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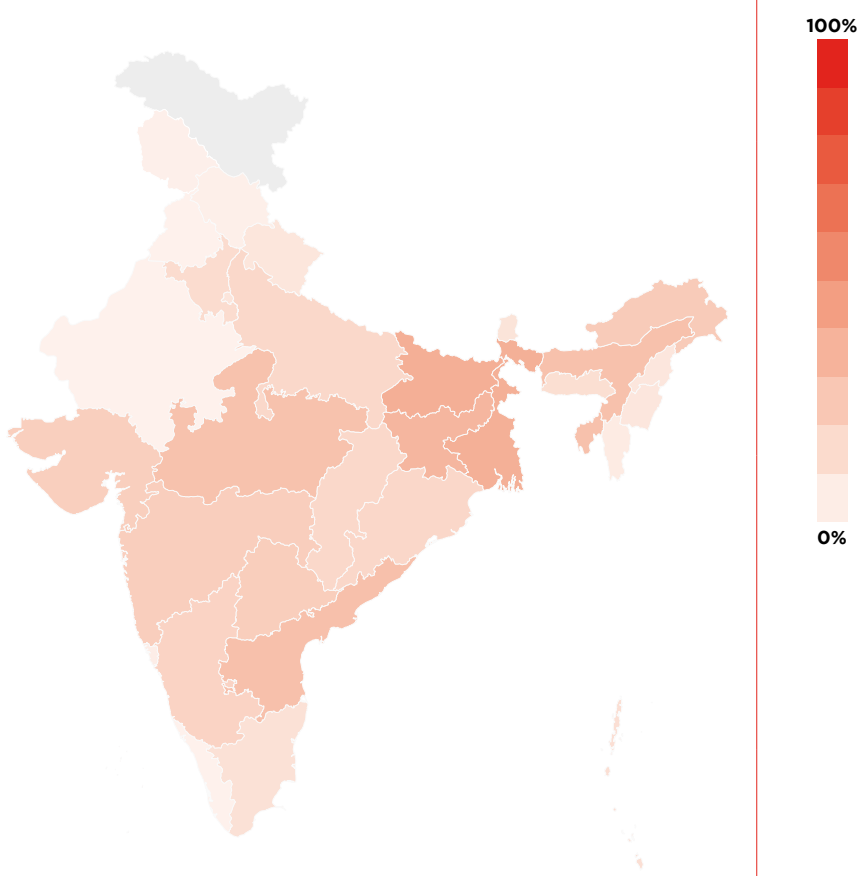
COUNTRY PROFILE



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INDIA

Percentage of women aged 20-24 years who were first married or in union before age 18.



Source: India National Family Health Survey 2015-2016. **Note:** This map is stylized and not to scale. It does not reflect a position by UNFPA or UNICEF on the legal status of any country or the delimitation of any frontiers. No data for grey region.



The country context

India is home to the largest number of child brides in the world: 223 million child brides – a third of the global total. While it is illegal for girls under the age of 18 to marry in India, estimates suggest that at least 1.5 million girls under age 18 get married in India each year. Nearly 16 per cent of all adolescent girls aged 15-19 are currently married.¹ Recent evidence, though sparse, highlights the persistence of family-arranged marriages without meaningful consent.

However, the country has seen a large decline in the prevalence of the practice of child marriage in the last decade, from 47 per cent to 27 per cent of all young women being married in childhood – driving the reduction of child marriage globally. Across the world over the past decade, the proportion of young women who were married as children decreased by 15 per cent, from nearly 1 in 4 to 1 in 5. This means that, over the last 10 years, the marriages of some 25 million girls have been averted.² This remarkable accomplishment is now under threat. Over the next decade, up to 10 million more girls will be at risk of child marriage as

a result of COVID-19, putting the global total number of girls at risk at 110 million girls by 2030.³ Further, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) estimates that nearly 24 million children and adolescents, including 11 million girls and young women, may drop out of school due to the pandemic’s economic impact.⁴

In 2020, India – like the rest of the world – was rattled by the COVID-19 outbreak that placed the country under stringent nationwide lockdowns, which led to a complete closure of educational institutions, industries and all

forms of socioeconomic activity. To further compound problems, the Global Programme-targeted states of Maharashtra, Odisha and West Bengal were affected by the tropical cyclones that wrecked the region. It is feared that the economic hardship caused by the lockdown and the cyclones might prompt many poor parents to consider getting their underage daughters married to men who do not demand dowry.

A case study on child marriage during the lockdown, supported by UNICEF India in West Bengal, noted that parents seem to be caught in a dilemma between adhering to the socio-legal justifications against child marriage and common fears of their adolescent girls falling prey to trafficking, runaway child marriages, abuse and 'tarnishing family honour' on account of late marriage. A parent in South 24 Parganas noted

that "their life will be spoiled, they will not be able to manage their family and get sick." Though the case study analysis sample size was limited, it is worth noting that 46 per cent of the child marriages recorded were of supposed runaway child marriages, in which the girls (attempted to) escaped with their partners.⁵

Despite these setbacks, the elimination of child marriage by 2030 remains a priority under Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality. This monumental task puts pressure on the global community to deliver effective interventions and policies at scale, generating calls for coordinated efforts and renewed commitments from stakeholders, particularly governments, to invest more to accelerate an end to child marriage.

The elimination of child marriage by 2030 remains a priority under Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality.



Key highlights



A special training package on alternative education for out-of-school children was rolled out in three states (Assam, Jharkland and Rajasthan) that benefited close to **115,000 adolescent girls** from the most disadvantaged communities.



Over

3.6 MILLION

adolescent girls actively participated in life-skills training or comprehensive sexuality education in programme areas during the year. The programme integrated life-skills training and social and behavioural change communication materials into online platforms during COVID-19.

Close to

1.5 MILLION

adolescent girls were provided training in life-skills during the pandemic to address child marriage.



Using advocacy and data to strengthen political accountability, **five states were supported to develop and cost action plans on ending child marriage.** Intensive dialogues and advocacy with the Government led to inclusion of adolescent girls' issues in the 'Handbook for Members of Village Health Sanitation and Nutrition Committee',¹⁸ and the school development monitoring committee.



About 10 million parents engaged in regular dialogue on responsive parenting through online platforms and community networks created during COVID-19 to prevent and respond to child marriage and **gender-based violence (GBV).** In addition, close to 3,000 religious leaders were mobilized and sensitized on preventing and responding to child marriage and GBV during the pandemic.

2020 Achievements



UNICEF trained teachers in remote teaching and established a **Learning Management System** supporting self-learning and blended training programmes, reaching

125,000
users.



With schools closed during the pandemic, learning and awareness programmes through **Direct-to-Home**, national and state Doordarshan television channels cumulatively reached an estimated

8.2 MILLION
adolescent girls.

Providing intensive support to marginalized girls

The Global Programme approaches in India are grounded in human rights and based on the principle of 'leave no one behind'. This means protecting the rights of women and girls to education, including human rights education during life-skills training and catch-up training for those who dropped out of or never went to school.

UNFPA and UNICEF used multiple approaches to reach out to adolescent girls and boys with information on and training in life-skills, including: face-to-face life-skills education in schools and community settings through government programmes such as the National Adolescent Health Programme (Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram [RKSK])⁶ and Scheme for Adolescent Girls (SAG). UNFPA's experience with interventions under the Action for Adolescent Girls programme in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan was leveraged to develop and support the implementation of national guidelines and curriculum for SAG7 in the two states, and UNFPA's support for integration of life-skills education in madrasas in two districts of Bihar led to scale-up of the intervention across all madrasas in the state.

With schools closed during the pandemic, learning and awareness programmes through Direct-to-Home, national and state Doordarshan television channels cumulatively reached an estimated 8.2 million adolescent girls. Across states, UNICEF trained teachers in remote teaching and established a Learning Management System supporting self-learning and blended training programmes, reaching 125,000 users. The Call a Student programme used digital platforms to promote continued education for girls and boys, especially during lockdown and school closure; and educational programmes for young people were broadcast through multimedia channels to address the digital divide.

Challenges, lessons learned and next steps

As a result of COVID-19, which was further compounded by other regional natural calamities, children and adolescents faced multiple challenges and an exacerbated risk of violence, including trafficking, sexual exploitation and fake marriages.

The COVID-19 pandemic has restricted face-to-face activities and dependence on technology has brought about a huge digital divide, restricting access to marginalized communities and girls. As internet

accessibility is limited in rural areas, a large number of adolescents (especially girls) are unable to participate in activities conducted via various web platforms by the Government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Internet accessibility is no longer just a service for the privileged but a basic service warranting the urgent attention of the Government to ensure better access and affordability for enabling the information, knowledge and skills of adolescents, community members and even service providers. For instance, in Odisha, nearly 300,000 adolescents (girls and boys) of the tribal residential schools were deprived of comprehensive sexuality education sessions. While online sessions continued, attempts were made to conduct repeated sessions to increase coverage, strategize and reach out to more and more girls from remote communities through innovative programme strategies such as short films. Multimedia digital packages in vernacular languages were developed and disseminated for wider reach among all stakeholders (parents, teachers, community leaders). However, these outreach programmes by the Government still met with challenges due to poor internet penetration and non-availability of smartphones among teachers and students in hard-to-reach and interior tribal districts.

The intersectionality with violence against women and girls, mental health and adolescent empowerment also came to the fore as a result of COVID-19, requiring more informed programme design for the coming years.

The COVID-19 pandemic also led to a shift in the Government's engagement of adolescents and youth. The critical deficit in human resources – especially front-line functionaries – at the last mile led to extensive reliance on and engagement by volunteers. In recognition of youth leadership potential and aspirations, UNICEF engaged 524,587 youth volunteers (15–24 years) and 1,522,805 volunteers from civil society organizations, women's and community structures to disseminate accurate information on COVID-19; provide peer-to-peer psychosocial counselling; establish linkages to entitlements; combat stigma, discrimination, early and forced child marriage, and violence against children; and raise awareness on the use of masks.

Going forward, the programme will complement the Government's efforts to effectively implement the SAG and RKSK in all intervention states; and the peer educator programme under RKSK will be further strengthened in four districts using a saturation mode in Rajasthan.

The programme will also continue to ensure meaningful adolescent participation and engagement. The work on adolescent engagement needs to be viewed from a meaningful participation lens and not just reach of adolescents with messages, information and uptake

of services. UNICEF defines adolescent participation as: “adolescent girls and boys (individually and/or collectively) form and express their views and influence matters that concern them directly and indirectly”. States should work in partnership with adolescent networks, youth network institutions (such as the national service scheme [NSS]; the Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan [NYKS] under the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports; and the National Cadet Corps – the youth wing of the Indian Armed Forces) to plan participation and civic engagement initiatives.

Enhancing the family and community environment

Across 12 states, over 9 million community members have been reached and engaged in promoting gender-equitable attitudes, alternatives to child marriage and support for girls' rights. Over 20 million individuals are estimated to have been reached by traditional and social media messaging on child marriage, the rights of adolescent girls and gender equality.

In Maharashtra, for example, a set of eight films and information resources was developed to sensitize village child protection committees, resulting in activation of 44,000 village child protection committees that were trained in ending child marriage, preventing GBV, child protection and harm prevention. This led to identification of 226 girls vulnerable to child marriage and at-risk families that were linked to child protection services. Across different states, the reactivation of the village child protection committees has led to proactive community engagement in addressing child marriage and GBV issues. In Odisha, the village committees worked with district prohibition and social welfare officials to cancel over 800 child marriages during the last quarter of 2020. With the active engagement of the village committees, 900 child marriages in Bihar, 898 child marriages in Uttar Pradesh and 629 child marriage in Maharashtra were cancelled during the first two months of the lockdown. UNICEF also used the Tarunya package (a package of communication and training tools for adolescent empowerment and ending child marriage) to equip government functionaries and community members with skills and knowledge to address child marriages and violence against children.⁸

In Rajasthan, the education-entertainment initiative 'Naubat Baja' is currently being leveraged by several departments to disseminate information on social protection schemes and programmes related to gender and adolescent empowerment. This medium has been used extensively to engage with influencers (men, youth and community leaders) who further spread awareness messages on gender and child marriage in their networks. The state also used this channel to spread messages on COVID-19 safety protocols during the lockdowns.



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Panchayats (rural local governments) in four states are being engaged for sensitization on enhancing the value of women and girls. Fifty-seven trainers from the State Institute of Rural Development (SIRD), including Block Coordinators in Madhya Pradesh, were capacitated to mainstream the role of panchayats in addressing gender inequality and harmful practices as part of the SIRD training curriculum for panchayat-elected representatives. Further, with support from a local civil society organization, 333 elected representatives of panchayats from Chattarpur District of Madhya Pradesh underwent capacity-building on gender, GBV and harmful practices, to enable them to address gender-discriminatory norms, promote safe spaces for women and girls, and support improved access to government schemes and entitlements by women and girls.

In order to actively respond to the community's sexual and reproductive health and rights needs during

COVID-19 in Bihar, UNFPA organized Ratri chaupal (evening sessions in village common places using audio-visual aids) to train grass-roots cadres and share sexual and reproductive health and rights and COVID-19-related information.

Challenges, lessons learned and next steps

The role of gender norms in shaping adolescent realities and protecting them from child marriage, violence and other types of exploitation is of paramount importance and a lesson learned is that work around social norms is not enough. Experience shows that interventions directly addressing the pervasive issues of gender discrimination, unequal gender roles and power dynamics are of significance for meaningful change to happen and to transform rigidly held gender norms. The pandemic has delayed the introduction of planned gender-transformative programme approaches that rely on face-to-face contact. An analysis of triggers and drivers of child marriage during the COVID-19 pandemic

in West Bengal indicates that, while a multisectoral approach to address child marriage is needed, greater acknowledgement of adolescent sexuality and development of parental skills are needed to address increasing cases of elopement.

Working with suitable partners in the community and the sense of ownership of the local government in taking forward the agenda to end child marriage have been invaluable and an integral approach for success and best practices. Adopting a 'partnership' approach with both the Government and civil society (including community organizations) has helped bring the two together and created an enabling environment.

Adolescents can be excellent content creators – many of them have created content for awareness of COVID-19 and key messages on GBV and ending child marriage. At the same time, a great concern continues to be the digital divide between communities and being able to find effective solutions that can be safely implemented while addressing this divide.

Going forward, the Global Programme will implement an adolescent parenting package that will focus on three key themes: (1) improving interaction between parents and adolescents, (2) changing social norms, and (3) gender socialization practices. Additionally, effort has been made to present specific issues to be addressed during early adolescence (10–14 years) and late adolescence (15–19 years). The package will be implemented as part of the district-level support integrated in the district action plan for smooth implementation. UNICEF will plan to provide all the required support in development of capacity of the front-line workers (such as accredited social health activists and Anganwadi workers), self-help groups, community influencers, civil society partners and relevant government institutions for wide-scale implementation.

Strengthening systems

As part of the systems-strengthening approach, UNFPA and UNICEF equipped education, health, child protection and GBV service providers with knowledge and skills to provide gender-responsive girl-friendly services. The capacity-building approach was used to successfully anchor and institutionalize toolkits and approaches to address some of the key issues related to harmful norms and social practices.

In Bihar, prior to COVID-19, UNICEF worked with the Education Directorate to ensure the roll-out of an initiative for the prevention of abuse in schools, with special focus on ensuring identification of girls

dropping out of schools to get married. A menstrual hygiene management (MHM) training module was also developed and shared with the State Government for roll-out. Complementing the module, a MHM week was celebrated, which helped hundreds of girls who were otherwise not attending the schools due to lockdown to access the services. Online and offline messaging were sustained with community members and adolescents on child marriage and violence prevention and gender. Further 'handholding' support has resulted in placing ending child marriage firmly on the agenda of the Department of Women and Child Development.

In Bihar, as part of the scale-up of the madrasa (Islamic schools) initiative, the Global Programme supported the development of a curriculum that includes a module on gender norms, GBV and harmful practices such as child marriage, with inputs from experts and religious scholars. The initiative is now being scaled up across 2,000 madrasas in the state through government resources.

UNFPA and UNICEF sustained convergent support to the national School Health and Wellness 'Ambassadors' Initiative (SHWAI) of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and the Ministry of Education to develop guidelines and teaching aids. UNICEF supported the national launch of the programme along with 56 interactive videos on 11 thematic areas to help facilitate discussion between teachers and students on issues related to growing up healthy; emotional well-being and mental health; interpersonal relationships; values and citizenship; gender equality; nutrition, health and sanitation; prevention and management of substance misuse; promotion of healthy lifestyle; reproductive health and HIV prevention; safety and security against violence and injuries; and promotion of safe use of the internet and social media behaviour. Both organizations are supporting the State scale-up of the programme. In the last quarter of 2020, support was provided for a baseline assessment and orientation of school principals and teachers. With UNFPA and UNICEF support, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and Ministry of Education jointly rolled out SHWAI in 191 districts in the first phase; UNFPA and UNICEF are providing technical support, which included training of over 1,800 State resource persons. UNFPA will continue to provide technical support in four states (Bihar, Delhi, Odisha and Rajasthan) to reach 40,000 teachers across 20,000 schools in 2021. Based on popular demand and a felt need for developing self-learning tools for teachers, UNFPA is working on an e-course for school teachers.

At the national level, UNFPA partnered with the Indian Nursing Council (INC) to train 8,700 nursing faculty staff, doctors and nurses on youth-friendly health services. These sessions were part of larger trainings

In Rajasthan, 314 service delivery points were supported through staff training to provide adolescent-friendly health services. These clinics recorded 68,018 girls and 130,255 boys accessing services during and immediately after the lockdown period.

conducted online on sexual and reproductive health and included national-level participation. Leveraging lessons learned from the pilot intervention for the Action for Adolescent Girls (AAG) in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, technical assistance was provided to the Government's SAG initiative to develop implementation guidelines, curriculum, training materials and modules on life-skills outreach.

In Rajasthan, 314 service delivery points were supported through staff training to provide adolescent-friendly health services. These clinics recorded 68,018 girls and 130,255 boys accessing services during and immediately after the lockdown period. In Madhya Pradesh, the Global Programme provided strategic support to the development of the detailed implementation plan of the National Adolescent Health Programme of the Health Department/RKSK, under which 24 comic books were developed for adolescent girls to transact sessions with peers at the village level. Training of 51 district prohibition officers, 453 child marriage prohibition officers, 97,135 Anganwadi workers (community health workers) and 2,954 Anganwadi supervisors has been completed on the use of comics for conducting monthly sessions with adolescent girls.

Around 799,206 (84 per cent female) government functionaries have been equipped with knowledge and skills to use UNICEF-developed social and behaviour change communication toolkits and approaches to address some of the key priorities related to harmful norms and social practices while promoting girls' empowerment. These toolkits have been institutionalized in the district implementation through district-level resource groups (DRGs) responsible for strengthening capacity and skills of government officials, functionaries and community structures.

In Odisha across all 30 districts, UNFPA and UNICEF conducted state-level webinars and district-level online trainings covering all 2,100 (1,207 women and 893 men) district social welfare officers, child marriage prohibition officers, district child protection officers, and One Stop Crisis counsellors on the state action plan on ending child marriage and adolescent empowerment. With the support of UNFPA and UNICEF, a series of online orientation and capacity-building training activities conducted on ADVIKA - the state-wide adolescent programme - has been rolled out, covering all 75,000 (74,473 females and 527 males) Anganwadi workers, child marriage prohibition supervisors and other field functionaries.

In West Bengal, a state-level Adolescent Cell has been established under the Department of Women and Children Development and the Department of Social



Work with technical support from UNICEF. It is aimed at improving the overall situation of adolescents in West Bengal and to institutionalize response to their growth, development, protection and participation needs, as well as at creating greater synergies between different sectoral interventions and improving coordination between different stakeholders.

Challenges, lessons learned and next steps

Integrated interventions engaging key government departments and civil society organizations are key to promoting adolescent well-being, development, their access to quality services and progressive social and gender norms. Political commitment, continuous evidence-based advocacy with systems, convergence efforts and capacity-building, quick discussion, review of progress, and online monitoring of progress under the project are key for addressing the issue of child marriage and other child protection issues.

In light of the pandemic, plans have been revised with all partners involved in the process of implementing interventions across high-burden districts. A reimagining process has been initiated with a revisit of achievements, and challenges faced as a result of lockdowns, school closures and fewer economic opportunities. The challenge posed by the pandemic also opened possibilities for effective and efficient advocacy as officials and functionaries were easily accessible for discussions over digital platforms, opening a new avenue to impart training. The linkages established with adolescents and communities through the field-level workers during COVID-19 to ensure health, protection, mental health, food and nutrition services was noteworthy, and the cost-effective benefits experienced was a significant learning experience for future consideration. Government functionaries such as accredited social health activists, Anganwadi workers and police are the backbone of implementation in the Indian system and law enforcement structure. They were also the first responders during the pandemic; consequently, their time and ability to engage in child marriage prevention were diminished. Gathering information regarding imminent child marriages has been a challenge due to the reduced physical contact and peer engagements at the Gram Panchayat and village level.

Strengthening community-level mechanisms such as child protection committees and health services for adolescents through adolescent-friendly health clinics help create an enabling environment for adolescents and ensures their protection and well-being. Mental health and psychosocial support were recognized as a new area of intervention that need to be addressed for adolescent development. Case management

and robust information management systems that can maintain linkages and transparency of scheme benefits and access remain a challenge. In Bihar state, feedback received from community cadres during the COVID-19 pandemic on addressing harmful gender roles and sexual and reproductive health and rights highlighted that the lessons learned from the online training were less effective. Health and ICDS front-line workers who are part of the programme could not make themselves available for the training due to their engagement in pandemic response. The administration was busy with COVID-19 response in the initial months and therefore the child protection issues were not a priority. Recruitment of staff members/functionaries in the Mahila Shakti Kendra scheme and the District Child Protection Unit was delayed due to COVID-19, which also limited scheme coverage. Designating the social service workforce as essential – including GBV and adolescent health service providers – is therefore key in sustaining services for adolescents during a pandemic. A key partner that continued to be able to respond to children's needs in the pandemic was CHILDLINE, the telephone helpline, which could continue to operate under the recognition of being an essential service during the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a shift in the Government's engagement of adolescents and youth. The critical deficit in human resources at adolescent youth-friendly facilities, especially front-line functionaries, led to extensive reliance on and engagement of volunteers. This is compromising the quality of services that adolescents are receiving during the pandemic.

Going forward, the programme will attempt a blended approach between the district and state approach alongside outreach to community-level structures leveraging civil society networks. The community outreach will be done with child protection committees, community-based organizations and Gram Panchayats to be able to foster community dialogue and adolescent participation and engagement. This approach will involve the following:

- Advocating with the Government for availability of the dedicated human resources at subdistrict level.
- Supporting the district and community-based protection structures to respond and prevent early marriage and violence in the communities.
- Continuing advocacy and implementation support to the madrasa initiative and enhance advocacy on sexual and reproductive health and rights and vulnerabilities among adolescent Dalit girls, a generally marginalized group, in Bihar.

In Odisha, **1,730 residential schools** will be supported to promote a student-friendly environment. Technical assistance will be extended to strengthen the life-skills programme with adolescents living with disabilities, to about **8,500 adolescents** with different kinds of disabilities in **157 schools**.



- In Odisha, 1,730 residential schools will be supported to promote a student-friendly environment. Technical assistance will be extended to strengthen the life-skills programme with adolescents living with disabilities, to about 8,500 adolescents with different kinds of disabilities in 157 schools. The trainings will focus on life-skills, but also equip them to deal with sexual and reproductive health issues, violence and sexual abuse. It is also proposed to orient the matrons, teachers and principals of the special schools to create an enabling environment. Sensitization of caregivers and parents on sexual and reproductive health needs and issues faced by adolescents with different types of disabilities will be a main focus. User-friendly learning tools and resource materials will further be developed and disseminated, and an app developed for reporting.

Addressing poverty

The COVID-19 pandemic posed serious threats to livelihoods, impacting the overall socioeconomic deprivation among the most marginalized across almost all states and districts. The indirect impact visible was the proneness to harm, abuse and exploitation of children irrespective of their caste, class or religion, with schools remaining closed due to lockdowns and other preventive steps adopted by the respective states. UNFPA and UNICEF strengthened collaborations and partnerships with government, states and civil society organizations to successfully leverage social protection programmes to benefit vulnerable girls and their families.

A focus and emphasis remained on ensuring stability within migrant worker communities, where children can be at particular risk of child marriage. The Government

responded to this by announcing multiple measures of social protection (free rations, one-time cash transfers, access to all key services) and the roll-out of the centrally sponsored economic empowerment scheme for migrant workers. Linkages were explored and emphasized with income-generating or livelihood-promoting platforms and programmes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), the State Livelihood Mission, and civil society organizations promoting income-generation livelihood options, with a focus on reaching out to the most vulnerable families to reduce economic vulnerabilities. The 'Cash Plus' model, where cash transfers are coupled with access to social services, has become even more critical as a means to also deal with the after-effects of the COVID-19 crisis.

Considering the need to assist adolescent girls and their families to avoid negative coping mechanisms such as child marriage during the pandemic, UNFPA and UNICEF partnered with 26 civil society organizations to create linkages with Government-supported social protection programmes to extend services to vulnerable girls and their families. UNFPA and UNICEF provided technical support in design, implementation and monitoring of social protection schemes – such as Kanyashree (West Bengal), Mukhya Mantri Kanya Utthan Yojana (Bihar), Mukhyamantri Sukanya Yojana (Jharkhand) and Kanya Sumangla Yojana (Uttar Pradesh) – to ensure that the most marginalized girls benefit from education, skills training and career opportunities. Ten million adolescent girls are estimated to have benefited from these schemes as a result of the programme support and linkages created with partners. Technical support provided to Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) scheme district task forces using linkages with civil society strengthened the institutionalization and sustainability of the scheme across 12 states, and increased funding utilization, especially in Rajasthan.

In Odisha, civil society organizations partnered with the programme-supported district administration in arranging transport for 70,000 migrants during the lockdown and assisted in settling them in close to 7,000 temporary medical centres set up by the Government. In addition, 150,000 migrants (72,000 females and 78,000 males), including adolescents and youth, were linked with social protection schemes such as MGNREGA and Nutri-garden, enrolling returnee migrant children in midday school meal schemes and integrated child development services.

In Uttar Pradesh, UNICEF advocated for a core social protection package to respond to the pandemic, which was accepted and implemented by the state government. This included technical support for

the formulation of guidelines, labelling the scheme, communication materials, capacity-building modules and an online monitoring system. In Jharkhand, rapid assessment and advocacy conducted by UNICEF resulted in a first tranche of allocation of 1,720 million rupees for cash transfers for girls.

Challenges, lessons learned and next steps

Convergence for social protection continues to be a challenge with various departments, multiple schemes and inadequate focus on 'Cash Plus' components in most states. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the livelihood crisis for migrant workers and poor families and subjected them to further vulnerabilities. Important next steps include ensuring access of marginalized populations to existing social protection measures, and ensuring that adolescent empowerment processes couple life-skills training with a focus on employability (e.g., through linkages to the State Skill Mission).

Facilitating supportive laws and policies

The overall approach of the Global Programme has been towards advocating for the development and implementation of costed strategic action plans at the state and district levels across all 12 states, including policies that are critical to adolescent-friendly programmes. To support the implementation and review of these, district task forces have been put in place in all intervention districts. Technical support continues to be provided to strengthen the functioning of these task forces.

In Assam, UNICEF supported the development of a strategic action plan and integration of a multisectoral approach towards ending child marriage in the state. To ensure implementation, action plans on six dimensions (political support, policies, governance, human rights, accountability, access and participation) have been developed in 17 priority districts.

In Gujarat, the strategic action plan was launched with the State Government committing US\$700,000 towards awareness generation about the plan, community outreach and campaigns, and development of information and communication materials and training on ending child marriage.

In Madhya Pradesh, the gender-responsive, costed and integrated multisectoral strategic action plan for adolescent empowerment with focus on ending child marriages and ending violence against children was developed and approved by the state government.

In Odisha, a state-level steering committee for multisectoral convergence on the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act and state action plan was established and chaired by the Principal Secretary. Odisha state increased its budget for the implementation of the state action plan from US\$100,000 in 2019 to US\$50 million in 2020 and, for the first time, a budget provision was made in the plan for quarterly meetings of committees at block and Gram Panchayat levels.

In Rajasthan, UNFPA supported the drafting of the Rajasthan State Policy for Women 2021 in partnership with the Directorate of Women Empowerment after a series of consultations with various stakeholders and representatives from special groups. The policy focuses on holistic empowerment of girls and women, designing of schemes and programmes for girls with special needs, and engagement of men and boys.

In Uttar Pradesh, all 75 districts have functional district task forces that plan, implement, monitor and review the progress of the child protection and adolescent empowerment programme based on the state action plan. Among the 75 districts in Uttar Pradesh, 68 districts have an approved district action plan with financial allocation of US\$1.55 million under the BBBP programme to address the issues of masculinity, GBV and child marriage.

Challenges, lessons learned and next steps

Coordination with districts to complete certain processes were delayed during the year because of restricted movement and different priorities set by line departments in the wake of pandemic. Delays in district action plan approvals resulted in subsequent delays in rolling out district workplans and integration of services for adolescent empowerment, and delays in developing the associated monitoring mechanisms.

The balance between adolescent sexuality, protection and their agency is not easily supported by a normative framework that has pegged the age of consent at 18 years of age, thereby criminalizing adolescent sexuality. This needs to be understood in greater depth, and research has been planned by UNFPA and UNICEF for 2021. For instance, a formative study has been initiated by UNICEF in Bihar to see how these dynamics are curtailing autonomy and decision-making for girls. UNFPA has completed research on the impact of amendment to the Child Marriage Law in Karnataka that introduced a clause of declaring all child marriages void. Research on legal and policy reform processes has revealed that exclusive reliance on legal initiatives can sometimes adversely impact the interests and well-being of girls who are vulnerable to the risk of child marriage.

Going forward, the programme will also undertake evidence-based advocacy on issues of (1) age of consent, (2) girls confined to childcare institutions when rescued from consensual elopement or marriage, (3) efficacy of working on social and behaviour change communication for the prevention of child marriage, and (4) identifying and designing drivers for change like the 'Cash Plus' programmes.

Generating and applying data and evidence

UNICEF in partnership with MAMTA Health Institute for Mother and Child, Child Rights and You (CRY) and Action Aid India undertook a study in nine states (Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh) to identify the socioeconomic and demographic factors that make adolescents vulnerable to child marriage, assess their needs from a programmatic perspective and map the drivers that help accelerate adolescent empowerment and ending child marriage, and those that hinder progress and act as bottlenecks. The study findings are informing programmes to help district officials of different departments such as education, health, labour, RKSK, BBBP, District Child Protection Unit, Child Welfare Committees, the Juvenile Justice Board and the Special Juvenile Police Unit, who are implementing adolescent-specific programmes and schemes to strengthen the ongoing work and programmes associated with adolescents, to make them more targeted.

In Gujarat, the study findings are informing both the advocacy planning with the state government and programmatic planning with civil society partners in terms of prioritization and de-prioritization of identified focus areas. In Tamil Nadu, policy briefs were prepared for seven core areas to strengthen implementation: political advocacy; adolescent education; adolescent-friendly water, sanitation and hygiene; adolescent health; adolescent nutrition; child protection; and ending child marriage. These will help the department frame evidence-based adolescent-friendly policies. The policy briefs will also be the guiding principles for key stakeholder departments during implementation of adolescent- and children-related policies and schemes. UNICEF supported policy-level discussions on adolescents through research and field-level demonstration by conducting an analysis of budgetary provisions (expenditure) on children by age groups (including disaggregation for adolescents) in collaboration with the Centre for Budget Studies and Planning. The analysis of multidimensional poverty index with age-specific analysis for children and adolescents by age group disaggregation provides solid analysis for adolescent boys and girls.

UNFPA initiated support for development of a comprehensive information management system to monitor the gender and adolescent outputs of various programmes and schemes implemented by the Directorate of Women Empowerment, Department of Women and Child Development, and Rajasthan state. Support for the information management system has helped influence increased focus on data collection and analysis related to women's and girls' empowerment.

In West Bengal, UNICEF – through its partners – supported the districts in the collation and analysis of the SAG- Kanyashree Prakaalpa District Monthly Progress Report (DMPR), resulting in tracking the progress, understanding gaps and making necessary course correction. At the state level, the analysis of DMPR of all 23 districts that led to a state-level review meeting by the Department of Women and Child Development helped to determine the effectiveness of the process and make necessary adjustment. Support has been provided to the department in collating child marriage cases received from the district Kanyashree cells, followed by analysis and suggesting recommendations on the gaps identified.

Another emergent area was ending violence against children (GBV, online abuse, child labour, etc.) from a child-rights perspective. There is a need for greater engagement with district-level authorities to be able to intensify identification and reporting of violence against children and engage with communities on underlying normative issues.

UNFPA, working with a civil society organization-led national coalition advocating for adolescent concerns, launched an online platform to work as a repository for resources for a range of issues relevant for young people, including child marriage, child sexual abuse, juvenile justice, and adolescent reproductive and sexual health. This partnership with the civil society coalition with expertise in legal advocacy has helped to sharpen perspectives about the implications of legal and policy reform initiatives related to child marriage and adolescent well-being.

UNICEF supported government programmes and civil society implementation with an early assessment of adolescent vulnerabilities through the mobile platform/service U-Report to understand the challenges faced by them and whether they have access to essential services during the COVID-19 lockdown. Some 45 per cent of adolescents reported school closure as their main challenge; other challenges included separation from family and friends, inability to access online classrooms run by schools and colleges, fake news and rumours online, loss of family income and no alternative livelihood

opportunity, increased stress and anxiety, and inability to access job and training opportunities. About 48 per cent of U-Reporters were aware of special central government benefits or schemes during this crisis, and 50 per cent of those who are aware have been able to access the benefits of these schemes. Some 88 per cent of U-Reporters have access to information and messages related to COVID-19 on how to keep themselves safe. The main source of information was television (49.8 per cent) followed by newspaper (16.2 per cent), Facebook (7.2 per cent) and WhatsApp (7 per cent). About 40 per cent of the U-Reporters said that they consider videos from credible sources to inform others on COVID-19. GIFs (21 per cent) and posters (20 per cent) were other cited methods for sharing information. About 76 per cent of the U-Reporters have been able to take actions within their family or community to inform people on ways to keep themselves safe. Another U-Report poll was conducted to assess the psychosocial issues faced by young people. The questions included assessing mental health and inquiring about other activities done at home. Some of the key results are that most young people (70 per cent) were eating, sleeping well, helping with housework and enjoying spending time at home. Less than half felt connected with friends, connected through phone calls and meetings, video chats and social media. Less than half knew the numbers of CHILDLINE or psychosocial support helplines. Less than half were following ways to keep safe online, and a fifth were not doing anything.

Challenges, lessons learned and next steps

As a result of COVID-19, there have been delays in data collection, updating of information management systems and maintaining monitoring and evaluation systems at government level due to gaps in communication and reprioritization of efforts. This has slowed the work of comprehensive information management in various government systems, making it difficult for systems to reflect data. Technical assistance has also been offered to the state governments to support and strengthen information management efforts.

In the COVID-19 scenario, new evidence will need to be generated on the impact of the socioeconomic stress on households and family-level decision-making related to child marriage. However, these changes are likely to emerge over a period of time. Therefore, longitudinal research and data analysis will need to be planned.

Partnerships and working as one

In 2020, the Global Programme engaged 304 partners across regional and country offices – an increase from 249 partners in 2019. A large portion of these partners are through the programme in India: engaging 126 partnerships in 2020. Of these, 57 are government bodies, 45 civil society organizations, 14 academic institutions, 6 media entities and 4 national partnerships. Nine of the civil society organizations are youth-led and 34 have a focus on one or more of children's, youth or women's rights. At the same time, the engagement with government bodies expands across sectors such as health, education, social protection, child protection, justice, finance and gender. This shows the importance of a multisectoral approach to responding to child marriage.

In 2021, the programme will continue to build partnerships with existing civil society organizations at the community level and leverage resources from district administrations to strengthen the programme. Through its partnership with existing networks of young people such as NYKS and NSS, in addition to civil society organizations, the programme also works to ensure sustainable development, autonomy and youth participation.

UNFPA and UNICEF continue to work together for enhanced results in India. Joint meetings between the two organizations have been undertaken at the state level to facilitate joint implementation and achieve better synergies. Example include the joint partnership to strengthen the core group designed for rolling out the state action plans for child marriage in Odisha and

Rajasthan; joint advocacy with the Minister of Women and Child Development to emphasize the issue of child marriage and adolescent girl empowerment in Odisha; and two joint meetings with the Minister of Women and Child Development in Madhya Pradesh during the year. Further, a joint webinar was organized for all staff of UNFPA, UNICEF, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women (UN Women), the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), including heads of agencies, to build a common understanding and perspective on legal and policy measures related to child marriage in the country.

Other state-level examples of joint work in 2020 include the joint regular meetings between UNFPA, UNICEF and UN Women in Rajasthan to take the mandate of the state-specific action plan for ending child marriage forward. In Bihar, there is scope for joint work between the two organizations for leveraging the work with adolescent groups, and for joint advocacy with the Department for Women and Child Development. Strong synergy and partnerships have been established between UNFPA and UNICEF at the state level in Odisha. Both organizations have been members of the state-level steering committee for multisectoral convergence on the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act and the State Action Plan since 2019. This partnership led to the development of the adolescent programme ADVIKA ("every girl is unique") and capacity-building of key government functionaries on ending child marriage and adolescent empowerment in the state.

Communicating the need to end child marriage

Materials to support communication around child marriage, such as awareness-raising materials in the form of posters, videos and fact sheets, have continued to be used throughout the year. Resorting to online methods due to COVID-19 ensured extensive reach and coverage of the Global Programme messaging. Some examples of communication activities at national level include the Tarunya Toolkit⁹ and its adolescent and youth package.¹⁰ Extensive social media coverage of the UNFPA 'State of World Population' report launch in 2020 included a strong focus on child marriage, reaching across all segments of the population, with webinars and talk shows being conducted where child marriage was discussed in great detail. Training of media fellows (e.g., journalists and photographers)

on gender, media scholarships and print products on gender-transformative approaches, on reducing girls' vulnerabilities and on enhancing the value of girls were also covered widely during the year. A web portal on life-skills was developed during the year, which works as an interface, making it easier for students to work on as it provides videos, e-handouts and e-forms on a single web page. About 75,000 students have responded favourably to the portal, making it the most preferred mode of communication.¹¹

In Gujarat, the programme engages with Commutiny, a youth collective, and their initiative, 'Be a Jagrik',¹² through which young people across the country have been involved in online and face-to-face engagements.

In Maharashtra in 2019, a social behaviour change communication strategy to end child marriage was developed with the support of the programme, guiding communication activities in the state. In 2020, an advocacy resource tool in the form of a video was also created with the objective of sensitizing the Government of Maharashtra on the issue of child marriage.¹³ In October, the ADVIKA adolescent empowerment programme was launched in Odisha.¹⁴ The programme ran a social media campaign (across YouTube, Facebook and Twitter), led by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, for a week in October to spread awareness on themes covered under the programme; share quotes by adolescent champions; and highlight key moments and occasions. In Rajasthan, through the partnership with ActionAid India, three blog posts were published during the year as part of the 'Say no to marriage – yes to school' campaign.¹⁵ From Bihar, a story on gender-sensitive flood response and on the distribution of dignity kits was published on the UNFPA global and India websites, and subsequently published

in United Nations News Hindi.¹⁶ Another important coverage of the programme in Bihar was published on the UNFPA regional website for Asia and the Pacific, focusing on life-saving support to pregnant women and new mothers during the pandemic.¹⁷ In Madhya Pradesh, as part of Umang animatics, a school-based programme supported by the Global Programme, 24 animated videos on health, nutrition and life skills were developed earlier in collaboration with the Department of Education, and are still being used by different departments for disseminating messages to adolescents. In Tamil Nadu, booklets and videos on adolescent empowerment and child marriage were produced and disseminated throughout the year. The booklets, part of the Ilanthendral communication materials, were launched by the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu together with the Minister of Education. In West Bengal, a music video on gender equality was published during the year in partnership with the West Bengal Commission for the Protection of Child Rights, and its launch received attention in both the *Times of India* and *Telegraph India*.

Summary of output indicator performance (2020)

| Indicator | Target | Result |
|---|-----------|------------|
| Indicator 3221: Number of South-South cooperation activities (conferences, expert visits, peer consultations, study tours, communities of practice) supported | | |
| Indicator 1111: Number of adolescent girls (aged 10–19) who actively participated in life skills or comprehensive sexuality education interventions in programme areas | 3,246,395 | 3,610,573 |
| Indicator 1121: Number of girls (aged 10–19) supported by the programme to enrol and/or remain in primary or secondary school | 265,731 | 114,740 |
| Indicator 1211: Number of boys and men actively participating in group education/dialogues that address harmful masculinities and gender norms | 3,000,000 | 5,900,558 |
| Indicator 1221: Number of individuals (boys, girls, women and men) who participate in group education/dialogue sessions on consequences of and alternatives to child marriage, the rights of adolescent girls, and gender equality | 1,293,000 | 8,252,151 |
| Indicator 1222: Number of individuals (boys, girls, women, and men) reached by mass media (traditional and social media) messaging on child marriage, the rights of adolescent girls, and gender equality | 4,215,271 | 20,015,101 |
| Indicator 1223: Number of local actors (e.g., traditional, religious and community leaders) with meaningful participation in dialogues and consensus-building to end child marriage | 1,350 | 16,745 |
| Indicator 1231: Number of civil society organizations newly mobilized in support of challenging social norms and promoting gender equality by the Global Programme | 135 | 22 |
| Indicator 2121: Number of primary/secondary/non-formal schools in programme areas providing quality gender-friendly education that meets minimum standards | N/A | N/A |
| Indicator 2131: Number of service delivery points in programme areas providing quality adolescent-responsive services (health, child protection/gender-based violence) that meet minimum standards | N/A | N/A |
| Indicator 2211: Number of partnerships (both formal and informal) established to deliver adolescent-responsive social protection, poverty reduction and economic empowerment programmes and services | 5 | 26 |
| Indicator 3111: Number of policies or legal instruments addressing child marriage drafted, proposed or adopted at national and subnational levels with Global Programme support | 0 | 4 |
| Indicator 3211: Number of pieces of evidence and knowledge generated that focus on what works to end child marriage | 0 | 0 |
| Indicator 3212: Number of pieces of evidence and knowledge generated that apply a gender analysis | 0 | 2 |
| Indicator 3221: Number of South-South cooperation activities (conferences, expert visits, peer consultations, study tours, communities of practice) supported | 3 | 0 |

N/A, not applicable

ENDNOTES

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- 5 United Nations Children's Fund, *Child Marriage in Lockdown 2020: An analysis of cases prevented from child marriage in selected districts of West Bengal*, UNICEF, September 2020, unpublished.
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- 7 Scheme for Adolescent Girls (SAG), implemented by the Ministry of Women and Child Development under Umbrella Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), primarily aims at breaking the inter-generational life cycle of nutritional and gender disadvantage, and providing a supportive environment for self-development.
- 8 Tarunya Toolkit is a gender-responsive e-repository package of resource materials for social and behaviour change communication to address the issues of ending child marriage and adolescent empowerment with multiple stakeholders at state, district, community and individual levels: <<https://prachicp.com/tarunya/>>.
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- 11 <<https://lifeskillsumang.in/umang.php>>.
- 12 Commutiny – The Youth Collective, 'About Jagrik', New Delhi, <<https://commutiny.in/jagrik/>>, accessed 17 August 2021.
- 13 United Nations Children's Fund, *Sakshyum "Ending Child Marriage in Maharashtra"*, video, UNICEF, 6 May 2020, <www.youtube.com/watch?v=bU-ILyRHlpY>, accessed 17 August 2021.
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- 15 Read the blog posts here: <www.actionaidindia.org/blog/protecting-children-india-child-marriage/>; <www.actionaidindia.org/blog/child-marriage-rajasthan/>; <www.actionaidindia.org/blog/say-no-to-child-marriage-and-yes-to-school/>.
- 16 United Nations Population Fund India, 'Gender-Sensitive Flood Response – A UNFPA initiative in Bihar', UNFPA, New Delhi, 12 September 2020, <<https://india.unfpa.org/en/news/gender-sensitive-flood-response-%E2%80%93-unfpa-initiative-bihar>>, accessed 17 August 2021.
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