

## SPARK LEARNING EXCHANGE

### LEARNING REPORT

Urmul Rural Health Research and Development Trust

INDIA

**“UNDERSTANDING THE IMPLICATIONS OF COVID-19 ON FEMALE ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY AND CHILD MARRIAGE IN THE DESERT DISTRICTS OF RAJASTHAN: PREPARING FOR FUTURE CRISES”**



**A learning exchange with civil society practitioners; local self governance institution members, adolescent champions, frontline workers and teachers on how to design, implement, and evaluate programs that address the links between adolescent girl sexuality and ending child marriage**

### SUMMARY

The More Than Brides Alliance, through its learning arm, the *Making the Most of What We Know* project (MMWWK), awarded small learning exchange grants to organisations in nine countries in Africa and Asia, as part of a participatory grantmaking process under the Learning Spark Fund. The Learning Spark Fund partnered with organisations belonging to one of four Dutch-funded Child Marriage Alliance Programs – *More Than Brides*, *Yes I Do*, *Her Choice*, and *Girls Not Brides*.

The Learning Spark Fund is designed to capture and elevate practical and experience-based knowledge and insights on the links between sexuality and child marriage, rather than that generated from research studies. Instead of prioritizing or giving favor to any one source of knowledge we seek to hear and learn from different voices and perspectives. Rather than assuming that all knowledge gained from those designing, implementing, and evaluating child marriage programs is explicit, documented, and communicated, we believe that practitioners have valuable implicit knowledge that is not yet documented or shared. We also believe that this knowledge can be “sparked” and additional knowledge co-created through exchanges amongst practitioners, both nationally and internationally, as well as with members of the communities they serve.

The Spark and Fireworks grants are designed to shed light on the practitioner knowledge, experiences, and actions that happen within and beyond the project cycle of a child marriage programme.

Under the overall theme of MMWWK, which aims to learn about the link between adolescent female sexuality and Child Marriage, these Spark grants focused on various perspectives and responses to address the links between sexuality and child marriage for the purpose of ending the practice.

### [Why a learning exchange?](#)

The learning exchange is one way to bring these different knowledges together, elevate them, and build upon them. We see learning exchanges as a space where professionals from different organizations and people from different communities come together to share and listen to what communities do and know. They can dive into the issues and questions that excite them in exploring the links between adolescent sexuality and child marriage, first sharing their knowledge, strategies, and experiences, and then reflecting on the implications of community knowledge and experiences for improving the design, implementation, and advocacy of child marriage programs.

### **Our organization**

Our organization, Urmul Rural Health Research and Development Trust, was awarded a Spark grant for our learning exchange entitled: Understanding the implications of COVID-19 on female adolescent sexuality and child marriage in the desert districts of Rajasthan: Preparing for future crises

### **The Learning Exchange**

In this section, we share the basic information about our learning exchange design.

#### **The Guiding Question**

**As with all Community Skyrocket grantees, our learning exchange was designed to address a Guiding Question:**

How can community knowledge and responses to addressing adolescent sexuality in tackling Child Marriage, including meaningful ideas and actions on community response to addressing this link, be leveraged and built on to improve Child marriage programs?

#### **The Key Question(s) we wanted to learn about**

What are the implications of a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic on female adolescent sexuality and child marriage for a region that does poorly on the gender parity indicators?

What were the challenges and learnings of practitioners in the first few months of the pandemic?

What innovative strategies could be adopted by practitioners to respond to increased vulnerabilities of adolescent girls to child marriage in times of crisis?

#### **Who was involved**

Civil society practitioners; local self-governance institution members, adolescent champions, frontline workers, and teachers were involved in this program.

#### **Key features of learning exchange methods and design**

- I. Listen and share

- a. Introductions with participants sharing about their work, passions, and their understanding of the pandemic to everyone.
- b. Round-Robin Storytelling Part I - Participants would be provided with a few prompt themes that would focus on the nature of the urgent support they extended to the female adolescents and their households during the COVID-19 pandemic. The nature of support along the timeline of the pandemic would be mapped.

## II. Reflect

- a. Round-Robin Storytelling Part II - Participants would be provided with a few prompt themes that would focus on if they felt the responses of the government and civil society were adequate and if there were any glaring gaps that jeopardized the well-being of the girls.
- b. Truth, Confusion, Importance - Participants would be asked to categorize their responses on what they found to be true, what they were confused about, and the themes that would need to be addressed.

## III. Sensemaking

- a. VIPP Card Collection and Clustering - The participants would be required to answer specific questions on "How do we think we can safeguard the sexual well-being of female adolescents during the ongoing COVID-19 crisis?", "Which long-term strategies do the institutions need to adopt to be better prepared against future natural or man-made crises?", and "What all digital and offline strategies need to be adopted to ensure that the female adolescents could always seek support?".

## KEY LEARNINGS

Here are some notable quotations for this conversation:

"Girls need to be comfortable about their own bodies; The interaction between girls and boys needs to be normalized. There should not be any shame and guilt attached in discussing issues around their sexual and reproductive rights."

~ - Saiian Bhati. Social worker. Jaisalmer district, Raiasthan. India

"Girls from early on should be given life skills early on in their life. This would ensure that they are not hesitant in voicing their needs and concerns."

- Ashok Sharma, Social worker, Jodhpur district, Rajasthan, India

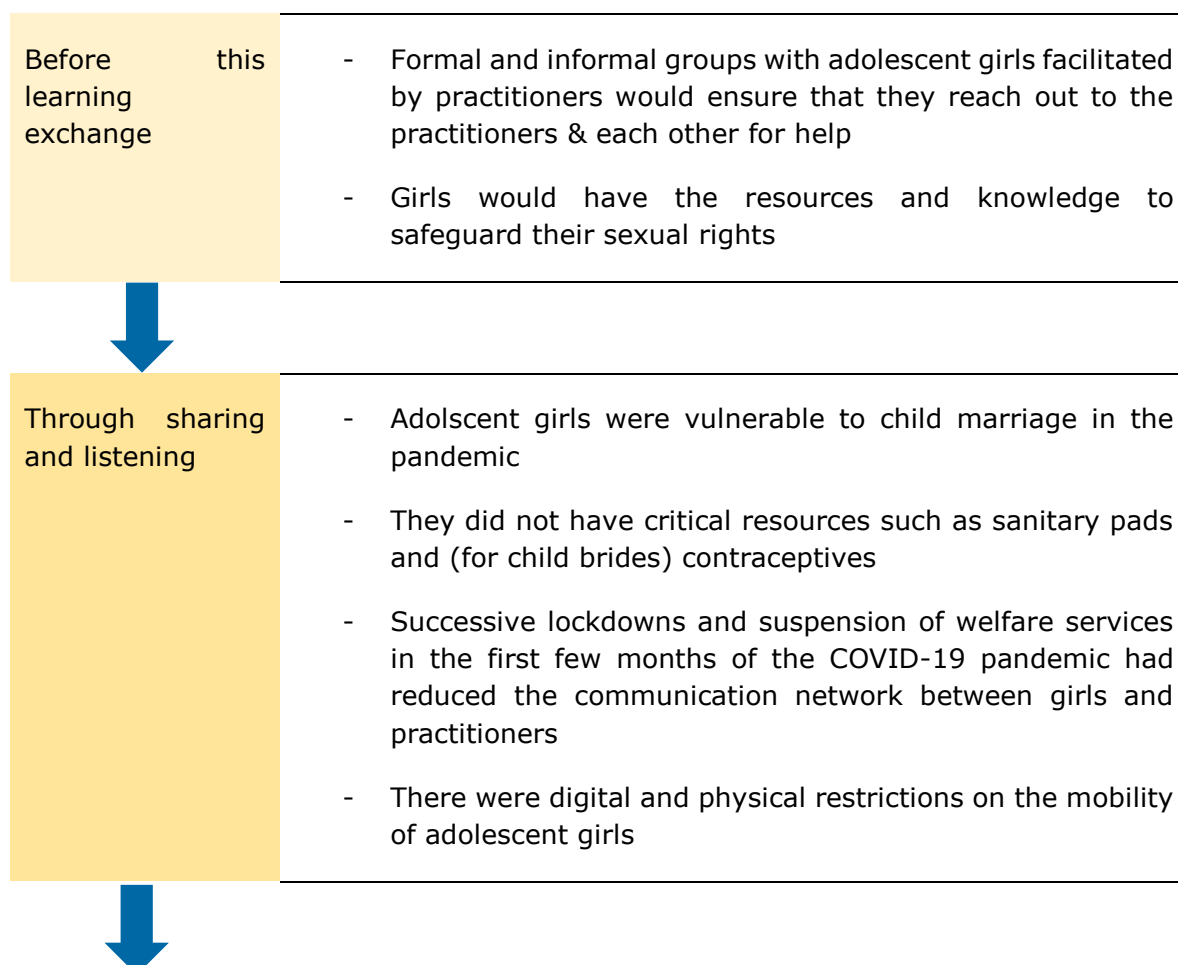
“Information on sexual and reproductive health and rights should be made part of the curriculum of children. This would ensure that they have credible information during any crisis such as the present COVID-19 pandemic.”

- Chenaram Bishnoi, Social worker, Bikaner district, Rajasthan, India

“A suggestion box could be placed across public spaces in the village so that girls can add their recommendations that safeguard their well-being. In our region, girls have always been discouraged to voice their opinions on menstrual hygiene, child marriage and other issues. Through a suggestion box that accepts anonymous inputs, we could maybe finally hear the problems and solutions that they wish to put forth.”

### A Summary of our learning trajectory

While we have provided details about our learning exchange and knowledge co-creation process above, we will attempt to summarize the learning trajectory in three parts:



Through reflection

- The COVID-19 pandemic posed unprecedented challenges to the sexuality of adolescent girls
- There is a need for developing strong digital means of communication between girls and practitioners

## DISCUSSION

*[In this section, present the sensemaking/analysis of knowledge and insights. This answers the "So What?" question: What is this saying or telling us? What is the importance of this new knowledge?]*

## IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING CHILD MARRIAGE PROGRAMS

The learning exchange closed with members naming the implications of what we learned about knowledge and actions related to addressing the links between sexuality and child marriage in child marriage programming, and specifically recommendations for what the knowledge and actions could mean for improving these programs. How can these different stakeholders' knowledge about the links between sexuality and child marriage and their actions and responses to it be tapped into and built from? What can this mean for engaging these stakeholders in child marriage programming in new and innovative ways?

## Formulating Implications and Recommendations

In order to design future intervention that more adequately and fully address the links between sexuality and child marriage in terms of what practitioners and other stakeholders do and know, we put forth the following recommendations based on this learning exchange:

<b>Recommendation 1:</b>	
<b>Knowledge base</b>	The child rights clubs and adolescent girls groups act as an important support network for girls in crisis. Adolescent girls should act as active participants, rather than passive beneficiaries, in the process of their empowerment. The aim is to bring their voices more prominently in the public domain. Further, access to online platform hosting relevant information could be ensured.
<b>Description of recommendation</b>	The NGOs and school administration facilitate the formation of informal groups and clubs in which the adolescent girls frequently connect. In the times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the gap in communication between aid workers and adolescents was evident. Encouraging formation of such groups would ensure the girls are confident to help each other. Online platforms which could host the right information, have counselling for children and where children could interact with each for help should be developed. This would ensure minimum reliance on offline medium.
<b>Timeline</b>	We propose that this recommendation happens at the design, and implementation phase of the project.
<b>Level/actor</b>	This recommendation is designed for NGOs, school administration, and rural local self governance structures.
<b>Context</b>	The network of girls must be strong enough to arrange for resources. The formation of groups would ensure that the reliance of girls on external support is minimal.
<b>Change</b>	The recommendation needs to be implemented keeping in mind that any sort of crisis could befall our communities. Strong networks of adolescents could help them protect themselves better.

## Recommendation 2:

<b>Knowledge base</b>	The welfare services delivered by frontline community health workers is very important in the rural areas. These workers remain a strong link between state machineries and communities. They provide resources for menstruation, information on family planning, nutrition, etc. During any crisis, their services should not be suspended.
<b>Description of recommendation</b>	In India, due to the pandemic there were lockdowns imposed and initially the services provided by frontline healthcare workers such as Accredited Social Health Activist, Anganwadi worker and helper and Auxiliary nurse midwife were diverted for tracking COVID-19 patients. These workers were unable to perform their routine tasks of mother and child care. Their unavailability deprived many adolescents and child brides to the required information and resources in the pandemic.
<b>Timeline</b>	We propose that this recommendation happens at the design, and implementation phase of the project.
<b>Level/actor</b>	This recommendation is designed for policy makers to allocate the services of frontline healthcare workers optimally.
<b>Context</b>	In any crisis, adolescent girls tend to be the most vulnerable and grassroots healthcare workers are essential to provide them timely aid.
<b>Change</b>	The recommendation needs to be implemented to ensure adolescent girls remain connected with grassroots workers who would be capable of helping them.

### Recommendation 3:

<b>Knowledge base</b>	This recommendation is based on knowledge that participative bottom-to-top changes are fully embraced by communities. Parents are in a unique position to influence young people's health and personal development, and their transition to adulthood. Many of the drivers of child marriage are parent-initiated, and initiatives that inform, sensitise, change attitudes of and open new horizons for parents may go a long way in changing perceptions about the limited value of girls versus boys, and the importance of controls on girls' sexuality.
<b>Description of recommendation</b>	We need to focus making a behavioral change wherein the community members especially parents need to be made aware of the issues of adolescent female sexuality and child marriage.
<b>Timeline</b>	We propose that this recommendation happens continuously and in tandem with other interventions.
<b>Level/actor</b>	This recommendation is designed for frontline workers (community workers delivering primary services), NGOs and policymakers)
<b>Context</b>	The impact of any intervention gets reduced if the essence of it is not accepted by communities and the change is believed to be top-to-bottom. By focusing on greater participation in awareness generation efforts, the communities could wholeheartedly embrace reforms. The participation could be ensured through interactive dialogues, street plays, puppet shows, etc.
<b>Change</b>	We have adopted such interventions actively. However, now more than ever, these efforts need to be encouraged and amplified.



#### Recommendation 4:

<b>Knowledge base</b>	Discussions on adolescent female sexuality needs to be normalised. In this region with poor awareness levels of women, there is reluctance to discuss issues on sexuality. Access to education and comprehensive sexuality education has been observed to build awareness, develop agency, communication and negotiation skills, expand social networks, and empower adolescent girls to adopt health-promoting practices and make informed life choices, including in the marriage arena. In humanitarian crisis situations, too, such knowledge would only empower girls to make the right decisions tailored to their own vulnerabilities.
<b>Description of recommendation</b>	Through the school curriculum and interactions with adolescents by practitioners, girls need to be made comfortable about their own bodies and their interactions with boys need to be normalized. The girls should not have any shame nor guilt attached in discussing their issues. Through the curriculum, universal access to accurate sexual and reproductive health information would be provided, this would ensure adolescents make the right choices.
<b>Timeline</b>	We propose that this recommendation happens at the design, implementation, lobbying and advocacy phase of the project. The incorporation in curriculum could be done by policymakers and the discussions could be led by practitioners on ground.
<b>Level/actor</b>	This recommendation is designed for state and national policymakers, communities, and NGOs.
<b>Context</b>	Our recommendation focuses on enhancing awareness levels of adolescents. Empowering them with the right knowledge would encourage them to take the right decisions.
<b>Change</b>	Our recommendation is an adaptation of our current efforts. However, we believe this intervention was previously done in silos and should now be mainstreamed.

## ANNEXURES

### Annex 1 - Carefully Selected Participants

In designing our learning exchange, we carefully selected participants who could add to the conversation with their knowledge and experience, engage in knowledge co-creation, and benefit from this co-created knowledge.

Below is a table describing the participants we selected and invited:

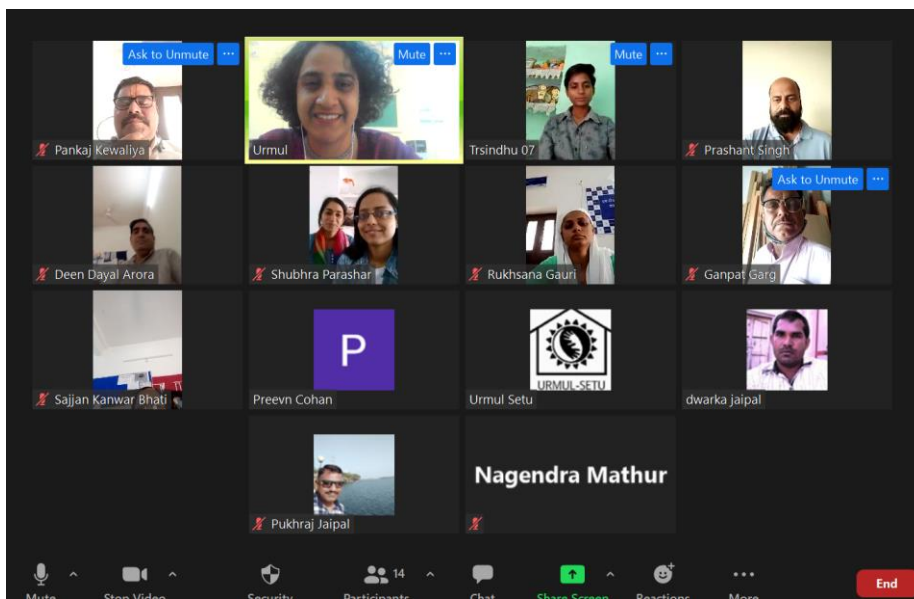
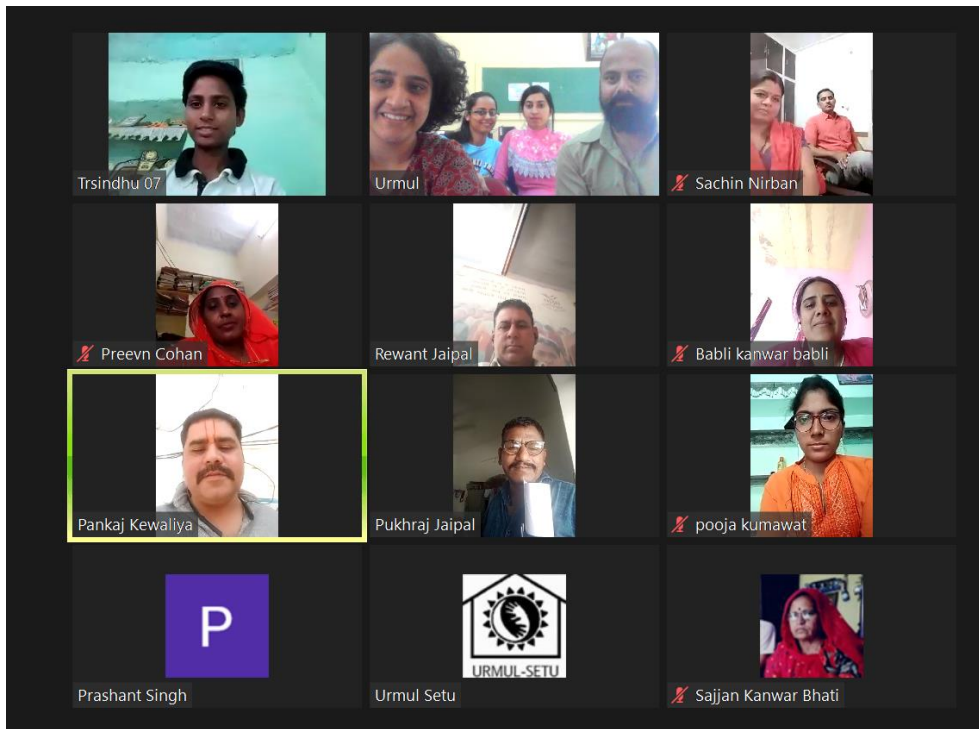
Learning Exchange Members by Stakeholder Type				
Stakeholder Type	Short description Role/affiliation, name organization/service, experience	Region(s)	Total number	Of total, how many girls/women?
Non-profit program implementers	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mr. Sunil Lahri (Secretary-Urmul Seemant; three decades of experience)</li> <li>2. Mr. Pukhraj (Program Coordinator, Urmul Trust)</li> <li>3. Mr. Ashok Sharma (Program Manager, Urmul Trust; three decades of experience)</li> <li>4. Mrs. Parveen Chauhan (Field Coordinator, Urmul Trust; one decade of experience)</li> <li>5. Mrs. Bhanwari Bishnoi (Field Coordinator, Urmul Trust ; five years of experience)</li> <li>6. Ms. Rukhsana (Field Coordinator, Urmul Trust; five years of experience)</li> </ol>	Rajasthan	9	4

	<p>7. Mrs. Shera Devi (Social Worker)</p> <p>8. Javed Mangliya (Social Worker)</p> <p>9. Prashant Singh (Programme Manager, Urmul Trust ; five years of experience)</p>			
Government program implementers	<p>1. Mrs. Manju Sharma (Accredited Social Health Activist),</p> <p>2. Mrs. Vimla (Accredited Social Health Activist) ,</p> <p>3. Mrs. Sanju (Accredited Social Health Activist),</p> <p>4. Mrs. Suman Devi (Accredited Social Health Activist)</p>	Rajasthan	4	4
Researchers	NA			
Policy-makers	<p>1. Mr. Mahendra Sethiya (Member of Zila Parisad)</p> <p>2. Mr. Natthiram (Sarpanch)</p> <p>3. Mr. Revant Ram (Sarpanch)</p> <p>4. Mrs. Shushma (Sarpanch)</p>	Rajasthan	4	1
Traditional / religious leaders	NA			
Community members - Adolescent girls	<p>1. Vasundhra Suthar (Adolescent Girl Group Member)</p> <p>2. Hulash (Adolescent Girl Group Member)</p>	Rajasthan	3	3

	3. Pooja (Adolescent Girl Group Member)			
Others- Teachers	1. Mr. Modaram Kadela, 2. Mr. Sheridan Singh, 3. Mr. Ajay Puniya, 4. Mr. Om Nath, 5. Mr. Bansi Lal Jakhad	Rajasthan	5	5
Total number of participants			25	

In convening these participants, we were hoping that they would add their inputs on being at the forefront of providing COVID-19 aid to communities, and working on the sexual and reproductive rights for adolescent girls. Their long experiences and strong network with the communities enhanced the conversation and augmented our individual and collective learning

**Some snippets from the workshop:**



## Annex 2 - Intentional and Structured Conversation

The learning exchange event was designed to take place over [...] at [...]. We designed the following agenda to structure our learning conversation:

Time	Session/Activity
<p><b>DAY 1</b></p> <p>10 March 2021</p> <p>Urmul Setu campus, Lunkaransar, Bikaner</p> <p>10:00 AM - 12:00 PM</p>	<p><b>LISTENING AND SHARING</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Introductions with participants sharing about their work, passions, and their understanding of the pandemic to everyone.</li><li>- Participants would share the nature of the urgent support they extended to the female adolescents and their households during the COVID-19 pandemic. The nature of support along the timeline of the pandemic would be mapped.</li></ul>
<p><b>DAY 2</b></p> <p>11 March 2021</p> <p>Urmul Seemant campus, Bajju, Bikaner</p> <p>10:00 AM - 01:00 PM</p>	<p><b>REFLECTING</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Participants would share if they felt the responses of the government and civil society were adequate and if there were any glaring gaps that jeopardized the well-being of the girls.</li><li>- Participants would be asked to categorize their responses on what they found to be true, what they were confused about, and the themes that would need to be addressed.</li></ul>
<p><b>DAY 3</b></p> <p>12 March 2021</p> <p>Urmul Marusthali Bunkar Vikas Samit, Pokaran, Jaisalmer</p>	<p><b>SENSEMAKING</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- The participants would be required to answer specific questions on<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- "How do we think we can safeguard the sexual well-being of female adolescents during the ongoing COVID-19 crisis?"</li><li>- "Which long-term strategies do the institutions need to adapt to be better prepared against future natural or</li></ul></li></ul>

10:00 AM - 01:00 PM

man-made crises?"

- "What digital and offline strategies need to be adopted to ensure that the female adolescents could always seek support?"

We designed the sessions in a manner in which the participants first became wholly comfortable with each other and then felt comfortable in discussing their learnings, experiences and thoughts.

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