

Pinjra Tod Kar Education - A way out

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Neha: Humare community mein, ladkiyon ko padhne nahi dete, zyadatar ghar me betha dete hai, aur child marriage kara dete hai. Ghar pe ich rahete hai sare ladkiyan, ghar ke bahar nahi nikalna, aise soch hai inn logo ki.

This is 18 year old Neha from Hassan Sagar in Hyderabad.

Neha: Bachpan mein, school jate the, khelte the, kisi se nahi puchte the. Bahar nikal jate the, kahi bhi chale jate the.

She continued to stay in school with grave difficulty. In a poor household, education of a girl is always the first thing that is sacrificed.

Padma Priya (Host): Hi I am Padma Priya, Editor of Suno India and host of Pinjra Tod Kar. This podcast is conceived and produced by Goethe-Zentrum Hyderabad with the support of Suno-India and Bol-Hyderabad. In this episode we talk about how educating a girl child is one of the ways to empower them & help them to become independent. While many of us who are listening to this episode may have taken access to education as a given, for many in India, it still remains a luxury. According to UNICEF, More than 50 percent of girls fail to enroll in school & those that do are likely to drop out by the age of 12. Statistics also revealed 27% of girls in India are married before their 18th birthday and 53% of girls in the age group of 5 to 9 years are illiterate. In this episode, I sat down with Neha and Afreen who work at Shaheen who told me about their attempts to be educated to secure their future. You will also hear from noted child rights activists Dr. Shantha Sinha, Founder secretary of MV Foundation and Padma Shri awardee.

Neha's story began when she was barely 11 years old and in her sixth standard. Like others in her community, Neha too was forced to drop out of school so that she could be married at an early age.

Neha: Mai pehle school me sixth class me thi, hamare ghar mein school drop kara dete. School drop karne ke baad, main boli me ghar me baith kar kya karu, kuch skills toh bhi seekh leti hoon. Shaheen hum log ke ghar pe paas ich tha, Shaheen centre, toh main mehendi seekhne ke liye aayi thi. Mehendi seekhe, aur uske saath saath yahan pe jo trainings hote the, education pe, aur child marriage pe, wo sab merko malumaat hua. Toh mera education drop ho gaya tha, main yahan Shaheen se aane ke baad, mera education continue kari. Main open se 10th ka exams di. Humare ghar pe kitne ki baar, do-teen baar meri child marriage kara dena, matlab ghar me sab log samaj liye the child marriage karana. Mai inn logo ko ghar mein samjhaye, child marriage nahi karna. Child marriage karna toh

matlab ladki ki umar kum rehti aur uske paas education nahi hai, uske paas koi tareekath nahi rehta. Abhi wo bohot choti rehti, uske khelne-khoodne ki umar rehti. Hum log ke paas gender discrimination bhi bohot hota tha. Wo uske barein me bhi samjhaye main, discrimination nahi karna, ladki ladka dono barabar hai. Agar ladke ko padha rahe toh ladke ko bhi, nahi, ladke ko padha rahe toh ladki ko bhi padhana chahiye. Ladko ko bagair puche bahar bhej dete, kahi bhi jana hai toh bhejte, shopping pe bhejte. Lekin ladkiyon ko nahi bhejte. Main hum log ke ghar mein wo sab discrimination khatam kari.

This confidence to take on this discrimination didn't develop overnight in Neha.

Host: Aapne khatam kiya? Kitna time laga aapko apne saath bhaiyon ko, papa ko, sab ko samjhane mein?

Neha: Bohot time laga. Pehle toh bolte the ye sab, aise baatan kahan se seekh rahe tum, kaun seekhate tumare ko ye baatan, galat hai, aisa bolte the lekin main haar nahi maani, hamesha un logo ko roz samjhate gayi.

Host: Toh aap ko ye kahan se aaya ki mujhe karna hi hai abhi padhai khatam karna hi hai, mujhe shaadi nahi karna hai. Kahan seekha ye sab aapne?

Neha: Shaheen se.

Host: Shaheen se hi.

Neha: Shaheen me himmat dilate apan ko. Aage padhna aur apne pairon pe teherna.

Host: Kabhi darr nahi laga aapko? Itne saare bhaiyon ko aur papa ko?

Neha: Pehle lagta tha, abh nahi lagta.

Host: Abhi Nahi lagta. Abhi kya bolte hai, papa aur ghar me sab bahi log kya bolte hai abhi?

Neha: Abhi bolte hai jahan tak padhna hai, padho bolte.

Host: Bolte hain, abhi? Abhi aapne kahan tak padha hai?

Neha: Mera 10th main paper ruk gaya, 10th ke paper diye, abhi aage continue karna hai.

Host: Kya karna hai aapko aage?

Neha: Merko doctor banna hai.

Neha's story of fighting against all odds and ensuring she didn't become a victim of her circumstances and another number in the never-ending social evil of child marriage is unique and is among those which has a happy ending. But not every child is so lucky. Dr Shantha Sinha, the founder secretary of MV Foundation has been an ardent supporter of child rights. It was in 1991 that she first came face to face with the gaps in child rights including challenges in access to education for girl children. We spoke about what factors lead to child

marriage, the law surrounding it and how lack of schools is actually a big factor for child marriages.

Shantha Sinha: The last two decades we have been able to reach out to some hundreds and thousands of children and got over a million children from out of work and into Schools. All children out of school should be seen as child labor that's how so we began and I think we have pioneered here the definition of child labor as we out of school. Right now we are working on the issue of adolescence girls and on the issue of child marriage, gender discrimination, gender violence sexual abuse because when we took and put one million children into school we found that girls usually dropped out while boys continued till they finished higher education. So, in the last six or seven years we decided to focus on girl children and our learning a lot about the challenges girls face in surviving in a society with dignity in surviving in the education system and in combating patriarchy and gender violence.

Host: Mam like you just mentioned children especially, girls also seem to drop out also because of the issue of child marriage. Recent data by UNICEF also shows that in terms of absolute number India still remains one of the highest places where child marriage takes place. Could you give us a bit of insight into what are some of the challenges facing India as a society in combating social evil of child marriage?

Shantha Sinha: This is at several levels I think I would first of all point out the issue of patriarchy and from the time girl is born she is unwanted, unwelcomed and not celebrated at all so, you know she comes into a hostile society and a hostile world and she faces this hostility all through her life, not in such an exclusive form but certainly it is pervasive and it is quite subtle she is made to do domestic work and boys are preferred over girls she has to wait till everybody eats all women have to wait till they get their turn, they do the domestic chores they have constantly being daunted for talking to boys, for going on to the public, to the bazaar alone so in a way she has been given a message that look we are here to control you the family controls you, the school controls you and the society controls you and you have to submit yourself you can't question so that form of gender and patriarchy gender patriarchy I would think is one important reason. The second reason I would think is that there are just not enough schools you know now the statistic shows children somehow girls and boys are able to continue schools till class 8 after which, children are not in school you know and basically girls drop out very fast while boys go into private schools the families are not willing to pay fees for the girls and they come up with an excuse that there are not enough schools or the distance is just too large so the girls can't travel but I think this is a double standard. Sometimes, they walk 6 to 7 kilometers to the next village to do agriculture work, then they don't talk about distance and then even traffic and send out of villages and sometimes they are out of the country then the distance doesn't come they don't talk about distance somewhere I think the argument of keeping the child the girls under control keeps them out of school its the issue of or this is unsafe for a girl, it is insecure for a girl she cannot go out but is it not unsafe for her to go into a cotton seed

farm? Travel some hundred kilometers why is it that then such argument are not made then, you know but then you make this issue of safety and security where the girl has to go just 5 kilometers to a high school I would think that the argument of safety and security, argument of restricting mobility on the girls in the name of safety and security is an argument to control girls and if the family so desired then, I think they would support a girls education. But if the girl cannot fight because there are just not enough schools for her to say no no I will go and study. If she even embarks on a journey to study, where are the schools? Where are the schools that are gender sensitive? So I would think of it as patriarchy, gender violence, that lakhs of schools arguments of safety and security that control women. These are some of the issues that are serious issues that keep girls from dropping out into submission.

Host: What do you think of the existing child marriage laws? Do you think they are strong enough to prevent child marriage?

Shantha Sinha: The Child Marriage Act does not annul the child marriage totally, right. You can stop a child marriage using the child marriage act. The child marriage provisional officer can come and stop the child marriage, criminalize all those who have aided and abetted the marriage. But once he is unable to stop the marriage, the marriage gets consummated. The girl is, from then onwards, a victim of all kinds of abuse: sexual abuse, violence, domestic work, and insults, humiliation, doting. She really doesn't have a mind. Nobody really thinks that she can have her own mind. So I would think that the Child Marriage Act is flawed because it does not make the child marriage totally void. Under the law the girl will have to exercise some agency, if she is under 18 years of age, to say that I don't want to get married. Go to the district magistrate to get the marriage annulled. Even adult women can't do that. How do you imagine a 12-year-old or a 13-year-old girl or 14 year old to get support from family or from anyone to reach to the district magistrate and ask for annulment. I would think that it's totally flawed. The other reason why I think it is flawed is because it does not give responsibility, any kind of responsibility to the state to protect the girl, or talks about prevention. There's nothing of that sort. And there is nothing of that sort to get it annulled. The responsibility to take care of the child is with the marital family or the natal family to take care of the woman when she seeks a divorce. This is what happens when a woman, an adult woman seeks a divorce. But here, both families are poor and she is just a child. Somewhere the state should take the responsibility for rescuing her, for rehabilitating her, for giving her education. The state is nowhere in the picture of the Child Marriage Act. I think it is totally flawed. I believe very strongly that the child marriage should be nullified and they shall not make any excuses of tradition, culture, poverty, whatever. State has to take responsibility for the child and do its best for her present and future.

Host: Do you know of any countries that have implemented the Child Marriage Prevention Act or any countries have succeeded in combating child marriage?

Shantha Sinha: It is a known fact that if you have a girl child in an education stream, where whether she is in school or whether she is in a vocational training institution, where she is

protected till she is 18 years of age, that is the best antidote to child marriage. It's not so much as child marriage act but the presence of a girl in school where she can aspire for education and using her aspiration for education has a sound footing to combat the pressure of marriage. She can say look I want to study, I want to do higher education, I want to go beyond higher education. So without education, she is more vulnerable she is in a labor force. In spite of the fact that there is a child marriage act, there had never been as much success for a girl to resist the pressure of marriage.

Being married as a child doesn't give the option for a girl to grow, educate, become decisive and independent. Afreen's story gives us a glimpse into how education can come to the rescue of women especially at their most vulnerable times. Afreen is 35 years old and hails from Hyderabad. She lost her father at a young age. Raising her as a single parent, her mother laid a lot of emphasis on education and ensured that Afreen completed her bachelors in physiotherapy.

Afreen: After that I got married. Married karne k liye humare jo Aunties wagherah even family members they told that she's not having father. toh iski jaldi shaadi karo. You can't take time, age will go on. What is this long-term education you have taken, kyunkil have completed my bachelor degree of five years. So, they force and do everything then Mumma k koi friend unhone bola nikah kardena chahiye jaisa bhi ho and all life set ho jaati hai.

Afreen then received a proposal from a man who was based in Australia. She was told that he hails from a well-to-do family and that she could pursue her career post marriage. However after her marriage, she found out that this was untrue.

Afreen: They were totally fake kuch bhi nahi tha aisa, after marriage mujhe pata chala education bhi jo PG batai thi IT mein he was B.Com and he was doing the waiter's job in the hotels in Australia it seems. Two years me hi returned back to kuch bhi nahi kara he made me sit in the house only. Like it will take time it will take time to go to Australia. The procedure is going on. It has taken nearly eight months. That time I was pregnant. I have got everything else then after that I was totally confused what to do what to do what to do then in the seventh month of pregnancy. We have to go to our mother's house. So they decided ,at that time my mother financially, economically was not good..matlab samajh hi nahi aa raha tha what to do. Before marriage I was working in a hospital and I'm doing... I was well settled but after marriage Puri life was totally stuck in 4 Rooms matlab woh 4 deewari usme hogaya, uske baad mere mami se share ki maine story.

Afreen's aunt based in the US gave her confidence and a lot of food for thought on what to do next. She says she spent many a sleepless night after that conversation and it was sheer providence that got her connected to Shaheen.

Afreen: Mai raat mai soyi nahi pareshan rahi. Then morning five o'clock, woh prayer k liye jaagna. Neend hi nahi aa rahi thi what to do in life then mai boli NGO jab US mai honga toh India mai bhi hoga kahi na kahi toh the whether to try in net toh net pe search kiya toh I got Shaheen name. Shaheen ka pata chala Then I said that call kar ke kyunki economically, I don't have anything at that time. So, I said that I don't have any money. You guys will take money from me Or do my work what you wanted. I was told that we won't take any money. What We will do first you come to our office we will discuss the matter then we will further know, do whatever you want to do. At that time, I was eight months pregnant. So, I at that situation only I have gone there and discuss at that time mam was there Jamila nishad mam. She told me ki after delivery you decide

Soon after her delivery, Afreen had a fall out with her husband and got legally separated. Her husband also refused to take any responsibility of their child, she told me. Since then she has won full custody of her child. It was Shaheen which helped her through this tough time she tells.

Afreen: shaheen ne toh meko bahut help kiya ek toh mere husband ka real face jo batana hai woh ki woh aadmi kya chah raha hai. Woh log counselling mai isliye rakhe so that you can study this man. Atleast you will realise. Aur tumhari responsibility badengi woh karenge woh pehle samjha chuke the. Phir woh logo ne mujhe police station jaane mai help kiya. Phir separation k time bhi poora help Kiya phir mera bhi record everything khula papers and everything with shaheen. Now also after every 6 month or three months they wil call and ask me whether you are going fine or not.

Host: Abhi aap kya karte ho?

Afreen: Physiotherapy ki hai.

Now Afreen works as a physiotherapist at a local hospital and earns enough to support her mother, her child and also her brother's family. She aspires to start her own clinic.

Host: Jaise aapke case mai bahut clearlydikh raha aapne education poora kiya, Aapke pass career ka option tha. Toh isliye aap ye step confidence se le saki. Toh jin jin ladkiyo ya aurton ko aise education nahi kar pate ya beech mai dropout ho raha hai, hona pad raha hai, unko aap kya batana chahenge.

Afreen: Mai bas yehi bolti hu ki self confident sabse zyada important hai. Aap apna kya bolte atmavishwas uspe atal rahe aur aage badne ki chah aapme ho to aapko koi rok nahi sakta.

Afreen's story of resilience coupled with self confidence given by education may seem simple but for her it was life-changing. Another underlying problem facing girls and boys alike is patriarchy says Shanta Sinha who believes that there is an urgent need to educate children

about what patriarchy is and what gender discrimination is. She says doing so would eliminate a lot of the struggles faced by children especially adolescent girls.

Shantha Sinha: There has to be a partnership between the civil society and the government. These kinds of profound issues need to be dealt with in partnership and from the ground. In schools we form gender committees where boys and girls are a part of the gender committees and they are being oriented on what patriarchy is about or what gender discrimination is about. And when a girl is not coming to school regularly, then this gender committee of boys and girls go to the family and find out why she's not been able to come. Then of course issues of her discrimination comes out. Somebody's not well and the boy is going to college but the girl is asked to stay back to take care or the girl's health is bad because of menstrual issues or she's forced to get married and therefore asked to stay back at home. So these boys and girls visit the girl's family, talk to them. They are young boys and girls- 12 or 13 years old. They come back and tell their school teachers that this is what is happening. Or there are some girls who are victims of sexual harassment, stalking that happens, so they put in front of the gender committee and they say that look I've been stalked by this and the teacher counsels them and tells them how to tackle it and sometimes the teacher doesn't even know what to say and tells the girl that you do it yourself. These girls have the courage to surround the boy and ask him why are you doing this? Do you think it will stop me from coming to school? to look at his face and talk to him. You know these things are happening. More importantly what is happening is talking to boys about masculinity and girls about discrimination and generating a discussion around it is helping us a lot. Usually when someone talks about girls and discrimination, One addresses only girls. We are talking to both boys and girls and it is helping a lot. Now they are playing sports together. There is no more gender division within the classroom. They are sharing the same table. Earlier boys would do the books and girls would do the sweeping so getting the teachers aware you are now discriminating all recorded practices of gender discrimination within the school itself between the girls and boys. The games boys play and in the functions, the boy is hoisting the flag, not the girl. Or organising the function, boys are organising and girls are spectators. So we said for all these forms of discrimination to go, we have to start young and if you invest in it for one whole generation I think some transformation can be seen. Schools can be a very important institution for building the cultures.

Host: Having worked in this space for so many years, how do you feel about the future. Do you think we are making those steps forward? So do you think we have made some strides as someone who is working from ground up?

Shantha Sinha: You see if you are not hopeful, you won't even get into the business of wanting to change. So we are all compulsive optimists. We all live on hope and anchor on what we have gained rather than look at things that are not happening. So I think things will change for the better that at least we are having a discussion and I'm sure voices of girls will be heard and they will impact state international policies.

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