme has received a positive response from listeners. The programme, overseen by UNFPA representatives, is produced in studios with the help of a content team of researchers and presented by professional radio jockeys, and the content is regularly updated. Messages on themes, such as child marriage, domestic violence, adolescent girls’ health, menstrual hygiene, gender sensitization, financial awareness and COVID-19 protocols are conveyed through mini radio dramas.

“It is a new and innovative way of spreading socially relevant messages to the youth,” says Umar Deen Khan, district magistrate, Jhunjhunu, a region where child marriage exists.

The programme is marketed and popularized through social media, graffiti and awareness campaigns in rural and urban areas by volunteers, community leaders, members of Panchayats (rural governing bodies) and Anganwadi (rural childcare centres) and accredited social health activist (ASHA) workers. Volunteers and adolescent group leaders associated with Naubat Baja are called champions. Shreya is one such champion.

* Name changed to protect her identity.
Facilitating supportive laws and policies

UNFPA and UNICEF used multiple approaches to support the review, development and strengthening of guidelines and policies at the state level, such as rapid policy assessment tests to identify gaps and amendments required to improve state action plans addressing child marriage, advocacy with key stakeholders using data and evidence to address discriminatory laws and policies and capacity building of key stakeholders aimed at improving the review and modification of policies and strategies.

In Odisha, UNFPA and UNICEF provided technical support to the state government in developing draft guidelines for declaring villages/gram panchayats child marriage free. The process of declaration of a child marriage free village created momentum in the state with over 10,000 villages and 400 wards in Odisha declaring themselves as child marriage free.

At the federal government level, the Prohibition of Child Marriage (Amendment) Bill, 2021, was introduced in parliament, envisaging the increase of the age marriage from 18 to 21. UNICEF supported initiatives like increasing 12
the numbers and improving capacities of Child Marriage Prohibition Officers to strengthen the implementation of the Prohibition of Child Marriage Bill. UNFPA in collaboration with Partners in Law for Development convened a meeting of the National Coalition Advocating for Adolescent Concerns (NCAAC) in December 2021, with the participation of 13 newly mobilized civil society organizations, to discuss the draft Uttar Pradesh Child Marriage Rules, 2021, and the proposal to increase the minimum legal age of marriage for girls and provide feedback from a rights-based perspective.

Concerted support by UNFPA and UNICEF was extended to the national and state governments of India to support district action plans in 175 districts for adolescent empowerment, continuation of girls’ education, linkages to career guidance opportunities, school-to-work transition and social protection programmes and for improving social protection services. Furthermore, policy recommendations were provided to the government (e.g., to increase the number of instalments of cash transfers for girls, implement a single registry to improve delivery and outreach of schemes, especially in vulnerable communities) for horizontal and vertical expansion of existing cash transfer schemes to respond to the pandemic and support vulnerable families.

In Maharashtra, UNICEF supported the state government in publishing the Gender and Child Budget Statements FY 2021-22 for the second consecutive year and in producing an improved GN-7 plan document on child and gender budgets. Analysis of the child and gender budgets showed the inadequacy of investment for ending gender-based violence in the state. High-level advocacy around this led to the development of an action plan for gender equality and child rights, which outlined actions, monitoring indicators, responsible departments and resource allocation mechanisms.

CHALLENGES, LESSONS LEARNED AND NEXT STEPS

The severity of pandemic in India in 2021 led to increased involvement of district and block administrations in COVID-19 prevention and response, including vaccination. This led to limited government attention to the systematic implementation of the state and district action plans to end child marriage and its regular review. Hence, this will be a major priority for state-level advocacy in 2022. While the ongoing pandemic response will continue to take precedence, UNFPA and UNICEF state offices will engage with respective state government to address the loopholes in reviewing state and district action plans.

Consultative meetings bringing together multiple stakeholders of government departments and civil society organizations have paved the way for inter-sectoral convergence in the district. This is required at the state level and will be further pursued. With the activation of a task force and its meaningful participation of stakeholders, capacity building through training of trainers and orientating stakeholders have been able to engage actively. Bilateral discussions with each state department have been useful to guide them in linking their programmes and schemes for prevention and response to child marriage and adolescent priorities.

The approach of developing local resource groups of so called ‘Master Trainers’ from line departments that have an outreach to the community and/or children and adolescents is emerging as good practice since it capacitates a locally available resource. While there are clear challenges in developing such a group, investment in the capacity building of District and Block Resource Groups has been beneficial to the programme and has brought visibility to the adolescent concerns and strengthened prevention and response mechanisms.

Generating and applying data and evidence

A qualitative assessment was undertaken during the year based on data compiled by UNICEF implementing partners (ActionAid, MAMTA and CRY) from the CHILDLINE India Foundation and government data reports on child marriage. The assessment alluded to a rise in domestic violence and a trend of adolescent girls likely to drop out of school. Furthermore, UNICEF implementing partners reported
that containment measures due to COVID-19 may have given parents the opportunity to utilize the secret social space that emerged to give in to economic pressures, leading them to arrange child marriages for their daughters to reduce their economic burden, at a low cost (savings in dowries and other associated wedding ceremony costs).

UNFPA and UNICEF collaborated on two critical pieces of evidence in 2021, first, looking at child marriage through the lens of compulsory marriage, which advocates for life-cycle empowerment approaches to make accelerated progress towards ending child marriage, and second, the development of a policy paper on age of consent and statutory rape laws in India from a child rights perspective. Together with other United Nations agencies, the programme also worked jointly on a technical paper providing input to the discussion on raising the legal age of marriage for women from 18 to 21, highlighting the consequences of such an increase. This paper was submitted to NITI Aayog, the apex public policy think-tank of the Government. In addition, UNFPA and UNICEF supported studies in Rajasthan state to understand the impact of COVID-19 on adolescent girls and parenting. The report is currently being finalized.

UNFPA and UNICEF undertook an analysis of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) and disseminated the findings at the national and state level, advocating for policy commitments on child marriage and concerted action on child marriage in states like Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Maharashtra, and West Bengal. In Telangana, the state commission for protection of child rights used the data analysis for district level reviews, which resulted in integrating child marriage issues into district level review meetings, field visits and in advocating district collectors to strengthen ongoing programmes addressing child marriage. In Andhra Pradesh, the data analysis on child marriage, teenage pregnancy and other adolescent issues resulted in meaningful advocacy around child marriage issues.

In Assam, evidence-based policy advocacy and knowledge generation has been intensified with government and civil society partners. The state has commissioned two assessments to understand the dynamic context vis-à-vis child marriage and gender-based violence, and a situational analysis has been initiated by State Resource Centre for Women and the Indo-Global Social Service Society with technical inputs from UNICEF. In Bihar, a baseline study was conducted to assess the inter-linkages between migration and adolescent vulnerabilities, including child marriage. In collaboration with its partner WaterAid India, UNFPA generated four key pieces of evidence on menstrual hygiene management to inform national and state policy and advocacy. These related to addressing menstrual hygiene management needs of women and girls during emergencies, menstrual hygiene management needs of women and girls with disabilities, understanding knowledge, attitudes and practices of women and girls around menstruation and menstrual hygiene products and understanding the supply chain and procurement practices for menstrual products.

**CHALLENGES, LESSONS LEARNED AND NEXT STEPS**

The absence of standardized management information system platforms and the lack of administrative data from government sources in addressing adolescent programmes is a constraint on programmes addressing child marriage. UNFPA and UNICEF are in the process of developing a programme-specific management information system for capturing data collected manually from available government sources. Both agencies are also working with state government structures in the development and implementation of relevant management information systems. The support to strengthen the management information systems at state and district levels will facilitate the availability of administrative data disaggregated by sex, disability, caste and other socio-economic factors for more effective programming.

Furthermore, there is need for data and evidence to understand the specific reasons and regional factors that contribute to an increase in child marriage. The need for subdistrict level data that can provide specific insights on the prevalence of child marriages has also been raised by some district collectors and state governments.
end child marriage