

They dared to dream

Meena Manch, a club for adolescent girls in UP Govt schools, is motivating students to reject child marriage, continue their education and develop leadership and life skills



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When Reema turned 14, her mother decided to get her married. The teenager was then studying in Class VIII at the Kalli Paschim upper primary school in Lucknow district, Uttar Pradesh (UP), but her mother was confident that her dutiful daughter would honour her wishes. She was right and Reema did not reject the proposal.

If this story sounds all too familiar, it is because a majority of young girls in UP and many other States face the same fate. UP is among the 13 States where over 80 per cent of child marriages take place in rural India, according to a recent study by the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) and Young Lives. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4) found that 21 per cent of the 8.5 crore children in UP still fall prey to child marriage.

In fact, one in every five girls in UP is a child bride and every 10th underage pregnancy is from there. Out of the 44.67 lakh teenage pregnancies reported annually from India, over four lakh cases are from UP alone (NFHS-4).

But Reema was about to script a change in her story thanks to Meena Manch, a club for adolescent girls in UP Government schools. Not only had the youngster learnt about the pitfalls of early marriage through the club, she also knew the economic reasons behind her mother's decision. So, along with a few members of the club, she persuaded her mother and her prospective in-laws to allow her to continue her studies after marriage. They also agreed not to force her into living with her husband until she turned 18.

The initial concept of using "Meena" — a nine-year-old fictional girl who overcame all obstacles to go to school and illustrate the necessity of education for girls — was developed by UNICEF. Created to change perceptions that hamper the survival, protection and development of girls, the initiative, developed as part of the International Year of the Girl Child in the 1990s, was adapted under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), the Government's flagship education programme.

The innovative Meena club was formed to motivate girls to continue their education and develop leadership and life skills with the help of a series of Meena story books, flip charts and activity sheets. Each club, comprising 20 girls in the age group of 11-14 years, discusses the stories. Meena Cabinets, comprising two children from Classes III, IV and V, help to resolve issues club members may have with the aid of the *Sugamkarta* — a female teacher from the school who acts as the facilitator.

At present, over 36,000 such clubs exist in upper primary schools in UP but soon, all upper primary schools in the State will have them. This was announced by the UP education department recently.

This is not surprising, considering the impact the manch is having. Thirty-year-old Anju's experience is a prime example of the change effected by members of the Meena Manch. When she stopped Rani, her 13-year-old daughter from going to school, the girl's classmates marched to her house and demanded to know why she had dropped out. "Why isn't Rani coming to school? Don't you know how happy she was there? We won't leave until you give us

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a written promise that you will send Rani to school from tomorrow."

The group of diminutive girls, all members of the club, didn't stop there. For the next two hours, they explained to Anju how important it was for Rani to continue her education.

The turning point came when one of them asked the mother whether she wanted Rani to be like her and not be able to write her own name. This is when Anju put her thumb impression on the letter the girls had brought, promising to send her daughter back to school. The girls of Meena Manch had scored again.

In fact, teachers of the upper primary school in Sarojini Nagar, Lucknow district, have no qualms in admitting that their club members were the driving force in bringing back dropouts, both girls and boys. "Ever since Meena Manch was formed, we don't have to worry about children not coming to school. The members, spring into action as soon as they learn about any missing student," says Aarti, a senior teacher and a manch facilitator.

Thirteen-year-old Shanno Sharma says elders in her village Parsauli, Kanpur Dehat district, know she is a member of the club. "Our group is well-known because we have managed to stop marriages where dowry was demanded", she says.

Shama Awasthi, another member

of the same group, reveals that after one boy of her village was almost beaten up by club members for eve-teasing, the rest of the boys fell in line.

Even *Meena Ki Duniya*, the radio programme introduced in UP in 2010, has increased the levels of awareness and knowledge among children and teachers on issues related to education of girls, child rights, adolescent health and hygiene, life skills, the perils of child marriage and gender roles.

The 15-minute programme, designed by Sesame India is broadcast through All India Radio (AIR) in schools across UP six days a week.

Students tune into radio sets provided by the Government in the afternoons, Monday through Saturday. The broadcast fee for the programme is borne by the UP Government and each episode has a story, a song and a game designed to entertain schoolchildren while encouraging them to think.

The International Day of the Girl Child, celebrated every year on October 11, has become a good platform to turn the spotlight on the manch engendering schoolchildren and teachers. Government school teachers have also been trained on how to use Meena Radio as a teaching aid.

With the education department issuing a directive to schools to enable students to listen to the radio at the prescribed time, Meena has become a pop-

ular character among school children.

One of the critical objectives of the radio programme, a partnership between UNICEF, the UP Government and AIR, is to focus on motivating children between the ages of 11 and 14 to continue their education. Studies have shown that children in this age group are prone to drop out of school. An assessment report found that in UP, the dropout rate in primary school is 20 per cent and rises by about 10 per cent in upper primary school.

This is where the club and radio programmes are making a difference, especially since more girls drop out of school than boys. Since the programme is in Hindi, the messages are easy to understand and reach the students, community and parents they are meant to target.

More importantly, with many of the girls already a part of the Meena Manch, they identify and want to be like their role model Meena, a confident and educated girl.

While Archana wants to be a police officer, Manju wants to become a doctor, Muskan aspires to be an education official, Rukmini, a social worker and Francys, a journalist. And like Meena, they are no longer afraid to be seen and heard. Ordinary girls in rural areas are daring to dream and are on the threshold of making their dreams come true. (The writer is a senior journalist)