

Agents of Change

The Rajasthan government's women empowerment project UDAAN is transforming the lives of girls in the districts of Dausa, Karauli and Tonk

Trisha Mukherjee

HAD Aarti not discovered that she was eligible for a government scholarship, she would likely have dropped out of school long ago. With only one earning member in a family of eight, educating children, especially girls, was a luxury the family couldn't afford.

So, when she found out that she could seek the government's aid to continue in school, she couldn't be happier. "The chances of me dropping out were very high. In view of the large size of our family, the scholarship amount was essential. I have two brothers and three sisters. More people mean more mouths to feed.

"My father is a construction labourer. Running the house is a difficult task. For girls, scholarship money is very important, because spending money on their studies is considered an economic burden!" says Aarti, now a first-year college student.

Confidence personified Girl students on their way to school in Rajasthan

She adds that the scholarship money helped her enrol for mathematics tuition, buy new clothes, books and a pair of new *chappals*. And she says she has UDAAN—a women empowerment project in Rajasthan - to thank.

The five-year project by the government of Rajasthan is being implemented in the state by IPE Global Limited, an international development consulting group. They are being assisted by the Children's Investment Fund Foundation (CIFF), which works at reducing the number of early marriages of girls across different parts of Rajasthan. According to IPE Global, the project looks at empowering young girls by encouraging them to continue in school, thereby preventing chances of being forced into early marriages and teen pregnancies, a situation that is not unheard of, particularly in rural India.

Rajasthan has around 7.4 million adolescent girls (10-19 years), representing approximately 22 per cent of the state's total female population (Census 2011). Of these, 1.1 million are married under the legal age of 18 years—a practice that drives early childbearing, dropping out from school, sexual exploitation and domestic violence. The state has the third highest adolescent fertility rate in the country. According to the 2011 Census, the state had 2,44,872 girls under the age of 19 who were mothers.

To achieve its goals, the project that began in December 2016, adopted a multi-pronged approach. One of its core objectives was looking to keep girls in secondary schools, preventing them from dropping out. This was achieved by strengthening scholarship delivery systems; generating wide public awareness on the scholarship schemes; mobilising communities to shift traditional norms with regard to girls' education; and building capacities of government functionaries for effective state-wide scale-up.

Citing the project's findings, Ashish Mukherjee of IPE Global says that out of every 100 girls enrolling in Grade 1 in Rajasthan, 44 do not reach Grade 10. The financial cost of educating a girl child is cited as a major reason for drop-outs. Further, there are issues of safety and security of girls, lack of safe transport; strict gender-based norms—girls not allowed to go to school alone after attaining 'marriageable age'. "UDAAN implemented interventions with the objective of getting more girls to enrol in secondary school by creating awareness of the scholarship schemes and mitigating social barriers to girls' education through social mobilisation strategies like engaging with Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) to identify dropouts, and interpersonal counselling of

parents/guardians/students," he says.

Focus group discussions conducted in Dausa, Karauli and Tonk as part of the project, revealed that girls in these areas study up to secondary/higher secondary levels and some pursue graduation and beyond. However, in Udaipur, girls and their parents reported that girls rarely study beyond Class VIII. A major concern is safety.

"It is evident that in Dausa, Karauli and Tonk, schools are available within a radius of 2-8 km in most gram panchayats (GPs). Where schools are beyond 4 km, bicycles have been provided to girls, and they can cycle to school. However, safe passage in case of deserted roads and eve-teasing continue to be a concern for the parents," Mukherjee explains. In Udaipur, for example, where several villages are located in remote areas or on hilly tracts, it was a challenge for girls to access schools, resulting in higher levels of concerns around safety among parents.

Despite these challenges, one of the major breakthroughs of this project was achieved by increasing awareness of government scholarships among girls and their families, a long-term consequence of which would also result in employment and subsequent employment opportunities.

To achieve this, UDAAN made registration in the government schemes easier by supporting linkages with local banks by obtaining the mandated documents (Aadhaar, Jan Aadhaar, caste and income certificates) for submission of the scholarship application form.

"I was in Class VIII when people from UDAAN came and guided us about the scholarship process. After that, my principal and parents helped me open an account at the Punjab National Bank in Maniya. I got Rs 1,250 as scholarship in my account," says Aarti, who went to a school in Dholpur.

A direct outcome of girls getting scholarships was that it allowed parents to perceive their daughter's education as a boon and not a bane, particularly in economic terms. "Apart from improving girls' enrolment and attendance, one of the things we see is that scholarships do not just ease the burden of parents in terms of educational investments, but also motivate parents to invest not just money but time in the education of their daughters," Mukherjee says.

From 2017 till now, UDAAN claims to have facilitated enrolment of nearly 52,000 additional girls in secondary school in its intervention districts in Rajasthan. It is estimated that getting these additional girls in secondary school will have prevented approximately 17,500 early marriages. Preventing child marriage conspicuously results in averting teenage pregnancy as well as health and well-being of both mother and child

due to delay in childbearing. It also impacts girls' educational attainment, income and job potential in the future.

To make this strategy more effective, the project also worked towards introducing sex education in the school curriculum. A beneficiary of this initiative was Rife Khanam, who was in Class XI when she first attended a sex education class. She recalls feeling "uncomfortable" when the topics of menstruation and teenage pregnancies were discussed in class, but admits that as the sessions offered more clarity on taboo subjects, she felt more informed to take decisions independently about her life, and also make her friends aware of the same.

"I truly realised the importance of these classes when a friend of mine was forced into marrying at a young age. While she couldn't prevent the marriage, she had confided in me about how she didn't want to have a child at an early age. Because of the classes, I could share with her the contraceptive options available," she says.

Access to education also instils in girls a heightened sense of agency over their lives. The project showed that there was a "marked difference" in the attitude of girls who received the scholarships. "The aspect of financial inclusion is empowering for them—a lot of them proudly speak of their experience of going to a bank. The fact that they have bank accounts makes them feel more connected to the environment where adults operate, giving them a sense of superiority and confidence."

"This feeling of empowerment and confidence improves their agency. There are instances where girls have stated that they are now involved in discussions regarding their marriage, refusing proposals their parents brought, or have been able to negotiate to delay marriage until the completion of Class XII," Ashish says.

In another initiative titled 'Manzil', IPE Global works with over 30,000 girls who have already dropped out of school or are at a high risk of dropping out, with an objective to achieve economic liberty.

The project first mobilises these girls to enrol in government or CSR-run skill courses and complete them, after which, it facilitates jobs by negotiating with employers and getting them to accept potential for growth and gender sensitivity at the workplace.

"These girls will be the first generation to step out of their villages. While some of their mothers are daily wagers, they do not have control over the money they earn. Agency for these girls will come with economic liberty. They will be better placed to make decisions on their lives," says Neelakshi Mann of IPE Global. □

ONE OF THE MAJOR BREAKTHROUGHS OF THIS PROJECT WAS ACHIEVED BY INCREASING AWARENESS OF GOVERNMENT SCHOLARSHIPS AMONG GIRLS AND THEIR FAMILIES.