DISCUSSION PAPER

RECASTING SOCIAL NORMS TO UNIVERSALIZE EDUCATION FOR ADOLESCENT GIRLS: The Mamidipudi Venkatarangaiya Foundation Experience

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REKHA WAZIR AND SHANTHA SINHA

UN WOMEN

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The ideas in this paper have been developed in the course of ongoing discussions and dialogue with our colleagues Bhaskar Goud, Rajendra Prasad, Venkat Reddy and Linda van der Wijk and, of course, the field mobilizers who are the real backbone of the adolescent girls' programme. We would like to acknowledge the thoughtful and incisive comments that we received from the anonymous external reviewers, which have improved the paper considerably. Finally, thanks to Paro Chaujar, our interlocutor at UN-Women, for seeing the paper through cheerfully and patiently from the commissioning stages to its publication, to Constanza Tabbush for her insightful comments, to Elisa Acevedo Hernández for her painstaking editorial coordination and to UN-Women for investing in the dialogue on the complex processes involved in changing social norms towards gender equality and women's agency in the context of the Global South. It has given us a platform and a unique opportunity to share and reflect on praxis and theorization emerging from the work of MVF.

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CRPF	Child Rights Protection Forum
CSD	Council for Social Development
MVF	Mamidipudi Venkatarangaiya Foundation
NGO	non-governmental organization
PCMA	Prohibition of Child Marriage Act
PLD	Partners for Law in Development
POCSO	Protection of Children from Sexual Offenses
SMC	School Management Committee
SNA	Social Norms Approach

SUMMARY

The Social Norms Approach (SNA) is the latest entrant from the behavioural sciences into the field of development practice. It claims to be a scientific and more accurate, efficient and cost-effective methodology for identifying, measuring and changing harmful social norms with a view to bringing about changes in collective behaviour. However, despite its increasing popularity with donors, international agencies and governments, there have been no systematic or long-term evaluations to validate the effectiveness and sustainability of using this approach. Nor is there any research to demonstrate its superiority over other pre-existing approaches. This paper contributes to the ongoing debate in the literature on social norms by providing a counterpoint to the SNA in the experience of the Mamidipudi Venkatarangaiya Foundation (MVF), a civil society organization that aims to universalize education for adolescent girls in three districts of Telangana State, India. Its programme addresses the broad range of obstacles – such as gender discrimination, child labour, early marriage, cultural barriers, lack of safety and security, inadequate facilities in schools and restrictions to physical mobility – that keep girls out of school.

The paper discusses MVF's contrasting community-led approach to transforming social norms on child labour, education and gender and the multi-layered processes that are involved. It outlines the conceptual framework that the organization has developed during its work on social norm change and how its understanding of social norms has evolved in relation to its work on child labour, education and gender justice. It also spells out the specific challenges that are encountered in building social norms for gender equality and adolescent girls' education and the interlinked strategies that are used for bringing about sustainable and lasting norm change. A case study is provided of how adolescent girls were able to resist attempts during the COVID-19 pandemic to reverse the positive norms that had been created, particularly parental and community pressures to send them back to work or force them into early marriage.

There is credible and mounting evidence from the field that MVF's programme has led to sustainable gender norm change and concrete improvements in outcomes for girls. Data collected by the field staff for purposes of tracking and responding to the needs of every girl in the programme provide quantitative corroborations for the claim. These findings have been validated by an independent study that found significant differences in the situation of girls in the programme and in control villages on a variety of variables, including the status of girls in the family, in school, in the community and in resisting early marriage.

RÉSUMÉ

L'approche des normes sociales, la dernière arrivée dans le domaine des sciences du comportement applicables à la pratique du développement, se veut une méthode scientifique et plus précise, plus efficace et plus rentable d'identification, de mesure et de modification des normes sociales néfastes, dans le but de faire évoluer les comportements collectifs. Malgré sa popularité croissante auprès des donateurs, des organismes internationaux et des gouvernements, aucune évaluation systématique ou à long terme n'a été réalisée pour en valider l'efficacité et la durabilité. Par ailleurs, aucune recherche n'a été menée pour prouver sa prééminence par rapport aux approches qui lui ont précédé. Ce document contribue au débat sur les normes sociales qui a lieu actuellement dans la littérature, en proposant une alternative à l'approche des normes sociales fondée sur l'expérience de la Fondation Mamidipudi Venkatarangaiya (MVF), une organisation de la société civile qui vise à universaliser l'éducation des adolescentes dans trois districts de l'État de Telangana, en Inde. Son programme s'attaque au grand nombre d'obstacles, tels que les

discriminations basées sur le genre, le travail des enfants, le mariage précoce, les barrières culturelles, l'insécurité, les installations inadaptées dans les établissements scolaires et les restrictions à la mobilité physique, qui perpétuent la non-scolarisation des filles.

Ce document traite de l'approche communautaire différente adoptée par MVF pour transformer les normes sociales relatives au travail des enfants, à l'éducation et au genre, de même que les processus à plusieurs niveaux qui sont impliqués. Il présente le cadre conceptuel développé par l'organisation dans le contexte de ses travaux relatifs au changement des normes sociales et explique comment sa perception de ces normes a évolué au fil de ses travaux sur le travail des enfants, l'éducation et la justice de genre. Il expose par ailleurs les difficultés spécifiques rencontrées dans le cadre de la création de normes sociales pour l'égalité des sexes et l'éducation des adolescentes, de même que les stratégies interconnectées utilisées pour assurer un changement de normes qui soit viable et durable. Il propose une étude de cas sur la manière dont les adolescentes ont résisté, durant la pandémie de COVID-19, aux tentatives visant à inverser les normes positives qui avaient été créées, et en particulier aux pressions exercées par leurs parents et par la communauté pour les renvoyer au travail et les contraindre à un mariage précoce.

Il existe des preuves crédibles et de plus en plus nombreuses sur le terrain que le programme de MVF a conduit à des changements de normes de genre durables et à des améliorations concrètes pour les filles. Les données collectées par le personnel sur le terrain à des fins de suivi et de réponse aux besoins de toutes les filles bénéficiant du programme corroborent cette affirmation de manière quantitative. Ces conclusions ont été validées par une étude indépendante qui a découvert des différences importantes entre la situation des bénéficiaires du programme et celle des filles de villages témoins sur différentes variables, y compris leur statut au sein de la famille, à l'école et dans la communauté et leur opposition au mariage précoce.

RESUMEN

El enfoque de las normas sociales es la más reciente incorporación de las ciencias del comportamiento al campo de la práctica para el desarrollo. Presenta una metodología científica y más exacta, eficaz y eficiente para determinar, medir y transformar las normas sociales perjudiciales con el propósito de modificar el comportamiento colectivo. Sin embargo, pese a su creciente popularidad entre donantes, organismos internacionales y gobiernos, no se han llevado a cabo evaluaciones sistemáticas o a largo plazo que validen la eficacia y la sostenibilidad de su uso. Tampoco existen investigaciones que demuestren su prevalencia sobre otros enfoques preexistentes. Este trabajo contribuye al debate en curso en la bibliografía científica en torno a las normas sociales al presentar una alternativa basada en la experiencia de la Fundación Mamidipudi Venkatarangaiya (MVF). La MVF es una organización de la sociedad civil dedicada a universalizar la educación de las adolescentes en tres distritos del estado de Telangana (India). En su programa aborda la enorme variedad de obstáculos que les impiden asistir a la escuela, como la discriminación de género, el trabajo infantil, el matrimonio precoz, las barreras culturales, la falta de seguridad e infraestructuras escolares adecuadas y las restricciones a la movilidad física.

En este documento se analiza el enfoque comunitario alternativo adoptado por la MVF para transformar las normas sociales relacionadas con el trabajo infantil, la educación, las cuestiones de género y los procesos multidimensionales conexos. Se describe el marco conceptual que ha elaborado la organización a partir de su trabajo y cómo ha evolucionado su percepción de las normas sociales a raíz de su labor en el ámbito del trabajo infantil, la educación y la justicia de género. Asimismo, se explican los desafíos específicos que plantea la construcción de normas sociales sobre la igualdad de género y la educación de las adolescentes, así como las estrategias empleadas para que el cambio sea sostenible y duradero. Además, se incluye

un estudio de caso sobre cómo un grupo de adolescentes lograron oponer resistencia, durante la pandemia de COVID-19, a los intentos encaminados a eliminar las normas positivas que se habían desarrollado, en particular a las presiones parentales y de la comunidad para que se reincorporaran al trabajo o forzarlas a contraer matrimonio de forma precoz.

Existen cada vez más pruebas fehacientes obtenidas sobre el terreno de que el programa de la MVF ha generado un cambio sostenible de las normas de género y mejoras concretas de los resultados para las adolescentes. Los datos recopilados por el personal de campo con fines de seguimiento y de responder a las necesidades de las beneficiarias corroboran esta afirmación de manera cuantitativa. Los resultados se han validado mediante un estudio independiente que constata diferencias de calado entre la situación de las participantes y la de las adolescentes de las aldeas de control con respecto a diversas variables, incluido su estatus en la familia, la escuela, la comunidad y en la oposición al matrimonio precoz.

INTRODUCTION

This paper will contribute to the ongoing literature on social norms by giving voice and visibility to the work of the Mamidipudi Venkatarangaiya Foundation (MVF), a civil society organization based in Telangana, India.[1] It offers a counterpoint to the behaviour change strategies proposed by the Social Norms Approach (SNA) that is currently making inroads into development theory and practice.[2] MVF was established in 1981 as a non-profit trust to work on issues relating to social transformation. Since 1991, it has been working to abolish child labour and universalize education, in the process developing its own complex, nuanced and effective approach to challenging and changing deep-seated social norms around these issues for children in the 5–14 age group and catalysing a local movement for change.[3] Building on its years of experience and success in eliminating child labour and promoting primary education for all, MVF expanded its focus in 2014 to the obstructive social norms that prevent adolescent girls (aged 14–18) from realizing secondary education and gender equality.[4]

The adolescent girls' programme, which provides the backdrop for this paper, has the objective of universalizing education for adolescent girls in three districts of Telangana State: Ranga Reddy, Vikarabad and Suryapet. It aims to keep girls in (or get them back to) school while addressing a broad range of obstacles that keep them out of school, including gender discrimination, child labour, early marriage, cultural barriers, lack of safety and security, inadequate facilities in schools and lack of physical mobility. The goal is that *all* adolescent girls in the programme area should be able to access and complete secondary education (up to and including 12th standard). Extending the programme to include universal education for girls in the 14–18 age group is significant because without secondary education they cannot continue to the university level, cannot access vocational programmes and are not eligible for a range of employment opportunities. This is also an age when they become vulnerable to early marriage, and patriarchal norms controlling their mobility, behaviour and sexuality come into play with full force – more so than for the younger cohort of girls. The adolescent girls' programme is rooted in the belief that it is possible to change the patriarchal values that rule society, and thus the actions undertaken in the project are based on the possibility of a change in the social norms that are associated with or reflect patriarchy.

MVF has gained recognition for its innovative and distinctive approach to changing norms about education and child labour. Successive external evaluations have attested to the positive results achieved by the programme.[5] Its three decades of work have resulted in dramatic and demonstrable quantitative outcomes: Over a million children have been withdrawn from labour and enrolled into full-time formal schools; 1,500 villages are child labour free, with all children there in school; 25,000 adolescent girls have been retained in school; and 8,000 early marriages have been prevented or pre-empted.[6] Equally significant are the intangible outcomes that have been achieved. The standard processes of systemic social reproduction of inherited norms and structures have been challenged; there has been a transformation in social

1 For details about the MVF, see www.mvfindia.in.
2 For details, see Wazir 2022.
3 Mahajan 2008; Wazir 2002a.
4 The adolescent girls' programme is implemented as a collaborative partnership between the MVF and Stichting Charity Fund Rijsholt based in The Netherlands.
5 See Basu and Millard 2015; Dev 2001; Mukherjee et al. 2005; Purushothaman et al. 2014; Wazir and Saith 2010, among others. For the full range of evaluation and assessment reports, see https://mvfindia.in/documentation-research.
6 www.mvfindia.in.

norms; new imaginaries have been introduced into the lives of the excluded; and local institutions and officials have been made partners in this process.

MVF's work has had a profound influence on government programmes in Andhra Pradesh, most notably on the discontinuation of the non-formal education centres and night schools that were meant to cater to out-of-school children. Instead, following MVF, the government defined child labour as "all children out of school" and adopted the organization's strategy of conducting bridge courses for children who had been removed from work to enable them to be mainstreamed into the formal education system.[7] MVF has made vital contributions to shaping the formulation and enactment of the Indian Government's policies on child labour and education. It participated actively in the National Advocacy Forum for Right to Education – a network of civil society organizations – and was involved in the drafting committee that eventually led to the Right to Education Act (2009). Further, with active participation in the Campaign Against Child Labour – a movement linking abolition of child labour with children's right to education – it pressured the Government to amend the existing Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act 1986 that prohibited child labour only in certain processes and occupations that were defined as "hazardous". The Child Labour Act was amended in 2016, providing for complete prohibition of work or employment of children below 14 years of age in any occupation and process and prohibition of adolescents aged 14 to 18 years in hazardous occupations and processes, bringing it into sync with the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (2009) Act.

In addition, MVF's programmatic approach has been widely disseminated within India in Assam, Bihar,[8] Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh[9] and Tamil Nadu as well as internationally in Ethiopia, Kenya,[10] Morocco, Nicaragua, Nepal, Uganda and Zimbabwe, among other countries.[11] The "MVF model" continues to provide the inspiration and driving force for the international campaign 'Stop Child Labour – School is the Best Place to Work', which is managed by a consortium of agencies in six European countries in cooperation with partners around the world.[12]

We start in section 1 by providing a brief description and critique of the SNA, followed in section 2 by the context in which MVF developed its programme and philosophy. This contextualization is imperative as it provides the foundation on which the adolescent girls' programme evolved and took shape. In section 3, we unpack the conceptual framework that MVF has developed during its work on social norm change, including its understanding of social norms that has evolved in relation to its work on child labour/education and subsequently carried on and matured in the context of the adolescent girls' programme. Section 4 specifies the specific challenges that it encountered in building social norms for gender equality and adolescent girls' education and how they are dealt with in the programme, while section 5 spells out the interlinked strategies that are used by MVF for bringing about sustainable and lasting norm change. In section 6, we provide a case study of how adolescent girls were able to resist attempts during the COVID-19 pandemic to reverse the positive norms that had been created, particularly parental and community pressures to send them back to work or force them into early marriage. Section 7 provides evidence from MVF data and from an independent study of the adolescent girls' programme to confirm the success of the approach in bringing about sustainable gender norm change in the project area. Finally, section 8 concludes with policy recommendations.

7 Jagannathan 2001; Guarcello et al. 2010.
8 See Sinha and Wazir 2024.
9 See Wazir 2007.
10 See Okwany and Wazir 2016 for the replication of MVF's programme in Kenya and Uganda.
11 On the replicability of MVF's approach, see Murphy 2010.
12 See www.stopchildlabour.org.

1.

THE SOCIAL NORMS APPROACH

The use of behaviour change strategies to recast the norms that hold harmful societal practices in place is relatively recent and has been driven largely by behavioural scientists in the Global North. This approach was first used in the 1980s in the United States of America to tackle a range of negative health behaviours such as alcohol consumption, smoking, unhealthy diets and risky sexual behaviours among university students and later extended to other issues such as water use and waste generation.[13] In the last decade, the Social Norms Approach (SNA) has been widely promoted as a more scientific, efficient and cost-effective strategy for tackling a range of recalcitrant behaviours in the Global South.[14]

This move has been spearheaded by Cristina Bicchieri, a philosopher who draws on behavioural economics, behavioural psychology, game theory and randomized control trials (RCT) methodology to develop her thesis. Her premise is that the development projects of international agencies have failed because they did not take account of the social norms that support practices such as child marriage, open defecation, gender violence and AIDS prevention.[15] She was invited by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) to conduct research and design customized manuals and toolkits on changing social norms in the Global South. Her work in this field has spawned a range of researchers who are extending and adapting social norms approaches developed in the North for virtually unrestrained use in the South. The bulk of these researchers are associated with the Social Norms Learning Collaborative, a network of researchers and practitioners who aim to build and share knowledge on social norms theory, measurement and going-to-scale.[16]

According to the theoretical principles underlying the SNA, social norms are guided by social expectations or beliefs about what others do and what others think one should do.[17] Norms are thus maintained by the approval and disapproval of others – the others being the persons in each individual's reference group. In common with other behavioural approaches, the locus of responsibility rests with the individual whose expectations need to be changed to achieve a change in harmful collective behaviours. Thus, the SNA effectively shifts attention away from structural inequalities, constraints and power imbalances in society and locates the problem in the behaviour, choices and actions of individuals. According to Fine et al., this becomes another narrative of blaming the poor for their poverty[18] as "the individual serves as the object of theory development and guides the methodological and practical choices of scholars".[19] The claim is that small "nudges" would add up to a dynamic process of cumulative change in the lives of individuals, families or groups.[20]

The SNA as applied to behaviour change interventions in the Global North has been extensively critiqued on the grounds of the evaluation methodology used – largely RCTs – and the excessive reliance on

13 Dempsey et al. 2018.
14 For a comprehensive exposition and critique of the Social Norms Approach as applied to development practice, see Wazir 2023.
15 Bicchieri 2017.
16 For details, see www.alignplatform.org/learning-collaborative.
17 Mackie et al. 2015.
18 Fine et al. 2016.
19 Dutta-Bergman 2005, p. 106.
20 Sunstein, 2014; Thaler and Sunstein 2008.

self-reporting by participants.[21] In fact, Sniehotta et al. conclude that it might be "Time to retire the theory of planned behaviour".[22] However, it continues to be uncritically endorsed and aggressively promoted in the Global South by a range of international agencies, corporate donors, government agencies and researchers as a panacea for all the problems of development. This is despite any systematic, robust or long-term field evaluations to demonstrate the effectiveness and sustainability of using the SNA in development interventions or its superiority over other, pre-existing methods. The appeal of the SNA can be attributed to the fact that it is ostensibly scientific, measurable and replicable; it promises quick results in solving seemingly intractable issues of development for which international agencies have thus far failed to find solutions; and measurement refers to assessing changes in people's 'expectations' rather than in their behaviour. Additionally, it has the political convenience of diverting attention away from structural rigidities, power and wealth inequalities to the individual, who is now made the key agent for change. This large-scale takeover of field practice by a single approach, backed as it is by powerful donors, governments in the North and researchers, threatens to drown the voices of smaller, independent, creative initiatives of various local movements and organizations that have been active in the field of development – of which MVF is taken here as an exemplar – and that offer an alternative, more nuanced and community and evidence-based approach to changing social norms.

21 Dutta-Bergman 2005; Sniehotta et al. 2014, p. 1.
22 The title of their 2014 editorial.

2.

CONTEXT

When MVF started its programme to eliminate child labour and universalize primary education (classes 1–10) in rural Andhra Pradesh[23] in 1991, the restrictive context posed a daunting challenge. According to the 1991 Census of India, of the total population of children in the 5–14 age group in the state, 44 per cent of boys and 58 per cent of girls were not attending any educational institution while the All-India average for out-of-school children was 44 per cent for boys and 57 per cent for girls. In fact, Andhra Pradesh ranked 22 out of 31 states in the country. In the same year, it had the largest number of child labourers at 1.6 million. Most parents were poor, (near-)landless labourers who did not have the benefit of a school education themselves. Alongside rampant child labour, child marriage was the norm with girls getting married from the age of nine.

Changing deeply ingrained social norms about child labour, out-of-school children and gender inequality was a challenge that MVF confronted head on, with an impressive measure of success. Within a decade of starting its programme in 1991, there was a perceptible improvement in the participation of children in schools in the state of Andhra Pradesh, with the figures for boys and girls not in educational institutions declining to 23 per cent and 29 per cent, respectively.[24] The national average for out-of-school children for this period was 31 per cent of boys and 38 per cent of girls. While these improvements in children's participation in schools as well as in the reduction in child labour cannot be entirely attributed to the work of MVF, which worked in selected districts of the state, it can be partially accounted for by the shift in perception and stance of the state government towards the definition of child labour. As stated above, it began to define child labour as 'all children out-of-school' and started conducting bridge courses to help out-of-school children reach the academic level appropriate for their age in an accelerated fashion so that they could be enrolled in formal schools.[25]

Gender discrimination was deep-rooted, with women worse off on all indicators of literacy and development. The female literacy rate for Andhra Pradesh in 1991 was 32.7 per cent, well below the All-India average of 52.2 per cent and significantly lower than the male rate. Fewer girls were enrolled in school and a larger proportion of them dropped out. Social norms dictated that girls get involved in domestic chores at an early age, and many were married off while still children. The expansion of commercial cash crops – encouraged partly by the ready availability of cheap girl child labour – increased their involvement in bonded and wage labour. The situation of girls was made worse by the fact that parents, particularly mothers, were largely illiterate, there were few role models of educated women and schools were not girl child friendly. In the perception of the parents, their only options were to either put their daughters to work or marry them off.

The work to change social norms on adolescent girls' education and early marriage required addressing a different set of concerns to those that were involved in the work on child labour and primary education. It required addressing questions of personhood, bodily integrity and autonomy and confronting structural and other specific constraints they faced. This has involved MVF in tackling issues such as early marriage, security, violence, sexuality, masculinity and gender

23 The erstwhile state of Andhra Pradesh was split into two states – Andhra Pradesh and Telangana – in 2014.
24 Census of India 2001.
25 Jagannathan 2001; Guarcello et al. 2010.

discrimination in the family, school, local social environment and wider society (see section 4). Gender discrimination is pervasive in Telangana, as in the rest of India, and there are several interlinked sites where this becomes evident:

The home: Discrimination at home is found in the division of labour, the hierarchy in eating, the lack of leisure time for girls, the fact that they do not get new clothes when boys do, the pressure of work and marriage, the norms of behaviour and the lack of time and space given to girls for homework and exams. Girls generally have no freedom and mobility to visit friends, the market or public spaces or to walk alone without an escort. Parents fear social stigma and damage to the family's reputation should the girl fall in love or elope and blame her even when she is a victim of sexual violence. Many girls suffer from emotional anxiety and trauma and are confronted with insinuations and suspicion from their families and communities. Furthermore, the threat of early marriage looms over the lives of most girls, heralding an end to their dreams and aspirations.

The community: The second site is the community, which has its own perceptions about girls overstepping their prescribed norms or behaviour and includes powerful structures, both traditional and secular. Girls are stigmatized for being vocal or strong and for having and expressing leadership qualities, personal aspirations, ambitions and goals. Usually, it is the girls that get pilloried and punished when they are victims of violence and abuse or when they elope to get married. The issue of stopping early marriage for the 14–18 age group – for whom education is neither free nor easily accessible – turned out to be particularly contentious, and a new set of groups had to be won over to establish a social norm.[26]

The school: While schools should be safe sites where all students are considered equal, in reality gender discrimination is rampant, including uneven treatment of girls and boys and staff exercising controls over adolescent girls lest they have boyfriends or even just friends who are boys. Girls are often given the tasks of cleaning the classrooms, school premises and toilets, while boys distribute textbooks, clean the blackboard, assist the teachers in monitoring the class and play active roles in planning and participating in school functions such as the Annual Day, Independence Day or Republic Day. Boys are encouraged to play games, participate in sports and given sports materials while girls are ignored or confined to playing *kho kho*,[27] and they seldom participate jointly with boys in sports. In addition, girls who are married and/or separated are denied access to education.

Legal and policy frameworks: Loopholes and gaps in the legal and policy frameworks leave a space open for harmful practices. For example, the Protection of Children from Sexual Offenses (POCSO) Act was enacted with a view to protecting children from different forms of sexual abuse and to making provisions for child-friendly procedures. Significantly, it raised the age of consent for sexual intercourse from 16 to 18 years. However, a significant proportion of cases under the POCSO Act pertain to consensual relationships between children who fall under the middle adolescence category i.e., 15–18-year-olds.[28] In the majority of these cases, the criminal justice system was triggered by parents who lodged complaints of kidnapping and rape against girls' partners. One study revealed that the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (PCMA), 2006 "is used twice as much against elopements or self-arranged marriages, than it is used in relation to arranged marriages",[29] while Raha demonstrates that "laws meant to protect children have become an instrument to induce fear, regulate and control normative expressions of sexuality, and to punish adolescents for engaging in relationships that families or societies do not approve of".[30]

26 It should be noted that marriage of girls below the age of 14 is no longer practiced in these areas as a result of the earlier work of MVF.

27 A popular South Asian tag game.
28 NCRB 2020.
29 PLD 2020, p. 2.
30 Raha 2021, para. 2.

3.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK EMERGING FROM MVF'S WORK

MVF's approach to recasting social norms – as indeed the definition of social norms that it uses, the philosophical principles that underpin its work and its innovative stance on how to assess sustainability – has evolved independently and organically in the iterative process of designing and then implementing its programme. The framework is constantly evolving and absorbing new organizational learnings as the programme deepens and matures. For example, the extension of the programme to changing education and gender norms for adolescent girls has led to new realizations on issues such as gender justice, patriarchy, masculinity, violence against women, bodily integrity and sexuality that had been internalized by staff at all levels of the organization, not just those who are dedicated to this programme. It is worth revisiting the genesis of MVF's programme to better understand the approach that it uses for challenging and changing gender norms.

3.1 The genesis of MVF's approach to social norm change

MVF started its work on child labour in Andhra Pradesh in 1991 with the release from bonded labour of 30 children – mostly from *Dalit* communities – who were enabled to join schools. Based on this initial field experience, several key issues came to the fore and were discussed and debated within the organization. A contentious issue was whether it was compulsions of poverty that forced *Dalit* parents to pledge their children into bondage and servitude, as informal village study conducted at the time showed that this practice was prevalent mainly among those communities and had to do with caste hierarchy and traditional forms of oppression. However, it emerged that some of the poorest (including some *Dalit*) families deviated from the norm and did send their children to school. And an important realization was that even as some children were released from bonded labour, there was an endless supply of out-of-school children who were available to be employed in their place. This was equally true for girls who were engaged in domestic work. It thus became clear that the programme had to focus on children and their rights and not on caste issues. As the inextricable link between the elimination of child labour and children enjoying their right to education became crystal clear, MVF began to take a universal approach and define all children who were out of school as child labour.

The view that child labour was "normal" and "inevitable" for poor families was deeply entrenched at all levels of society – rich and poor, elite and subalterns – as well as at the level of the state. The state education policy was in consonance with this regressive societal norm as it prescribed non-formal education for

working children so that they could "earn and learn". The schools also gave a clear message that they were not serious about enrolling and teaching poor children. Moreover, the governmental and international legal and policy frameworks gave legitimacy to the existence of child labour by prohibiting only *some* forms. All this is to the advantage of the market, which depends on the exploitation of children as a source of cheap labour, and the state, which finds a justification for not investing enough on education. Poor parents internalized these messages and did exactly what was expected of them by giving up on their children's education and sending them to work. This dire combination of regressive social norms and enabling policy framework played a hegemonic role in both child labour and out-of-school children being regarded as "normal" and in reproducing structures of domination and oppression in society. MVF took an uncompromising stand that *all* children should be in school and *no* child should be at work. This was at odds with the normative expectations of the society at large that poor children must work to contribute to family income and that they would be better off learning traditional skills as the formal education system had neither the quality nor relevance to improve their lives.

Changing the prevailing situation where child labour was rampant required challenging the existing social norm that tolerated child labour and out-of-school children and replacing it with the new norm that all children had rights that had to be protected in all circumstances. The rights-based discourse and the principle of universality fit well into MVF's definition of child labour that embraced all out-of-school children. The principles of equality and non-discrimination based on caste, gender or other deprivations became paramount. It was clear that a change in social norms required the *entire* community – and not just parents of non-school-going children – to transcend its political, cultural, class, caste and other differences in favour of children's rights. The community, civil society and the officials and institutions of the state were made equal partners in bringing about a change in the lives of children.

MVF's tradition of debate and deliberation on the early experiences and initial practice in the field led to the creation of a charter of basic principles to eliminate child labour in its entirety, also known as the non-negotiable principles:

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

These non-negotiable principles have become the organization's guiding philosophy and provide the theoretical framework within which field staff develop and implement their programme to change norms in the community. It gives them the conviction that it is possible, and necessary, to end child labour and universalize education here and now and not to postpone the target as policymakers are habitually inclined to do. A complementary set of non-negotiables principles was created in 2014 when the programme was extended to ensure universal education for all adolescent girls:

> "1. All girls must be in a full-time school or any full-time education stream until completion of 18 years.
> 2. Girls and boys must enjoy equal opportunities to pursue education and build their capabilities.
> 3. Presence in an education institution should be a pre-condition for building awareness on reproductive health care, sex education and life skills for both boys and girls.
> 4. Arguments such as domestic work, distance to schools, lack of safety for girls, sexual harassment, increase in dowry, sibling care, poverty and pressure of marriage are mechanisms used to control girls' bodily integrity and deny

them education, choices, opportunities, mobility, autonomy and are therefore unacceptable.

5. The discourse on gender equality must be introduced into the school curriculum from Class 1 onwards.

6. Youth clubs must be non-gendered, secular spaces where all members are equal, without distinctions of gender, caste, religion, disability or any other forms of discrimination.

7. No girl should marry before attainment of 18 years of age. Child Marriage law must be amended to nullify marriage of all girls until 18 years of age.

8. Even after attainment of 18 years, the girl's decision and choice for her marriage is to be given full support."

As is obvious from the above, even the non-negotiable principles that guide MVF's work in the field are not static but evolve and respond to new needs. Each of the above principles contests the existing practices ingrained in patriarchy and gender discrimination. They disturb the normative frameworks that deny girls mobility and freedom, and they enable a discourse on girls' agency towards a society that respects gender equality.

3.2
Unpacking MVF's understanding of social norms

According to MVF's understanding, social norms ascribe legitimacy, desirability, appropriateness, normality or inevitability to accepted practices of behaviour in a community or society. Norms are embedded in and reflect economic, political and social inequalities that characterize particular social settings. This applies to practices such as child labour and lack of education, which are seen as normal and inevitable for poor children, or to early marriage, which is seen as both desirable and appropriate for poor girls. Such regressive social norms legitimize and support inequality and exclusion in societies, and this disparity is handed down through the generations, helping to maintain and entrench the status quo. Even those members of society who know these practices to be incorrect or unjust reconcile to them as they see them as inevitable.

It is important to note that norms do not apply equally, or in the same manner, to all members of any given community or society. Thus, those at the top of the pyramid might believe that their children should go to school while they consider this unnecessary or unfeasible for the children of families at the bottom, who should work to supplement family incomes, i.e., there is one rule for the privileged and quite another for the disadvantaged. The values of the elite and better entitled thus get reflected as the values of the entire society. The reproduction of such harmful practices is condoned and supported by custom as well as by religious and local institutions.

Even the state bureaucracies, whose job it is to ensure school enrolment and prevent child labour and early marriage, flout the laws of the land with impunity, adhering to the social norms that justify child labour, out-of-school children and early marriage. The existing social norms become an excuse and justification for maintaining the status quo, resulting in half-hearted budgetary allocation for children's right to education and protection and non-compliance with laws. Thus, state inaction and complacency towards children, especially of the poor, reinforces existing social norms.

MVF believes that such deeply entrenched norms change only when there is a rise in awareness at the bottom of the pyramid that triggers a process of contestation and the instalment of new norms to which the entire society agrees. It recognizes that there are structural inequalities in society, but it is not overwhelmed by them. It believes that changing social norms impacts societal structures as well. Indeed, every right attained has a deep impact on changing the structure of society and the deepening of democracy. Propelled by the perspective that changing social norms is doable and necessary, MVF has evolved a set of principles of field practice, which in turn are converted into field strategies that result in a lasting impact.

3.3

Philosophical underpinnings of MVF's approach

The philosophical underpinnings of MVF's approach, as well as the strategies used (see section 5) are not static but are continuously developing, evolving and responding to ground realities and to new issues that are taken on board. MVF's field practices are marked by adherence to a set of organically evolved ground rules and principles, and it is possible to elicit these inductively through their practice.

The first of these is *recognizing the indispensability of every person* in the process of changing social norms. The most self-serving employer of children, stubborn parent, recalcitrant schoolteacher, corrupt functionary, indifferent politician, insensitive opinion-maker, hardened underground Maoist cadre, rent seeker and local dons are all given equal importance and respect. The challenge is to win them over and change their hearts and minds so that they all become partners in the process of changing norms on child labour, education and gender. Nobody is treated as an adversary and everyone is seen as a potential partner, since the quarrel is not with the person but with the values they hold. Contrary to the quick fix suggested by the SNA, in MVF's approach the process of discussion and motivation carries on till there is a change in the mindsets of the individuals involved and they gain the courage to take a stand in favour of change. For the mobilizers, the real victory is in getting these same people to become children's advocates and their partners in the movement against child labour and in favour of education. MVF is of the firm belief that social norms will change only when the entire community agrees with the new norm, not just employers of children, parents of child labourers and out-of-school girls or those who arrange early marriages for their daughters. The principle of universality thus applies not just to including all children in the programme but to including the last person in the community as well. This is an important difference with the SNA, where change is sought merely through changing the mindsets of individuals in a sub-section of the community.

A second principle is that *violence is to be shunned at all times*. In the early phases of the project, there were instances when the mobilizers experienced boycotts, abuse, insults, humiliation and threats to their life in the process of withdrawing a child from work or preventing a child marriage. However, dialogue, discussion and patient engagement were strictly adhered to at all times. The principle of universality requires that the discussion with the community does not stop until the original objective of reaching every child or every adolescent girl has been achieved. Non-violence, as well as the process of dialogue and discussion, compels openness, transparency and inclusion. It is seen not only as a moral force but also as the only method to democratize societies.[31] Adhering to the principles of non-violence and universality has the additional advantage of ensuring that there is no backlash in matters such as withdrawing a child from work, enrolling an adolescent girl in school or preventing an early marriage, all of which require the exercise of agency in defiance of power relations withing the family and the community. MVF's experience has shown that the process of building a social norm is one of resolving conflicts, and the success of the action lies in the *manner* in which the conflicts are resolved. The field staff are trained to follow up with parents, have a continuous dialogue with them and help them reconcile to the new reality. Gradually parents come to be convinced that they made the right decision. Others in the community – those who took a stand in favour of the child and those who opposed it – are also contacted and the discussion continues with them as well. This process eases tensions and helps in vocalizing support for children's education and their rights.

Third, *the attitudes of individual state officials and the roles of local institutions are not seen to be static*. There is no acceptance of the stereotypical view that these officials have a vested interest in maintaining their own power and authority and would never work for the common good. MVF is in constantly engaging with local institutions as public institutions providing services, and with elected local officeholders as public representatives and not as individuals

31 For the influence of Gandhian thought and practice on the work of MVF, see Mukherjee et al. 2005; Sinha 2019.

belonging to a particular caste or community, so that the possibility of changing institutional responses opens up. Engaging with these individuals is seen as an issue of governance that must be corrected. For example, the presence of officials and law-enforcing institutions gives legitimacy and a stamp of authority to the process of stopping an early marriage. To get them to this stage of commitment is again a process of interface with project staff, the community and the girls themselves. From initial indifference to the issue, public servants begin to take pride in the transformation their actions make to the lives of girls. It is in this environment that girls get the courage to act without fear of reprisals, and the agency of the girls reinforces the rest of the community to take a stand.

Fourth, MVF field staff *appeal to the values of freedom, equality, rights and social justice that are enshrined in the Indian Constitution* to give legitimacy to their stand, be it against child labour, in favour of education or in support of adolescent girls' rights. According to Appadurai, "the poor have a deeply ambivalent relationship to the dominant norms of the societies in which they live" and can display "fairly deep moral attachments to norms and beliefs that directly support their own degradation".[32] The mobilizers encourage the process of discussion and debate to contest these deeply held views by raising questions such as: Is it fair and just to have thousands of children in our villages working as child labourers? Should they not all be in schools? What about their rights? How does early marriage impinge on the health and well-being of girls? Should adolescent girls not have the same rights as adolescent boys? What they do, in Appadurai's words, is develop the "capacity to aspire ... to debate, contest, enquire and participate critically" so as to challenge these norms.[33]

In most cases, the values enshrined in the Indian Constitution have not percolated down to the community or local institutions, and even officials of the state and public institutions, who as the duty bearers should have been defending these principles, have not internalized them. They too adhere to the existing practices that perpetuate inequality, bondage and gender injustice in society. Thus, the old social norms remain in place even when they contradict constitutional principles. Translating these constitutional values into daily practices within the family and the community has a lasting value and appeal for public action. While constitutional principles are emphasized, the mobilizers also focus on moral and ethical values of justice and fairness. For instance, the issue of childhood being denied is very powerful in moving people to take a stand in favour of children and their rights. While the notion of childhood is abstract and thus cannot be guaranteed by law, discussions about whether it is fair that their children should be denied the right to education and should work, whether they deserve a better life today and in future and whether they also need to learn and play like other children do add a normative symbol of what constitutes childhood in principle and how it is being denied to so many children in their community.

Fifth, *children's participation* is seen as crucial by MVF in bringing about a transformation in their own lives and in building new norms in the community. When children begin to exercise agency and demand their rights, parents are forced to give in to their attempts to exercise control over their lives. Children, especially girls, also use other means of negotiation such as refusing to eat or speak till the parents relent and allow them to attend school, continue their education or avoid early marriage. Similarly, officials in public institutions are compelled to address the urgent and practical challenges posed by children's determination to secure their rights. Children's acts of defiance against existing social norms compels officials to utilize the policy mandates and legal instruments at their disposal and respond to children's demands that their right to education and protection from labour and early marriage should be secured. For example, the collective action of adolescent girls in the project has resulted in bus services plying to their villages to coordinate with school timings. The girls petitioned the District Transport Corporation and conducted very public *rasta rokos* (roadblocks) and *dharnas* (sit-ins) till they were successful. Another difficulty faced by the girls was procuring income and caste certificates required for admission to secondary schools. They managed

32 Appadurai 2004, p. 65.
33 Ibid., p. 70.

to get this resolved by taking the issue beyond the village to the *mandal* level.[34]

There are, however, limits to what local officials can do. Children's voice and agency thus also confront, and lay bare, the overall norms that shape governmental policies. These seemingly micro and local acts expose the larger structures of the economy, the politics of development and the priorities of the state. Thus, the simple act of saying 'no' to one's past and charting a new path disturbs the equilibrium and has implications for radicalizing society.[35] It can lead to fashioning a new set of traditions, cultures, values and norms based on respect for dignity, equity and justice for children. Exercising agency leads to shaping new destinies for, and by, the child, which hopefully galvanizes the state and local society to embrace its responsibilities towards all children and their rights.

3.4
Impact and sustainability

MVF sees an inextricable link between changing social norms and achieving its organizational objectives of eradicating child labour in its entirety and universalizing education, including for adolescent girls. While the process of changing social norms enables the realization of the objectives of the organization, it in turn solidifies the social norms in favour of children's rights. The success of the programme in changing social norms is, on the one hand, assessed in terms of tangible outcomes such as increases in school attendance, reduction in child labour, an end to the practice of early marriage, increased mobility of girls and a decrease in incidents of sexual harassment against them. On the other hand, it is also assessed in terms of intangibles such as changes in the daily practices of gender discrimination and towards gender equality in families, schools and other relevant public institutions such as local bodies, SMCs and public spaces.

A fundamental question that arises, as in the case of all such civil society-led interventions, is the issue of sustainability with autonomy and independence. True sustainability can occur only when the new norms take hold and the community and local institutions are sufficiently empowered to ensure that there is no back-sliding to the previous situation even after the external agency has withdrawn. An exceptional feature of MVF's approach is that it builds the conditions for ensuring its own withdrawal. Long-term sustainability has been translated into operational strategies and is implemented and developed from the outset everywhere. MVF embeds processes and institutional structures that enhance local capacities for independent action. In fact, MVF judges the sustainability of new norms by the ability of the community and its institutions to take independent actions in monitoring and ensuring the rights of all children to education and protection from labour. It does not create parallel institutions to the state, become a substitute for community action or act on behalf of the community. For example, while petitioning the government for better infrastructure facilities, stopping a child marriage or engaging with the schools for re-admission of a school dropout into an age-appropriate class, its primary role is to facilitate and prepare the community for collective action and taking a stand.

Widespread acceptance of the new norm means that the organization can reduce its role and presence over time. Once the new norm takes hold, the old framework rapidly begins to lose credibility and it is rare for the community to slide back to the previous status quo. In the villages where all children have been successfully enrolled in formal school, the discussion has gradually shifted from whether children should be at work or in school to the quality of education, teachers and school infrastructure and to facilitating access to high school so that children can continue their education beyond the village school. A similar change is discernible in the adolescent girls' programme, where parents are no longer focused on arranging marriages for their adolescent daughters and are instead more concerned about how and where the girls can complete their secondary education.

34 A *mandal* is an administrative block consisting of several villages.
35 Sinha 2016, p. 64.

4.

CHALLENGES IN BUILDING SOCIAL NORMS FOR GENDER EQUALITY AND ADOLESCENT GIRLS' EDUCATION

The process of building social norms around child labour and education had resulted in getting all children in the 5–14 age group, including girls, into school till the completion of class 10. The adolescent girls programme extended universalization of education to the 14–18 age group. While the strategies for changing social norms remained the same as in the child labour/education programme, there were certain specificities that had to be resolved in the work with adolescent girls. Existing norms about child marriage, sexuality, safety and the behaviour expected of an adolescent girl had to be exposed, challenged and replaced, and the gender biases in each girl's journey to school had to be addressed. Indeed, many more nuanced practices had to be introduced to create an atmosphere in support of adolescent girls' education and gender equality in the family, in schools, in local institutions and in public spaces. This made the work with adolescent girls more complex.

In the child labour/education programme, the mobilizers could take a strong stand as they came from similar backgrounds and needed no convincing. MVF staff are all committed activists and field mobilizers who have worked long years on changing social norms on child labour and education. Many of them are dedicated trainers themselves and all of them had been exposed to several rounds of training over the years on a variety of issues, including on gender. However, extending this work to the fight for gender justice and universal education for adolescent girls raised a fresh set of challenges for staff. It opened up debates on patriarchy, masculinity and gender equality, and the mobilizers – both female and male – had to actively internalize a new set of norms themselves before they could set out to work on changing mind sets in the community. It became clear that a fresh round of orientation and training for staff at all levels of the organization was required. The men had to confront and challenge themselves about the inequalities in their own familial relations, while the women gained voice and empowerment to make changes in their personal domains.[36]

The training sessions led staff to a transparent understanding of the social constructs of gender inequality and the politics of patriarchy. The starting point was

36 For the reflections of MVF staff about the dramatic, profound and personal impact of the gender training that they underwent, see Ika Chaalu 2022a.

for the male staff to interrogate their own roles in their respective families and the space they gave to the women to exercise agency. They began to grasp how patriarchy is pervasive; it is about power relations and expresses itself in every nook and cranny of not only their professional work but also their personal lives. And it went beyond them, affecting institutional frameworks, laws and policies as well as mobility, freedom and justice for women. While patriarchal norms exist in all classes, regions and cultures, they are further compounded for the poor, marginalized, lower caste *Dalit* and *Adivasi* women who have to combat multiple layers of inequality. MVF staff – female and male – began to recognize that gender inequality was a deeply political and contentious issue that had to be combatted alongside all other issues of inequality. For a social norm in favour of gender equality to be arrived at and emphasized in their work, they had to first become the change they wanted to bring about in the community. In fact, they had to defy patriarchal norms within their families, leave behind the gendered roles defined by masculinity, contend with resistance from their own family and neighbourhood and emerge as a voice for gender equality and mutual respect. Empowered by their success in resolving the issues of gender discrimination in their own homes, they had the wherewithal and conviction to set out to change norms through in the adolescent girls' programme.

The activities under the adolescent girls' programme (see section 5) aim at resolving the sites of conflict in favour of girls' education and a more equal situation at home and within the family, and the elimination of gender discrimination in the neighbourhood, schools, residential hostels and other institutions. Furthermore, the goal is to change the attitude of teachers, elected officials and other government officeholders. To do so, the project not only works with adolescent girls directly but also with boys, parents, teachers, local institutions, state officials and community members. It is considered essential to build the capacities of *Gram Panchayats* (elected local government), SMCs, youth associations and women's groups, as they are the key institutions that give support to girls and make it possible for them to not only assert and exercise agency but also to fulfil their aspirations.

At home, MVF's interventions had to start at a micro level. A girls' claim for equal space in the family was contentious; it disturbed the equations among family members and had to be resolved. At the community level, MVF mobilizers had to contend with powerful *caste panchayats* – traditional bodies led by caste elders who adjudicate in marital, land, theft and family disputes in their caste – which reinforced and justified patriarchal norms. While their decisions have no legal sanctity, they have enormous moral authority over members of their caste. Defying such powerful caste elders, who often mediated on issues of marriage, was not easy. Even priests who solemnized and blessed marriages were instrumental in perpetuating discrimination against girls. They were significant barriers to adolescent girl's education and had to be won over so they would be in favour of girls and against gender discrimination. This meant contending with entrenched traditional forces that had a moral presence in the lives of the people.

The role of traditional institutions could be contested only when more secular ones such as *Gram Panchayats,* schools and law enforcement agencies were prevailed on to establish new values of gender equality for adolescent girls. In the beginning, even public servants such as schoolteachers and the police were not ready to accept the idea of adolescent girls' mobility and would question parents about giving so much liberty to their daughters. They, too, had to be sensitized and brought on board to act in support of gender equality and girls' education. After repeated engagement with secular institutions, as well as with *caste panchayats* and religious leaders, and after seeking their support to be part of the solution and not the problem, they have also changed their stance.

In schools, teachers at first refused to acknowledge that gender discrimination was an issue, resisted the idea of MVF mobilizers advising them on girls' education and construed it as a threat to their authority. However, after constant interaction and persistent dialogue, there has been a change in their attitudes towards adolescent girls.

Changing social norms on sexuality in the wider society required a new vocabulary as such issues were seldom openly debated or discussed. MVF mobilizers

enabled the community to regard instances of girls' elopement or falling in love as a natural process of adolescence and growing up and a matter of bodily integrity and autonomy. These issues are now being discussed at the *Gram Panchayat* level, and girls raise the issue of sexual violence in meetings. From a position where sexuality was not a point of discussion at all, clear stands are being taken on the matter in favour of girls. Such discussions about personhood, bodily integrity and autonomy did not come up in an explicit manner during the establishment of a social norm against child labour and in favour of education for all children in the 5–14 age group.

5.

STRATEGIES FOR CHANGING EDUCATION AND GENDER NORMS FOR ADOLESCENT GIRLS

The field practices of MVF evolved in the earlier child labour/education project in the process of planning for every child's journey out of work and into school.[37] MVF field staff use a range of interlinked strategies for bringing children to school and ensuring that they remain there. Briefly, these include activities to create a demand for education, raising awareness of gender issues in the community, involving the community in the ownership and management of the programme, strengthening existing structures and institutions, building consensus in the community, negotiating resistance and forming local pressure groups.

However, MVF staff do not have a toolkit or training manuals to guide them in this work. The strategies develop organically, respond to needs as they arise and are locally designed and acceptable. Nuanced processes are initiated that involve constant planning, implementing, monitoring, evaluating and learning from each move. The field mobilizers have to count on their experience and intuition to draw from several possibilities of action, but always with the end goal of enrolling every child in school, and in so doing expand the base of child defenders. The role of MVF as an organization is to enable the dynamic efforts on the ground, be aware of the challenges and risks, facilitate learning and conceptualize the practices that emerge in the process of building a social norm.

The same strategies are used in the adolescent girls' programme but with the added objective of changing education and gender norms for adolescent girls. The framework within which field staff develop their strategies are described below.

37 For a detailed exposition of the strategies used by MVF in their child labour/education, programme see: Mahajan 2008; Wazir 2002a, 2002b.

5.1 Taking an area-based approach

In keeping with MVF's philosophy, universality is not only an underlying principle but also an integral part of the approach. MVF operationalizes the principle of universality that underpins its work by taking an "area-based approach", i.e., covering every child in the 6–18 age group whether in or out of school in the designated project area, which can be a politico-administrative unit of a *Gram Panchayat*, a cluster of *Gram Panchayats*, a *mandal*, a cluster of *mandals* or blocks or a district as a whole. Every child out of school in this area, regardless of gender, caste, disability or any other differentiation, is reached out to and motivated to enrol in a full-time day school.

In the adolescent girls' programme, every adolescent girl in the designated project area is known to the field mobilizers, and data are collected and updated on each one of them on a regular basis (see section 5.6 on MVF's data collection methodology). The focus is not on specific target groups, such as *Dalits*, *Adivasis* or victims of sexual abuse, or on specific issues such as child marriage, child labour or trafficked children. Every girl matters and is heard and motivated by the mobilizers, and the problems of each one of them are resolved. The task of enrolling girls in school is supplemented by activities to ensure that they remain in school as it is believed that survival in the school system, especially of first-generation learners, is precarious; unless there is a rigorous follow up, they may drop out and eventually join or re-join the labour force. Since every girl is deemed to matter in this approach, it becomes a practical instrument for enabling alliances and partnerships transcending identities of religion, caste, region or occupational patterns and political alignments in support of adolescent girls and their well-being. It allows for public debate and discourse on their rights in the community as well as with state officials and fosters the process of building a new social norm in their favour.

5.2

Building a consensus about the need for gender norm change

Harmful practices can change only when there is a consensus in the community about the need for norm change. MVF field mobilizers expose practices, attitudes, habits, cultures and institutions that reinforce child labour, child marriage or gender discrimination. They are trained to use case studies and concrete examples in their discussions with members of various forums. These issues are not discussed in a vacuum; rather, they are brought up through campaigns, public meetings, posters, wall writings, street theatre and other modes that propel individual agency as well as collective action. Concrete instances of the release of children from the labour force and its impact on the child and the family, or of stopping a child marriage and its consequences for a girl's future health and well-being, are taken up while engaging with the community and serve as examples to hesitant parents and hardened employers. These cases are debated and discussed, and experiences are shared about how the issue was resolved with the help of allies in the community, local institutions and state offices. Poor parents know that because they have never been to school, they live a life of unfreedom, insults and humiliation. They do not want their children to go through the hardships of poverty and injustice that they do and see education as the only way to give them opportunities. When they hear their experiences being discussed and debated, they gain the confidence to say, "I do not want my child to become like me". The consensus-building activities enables their voice. Gradually, the mindsets of the community begin to change as they internalize the new norms and become partners in the process of eradicating harmful norms and replacing them with the new ones. They are galvanized and prepared to engage with local officials, and then with district and state level officials, to make them accountable for protecting the rights of children.

5.3

Strengthening local Institutions and creating new ones

From its inception, MVF has followed the policy of strengthening local institutions to become champions of children's and adolescent girls' rights and to monitor child labour, education and early marriage in their village. Every public space and institution – such as women's groups, self-help groups, youth associations and farmers' associations as well as formal structures such as *Gram Panchayats*, parent-teacher associations and SMCs – are reached out to in the process of creating new norms.

In addition, new institutional arrangements such as the Child Rights Protection Forum (CRPF),[38] Adolescent

38 CRPFs are local institutions set up by MVF in all villages in the project area.

Girls Committees[39] and School Gender Committees[40] are constituted. Depending on the context or issue, a federation of each of these forums is constituted with an apex body, while at other times there is a coming together of all the forums. Networks are seen to be important, and so a number of different ones are built through these forums. There are also situations where the members wear multiple hats; for example, the same woman may be a parent and a member of a self-help group, an SMC, a *Gram Panchayat* and a CPRF.

5.4
Setting up a variety of forums and networks

The question is frequently asked about the need to have so many forums in the field. This is a deliberate strategy of MVF as overlapping forums are seen as an advantage in building a new social norm since each of them has a distinct role to play. The forums' activities depend on their leadership and their level of preparedness. They are necessary in bringing people together to have an open debate and discussion based on concrete evidence and in building a consensus on new ways of thinking about adolescent girls' rights, gender equality and justice. These platforms help to contend with specific cultural practices that thwart adolescent girls' rights in different communities – for example, *Dalits*, *Yadavs*, tribals and nomads – getting them to think about issues, dispelling their fears, giving them confidence to accept a changed reality and enabling them to take a common stand. There is no one-size-fits-all approach or strategy for achieving this. Instead, field mobilizers undertake several micro-level interventions enabling a common stand on children. There is, after all, strength in numbers, and expressions of solidarity in the various forums help to gradually reshape deeply rooted and inherited norms.

MVF mobilizers have gained sufficient field experience to gauge the preparedness of individuals in the various forums and the forums' readiness as a group to take a stand. Thus, the agenda for action is not imposed by them but is collectively decided. Activities such as meeting parents, local bodies and *sarpanches* (elected heads of local government), petitioning the local government and the district authorities, holding public meetings, meeting the press and escalating the issue to a higher level are all charted out based on these dynamics. The many fears the community has are addressed by the mobilizers with patience, issue by issue, in all the forums that are set up by the project till the members are ready to take action.

5.5
Taking a multi-pronged approach

Changing social norms is a multi-pronged activity that must take place at several levels and in different arenas. It is not a sequential process, as suggested by the SNA, and nor is it a mechanical activity. It requires social mobilization that is affective, emotionally fuelled and a work of care, love and empathy and that galvanizes the support of the community and those working in local institutions. For example, at times teachers or schools may be ahead of the community in being sensitive to the issue of gender discrimination in schools. They may initiate a process of girls and boys playing together in the school grounds, which may be seen as a radical step by the community. In other places, the community and the *Gram Panchayats* may be prepared to send married girls or girls who have eloped back to school to pursue their education, but the schools may not be ready to accept the girls out of fear that they could be a bad influence on other students. MVF mobilizers thus often have to take decisions that are contextual, challenging and complex but that are essential to bringing about holistic and sustainable change.

39 Adolescent Girls' Committees have been constituted in every programme village and consist of all the girls in the village aged 11–18. The field mobilizers provide training on gender issues, rights, laws and policies and introduce them to relevant local institutions such as the police and Childline. They meet once a fortnight and more often when urgent action is required to, for example, stop an early marriage. Currently there are about 8,000 active members in these committees.

40 These are school-based groups, and the members are both girls and boys.

5.6

Data collection, tracking and measurement

The development of a reliable, comprehensive and readily usable database is another crucial element in MVF's norm change strategy. This database allows it to track each child in the school-going age group to more accurately identify the weak links in the educational chain on a continuous basis. In the adolescent girls' programme, MVF field staff gather information on every girl in the 11–18 age group. They collect information on girls in and out of schools: their names, the classes in which they are studying and, if out of school, where they are and what they are doing. They make lists of girls enrolled in residential institutions, model schools and hostels, those planning to take the class 10 board examinations and those attending higher secondary schools, diploma courses and undergraduate studies as well as a list of child marriages. Each adolescent girl is accounted for by the field staff, who are constantly in touch with them either directly or through their networks. In this way, they enable girls to continue their secondary education, ensure that they attend school regularly, stop early marriages from taking place and resolve any other issues as they arise that may prevent a girl from pursuing her education. This process of information gathering brings the field mobilizers in contact with every household and allows them to have a conversation with family members and identify potential allies in the community who see merit in the programme, whether farmers, bus conductors, auto rickshaw drivers, shopkeepers, women's groups and so on. It allows them to gauge the challenges in addressing the issue of gender equality and girls' education, and they become aware of cases of violence, abuse, child labour and child marriage that require urgent action.

Household-level information is supplemented by comprehensive data collection at the school level. For each school, up-to-date statistics are gathered for each class covering children resident in the reference village as well as those coming from neighbouring villages. All cases of new enrolments, as well as individual-level information on all long absentees (defined as children not attending class for longer than 7–10 days) in each class in each school are noted. These two databases allow MVF staff to focus on three key points of vulnerability: First, they can identify and follow up on each non-school-going adolescent girl; second, they can identify children who are at risk of dropping out by quickly and accurately capturing episodes of long absenteeism (the first indication of eventually dropping out) and following up with the family of the child concerned; and third, they can focus on the outcome of annual exams, the crunch point in the transition of cohorts from one school year or schooling level to the next. Data are gathered for each annual exam of each class to track those who passed, those who failed but stayed enrolled, those who did not take the exam and those who did not register in the next class. Again, individual-specific follow-ups take place for all children who do not remain registered. It is through actions such as these that the rate of dropouts during the schooling process is minimized. Clearly there is many a slip between enrolment and completion, and this is where MVF's interventions make a telling difference.

The information collected by MVF mobilizers is continuously updated and consolidated as numbers and statistics that show the progress of their interventions in quantitative terms. In addition, MVF has records of case studies, focus group discussions, interviews with teachers, parents and children, diaries of MVF mobilizers, lists of the meetings held by the MVF mobilizers with members of CRPFs, SMCs and *Gram Panchayats* along with the numbers of child labour released and child marriages stopped. All this becomes useful for MVF to gauge the challenges faced by the mobilizers on the ground and in giving them support whenever needed. This information also assists in reporting to donors against the parameters agreed with them and for the purposes of accountability (see section 7).

5.7

Bringing it together: The role of MVF field mobilizers

The strategies listed above are implemented on the ground by MVF field mobilizers – both female and male – who form the key link in the process of changing

child labour, education and gender norms. They are paid staff, belong to the communities in which they work, and have graduated Class 10. They are all first-generation learners from poor, marginalized *Dalit* and *Adivasi* communities who have struggled to overcome their own challenges in securing an education. They are acutely conscious of the inequalities in the education system and have first-hand knowledge about the culture of schools and residential hostels, which can be humiliating and discriminatory. At the same time, they have experienced the transformation that education can bring about, especially to confidence, self-esteem and life chances, and they know the difference education can make in the lives of children, their families and the society. They need no convincing about the importance of education and are willing to go the extra mile to get every child out of work and into school. They are equipped with a sense of justice and fairness and the belief that all children – girls and boys – deserve equal opportunities. Their practice and interventions give meanings to abstract notions of democracy, equality, freedom and justice, and they make the community aware of legal remedies and constitutional principles.

The field mobilizers have all been trained by MVF and are highly motivated individuals who have internalized MVF's non-negotiable principles that provide the theoretical framework to their efforts to ensure gender justice and equality for all girls. Having worked in the earlier child labour/education programme, they have enormous experience that they bring to bear in the adolescent girls' programme. It is their task to interface with the girls, solve the problems and obstacles they face in completing secondary education and sensitize parents and the community to gender issues. They liaise with teachers, local authorities and institutions to make them partners in the process of delivering gender rights to all adolescent girls. Through their holistic approach, they can tackle many forms of gender discrimination and violence such as child marriage, sexual harassment, gender division of labour, lack of mobility, labelling and stigmatization.

6.

SUSTAINING NORM CHANGE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A CASE STUDY

As is clear from the discussion above, the approach followed by MVF is a gradually unfolding and labour-intensive one, but it does result in a significant and sustainable shift in practices and in lasting gender norm change. This was confirmed during the recent COVID-19 pandemic, when adolescent girls resisted a reversal of norms in their villages. The lockdown due to COVID-19 came as a big blow. As has been reported from various other locations, the girls in Telangana too experienced enormous difficulties. Girls and boys who should have been in school were pushed into exploitative conditions of work and child labour, experiencing drudgery, loss of health and anxiety.[41]

> "There was no work, no cash at home, no food reserves and tensions began to brew. Everyone in my family – father, mother, siblings – were irritable over practically everything."
>
> "There was no money at home. I joined my mother to work on a chilli farm and later on cotton farms. We together earned Rs. 300-500 a day."
>
> "I have stopped using sanitary pads and now make do with old rags. More and more my conversations with my friends are about the workload and the situation of poverty at home. We are all waiting for normalcy to be restored and colleges to reopen."

To compound their problems came the announcement of online classes. No child wanted to miss these, but gender discrimination and precarity meant many girls found it difficult to access and use mobile phones to go online while it was so much easier for their brothers to borrow the phone from their fathers to catch up with online lessons. Some parents invested in buying mobile phones for their children, especially boys, but girls could hardly get their hands on one.

> "My older brother monitored every call I made. I once used the mobile to conduct a social survey for which I got paid. He became suspicious, questioned me for using the phone, for making so many calls and accused me of talking to male friends ... He was so wild that ... he beat me very badly and locked me up in the room all night. In my case the mobile phone only aggravated gender discrimination rather than help me."

41 Data for this case study were collected by the authors on the basis of interviews and zoom meetings during the lockdown. For a detailed account of the voices of adolescent girls and their experiences during the pandemic, see Ika Chaalu 2021, 2022b, 2022c.

Many a girl worked overtime to buy a mobile phone for herself. Indeed, they carried their phones along with them to work and tried to keep abreast of online classes there. At times they took screenshots of their class to reassure their families that they were using the phone for education. They did not want to miss the classes as they feared that they would end up getting married at the slightest hint that they had discontinued their education.

With uncertainty about reopening of schools, precarity due to loss of livelihoods and income, a few stray incidents of girls' eloping or just parental fears about their daughters being sexually abused, some parents of adolescent girls started arranging marriages for their daughters. The weddings took place in stealth. These were the very same parents who were full of pride that their daughters were performing well in their studies and had even encouraged their pursuit of higher education.

> "Now my parents have begun pressing me to get married. I refused to get married. I said I wanted to study until completion of graduate degree; if needed I would work alongside but not get married. My father supported me and decided not to raise the issue again. It is sad that three of my friends succumbed to the pressure. If only there was no lockdown, we would have all supported them and stopped the marriages."
> "My relatives keep telling my parents that I should get married. Thankfully, they have decided not to push me into marriage. I am waiting for schools to reopen so I can resume my usual routine."
> "We are living by the day and not thinking about our future at all. I have already lost one academic year. There is talk about discontinuing my education and getting me married. I have resisted this idea and convinced my mother not to listen to anyone on this matter."

6.1
Adolescent girls resisting a reversal of norms

The structures that had been put in place by the adolescent girls' project made it possible to respond to their needs during the COVID-19 lockdown. While the situation was far from ideal, the Adolescent Girls' Committees and the intricate networks created in the community did not disappear totally, they merely shifted online. Despite anxieties about lack of cash for the basic necessities of food, sanitary pads and soap, increasing work at home and on farms and lack of mobility and freedom, the girls somehow managed to maintain contacts with their peers and support persons in the CRPFs. Those who could do so used mobile phones for this purpose, sometimes stealthily. Furthermore, since the adolescents in the project area were comfortable discussing gender injustice and sensitive issues, they not only had the means but also the vocabulary to continue to reach out and address their plight. This allowed them to take control of the narrative and thus of their futures. Girls shared their difficulties whenever possible through phone calls and WhatsApp messages. They talked about the pressures on them within the family, the increase in domestic work, the hazards of child labour and finding ways of keeping track of online lessons.

They also shared information when they or their friends were at risk of marriage and made plans to prevent this by using their existing networks of support groups, Childline and MVF field mobilizers. Members of the Adolescent Girls' Committees made phone calls to the field mobilizers as well as to Childline to stop marriages. Local institutions such as the *Gram Panchayats* and the CRPFs took a clear stand against child marriage whenever they were alerted, as they had all been sensitized to this issue in the adolescent girls' project. The following are two illustrative examples of how adolescent girls and MVF field staff mobilized relevant officials to cooperate in stopping child marriages during the lockdown:

> A field mobilizer in Nutankal received a call from a member of the Adolescent Girls Committee that a girl from Yedavelli

was due to be married. She contacted a district official and the Child Development Project Officer and, along with the Anganwadi (preschool) Worker and a member of the CRPF, the officials counselled the girl and her parents and prevented the marriage.

Through the lockdown in 2020, Uma went with her mother to work on cotton seed and chilli farms and at the same time attended online classes. It seems all was well till her aunt visited them with a proposal of marriage. Uma resisted fiercely and said that she had nothing against the boy but would like to get married only after completion of her graduation. Given the unpredictability of colleges or schools reopening in the near future, her arguments for pursuing education fell on deaf ears. Dhanamma – a field mobi lizer – got to know about the engagement from Uma's friends in the Adolescent Girls' Committee and discovered that the wedding was going to be fixed for the second week of May 2021 and that the family were going to meet the priest to fix an auspicious date and time for the wedding. Within an hour, all the relevant functionaries arrived at the priest's house. They warned the parents against printing invitation cards or going ahead with the wedding. The Supervisor of the Anganwadi (employed by the department of Women and Child Welfare and officially in charge of the well-being of adolescent girls in her village) was instructed to visit Uma's home every other day to ensure that she was safe and was made personally accountable should Uma be stealthily married.

Not every intervention was successful, however:

> In Pedanemila, Lalita – a field mobilizer – received a call about a proposed child marriage but she could not make it to the venue in time. She rang Childline and persuaded a team of officials to stop the marriage. They visited the girl's house, but her grandparents denied any such plans. Even the neighbours concealed information and questioned the officials about how they could possibly think that a wedding would be performed during the lockdown. The officials left and the girl was married after four days. This was a huge disappointment for the field mobilizer as she had earlier been instrumental in removing this girl from child labour and had succeeded in enrolling her to formal school in Class 9.

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

The success of the project in preventing a large number of early marriages during the lockdown can be ascribed to the manner in which societal conflicts are resolved. In the cases above, for example, exposing parents to public insult and humiliations could potentially have led to a backlash from the community and girls being subjected to sanctions and punishment for exercising agency in defiance of power relations in the family. However, this did not happen as field staff are trained to have a continuous dialogue with parents and help them to reconcile to the new reality. Gradually, parents come to be convinced that they had made the right decision. Others in the community – both those who took a stand in favour of a girl and those who had supported the marriage – are also contacted and the discussion continues. This process

eases tensions and helps in vocalizing support for girls' education and rights. The presence of officials and law-enforcing institutions gives legitimacy and a stamp of authority to the entire process of stopping an early marriage. To get them to this stage of commitment is again a process of interface among project staff, the community and the girls themselves. From initial indifference to the issue, state officials begin to take pride in the transformation their actions make to the lives of girls. It is in this environment that girls get the courage to act without fear of reprisals, and the agency of the girls reinforces the rest of the community to take a stand.

6.2
Post-COVID-19 developments

The long drawn-out COVID-19 lockdown was lifted in Telangana in the beginning of August 2021.[42] Schools and colleges reopened, adolescent girls were finally able to resume their education, programme activities could restart and they began to meet again in the Adolescent Girls' Committees. The girls expressed their despair at what they had experienced during the lockdown and the pressures put on them to get married. At the same time, their conversations were full of hope, and they shared their yearning to get back to school and continue their education no matter what. Girls who were part of the Committees and had been exposed to gender issues and the struggle against patriarchy could better resist pressures of marriage from the family. They said that participating in the meetings had helped them to understand gender issues and to stand their ground during the lockdown. They had called the MVF field mobilizers or Helpline 1098 to save them or their friends from marriage. The Gender Committees set up in schools had also helped to get boys on board and they were keen for this activity to restart now that schools had reopened as they were acutely aware that girls and boys, in fact the entire village, would have to work together to change social norms in favour of girls. More importantly, the lockdown had made the girls realize that they would have to be in the forefront of leading the movement to change social norms in their favour.

Almost the first issue they decided to take up was to request the *Gram Panchayats* to give them a space where they could meet – a space that they could call their own.[43] This was triggered by an event in Ravulapalli where the youth association, which consists only of boys, asked the girls to vacate the room in their club and carry out their activities elsewhere. The girls argued that if boys' youth clubs had a space that was exclusively for them, then they too must claim their space. In village after village, they started to meet the *sarpanches* to convince them of their need for a dedicated space where they could conduct meetings, start a library and reading room, plan for midday meals for all children and distribute KCR (hygiene) Kits. It could also be a space where they could plan for the hoisting of the national flag on 15 August – Independence Day – an activity normally performed by boys.

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

Significantly, several *sarpanches* have started to participate in the Adolescent Girls' Committee meetings and girls have started bringing up a diversity of issues to be resolved by the *Gram Panchayat*. These range from buses not plying to their village, forcing girls to take the auto rickshaw to school (which they can ill afford), to the case of a girl dropping out of school after being sexually harassed by local youth on

42 This section is based on a field visit on 19 October 2021 after the lockdown was lifted.

43 For a detailed account of adolescent girls' interactions with *sarpanches,* see Ika Chaalu 2022d.

her way to college to the complaint that there was no teacher of English in their school. The convincing way the girls engaged with members of local bodies, put forth their demands for exclusive space and negotiated viable alternate accommodation in the village is indicative of the determination and courage they have gained in the adolescent girls' project. They have acquired this strength through their participation in the Adolescent Girls' Committee meetings and other project activities such as regular conferences where they have learnt from each other as well. It is heartening to see that their resolve has not been dimmed by the lockdown; in fact, they seem to have come out of it even more determined to stand up for their rights to education and gender justice.

Demanding space in the village was not just a routine activity for the girls; it had a symbolic value at several levels. It has filled them with energy and given the groups legitimacy and strength, and it proves that they are visible and individuals in their own right, strong enough to take up issues for collective action, courageous and prepared to fight for justice and mature enough to be taken seriously. Girls who were hesitant and shy earlier and did not go out of their homes are now engaging with the *Gram Panchayats*. Witnessing the impact of their voices on the *Gram Panchayats* has filled them with pride, self-belief and self-confidence. Even a symbolic activity such as taking the leadership to hoist the flag in the middle of the village has had a profound impact on the girls. It was significant as it made them feel that they were equal citizens with rights as guaranteed by the Constitution and a clear endorsement of the process of gender norm change that had been put into motion by MVF.

7.

EVIDENCE OF SUSTAINABLE NORMS CHANGE

As a result of MVF's interventions, there is credible and mounting evidence from the field that adolescent girls in the programme areas are now able to exercise agency and demand their rights; parents have stopped forcing girls into early marriage and allow them to follow their aspiration for getting a secondary education; public servants are defending the rights of girls; and even traditionally conservative bodies such as *caste panchayats* and priests are coming round to the idea of arguing against early marriage and refusing to solemnize the marriages of minors.

The girls get the strength to stand up for their rights when they know that there are people in the community – members of *Gram Panchayats*, women's groups and teachers – who show concern for them and will support them. In turn, it is the strength and firm resolve of the girls that gives an impetus to the community and members of various forums to go the extra mile in their favour. The girls' struggle also strengthens the response of public institutions as state officials find themselves compelled to address urgent and concrete challenges posed by the girls. They can no longer hide behind convenient arguments about structural constraints, tradition, culture or the poverty of the parents but are obligated to utilize the policies and legal instruments at their disposal to protect girls' rights. There is now an imperative to respond in real time. Children's participation and exercise of agency thus becomes the indispensable pivot in bringing about a transformation in their own lives and in building new social norms in the community.

Data collected by MVF mobilizers for the purpose of tracking and responding to the needs of every child in the programme (see section 5.6) provides quantitative corroborations for the claims made above,[44] and these findings have been confirmed in an independent study.[45] It is especially noteworthy that these gains have been made despite the major disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying lockdowns during the period under review. MVF data shows that when it started its interventions with adolescent girls in 2015, there were 355 girls who had completed class 10 in the four *mandals* included in the project (see Table 1). By 2022 this number had increased to 513 – a distinct rise even after taking into account a nominal rate of local population increase. Significantly, in Atmakur and Nuthankal *mandals*, more girls than boys were completing class 10 by 2022.

MVF's efforts in tracking girls, motivating them to continue their higher education and facilitating their admission into colleges, resulted in 533 girls going on to undergraduate studies in 2022, while only 67 girls had done so in 2015 (see Table 2). Significantly, from only 6 girls admitted into professional courses such as engineering, pharmacy and teacher training in 2015, by 2022 this number had gone up to 42 girls (see Table 3). These statistics point to dramatic improvements.

44 The consolidated data collected by field mobilizers is available in digitized form with MVF.

45 CSD 2023.

TABLE 1

Class 10 completion of board examination, 2015–2022

Mandals	2015			2019			2022		
	Class 10			Class 10			Class 10		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
Shankarpally	100	94	194	80	94	174	133	120	233
Vikarabad	97	88	185	127	100	227	197	158	355
Athmakur	73	69	142	75	71	147	80	87	167
Nuthankal	121	104	225	117	108	225	142	148	290
Total	391	355	746	399	373	773	552	513	1,045

TABLE 2

Admission into undergraduate courses, 2015–2022

Mandals	2015			2019			2022		
	Degree			Degree			Degree		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
Shankarpally	17	21	38	76	68	144	92	102	194
Vikarabad	10	3	13	29	55	84	124	120	244
Athmakur	27	18	45	47	41	88	141	119	260
Nuthankal	23	25	48	75	73	148	304	212	516
Total	77	67	144	227	237	464	661	553	1,214

TABLE 3

Admission to professional courses (engineering, BPharm, B.Ed.), 2015–2022

Mandals	2015			2019			2022		
	Engineering and other			Engineering and other			Engineering/ Pharmacy/B.Ed.		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
Shankarpally	1	4	5	10	5	15	16	17	34
Vikarabad	0	0	0	0	1	1	7	10	17
Athmakur	3	1	3	5	6	11	15	5	20
Nuthankal	3	1	4	0	1	1	20	10	30
Total	7	6	12	15	13	28	58	42	101

A separate study of the adolescent girls' programme conducted by the Council for Social Development provides an independent validation for the information presented above.[46] Data were collected from 19 programme villages across 3 districts as well as from a control group of 10 villages across 4 districts to provide a comparative framework for impact assessment. The aim of the study was to understand the transformation brought about by the MVF intervention during 2015–2019 in the lives of adolescent girls before the COVID-19 pandemic and to assess any reversal of gains in relation to gender discrimination in the family, community and public spaces during the lockdowns. The study found significant differences in the situation of girls between the programme and control villages on a variety of variables, including the status of girls in the family, in school and in the community and in resisting early marriage. A few examples have been highlighted below.[47]

Consumption of food and girls' mobility constitute two important markers of gender discrimination within the family. Regarding consumption of food (in terms of girls eating last, getting smaller portions of special dishes and being consulted about what to cook), 44 per cent of respondents in the project area reported that there was discrimination against girls in the pre-intervention period. However, after the intervention this came down to 4.1 per cent. An important observation is that the pandemic did not result in any perceptible negative impact. In the control group, 64.2 per cent reported discrimination against girls and this did not change substantially during the pandemic. Girls' mobility has also shown remarkable improvements in the project area: Only 7 per cent of girls were allowed to move around freely outside the home prior to the intervention, while this increased significantly to 96 per cent post intervention and was not negatively impacted by COVID. In the control group, 75.3 per cent of girls reported restrictions on their movements outside the house pre- and during the pandemic. Similar improvements and differences with the control group can be observed regarding the allotment of time given to girls as opposed to boys for study and play and for decision-making within the family.

The gender-awareness activities conducted by MVF with families, in schools and in the community have resulted in positive changes in the attitude of parents, schools and the community towards adolescent girls. As many as 73.2 per cent of parents said that they now see girls and boys as equals, and 99.6 per cent allow their daughters to attend the adolescent girls' meetings and think that girls' empowerment is good. The parents acknowledge that girls can now talk freely and without fear, they are taking on challenges, competing equally with boys and openly discussing issues of physical and sexual harassment and abuse. Regarding early marriage, the girls stated that earlier they had not been able to oppose parental decisions about their marriage and were forced to succumb to the will of their parents; only 2 per cent reported that any discussions had taken place. Post-intervention, 64 per cent of respondents reported that there was a discussion about their marriage, and they could oppose their parents and continue their education. In 40 per cent of these cases, the parents respected the girls wishes, while the remaining girls sought the intervention of MVF mobilizers, teachers, *anganwadi* workers, the police, Childline, the Adolescent Girls' Committees and the village *Panchayat*. During COVID-19, adolescent girls came under enormous pressure to get married, but they could obtain the help of the Committees and MVF mobilizers to convince their parents otherwise. Significantly, 47 per cent of girls actively contributed to stopping other marriages during the pandemic by informing people who could help these girls. The girls in the control group had no such support and had to give in to early marriage.

Schools are another major arena were MVF works to combat gender discrimination. Before MVF's intervention, 94.4 per cent of girls reported experiencing discriminatory behaviour from teachers; this went down significantly to 5.6 per cent post-intervention and did not change as a result of the pandemic. In the control group, however, 76.5 per cent reported discrimination pre-COVID-19 and the figure did not change much at 74.1 per cent during the pandemic. School enrolments for adolescent girls also showed

46 Ibid.

47 The charts in this section refer to CSD 2023.

improvements. While most of the girls in the project area were reported to be enrolled in schools in the pre-intervention period, 40 per cent of these were in fact not attending school regularly as they were helping with domestic chores or engaged in wage labour. This figure went down to 10 per cent after the intervention. On the other hand, 91.4 per cent of total respondents in the non-project area reported they were enrolled in school, but 50 per cent of these stated they were unable to attend school regularly in the pre-COVID-19 period.

Responses were also collected from various members of the community to assess their attitudes towards adolescent girls. The report clearly shows positive improvements in attitudes in favour of girls in the post-intervention period. More than half the respondents stated that it is girls' choice what clothes they wear, a significant 95 per cent agreed that there was no problem about girls and boys playing sports together and a similar number (90 per cent) agreed that activities conducted for girls' empowerment were working. The contrast with the control group could not be more stark; here, the majority of respondents said that it was not acceptable for girls to wear modern dresses and 75 per cent felt that it was good for girls and boys to maintain distance and not play games together.

The evidence from the field confirms two findings: first, that the MVF villages posted far better outcomes for adolescent girls than what was observed in the control villages; and second, that these gains in the MVF villages were sustained despite the constraints and impositions of the COVID-19 pandemic and its lockdowns. These positive outcomes can be explained by the collective power of the effective and multi-layered gender norm-change strategies implemented by the MVF.

8.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The section draws on MVF's experience of successfully challenging deeply entrenched, discriminatory social norms regarding child labour, education and gender. The recommendations refer to approaches and strategies that would be useful for changing norms more generally, but they are specifically applicable to changing norms for universal education and gender justice for adolescent girls in India. Implicit in the policy advice is the assumption and conviction that it is possible to alter existing discriminatory social norms in favour of more egalitarian norms about education and gender equality.

8.1 Effective approaches for changing discriminatory social norms

In MVF's experience, taking a universal approach in a clearly defined geographical area is the most effective strategy for successful and sustainable norm change. This involves continuous efforts till every adolescent girl in the community is reached and is enabled to attend formal secondary school. It requires changing the mindsets of the entire community through a continuous process of debate and discussion till the last person in the community is convinced about the rights of adolescent girls to secondary education, protection from child marriage, gender justice and equality.

8.2 Key players in bringing about this change

A key player in the process of changing norms is the facilitating civil society agency that has the skills to develop public discourse and debate and create an environment that brings together the community in support of those who have been discriminated against and gives them strength to exercise agency and claim their rights.

An important step is forging a wide and expanding networks of key stakeholders, brokers and allies in the community. These can be individuals, local officials, informal leaders and like-minded people who are in favour of norm change. Thus, new alliances and networks are built continuously, with many more individuals emerging as key players in the process of resolving conflicts and building a social norm.

However, not all issues can be resolved at the local level. Decisions requiring investments and policy changes can only be taken at the higher echelons of the executive and legislative machinery of government, which may be located at district, state and national levels. These institutions beyond the local also have a crucial role to play in successful norm change and are thus also key players in the process. A wholehearted commitment from the state is essential in changing gender norms. It is therefore incumbent upon the facilitating agency to encourage government officials and institutions to take on this role.

In addition, many spokespersons and institutions such as media, journalists, researchers, donors and

international agencies can also play a key role in giving voice and visibility to local initiatives for change and in helping them to link with other similar initiatives and like-minded individuals to create a movement for change.

It is also imperative to educate boys about the negative impacts of their actions (e.g., sexual harassment, stalking and other forms of sexual abuse) on girls and their lives. Boys need to be sensitized to issues of masculinity in schools, at home and in society.

8.3

Key factors for norm change to happen

The following factors are specific to the context of changing norms about education and gender justice for adolescent girls in India, but they will hopefully be relevant for other countries in the Global South as well.

Need for longer-term funding

Long-term and sustainable norm change is both labour- and human resource-intensive. It requires a longer cycle of funding than is the current norm with donor agencies to allow the programme to unfold in a systematic manner. In MVF's experience, it takes five years to engage and involve the community and another five to guarantee the sustainability of the new norm. In other words, one generation of children has to go through the programme to ensure permanent change. Consistent engagement is thus required to bring about lasting change, not just in the implementation of the programme from MVF staff but also from donors who are willing to stay the course till sustainable results are achieved. Short-term funding or breaks in funding cycles are pointless and potentially harmful.

MVF's approach is in stark contrast to the SNA, which promises quick and cost-effective results in solving some of the most intractable issues of development. This, perhaps, accounts for its appeal to the international donor community, which is increasingly driven by the need to supply "results-based" and "evidence-based" deliverables in short periods of time. However, the sustainability of norm change brought about by that approach has yet to be verified or confirmed.

Education and the role of the state

Civil society and the state are equal partners in the process of changing social norms. When an environment in support of girls' education emerges, and there is a swing towards gender equality at the local level, it becomes important that the state too should respond with a sense of commitment and urgency in provisioning of education and protection for girls. The challenge is in getting the state to fully recognize its responsibility and step up its role to make up for any deficiencies and gaps. Civil society can play a role in impressing this upon the government.

Child marriage and child protection

There is a need for a well-supported institutional framework offering protection to children from child labour, abuse, violence, early marriage and trafficking. At present, the services of the juvenile justice system in terms of Child Welfare Committees, the Integrated Child Protection Scheme, Childline and other institutional and non-institutional services of care and protection are skeletal.

Further, there is a need to expand secondary schools to respond to the growing demand from girls for secondary education, as well as to protect girls, as it could be argued that an inadequate number of secondary schools providing free education to girls forces parents to marry them off. In addition, schools should be sent a strong message that married girls are to be encouraged and facilitated to continue in schools without discrimination and that removing their names from the school rolls should be discouraged.

The government's cash transfer schemes such as Kanyasree, Rajsree, Shaadi Mubarak and Kalyana Lakshmi, which incentivize parents to marry off their daughters after age 18 years, have had an adverse impact on girls. They basically encourage parents to marry off their girls as soon as they reach 18, thus preventing them from pursuing their education further should they wish to. These schemes should be replaced by scholarships and free education to girls for pursuing higher education.

Build awareness on gender discrimination

Sustained campaigns need to be carried out in all colleges, hostels and educational institutions on girls' education, patriarchy, gender justice and equality. As stated above, it is important that such awareness on gender issues should extend to boys as well so that they can become partners in changing norms for adolescent girls.

8.4

The support role of international organizations such as UN-Women

At present, research and practice on social norm change is a site for contestation of resources. International organizations, governments and corporate donors are increasingly supporting behavioural approaches to norm change without a critical understanding of the issues involved for the Global South, and with no evaluations to show that this approach works or is superior to other approaches. UN-Women can take the lead in setting up a platform to encourage voices and expertise from the Global South, creating a much-needed space for debate and discussion on these issues, and set up a database of "how sustainable change happens" that could be used as a resource by civil society organizations in the Global South.

The following activities are suggested:

- Commission an annual national audit of laws and policies in the Global South that support gender equality and girls' education and give publicity to these. The preparation of the gender audit could involve both government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The devil is in the details, and so the audit would need to look beyond the rhetoric and examine the actual implementation of these legal and policy measures on the ground.
- Commission case studies from the Global South on approaches that have been successful in changing gender norms and in creating an environment towards gender equality and justice.
- Commission systematic evaluations of successful approaches to norm change from the Global South, looking at both process and measures of impact and behaviour changes.
- Encourage leadership and voices of girls who stand up for their rights and provide a platform and visibility to their actions at all levels, thus giving legitimacy to the struggles of girls for their rights.
- Put constant pressure on governments in the Global South to accept their obligations as duty bearers, take responsibility and act with a sense of urgency in ensuring gender justice and equal opportunities for girls and women.
- Act as an interlocutor with other United Nations agencies and donors to support projects aimed at sustainable and long-term gender norm change.

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UN-WOMEN IS THE UNITED NATIONS ORGANIZATION DEDICATED TO GENDER EQUALITY AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN. A GLOBAL CHAMPION FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS, UN-WOMEN WAS ESTABLISHED TO ACCELERATE PROGRESS ON MEETING THEIR NEEDS WORLDWIDE.

UN-Women supports United Nations Member States as they set global standards for achieving gender equality, and works with governments and civil society to design laws, policies, programmes and services needed to ensure that the standards are effectively implemented and truly benefit women and girls worldwide. It works globally to make the vision of the Sustainable Development Goals a reality for women and girls and stands behind women's equal participation in all aspects of life, focusing on four strategic priorities: Women lead, participate in and benefit equally from governance systems; Women have income security, decent work and economic autonomy; All women and girls live a life free from all forms of violence; Women and girls contribute to and have greater influence in building sustainable peace and resilience, and benefit equally from the prevention of natural disasters and conflicts and humanitarian action. UN-Women also coordinates and promotes the United Nations system's work in advancing gender equality.

This paper offers a counterpoint to the behaviour change strategies proposed by the Social Norms Approach in the field of international development. It discusses the community-led and multi-layered approach of the Mamidipudi Venkatarangaiya Foundation (MVF) in Telangana State, India, to transforming social norms on child labour, education and gender. The MVF's programme on universalizing education for adolescent girls is rooted in the belief that it is possible to change the patriarchal values that rule society. It addresses a broad range of obstacles to girls' schooling, such as gender discrimination, child labour, early marriage, cultural barriers, lack of safety and security, inadequate facilities in schools and restrictions to physical mobility.

Credible and mounting evidence from the field shows that adolescent girls in the programme areas are now able to exercise agency and demand their rights; parents have stopped forcing girls into early marriage and are allowing them to follow their aspiration for secondary education; public servants are defending the rights of girls; and even traditionally conservative bodies such as caste panchayats and priests are coming round to the idea that early marriage has negative effects and are refusing to solemnise the marriages of minors. Data from MVF field mobilizers and from an independent study of the adolescent girls' programme are provided to confirm the success of the approach in bringing about sustainable norm change and concrete improvements in outcomes for girls. These positive results were shown to persist despite the COVID-19 lockdown.

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