

Endline Report

Community Action to Address Child Marriage and School Dropout: Findings from Action Research on Community-Led Child Protection in Jharkhand, India

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ABBREVIATIONS

AWW	Aganwadi worker
BC	Backward class
CINI	Children in Need Institute
COVID-19	Disease caused by coronavirus SARS-CoV-2
CWC	Child Welfare Committee
IASC	Interagency Standing Committee (United Nations)
ICPS	Integrated Child Protection Scheme
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OBC	Other backward class
OC	Open category
SC	Scheduled caste
SHG	Self-help group
ST	Scheduled tribe
SES	Socio-economic status
VLCPC	Village Level Child Protection Committee

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Jharkhand state, India, children face a wide array of protection risks such as trafficking, child labor, rape and sexual assault, child marriage, and recruitment into armed groups. To help address the protection risks to children, the Government of India is currently implementing an Integrated Child Protection Scheme, which calls for the formation of a Village Level Child Protection Committee (VLCPC) at local level and also linked Child Protection Committees at higher levels. Ideally, the VLCPCs monitor the risks to children, report to authorities serious violations against children, and help to prevent violations against children at local level.

The available global evidence suggests that because the VLCPCs are being implemented in a top-down approach, they will likely face challenges related to local ownership, effectiveness, and sustainability. The goal of this inter-agency action research is to enable and systematically test the effectiveness of community-led processes of child protection in Jharkhand that are community owned, provide a civic platform for child protection, and can help to support the VLCPCs. The action research entailed extensive collaboration between five agencies (the Core Group): CINI, Chetna Vikas, Child Resilience Alliance (formerly the Columbia Group for Children in Adversity), Plan India, and Praxis.

Action Research Design and Previous Phases

The action research used a two arm, randomized cluster trial design that enables one to make causal attributions regarding the effectiveness of the community led intervention. In each of four Districts (Dhanbad, Giridih, Khunti, and Ranchi), a cluster of three villages was selected, with attention given to having two similar clusters in Dhanbad-Giridih and Khunti-Ranchi, respectively. Following an initial learning process, one cluster from each pair was assigned on a random basis to either the intervention or the comparison condition.

During the planning phase, each intervention cluster engaged in slow, inclusive, participatory dialogues with the assistance of an NGO facilitator and identified which harm(s) to children they wanted to address. In Dhanbad, the communities selected child marriage, whereas in Khunti, the communities selected school dropout. A baseline survey was then conducted in both the intervention and comparison communities, with attention to the selected harm to children and also to matters such as education, beliefs and attitudes related to the selected harm to children, relations with parents, and social well-being. Next, the intervention communities developed their own action plans for reducing child marriage and school dropout, respectively. The action plans were designed to create a civic process of child protection that engaged individuals, families, and communities, and they aimed to link with and help to support the VLCPCs and also processes at the panchayat level.

The community-led actions were implemented for over two years, from August, 2017 to mid-March, 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted life. The interventions were community actions facilitated by collectives that consisted of adults and adolescents. The intervention in Khunti to reduce child dropout included elements such as street dramas and public rallies emphasizing the importance of keeping children in school; community monitoring of out of school children, meetings and problem-solving discussions with families whose children were

out of school; discussions in gram sabhas about steps that could help particular children return to school; and linkage with Self Help Groups and other groups that could help families to keep their children in school. The intervention in Dhanbad to address child marriage included campaigns and street plays to raise awareness about the adverse effects of child marriage; identification of potential cases of child marriage; outreach to and work with families to prevent early marriage; linking economically disadvantaged households with supportive government schemes; monitoring of and encouragement for keeping children in school; discussions and problem-solving with *Mahila Samohs*, Panchayat representatives, and the gram sabha.

Methodology

The data collection took place September-October, 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated significant adjustments. Surveys were administered in person, though with social distancing and wearing facemasks. The qualitative data were collected by phone.

Quantitative. The participants were 531 children between the ages of 12 and 18 years. 316 participants were from Khunti-Ranchi areas, whereas 255 participants were from Dhanbad-Giridih areas. The participants were randomly selected from grid defined areas in each of the 12 villages.

Two separate survey instruments were developed since different interventions were used in Dhanbad and Khunti. Both instruments included general questions on demographics, SES levels, living arrangements, level of education, why children were out of school, daily activities and income, and social well-being. The survey instrument for Khunti (and its comparison area, Ranchi), where the intervention focused on out of school children, also included questions related to children's experience and treatment at school by teachers and also by children, and family support for attending school. The survey instrument for Dhanbad (and its comparison area, Giridih), where the intervention focused on child marriage, also included questions on attitudes, beliefs, and social norms related to child marriage and on community action or steps to prevent early marriage. Prepared in English, each instrument was then translated into Hindi by Praxis, which worked with the local researchers to insure that the questions were contextually appropriate and understandable for the participating children.

Seventeen data collectors – 6 in Dhanbad, 6 in Giridih, and 5 in the Kunti-Ranchi villages--operated in pairs or groups of three in villages assigned to them. They were familiar with the local areas, fluent in the local languages, and had social profiles that favored the establishment of trust with the local people. Eight of the data collectors were women, while 2 belonged to Scheduled Tribes (ST). For each ST-populous village, the data collectors had an ST background.

The data were cleaned and analyzed by a PhD statistics consultant of the Child Resilience Alliance who used SPSS and statistical tests such as Pearson Chi Square and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), with the latter focused on interaction effects.

Qualitative. Qualitative data were collected from 114 people only in the intervention communities of Dhanbad and Khunti, respectively. The participants included adolescent girls

and boys, adults who had (or had not) been actively involved in the community action, natural leaders, service providers, and members of the gram panchayat.

The qualitative data collectors were four experienced researchers of Praxis. Two of the researchers were female, and two were male. Also, two represented the category of SC (Scheduled Castes), while one of them belongs to BC (Backward Classes). Recognizing that the participants were all affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, the interview began with a discussion about the current situation. Then the discussion turned to the community-led process and its impact. The questions were broad and open-ended, and the interviewers used a conversational approach in which they followed the respondents in learning about the community-led initiatives. The questions probed into how the community-led process formed, what considerations led people to select a particular harm, who was involved or not involved in the process, how the collectives conducted their work and engaged with different people, the impact the community initiatives had achieved before the COVID-19 pandemic, and the sustainability of the community initiatives. The recorded interviews were translated into verbatim English transcripts, which were analyzed by experienced qualitative researchers from Praxis, who as a team identified patterns and selected illustrative narratives.

Ethics. In both the quantitative and the qualitative work, careful attention was given to ethical issues on an ongoing basis. The research team was careful to respect the Government calls to wear face masks and avoid large group gatherings. Recognizing that the pandemic had significantly worsened economic hardships and added to already heavy work schedules, the team attempted to collect data at times that were convenient for the participants. Researchers adhered to the Code of Conduct that is part of Praxis' Child Safeguarding Policy. Informed consent was obtained verbally from the participating children's parents or guardians, and informed assent was also obtained from the children who participated in the survey or in the interviews. Confidentiality was protected by removing personal identifiers from the data and storing the quantitative data on a secure electronic platform. In all but a few cases, the children were interviewed alone, with their parents or guardians not present.

Limitations. Because the data were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is possible that survey responses were influenced by the pandemic, although the effects should have been similar across the intervention and comparison conditions. Also, in Giridih, data collection was constrained by restrictions imposed by law enforcement authorities on the movement of the survey team in the comparison villages that have a strong presence of extremist groups and had experienced a recent spike in cases of abduction of children. Since the study did not use a representative sample that is representative of Jharkhand, care should be taken in generalizing the findings. Within the study areas, the use of relatively small, somewhat heterogeneous samples limits one's ability to generalize the survey findings. Since the qualitative data were collected by phone and people were not accustomed to talking with unknown people whom they could not see, the responses were limited and not display the richness usually seen in in-person interviews.

Key Findings: Dhanbad-Giridih

Demographics. Difficulties recruiting people in Giridih led to unequal sample sizes, with 168 participants from Dhanbad and 87 participants from Giridih. The participants' mean age was 15 years, with 54% and 46% females and males, respectively. The dominant caste representation was BC, followed by SC and ST, and over 87% of the participants from both areas were Hindu. In Dhanbad, most respondents were middle or high SES, with only 8.7% being low SES. In Giridih, half the respondents were low SES followed by high SES (33.3%) and middle SES (14.9%). Because of these SES differences, key effects reported below were analyzed to see if the results varied by SES, with statistically significant differences reported below.

Collectivization. The Dhanbad participants united around the issue of child marriage and called themselves the 'Committee on Child Protection,' which aimed to help the community to prevent early marriage and promote children's education. Most of the Committee members and participants in the community action were girls and women. The Committee members held weekly meetings and helped organize street corner plays, rallies, wall writing, picnics, and cultural activities aimed to help prevent child marriages. Anganwadi workers (AWWs; community health workers) played an active role in the Committee and used Self-Help Group meetings for spreading messages or sharing information.

In contrast to the comparison condition, people in Dhanbad showed large increases in the upsetness they would experience if a girl from their community were married early. Also, people became very eager to prevent child marriage in Dhanbad, a pattern that was seen on a smaller level in Giridih. This momentum led to the development in Dhanbad (more than in Giridih) of a specific community plan to reduce child marriage.

Early marriage. The main outcome for children was a reduction in the number of number of child marriages in Dhanbad but not in Giridih. Participants in Dhanbad were more likely than those in Giridih to agree that there are community leaders who take action against child marriage. In Dhanbad, the participants spoke of how the community-led process had enabled the community to know about impending cases of child marriage and to take appropriate, preventive action such as talking with the family of the girl and helping them to agree to wait until she was 18 before she married. Participants in Dhanbad indicated that before the community-led intervention, 4 – 5 girls between the ages of 15 and 17 years were married each year but that number had decreased by the endline study to 1 – 2 girls per year getting married early.

A contributing factor to the reduced early marriage in Dhanbad was the communities' decision to increase girls' participation in education. As the communities focused on keeping girls in school, families viewed girls' education as increasingly important and worked actively to enable girls to stay in school. Parents afforded greater freedom to girls, who became more comfortable sharing their demands for education with the parents, voicing their reservations about early marriage, and negotiating for a later marriage. Over time, parents came to see marrying girls at the right age as their responsibility and also as a right of the child. These family level changes complemented and added to the community level changes in early marriage. Community members, too, attached greater value to girls, who began to participate in gram sabha meetings and felt that they were taken more seriously.

There was mixed evidence regarding changes in beliefs and attitudes that support early marriage. Over time, people in Dhanbad became less likely to agree with the statements that ‘A girl is ready for marriage once she starts menstruating,’ or that ‘Child marriage of girls can help to prevent sexual violence, assault, and harassment.’

However, no such shift was evident in regard to questions related to family honor, economics and forced marriage. In Dhanbad, there was no significant change in the level of agreement that ‘Marrying girls young can help to protect family honor/reputation.’ Similarly, there was an increase between T1 and T2 in the agreement with the statement ‘Even if a girl does not want to be married, she should honor the decisions/wishes of her family.’ However, there was not a decrease at T2 in agreement with statements such as ‘Economic gain from dowry and gifts associated with marriage encourage child marriage or ‘‘Poor families marry off their children at a young age to wealthy men to elevate their economic status.’ Also, at T2, people in the low SES category agreed much more than did people of middle or high SES with the latter statement. This suggests that the change process toward disfavoring child marriage was incomplete and slowed by economic hardships. In fact, poorer families may need the economic gain from the dowry or seeing child marriage of girls as a practical means of improving their economic status.

Linkages. In Dhanbad, the community-led action brought together people from all segments of the community. As people talked together about preventing child marriage and the well-being of girls, they shared their information about services available, providing a community clearinghouse for information. Both girls and Committee members said that the community-led action had successfully linked girls and families with different services and programs. Also, the community-led process enabled effective communication across and coordination of different groups and networks that supported children. Because the Committee members came from diverse areas and orientations, it included members of SHGs, School Management Committees (SMCs), the gram panchayat, and other groups. The coordination that arose across these different groups was likely both an effect of the community-led process and a source of increased participation in it. Although several VLCPC members were part of the collectives, the VLCPCs in the intervention villages existed on paper only and had not become functional, making this expected linkage impossible to evaluate.

Sustainability. The community-led action achieved high levels of community ownership. Over three-quarters of the participants said they saw the community-led action as worthwhile, and more than half the participants said they actively participated in the initiatives. However, the evidence of sustainability was mixed. Although the communities had clearly internalized concern about preventing child marriage and demonstrated significant ability to reduce it through their own self-guided action, some level of dependency on Chetna Vikas may have been created, as some people rely on the NGO for getting information about government schemes and keeping people motivated.

Challenges. Although the community-led work established a dynamic, effective civic process for preventing child marriage, additional work is needed to address the economic drivers of child marriage, which the COVID-19 pandemic will likely strengthen. Further work is also needed to address further the patriarchal relations that privilege men and devalue women. Increasing the

engagement of men in the community-led process will also be essential. The sustainability of the community-led process will likely require additional steps on the part of Chetna Vikas and other Core Group members to step back, enable even more community self-reliance. These challenges are opportunities for future development and enrichment of the community-led process.

Key Findings: Khunti - Ranchi

The key findings focus mostly on Kumkuma and Taro villages since Aloundi was strongly affected by the *pathalgarhi* movement and came into the intervention very late and in a limited manner. Qualitative data are emphasized since challenges such as those associated with COVID and the *pathalgarhi* movement made it difficult to collect and interpret the quantitative data.

Demographics. The mean age of the participants was 15.4 years, and 52.2% and 47.8% of the participants were females or males, respectively. Most of the participants were members of Scheduled Tribes. Over half the sample identified their religion as ‘Other’, and smaller percentages identified themselves as Muslim, Christian, or Hindu. Most of the participants were low or middle SES.

Collectivization. In Khunti, where people had decided to address the issue of out of school children, collectives formed in each of the three intervention villages. The village level collectives each have 16 members (female and male), including the Gram Pradhman (Village Head), the ward level representative of the panchayat, teachers, and representatives of the adolescent girls and boys. Most of the members articulated the core purpose of the collective, that is, to ‘ensure that children go to school, get married at the right age, and stay away from bad habits,’ and they saw themselves as helping the entire community to address the issue of out of school children. The collectives met monthly to plan activities such as street dramas, campaigns against school dropout, meetings with school officials, etc. They also monitor which children are out of school and plan home visits or other steps to work with families and help the children return to school.

The collectives worked through multiple networks, including traditional governance structures such as the gram sabha, which in tribal communities of Khunti is the key decision making authority for matters of collective interest. The collectives also worked closely with groups of adolescents and with teachers. The adolescent groups, known locally as ‘*Kishore Kishori Samooh*,’ helped to do peer tracking of who is in or out of school. The collectives’ work with teachers enabled them to understand and work to improve conditions at schools and also to verify reports of particular children being out of school against school attendance records.

To identify out of school children, the collectives mapped their respective communities by visiting each household and taking stock of whether children of school going age were in or out of school and were attending regularly. Teachers and community leaders visited the homes whose children were out of school to learn more about the children’s situation. Also, the parents of out of school children were invited to meet and talk with the collective, which took a supportive stance and engaged in collaborative problem-solving and finding a way forward that would enable the children to return to school.

School Dropout. The community-led action succeeded in decreasing school dropout and enabling children to go to school on a more regular basis. The reduced school dropout rates were evident in the significant increase from T1 to T2 in the intervention villages in the percentage of children who have ever attended school, whereas the comparison villages experienced a modest reduction. Also, there were 22 cases of children who had dropped out but who returned to school through the action of committee members, community leaders, and in some cases the gram sabhas. In cases in which a child's parents had not been attentive to the importance of education, the committee members helped the parents and family members to understand the value of education for both the child and the family. In cases in which a child was out of school due to poverty, the committee tried to link the family with SHGs and also emphasized the long-term value of education. Also, the committee members helped children who represented lower caste categories to obtain the documents needed to attend school.

The reduced school dropout rates also meant that children, particularly girls, stayed in school longer and completed higher levels than children had typically achieved before the intervention had begun. A contributing factor in girls' ability to stay in school longer was that the collectives had helped them to know which documents they needed in order to claim entitlements that reduced economic burdens on the family. The intervention also led to increased participation by girls in vocational courses such as computer courses and coaching institutes and also skills development programs such as those offered under the '*Tejaswini scheme*.' Girls' increased participation in education and vocational training seemed to have been enabled by increases in their freedom and status. Throughout the intervention phase, both facilitators and Praxis staff reported that women were being heard and had become more influential in the gram sabha.

Both peer and parental influence were significant determinants of children staying in school. Adolescents reached out to children who were out of school and helped convince them to continue their education. Parents became more committed to keeping their children in school, even during periods in which villagers engaged in heavy agricultural work. Also, the parents showed better understanding of and improved relations with their children, and some parents shifted away from harmful behavior such as excessive drinking of alcohol.

Although the communities and families reduced school dropout, they did not entirely eliminate it. Ongoing problems such as extreme poverty, not having the appropriate documents such as the Aadhar card, the caste and income certificate, or *Khatiyani*, a document related to land ownership) or loss of parents led to new cases of school dropout.

Child marriage and other issues. The collectives' action in preventing and responding to school dropout also led them to address inter-related issues such as child marriage that were a major source of school dropout among girls. There were numerous cases in which the collectives identified and worked with the families and other groups to prevent impending child marriages and enable the girls to stay in school. Participants also reported that as children went to school more often, children spent less time on the streets, where they had often engaged in gambling. Collectively, these findings suggest that as communities activate themselves around a particular, self-selected issue, the community members become increasingly attentive to diverse issues affecting children and more active in addressing them.

Linkages. The effectiveness of the community-led action owed in no small part to the effective linkages that were developed between the collectives and other community structures, groups, and services. In Taro village, eight girls who were out of school were linked with relevant schemes (e.g., economic aid) so they could continue their education. With CINI's support, the collectives became clearinghouses of information regarding such schemes and also community-level connectors who were able to approach the relevant government offices to obtain the needed services.

The collectives in both Taro and Kumkuma developed extensive linkages with other groups and structures that then mobilized themselves around addressing school dropout. The gram sabha meetings began discussing children's issues, which helped to legitimate them, and became active in helping out of school children to return to school. Also, the collectives linked with the School Management Committees, sharing, for example, information on the school scorecards wherein children rated the quality of the school environment and the instruction. As the collectives helped children to return to school, they came to be seen as allies who supported children's education, and this increased their influence on the schools. Valuable also were linkages with adolescent groups, which were active in doing street dramas, participating in campaigns, conducting village mapping, and encouraging peers to stay in school.

Although the Village Level Child Protection Committees were not functional in Khunti, the District Level Child Welfare Committee had been established. When the collectives identified children who were out of school and who needed additional support, they referred these cases to the CWC. In several cases, the district level CWC helped the referred children to return to school. This effective, bottom up linkage suggests that a community-led process can help to support the work and effectiveness of bodies that are part of the formal system of child protection. Collectively, these linkages and associated activities made for a coordinated, whole community approach that mobilized all elements of the communities—adolescents, parents, peers, schools, and community structures—on behalf of decreasing school dropout and enabling children's well-being.

Challenges. These successes notwithstanding, the community-led process of addressing school dropout in Khunti faces ongoing challenges such as difficult economic conditions, which have been significantly worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic, leading children to drop out of school and work in order to help support their families. These economic challenges indicate the necessity of fully integrating economic and livelihoods support into work on child protection. Sustainability also poses ongoing challenges since the intervention communities may have become too reliant on CINI to help provide information that would enable the collectives to help out of school children to return to school and to help the process keep on track. Further work is needed to strengthen the communities' self-reliance and capacities for maintaining high levels of motivation, care, and oversight. Ongoing challenges also arise in regard to diversity, as additional steps are needed to enable the full inclusion of Muslims. The upheavals associated with community-government tensions are also an ongoing challenge, making it essential to ask how children are being affected. In a significant way, this action research challenges the world to think how the world might become a better place if the needs, voices, and well-being of children were made increasingly central priorities.

Conclusion

This study provides clear evidence for the effectiveness of community-led approaches to child protection in improving children's protection and well-being in an Indian context. In Dhanbad, the evidence indicated that communities had mobilized themselves around child marriage, developed clear plans for reducing it, and had taken specific steps to prevent impending child marriages. Although the community-led action did not eliminate child marriage, it did succeed in reducing it and in establishing an ongoing civic process for preventing child marriage and also for enabling girls to pursue their education. In Khunti, the evidence indicated that communities had mobilized themselves around school dropout, developed effective networks and strategies for addressing it, and had taken specific actions that had reduced school dropout. Although school dropout was not eliminated, the community-led action succeeded in reducing it and also child marriage, which was one of the key sources of school dropout for girls. Together, these findings help to establish the generalizability of the community-led approach to child protection.

The findings from Dhanbad and Khunti also attest to the importance of community ownership. In both areas, the interventions were community owned since local people rather than outside agencies and experts made the key decisions, drove the community actions, and directly influenced the outcomes for children. This bodes well for sustainability and ongoing community action to protect children.

This study provides the first systematic evidence that NGOs can use community-led approaches to child protection in an effective manner that produces positive outcomes for children. The successes of the community-led approach reported in this study increase confidence that other NGOs could also use this approach successfully, if it were applied with the flexibility, trust in the communities, and spirit of co-learning and accompaniment that were embodied in this action research. Wider use by NGOs of a community-led approach would be a valuable complement to the use of the dominant, top-down approaches and could help to animate grassroots community action for child protection on a large scale.

Three aspects of the community-led work were important for its effectiveness. First, the village collectives functioned as networks of networks that activated different centers of resources, power, and influence on behalf of children's well-being. As a result, many different actors within the community began taking responsibility for the protection of children. Also, when particular resources were needed, the resources were leveraged by working through other stakeholders in the networks. Second, children played key leadership roles in the community-led actions. This leadership went well beyond the child participation that is usually seen in NGO projects, and it invites further efforts in enabling children's leadership to alter the social processes that cause harm to children. Third, the community-led action embodied a social ecological approach, which mobilized diverse actors at different social levels around addressing child marriage and school dropout, respectively. This shows how community-led work can stimulate a whole community approach that elevates the priority of children's issues in the community and ignites action across diverse sub-groups within the community.

Overall, these findings are highly encouraging for the wider task of strengthening national systems of child protection, both in India and other countries, too. The community-led approach

provides a grassroots, locally owned process that activates communities, families and children around preventing harms to children. A community-led approach offers a strong civic arm of child protection and a platform of collective resilience that complements and supports the formal arm of child protection systems. Such an approach is of vital importance since our efforts to protect children must be as comprehensive as are the risks that threaten children's well-being.

INTRODUCTION

In Jharkhand state, India, children face a wide array of protection risks such as trafficking (Judicial Academy Jharkhand, 2016; UNICEF, 2020), child labor (Government of Jharkhand, 2012), rape and sexual assault (Asian Center for Human Rights, 2013), early marriage (UNICEF, 2019), recruitment into armed groups amidst a Maoist insurgency (Child Soldiers International, 2016), and various forms of violence (UNICEF, 2020). These risks interact with ongoing problems of poor nutrition (UNICEF, 2017a), poverty, discrimination, and low rates of education participation. Due to a history of discrimination and economic hardships, the risks to children are extensive in the tribal areas of Jharkhand, where Scheduled Tribes comprise approximately one quarter of the population in the state. Many of the protection risks to children worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic, with adverse effects on children's mental health and psychosocial well-being (Ramaswamy & Seshadri, 2020).

To help address the protection risks to children, the Government of India is currently implementing an Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS). The ICPS calls for the formation of a Village-Level Child Protection Committee (VLCPC) at local level, which in turn would connect with Child Protection Committees (CPCs) at block level and higher levels. Each VLCPC consists of people who, ideally, have been trained to monitor the risks to children, report to authorities serious violations against children, and help to prevent violations against children at local level. If they were effective, the VLCPCs would be an important foundation of child protection at community level. In many parts of Jharkhand, the process of establishing, capacitating, and making functional the VLCPCs is still in its formative stage.

Aside from the problem of scale, significant challenges arise in enabling VLCPCs to contribute significantly to child protection at community level. For one thing, the effectiveness of mechanisms such as VLCPCs is not well established. Both global, inter-agency review and a recent systematic review of community-based child protection mechanisms such as CPCs (also called Child Welfare Committees) reported that there is a weak evidence base regarding the effectiveness of such mechanisms (Wessells, 2009; see also Ellermeijer et al., in press).

Overall, the implementation of the ICPS in Jharkhand employs a top-down approach, as the impetus for the formation of VLCPCs comes from the Government rather than people at community level. The aforementioned global review found that top-down approaches to forming mechanisms such as CPCs yield low levels of community ownership. Often, community people described NGO facilitated CPCs as 'a UNICEF project' rather than their own, and the CPCs usually floundered once the external funding had ended. The review also identified community ownership as the single most important determinant of effectiveness and sustainability. Research in countries such as Sierra Leone (Behnam, 2011; Krueger et al., 2013; Wessells, 2015) and Kenya (Wessells et al., 2014) indicate that because top-down approaches impose outsider views and values, they often produce backlash and limit people's willingness to report violations against children through the CPCs. Hence, there is a risk that the rollout of VLCPCs in Jharkhand will face significant challenges related to low levels of community ownership, sustainability, and willingness to use the government supported mechanisms.

A promising way of addressing these challenges is to use a community-led approach, which uses a bottom-up approach and recognizes that communities themselves can help to create a protective environment for children. In the widely used social ecological approach to child protection, community-level supports—including community-led child protection—are recognized as powerful means for protecting children on a wide scale (Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2019). A community-led approach is one in which communities themselves hold the power, take the key decisions, and engage in action to support vulnerable children, regardless whether they call it 'child protection' (Wessells, 2018). For example, in an African village where there are many orphans due to the HIV and AIDS pandemic, religious groups may organize themselves to provide foster care for the children.

Community-led action can also emerge with the support of NGOs that position themselves as facilitators and co-learners rather than experts. For example, in Sierra Leone, external actors facilitated a slow, inclusive process of community dialogue, reflection, problem-solving, decision making, and action. Yet it was the community which decided which issue to address, designed an intervention or processes for addressing it, and then led the implementation and helped to evaluate the intervention (Wessells, 2015). Similarly, in coastal Kenya, communities elected to address the problem of early sex, which is a precursor to sexual exploitation and abuse, early marriage, and teenage pregnancy. The communities themselves led the community action that reduced early marriage, in part through teenage girls' strong leadership (Kostelny et al., 2020). Because communities hold the power, this kind of approach tends to unleash the creative abilities of communities in supporting vulnerable children. Evidence thus far from multiple settings indicates that community led approaches have higher levels of sustainability (Donahue & Mwewa, 2006) since local people take responsibility for them and use local resources to keep them running (Wessells, 2015, 2018). Thus community-led approaches offer a promising way of helping governments and agencies to achieve the global Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015).

The goal of this inter-agency action research is to enable and systematically test the effectiveness of community-led processes of child protection in Jharkhand. This is the first systematic test of a community-led approach facilitated by NGOs in an Asian context. It is expected that a community-led approach will help to strengthen prevention and create a civic process for child protection that complements formal aspects of child protection systems. In order to support the ICPS, the community-led processes sought to link with and support the VLCPCs and also higher-level processes at the panchayat level. In this holistic approach, the VLCPC is not a 'one stop shop' for child protection but part of a wider system of child protection in which formal (government led) elements and nonformal (civil society) elements interact and support one another.

The action research entails extensive collaboration between five agencies (called 'the Core Group'): CINI, Chetna Vikas, Plan India, Praxis, and the Child Resilience Alliance. The inter-agency nature of the research allows extensive co-learning across agencies of differing size and orientation. Also, it makes it possible to draw upon the complementary strengths of different agencies. Because the Core Group includes a mix of practitioner agencies and research agencies, it makes it possible to conduct more robust evaluations of interventions than are typically conducted. Further, the action research is part of a wider process of inter-agency learning and

institutionalization of community led approaches. The Core Group is able to get farther in its work than a single agency would, as the Core Group members learn and problem-solve together on how to use a community-led approach in the Indian context and use their respective networks to help share the learning, methods, tools, and the approach with other child focused agencies.

OVERVIEW OF THE ACTION RESEARCH: DESIGN AND PREVIOUS PHASES

The field of international child protection has had a relatively weak evidence base owing in part to the use of designs that lack a comparison condition. Without the use of a robust design, one cannot make causal interpretations regarding the effectiveness of an intervention. This action research attempted to help fill this important gap by using a more robust design and including measures of the actual outcomes for children.

Design

The action research used a two arm, randomized cluster trial design (see Figure 1) that enables one to make causal attributions regarding the effectiveness of the community led intervention. Initially, the Core Group selected two geographic areas in Dhanbad-Giridih and in Khunti-Ranchi Districts, respectively (see Figure 2 on the following page). In each District, a cluster of three villages was selected, with attention given to having two similar clusters in Dhanbad-Giridih and Khunti-Ranchi, respectively. The intent was to have two approximately matched clusters in each area for purposes of comparison. However, the matching was highly imperfect due to the limited data available, and was based mainly on observations regarding demographics, poverty levels, child protection risks, and the availability of services for children.

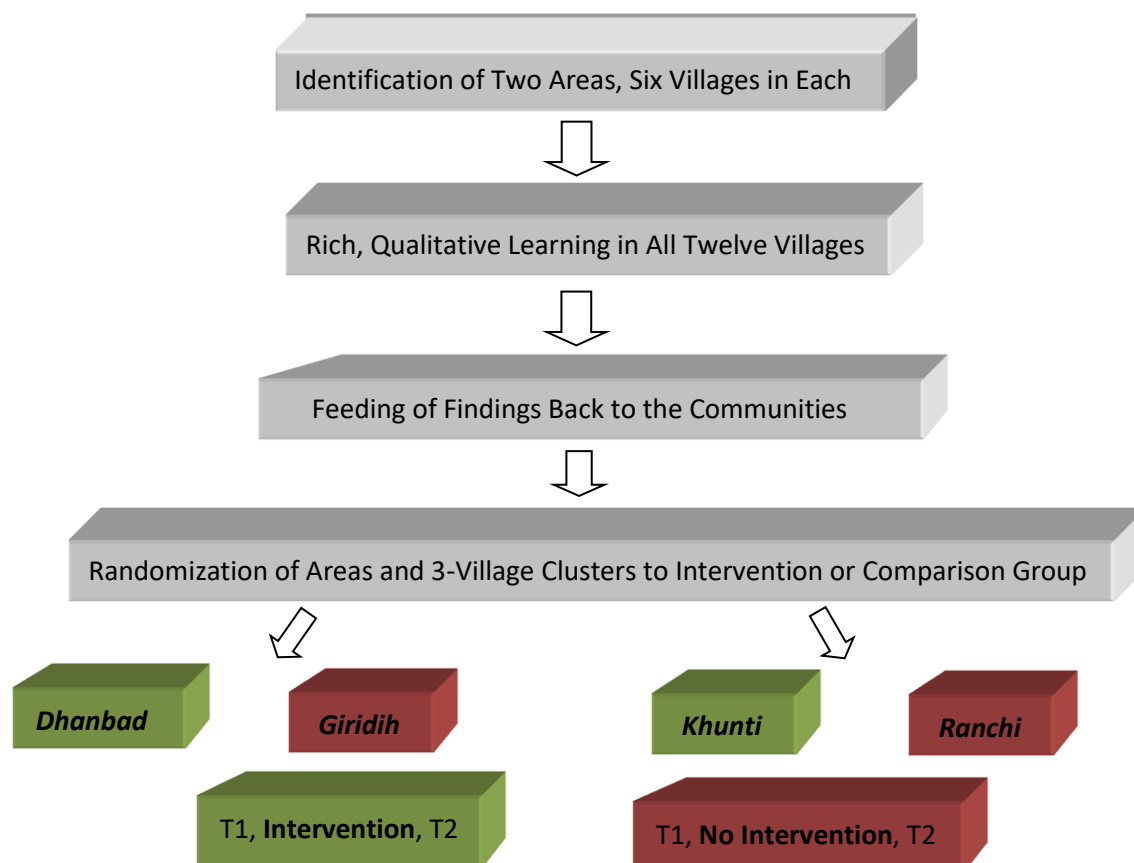


Figure 1. The design of the multi-phase action research in Jharkhand.

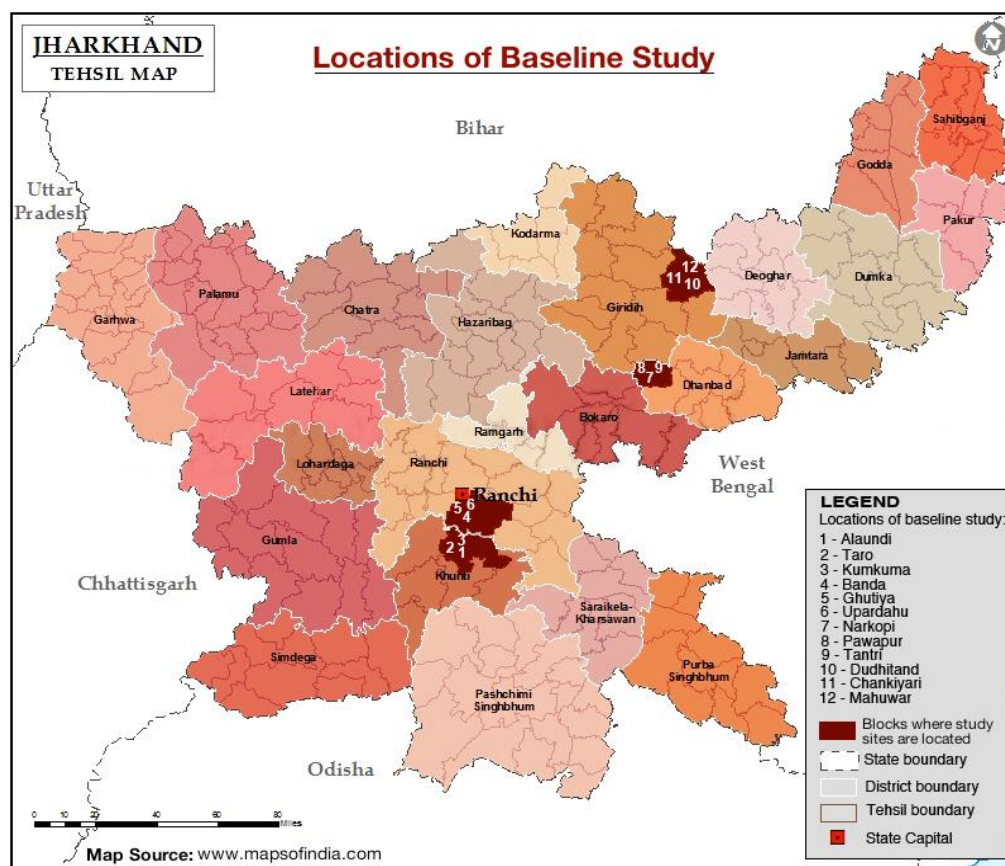


Figure 2. Map of Jharkhand showing the action research sites (From Interagency Core Group, 2016).

The Action Research Phases

The five phases and the timeline for the action research are outlined in Table 1.

Phase	Dates
Learning phase	December, 2015 – February, 2016
Planning phase - Selection of harm to children - Intervention planning	April, 2016 – April, 2017 May – August, 2017
<i>Baseline data collection</i>	June, 2017
Intervention phase	September, 2017 – mid-March, 2020
<i>Endline data collection</i>	October – November, 2020

Table 1. The phases, data collection points, and timeline for the action research.

The Learning Phase. At field level, the action research began with Praxis leading a rich, participatory process of grounded learning about each of the twelve communities (Inter-Agency Core Group, 2016). This learning illuminated some of the main risks and protective factors for

children in each village, providing a qualitative baseline picture of the villages before the community-led planning and intervention had developed. Because the learning process was slow and deep, it generated higher levels of trust than would likely have been achieved by a standard rapid assessment on child protection. In a respectful, non-extractive process, Praxis also fed the findings back to the communities.

The learning phase ended with the assignment on a random basis to the intervention condition of one of the paired clusters within each of Khunti-Ranchi and Dhanbad-Giridih. Khunti and Dhanbad were selected as the intervention sites, with Ranchi and Giridih, respectively, serving as the comparison sites that would not have an intervention. Table 2 shows the twelve participating villages and their division by area into clusters of three intervention villages and three comparison villages, respectively.

Area	Intervention Clusters	Comparison Clusters
Dhanbad-Giridih	Tantri	Mahuar
	Narkopi	Chankiyari
	Pawapur	Dudhitand
Khunti-Ranchi	Taro	Banda
	Kumkuma	Ghuthiya
	Aloundi	Upardahu

Table 2. The intervention and comparison clusters for each of the two areas included in the action research.

The Planning Phase. The planning phase consisted of two parts—the choice of which harm(s) to children to address and the planning of a community-led intervention to address the selected harm to children.

With respect to the former, each of the two clusters of three villages in the intervention condition was free to choose which harm(s) to children to address. Consistent with the principles of a community-led approach (Wessells, 2018), the clusters engaged in a process of inclusive dialogue that explored different options and their strengths and limitations. The dialogue was intended to have an appreciative, respectful quality that welcomed different views and steered away from win-lose debates.

Supporting each intervention cluster's planning was a trained facilitator who lived in the area, spoke the local language, and understood the context. The two facilitators were employed and backstopped by their respective agencies--CINI in Khunti and Chetna Vikas in Dhanbad--with periodic mentoring from Praxis in the field. The facilitators enabled a slow, inclusive process of dialogue and problem solving to help their respective cluster of three villages to select a single harm to children to be addressed. The intent was for everyone in the villages to have voice in the discussions and the decisions, and to enable meaningful participation by girls, boys, women, and men regardless of caste, age, or socioeconomic status (SES). This process moved according to 'community time' and took longer (one year) than had initially been expected in part because the communities within a cluster had little or no history of collaborating.

In Dhanbad, the communities decided to address child marriage because this practice was seen as causing significant harm to children by disrupting education, enabling early child birth, and depriving children of opportunities to improve their lives and futures. It was also consistent with the anganwadi (rural child care center) implementing the ‘Kanyadan Yojana’, which incentivizes delaying girls’ marriage to age 18 or older. The majority of villagers from the contiguous villages of Tantri, Pawapur, and Narkopi saw it as a common interest since it saves the next generation by reducing mortality, preventing child labor, and enabling education.

In Khunti, the communities discussed a nexus of problems such as children’s playing cards, alcohol abuse, dropping out of school, and engaging in labor. The communities selected school dropout, which they saw as the root cause and a precursor of the other harms to children. In both intervention areas, the discussions of which harm to children to address shaded into considerations of possible interventions since communities wanted to have a sense that practical steps for addressing a particular harm existed before they finalized their selection of which harm to address.

Following the selection of which harms to children to address, each cluster of communities set about planning its intervention to address the self-selected harms. Each intervention cluster was free to develop, implement, and help to monitor and evaluate its own intervention or action. As before, the planning discussions aimed to enable full participation by girls and women, boys and men, and people of lower SES. The facilitators worked in their respective areas to enable an inclusive dialogue and to insure consistency with standards of child rights, low cost, and likely sustainability. Further, it was expected that the intervention should link with and support the VLCPCs and also with processes at the panchayat level.

The intervention planning continued May - August, 2017 and ended with the development of an agreed implementation plan in each area (see Annexes 3 & 4). It was understood, however, that the plans were flexible and open to new innovations as the situation warranted.

The Baseline Study. Following the selection of the harm to children to be addressed but before the completion of the intervention planning, the baseline study was conducted (Inter-Agency Core Group, 2017). Since the intervention elements were visible by the end of June, 2017, it was possible to build into a baseline survey questions that were relevant to the respective, community-led interventions on school dropout and child marriage, respectively. Part of the rationale for conducting the baseline study in June rather than August, 2017 was that the intervention planning dialogues would likely raise awareness of the issue selected and the willingness to address it. In this sense, the intervention planning dialogues straddled the boundary between planning and intervention, and the baseline study aimed to capture the pre-intervention situation.

Two separate survey instruments were developed in order to take into account the different interventions to be developed by the clusters in Dhanbad and Khunti. Each survey consisted of just over 80 questions (see Annexes 1 and 2). The survey questions, which were similar to those used in previous research in Sierra Leone and Kenya, were informed by reviews of UNICEF MICS indicators (UNICEF, 2017b), the National Survey on the Drivers and Consequences of Child Marriage in Tanzania (Ministry of Health, Community Development, Gender, Elderly, and

Children, 2017), and the Young Lives Study Child Questionnaire - 12 yr Old (Ministry of Health, Community Development, Gender, Elderly, and Children, 2017).

Both instruments included general questions on demographics, SES levels, living arrangements, level of education, why children were out of school, daily activities and income, and social well-being. The survey instrument for Khunti (and its comparison area, Ranchi), where the intervention focused on out of school children, also included questions related to children's experience and treatment at school by teachers and also by children, and family support for attending school. The survey instrument for Dhanbad (and its comparison area, Giridih), where the intervention focused on child marriage, also included questions on attitudes, beliefs, and social norms related to child marriage and on community action or steps to prevent early marriage. Each instrument was prepared in English and was then translated into Hindi by Praxis, which worked with the local researchers to insure that the questions were contextually appropriate and understandable for the participating children.

The participants were 612 children between the ages of 12 and 18 years. 299 participants were from Khunti-Ranchi areas, whereas 313 participants were from Dhanbad-Giridih areas. A mixture of quota and purposive sampling strategies were used, with the latter designed to insure that all parts of the villages were represented. The data were collected in June, 2017 by a team of 11 trained researchers, 5 of whom were women and three of whom were members of Scheduled Tribes. With Praxis supervising, the data collectors used digital tablets to collect the data, which were then analyzed by researchers from the Columbia Group for Children in Adversity (now called Child Resilience Alliance). The data from the baseline study provided a reference point against which to gauge the effects of the community-led intervention.

The Intervention Phase. The community-led interventions will be described more fully in the discussion of key findings below. Consistent with a social ecological approach (Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2019; Boothby et al., 2006), these actions featured the engagement of people at different levels—family, peers, school, and community. The facilitators continued to work with the communities during the intervention phase but, over time, community members themselves came to perform the different facilitation functions and to lead the community action on behalf of children.

The intervention in Dhanbad to address child marriage included the following:

- Regular meetings by the natural leaders to monitor the implementation of the plan, identify gaps, and make any needed adjustments, with outreach to increasing numbers of people to get involved in the community action;
- Wall writings, campaigns, street plays, and sports events to raise awareness about the adverse effects of child marriage;
- Identification of potential cases of child marriage and work with families to prevent it;
- Linkage with different groups to help take steps that prevented impending child marriages;
- Identification of economically disadvantaged households plus linkage with supportive government schemes;
- Monitoring of and encouragement for keeping children in school;
- Networking with SHGs; and
- Discussions and problem-solving with *Mahila Samohs*, Panchayat representatives, and the gram sabha.

- The intervention in Khunti to reduce child dropout included elements such as the following:
- Regular meetings by the natural leaders to monitor the implementation of the plan, identify gaps, and make any needed adjustments, with outreach to increasing numbers of people to get involved in the community action;
 - Discussions with children and families about the importance of staying in school;
 - Community and school identification of out of school children;
 - Visits with families to learn the reasons for school dropout and engage in problem solving about how to enable their children's return to school;
 - Community use of a self-designed scorecard for rating schools on their quality of learning, play areas, safety, sanitation, and food, with the results used to influence schools to make improvements;
 - Discussions in gram sabha meetings about children's issues such as out of school children and collective problem-solving on how to address them;
 - Discussions of children's issues with women's groups (*Mahila Mandals*);
 - Street dramas and campaigns that illustrate the situation of children out of school followed by discussions of how to enable children to return to and stay in school; and
 - Discussions and linkage with other groups such as the Panchayati Raj Institutions (panchayats).
 - Linkage with Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and other local groups that can help to enable children to stay in school.

Both interventions continued approximately 2.5 years and were interrupted by the eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic in mid-March, 2020. The following sections detail the methodology, key findings, and implications of the endline study.

METHODOLOGY

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated significant adaptations of the endline study and its methodology. Initially, the endline study was planned for May, 2020, but closures and health security concerns led to a shift in the data collection timing to September-October, 2020. Although the pandemic in Jharkhand had past its peak by that time, it remained a significant threat. As a result, the qualitative methodology was shifted away from face-to-face group discussions and individual interviews to small group discussions and individual interviews conducted by phone. The combination of weak phone connections and participants speaking to people whom they did not know led to a reduction in the richness of the discussions. The quantitative data collection entailed individual survey administration with data collectors and participants wearing face masks and maintaining a 6-ft. distance.

Sites

The research sites were as shown in Table 2 above.

Quantitative Methodology

Participants

The participants were 531 children between the ages of 12 and 18 years. 316 participants were from Khunti-Ranchi areas, whereas 255 participants were from Dhanbad-Giridih areas.

Sampling

Following a grid sampling approach, each village was divided into multiple distinct parts, and the data collectors visited every 50th house in each area, continuing until the entire desired sample (50 people in each village) had been obtained or nearly so. If there was no child of the desired profile in the selected house, the very next house would be picked (till finding a suitable house), and thereafter the same approach of picking the 'nth' house resumed from there.

Survey Instruments

Two separate survey instruments were developed in order to take into account the different interventions to be developed by the clusters in Dhanbad and Khunti. Each survey consisted of just over 80 questions (see Annexes 1 and 2). The survey questions, which were similar to those used in previous research in Sierra Leone and Kenya, were informed by reviews of UNICEF MICS indicators (UNICEF, 2017b), the National Survey on the Drivers and Consequences of Child Marriage in Tanzania (Ministry of Health, Community Development, Gender, Elderly, and Children, 2017), and the Young Lives Study Child Questionnaire - 12 yr Old (Center for Economic and Social Studies, Hyderabad, 2006). Both instruments included general questions on demographics, SES levels, living arrangements, level of education, why children were out of school, daily activities and income, and social well-being. The survey instrument for Khunti (and its comparison area, Ranchi), where the intervention focused on out of school children, also included questions related to children's experience and treatment at school by teachers and also

by children, and family support for attending school. The survey instrument for Dhanbad (and its comparison area, Giridih), where the intervention focused on child marriage, also included questions on attitudes, beliefs, and social norms related to child marriage and on community action or steps to prevent early marriage. Each instrument was prepared in English and was then translated into Hindi by Praxis, which worked with the local researchers to insure that the questions were contextually appropriate and understandable for the participating children.

Researchers and Their Preparation

Seventeen data collectors – 6 in Dhanbad, 6 in Giridih, and 5 in the Kunti-Ranchi villages--operated in pairs or groups of three in villages assigned to them. They were familiar with the local areas, fluent in the local languages, and had social profiles that favored the establishment of trust with the local people. Eight of the data collectors were women, while 2 belonged to Scheduled Tribes (ST). For each ST-populous village, the data collectors had an ST background.

The researchers went through a multi-day preparation process that included mock exercises on administering the survey and how to introduce the purpose of the survey, how to put participants at ease, how to obtain informed assent (children) and consent (guardians), and how to ensure ethical conduct of the survey. The preparations considered how best to ask the questions on each survey in the local language without raising undue expectations or apprehensions on the part of the participants.

Data Collection

Questionnaires for the survey were converted into a customized survey instrument installed on a digital tablets, which permitted real time tracking of the survey process. In most cases, two data collectors worked in each village. Two persons from Praxis supervised the survey process at field level.

Data Analysis

The data were cleaned and analyzed by a PhD statistics consultant of the Child Resilience Alliance who used SPSS. Descriptive statistics were used to characterize the entire sample. SES was measured on a multidimensional basis that considered the dominant kinds of materials used in a household's roof, walls, and floor. Also, planned comparisons were made between intervention and comparison sites in the Dhanbad-Giridih area and the Khunti-Ranchi area, respectively, using Pearson Chi Square and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) statistical tests. One should note that differences at baseline between the intervention and comparison conditions are not inherently problematic and are taken into account in the statistical analyses. Of particular interest were differences between conditions in the magnitude of the change between T1 and T2, which ANOVA detected via significant interaction effects. The effects reported were significant at the $p < .01$ level, unless noted otherwise.

Qualitative Methodology

Sites

Due to travel restrictions and risks of face-to-face interaction during the pandemic, and also to risks associated with movement in areas that have a strong extremist presence, a decision was made to limit the qualitative data collection to the intervention (Dhanbad and Khunti) communities only.

Participants

In qualitative research, it is common practice to continue recruiting interviewees and conducting interviews until saturation has been achieved. This was infeasible during the pandemic, particularly since many of the participants were unaccustomed to having long conversations by phone with people whom they did not know. Instead, the research team sought to interview a predetermined number of people.

A deliberate effort was made to interview people who were positioned differently within their communities, including areas within the communities that had been very involved in the community-led action process and areas that had had less intensive involvement. For each intervention community, the desired participants included 16-17 interviewees:

- 2 adolescent boys, one from areas where participation in the community-led process was high, and one from areas where participation in the community-led process was lower;
- 2 adolescent girls, one from areas where participation in the community-led process was high, and one from areas where participation in the community-led process was lower;
- 5 natural leaders (1 girl, 1 boy, 1 woman, 1 man, and 1 village leader or office bearer who had been highly active in the collectives that guided the community-led process;
- 4 adults (2 men and 2 women; 1 each from areas where participation in the community-led process was high or low, respectively) who were not part of the collectives that had guided the community-led process;
- 1 elected representative of the gram panchayat, as available;
- 2 service providers such as teachers or health workers;

Also, in Khunti, an effort was made to include one community leader who had been involved in traditional institutions of governance.

The participants who fit these profiles were recruited with the assistance of the facilitators and community mobilizers from CINI (in Khunti), and from Chetna Vikas (in Dhanbad).

Table 3 on the following page shows that 114 people actually participated in the interviews. It should be noted that Aloundi had no members of village-level collectives since its participation in the community-led process was significantly interrupted by the '*pathalgarhi*' movement in which tribal communities in the area formed a campaign to resist and boycott institutional services delivered by the government and external agencies.

Data Collectors

The qualitative data collectors were four experienced researchers of Praxis. Two of the researchers were female, and two were male. Also, two researchers represent the category of SC (Scheduled Castes), while one of them belongs to BC (Backward Classes).

Profile of participants	Khunti Cluster			Total	Dhanbad Cluster			Total	Grand Total
	Taro	Kumkuma	Aloundi		Pawapur	Tantri	Narkopi		
Adolescent girls	2	3	3	8	2	2	2	6	14
Adolescent boys	2	3	3	8	2	2	2	6	14
Parents/ Community Members	7	4	15	26	4	4	4	12	38
Members of village level Collectives	5	3	--	9	5	5	5	15	23
Service providers and other stakeholders	4	5	4	13	4	4	4	12	25
Total	20	18	25	64	17	17	17	51	114

Table 3. Key stakeholders who were interviewed as part of the endline study.

Data Collection

The interviews were conducted in Hindi by phone. The interviewers stated that the purpose of the interviews was ‘to learn about the initiatives of the local community to support children to attend school regularly (in Khunti villages) or to escape child marriage’ (in Dhanbad villages). Next, the interviewers sought the informed consent of the participants, to know if they were comfortable and happy to be part of the conversation and to have the conversation recorded. The interviewers also ascertained the suitability of time of the conversation for the participants, rescheduling them as needed.

The four interviewers each interviewed participants having a particular profile. One interviewed all the members of the village level collective from all locations, whereas another (a female) interviewed all the adolescents. The third interviewed all the villagers who were not part of the village level collectives. The fourth interviewed all the other stakeholders (e.g. community leaders associated with gram sabhas, teachers, members of school management committee, etc.). All four interviewers talked with people of diverse backgrounds.

Recognizing that the participants were all affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, the interview began with a discussion about the current situation. Then the discussion turned to the community-led process and its impact. The questions were broad and open-ended, and the interviewers used a conversational approach in which they followed the respondents in learning about the community-led initiatives. The questions probed into how the community-led process formed, what considerations led people to select a particular harm, who was involved or not involved in the process, how the collectives conducted their work and engaged with different people, the impact the community initiatives had achieved before the COVID-19 pandemic, and the sustainability of the community initiatives. As indicated in Annex 4, the questions were tailored for the various sub-groups of participants, with additional questions asked of local leaders about how the community-led process had been affected by the pandemic.

As the participants spoke, the interviewers took notes for themselves, and subsequently used the digital recordings to translate the conversations into verbatim English transcripts.

Data Analysis

The Praxis team of experienced qualitative researchers that had collected the data reviewed the interviews in a holistic manner, looking for overall response patterns and also for differences between various sub-groups. With careful attention to what the respondents had said, the team identified patterns and selected illustrative narratives. As a pattern was suggested by a reader, other team members checked the pattern against the verbatim interviews to provide convergent validation of the pattern. Disagreements between team members evoked critical discussion that continued until the team agreed that there was (or was not) a consistent pattern and how to describe and present the findings in the most accurate manner.

CRA researchers also reviewed the qualitative data, triangulating the key findings with those from the survey and collaborating with Praxis on the interpretation of the data.

Ethics

In both the quantitative and the qualitative work, careful attention was given to ethical issues on an ongoing basis. The research team was careful to respect the Government calls to wear face masks and avoid large group gatherings. Recognizing that the pandemic had significantly worsened economic hardships and added to already heavy work schedules, the team attempted to collect data at times that were convenient for the participants.

All the researchers had expressed their willingness to adhere to the Code of Conduct that is part of Praxis' Child Safeguarding Policy. Informed consent was obtained from the participating children's parents or guardians using verbal means due to the low rates of literacy in the participating villages. Informed assent was also obtained from the children who participated in the survey or in the interviews. Confidentiality was protected by removing personal identifiers from the data and storing the quantitative data on a secure electronic platform. In all but a few cases, the children were interviewed alone, with their parents or guardians not present. Although the survey questions were not invasive or likely to upset the participants, the research team nonetheless stood ready to refer to natural helpers in the community any child who did become upset during the interview. No such cases actually arose.

Limitations

Because the data were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is possible that survey responses were influenced by the pandemic experience and conditions. However, any such effects should have been similar across the intervention and comparison conditions in the respective areas.

Data collection in Giridih was constrained by restrictions imposed by law enforcement authorities on the movement of the survey team in the comparison villages that have strong presence of extremist groups and had experienced a recent spike in cases of abduction of children. The associated security risks made it necessary to reduce the sample size in Giridih. Also, one of the intended intervention villages in Dhanbad—Aloundi—was affected by the

pathalgirhi movement, which significantly reduced its participation in the community-led process.

Since the study did not use a sample that is representative of Jharkhand, care should be taken in generalizing the findings. Within the study areas, the use of relatively small, somewhat heterogeneous samples limits one's ability to generalize the survey findings. Temporal and financial constraints did not permit a full external validation process on the survey instruments. In addition, some of the survey data may have been affected by sampling bias. In Dhanbad, challenges arose in accessing married children, most likely because the adults in the household knew that child marriage is illegal in India and feared the consequences of having a married child within their household identified and interviewed.

As noted above, the qualitative data were collected by phone and the responses to the interviewers' questions did not display the richness characteristically observed in interviews that were conducted in person.

KEY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The key findings are presented separately for Dhanbad-Giridih and Khunti-Ranchi, respectively. For each area, the findings relate both to the collectivization process and the actual outcomes for children.

Dhanbad-Giridih

Demographics

Table 4 shows the demographics of the sample of people who participated in the surveys in Dhanbad and Giridih. As discussed above, the unequal sample sizes stemmed from the difficulties in recruiting participants during the COVID pandemic, particularly in Giridih.

Item	Intervention: Dhanbad		Comparison: Giridih		Total	
	N=168		N=87		N=255	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Female	95	56.5	43	49.4	138	54.1
Male	73	43.5	44	50.6	117	45.9
Age, mean	166	15.1 yrs.	87	14.7 yrs.	253	15.0 yrs.
Caste						
SC	31	18.5	22	25.3	53	20.8
ST	12	7.1	13	14.9	25	9.8
BC	119	70.8	52	59.8	171	67.1
OC	6	3.6	0	0	6	2.4
Religion						
Hindu	138	87.3	75	89.3	213	88.0
Muslim	19	12.0	0	0	19	7.9
Christian	1	.6	6	7.1	7	2.9
Sikh	0	0	1	1.2	1	.4
Other	0	0	2	2.4	2	.8
SES						
Low	14	8.7	45	51.7	59	23.8
Middle	77	47.8	13	14.9	70	36.3
High	70	43.5	29	33.3	110	39.9

Table 4. The characteristics of the sample in the Dhanbad-Giridih area.

Overall, the mean age of the participants was 15 years, and the percentage of females and males was approximately 54% and 46%, respectively. For both areas, the dominant caste representation was BC, followed by SC and ST. Over 87% of the participants from both areas were Hindu, with some Muslims present in Dhanbad and some Christians present in the Giridih sample. In Dhanbad, most respondents came from the middle and high SES categories (47.8% and 43.5%, respectively), with only 8.7% coming from the low SES category. In Giridih, most of the

respondents came from the low SES category (51.7%) followed by the high SES (33.3%) and middle SES (14.9%) categories. Because of these SES differences, key effects reported below were analyzed to see whether the results varied by SES, with statistically significant differences reported below.

Collectivization

The participants in each of the Dhanbad villages described how they had come together as a group, which they named the ‘Committee on Child Protection’ (referred to hereafter as ‘the Committee’) to help enable community action on preventing early marriage and promoting children’s education. Although they had reached out to all segments of their community and invited inclusive participation, most of the participants were girls and women, who were highly active and dynamic in their work. Each Committee had 17 members from different habitations of the village and included adults, adolescents, panchayat representatives, and members of Self Help Groups, School Management Committees, and anganwadis.

The collectives held weekly meetings where they planned their weekly activities such as *nukkad natak* (street corner plays), rallies, wall writing, picnics, and cultural activities aimed to raise awareness and discussion of the importance of preventing child marriages. Aganwadi workers (AWWs; community health workers) played an active role in the Committee and also made home visits, interweaving their work on health and child protection. Members of the Self-Help Groups used SHG meetings for spreading messages or sharing information.

Besides members we also include SHG women in our meeting, so that they could spread the message in their SHGs and VOs thus their participation is also given importance to. As every SHG has different meeting date, we haven't fixed any single date for our committee meeting, as this is also not sure I would be available on that particular date. I per the availability of majority I coordinate and inform them the date, that's the job of AWW. I keep visiting every household so it's not a problem for me. I do both jobs together perfectly well. (Member of village level collective, Narkopi)

Initially, considerable effort was expended getting village people to attend meetings. Over time, however, people in Dhanbad became more united in their concern about child marriage and participated in the activities.

During the early days, we had to make a lot of efforts in bringing people to the meeting; now people come to the meeting on their own and have discussions in their family and SHGs. Everyone's cooperation and collective effort has been the main reason of the success of this initiative. Women eventually understood the purpose of the initiative. (Committee member and AWW, Narkopi)

As shown in Figure 3 on the following page, there was nearly a doubling between T1 and T2 in the percentage of respondents who indicated that most or many people would be upset if a girl from their community was married early. This significant change was greater than the smaller increase that occurred in Giridih, which may owe to the multi-decade movement within India to reduce child marriage (UNICEF, 2019).

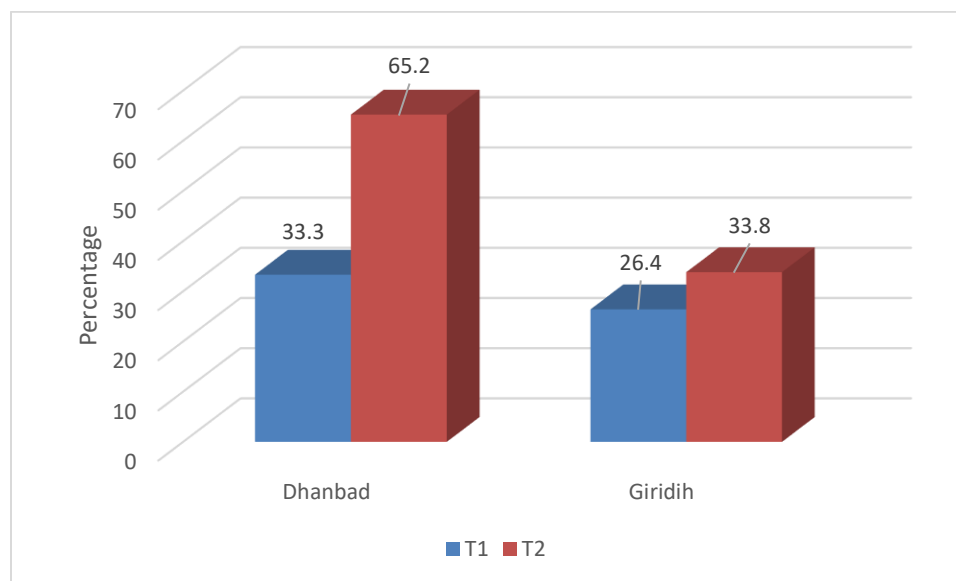


Figure 3. The percentage of respondents who indicated that most/many people would be upset if a girl from their community was married early by area at T1 and T2.

A further outcome of the collectivization process was that community people became increasingly eager to prevent child marriage (see Figure 4). By the end of T2, 79.2% of the Dhanbad respondents agreed or strongly agreed that people in the community are eager to prevent child marriage. In contrast, 27.3% of the Giridih respondents indicated that people in the community are eager to prevent child marriage. However, the significant increase in Giridih between T1 and T2 signals that a slower change process was underway in Giridih.

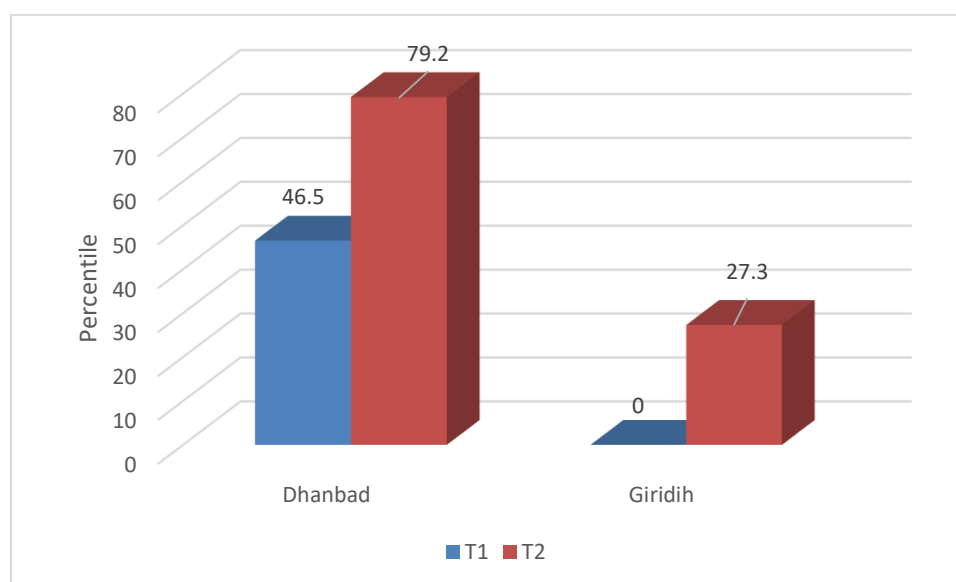


Figure 4. The percentage of respondents who agreed/agreed strongly that people in community are eager to prevent child marriage by area at T1 and T2.

A key outcome of the collectivization process was the development and use of a community-level plan to reduce child marriage. In both the intervention and the comparison communities, more people agreed or strongly agreed at T2 than had occurred at T1 with the statement that communities have a plan to intervene if a family is planning to marry their daughter (see Figure 5). However, the increase was greater in the intervention area (Dhanbad). By the endline, 70.7% of the Dhanbad participants agreed that their community has a plan, whereas 14.3% of the Giridih participants agreed that their community has a plan.

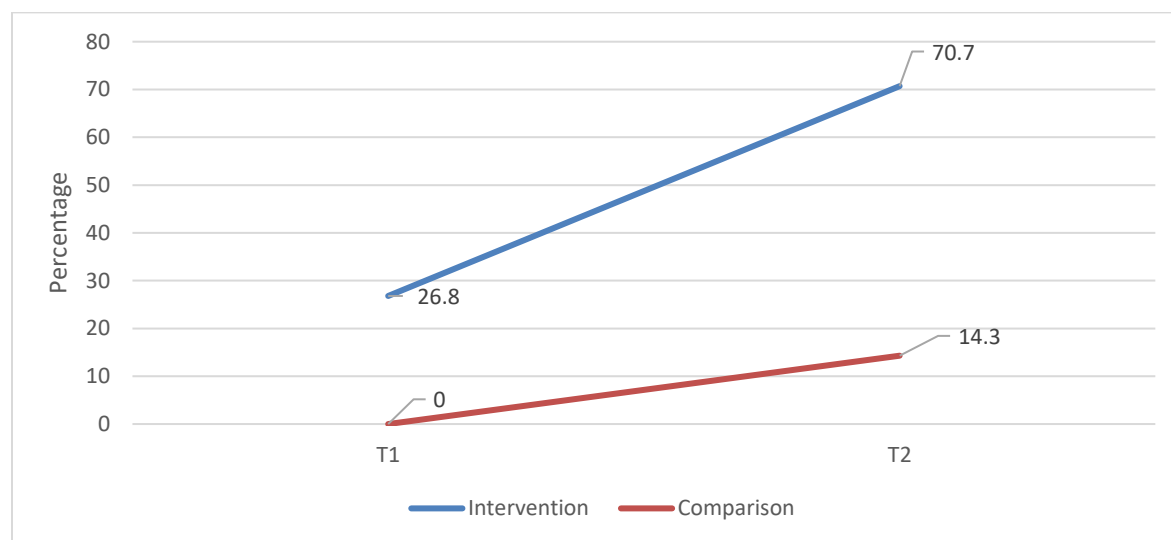


Figure 5. *The percentage of participants who agreed or strongly agreed that communities have a plan to intervene if a family is planning to marry their daughter at an early age by area at baseline (T1) and endline (T2).*

In each village, the Committee developed its own distinctive modalities and influencing strategies for implementing its plan to prevent child marriage. In Pawapur, when the Committee learned of an impending case of child marriage, the Committee identified a person who would likely be accepted by the relevant family. The selected person then met with the family, discussed their situation, and counseled against the child marriage and in favor of delaying the marriage until the girl had reached 18 years.

Child Marriage

The results from Dhanbad show a pattern of concerted community action to prevent child marriage in Dhanbad. In both the intervention and the comparison communities, more people agreed or strongly agreed at T2 than had occurred at T1 with the statement that there are community leaders who take action against child marriage (see Figure 6 on the following page). However, the increase was significantly greater in the intervention area (Dhanbad), where just over 71% of participants agreed. The fact that in Giridih, the comparison area, just under 20% of respondents agreed at T2 that community leaders take action against child marriage indicates significantly lower levels of community mobilization and action against child marriage.

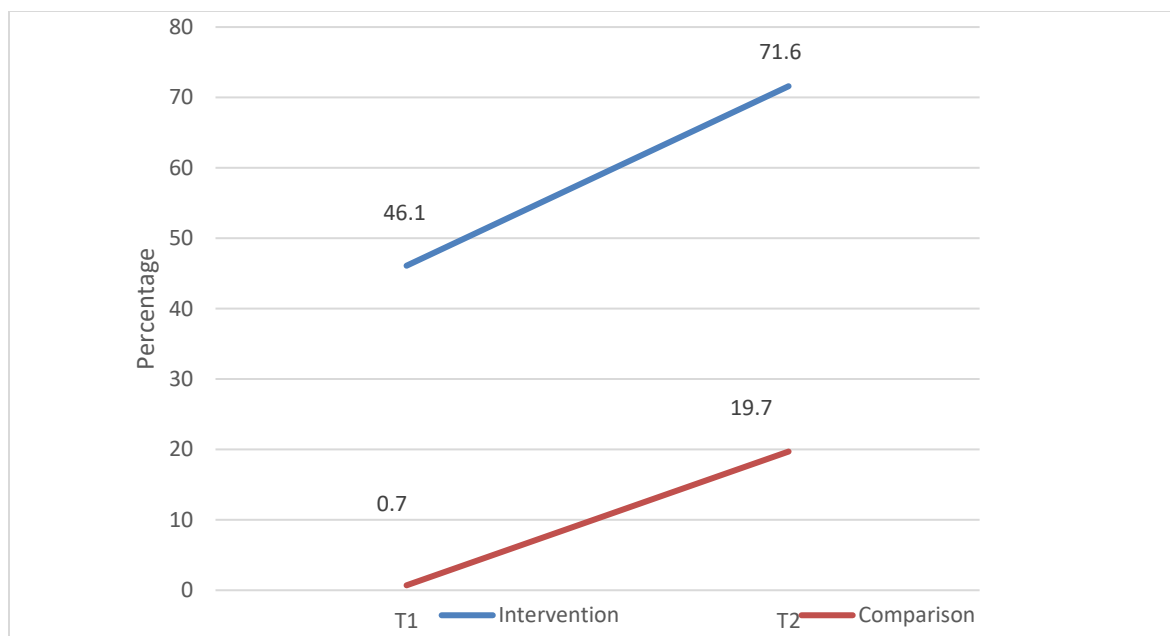


Figure 6. Percent of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed that there are community leaders who take action against child marriage.

In Dhanbad, the participants spoke of how the community-led process had enabled the community to know about impending cases of child marriage and to take appropriate, preventive action.

Earlier we never came to know if marriage of any of our friends was fixed. Now with the committee, we come to know about such incidents before their occurrence. Also through the committee we get to know about the dropouts and chances of drop out in vulnerable families. The main role of the committee is to stay alert and keep itself updated about the happenings. Our reach has expanded to a wider population of the village through association with the committee. (Adolescent girl, Tantri village)

Once a case of early marriage of a 16-year-old girl came to light, committee counseled the family to wait at least till 18 years of age and family agreed to it. It happened last year or the year before that. (Committee member, Pawapur)

Consistent with these narratives, survey participants indicated that marriages had been prevented by community intervention, with greater increases in community action between T1 and T2 in Dhanbad than in Giridih. At T2, nearly two-thirds of the participants in Dhanbad agreed that there are girls whose marriages had been prevented by community action, compared to 21.3% in Giridih (see Figure 5).

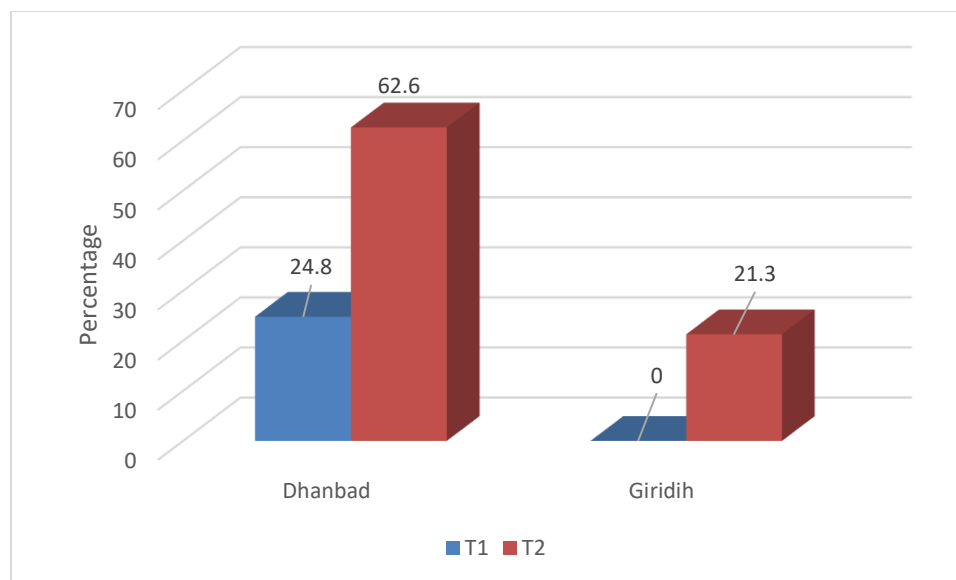


Figure 7. The percentage of respondents who agree or strongly agree that there are girls who have had their marriages prevented by community intervention by area at T1 and T2.

The exact number of child marriages is difficult to determine, as respondents likely under-reported owing to the illegality of child marriage. The number of participants who reported being married decreased in Dhanbad from four to three at T2, whereas the number increased in Giridih from zero at T1 to three at T2. Although the small number of respondents precluded meaningful statistical comparison, these numbers fit the pattern of greater and more effective community action in Dhanbad.

The qualitative data consistently indicated that child marriage had been reduced in Dhanbad.

No, this year no incident of early marriage has happened so far and now most families don't marry off girls early..., only in critical situations, when it's a matter of family honor or there is an economic crisis girls are married off early, and number of such families is negligible. I would say our initiative is successful. (Committee member, Narkopi village)

4-5 years back, girls were married at the age of 15-17 years. But now one girl is rarely married before 18 years. Also, the people now discuss how marrying off girls early creates psychological pressure on the mental health of the girls. (Adolescent Girl, Pawapur village)

Earlier there would be 5-6 cases of child marriage in the village during any year, which has reduced to 2 over the period. Although there has been no case during this year so far, the reason could be the Corona pandemic. But I believe that it wouldn't be more than 2, even otherwise. There were some social norms, and it will take some time for people to get out of that mind-set. (Health worker, Tantri Village)

Deliberate community decisions to work to increase girls' participation in education may have contributed to the decrease in child marriage in Dhanbad. As part of their action plans, the communities in Dhanbad aimed to increase girls' participation in education. In both Dhanbad and Giridih, there were reductions from T1 to T2 in the percentage of children aged 12-17 years who have never attended school, reaching zero percent by T2 in both cases (see Figure 8). However, the reductions in Dhanbad were significantly greater than those in Giridih.

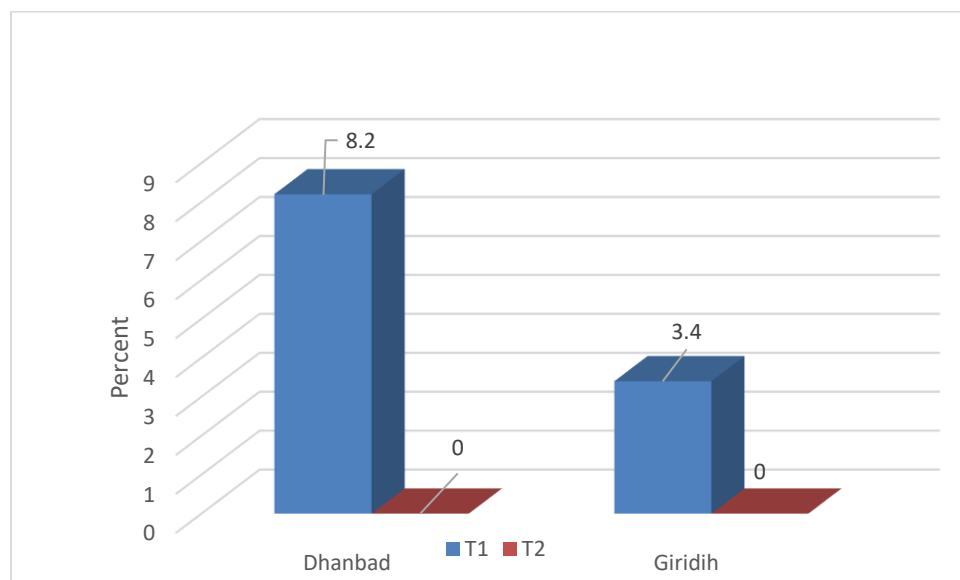


Figure 8. The percentage of 12-17 year olds who have never attended school by area at T1 and T2.

The Dhanbad, both adolescent girls and adolescent boys described how families were viewing girls' education as more important and were actively working to enable it.

When girls share about their problems we also invite parents and discuss and try to resolve it. One woman approached me if she can get support for her daughter's education. The woman had 4 daughters and she wanted to know if any kind of help can be made available for the daughter. We assured her that we will provide books and also help her in completing the course. Later, both the daughter and the mother agreed and now the girl is studying in graduation. We made the mother understand how her graduate daughter can provide tuitions and make a living. (Adolescent girl, Tantri)

My father took the decision of educating my sister considering her interest and she is pursuing science in her graduation. He wanted my sister to be an example for others. (Adolescent boy, Tantri)

However, girls' increased participation in education was not the only path through which the intervention reduced child marriage. A related contributing factor may have been the positive effect of the intervention on the value attached to girls. Adolescent girls spoke of how they had come to participate in meetings of the gram sabha, something they had not done before the intervention.

Earlier, neither the girls participated nor were they called by the gram sabha to participate in the meeting. People also started noticing us after we took out rallies. It's only after we started having regular meetings and rallies the people of the village started knowing about us. We attend gram sabha meetings only if there is a big meeting involving discussions on important issues and involve PRI members and other key members of the village as well. If the meetings are convened by Mukhiya or ward members or any expert or official from outside, then we too receive invitation. (Adolescent girl, Narkopi)

Also, people began to take girls' issues more seriously.

After multiple rounds of discussions on important matters, it took 1-2 years for the changes to be noticeable. Earlier people used to gossip about girls but now they talk about what would be better for them. (Adolescent Girl)

An important change was that girls came to be more highly valued at family level, with parents showing increased commitment to their girls' education and well-being. Adolescent girls said that before the community-led action, girls had not been encouraged to stay in school or to have much freedom.

We were never given so much of freedom and encouragement to study. Also we attend coaching classes and often in case of delays we used to be scolded. However, now we don't get scolded for being late. Attitudes of parents have changed. Now we go in groups and attend college, and the parents remain stress-free too.

Viewing girls as assets rather than liabilities, parents in Dhanbad began investing more in their daughters' education.

They [parents] now take into consideration the interest of the children in education and also they assess their economic condition if they will be able to support their children's education. In deciding about the marriage of girls, they seek the consent of their children. All these changes are result of the change that has come due to time and to some extent it's the efforts of the collective as well. (Adolescent Girls from Pawapur and Narkopi Village)

With parents having become increasingly appreciative of girls' value and needs, girls found it easier to share their demands for education with their parents and also became more comfortable in voicing their reservations about marriage and negotiating for a later marriage.

Yes, adolescent girls now try to negotiate with their parents in order to continue their studies and delay the marriage. Earlier they never used to say anything to their parents. Meetings and discussions with girls have helped in developing confidence in them. Now parents also give attention to their children. (Committee member, Narkopi)

This joint dialogue and decision making about marriage led to improved relations between girls and their parents. Over time, parents came to see marrying girls at the right age as their responsibility and also as a right of the child. These family level changes complemented and added to the community level changes in early marriage.

Attitudes, Beliefs, and Social Norms

Despite the positive changes outlined above, child marriage was not completely eliminated in Dhanbad. The data on attitudes, beliefs, and social norms may help to illuminate why.

As shown in Table 5, which continues on the following page, people in Dhanbad became less likely to agree over time with the statement that ‘A girl is ready for marriage once she starts menstruating.’ This is consistent with the idea that beliefs and attitudes in Dhanbad changed and increasingly opposed child marriage. Similarly, people in Dhanbad showed decreasing agreement with the statement that ‘Child marriage of girls can help to prevent sexual violence, assault, and harassment.’ These patterns suggest that attitudes in Dhanbad increasingly opposed child marriage.

Attitudes & Beliefs about Child Marriage	Intervention – Dhanbad				Comparison – Giridih			
	T1		T2		T1		T2	
	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree
A girl is ready for marriage once she starts menstruating	59.4	38.3	15.6	71.9	0	100	20.0	63.3
Marrying girls young can help to protect family honor/reputation	25.0	72.1	23.5	66.0	2.0	95.9	27.5	58.0
Marrying girls young does not help to provide them with security	51.1	46.6	53.1	36.1	93.9	6.1	38.2	29.4
Poor families marry off their children at a young age to elevate their economic status	62.3	34.1	44.5	39.4	0	98.6	45.1	42.3
Economic gain from dowry and gifts associated with marriage encourage child marriage	48.5	50.0	56.5	35.1	.7	99.3	17.1	72.9
Child marriage of girls can help prevent sexual	40.4	56.0	20.0	65.6	.7	99.3	7.3	74.5

violence, assault and harassment								
A girl should never be forced into marriage	65.2	33.5	61.8	29.1	94.0	6.0	68.4	23.7
Even if a girl does not want to be married, she should honor the decisions/wishes of her family	41.3	58.0	47.2	43.6	62.6	36.7	74.0	12.3
I think marriage of girls is fine	12.3	83.9	12.3	81.7	0	100	12.7	77.2
I think marriage of boys is bad	68.8	29.3	73.6	17.8	89.9	10.1	65.8	25.3
Child pregnancies are harmful for girls	79.4	20.6	82.6	11.6	97.3	1.3	68.4	15.8

Table 5. Percentage of respondents who agree and disagree with various statements about child marriage by area at T1 and T1.

However, no such shift was evident in regard to questions related to family honor, economics and forced marriage. In Dhanbad, there was no significant change in the level of agreement that ‘Marrying girls young can help to protect family honor/reputation.’ Similarly, there was an increase between T1 and T2 in the agreement with the statement ‘Even if a girl does not want to be married, she should honor the decisions/wishes of her family.’ This pattern suggests that for at least part of the communities, concerns about family honor and the tradition of parents deciding whom a girl should marry remain strong. This fits with the findings from the interviews, which indicated that child marriage has been significantly reduced, with only a few instances occurring now, mostly in cases where family honor is to be protected. Overall, then, the communities in Dhanbad did change in important ways owing to their community action, but the change process is incomplete. This is not surprising since change in social norms and traditions often occurs slowly, often over decades (Bicchieri, 2006).

Further light on this issue comes from data regarding beliefs about the economic factors that influence child marriage and how these vary by SES. In Dhanbad, between T1 and T2, respondents showed increased agreement with the statement ‘Economic gain from dowry and gifts associated with marriage encourage child marriage’ (48.5% vs. 68.5%). Although they showed decreased agreement with the statement ‘Poor families marry off their children at a young age to wealthy men to elevate their economic status,’ this likely reflected the Dhanbad sample bias toward high SES level. As Figure 9 shows (see the following page), low SES respondents showed greater agreement with both statements than did high SES respondents. This suggests that economic hardships slow the change process, since poorer families may need the economic gain from the dowry or seeing child marriage of girls as a practical means of improving their economic status.

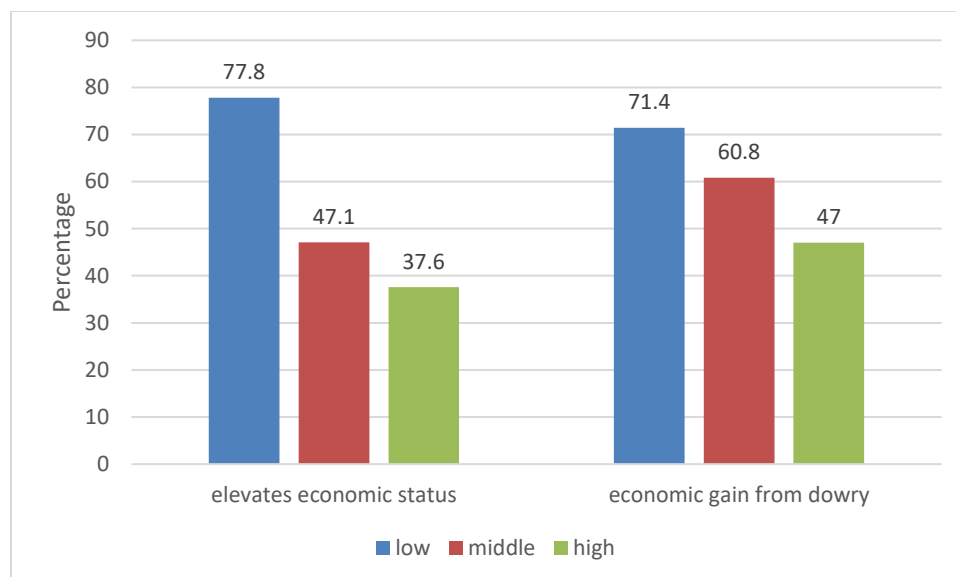


Figure 9. Differences by SES in Dhanbad as it relates to beliefs about economic benefits of child marriage at T2.

The critical importance of economic factors was visible also in the difficulties faced by children of single parents. Some committee members in Dhanbad said that the community-led action would not likely help such children. The importance of economic factors warrants additional research and attention in the COVID-19 era since the pandemic has significantly worsened the economic situation, particularly in the poorest families.

Linkages

In Dhanbad, the community-led action brought together people from all segments of the community. As people talked together about preventing child marriage and the well-being of girls, they shared their information about services available, providing a community clearinghouse for information. Both girls and Committee members said that the community-led action had successfully linked girls and families with different services and programs.

Parents also feel confident of teaching their daughters seeing other girls doing well in their life. Also, there are some policies and schemes of education that also help girls to continue education. (Adolescent girl, Pawapur)

SHGs also need a topic to conduct discussions every week, so when they joined our meeting, they found a new subject to discuss in their SHG meetings. They have also benefitted from our process in some or the other way, so we have the support of everyone. Also, one big gain is that the anganwadi centre has linked many girls with programmes such as Kanyadan Scheme and Ladlee Scheme, and connected children with special needs with schemes for persons with disability, etc. Thus there is no question of resistance and people get benefitted through our efforts. Mobilising people has never been an issue for us. (Committee member, Narkopi)

Also, the community-led process enabled effective communication across and coordination of different groups and networks that supported children. Because the Committee members came from diverse areas and orientations, it included members of SHGs, School Management Committees (SMCs), the gram panchayat, and other groups. The coordination that arose across these different groups was likely both an effect of the community-led process and a source of increased participation in it. As the SHGs became active in discussing children's issues, increasing numbers of people became attentive to issues of child marriage and were more likely to participate in community-led initiatives to end child marriage. Of note, the VLCPCs in the intervention villages existed on paper only and had not become functional, making this expected linkage impossible to evaluate.

Moreover, as community members saw other people's children benefitting from the services they had learned of in group discussions, they became more supportive of the community-led initiative and also were more likely to work to enhance it. Over three-quarters of the participants said they saw the community-led action as worthwhile, and more than half the participants said they actively participated in the initiatives. This indicates the achievement of high levels of community ownership, which had been nurtured by the fact that the communities themselves had driven the process, made the key decisions, and led the action to prevent child marriage.

Prospects for Sustainability

The evidence was mixed in regard to the likely sustainability of the community-led initiative in Dhanbad. On the positive side, the communities had clearly internalized concern about preventing child marriage and demonstrated significant self-reliance through their own planning and action, with positive results to help motivate continuation of the process. Committee members expressed confidence that the community-led process would continue.

Yes, it will go on... right now also it is going on... If Chetna Vikas supports, it will be good; we'll feel there is some one with us! (Members of village-level collective, Tantri)

Further, although COVID-19 had disrupted the community process by making it impossible to have large group discussions and closing schools, people in Dhanbad had begun by the time of the endline study to meet in small groups and promote girls continuing education and avoiding child marriage. Yet some level of dependency on Chetna Vikas may have been created, as some people rely on the NGO for getting information about government schemes and keeping people motivated.

Challenges

It seems clear that the community-led work in Dhanbad has increased attention to the needs of children and established a dynamic, effective civic process for preventing child marriage. Nevertheless, there are significant, ongoing challenges to this work that deserve ongoing attention. The COVID-19 pandemic, with its increasing economic hardships and social isolation, will likely affect the communities for some time, necessitating ongoing adaptations in their modalities of work. Significant attention should be given to addressing economic hardships, since these are key drivers of child marriage (Jejeebhoy, 2019). Further work is also needed to

address further the patriarchal relations that privilege men and devalue women (UNICEF, 2019; Jejeebhoy, 2019). Despite the importance of empowering women, it will also be crucial to make additional progress in engaging men in the community-led process, as the initial engagement of mostly female community health workers may have inadvertently paid too little attention to bringing in men. More broadly, additional work is needed to increase inclusivity, bringing in more people from marginalized positions. The issue of the sustainability of the community-led process will likely require additional steps on the part of Chetna Vikas and other Core Group members to step back, enable even more community self-reliance, and enable the requisite capacities for sustainability. These challenges are to be expected in work of this complexity and are not detractions but rather areas for future development and enrichment of the community-led process.

Khunti-Ranchi

The key findings focus mostly on Kumkuma and Taro villages since Aloundi was strongly affected by the *pathalgarhi* movement and came into the intervention very late and in a limited manner. The qualitative data are emphasized since challenges such as those associated with COVID and the insurgency movement in Ranchi made it difficult to collect and interpret the quantitative data.

Demographics

The demographic characteristics of the survey sample are shown in Table 6. The mean age of the participants was 15.4 years, and 52.2% and 47.8% of the participants were females or males, respectively. Most of the participants were members of Scheduled Tribes. Over half the sample identified their religion as ‘Other’, and smaller percentages identified themselves as Muslim, Christian, or Hindu. Most of the participants were low or middle SES, and only 7.4% were high SES.

Item	Intervention: Khunti		Comparison: Ranchi		Total	
	N=155		N=161		N=316	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Female	79	51.0	86	53.4	165	52.2
Male	76	49.0	75	46.4	151	47.8
Age, mean	155	15.2	161	15.5	316	15.4
Caste						
SC	37	23.9	46	28.6	83	26.3
ST	92	59.4	85	52.8	177	56.0
BC	26	16.8	30	18.6	56	17.7
OC	0		0		0	
Religion						
Hindu	21	13.5	19	11.8	40	12.7
Muslim	24	15.5	32	19.9	56	17.7
Christian	17	11.0	29	18.0	46	14.6
Sikh	0		0		0	
Other	93	60.0	81	50.3	174	55.1
SES						
Low	67	43.5	75	47.8	142	45.7
Middle	78	50.6	68	43.3	146	46.9
High	9	5.8	14	8.9	23	7.4

Table 6. The characteristics of the sample in the Khunti-Ranchi area.

Collectivization

In the intervention villages in Khunti, people had decided to address the issue of out of school children. During the planning dialogues, they had united around this issue since it was seen as

related to other risks to children such as gambling, substance abuse, child marriage, and child labor. To address issues of school dropout, collectives formed in each of the three villages of Kumkuma, Taro, and Aloundi. The collectives had different names in the three villages. In Taro village, it was called '*Gram Baal Vikas Simiti*' (Village Committee for the Development of Children), whereas in Kumkuma, it was named '*Birsa Jan Vikas Simiti*' (Birsa Committee for People's Development).

The village level collectives each have 16 members, including the Gram Pradham (Village Head), the ward level representative of the panchayat, teachers, and representatives of the adolescent girls and boys. The members consist of men as well as women, and adolescent girls and boys. The collectives have worked hard to be inclusive, but one collective member in Taro Village said that the participation of Muslims was relatively low. Most of the members clearly articulated the core purpose of the collective, that is, to 'ensure that children go to school, get married at the right age, and stay away from bad habits.' Members of the collectives saw themselves as helping the entire community to address the issue of out of school children. The collectives have monthly meetings in which they plan their next activities, which could include street dramas, campaigns against school dropout, meetings with school officials, etc. They also monitor which children are out of school and plan home visits or other steps to work with families and help the children return to school.

The collectives worked through multiple networks, including traditional governance structures. In tribal communities of Khunti, the collectives work closely with the traditional institution of governance and its general assembly, the 'gram sabha.' The gram sabha, which is the key decision making authority for matters of collective interest, has supported the community-led initiative to prevent school dropout and has helped to legitimate it. Collective members realized the advantages of having the backing of the gram sabha and the entire community.

We discuss about issues of children in our meetings and find out solutions for them. We discuss all issues in the meetings of the committee only, but for decision on bigger issues, the case is discussed in gram sabha, so that entire village could participate and conclusions could be drawn. (Adolescent male, Taro village)

The collectives also worked closely with groups of adolescents and with teachers. The adolescent groups, known locally as '*Kishore Kishori Samooh*,' help to do peer tracking of who is in or out of school. The collectives' work with teachers enables them to understand and work to improve conditions at schools and also to verify reports of particular children being out of school against school attendance records.

Every week, the meeting happens on Saturday. The child-tracking sheet is reviewed and updated once every month during larger meeting. In small meetings of adolescents that happen every Saturday, we only gather details from children, which are then verified with attendance records at the school. (Collective member, Kumkuma Village)

In order to make the tracking of school age children highly systematic, the collectives mapped their respective communities by visiting each household and taking stock of whether children of

school going age were in or out of school, were attending regularly, and so on. Having identified the out of school children, teachers and community leaders visited the homes to learn more about the children's situation. Also, the parents of the children who had dropped out of school were invited to meet and talk with the collective. In these discussions, the collectives took a supportive stance that emphasized collaborative problem-solving and finding a way forward that would enable the children to return to school.

Home visits and school visits are done by the committee members, when we come to know about issues of school dropout, or early marriage, or any issue concerning children. We track attendance of school going children, to identify those who are not regular; we also try to find out the reasons during home visit, which is done as per need. Every week our meeting takes place on Saturday, when the child-tracking sheet is reviewed. It is updated once every month during larger meeting. In small meetings of adolescents that happen every Saturday, we only gather details from children, which are then also verified with school attendance record. (Collective member, Kumkuma)

Radhika [not the child's actual name] had dropped out from school. We raised the issue during our committee meeting, and several home visits were made to understand the reason. Radhika said there is no one to look after family, as her mother manages the household all by herself and her only brother got separated after marriage. Though she wanted to study but was helpless. We felt that it would be good to take this matter to the gram sabha. The gram pradhan encouraged Radhika's mother to send her to school. She was linked with school and now she goes to school. (Collective member, Taro)

As the collectives did this case-based work, they also continued to organize street plays, rallies, and sports events that highlighted the importance of children staying in school and continuing their learning and development.

School Dropout

The community-led action succeeded in increasing children's participation in education. Participants in both Kumkuma and Taro spoke of how dropout rates had decreased and children were going to school on a more regular basis.

Some Didis ['sisters' representing the community] came to our school to know about children's attendance. I supported them as much as I could. I provided them with a list of such students who had been irregular in the recent past. This resulted in increased regularity of children from the following month, though the trend of absenteeism returned a few months later. I think this will improve slowly. This has definitely reduced the dropout rates. (Teacher, Kumkuma Village)

Now all children are going to school; no one is into gambling now. Now adult men go to other villages for gambling or playing cards and parents are more concerned about studies of children. (Collective member, Taro Village)

The biggest achievement, I would say is that there isn't a single dropout child in the village. Though currently schools are closed due to Corona, the children will resume going to school whenever it starts, as now everyone is enrolled in school. This has been made this possible with everyone's support; else it would not be possible. (Collective member, Taro village)

These and similar reports are consistent with cases documented by collectives and CINI. During the period of the intervention, there were 22 cases of children who had dropped out but who returned to school through the action of committee members, community leaders, and in some cases the gram sabhas. In cases in which a child's parents had not been attentive to the importance of education, the committee members helped the parents and family members to understand the value of education for both the child and the family. In cases in which a child was out of school due to poverty, the committee tried to link the family with SHGs and also emphasized the long-term value of education. Also, the committee members helped children who represented lower caste categories to obtain the documents needed to attend school.

The reduced school dropout rates also meant that children stayed in school longer and completed higher levels than children had typically achieved before the intervention had begun. The benefits for girls' education were particularly noteworthy.

Earlier most of the children studied up to 7th or 8th grades. For girls, 6th grade was the common upper limit of education. Now most of the children aspire to complete at least 10th grade and will continue further if their parents agree. Girls aspire to complete at least the 10+2 grade. At present at least 4-5 girls are studying in graduation, which is a recent development. (Aganwadi worker, Taro village)

A contributing factor in girls' ability to stay in school longer was that the collectives had helped them to know which documents they needed in order to claim entitlements that reduced economic burdens on the family.

While talking to girls, once we came to know about their requirement of certain documents so that they could claim their entitlements, which included documents such as Aadhar card, caste certificate, certificate of domicile etc. Production of such documents would entitle them to avail of relaxation in tuition fees during the 10th grade and higher classes. Now only few girls are left to get these certificates. Most of the girls are interested in taking admission in senior secondary grades and they have started applying over online mediums as well. (Village Health, Sanitation, and Nutrition worker, Kumkuma)

The intervention also led to increased participation by girls in vocational courses such as computer courses and coaching institutes and also skills development programs such as those offered under the 'Tejaswini scheme.' Girls' increased participation in education and vocational training seemed to have been enabled by shifts in their status and that of women as well. Prior to the intervention, girls were not expected to continue education, and if they stepped outside their limited boundaries, males spoke badly about them and circulated stories about them, damaging

their reputation and well-being. Yet the community action process helped to change the environment so that it was more supportive of girls. Further, throughout the intervention phase, both facilitators and Praxis staff reported that women were being heard and had become more influential in the gram sabha.

The reduced school dropout rates were evident also in the increase in the percentage of children who have ever attended school. As Figure 10 shows, there was a significant increase from T1 to T2 in the intervention villages in the percentage of children who have ever attended school, whereas the comparison villages experienced a modest reduction. The reasons for the decline in the comparison villages is not entirely clear, although it may have related to increased economic hardships or to the fact that as the *pathalgarhi* movement developed, all the villages in Ranchi became active in it. The movement may have concentrated community members' and parents' attention on the struggle rather than on children and their participation in education.

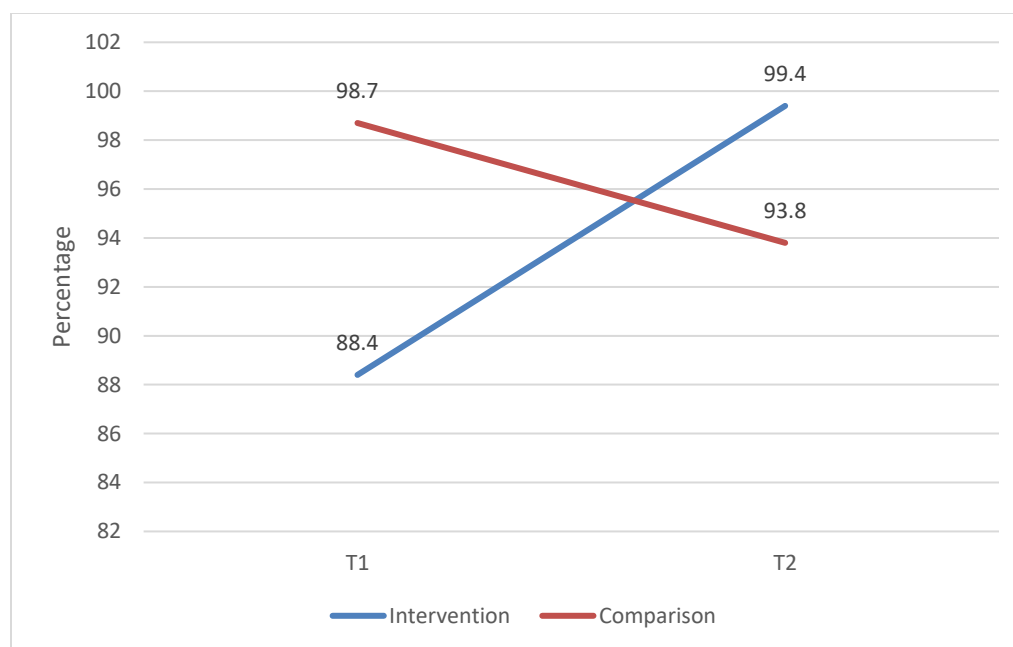


Figure 10. The percentage of children who reported ever having attended school.

The role of peer influence in keeping children in school was evident in the impact achieved by the Kishori baithak (meeting of adolescents).

There was a case where a girl dropped out oafter completing 8th grade. We reached out to her and requested her to attend kishori baithak, and finally managed to convince her to pursue her education. (Collective member, Taro)

There was also evidence that children's increased participation in education in Khunti owed to changes in parents' attitudes toward education and commitment to keep their children in school. Since people in Khunti derived their livelihood mostly from agriculture, it had previously

been relatively common for parents to take or allow their children out of school during the intensive periods of agricultural work. Yet the intervention helped to change this situation.

Earlier parents were not that serious regarding schooling of children. But after the awareness drive, meetings and rallies parents are more serious now and also engage with their children more.

Young people who used to migrate from the village at a tender age, now come to the meetings of adolescents and motivate children to complete studies for a decent job. This year several boys grabbed jobs in JSLPS after completing 10th grade of education. Earlier children would study mostly up to 5th or 6th grade. Parents used to stop them during agriculture session and most of them could not return back. Also girls in contact with senior girls used to get influenced and dropped out of school. These issues are now being discussed during meetings of adolescents. (Village Health, Sanitation, and Nutrition Committee member, Taro).

In addition, parents in Khunti showed better understanding of and improved relations with their children.

The meetings have made the people understand that the collective processes are for every person in the village then it is the responsibility of the children also to express their views and suggestions in the meetings. Earlier it created many problems for the children but now many parents support children on their views and judgments. (Adolescent girls, Kumkuma)

There are many changes as the parents have started understanding their children and began supporting them in their studies. The fathers have stopped drinking alcohol. Also, the mentality of parents has changed regarding the practice of child marriage. (Adolescent boys, Kumkuma)

Now even poor families want to send their children to school, thinking why can't their children go to school, when everyone else's children are goign. Good changes inspire others; no one wants to be left out. (Collective member, Kumkuma)

The fact that parents become more supportive of children and shifted away from harmful behavior such as excessive drinking of alcohol put families in a better position in the future to problem solve themselves around how to keep their children in school.

These successes notwithstanding, the intervention did not entirely eliminate school dropout. On an ongoing basis, problems such as extreme poverty, not having the appropriate documents such as the Aadhar card, the caste and income certificate, or *Khatiyan*, a document related to land ownership) or loss of parents led to new cases of school dropout. Ongoing work is needed to address these issues, yet it is hopeful that the community-led action proved to be effective and that the communities have the motivation, intent, capacities, and social processes needed to reduce school dropout in the future. This is likely to be a considerable asset in communities' coping with COVID-19, which has severely disrupted education.

Child Marriage and Other Issues

Once the village collectives had become active in preventing and responding to school dropout, they also addressed inter-related issues such as child marriage that were a major source of school dropout among girls.

Once an issue of child marriage came, a family was finding groom for their daughter, who was minor. We called the parents and counselled them to delay the marriage at least till she is 18 years old and raised this matter in the gram sabha. Gram pradhan also supported this and asked the family not to marry off the minor girl but the family was allowed to perform the engagement. They agreed and got the girl engaged. After the engagement, parents of the girl discussed with boy's parents and the villagers, including the gram pradhan too pushed for delaying of the marriage, so the groom's family also agreed. Now this year, after completing 18 years of age she got married in April during the lockdown, which is a great success of our efforts I would say.
(Collective member, Taro)

Last year, there was a case [of organising a child marriage] where even invitation cards had been printed. The case was brought to the notice of the adolescents' group and discussed. The members approached the groom's family and had a dialogue with them, telling them about the illegality of the practice and advised them not to go ahead with the wedding. After a lot of discussion, both the families agreed to stop the marriage.
(Ward member, Taro)

Ekiya (not the actual name) was only 14 years old when her parents fixed her marriage. In a meeting of adolescents, one of the girls disclosed the news of her marriage. Then, in the monthly meeting of the village level collective, we decided to take this matter to the gram sabha, where her parents were also called. Everyone advised them to stop the marriage as she was still a minor. Her parents finally agreed to wait till she completes 18 years of age. It got a bit difficult when the parents of the groom started demanding reimbursement of expenses they had incurred by then, but gram sabha's decision is binding and they had to come around. Ekiya also didn't want to marry. Thus, the committee managed to stop her marriage with everyone's support. (Collective member, Taro)

As children's participation in school became more regular in Khunti, there was a corresponding decrease in children working (child labor). As one collective member stated:

The initiative has already stopped child marriage, child labour and migration of children. It will bring more change in future. The usual steps include small meetings with adolescents, meetings at the level of village level collectives, discussions at gram sabha and home visits to stop the issue, besides counseling, whenever needed.
(Collective member, Kumkuma)

Also, participants also reported that as children went to school more often, children spent less time on the streets, where they had often engaged in gambling.

Together, these findings suggest that as communities activated themselves around a particular, self-selected issue, the community members become increasingly attentive to diverse issues affecting children and more active in addressing them. This wider civic process of child protection that addresses diverse issues that negatively affect children is highly valuable since the nexus of issues facing children in Jharkhand morphs and changes continually. The community-led process puts communities in a better position to address and prevent such issues as they arise, thereby strengthening child protection and prevention on behalf of children.

Linkages

The effectiveness of the community-led action owed in no small part to the effective linkages that developed between the collectives and other community structures, groups, and services. In Taro village, eight girls who were out of school were linked with relevant schemes so they could continue their education. Since two of these girls had guardians who were finding it difficult to care for the girls, the guardians were linked with a foster care scheme that provided caretakers with Rs. 2,000 per month until the children had become adults. With CINI's support, the collectives became clearinghouses of information regarding such schemes and also community-level connectors who were able to approach the relevant government offices to obtain the needed services.

So far 6 girls living in distressful conditions have been registered in KGBV schools [residential schools for girls] and 2 girls from families of poor economic condition where there is no earning male member and the family is even suffering to arrange two meals in a day have been linked with Child Welfare Committee of the district and were offered Rs. 2000/- per month under the foster care scheme of the government. (Ward member, Taro)

As Table 7 shows (see the following page), the collectives in both Taro and Kumkuma developed extensive linkages with other groups and structures within their respective communities that then mobilized themselves around addressing school dropout. Of high importance was the effective linkage with the gram sabha, which in tribal villages is seen as the legitimate institution of governance and the authority that yields significant influence. The participants said consistently that before the community-led action, the gram sabha meetings had not taken up issues facing children. Through the community-led process, however, collective members went to the gram sabhas and requested space for discussing the issue of school dropout. As the gram sabhas became aware of the issues that harmed children in the village, they became more concerned and actively took steps to address school dropout. For example, the gram sabhas intervened in particularly challenging cases and helped get the out of school children back to school. The gram sabhas' action helped to strengthen the community-led process since all the community members respect the decisions of the gram sabha. The fact that the gram sabha cared and made space for children's issues also served to legitimate the importance of children's issues and helped to make adults more responsive to the situation and needs of children. As mentioned earlier, the increased voice and influence of women in the gram sabha was highly significant since this enabled greater attention to the unique situation of girls and also contributed to gender equity.

Group or Structure	Activities
Gram sabhas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Deliberately began discussing issues of children’s well-being, thereby setting a positive model and increasing the salience of children’s issues by discussing them on a regular basis. - Used its legitimacy and influence to motivate villagers to help children stay in school. - Helped to solve the various problems that had led children to be out of school.
Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Regularly monitored students’ attendance at school. - Notified the collective when a child was out of school. - Worked with collective to address problems identified in community school ratings. - Teachers connected schools with the collectives.
Adolescents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Exercised leadership in street dramas, rallies, and community mapping. - Made home visits to talk with out of school children. - Used peer influence and problem-solving to help children return to and stay in school.
District level Child Welfare Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Received referrals from the village collectives of particularly challenging cases of out of school children; - Helped to identify and take steps to help those children to return to school.

Table 7. Groups in Khunti that were linked with the collectives and engaged in activities that supported and contributed to the community-led action against school dropout.

Strong linkages with schools materialized in diverse ways, among which was the inclusion of teachers in the collectives. Also, the collectives linked with the School Management Committees, which were an important interface between the community and the school. Collective members also met regularly with school authorities, sharing, for example, information on the school scorecards wherein children rated the quality of the school environment and the instruction. As the collectives helped children to return to school, they came to be seen as allies who supported children’s education, and this increased their influence on the schools.

Also a key factor in the impact the collectives achieved was the linkage with adolescent groups. Far from being recipients of the collectives’ action, adolescents were leaders in the community-led action whose agency was expressed in the enthusiasm with which they worked to keep children in school. They were highly active in doing street dramas, participating in campaigns, in the village mapping that identified who was out of school, and encouraging peers to stay in school.

Although the Village Level Child Protection Committees were not functional in Khunti, the District Level Child Welfare Committee had been established. When the collectives identified

children who were out of school and who needed additional support, they referred these cases to the CWC. In several cases, the district level CWC helped the referred children to return to school. This effective, bottom-up linkage suggests that a community-led process can help to support the work and effectiveness of bodies that are part of the formal system of child protection. This is significant since without grassroots supports, people may not be willing to use formal structures and services. Also, it is widely recognized that an effective child protection system includes collaborative, aligned formal and non-formal elements. The community led approach enabled this alignment and a more comprehensive approach.

Collectively, these linkages and associated activities made for a whole community approach that mobilized all elements of the communities—adolescents, parents, peers, schools, and community structures—on behalf of children’s well-being. Importantly, the collectives helped to coordinate action among these different actors. The net result was a transformation of the children’s social ecologies in Khunti in ways that increased the attention and commitment to children and that led to discernible improvements in children’s school participation and wider well-being.

Challenges

The community-led process of addressing school dropout in Khunti faces a number of significant, ongoing challenges. The community-led action achieved significant success in reducing school dropout but did not completely eliminate it. The existence of difficult economic conditions, which have been significantly worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic, leading children to drop out of school and work in order to help support their families. Similarly, poorer families continue to lack appropriate access to the documentation and information needed in order to access government schemes that could enable them to keep their children in school. As discussed in the following section, these considerations indicate the necessity of fully integrating economic and livelihoods support into work on child protection.

Sustainability also poses ongoing challenges. In Khunti, communities achieved much higher levels of self-reliance than are typically seen when top-down approaches are used. To some extent, though, the intervention communities may have become too reliant on CINI to help provide information that would enable the collectives to help out of school children to return to school. Also, people in the collectives seemed to have relied on CINI’s oversight.

Yes, it can run without CINI’S support but would certainly face problems. I think people might become careless, thinking no one is watching them and would ask them questions.
(Adolescent collective member, Kumkuma)

This indicates the need for further ‘stepping back’ by CINI, with greater reliance on the community itself to maintain high levels of motivation, care, and oversight.

The challenge of achieving diversity remains an ongoing priority. Although the community process achieved good diversity in terms of gender, age, and SES, and brought in people from different habitations within the intervention villages, the full inclusion of Muslims remains challenging. This owes in no small part to the wider trend process within India of inter-religious

factionalization and tension. It is hoped that going forward, each community will do its part to enable the climate of respect for diversity that is crucial for enabling children's well-being. Also, it is hoped that the significant improvements evident in the community-led process for enabling girls to continue their education will spread to other communities and help to inspire concerted movement toward equality for women and girls in Jharkhand.

Community-government tensions are also an ongoing challenge. The eruption and spread of the *pathalgarhi* movement made it difficult to complete aspects of the action research, the Aloundi's participation in the movement significantly decreased its participation in the community-led process in Khunti. Although how to address or even view this movement is beyond the scope of this action research, it is essential to ask how all political movements affect children. In a significant way, this action research challenges the world to think how the world might become a better place if the needs, voices, and well-being of children were made increasingly central priorities.

CONCLUSION

This study provides clear evidence for the effectiveness of community-led approaches to child protection in improving children's protection and well-being in an Indian context. In Dhanbad, the evidence indicated that communities had mobilized themselves around child marriage, developed clear plans for reducing it, and had taken specific steps to prevent impending child marriages. Although the community-led action did not eliminate child marriage, it did succeed in reducing it and in establishing an ongoing civic process for preventing child marriage and also for enabling girls to pursue their education. In Khunti, the evidence indicated that communities had mobilized themselves around school dropout, developed effective networks and strategies for addressing it, and had taken specific actions that had reduced school dropout. Although school dropout was not eliminated, the community-led action succeeded in reducing it and also child marriage, which was one of the key sources of school dropout for girls.

Together, these findings demonstrate the efficacy of community-led child protection in an Asian context. This is valuable in establishing the generalizability of the community-led approach to child protection, which had previously been shown to be effective in contexts of sub-Saharan Africa (Kostelny, Ondoro, & Wessells, 2020; Wessells, 2015). The fact that the approach worked well in very different contexts within Jharkhand and in addressing different issues suggests that community-led approaches are highly flexible and can work in diverse contexts. The generalizability of the community-led approach likely owes to people's collective resilience and ability in different contexts to analyze and solve problems facing children through collective action. The generalizability of community-led approaches may also owe to the fact that different communities construct and adapt these approaches within their cultural worlds and in a creative manner the embodies the lived experiences, the agency, the social networks, and the values of local people. There is good reason to expect that the successes achieved in Dhanbad and Khunti could also be achieved in many other parts of India, and Asia for that matter.

The findings from Dhanbad and Khunti also attest to the importance of community ownership. In both areas, the interventions were community owned since local people rather than outside agencies and experts made the key decisions, drove the community actions, and directly influenced the outcomes for children. The importance of community ownership in the Jharkhand context fits with the findings from other, predominantly African, contexts (Benham, 2008; Cislighi, 2018; Donahue & Mwewa, 2006; Hope & Timmel, 1988; Kostelny et al., 2020; Wessells, 2009, 2015). The communities involved in this action research achieved higher levels of community-ownership and self-reliance than typically occur when top-down approaches to child protection are used (Wessells, 2015, 2018). This bodes well for sustainability and ongoing community action to protect children, although, as noted above, additional steps need to be taken to reduce dependency on the NGOs that supported the community-led work.

This study provides the first systematic evidence that NGOs can use community-led approaches to child protection in an effective manner that produces positive outcomes for children. In previous work in Sierra Leone and Kenya, for example, the initial facilitation was done by a trained facilitator, but for the most part, the facilitators did not work for international NGOs. By contrast, the work reported on in this study entailed deep involvement and

commitment by four Indian NGOs. CINI and Chetna Vikas played important, facilitative roles in Khunti and Dhanbad, respectively. These agencies oversaw the work of the community facilitators, who enabled inclusive dialogue and collective problem-solving and decision-making, worked according to community time, and continuously put communities in the driver's seat. As CINI and Chetna Vikas played their facilitative roles, they received valuable, ongoing support from Praxis and Plan-India. Experience during the intervention indicated that regular Praxis visits to the facilitators as they worked with the communities helped to support the facilitators, strengthen their skills and habits of reflection, and insure fidelity to the principles of community-led child protection. Also important were ongoing Core Group meetings in which the partners reflected on the accomplishments and challenges of the current community-led process, engaged in collective problem-solving, and agreed on collective steps and adjustments that would strengthen the process further.

The successes of the community-led approach reported in this study increase confidence that other NGOs could also use this approach successfully, if it were applied with the flexibility, trust in the communities, and spirit of co-learning and accompaniment that were embodied in this action research. Wider use by NGOs of a community-led approach would be a valuable complement to the use of the dominant, top-down approaches and could help to animate grassroots community action for child protection on a large scale.

Three aspects of the community-led work evaluated in this study warrant special mention since they contributed significantly to the positive outcomes for children. First, the village collectives functioned as networks of networks that activated different centers of resources, power, and influence on behalf of children's well-being. In Dhanbad, the Committee networking and linkage with Self Help Groups, for example, was essential for preventing child marriage. In Khunti, the networks with key actors such as the gram sabhas made it possible to help children who were out of school to return to school. Linkage with government schemes, particularly economic schemes, was often instrumental in enabling families to keep their children in school. This serves as a poignant reminder of the importance of linking economic support with child protection efforts.

This networking and linkage-intensive approach contrasts with other approaches to community-level child protection that attempt to have a single group such as a Child Protection Committee or a Village Development Committee take primary responsibility for insuring the protection of children. Whereas the latter approach emphasizes the work of a particular group, this network of networks approach seen in this action research made it the responsibility of diverse parts of the community to protect children. As a result, many different actors within the community began taking responsibility for the protection of children. Also, when particular resources were needed, the resources were leveraged by working through other stakeholders in the networks.

Second, children played key leadership roles in the community-led actions. In Dhanbad, adolescent girls were significant facilitators and leaders of community action to address child marriage. The girls' voices were highly impactful in raising community awareness of the harm caused by child marriage, and the girls were dynamic organizers and facilitators of the community-led action. The girls were instrumental, too, in bringing in parents, teachers and other

community members, who also contributed significantly to the community-led action. In Khunti, too, children demonstrated remarkable leadership, as the adolescents' groups helped to map the villages, identify out of school children, and make home visits in order to help the children return to school. In both areas, children played key roles in organizing street dramas and rallies and participating in activities that boosted community awareness of the harms to children and commitment to addressing them. This leadership went well beyond the child participation that is usually seen in NGO projects, and it highlights children's resilience and problem-solving abilities. This work invites everyone to think further how children's leadership could help to alter the social processes that cause harm to children, while also strengthening their own resilience and well-being.

Third, the community-led action embodied a social ecological approach, which is widely recognized as crucial for protecting children (Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2019; Betancourt et al., 2013; Boothby et al., 2006; Sidebotham, 2001; Ungar, 2011). In both Dhanbad and Khunti, diverse actors at different social levels became activated around addressing child marriage and school dropout, respectively. At household level, parents became more attentive to the respective problems and often joined in developing ways of preventing the harms to children. Peers, too, became highly active in enabling prevention, as did teachers and schools. Community groups such as gram sabhas became energized around children's issues and worked to prevent the community-selected harms to children. These different social actors worked in a coordinated manner, thereby aligning the social action across levels in a manner that has been shown to be most impactful and that is too often missing or weak (Tol et al.). Equally important, the community-led approach can stimulate a whole community approach that elevates the priority of children's issues in the community and ignites action across diverse sub-groups within the community.

Overall, these findings are highly encouraging for the wider task of strengthening national systems of child protection, both in India and other countries, too. The community-led approach provides a grassroots, locally owned process that activates communities, families and children around preventing harms to children. A community-led approach offers a strong civic arm of child protection and a platform of collective resilience that complements and supports the formal arm of child protection systems. Such an approach is of vital importance since our efforts to protect children must be as comprehensive as are the risks that threaten children's well-being.

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