

Working at the community level to end child marriage in Sindh province

Organisation

Sujag Sansar Organisation (SSO)

Country

Pakistan

Length of programme

November 2016 – August 2017

Supported by

Norwegian Human Rights Fund (NHRF)

Project summary

Sujag Sansar Organisation (SSO) is working to address child marriage in Sindh province, Pakistan by working with a variety of community members to change attitudes and behaviours around the practice. By identifying influential local figures in the marriage process such as 'Nikah Khawans' (performers of religious and legal marriage rituals), parents, camel riders and wedding singers they are working to raise awareness of child marriage through community discussions and street theatre.

The team are also building the capacity of elected representatives, journalists and the police so they are better equipped to respond to cases of child marriage and advocate for stronger legislation on girls' rights and implementation of the child marriage law.

What are the anticipated outcomes as identified in the *Girls Not Brides* Theory of Change?

SSO are working towards the following outcomes in the 'mobilising families and communities' strategy area of the *Girls Not Brides* Theory of Change:

- Families, communities and young people are increasingly aware of the harmful impact of child marriage and alternatives available
- Families, communities and young people value alternative options to child marriage
- Families and communities prefer not to marry girls as children
- Men prefer not to marry girls who are still children

- Increased use of media to inform and support norm change to end child marriage

They are also working to see change in the ‘establish and implement laws and policies’ strategy area:

- Increased accountability and monitoring of national/regional/community institutions
 - Increased use of media to inform and support norm change to end child marriage.
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What are the key activities of the project?

Using theatre and cultural activities to raise awareness of child marriage

SSO have been using theatre as a way to raise awareness about child marriage at the community level. Given that child marriage is still very much a sensitive issue in Pakistan, theatre helps to spark discussion about the practice in a non-confrontational way. Theatre is also a popular format within the communities and appeals to a large variety of community members. Four sessions are arranged in each village. Both females and males are invited to watch the plays and participate in the singing and debates which take place afterwards. After each performance, the team ask the audience for their feedback on the stories which helps to start a conversation around the harmful consequences of child marriage for girls, their families and communities.

The team also coordinate ‘otaque katchahries’ (or forums for cultural discussions), specifically on child marriage. These discussions involve the men in the village who use the time as an opportunity to come together to discuss the issue of child marriage and participate in cultural activities such as singing traditional songs. Participants include community members, parents, youth, teachers, Nikah Khawans, journalists, or members of committees against child marriage.

Providing training on child marriage

Three training sessions for Nikah Khawans, journalists and members of anti-child marriage committees also take place in each village. The team select potential stakeholders based on their influence in the community and their demonstrated interest in learning how to address child marriage. The team provide information on the law against child marriage which was passed by the Sindh Assembly in 2014 and provide information on the harmful impacts of the practice. Training sessions also help to build participants’ practical skills such as how to report a case of child marriage to the police as well as forging relationships between communities and their local police station so people are more comfortable with the process. The training sessions typically last 2-3 hours and use a variety of techniques such as role play, presentations, group discussions and video documentaries to engage their audiences.

After the theatre activities and the training, participants become social mobilisers, spreading key messages and information learned to their peers and community. Nikah Khawans monitor cases of child marriage in their village and journalists report on these cases. The community then discusses the issue with the parents.

Advocating for better implementation of the law

The Sindh Assembly was the first provincial legislature in Pakistan to pass a law prohibiting child marriage. Under the law, marriage under the age of 18 years is no longer allowed. Despite this progress, there continues to be a lack of understanding around the law and a lack of enforcement at the local level. SSO are working to raise awareness of the Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Law as well as advocating for better implementation and enforcement. By conducting meetings, media campaigns, seminars with legislators and relevant government departments, they hope to raise awareness of the new age of marriage and also build the capacity of those who are responsible for enforcing it at the community level. Although child marriage is a deeply engrained practice which has been around for generations, the SSO team are working for gradual change at the grassroots level so more families decide not to marry their daughters as children.

Has the project been evaluated?

SSO are currently working with a consultant to evaluate their work on child marriage.

What have been the challenges in implementing the project and how were they overcome?

- **Gaining the support of religious leaders:** At the start, the Nikah Khawans were furious about these interventions because child marriage is such a sensitive issue from a religious point of view. SSO was the first organisation to initiate debate at the local level which created a very tense atmosphere at the first workshops that were held. To overcome this, the team changed their strategy and asked the Nikah Khawans to present their point of view on child marriage so they could better understand their perspective and give them a voice. The SSO facilitators presented the legal and constitutional position and avoided adding their own opinions. This sparked a debate among the Nikah Khawans which highlighted that some religious leaders did believe the legal and constitutional position was important to consider. For others, the process of change has been longer and they continued to believe child marriage is good for girls and their families. However throughout the series of workshops the number of Nikah Khawans who support child marriage has declined and many have gone on to play an important role in preventing marriages by refusing to perform the ceremonies of underage couples in their villages.
- **Gaining the support of families and community elders:** similarly, parents and community elders justified child marriage by saying they are following traditions of their forefathers and it is a personal and family matter not open to public debate. To overcome these attitudes, the team used theatre and shared educational materials targeting parents and elders to help them understand the harmful consequences of marrying their daughters as children. Using theatre was a good way to approach these messages and in many cases it sparked conversation among the audience. The plays frequently prompted an emotional reaction among family members after seeing the tragic outcomes for girls today and the generations of women in their families. Many parents were moved by what they saw and voluntarily said they would abandon child marriage in their own families.
- **Funding community level work:** SSO continues to face difficulties in securing sustainable funding sources to be able to continue this vital work at the community level. Being part of the *Girls Not Brides* Partnership has helped SSO to overcome some funding issues by helping to identify more funding sources. Having their child marriage work highlighted and being able to take part in capacity building opportunities to strengthen their programmatic approach has also helped to support their work with communities.

What factors were important in the success of the project?

- Gaining funding opportunities to continue our work and having a platform to ensure better visibility of our work by being part of *Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage*. With increased funding the team hope to expand their work and launch a new campaign against child marriage.

What pieces of advice would you give other civil society organisations considering implementing a similar project?

1. **Develop strategies and awareness programmes carefully:** don't directly confront supporters of child marriages because they have carried out this practice for centuries and are often unaware about the harmful impacts of child marriage. Talking to them in a non-confrontational way about the issue and giving them space to put forward their own perspective will be more advantageous in the long term.
2. **Don't side-line the diehard advocates of child marriages:** they are crucial to the process of long term change. Instead, try to convert them from being supporters of this practice to understanding why it is harmful.
3. **Plan, develop, design and mobilize support for long-term programmes:** deeply ingrained attitudes and behaviours which keep the practice of child marriage going will not change after arranging one workshop or activity. Perseverance and a long-term vision is needed!

To learn more about the work of Sujag Sansar, visit their [website](#).