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Girls' Education, Child Marriage, & Gender Justice: A Study of *Balika Shivar* Educational Camp, Rajasthan, India

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors
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Honors Capstone Project in Women's & Gender Studies

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To my Mummy, my Daddy, Nidhi & Rudra

&

To My Dearest Grandparents

*Chintamaniprasad Pandya, Sushila Pandya, Manu Vaidya, Sushila Vaidya
You are gone, but your ideas about pursuing knowledge dogmatically and
ethically will stay with us forever.*

Abstract

Girls' education has long been considered a significant indicator of a girl's age at marriage in India. Based on this idea, policymakers in India have designed or supported various expensive programs to eliminate child marriage in the country. Using a feminist lens, this paper explores one such intervention, *Balika Shivar*, an adolescent girls' residential camp, located in the village of Lunkaransar, Rajasthan, in Western India. I focus specifically on my interviews with girls in this camp, highlighting their reflections on a number of issues dealing with education, culture, and agency in connection with their experiences at *Balika Shivar*. The inclusion of voices of the marginalized girls is central to the purpose of this paper. The goal is to gain a better understanding of the *Balika Shivar* camp, explore its potentials and drawbacks, and finally, provide recommendations not only to the organization but also to decision-makers in the context of girls' education and child marriage.

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Preface

On October 9th, 2012, an incident hit the news globally and generated a wave of responses and media attention. Malala Yousafzai, a 15-year-old Pakistani advocate of girls' education, was singled out by Taliban gunmen and shot in the head and neck. In the Swat Valley in Pakistan, where the Tehrik-i-Taliban have banned girls from attending school, Malala had been involved in advocacy for girls' education and women's rights. The fact that the Tehrik-i-Taliban attempted to silence Malala's voice in this violent way shows that it wishes to uphold a system that sees the education of Pakistani girls and women as a threat to their vision of society. Malala's story was heard around the world and led to many intense and engaged responses from human rights communities. The story told the world about how threatening the education of girl children can be to those who see girls belonging only in the domestic realm. The incident shows how a girl's desire to be educated and educate others can be perceived as a threat in so-called "traditional" (read anti-modern/Western) South Asian societies. Malala's story highlighted how access to education is crucial for South Asian girls in order to escape the negative consequences that result from not having access to education. For many girls in South Asia, education is integrally linked with child marriage. When child marriage occurs, a girl's childhood is forever lost. Malala's failed assassination attempt and the worldwide impact it had confirms that education for girls (and its connection to child marriage) is a key issue for ensuring gender justice and dismantling unjust patriarchal systems in South Asia.

Acknowledgements

I cannot put into words how thankful I am to my thesis advisor, **Dr. Chandra Talpade Mohanty**, who has given me unwavering support in the development of this topic as well as the numerous readings and re-readings of every draft (I don't even know how many at this point). Despite the fact that you are very busy and not on campus daily this semester, you have made it a point to be an extremely accessible and resourceful advisor and mentor, putting countless hours into this project. Working with you, reading your work, and learning from you has ignited my passion in the field of gender justice and has improved my critical-thinking skills and led to a conscious questioning approach that will prove useful for the rest of my life. You are a gift and a true inspiration. Many thanks for sharing your valuable and esteemed knowledge and for showering this project with your enthusiasm and guidance every step of the way!

I am extremely grateful to my thesis reader, **Dr. Himika Bhattacharya**, who has spent a great deal of time reading the work and providing insightful suggestions for improvement. You have been instrumental in helping me tie concepts together and for pointing out the big picture of the project and its valuable contribution to the field of gender and caste. The concepts I have learnt in the classroom with you have also proved tremendously useful for the project. I truly appreciate the time you have put into reading this thesis.

I am indebted to the Syracuse University **Renée Crown University Honors Program** and the **Mark & Pearle Clements Internship Award Committee** for realizing the value of a project like this and considering me a deserving recipient of the Crown-Wise Award and the Mark & Pearle Clements Internship Award. With the financial support, my internship and research abroad were possible and this project has been enriched by this experience.

Of course, I would like to thank my **Mummy and Daddy**, without whom I would not be at this stage in my academic career and personal life. Support can come from many places, but the type of support that you have given me is all encompassing and truly invaluable. You have made it a point to ensure that we have everything we want, and that we reach beyond the stars. You have never stopped believing in me and have given me strength to keep me going.

Nidhi & Rudra, you have hands down been the best sister and brother I could ever ask for. You have added the humor to my life when I've most needed it (and also when I haven't, but that's okay). You've kept me from going completely insane with schoolwork these past four years, and especially while writing this thesis. I love you both! "*Jaane kyun, dil jaanta hai. Tu hai to I'll be alright.*"

Finally, I would like to thank the **International Center for Research on Women**, as it provided me with the opportunity to conduct extensive research on child marriage in the South Asian context and assist in the development of relevant policy briefs. I would like to specifically thank Dr. Ravi Verma for facilitating the trip to *Balika Shivar*.

Advice to Future Honors Students

Dear Honors Student,

The Capstone project has been the most valuable and memorable experience of my entire undergraduate career. You can keep your Capstone as basic as you want or take it as far as you want. But at the end of the day, view the Capstone not as a requirement but as an enriching experience that will improve your work ethic and will motivate you in your pursuit for academic, professional, and personal excellence. The rewards are plenty and you will realize them if you put in the necessary effort. A good Capstone Advisor will push you to do your best. Always view this as a positive thing, even amidst all of the million other things you will need to do during your senior year. The project is really what you make of it. Good luck!

Introduction

Girls' desire to be educated is found all over the world. For years, education has been considered a primary indicator of development and progress in all societies. In many cultures, the education of girls and women was considered taboo and perceived as a luxury. The quest for girls' education is an aspect of a larger feminist struggle around patriarchal practices, masculinist culture, and the devaluation of girls. In the summer of 2012, as an Intern at the *International Center for Research on Women (ICRW)*, I had the opportunity to research child marriage practices in certain South Asian countries including, but not limited to, India. Existing particularly but not solely in the rural areas of India, child marriage proves a serious challenge to girls' education. In fact, scholarship on this topic indicates education is a strong deterrent and/or the single largest deterrent of child marriage.¹ I was interested in this idea of education as instrumental in eradicating child marriage, and was curious to understand the type of education that ensures such results. *Plan India*, with its Asia Child Marriage Initiative (ACMI), in collaboration with other NGOs has produced detailed studies and undertaken in-depth policy analysis over the past few years to determine the most effective programs and policy initiatives to eliminate child marriage. In its policy recommendations, Plan India promotes the use of

¹ International Center for Research on Women. Child Marriage and Education. Rep. New Delhi: ICRW, 2006. Child Marriage and Education. International Center for Research on Women. Web. <<http://www.icrw.org/files/images/Child-Marriage-Fact-Sheet-Education.pdf>>.

residential schools, such as the *Balika Shivir* program organized by Urmul Setu Sansthan in Rajasthan.²

As soon as I found out about it, I was intrigued by the *Balika Shivir* program, and in the summer of 2012, when the opportunity arose, I decided to visit the camp. I spent a week in *Balika Shivir*, an adolescent girls camp in rural Rajasthan, organized by a local NGO, *Urmul Setu Sansthan*. *Urmul Setu* fosters girls' literacy through these residential camps in an effort to empower the girls and improve their status in society. In addition, *Urmul Setu* has a long-term organizational goal of eradicating child marriage.³

Since *Plan India* and the *International Center for Research on Women* (ICRW) cite the *Balika Shivir* program as a useful intervention with the ability to eliminate child marriage,⁴ I decided to focus on examining its approach to literacy and capacity building, and to use the opportunity for field research to talk to the girls and their teachers/administrators. What I was able to learn from my visit to *Balika Shivir* (henceforth *BS*) is that while delay in girls' marriage may end up being an indirect consequence of the Urmul-led educational intervention, what was most valuable and useful was the program's success in building self-confidence while addressing caste and gender inequities. In this paper I suggest that although *BS* actively breaks down caste hierarchies and primarily provides a formal literacy-based education, the curriculum does not necessarily provide a

² Verma, Ravi, Tara Sinha, and Tina Khanna. *Asia Child Marriage Initiative: Summary of Research in Bangladesh, India and Nepal*. Rep. New Delhi: Plan Asia Regional Office / ICRW, 2013. Print.

³ "Urmul and Child Rights." URMUL Trust. URMUL, n.d. Web. 12 Apr. 2013. <http://www.urmul.org/?page_id=37>.

⁴ Verma, Ravi, Tara Sinha, and Tina Khanna. *Asia Child Marriage Initiative: Summary of Research in Bangladesh, India and Nepal*. Rep. New Delhi: Plan Asia Regional Office / ICRW, 2013. Print.

space for meaningful and radical critical-thinking that must happen to lower the likelihood of child marriage.

This paper begins with a literature review to highlight the context of child marriage in India and to explore how education is tied to child marriage. In addition, I address the discourse of gender and caste within the Indian feminist struggle. I review programs and interventions that address child marriage in India and argue that the current piecemeal, microscopic approach must be abandoned. In its place, NGOs, policymakers, and the Government of India need to adopt a holistic approach to devise a strategy that will incorporate and consider the multi-faceted nature of child marriage. After providing this critique of policy interventions, I focus on *BS* as an education-based intervention and explore the history and goals of the program and of the organization, *Urmul Setu*. I then focus on my experience at *BS* and explore empirical data (observations and stories) based on conversations with *BS* participants, teachers, and administrators/organizers. I explore the benefits and drawbacks of the program, with the overall aim of providing feedback to *Urmul Setu* as well as the decision-makers who possess the power to make the appropriate policy changes that impact the issue of girls' education and child marriage.

This paper uses a feminist perspective to explore the potential impact of the *BS* program on girls' identity. I make visible the potential of the program and highlight the voices of girls who are usually invisible in research, policy documents, and scholarly analyses of the impact of such programs.

Feminist scholarship in the last few decades has focused on the inclusion of the voices (and knowledges) of marginalized peoples and groups. This attentiveness to experience and voice as a key aspect of feminist research addresses the marginalization of the agency of women from different communities in the production of hegemonic knowledge. Patricia Hill-Collins describes the value of lived experience in knowledge production and knowledge validation. Though her work specifically concerns the African-American community, it can be widely applied to other groups that have faced oppression. Hill-Collins claims, "For most African-American women those individuals who have lived through the experiences about which they claim to be experts are more believable and credible than those who have merely read or thought about such experiences. Thus lived experience as a criterion for credibility frequently is invoked by U.S. black women when making knowledge claims."⁵ This paper applies similar logic by attributing importance and credibility to the lived experiences of the girls who participated in the *BS* camp.

Highlighting the girls' lived experiences requires the incorporation of their voices on their own terms, thus intentionally *not* misrepresenting their situations. Inclusion of multiple voices is also key to producing good feminist research. As Gloria Anzaldúa explains, referring to women of color, "Because our bodies have been stolen, brutalized or numbed it is difficult to speak from/through them."⁶ Recognizing that the silencing of voices has happened in a very involuntary and

⁵ Hill Collins, Patricia. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 2000. Print.

⁶ Anzaldúa, Gloria. "Haciendo Caras, Una Entrada." Introduction. *Making Face, Making Soul: Haciendo Caras : Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Foundation, 1990. Xv-Xxvii. Print.

unjust manner suggests the importance of bringing a multiplicity of voices to the foreground. The history of feminist scholarship has been somewhat exclusive and did not speak to the experiences of women in marginalized communities. However, since the 1980s, the women's movement has incorporated the voices and agency of those who were previously absent. Theory and knowledge production would be more inclusive and truthful if there is a movement to decolonize⁷ theories and ways of knowing. This is exactly what I seek to do in this paper. I want to highlight the voices and ideas of the girls in a very lucid manner, so as to allow their agency to emerge. In a later part of the paper, where I rely mostly on ideas that emerge from my conversations and interviews with certain girls, I am very careful to ensure that the language is directly translated, and thus, accessible and direct.

Literature Review

Child Marriage

More than 40% of the world's child marriages take place in India.⁸ From 2000 to 2010, 47% girls were married by age 18, 18% of who married before the young age of 15.⁹ In urban India, 29% of girls get married before the age of 18,

⁷ Anzaldúa, Gloria. "Haciendo Caras, Una Entrada." Introduction. *Making Face, Making Soul: Haciendo Caras : Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Foundation, 1990. Xv-Xxvii. Print.

⁸ Sinha, Kounteya. "Nearly 50% Fall in Brides Married below 18." *The Times of India*. The Times of India, 10 Feb. 2012. Web. <http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-02-10/india/31045526_1_child-brides-child-marriage-minimum-age>.

⁹ UNICEF. "India." UNICEF. N.p., 2012. Web. <http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/india_statistics.html>.

whereas in rural India, 56% of girls are married before the age of 18.¹⁰ The Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 prohibits child marriage in India, where the minimum age of marriage is 18 for girls and 21 for boys.¹¹ While rates of child marriage are declining, the pace of change is slow and in some states prevalence rates remain over 60%. In India, child marriage is entrenched in social customs and traditions and there is little enforcement of the law. In many rural communities, where incidence of child marriage is normally higher, there have been few attempts by law enforcement police officers to break up child marriages. However, many of these attempts are known to be unsuccessful, as police officers accept bribes, allowing the marriages to take place. In other cases, families end up performing the marriage ceremonies in an obscure location, often at night, or even in a neighboring village.¹²

Many reasons are given by parents and the communities in India to justify child marriage. The most common reason provided is economic. In many families, one less daughter is considered one less mouth to feed. Therefore, girls are viewed as burdens and getting them married early is an act of unburdening by reducing overall family costs.¹³

Apart from economic reasons, there are many other social and traditional reasons why girls are married at an early age in India. Marriage agreements are often made between families for dynastic, business, property or conflict resolution

¹⁰ UNICEF. UNICEF The State of the World's Children. Rep. UNICEF, 2009. Web. <<http://www.unicef.org/sowc09/docs/SOWC09-FullReport-EN.pdf>>.

¹¹ "The Child Marriage Restrain Act, 1929." The Child Marriage Restrain Act, 1929. National Informatics Centre, n.d. Web. <<http://wcd.nic.in/cm1929.htm>>.

¹² "Balika Shivar Interviews." Personal interview. 27 July 2012.

¹³ UNICEF. Early Marriage in South Asia: A Discussion Paper. Rep. UNICEF ROSA (Regional Office South Asia), n.d. Web. <[www.unicef.org/rosa/earlymarriage\(lastversion\).doc](http://www.unicef.org/rosa/earlymarriage(lastversion).doc)>.

purposes – Indian girls may be married as toddlers or well before the age of 10 in order to establish powerful relations between families.¹⁴ Additionally, because girls and women are considered unable to take care of themselves, a girl may be married early to ensure that she is “protected” or placed under male control. Parents are more likely to marry girls at early ages to control their sexuality in order to avoid family shame and to preserve family honor.¹⁵

Furthermore, many parents feel tremendous pressure to adhere to the community’s social norms. If a father does not marry his daughter at an early age, he is likely to face criticism from the community, as many will think something is wrong with the girl or that the father does not have the financial capability to fund the daughter’s marriage.¹⁶ Overall, in many rural areas, where parents are not educated, girls are seen as unwanted burdens because they are unable to contribute to the family’s wealth, as they would eventually be leaving the family. For this reason, many parents do not find strong enough incentives for educating the girls as they would their sons. Girls, if they fail, are not at all encouraged to try again or continue pursuing their studies, and in many rural and even some urban settings, if girls are not studying then the only other alternative is marriage.¹⁷

Other than the abovementioned social and traditional reasons for early marriage of girls, there are also a few other reasons, particularly in rural settings,

¹⁴ UNICEF. Early Marriage in South Asia: A Discussion Paper. Rep. UNICEF ROSA (Regional Office South Asia), n.d. Web. <[www.unicef.org/rosa/earlymarriage\(lastversion\).doc](http://www.unicef.org/rosa/earlymarriage(lastversion).doc)>.

¹⁵ UNICEF. Early Marriage in South Asia: A Discussion Paper. Rep. UNICEF ROSA (Regional Office South Asia), n.d. Web. <[www.unicef.org/rosa/earlymarriage\(lastversion\).doc](http://www.unicef.org/rosa/earlymarriage(lastversion).doc)>.

¹⁶ "Balika Shivir Interviews." Personal interview. 27 July 2012.

¹⁷ "Balika Shivir Interviews." Personal interview. 27 July 2012.

which force girls to be married early. For example, many girls are married at 18 but their younger sisters are married off at the same time so that the parents may avoid having to go through the tedious and expensive marriage process again. Another practice is known as the “exchange practice.” where families give the girls to another family in exchange for bringing in girls from that family for marriage with their sons. In such a practice, the needs and desires of girls are ignored and they are often married at young ages.¹⁸

Child marriage in India enables the violation of girls’ (human) rights in multiple ways. A survey conducted in the Indian states of Bihar and Jharkhand by *ICRW* and partners pointed to the fact that girls married before 18 were twice as likely to report “being beaten, slapped or threatened by their husbands than girls who married later. They were three times as likely to report being forced to have sex without their consent in the previous six months.”¹⁹ Apart from girls experiencing increased violence, those who are married early are pushed into early childbearing, which has long been a risk to maternity and has led to miscarriage, infant death, malnutrition, sterility, and maternal death. Girls between the ages of 15 and 19 are twice as likely to die of pregnancy-related reasons as women between ages 20 and 24.²⁰ Early marriage often results in young girls engaging in sexual activity with older partners, who due to their older age and experience have an elevated risk of being HIV positive, making the girl

¹⁸ "Balika Shivir Interviews." Personal interview. 27 July 2012.

¹⁹ ICRW. *Too Young to Wed*. Rep. International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), 2005. Web. <<http://www.icrw.org/files/publications/Too-Young-to-Wed-Education-and-Action-Toward-Ending-Child-Marriage.pdf>>.

²⁰ UNICEF. *Early Marriage in South Asia: A Discussion Paper*. Rep. UNICEF ROSA (Regional Office South Asia), n.d. Web. <[www.unicef.org/rosa/earlymarriage\(lastversion\).doc](http://www.unicef.org/rosa/earlymarriage(lastversion).doc)>.

increasingly vulnerable to HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. Early marriage has also halted girls' pursuit of education and consequently entry into the labor market. Due to the belief that investment in a girl's education is wasted once she is married,²¹ girls are less likely than boys to be educated. As a result, they lack the valuable and necessary skills to enter the labor market, thus limiting their individual economic progress. They also lack proper decision-making skills or bargaining power to fight back against the injustices they experience on a daily basis.

In this project, based largely on my visit to the *Balika Shivir* camp and the conversations and exchanges that have, in fact, inspired this work, I discuss the issue of child marriage as linked to girls' education. I explore the benefits and drawbacks of the education received by girls who participate in *Urmul's Balika Shivir* camp. I illuminate the cultural intricacies involved in shaping villages and the families in them, and by telling the stories of girls who have lacked a voice, I reflect on the educational and cultural shifts that must take place for this to be a truly meaningful endeavor, aimed not only at eradicating the practice but at dismantling the very institutions that continue to support and uphold this gendered, discriminatory practice.

Education and Child Marriage

Because of the grave consequences of child marriage, research has been undertaken by NGOs, the United Nations, and other governmental entities to

²¹ UNICEF. Early Marriage in South Asia: A Discussion Paper. Rep. UNICEF ROSA (Regional Office South Asia), n.d. Web. <[www.unicef.org/rosa/earlymarriage\(lastversion\).doc](http://www.unicef.org/rosa/earlymarriage(lastversion).doc)>.

evaluate the practice of child marriage in India. Studies have also evaluated programs that target child marriage. Much of the literature produced in this realm shows girls' educational advancement as the single largest factor in eliminating child marriage throughout the country. A great deal of the research produced in the child marriage realm has been conducted by the *International Center for Research on Women*, headquartered in Washington D.C., and operating a regional office in New Delhi. The *ICRW* has consistently considered education, or keeping girls in school, as a promising but "relatively untried approach to delaying age at marriage."²² In addition, the *ICRW* also conducted a study on child marriage and education, finding that the "education a girl receives is the strongest predictor of the age she will marry."²³

Following this logic, many NGOs operating to eliminate child marriage do so with the premise that education is the most significant determining factor in delaying the age at marriage. For example, a *GlobalGiving* project called "Prevent Child Marriage, Educate 100 girls in India" suggests that education provides "a strong disincentive to child marriage."²⁴ *The Times of India*, the largest selling

²² Gupta, Sreela Das, Sushmita Mukherjee, Sampurna Singh, Rohini Pande, and Sharmishtha Basu. *Knot Ready: Lessons From India on Delaying Marriage for Girls*. Rep. International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), 2008. Web. <<http://www.icrw.org/files/publications/Knot-Ready-Lessons-from-India-on-Delaying-Marriage-for-Girls.pdf>>.

²³ International Center for Research on Women. *Child Marriage and Education*. Rep. New Delhi: ICRW, 2006. *Child Marriage and Education*. International Center for Research on Women. Web. <<http://www.icrw.org/files/images/Child-Marriage-Fact-Sheet-Education.pdf>>.

²⁴ "Prevent Child Marriage, Educate 100 Girls in India." *GlobalGiving.org*. GlobalGiving, n.d. Web. <<http://www.globalgiving.org/projects/prevent-child-marriage-send-100-indian-girls-to-school/>>.

English newspaper in the world, reported on January 13, 2013 “only education can end child marriage evil.”²⁵

I am not arguing here that education will not at all assist in reducing or eliminating the instances of child marriage. What I am arguing is that the type of education and the quality of education that is delivered to Indian girls must be questioned and critiqued, with the ultimate aim of establishing which factors should be avoided and which factors must be present for meaningful education that leads to critical gender consciousness and empowerment of girls to take place. Often, education, as described by NGOs and other social service organizations entails literacy; however, education cannot be understood only as formal literacy. Certain elements, such as critical thinking, knowledge, and questioning, must be present in education so that those on the receiving end feel empowered and realize that they possess agency and decision-making capabilities.

The desire of girls to study is obvious—the case of Malala Yousafzai and her activism on behalf of education for girls made this desire visible to the entire world. A similar desire for girls’ education is echoed repeatedly by feminists, politicians, activists, and academic circles in India and abroad, especially when discussing child marriage. Many reports have shown education as the most effective factor in raising the age at marriage for Indian girls. Little work has been done, however, to expand on the type of literacy or education that must take place for meaningful progress in eradicating or destroying child marriage in the Indian

²⁵ Kumari, Ammi. "The Times Of India." Only Education Can End Child Marriage Evil, Say Experts. The Times Of India, 13 Jan. 2013. Web. <http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2013-01-13/ranchi/36310807_1_child-marriage-girl-child-annual-health-survey>.

context. I hope this study of *Balika Shivir* can contribute in a small way to this effort.

Women's Movements

The links between gender and caste discrimination have been at the forefront of discussions in the Indian women's movement in recent years. Dalit women and their concerns emerge as being central not just in certain feminist discourses but also in the country's attempts at social and legal reforms. In North India, caste as essentialized identity is practiced through four main categories: Brahmins (priestly caste), Kshatriyas (warrior caste), Vaishyas (traders), and the Shudras (menial task workers).²⁶ Dalits,²⁷ formerly known as the untouchables, fall outside all of these castes. Caste discrimination is historically/often based on the logic of purity and pollution. For example, contact with Dalits was (and still is) considered to pollute any work that they may engage in.²⁸ Though attempts have been made improve the status of Dalits in India, including governmental interventions aimed at affirmative action²⁹ for Dalits, the social stigma associated with being Dalit continues to belittle and trouble the community, preventing their success in many domains. Even though influential figures have tried to elevate the status of Dalits in society, these attempts have not always meaningfully addressed the caste-based injustice being inflicted upon this group.

²⁶ Mahanta, Upasana. "Transnational Activism and the Dalit Women's Movement in India." *Global Civil Society: Shifting Powers in a Shifting World* (2012): 140-48. Print.

²⁷ Dalit is a political category that challenges essentialized notions of caste

²⁸ Andharia, Jahnvi, and ANANDI COLLECTIVE. "The Dalit Women's Movement in India: Dalit Mahila Samiti." The Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), 2008. Web.

²⁹ Andharia, Jahnvi, and ANANDI COLLECTIVE. "The Dalit Women's Movement in India: Dalit Mahila Samiti." The Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), 2008. Web.

During the Independence Movement in India, Mohandas Gandhi worked to remove the indignity that was associated with Dalit work. Gandhi called Dalits “*harijans*,” or “Children of God” to change their perception and relations with people of upper castes.³⁰ B.R. Ambedkar, the Chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee, was extremely influential in outlawing untouchability and all forms of discrimination in the Indian Constitution. The fact that Ambedkar himself was a Dalit proved extremely significant in his campaigns against social discrimination. It is important to note, however, that though discrimination based on caste is outlawed in the Indian Constitution, the caste system itself is not outlawed.³¹

This exclusion of Dalits exists even in India’s major women’s movement. For long, the Indian Women’s Movement marginalized Dalit women, ignoring their interests, issues, and struggles. After 1975, the Indian Women’s movement gained considerable momentum.³² Participation in the movement, however, was restricted to upper-caste women.³³ The issues that were salient, therefore, were those affecting upper-caste and middle-class women who were educated. The 1975-85 decade revolved around women’s issues like domestic violence, sexual atrocities, dowry, and legal amendments.³⁴ Because the movement was closely

³⁰ Andharia, Jahnvi, and ANANDI COLLECTIVE. "The Dalit Women's Movement in India: Dalit Mahila Samiti." The Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID), 2008. Web.

³¹ "The Caste System in India - Backdrop for Discrimination against Dalits." Dalit Freedom. Dalit Freedom Network Australia, n.d. Web. <<http://www.dalitfreedom.org.au/dalits/caste-system.html>>.

³² Rajawat, Mamta. *Dalit Women: Issues and Perspectives*. New Delhi: Anmol Publications Pvt., 2005. Print.

³³ Rajawat, Mamta. *Dalit Women: Issues and Perspectives*. New Delhi: Anmol Publications Pvt., 2005. Print.

³⁴ Rajawat, Mamta. *Dalit Women: Issues and Perspectives*. New Delhi: Anmol Publications Pvt., 2005. Print.

tioned to the social reform movement of India which focused on “urban education and Brahmin women and had not brought to the forefront issues of caste discrimination,”³⁵ the Indian Women’s movement was unable to shift the lens to broader issues like caste-based discrimination that would affect Dalit women.

The social reform movement, along with the Indian Women’s Movement, focused primarily on modernizing women’s lives and keeping up with changing times rather than challenging the very patriarchal structures that were generating this oppression in the first place. Because the fight was not against the structures or systems, it was unable to tend to Dalit women, for whom it was critical to challenge the overarching systems that uphold the caste system. Though the Indian Women’s Movement does not necessarily uphold or sponsor the Hindu religion and henceforth the caste system that comes with it, the movement is also not ready to pointedly reject or speak out against the system of injustice that alienates Dalit women from the movement.³⁶

As a response to this exclusion, the *National Federation of Dalit Women* (NFDW) formed in 1995 in order to force the women’s movements to recognize the struggles of Dalit women. The main reason for the formation of the *NFDW* was an experience of a three-fold oppression that non-Dalit women did not necessarily face. First, the Dalits were oppressed by the women and men of upper castes. Second, agricultural workers face class-based oppression at the hands of upper-caste landowners, and third, Dalit women specifically faced oppression at

³⁵ Rajawat, Mamta. *Dalit Women: Issues and Perspectives*. New Delhi: Anmol Publications Pvt., 2005. Print.

³⁶ Rajawat, Mamta. *Dalit Women: Issues and Perspectives*. New Delhi: Anmol Publications Pvt., 2005. Print.

the hands of men, including men of all castes.³⁷ It has taken many years for Dalit women to claim ownership of their right and feminist positions and to actually emerge as leaders in their own struggle. As momentum within the group grew, in 2003, Dalit women formed a separate movement, *Dal Mahila Samiti*, with a clear, central focus on Dalit women's issues.³⁸ The ongoing concern of Dalit women is that the other women's movements fail to recognize that "Dalit women face further discrimination owing to their gender."³⁹ Both the Women's Movement and the Dalit movement failed to take these intersections of gender and caste into consideration⁴⁰ when crafting their restrictive gender-justice or caste-elimination based programs, lacking any overlap between the two categories.

As mentioned, a major fault of the Indian Women's Movement was the assumption that "caste is solely the concern of Dalit women" and the lack of highlighting "the need for all women to critically interrogate the complex histories of caste and gender oppression."⁴¹ Because of this split-logic way of thinking, the Women's Movement failed to realize the potential it actually had to strategically intertwine gender-based and caste-based oppressions as a means of critiquing or challenging the overarching system. There was a clear opportunity to link these oppressions and address them simultaneously. However, this

³⁷ Andharia, Jahnvi, and ANANDI COLLECTIVE. "The Dalit Women's Movement in India: Dalit Mahila Samiti." The Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), 2008. Web.

³⁸ Andharia, Jahnvi, and ANANDI COLLECTIVE. "The Dalit Women's Movement in India: Dalit Mahila Samiti." The Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), 2008. Web.

³⁹ Mahanta, Upasana. "Transnational Activism and the Dalit Women's Movement in India." *Global Civil Society: Shifting Powers in a Shifting World* (2012): 140-48. Print.

⁴⁰ Mahanta, Upasana. "Transnational Activism and the Dalit Women's Movement in India." *Global Civil Society: Shifting Powers in a Shifting World* (2012): 140-48. Print.

⁴¹ Rege, Sharmila. *Writing Caste, Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonios*. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2006. Print.

opportunity was left unexplored and thus resulted in the inability of the Women's Movement to take into consideration the oppression of Dalit women.

Though the Indian Women's Movement was not cognizant of the issues surrounding Dalit women, *Balika Shivir*, as an educational intervention, was cognizant of these issues. Having realized the struggles Dalit women face in community in terms of acceptance, *Balika Shivir* creates an environment in which Dalit girls are very much included and engaged in meaningful participation.

Child Marriage in India: Programmatic Interventions

Numerous programs have been developed to counter child marriage. A wide range of activities is present in these programs. For example, 6% of the programs focus on financial incentives, 7% of the programs focus on capacity building, 9% of the programs are advocacy based, 13% of the programs are awareness based, 14% of the programs focus on livelihoods, 15% of the programs are education-based, 17% of the programs are life skills based, and finally, 19% of the programs are health based.⁴² Another factor to keep in mind is whether these programs are “direct programs” or “indirect programs.” Direct programs are those “programs, which are defined as having a specific goal to change the age at marriage and build in or design specific activities for this purpose.”⁴³ On the other hand, indirect programs are interventions that indirectly try to change the

⁴² Gupta, Sreela Das, Sushmita Mukherjee, Sampurna Singh, Rohini Pande, and Sharmishtha Basu. *Knot Ready: Lessons From India on Delaying Marriage for Girls*. Rep. International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), 2008. Web. <<http://www.icrw.org/files/publications/Knot-Ready-Lessons-from-India-on-Delaying-Marriage-for-Girls.pdf>>.

⁴³ Gupta, Sreela Das, Sushmita Mukherjee, Sampurna Singh, Rohini Pande, and Sharmishtha Basu. *Knot Ready: Lessons From India on Delaying Marriage for Girls*. Rep. International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), 2008. Web. <<http://www.icrw.org/files/publications/Knot-Ready-Lessons-from-India-on-Delaying-Marriage-for-Girls.pdf>>.

age at marriage and see this change in marriage age as an outcome rather than a central objective of the work.

A fault of this type of structure is that the problem of child marriage is being addressed as a secondary concern within separate programs for economic development, capacity building, education, and health. Therefore, NGOs that have stakes in these issues are then creating programs through a lens, which prioritizes their area of concern (financial, education, or health) as primary. This strategy undermines the success of these programs because they are limited in scope. For example, health-based NGOs will tend to structure and design their intervention based on a health-based outlook. Those NGOs focusing on educational interventions will view the problem as largely being educational in nature and will likely not consider other problems as serious. This microscopic (solve-via-association) vision that NGOs and other entities have welcomed for solving the problem of child marriage has done a significant disservice to the cause of gender justice. To accurately and fully address the issue of child marriage, interventions must abandon the microscopic view and embrace a holistic view and only devise a strategy that will incorporate and consider the multi-faceted nature of child marriage.

Health Programs

Programs focused on health are the ones that most often address child marriage in India. **Action Approach for Reduction of Early Marriage and Early Pregnancy (EMEP)** was implemented by *Mamta-Health Institute for*

Mother and Child in selected districts of Rajasthan from 2002-2005.⁴⁴ The key strategies included community mobilization and involvement of young people and religious leaders. One of the main findings of the evaluation of the program is the fact that due to religious leader involvement, there was increased support among adults for later marriage. The **Development Initiative for Supporting Healthy Adolescents (DISHA)** was implemented from 2004-2007 in the states of Bihar and Jharkhand by the *ICRW*. Its key strategies included providing access to reproductive health information and life skills education, providing youth-friendly reproductive health services, as well as livelihood training by both male and female youth, and facilitating community mobilization.⁴⁵ Another health-focused program is the “**Promoting Change in Reproductive Behavior in Bihar**” (**PRACHAR**), implemented from 2001-2004 by *Pathfinder* in selected districts of Bihar.⁴⁶ The key objectives of the program were to delay childbearing and encourage spacing.

Economic Programs

Another approach to delaying the age at marriage is an economic one: the idea of a conditional cash transfer. The “**Apni Beti Apna Dhan (ABAD)**”

⁴⁴ Gupta, Sreela Das, Sushmita Mukherjee, Sampurna Singh, Rohini Pande, and Sharmishtha Basu. *Knot Ready: Lessons From India on Delaying Marriage for Girls*. Rep. International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), 2008. Web. <<http://www.icrw.org/files/publications/Knot-Ready-Lessons-from-India-on-Delaying-Marriage-for-Girls.pdf>>.

⁴⁵ Gupta, Sreela Das, Sushmita Mukherjee, Sampurna Singh, Rohini Pande, and Sharmishtha Basu. *Knot Ready: Lessons From India on Delaying Marriage for Girls*. Rep. International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), 2008. Web. <<http://www.icrw.org/files/publications/Knot-Ready-Lessons-from-India-on-Delaying-Marriage-for-Girls.pdf>>.

⁴⁶ Gupta, Sreela Das, Sushmita Mukherjee, Sampurna Singh, Rohini Pande, and Sharmishtha Basu. *Knot Ready: Lessons From India on Delaying Marriage for Girls*. Rep. International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), 2008. Web. <<http://www.icrw.org/files/publications/Knot-Ready-Lessons-from-India-on-Delaying-Marriage-for-Girls.pdf>>.

program implemented by the Government of Haryana throughout the state from 1994-2005.⁴⁷ The ABAD program was designed to improve parents' value of their daughters by offering economic incentives. To participate, families must fall below the poverty line. If not below the poverty line, the family must come from a lower-caste background such as "Scheduled Caste" (SC) or "Other Backward Caste" (OBC). When the daughter is born, the mother receives \$11. If the daughter stays unmarried until her 18th birthday, the family receives a cash sum of \$550. If a girl receives education at least until the fifth grade, the family receives a "bonus" of \$110. If she studies up to 8th grade, the family receives an additional \$22.⁴⁸

Similarly, a **Balika Samridhhi Yojana** program was launched by the Government of India in 1997⁴⁹ with four objectives in mind: To change negative attitudes within the family and community at the time of a girl child's birth, to improve the enrollment and retention of girls in school, to raise marriage age for girls, and finally, to assist the girls in obtaining income-generating activities.⁵⁰ The program promises participating families a similar cash transfer for delayed marriage, which is payable to unmarried 18-year-old girls.

Economic incentive-based programs can be especially problematic. While

⁴⁷ Gupta, Sreela Das, Sushmita Mukherjee, Sampurna Singh, Rohini Pande, and Sharmishtha Basu. *Knot Ready: Lessons From India on Delaying Marriage for Girls*. Rep. International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), 2008. Web. <<http://www.icrw.org/files/publications/Knot-Ready-Lessons-from-India-on-Delaying-Marriage-for-Girls.pdf>>.

⁴⁸ "Apni Beti Apna Dhan." Global Savings & Social Protection Initiative (GSSP). New America Foundation, Global Assets Program, n.d. Web. <<http://gssp.newamerica.net/apni-beti-apna-dhan>>.

⁴⁹ Gupta, Sreela Das, Sushmita Mukherjee, Sampurna Singh, Rohini Pande, and Sharmishtha Basu. *Knot Ready: Lessons From India on Delaying Marriage for Girls*. Rep. International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), 2008. Web. <<http://www.icrw.org/files/publications/Knot-Ready-Lessons-from-India-on-Delaying-Marriage-for-Girls.pdf>>.

⁵⁰ "Balika Samridhi Yojana." Department of Women and Child Development, Government of India, n.d. Web. <http://wcdhry.gov.in/balika_samridhi_yojana.htm>.

many families participate and comply to delay girls' marriage until age 18, this participation will not necessarily change the attitude towards girls. Happiness will likely arise when a girl child is born because of the economic incentives that accompany that birth. Rather than changing familial and community attitudes towards girls, this program can easily fall into the trap of representing girls as income generators. True change, in fact, is not likely to come with such programs because they do not necessarily challenge (or dismantle) the patriarchal logics of caste-based family, kinship, and marriage, which form the very basis for such practices.

Educational Programs

Civil society organizations have also aimed to increase the age at marriage by creating effective alternatives with a primary focus on education. The **Kishori Shakti Yojana (KSY)**, started in 2000 by the Government of India (Department of Women & Child Development) launched a 6-month vocational and home-based skills building program at community centers for out-of-school, poor adolescent girls (ages 11-18). The program aimed to create "safe spaces" for unmarried girls, diffuse parents' fears about premarital pregnancy and generate their support for the program.

Other NGOs, like *Urmul Setu Sansthan* in Rajasthan, have also launched similar education-based interventions, which indirectly aim to increase the age at marriage by persuading the parents of girl children to keep them in school. This includes the **Balika Shivir** camp in Lunkaransar, Rajasthan.

Balika Shivar: History & Goals

BS is a program of residential camps, run by an NGO named *Urmul Setu Sansthan* with the primary aim of advancing the education of participating adolescent girls. *BS*'s immediate goal "was to support girls' acquisition of literacy skills and their participation in school. Its long-term goal was to make girls better informed about issues connected with their well-being and to foster their critical awareness of themselves vis-a-vis their communities along with a sense of personal empowerment."⁵¹ Initiated in 1998, the *shivirs* had the primary goal of educating girls up until the 5th grade. Girls who had never received an education or had dropped out before 5th grade were invited and selected to participate in the *shivirs*. Each session accommodates close to a hundred girls for a period of seven months. The subjects to be taught were Language, Mathematics, and Environmental Studies as prescribed by the state government. The objective was to allow girls to complete their education up to the 5th grade, which is considered basic education. The *shivirs* also focus on nutrition, health, art, and craft. The *shivirs* have the long-term goal of providing information on those issues that girls would have to deal with in their daily lives, like familial relationships, gender issues, caste, and religious issues. One of the desirable goals is to increase girls' confidence. Each girl who I had the privilege of speaking to was able to attest to the fact that the camp had improved their speaking skills and made them more confident.

⁵¹ "Balika Shivar: Six-month Residential Education Program for Girls." URMUL Trust, n.d. Web. <<http://www.urmul.org/?p=46>>.

In the *shivir*, girls from all castes are invited to live and study together. *Urmul's* long-term goals are “to dilute and decentralise the traditional power silos, i.e. patriarchy, male dominance and caste and class biases.”⁵² In fact, Linda Moore, a teacher in Letchworth, England, visited the Lunkaransar *BS* camp in 2005 and noticed that the camp “gives girls the opportunity to interact for the first time with girls from different economic groups and castes”⁵³ and to foster lifelong friendships regardless of caste and religion. Though research indicates that eliminating caste discrimination is a goal of the program, there are no studies that gauge exactly how much of an impact it makes. During my time at *BS*, I noticed that the program’s most radical and progressive potential was this move to eliminate caste-based discrimination. I address these observations in a more in-depth manner later on. Having already explored Dalit women’s critique of the Indian Feminist movement, *Urmul's* active work in eliminating caste discrimination can then be viewed as a radical move, even in the context of NGOs and other progressive social movements.

Before sessions begin, *Urmul* field works or *karyakarta* employees (field workers) visit the neighboring villages and talk to the parents of the girls to convince them to allow the girls to participate in the program. When the *Shivir* was first established in Lunkaransar, it was extremely difficult for the field workers to convince parents to send their girls to a faraway place, and that too, for education. Because many parents did not (and still do not) believe that girls’

⁵² "Urmul and Child Rights." URMUL Trust. URMUL, n.d. Web. 12 Apr. 2013. <http://www.urmul.org/?page_id=37>.

⁵³ Moore, Linda. "An Initiative in Girls' Education, India." *Feminenza*. *Feminenza*, 13 Apr. 2005. Web. <<http://feminenza.org/an-initiative-in-girls-education-india/>>.

education should be prioritized, it was difficult to send the girls. Because the camp has now been running in Western Rajasthan for about 14 years, it has become easier for the field workers to convince the parents to allow their daughters to participate in the camps. The camps are completely free of charge for all participants.

The long term goal of *Urmul* is “to lead underprivileged sections of the villages especially women and children towards self reliance by providing them a package of developmental services which they themselves decide on, design, implement and eventually finance that would enable them upgrade their quality of life.”⁵⁴ While the camps were initially focused on delivering education, the teachers and the administrators also indicated that a side goal of the program is to have the girls develop and grow as individuals.

The *Urmul* spokespersons have claimed that girls who have graduated from the *Balika Shivirs* have, of course improved in terms of literacy (reading and writing) and Mathematics, but also stood out among other village girls by their appearance and behavior. They appear to be neatly dressed and groomed, as a part of the curriculum focuses on personal hygiene. Another aspect of the curriculum is to teach the girls to maintain cleanliness; they learn how to pick up after themselves, sweep, and mop. The girls are also taught to show respectful behavior to their classmates and teachers. For example, during dinnertime, girls take turns to serve food to others and do not eat until everyone else is finished eating. Respect for elders is an extremely important lesson emphasized in the camp.

⁵⁴ "URMUL SETU Sansthan Lunkaransar." URMUL SETU Sansthan, n.d. Web. <<http://urmulsetusansthan.blogspot.com/>>.

Fieldwork/Empirical Research

My field research in the *BS* camp in Summer 2012 is the basis of my exploration of girls' experiences and the impact of the *BS* camp. The overarching goal of the empirical work is to provide a feminist critique and produce knowledge in a way that is attentive to the voices of girls who have been marginalized. My data is insufficient to draw general conclusions about the situation of child marriage in Rajasthan, or India as a whole. Rather, the focus is specifically on the *BS* camp in Lunkaransar. I do not suggest that my findings are similar in all parts of rural India or even in rural Rajasthan. Due to time and resource constraints, I was unable to base my study in any other part of Rajasthan. This analysis is dependent on a very specific social context and gives a meaningful space for certain voices to emerge. I do not seek to homogenize these girls' or women's rural experiences and have them be interpreted by the reader as the experience of *all* women in rural parts of India.⁵⁵ (See Mohanty, *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*).

During the week that I spent in the *Shivir* camp, I conducted four focus group discussions (FGDs) comprised of about 10-15 participants and 6 in-depth interviews (IDIs) of girls who are currently enrolled in the camp or were previously enrolled. The FGDs last between 20 minutes – 2 hours. The interviews took between 40 – 90 minutes.

All of the girls I interview and quote have at least completed one full *BS* session. The rationale behind this selection of girls/women is that having

⁵⁵ Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham: Duke UP, 2003. Print.

completed at least a full *BS* session, they are well suited to answer questions about the camp and to assess the effectiveness of the program in certain areas.

I conducted one in-depth interview with an *Urmul karyakarta*, or field officer (lasting about 25 minutes) and also an in-depth interview with the director of the *Shivir* (lasting 1 hour and 15 minutes). One focus group discussion involved five of the current teachers at the camp (1 hour).

Though all of the quotations that I use in the study are part of the FGDs or IDIs, my understanding and observations are also shaped by what I saw, the activities that I participated in, and also the informal and casual conversations that I had with people who are, to some capacity, associated with the *BS* camp. I now move to a discussion and analysis of the *BS* camp based on the weeklong on-site fieldwork.

***Urmul/Balika Shivir* Context, Curriculum, & Goals**

I had the opportunity to speak with the director and organizer of the *BS* camp in Lunkaransar, Mr. Ramesh, and the following discussion of the socio-political context and goals of *Urmul/BS* is based largely on this discussion.

Mr. Ramesh expanded on *Urmul's* activities in the nearby areas and clarified that *BS* is not, by any means, the only project that *Urmul* actively sponsors in the area. He also explained that he is currently in charge of many different projects that revolve around education, specifically quality education in government-sponsored schools, training of teachers in various subjects, and community level capacity building work.

Mr. Ramesh described a project called “Child Protection,” in which there are regular meetings held in villages through which children are made aware of their protection and rights. *Urmul* also works towards ensuring the participation of children in various community projects. One of these is *BS*, which was founded in 1998. From 1998 to 2006, the *BS* consisted of 1st to 6th grades. During that period, a total of 623 girls were educated. From 2005 to 2007, there were two 8th grade camps with 61 girls. From 2005 – 2012, there were four camps for 10th grade girls and educated a total of 131 girls. While disclosing *BS*’s annual history, the Director failed to mention that there was a three-year gap from 2008-2011. When I asked him the reason for the gap, he responded that at that time, he was pushing for an initiative that would strengthen government schools. The Director believed, at that point in time, that if he teamed up with the government, he would be strengthening the government effort. He said:

“That’s why we stopped. We were thinking about merging with the government. We restarted the *Shivirs* because we realized that the government did not offer 10-12 grade education at all. I realized that we were covering a lot of villages through our project, and therefore, soon, I resumed the *Shivir* camps. There is a great higher education gap that existed and continues to exist in the areas, and that is why we have resumed *Shivir*.”

This showed that although the program attempted to merge with government effort, the government system was just not developed enough to reach all of the girls in every rural part.

The Director described that though the *Shivir* curriculum is based on the government curriculum and seeks to teach the same objectives, the *Shivir* style of teaching is special. He believed that at both primary and secondary levels, the *Shivir* applied a higher level of teaching and learning. The *Shivir*, according to him, seeks to make learning easy for all girls by using different techniques for the same content and curriculum as the government schools. Asked to comment on his motivation to invest in and continue a program like *BS*, he responded, “There is gender inequality. We want to abolish that because girls are being left behind. We want to create a stage to motivate these girls and give them life skills that will be useful to them for the rest of their lives.”

For girls who are unable to join the *Shivir*, there is a separate vocational training program that exists. Mr. Ramesh described the *Balika Mela* (Balika Fair), which more parents are willing to send their daughters to. A five-day program that is held every alternate year, the *Balika Mela* accommodates close to 2,500 girls and gives the girls a platform to share their experiences. The fair consists of 25-30 different exhibit stalls that are organized by different agencies in the area working on social upliftment and women’s rights. The director considers the *Balika Mela* as an extremely innovative idea since it accommodates girls who are unable to participate in the longer *BS* program. He emphasized the fact that *Urmul* has a very positive reputation in the nearby areas and villages, and hence families are not so reluctant to send their girls to *Urmul*-led camps, fairs, or sessions.

Though Mr. Ramesh took great pride in the positive image that *Urmul* carries in the area, my discussions with the girls demonstrate that there is, nonetheless, sustained opposition in some families when it comes to sending girls to *BS*. Sometimes, the opposition comes directly from the girls' immediate families. Other times, it comes from other members of the community or village. Not all parents are willing to send their girls to *BS* and long-duration *Urmul* events, as evidenced by the fact that the director's need to organize short-term events like *Balika Mela*. The Director himself recognized the difficulties that arise, especially when sending teenage girls. He acknowledged that it is significantly harder to convince the parents of older girls to send their girls to a program like *BS*.

According to Mr. Ramesh, there are a lot of "improvements" in the girls upon completion of their *BS* session(s). For example, he notes that the girls learn to live more hygienically and learn to eat healthy foods. He also explains that *Shivir* has indirectly impacted the girls' age at marriage. For example, because *Shivir* is giving them a platform to study, they are able to delay their marriage. He attributes a later marriage and describes the process of education and marriage as being part of a domino theory-type relation. Participation in *BS* is making them study more than they would have otherwise, and because they are staying in school, their marriage is consequentially delayed. Mr. Ramesh did not attribute delay in marriage directly to *BS*, however. Finally, he once again emphasized the power of *BS* and *Urmul* in transforming the lives of the participating girls and creating a keen shared awareness of the importance of education.

A recurrent theme discussed by the girls as well as the *BS* coordinators and Director is the problem of government schools. At one point or another, everyone I communicated with described their frustration with the government schools or “*sarkaari*” schools. All of the respondents linked their participation with *BS* with the poor or lacking government schools in their areas. A repeated problem was that a lot of the villages did not have government schools in or near the village. Therefore, a lot of girls were unable to continue their education. Because going to private schools was expensive and required a significant commute, girls were unable to pursue their education. In the case that government schools are accessible to the girls, the facilities, infrastructure, and teaching instruction lagged far behind acceptable and tolerable standards. Many girls described that because there were not enough female teachers in government schools, their parents were reluctant to send them. They strongly believe that the teaching and instruction at *BS* is better than the teaching that they would have at government schools.

While the problem of government schools is mutually shared, one respondent currently enrolled in the *Shivir*, Ani, offered a different perspective and described her dissatisfaction with the private school system in detail. Ani described a very horrific and unsatisfying private school experience and offered a different and negative outlook of private schools:

“At private school, the teacher thought that the guys are always right, and he thought that girls were always to blame. Teachers always told me that if a guy tells me anything bad, I should not repeat it to anyone and especially

not tell my parents about it. Initially, it was nice to go to co-ed school, but later I was suffering. They just teased us, used profanity against us, and they never considered us their sisters. And my teacher didn't do anything about it at all. Nothing. One day, I decided to tell my mother about it. My mother went to the boy's house and complained to his father about it. After getting yelled at by his father, the boy came back to school and kept teasing me and tormented me for telling his father about what he was doing to me. Eventually, I was fed up and had to leave the school. It wasn't worth it...especially because I was paying money for education and receiving such horrible treatment in return. This is why I don't like private schools. At least in government schools, I think girls are respected a lot. They don't hit girls at all. The opposite was going on in private schools."

It can be concluded that there is an ongoing struggle that girls face when it comes to education, regardless of which school system they partake in. Because of their dissatisfaction with both public and private school systems, *BS* has become a superior and sensible option for these girls. At *BS*, they find a sense of community with like-minded girls and are able to study and live free-of-cost. They are given the opportunity to venture out for the first time in their lives and learn to become more independent and autonomous.

Recruitment: Challenges & Accomplishments

Kyaa Karegi Padke? Kyaa Paayegi Padke?" (What will she do by studying? What will she accomplish by studying?) –Parent of Balika Shivar Participant

Joining *BS* has not always been a completely easy task for these girls in rural Rajasthan. It has taken a lot of convincing, and in some cases, it still takes a lot to convince parents to allow their daughters to join *Shivir*. The *BS* participants, graduates, facilitators, field workers, and Director all agreed that the older a girl gets, the harder it becomes for her to leave her village and join *Shivir*. When *BS* first started, the *Urmul* field workers had to give continuous incentive for about two-three months in order to convince the parents to allow their daughters to come to the camp in Lunkaransar. The Director of *Urmul* even described how it was difficult not just to convince the parents. In fact, when the camp was first established, it was even hard to recruit people for the field officer positions because no one had faith in the organization.

It was especially hard to convince the girls' fathers to allow them to join *Shivir*. This ties in with the notion of honor and a father's strict control over his daughter's movements. Most of the girls agreed that when their parents were approached by field workers about the prospect of sending their girl(s) to the *BS* camp, their mothers were usually the first ones to agree. When the father disagreed, his reasoning was often, "*Kyaa karegi padke? Kyaa paayegi padke?*" or "What will she do or accomplish by studying?" Though there is opposition by some parents, this is not the case for all girls. It has been significantly easier for some girls to join than others. Many parents who were reluctant to send their daughters were mainly against the idea because they did not see the point of having a girl study. Because a girl eventually becomes part of her marital home, some families do not see the point of educating that girl because she will not be

contributing to their home in the long run anyway. In contrast, educating the boy in the family was a lot more important for the parents as he would be responsible for providing monetary support to the family.

When speaking with a *BS* field worker, Saroj, I was able to better understand the idea of continuation that is used by *Urmul* when recruiting. Saroj, whose job is to go into villages and recruit girls to the *Shivir*, described:

“Our main way of convincing parents is by telling them that they should continue the girl’s education because, for example, if she has already studied until the 8th grade, it makes sense to just send her to *Shivir* and have her complete 10th grade so that she may be able to gain some employment within the village like becoming an *Anganwadi* worker (day care center worker), etc. We use this continuation idea to convince the parents to send the girls to *Shivir*. I give my own example, where I am a woman and I also work. I tell them that if they educate their daughter, she will one day be able to stand on her feet. Also, if there is only one girl coming from a village, the parents will not send their daughter. If there are more girls that are also going to *Shivir*, parents are always more likely to send their daughter. So the more girls we recruit, the easier it becomes for us.”

Once a girl finishes her session, she is often able to easily convince her sister, girl cousins, or other girls in the village to go to *Shivir*. After *BS* became more established, *Urmul* started becoming more venerated in the community. Soon after, many people were more eager to send their daughters as they were able to

verify that the girls were not coming back “ruined” and were not picking up any “bad habits.” Initially, people thought that if girls were sent far away to *BS*, they would return “worse” than they were before. However, people started noticing just the opposite. They noticed that the girls were receiving just as much love and care from the camp as they did from their mothers and that they were also healthy in the camps.

One of the girls, Amrita, described how *BS* fostered in her a lifelong desire to study:

“Before coming to the camp, honestly, we had no dream. We just used to play all day and do house chores. I did not have any hopes of studying at that point. I had a younger sister who studied but I was not studying. I did not want to study. I only wanted to play at that time and did not like studying. After coming to *Shivir*, we were able to play as well as learn and study. We used to break for lunch and then classes would end around 5 p.m. and then we would do prayers and play games. We would dance, sing, play, and do other fun activities. There were so many girls and we all used to live together. We never fought and we all got along really well.”

For many girls, *BS* provided a platform for them to study. Many of the girls noted that they would not have gotten so far in their studies had it not been for their involvement in *Shivir*. One girl in particular, Rukmani, said:

“I had stopped studying in the village. If I had not come to *Shivir*, I wouldn’t have made it past the 8th grade. I liked studying and being with the rest of the girls and playing with them. I definitely wanted to study

before joining *Shivir* but the problem was that my parents were not sending me anywhere to study. In my village, we did not have any school after 8th grade.”

Results of Participating in *Balika Shivir*

Learning Appropriate Femininities

All of the girls agreed that coming to *Shivir* spurred a desire to keep studying. Apart from improving the girls’ literacy, *Shivir* also aided in improvement of their personal hygiene. One part of the curriculum was to teach girls about the bodily changes they experience during puberty and to provide them the education needed for understanding these changes and improving their hygiene accordingly. The camp also included a component that taught them how to do proper cleaning and housekeeping chores. For example, they learnt cleanliness by learning how to sweep and mop. The fact that they had learnt sanitary ways of doing these chores demonstrated an overall sense of “maturity” that the girls did not possess prior to their participation in *BS*. This change was instrumental in the community’s acceptance of the girls and the *BS* program upon their return to their villages.

Even more appreciated than the hygiene and cleanliness were the manners that the girls were taught. An important part of the curriculum was to teach girls to speak to adults in a respectful manner and to treat them with respect in general. Most of the girls mentioned that they were rowdy and poorly behaved prior to the

Shivir. They often raised their voice and were not respectful to adults. The teachers at *Shivir* taught them good manners and how to communicate respectfully with adults, ensuring that respect always remains present in their communication. When the girls went back to their communities after completing the *Shivir* session, this was something that almost everyone noticed. This change is something that the girls themselves take a lot of pride in and that the village community greatly appreciates. Many of the girls say that because the community noticed this change in them, people who were initially opposed to sending their daughters to *Shivir* became more likely to do so, in hopes that their daughters would learn the same good manners, as well.

Changing Beliefs & Building Confidence

“Before coming to Shivir, I always thought, what’s in my mind? I always thought my mind was empty. But after coming to Shivir, I realized that I do have a mind and that is quite open. And that I do have an ability to think.” –Amrita

Another common trend that all of the girls mentioned about *Shivir* was the fact that it helped develop a confidence that they never had before. For example, almost all of the girls said that before the *Shivir*, they were too shy to ever speak out. However, the teachers at *BS* ensure that girls speak out in class to answer questions and also to ask questions when they have any. One of the girls, Jamuna, described this in particular. She said:

“After coming to Shivir, I learned to love my friends and to love myself. I learned how important it is to speak. In fact, you can say that I never even knew how to speak before. I learned how to speak in Shivir. After

coming to *Shivir*, I saw other girls speaking so then I learned from them. Now, I have no reluctance or nervousness when I speak in class and with my friends.”

The only girl who mentioned that *Shivir* changed her way of thinking and her thought process entirely was Amrita. The most formally educated of all the girls, Amrita provided insight into how her beliefs and thoughts changed after *Shivir*. She described that after *Shivir*, she was able to continue her studies and the continuation of her studies led her to believe that girls and boys can share a friendship, and that it is not a bad thing to talk to boys. She said:

“Village people think that if a girl talks to a guy, it is a bad thing and that it means the girl is bad. However, I started thinking differently and now I believe that it is okay for a girl and a boy to be friends. If we are in class together, it is okay to take help from both a girl and a boy. If there is a boy who is a good friend of a girl’s, there is nothing wrong with this. This changed after I learned and became more educated. Now I wish to just study, study, and study.”

Amrita also described how participating in *Shivir* allowed her to speak out:

“Before, I used to be nervous and hesitant to ask any questions. Now, I ask my teachers to further explain something if I fail to understand it. From the beginning, I have been talkative but after coming to *Shivir*, I have noticed this a lot more. Before, when I thought something, it would just stay inside. But after coming to *Shivir*, I was able to explain my thoughts and feelings more. Before coming to *Shivir*, I always thought, what’s in

my mind? I always thought my mind was empty. But after coming to *Shivir*, I realized that I do have a mind that is quite open. And that I do have an ability to think.”

Eliminating Caste- & Gender-Based Discriminations

“Our blood is the same. Our food is the same. This earth is the same. Then why discriminate? –Amrita

The concept or idea of *Urmul* came into being and evolved when people started noticing that girls were unable to study because of the absence of government schools or the poor environment in village schools. Seeing that girls are knowledgeable and intelligent but do not have the opportunity to study led to the formation of the ten-month *BS* camp. *Urmul* had the goal of ensuring that girls between the ages of 12 and 18, previously excluded from the educational system, would now have the chance to pursue their education. *Urmul* decided to find these girls from the surrounding villages and was able to recruit them into the camps in order to give them a chance to study and fulfill their educational advancement.

Apart from this goal of delivering education, *Urmul* also seeks to eliminate caste-based discrimination. By inviting girls of all castes into the organization and camp, *Urmul* is able to facilitate communication and ease intermingling between castes that normally did not interact.

The *BS* camp makes sure that all girls, regardless of their caste and class, mingle with each other and participate in intimate activities, such as eating together, playing together, studying together, singing together, dancing together,

and sleeping together. Caste politics in India are strongly connected with ideas of food and the purity of food. Touch is central to how caste hierarchies are enacted: The touch of lower-caste people has the capacity to “pollute.” For example, food that is served by lower castes to higher castes has historically carried with it a sense of impurity and “dirtiness.” Therefore, *Balika Shivar*’s arrangement of about 2-3 girls eating from one plate, coupled with the requirement that different girls take turns on a weekly basis to serve the food to other classmates fosters a special solidarity, unity, and respect amongst the girls. In this arrangement, every girl, regardless of her caste, then serves food to her other classmates. *Balika Shivar* actively breaks the codes and hierarchies associated with the practice of the caste system.

A few of the girls mentioned that their experience at *BS* made them realize how salient of an issue caste is within their own villages. They also spoke about the fact that engaging in daily activities at *BS* with girls from different castes made them realize that ultimately, people are just people. One participant, Amrita said:

“I am very much against untouchability and treating lower caste people differently. I learned by playing with all of the other girls at *BS* that we are really all the same. There is a specific caste in our village that buries animals. When an animal dies, they cut its skin and take the skin. Then they bury the animal. People used to discriminate against this group even more. When I heard about it, I was extremely upset and I convinced my dad that he has to do something about us. So then we all united and we

said that people should not discriminate. We got a lot of people together to tell the higher castes that they should not discriminate against this caste or any SC/ST caste. I had a keen desire to end this. Now, in our village, everyone talks to everyone. Our blood is the same. Our food is the same. This earth is the same. Then why discriminate?"

Though Amrita does not necessarily challenge the caste system as an institution, it is apparent that her experience at *BS* at least taught her to be aware of caste-based discrimination when it happens. She was not only aware, but was insistent that caste relations in her village change. Another girl, Bathula, when asked about whether the camp influenced her outlook on caste, responded:

"Of course it did. It was the first time that I had the chance to play with girls from all castes. I come from a lower caste. I thought coming to *Shivir* would be very bad for me because maybe some upper caste girls will feel they are better than me and would not include me in their games and dances. But when I came here, I realized that no one could take anyone out of her group. Everyone does everything together here. Maybe in the beginning I noticed that some girls were a little mean to me or hostile. But by the end, everyone was the same...one of the upper caste girls in our village who did *Shivir* a few years ago has also learnt to love people of all castes. When her sister was getting married, it was going to be a love marriage and the boy was from a lower caste. There was a lot of talk in our village about the love marriage. Everyone was saying bad things. But that girl made sure that her sister was able to marry the boy

she loved. So there are small things like that that are happening in our communities these days.”

This is demonstrative of the fact that *Shivir* participants are learning the salience of caste in village issues. They realize that the system is rather oppressive. Bathula’s words illustrate that participation in *BS* leads to caste awareness and caste tolerance, and even goes as far as impacting inter-caste or “love” marriages.

The camp also works, to a certain extent, to dismantle gender norms. In this respect, sports play a major role. One part of the *BS* curriculum is the idea of playing sports to stay fit and to build companionship and sportsmanship. It is important to note, however, that the camp allows and encourages the girls to play sports that have normally been seen as being “male sports.” By playing sports like *cricket* and *kabaddi*, which are traditionally played by boys and men, the camp and the girls are changing their views on accepted gender-appropriate behavior.

Community building and fostering relationships is a major goal of the program. Girls who come from different backgrounds are forced to put aside their differences, work together and respect each other. Certain activities that are conducted in the evenings particularly address this idea. For example, in the evenings, *Shivir* girls would all meet on the terrace and sing prayers together in a large circle. They would then sing other local songs and a few of the girls would dance. They also exercise together and play games daily to improve their physical health.

Post-*Shivir* Community-Based Challenges

Prioritizing Boys' Education

“There is just no trust placed on girls...they think that the girl will become spoiled. The boy can go as far away to study as needed. A boy can do anything, but he will never become spoiled.” –Dropati

The discussions showed a repetitive trend. The boys in families were educated more because they were seen as more worthy of receiving education. First of all, because boys are seen as belonging to the same family for the rest of their lives, parents deem it more sensible to educate them, as the education would lead to employment and ultimately to wealth, of which the parents would be clear beneficiaries.

Apart from this, ideas of honor were closely and systematically tied with girls' inability to leave the home and become educated. All of the girls complained about the fact that because their brothers were incapable of becoming “spoilt” and were trusted more to preserve the family honor, they were allowed to venture about freely and obtain education in places outside of the village. Because the girl's honor is closely tied with familial honor and because she is not trusted, she usually has a tough time leaving the home and village. The girls are expected to perform household work and chores with perfection. There is a bigger burden on the mothers to make sure that their daughters are learning these chores so that they are ready to move into their marital home. The girls currently enrolled in the camps explained that even though *Urmul* is a trusted, well-known, and appreciated organization in their area, there are still families who refuse to

send their daughters far away. Many of the families do not trust their daughters and do not trust the camp.

If a girl fails in school, irrespective of whether she fails just one subject or the whole school year, the parents feel discouraged and force the girls to drop out. They start believing that the girl will continue to fail just because she has failed once. The parents start believing that education is pointless for the girl, as she will anyways not require it when she moves to her marital home.

Attitudes towards Early Marriage in Rajasthani Villages

When asked why early marriage happens in their communities, most of the respondents said that it used to happen in the old days because of religion but today, it tends to happen because of financial issues, even though it may not have been the parents' intention to get the girl married. For example, in a focus-group discussion, Rukmani responded:

“Sometimes, we just have a good season. The crops are growing well. If the parents are having a good season, then they get the daughter married off because they're making more money. There's no guarantee that the next season will be good, too. Because they're making more money, it makes sense. As you know, the girl's family not only has to carry all the costs of the marriage but also has to pay dowry to the boy's family. So it makes a lot of sense to get her married like that.”

The respondents also described how early marriage is a product of daughter-exchange within families. For example, if a family has to marry their sons, they will marry their daughters in the same family in exchange of daughters from that family. To establish and facilitate this marital relationship, the family will marry their daughters regardless of their age because they have to get their sons married. Ani, one of the 17-year old respondents described:

“Like when my brother gets married, my marriage will happen then also. We will need to marry the brothers of the girls who our brothers marry. Our brothers won’t get those girls if we don’t marry their brothers in return. It’s hard for boys to find girls. Whatever house my brother gets married in, my sister and I have to get married in the same home. It’s an exchange. If we don’t give ourselves to that family, then our brothers won’t find any wives.”

Sometimes, because of financial constraints, the family tends to marry all the daughters in one ceremony. For example, one of the current *BS* student, Panchi, described this situation in her own family. She has four sisters that got married at ages 21, 19, 17, and 15 all at the same time in one family. She and her younger sister were spared because they were extremely young to be married.

Lack of Agency & Decision-Making Power

“Ladki ko to mauka hi nahi dete hai sochne ke liye, bas shaadi kar dete hai.”
(They don’t even give a girl the chance to think about marriage...they just marry her just like that”) -Para

Most of the girls/women described that they lack agency and power to ever go against their parents' wishes when it comes to their marriage. They are not allowed to suggest boys, refuse boys, ask for delay in marriage, or disagree with any plans that their parents make regarding their wedding. The women described that some women do speak out against their marriage, but they estimate that only 2 out of a 100 women in their village would do speak out against a marriage or any aspects of the marriage. Rukmani explained, "When the girl is really adamant on not marrying a man, then her family will actually hear them because they can't really force her. But, the thing is, the girl will only speak up when she's sure that her family will listen to her."

According to the women, to refuse or protest against their marriage would be an insult to their parents. When asked whether the girls have the power to even describe the type of boy that they wish for, the girls responded that this would be unacceptable in their villages. They believe that suggesting certain types of boys to their parents would be insulting, as their parents would be offended that they do not trust their judgment. One of the respondents, Para, said that if they revealed their "perfect type" to their parents, then the following would happen: "Our parents will say that why are you telling us what you want? We have given you birth, of course we will see the family and make sure it is a good family. We do not want you to go into a bad family! We want the best for you."

Despite agreeing that they are not allowed to speak out regarding the marriage, all of the unmarried respondents agreed that they did not feel ready for

marriage. They were keen on acquiring more education. Panchi described how she did not feel ready for childbearing:

“We want to study. We want education. We don’t feel ready. We don’t want kids right now and we know that right after marriage we will need to have children. In the marital home, we have to listen to everyone. We have to listen to the mother-in-law and put up with anything we’re told. We need to bear anything they tell us.”

All of the *BS* girls were aware of the fact that the child marriage law is set to age 18 and age 21 for girls and boys respectively. However, the girls disagreed with the law and felt that the age of 18 was too early for girls to marry. They felt that they would feel ready to marry only after age 21. This demonstrates that the law in place does not reflect the true desires or feelings of girls. Rather, the law can do a significant disservice to the issue of child marriage. Ani described:

“A girl should be educated before marriage. There should be a government law increasing the marriageable age of girl from 18 to at least 21. For example, I know that I am 17 now and next year I will turn 18. My parents are already looking for boys that can marry me. When I turn 18, I will inevitably have to get married. The law doesn’t save me then!”

This indicates that the law can work to enable and facilitate, rather than discourage, the marriage of young girls who do not feel ready to get married.

Failure of Law Enforcement to Eliminate Child Marriage

The respondents described that most of the people in their village are, in fact, aware of the marriage laws and minimum ages for marriage. However, people do not always abide by the rules and regulations. For example, many girls/women gave examples from their villages in which families were marrying girls as young as even a year old. There are times that police officers hear of underage marriages and when they come on site, the parents often bribe them to keep quiet and allow the marriage to take place.

In other cases, the parents hide the marriage. For example, they cover up the marriage by having two eligible marriage-aged people marry and during the same ceremony, conduct other underage marriages discreetly. These are covered up, however, by the other marriage that is taking place. During a focus-group discussion, the women agreed that there are also many cases in which the villagers do not tell anyone what is going on and keep the underage marriage a secret so that no one is able to find out about it and report the family to law enforcement.

Son Preference

“Agar bhaiyya nahi hoga to raakhi kisko bandhenge?” (If we don’t have a brother, then on whose hand will we tie a Rakhi?⁵⁶) -Ani

“Jab mujhe ladki hui to meri saans ne bola ki maine patthar ko janam diya.” (When I had a girl, my mother-in-law told me that I gave birth to a rock.” -Indra

⁵⁶ Raksha Bandhan, also abbreviated to Rakhi, is a Hindu festival that celebrates brotherhood and love. Sisters tie a *rakhi* around their brothers’ wrists to celebrate their relationship. A “rakhi” a bracelet made of interwoven red and gold threads. When a woman ties a rakhi around the hand of her brother, it shows her love for him and, in return, it becomes obligatory for him to honor his religious duty and protect her for the rest of their life.

When asked whether married women face pressure to have children, they all responded in the affirmative. They also responded that they face pressure from their in-laws (especially the mother-in-law) to not only have children but to have boys. The girls/women said that every family must have at least one boy. They are not allowed to obtain tubal sterilization surgery until they have at least one boy. One of the respondents, Laxmi, chimed in to mention how her sister has had eleven girls so far but is still expected to reproduce until she has a boy.

The girls themselves reproduce the idea that it is necessary to have brothers. They asked me directly, “Agar bhaiyya nahi hoga to raakhi kisko bandhenge?” (If we don’t have a brother, then on whose hand will we tie a Rakhi⁵⁷?). This describes how the girls, despite having dreams of their own, still slip into dominant logics and feel the need to have brothers in order to have a natural family.

Married women described the pressure they felt within their marital homes to have sons. The women even experienced considerable violence and were ostracized when they gave birth to girl children. For example, Indra, one of the teachers, described that boys are given more love. When she had a girl, her husband’s family asked, “What have you done? Who will pay for her?” There is an ongoing idea in her community that having girls is a serious burden, as there would be increased wedding expenses.

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There were, however, some women who described that their villages were different. They described that in their circumstances, when girls are born, there are celebrations and feasts. Not all places mourn the birth of girls. This is important to note because it reveals the complexities and different landscapes of the various communities in rural Rajasthan.

Community as a Site of Contradictions & Complexities

Throughout my discussions with the girls and women, I realized that the idea of community is an extremely complex one. It produces many contradictory results. For example, there were many times that I realized how community has the potential to create meaningful change. For example, the girls described that there existed a “*Bal Manch*,” which is a group of girls who seek to improve their situation in their respective villages. A large portion of this group consists of girls who previously participated in *BS*. Their goal was to solve the problems that girls were facing within their community. Seeing the solidarity that can be built through such an organization indicates that community-based interventions such as *Bal Manch* really do have the possibility of creating social change.

However, there is also a different side to the idea of community that produces complex issues and does a disservice to the idea of creating change. A recurrent idea was that the girls’ parents were highly influenced by what the community and members of society said when it came to matters that involved the girls. For example, community-wide acceptance and respect for *BS* can prove to be beneficial, as it would increase the chances of girls being able to participate in

the program. However, if the community was opposed or critical of girls leaving the home to be educated, this was a significant barrier and produced a considerable challenge for girls who wished to participate in *BS* or continue education elsewhere. All of the girls mentioned that what the community members thought or believed was very important to their parents. The community also influenced marriage norms, which inevitably impacted their age at marriage. A primary reason that the girls' parents started thinking about their daughters' marriage was the fact that people in society were insistent about the need for other families' daughter(s) to get married. If the daughter is eighteen years old and is not married, many neighbors start gossiping and insulting the family. For example, one of the women described that neighbors are quick to ask why the family's daughter(s) has/have not been married. They say things like, "*Tumhare pita kya tumhe puri zindagi saath hi rakhenge?*" (Will your dad just keep you with him for the rest of his life?). Therefore, community can prove to be both a significant enabler of positive change as well as a sizable roadblock to gender equity for girls and women.

Balika Shivar: Conclusions, Reflections, & Futures

I initiated the research because I wanted to explore the *BS* program in general with a particular objective of exploring if and how it leads to increased age at marriage. I soon realized, however, that this is more of an indirect outcome that may result from the *BS* training but can also be attributed to other factors that

I was not fully able to explore due to the time and resource constraints that this study faced.

Though I was not particularly able to fully understand whether and to what extent the camp was able to influence the age at marriage, I did understand the complexities that are at play when trying to address this question. The issue emerged as one that is not easy to decipher. It was made clear to me through my visit that trying to assess if and how the camp plays a role in this respect is tough because there are other factors that also have the potential to shape this. For example, as mentioned, the specific composition and level of conservativeness varies village by village, and this difference can, in fact, be indicative of when the girl gets married. The girls' family histories, number of siblings, financial situations, and level of attachment to their parents and family are also very significant in determining their age at marriage. With so many other factors playing such a significant role in the scenario, gauging *if* and *how BS* influences child marriage then becomes a difficult endeavor.

Based on this in-depth, albeit very brief glimpse into *BS* in Lunkaransar, Rajasthan, I believe I can draw some preliminary conclusions and make a few recommendations. *BS's* intervention proves extremely useful in building self-esteem and improving the girl's communication abilities. Almost all of the girls started the camp in a state of hesitancy. Their classroom environments along with the extracurricular and supplementary activities have helped the girls reach a comfortable state in communication and solidarity that works through caste differences.

However, like other organizations that attempt to do gender-justice work, *BS* contains contradictions that work against *Urmul's* goal of eradicating child marriage and goal of elevating the status of girls in society. One of the contradictions that emerged was that the program instilled in the girls certain mannerisms and behavioral traits focused on giving respect to elders. Being bound by the necessity to respect others can be seen as a positive quality but respect in this context can also be understood as obedience (appropriate feminine behavior), and thus work against the idea of having any agency to disagree. Embracing the logic of respect for elders can thus suppress any opposition that girls may have. For example, girls who are taught to respect the elders in their village may then be reluctant to speak out if they are being married at a younger age. The logic of respecting elders may then keep the girl from questioning the systems of oppression that keep her imprisoned. By complying with certain events merely out of respect for elders, the girl may end up reifying and upholding the system rather than challenging it.

Over the years, *Urmul* has been successful in accumulating a considerable amount of veneration and legitimacy. According to the *Urmul* staff and also the community members in the village, the *BS* girls return to the village “better” than they were before. They are observed as being well behaved, well spoken, respectful, hygienic, sanitary, and willing to participate in more household chores. This idea of returning to the village as “better,” upholds the prescribed feminine roles. Feminine expectations are thus protected by the organization and unchallenged by the *BS* participants. This can be seen as one of the most

influential results of the program and has unquestionably contributed to the program's success, popularity, acceptance, and positive perception in the nearby villages.

I have stressed here that one of *Urmul's* organizational goals is to eradicate child marriage. However, *BS* and *Urmul* employees have been known to arrange marriages for their girl children before the marriageable age of 18. Ani Sen, a 17-year-old current participant of the *Shivir* specifically mentioned that *Urmul* cannot help them with marriage issues, but she does wish that it would be able to extend her marriage age. She also pointed out the contradiction that two girls whose parents are field workers and/or organizers with *Urmul* have themselves married their daughters before the age of 18.

Therefore, it was made quite apparent through my visit that the problem of education as determining the age at marriage is not always straightforward. The "Education as Savior" approach is complicated by other factors. Regardless of these complications, NGOs, governmental entities, and policymakers have continued viewing education as all conquering. They view education as a straightforward solution when attempting to address child marriage.

What I noticed during my time at *BS* has informed and changed my understanding of the camp and its potentials. The camp has given the girls a platform and space to find their voices and challenge caste-based discrimination, which has long been a part of their social interactions with others. *Balika Shivir* has radically ensured that the space is one whereby girls see each other not as unmarked by caste but, rather, as human beings in spite of caste differences.

Suggestions for Further Research

As previously stated, my research does not comprehensively cover all aspects of *BS*. Due to time constraints, I was unable to do a more in-depth study with a large enough sample size to produce more generalizable data. I suggest additional firsthand empirical research at *BS* for which the researcher stays for an extended period of time and undertakes research that focuses on the difference in attitudes, beliefs, and thoughts of those *BS* participants based on the number of sessions they participated in. For example, some of the *BS* participants were part of the *Shivir* for 1 session, some for 2 sessions, and some were part of the *Shivir* for 3+ sessions. Perhaps the period of immersion and participation in *BS* could demonstrate a change in the girls' attitudes based on number of sessions attended.

I also urge further research in this realm to not only cover the Lunkaransar *BS* camp but also other *BS* facilities in other areas of Rajasthan. The director, Mr. Ramesh, had mentioned that there are other *BS* camps that exist apart from the one at Lunkaransar. Perhaps conducting similar research in those camps can produce valuable information regarding the success of the program and which factors may or may not be responsible, in varying degrees, for the program's success. Additionally, a specific tracing of where exactly most girls go after completing *BS* session(s) would be useful in assessing whether the program results in a long-term commitment to education.

On a broader level, research can also prove useful if conducted in other non-*Urmul* affiliated residential camps and even those initiatives which are non-

residential. Because education is often seen as the single largest determinant of girls' age at marriage, a study of similar residential and non-residential educational initiatives can inform the involved sectors of the success of these programs. Studies could demonstrate whether the concept of a residential camp actually proves more effective in addressing the issues. Finally, a more in-depth exploration of the curricula at such facilities would be advantageous, especially when the focus is on crafting specific strategies that challenge the practice of child marriage, and more specifically, gender inequity in education.

Policy Implications

I have demonstrated (in the initial section, which provides a review of programs focused on eliminating child marriage) that the current programs that are in place, whether government-sponsored or non-government-sponsored fall victim to a logic that separates different facets of a problem rather than acknowledging the existence and importance of all of the factors and interweaving them into an all-encompassing strategy. This approach is not holistic enough to account for all the different aspects and complications that arise with child marriage. Separating programs based on different intervening strategies (like health, economic, education) does a disservice to the overall goal of eliminating the practice of child marriage. Child marriage is multifaceted and arises not because of one factor or the other, but rather, because of a combination of multiple factors. Similarly, child marriage comes with a myriad of consequences that cross all borders: economic, educational, and health.

Policymakers and program designers are currently using a pop-bead model to address child marriage, where a separate pop-bead represents a different aspect of the problem, and the “significance of each part is unaffected by the other parts.”⁵⁸ There is no room for beads then to overlap or to represent more than one issue. The idea of multiplicity in experience and strategies addressing discrimination is erased with this logic.

Too often, organizations or systems that are engaged in an area of development look at a particular issue too narrowly. Only one lens is applied when deconstructing the issue, thereby implying that only that lens is present or most salient. I urge decision-makers to be cognizant of the “big picture.” Perhaps organizations that are focused on or have expertise in a certain area should all convene prior to designing such costly, yet exclusive, interventions so as to make these interventions more inclusive of all of the associated problems.

Though this paper specifically focuses on the issue of child marriage and gender equity in education, the problem is much wider. It is one that touches on all aspects of gender justice, and is just as pertinent in Western societies. An ongoing feminist struggle focuses on the “whole picture” and abandons microscopic perspectives and readings of social issues. Those advocating for and/or trying to address feminist issues, whether this be on the local, state, or international level, must then be aware of the interweaving of gender, caste, class, and religion in Indian feminist movements and must respond in a way that is conscious of these goals and intricacies that surround feminist issues.

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Summary of Capstone Project

In October 2012, Malala Yousafzai, a 15-year-old Pakistani advocate of girls' education, was singled out by Taliban gunmen and shot in the head and neck. Malala's failed assassination attempt and the worldwide impact it had confirms that education for girls, (and its connection to child marriage) is a key issue for ensuring gender justice in the South Asian context. . For years, education has been considered a primary indicator of development and progress in all societies. In many cultures, the education of girls and women was seen as a luxury. This lack of education has contributed greatly to the practice of child marriage in India. Existing particularly but not solely in the rural areas of India, child marriage proves a serious challenge to girls' education. In fact, scholarship on this topic indicates education is a strong deterrent and/or the single largest deterrent of child marriage. Following this logic, NGOs and policymakers in India have designed education-based interventions to eliminate child marriage in the country.

In this paper, I explore *Balika Shivar*, an adolescent girls' camp located in rural Rajasthan (a state in Western India). I had the opportunity to visit the camp in July of 2012 and this Capstone project focuses specifically on my visit to the camp. The conversations I engaged in have contributed to this paper, which, by applying a feminist methodology, seeks to incorporate the voices of girls who are often excluded from research and in knowledge production. These conversations with the girls have given me a very valuable insight about the *Balika Shivar*

program and have resulted in an exploration of the benefits and drawbacks of the program.

This paper has also demonstrated child marriage as a complicated and multi-faceted problem that cannot have straightforward approaches, such as those currently being implemented by the NGO community and the Government of India. Consequently, the paper will end with recommendations to decision-makers who have the power to eradicate child marriage in the country.