

WHY HAS ASHOK BEEN NOMINATED?

Nominated Child Rights Hero Ashok Dyalchand

Ashok Dyalchand has been nominated for his 40-year-long fight for girls' rights in India and his campaign to abolish child marriage.

Every day, 15,600 girls are subjected to child marriage in India. Girls are forced to quit school and they become slaves in their husband's home. They risk death if they fall pregnant because their bodies are not ready to give birth to children.

In order to save girls' lives, raise their status and put an end to child marriage, Ashok and his organization IHMP set up Girls Clubs. Since the organization was founded in 1975, some 50,000 girls in 500 villages have learned about their rights and received Life Skills Education. With knowledge, self-confidence and support from one another, the girls manage to convince their parents not to force them into child marriage, but to let them finish school instead. Ashok has also set up Boys Clubs, where so far 5,000 boys and young men have learned about child marriage, girls' rights and gender equality.

When Ashok started his organization, girls in the villages where IHMP works were being married off at an average age of 14 years. Now the average age is 17. The average age of a girl at the birth of her first child has risen to 18. This means that fewer mums and babies are dying in childbirth. The status of girls has also been raised in the villages where Ashok works.

IHMP also educates parents, the police, village councils and social workers from lots of other countries. Ashok fought for the introduction of the law that came into force in India in 1994, prohibiting abortion based on the baby's sex.



"A girl is discriminated against and oppressed from the moment she is in her mother's womb because many parents in India want an abortion if the baby is a girl, even though it's illegal. If the girl is born, many of her fundamental rights will be taken from her. The worst violation is being forced into child marriage. Every day, 15,600 girls are subjected to child marriage in India. My job is to put a stop to it," says Ashok Dyalchand, who has been fighting for girls' rights for over 40 years.

I grew up in a beautiful house, surrounded by a large garden. My mother was a doctor and my father led a big organization. I went to the best school in the city of Shimla, and in my spare time I played billiards, field hockey and table tennis," says Ashok.

"I decided to follow in my mother's footsteps and was accepted onto India's top

medicine course. I wanted to be a successful eye specialist, to work at a nice hospital in a big city, earn good money and live a comfortable life."

Rural mobile hospital

When it was time for Ashok to undertake the practical part of his course, he joined a healthcare team that travelled around to some of the mountain villages. It was a

All girls in India

"The fact that we're working via a system of state health workers that already exists means we should be able to reach all girls in India with our programme against child marriage and for girls' rights!" says Ashok.

rural mobile hospital that carried out eye operations on poor people, who would never have got the help they needed otherwise.

"I didn't do it because I was a good person; I was planning to return to the city and the good life as soon as possible. But I knew that the rural mobile hospital would give me lots of practical experience in a short space



Girls left in the rubbish

"We realised that the situation for girls in India was far more serious than we first thought, and that discrimination against girls started as early as in their mother's womb. If parents found out during a scan that they were expecting a girl, many chose to have an abortion. And across India, female foetuses could be found dumped at rubbish tips, having been killed at birth," says Ashok, sadly. He became an important voice in the movement that was responsible for the introduction of a law banning abortion on the grounds of gender, which came into force in India in 1994.

of time because we examined 400 patients every day and carried out 200 operations a week."

Ashok travelled around with the rural mobile hospital for three years and encountered a world that was completely different to the one he was used to.

"I'd grown up in luxury, protected from the problems around me. I'd never even been to an Indian village before I started working with the rural mobile hospital."

Ashok was now surrounded by people living in extreme poverty. Adults and children who were hungry and sick and who weren't getting any kind of education.

The girl from Tibet

One day, Ashok examined a poor little Tibetan refugee girl. He saw that she had an eye disease that could be cured if she got the right treat-

ment quickly. Otherwise she would go blind. Ashok placed her in one of the hospital beds, but his boss got angry and threw the girl out because the beds were only for patients who were to be operated on.

"A week or so later, I saw the girl at the market; she was being supported by her mother. I was devastated when I realised that the girl had already gone blind. I was ashamed that I hadn't fought harder for her.

Ashok found his boss and shouted:

"You've made a little girl blind. I'm not staying at your bloody hospital for another minute."

"I stormed out and never went back. I knew now that I wouldn't be able to fulfil my plan to become a well-paid eye doctor at a nice hospital. That little girl had changed me forever."

Women dying

Ashok decided to offer medical care to poor people. In 1975, he took over an old hospital with five beds in the little town of Pachod, which had been affected by severe

drought and famine for four years.

"I drove around on a motorbike to talk to people and find out what they really needed. I was out every day because I was the only doctor in a region

Dangerous life for girls in India

- 240,000 girls under the age of five die every year because of discrimination, through getting less food, medical treatment and care than boys.
- More than 3.7 million girls don't go to school.
- With over 200 million women who can't read, India has the highest number of illiterate girls and women in the world.
- Every five minutes, a case of domestic abuse is reported to the police.
- 92 girls and women are raped every day (2014).
- 11-16 million female foetuses may have been aborted between 1990 and 2018.



This is the motorcycle Ashok used to travel around on 43 years ago, talking to people in the villages to find out what they really needed. He was the only doctor in a region with 78 villages.



with 78 villages. I interviewed, examined, performed operations and then went out on my motorbike again!”

Ashok soon understood that the villagers felt the biggest problem was that many pregnant women were dying because of the lack of good maternal health care for women while they were expecting and help during childbirth.

“All the roads to the hospital were bad and transportation was by oxcart. During my first week at the hospital, two young girls and their unborn babies died because they hadn’t got to the hospital in time.”

Ashok came up with the idea of teaching simple mater-

nal health care to the traditional midwives, or dais, in Indian villages. That way they would detect any problems much earlier on in the pregnancy and know whether a woman needed medical treatment at the hospital. His idea proved to be a huge success and it spread across India. Pregnant girls and women flocked to Ashok’s little hos-

pital. It was now possible to save the lives of many women and their babies.

Child marriage

“We realised that many of the problems that young pregnant women had were down to the very fact that they were young. More than 8 in 10 girls in the villages married before they reached the age of 18, with

most of them being just 14. The girls were getting pregnant before their bodies were ready to give birth because they were still children themselves. Often both the girl and the baby died during childbirth. I felt I had to put an end to child marriage in order to save lives, but also because all the girls who were victims lost their own childhood and had their rights violated.”

Ashok realised that girls were being treated worse long before the marriage itself.

“From very early on in life, boys were taken better care of than girls. Sons got more breast milk, food, vaccinations and other health care than daughters. Girls were often undernourished and if they fell ill, they were taken later, or not at all, to see the doctor.”

While the boys went to school and spent time with their friends, Ashok saw that the girls in the villages were at home, doing all the household chores and looking after their younger siblings. The idea was to prepare the girls for being



12 million child brides

- Every year, 12 million girls around the world are forced to marry before they have reached the age of 18. That’s 23 girls every minute, or almost one girl every two seconds.
- 1 in 5 girls in the world are married off before the age of 18.
- Every day, 15,600 girls are married off in India, at an average age of 15, despite the fact that child marriage is illegal.
- India has the most child brides in the entire world.
- The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child prohibits child marriage, but 93 countries in the world allow girls to be married off before they reach the age of 18.
- One of the UN’s goals for 2030 is to put an end to child marriage.
- If we fail to reduce the number of child brides, an estimated 1.2 billion girls in the world will be child brides by 2050.

We are members of Ashok’s clubs!



Ajay, 17



Anjali, 14



Akosh, 17



Anjali, 14



Akosh, 16



Anyum, 14



Akosh, 17



50,000 girls have been reached through the work of Ashok and his organization. Half of them are unmarried girls in 500 villages who attended the Life Skills Education course and now belong to a Girls Club.

The book on Life Skills Education, which is so essential for these girls.



someone's wife and someone's mother, not to allow them to live their own lives.

"We wanted to be a voice for the girls, and their defender."

In 1985, Ashok and his seven colleagues started the organization IHMP (Institute of Health Management Pachod): a centre that would work with preventive maternal care and health care, and fight against child marriage and in defence of girls' rights.

Girls becomes slaves

"Nothing violates a girl's rights more than subjecting her to child marriage. She is forced to quit school to instead become a slave to her hus-

band, give birth to his children and do all the household chores. She is robbed of her family, her friends, her freedom and her dreams. The girl becomes a prisoner in her own home. I wondered whether this was what families really wanted for their daughters. And besides, child marriage is actually against the law in India," explains Ashok.

After talking to thousands of villagers, Ashok understood lots of important things. Most of the families didn't want to marry off their daughters as children, but old traditions, group pressure and poverty left them feeling they had no choice. All the neighbours

became suspicious if a family didn't marry off their daughter early, according to village custom. Rumours would start up. "There must be something wrong with the daughter if they don't want to marry her off? Maybe there's something wrong with the whole family?"

In India, the girl's family pays a dowry to the husband's family when it's time for the wedding, although this is also against Indian law. The dowry can be money, furniture, jewellery, cars, motorbikes, cattle or other items. The older the girl is, the more her family has to pay. That's why poor families often feel forced to marry off their daughters at a young

age. It's cheaper that way. And because the girl is going to be married off so early, the families don't think there's any point in letting her go to school for any length of time. It's wasted money because the daughter isn't going to contribute money to the family, as she's going to be a housewife and look after her new family. The families are also afraid that boys and men will subject their daughters to sexual harassment if they spend time outside the home, such as on their way to and from school. It brings shame on the daughter and the family's honour



Anand, 17



Ashawini, 14



Bhimrau, 17



Ashawini, 13



Chetan, 16



Bhagyshree, 14



Koran, 15



Gangasagar, 12



and makes it harder to marry her off.

Life Skills Education for girls

“We could see that girls had their rights violated because society was not equal and girls and women lacked worth in many ways. They were denied knowledge and power over their own lives. We also understood that many families didn’t want things to be like this, and instead wanted their daughters to avoid child marriage, to finish school, learn more and be happy.”

The villagers and Ashok decided to set up clubs just for girls, where they could support one another and learn important things. Together they produced a textbook on Life Skills Education that would help the girls cope better with life. The subjects were chosen based on what the vil-

lagers themselves thought was important for their daughters to learn. It covered everything from girls’ rights, menstruation and health, how to report an assault and how banks work to learning a craft to help them earn a living as adults. With more knowledge, Ashok hoped that the girls, their families and entire villages would raise girls’ status and be better at protecting them from child marriage.

Girls Clubs

“We had to think carefully about how to go about things in a way that would have the approval of the villagers because girls rarely or never went anywhere other than home or school. There were two really important things to do: find a safe way and a safe place for the girls to meet and learn. The villagers them-

This is what the girls learn about:

- The Rights of the Child.
- Girls’ rights.
- Child marriage.
- Menstruation, health and living together.
- Women’s right to divorce.
- Men’s violence towards women, for example, domestic abuse.
- How and where girls can report cases of assault.
- How to use a tablet and the internet.
- A craft, such as needlework.
- How society works, for example, the police, banks and the Village Council.

“We go on study visits with the Girls Clubs. Before, it was only the men who knew how society works. The women were totally dependent on the men and completely powerless. Now we learn more knowledge and therefore have more control over our lives,” says Salia, 15, one of the roughly 25,000 girls who have so far completed Ashok’s Life Skills Education Class.

On the way to Girls Club.



Ramday, 16



Kaveri, 13



Ravi, 16



Komal, 13



Rushikes, 16



Manisha, 12



Sagar, 16



Marjika, 13



Sahel, 16





selves suggested venues for teaching life skills. Places like the village hall, a temple or a classroom after school.” Since the villagers placed great trust in the female health workers, or Ashas, who are in every Indian village, Ashok felt they would be the perfect teachers for the girls. The health workers were trained by IHMP in how to teach the **Life Skills Education Class**, and 1999 saw the first clubs starting up. Each club was made up of 25 unmarried girls aged 11-19, who met twice a week for six months.

“The girls’ self-confidence grew as they gained more knowledge and the opportunity to get out of the house and talk to one another in a place that was just for them. And where their opinions mattered.” The girls shared what they learned about girls’ rights with their parents and neighbours.

Ashok and IHMP started more Girls Clubs in other villages. Before the courses came to an end, the girls chose someone from the group to undergo leadership training and lead the clubs and teaching from then on. The Girls Clubs also started demonstrating and putting on street plays to highlight their rights in the villages. IHMP educated parents, the police, members of village councils and others in girls’ rights.

Brave girls

After a while, things started to change with the practice of child marriage in the villages around Pachod.

“Girls who had completed the Life Skills Education Class and who continued to attend the Girls Clubs managed to



Girls who have completed the Life Skills Education course and continued to attend the Girls Clubs have succeeded in stopping child marriage after child marriage, and have been able to finish school. They have gained knowledge and courage, and succeeded in convincing their parents to stop planned child marriages.

Boys Club meetings

The boys meet once a month and learn about girls’ rights, child marriage and gender equality.

stop marriage after marriage and finish school. The girls had gained knowledge and courage. They had learned to speak up and use good arguments, which helped them convince their parents to stop planned child marriages. A group that used to be com-

pletely invisible and powerless had suddenly succeeded in explaining their rights and the importance of daughters also being allowed to finish school and gain a profession!” explains Ashok.

Although the work was going well, Ashok was still

concerned that things weren’t moving fast enough. Many girls were still being forced to marry, and many were dying in childbirth.

“We started working with newly-married couples where the girl was a child under the age of 18. We explained to her,

How Ashok and IHMP work

Ashok and IHMP fight against child marriage and for girls’ rights by:

- Starting Girls Clubs for unmarried girls, where they learn about their rights and receive Life Skills Education. The Girls Clubs also function as safe places for girls, where they can talk about things that are important to them.
- Starting Boys Clubs for unmarried boys, where they learn about child marriage, girls’ rights and gender equality.
- Educating newly-married couples, where the bride is a child under the age of 18, about girls’ rights and the importance of delaying the first pregnancy for as long as possible, to save the life of both the girl and the baby.
- Educating parents, police, village councils and social workers from many countries about girls’ rights and gender equality.



Sandeep, 17



Palavi, 14



Rupali, 12



Subhesh, 15



Sania, 13



Vinad, 17



Seema, 14



Vinad, 22



Uramila, 14





Baisheli and Arati's big brother belongs to one of Ashok's Boys Clubs. As a result, he has begun helping at home, so that his sisters have time for playing and homework.

her husband and the whole village about all the dangers involved in the girl getting pregnant, and tried to encourage them to delay the first pregnancy for as long as possible. We worked with the state health workers to try and change people's views on what is an appropriate age to marry. We explained the benefits of contraceptives and taught them about girls' rights. We also made sure that the girls were given support and regular health checks. This helped save the lives of many young girls."

So what about the boys?

In his work over the course of forty years, Ashok and IHMP have in fact never come up against any serious opposition because everything they do is based on what the villagers themselves want for their daughters. But sometimes teenage boys and young men in the villages threw stones at them and shouted: "You're teaching the girls to stand on our heads!" Next time you come, we'll stone you!"

Ashok realised that the boys felt left out and that it was a big mistake.

"Obviously the boys had to understand and be involved if we were to stop child marriage. It is after all men who are marrying girls who are too young, and boys and men who beat and discriminate against girls and women. That's why the boys also have to be on board and learn about gender equality."

In 2014, Ashok and IHMP started up Boys Clubs as well, which work in roughly the same way as the Girls Clubs. The boys get together once a month and learn about girls' rights, child marriage and gender equality.

in 173 villages and has 120 employees, including doctors, nurses, researchers and social workers.

"When we started our work in Pachod, the average age of a girl when she got married was 14; now it's 17. It's better than it was, but of course we won't be satisfied until everyone who marries is at least 18 years old."

In the villages where Ashok works, there has been a considerable improvement in the status of girls, and reports of his work have spread far and wide around the world. IHMP has run training courses at the centre in Pachod for social workers from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia and Sudan.

"Our goal is freedom for girls and a society free from sex discrimination and inequality. We have a long road ahead, but every time I meet the girls in our clubs and hear about their dreams for the future, it gives me new strength to continue with this important mission!" says Ashok. 🌍

Together

"I could never have managed to do this work alone. Without my friends and colleagues the fight for girls' rights would never have been possible. We are a team," says Ashok. Manisha at the office in Pachod has worked with him right from the start.



Major successes

Some 50,000 girls have been reached by Ashok's work. Half of them are unmarried girls in 500 villages who have completed the Life Skills Education Class and who now belong to a Girls Club. 5,000 unmarried boys and young men have so far been reached via the Boys Clubs.

The average age of a girl giving birth to her first child has risen to 18 in the villages where IHMP works. Fewer mums and babies are dying in childbirth. IHMP now works



Performances save girls' lives

It's evening in the little town of Jamkhed. By a temple at a busy street crossing, one of Ashok's Girls Clubs is performing a theatre piece about girls' rights. Koyal, 14, and Dipali, 13, perform a sentimental dance and acting number. The audience, which includes boys, girls, men and women of all ages, is transfixed.

"Street plays are a brilliant way of getting people to learn important things," says Koyal.

The song in our dance number is about not killing girls but instead giving us a chance to go to

school and have a good life. In India, girls can be killed before they are born by parents having abortions if



they find out they're carrying a girl. Sometimes girls are even killed after the birth when they discover the baby is a girl," says Dipali sadly.

Koyal nods and tries to explain:

"A girl's family pays a dowry to the husband's family when she marries. They pay for the entire wedding party, give money, household items, goats, cars and other gifts to the husband's family. The dowry is too much for many poor families, and that's why they decide to get rid of daughters. A son doesn't cost money. Instead, a new girl with a dowry joins the family when the son gets married. The family earns money from

a son and loses money from a daughter," she says.

"I get so angry when I think about it! It's wrong, and that's why we have street plays. We try and change people's way of seeing girls. That girls have the same worth as boys," says Dipali.

But although the Girls Club plays are often about serious subjects, and they are performed in front of a large audience, the girls don't hesitate for one second.

"We're not a bit nervous when we perform, it's just fun. And important. We're going to carry on with this for a long time!"

No to dowries!

"Dowries are really bad. They create major problems for girls. They're illegal, but it happens anyway," says Koyal. Koyal wants to be a doctor and Dipali a policewoman.





Salia, 15

Lives in: The village of Brahmanaon.

Loves: My little brother!

Hates: The fact that us girls and our opinions don't count.

Best thing that's happened to me: When I managed to stop my child marriage.

Worst thing that's happened to me: When they were planning my marriage.

Wants to be: A teacher or social worker in Ashok's organization, IHMP.

Looks up to: My grandfather. He respects me and listens to everything I say. I also look up to everyone at IHMP fighting for our rights. I want to be like them!

Salia's hunger strike against

"Without Ashok's Girls Club, my life would have turned out completely differently. I would have been married, forced to quit school and I'd probably already be a mum, despite being just a child myself. If I had survived the birth that is. My life would have been over," says Salia, 15, gravely. She was on her way to becoming one of the 15,600 girls in India who are forced into child marriage every day.

That day, two years ago, was just like any other. Me and mum were sitting by the fire, chatting and cooking together. She was making a vegetable curry and I was baking chapati bread. While we were sitting there, a woman, who is a family friend, stopped by to visit. There's nothing strange about that. Relatives, neighbours and friends often visit one

another in our villages. We ate, talked and had a nice time. But a bit later, after dinner, everything changed. I heard the woman suddenly say: 'I want you to give me your daughter Salia as a wife for my son.'

"I was shocked and started crying. I really didn't want to get married. I wanted to go to school, which I loved. I was just 13 years old, and I knew

that her son was at least ten years older, that he was an adult man. It felt surreal."

We put up a fight

"I was in one of Ashok's Girls Clubs, and I'd learned a lot of bad things about child marriage. I knew that I would be forced to quit school and that there was a high risk of me and my baby dying if I fell pregnant. But most of all, I knew that child marriage was illegal.

"I was worried and angry. It felt so strange that my family were sitting and discussing marrying me off. I cried and couldn't sleep that night. The thoughts were buzzing around my head. The woman stayed the night, but the next day I didn't say a word to her before I went to school. It felt like she



Education for a better life

"It's really important for girls to get an education! If a girl who has little or no education is forced to marry when she's 12 or 13 years old, it will be easy for an adult man to treat her like a piece of property. He dominates her and does what he wants. But if the girl has gone to school and is over 18, it's not as easy. Then she has more knowledge, she's more confident and more independent, and she can have a better life," says Salia.



child marriage



Salia grinds chilli and makes chapatis together with her mother.



"The nicest things I own are my school things. My books, pens and schoolbag," says Salia, doing homework together with her little brother.

wanted to destroy my life. And when I got home from school, it was impossible to concentrate. It hurt too much.

"I was so worried that I decided to ask my friends Rojina and Saima for help. They were also in the Girls Club. Together we decided to put up a fight. Even though, of course, I felt really awful, it felt better not to be alone."



Three generations

Both Salia's mum Sajida and her grandma Jeitun were married when they were 12 years old.

"When I was young, girls didn't go to school. No-one thought about us. I think it's really good that Salia hasn't married yet, and that she'll get to finish school and have a good future," says her grandma.



Dad and grandfather are good men

"In my family my mum and dad make decisions together. But it's more usual for the dad to have the most power in a family, and to decide whether or not a marriage is to be arranged. I love my dad Samad because he chose to cancel my wedding! And my grandfather Jalal has completely changed his mind. At first he thought that the wedding was a good idea, but now he doesn't at all. He's proud that I'm the peer leader of a Girls Club and that I travel to the town of Pachod for more training in girls' rights. He likes to accompany me on the way, and that makes me happy!"

TEXT: ANDREAS LÖNN PHOTOS: JOHAN BIERKE



Hunger strike

“Rojina came home with me after school and told my parents about a girl who had been forced into an arranged child marriage. The girl had been so distressed that she took her own life by drowning herself in the village well.

“My mum got worried when she heard this and talked to my dad. I knew that dad was actually on my side, but I was still worried that he would feel under pressure to go along with the woman’s proposal.

“While we were teaching my mum, dad and the rest of the family about child marriage and girls’ rights, I began a hunger strike. I said: ‘I’m not going to eat anything until you call off this wedding. I want to go to school! I refuse to get married!’

“Finally, my whole family understood that I was serious and they cancelled the wedding. I was so happy and I felt free! But the woman and her family were very angry and disappointed. They’re still not speaking to us after the whole thing.”

Ashok’s Girls Club

“It’s thanks to Ashok’s Girls Club that I gained the know-



ledge, support and courage to dare to talk to my family and fight against child marriage. Ashok saved my life and I’m so grateful!

“I joined the Girls Club in our village when I was 13 and I’m now a peer leader of a Girls Club myself. We meet twice a week and my friends Rojina and Saima come too. There are twenty of us who meet every Wednesday and Saturday, and I love it! The meetings last two hours. We spend time together and have fun, but we mainly talk about girls’ rights.

“Girls suffer many rights violations here. Us girls never get to choose whether or not

we can go to school. We never get to choose whether, or when, we’re going to marry. Girls always do all the work at home because families and society believe we need to prepare for life as a married woman. To be able to take care of our husbands and children. So we fetch water, cook, wash up, clean and wash clothes. And on top of that try and find time for school and homework, if we’re lucky enough to get to go to school! Sometimes the boys help their dads with farming, but often they don’t do anything other than hang out with their mates. It’s not right!”

What we’re doing is right!

“The Girls Club gives us knowledge, and together we are stronger. It boosts our confidence and we are bolder about saying what we think. And now that there are a lot of us, people listen!

“We bring both adults and children together at village meetings and we tell them about girls’ rights. When we last had a demonstration march through the village, there were just forty of us girls when we started, but more joined along the way and by the end of it there were loads of us! We held placards and shouted that child marriage had to stop, and that girls’ rights must be respected. Of course, some of the adults

The sign that Salia, Rojina and Saima are showing the others says:

Learning objectives

What is child marriage?

What are the disadvantages of child marriage?

What is the legal age of marriage for a boy and a girl?

weren’t happy with us, and some lads teased us and laughed, but we didn’t care. We know that what we’re doing is right.

“This is important to me. I want other girls to have the



Why are girls forced into child marriage?

Salia thinks that child marriage is mainly down to three factors:

Financial

If a family is poor, they can marry off a daughter and then there’s one less mouth to feed.

Safety

When a daughter reaches puberty, the parents worry that she might be raped or exploited in some other way. They think she’s safer within a marriage.

Honour

If you make sure your daughter isn’t raped, doesn’t have boyfriends or other relationships outside marriage, it protects the family’s honour.





Proud peer leader for girls' rights

"When my friends in the village, who are the same age, and I had completed the Life Skills Education Class that Ashok's organization runs, the other girls chose me to be a peer leader for our club. I was really happy and proud! Together with peer leaders from other villages, I go to Ashok's organization regularly to learn even more about girls' rights and about how to teach the Life Skills Education Class," says Salia.

courage to say no to child marriage, like I did. For all girls to know their rights, so we can defend ourselves when our rights are violated." 🌍

The Girls Club is freedom

"The Girls Club is the only place where we can be completely free. We can meet there and learn important things about our lives, chat, laugh and share our problems. These kinds of places to meet and opportunities don't normally exist for us girls. In villages like mine, girls don't get the chance to talk. Our opinions don't count. We're not listened to. Without Ashok and IHMP, we would never have had this freedom," says Salia.

Welcome!

"Today we're going to talk about child marriage and girls' rights," says Salia, and welcomes all the girls in the club.



Knowledge is the greatest gift!

“The Life Skills Education that us girls get from Ashok’s organization has given me knowledge and boosted my confidence. My dad never used to think about my education at all before. He understands now and he’s got big plans for me!” says Rojina, 15, who dreams of one day becoming a teacher.

But Rojina is already teaching others by being a peer leader for a Girls Club, which they’ve decided to call *Savitribai Phule*.

“**S**avitribai Phule was alive in the 19th century. She was India’s first female teacher and she started a school for girls and fought for girls’ and women’s rights. Savitribai paved the way for us girls and she’s my role model. I’m hugely grateful to her. If it hadn’t been for her, girls would never have had so much freedom. We would have just been prisoners in our own homes.

“I’m one of the peer leaders in our Girls Club, and sometimes when we’re teaching about girls’ rights in villages or schools, I put on a play

about Savitribai Phule. I think it’s important because her message about girls’ rights is just as relevant today as it was when she was alive. Some families still don’t let their daughters go to school. They think there’s no point, as the daughter will still be married off and belong to another family.”

Girls improve the village

“I think it’s all wrong. If a girl gets an education, it won’t just change her life, it will also change the family, the village and the whole of society for the better.



Rojina as a student ...



... peer educator ...



... and as Savitribai Phule.

“In India, girls are also subjected to harassment and sexual violence. Domestic abuse is also very common. But as more girls get to go to school and learn about their rights through Girls Clubs like ours, I believe things will change.

“The knowledge I’ve gained from Ashok’s organization has given me confidence. As a peer leader in the Girls Club, I pass the knowledge I’ve gained about girls’ rights on to others, both children and adults. And

knowledge is the greatest gift you can give to anyone. When I do it, I feel a bit like Savitribai Phule, and that actually makes me proud!”



Equal worth

"Many adults who see my performance are surprised that as a Muslim girl I choose to put on a play about Savitribai, who was a Hindu. But everyone enjoys it and thinks it's really good!" says Rojina.



Here, Rojina is teaching the students at her own school, Swaraj Maahyamik Vidyalaya School, about girls' rights through her performance about India's first female teacher, Savitribai Phule.

"I dream about becoming a teacher when I'm older. Then I'll teach a lot about girls' rights and about gender equality. I also want to be on the Village Council so I can influence others," says Rojina.

TEXT: ANDREAS LÖNN PHOTOS: JOHAN BJERKE





Saima empowers girls

Saima is just 16 years old, but really she should have quit school and got married years ago. Instead she's studying and fighting for girls to be allowed independence and to be treated with respect.

My dad was first asked by another family if he wanted to marry me off when I was 13. It was

followed by lots of other proposals. But my dad kept saying no. He explained that there will be no wedding until

I've been in education for 15 years, and that means that he thinks I need to have finished university studies first.

"The reason he thinks this is because I've always told him everything I learned about girls' rights in Ashok's Girls Club. Dad let me explain to him, and he has understood. I love him for that! The knowl-



Independent and equal.

Keeping informed!

Saima teaches the girls how to use a tablet and access the internet.





Saima's showroom!

edge and confidence I've gained through Ashok's organization IHMP have given me the chance to keep studying and try and achieve my dreams. My greatest dream is to one day be a doctor."

Independent girls

"I'm now leading the Girls Club in our village. As a peer leader, IHMP has given me the chance to go on courses on how to use a tablet, and now I'm teaching other girls about how to search for information online and I can access loads of news and knowledge in this way, so that us girls know what's happening in society and in the world.

"Being able to use a tablet boosts confidence and also we get treated with greater respect. People in the village listen to us now. It wasn't like that before. Then it was just boys and men who were

informed and learned things. Knowledge was withheld from girls. And then it was easy for men to take advantage of girls and trick them. Girls became the property of men, and they could do what they liked with them. Now that we have knowledge, we are both able, and have the confidence, to express our own opinions and then it's not so easy to be taken advantage of. We get more respect. We become more independent."

Earning an income

"Ashok's organization also helped me go on a course in sewing, with a certificate showing I completed the course. I wanted to go on the course because I like clothes, but also to know that I have vocational training. That's really important for a girl because then we can earn our own money, which makes us



more independent and on an equal level with men.

"I now make clothes to order. Customers come to me with the fabric and I make the clothes. I charge between 100 and 200 rupees, depending on the type of work. The money means I can pay for my school books and bus tickets to get to school. I can also contribute a little to my family, and that feels really good." 🌐

Wages pay for school books and bus tickets

"I charge between 100 and 200 rupees per garment, depending on the type of work," says Saima.





Boys must respect girls!

“I pledge as follows: I will not marry until I am 21 years of age and I will not marry a girl less than 18 years of age!” The atmosphere is festive as the twenty boys deliver their pledges strongly and clearly together, just as they always do to end each club meeting.

Sagar, 15, in the little village of Rohilagadh is among the 5,000 boys and young men who have so far been reached by Ashok’s message that girls and boys have equal worth.



The members of the Boys Club meet twice a month and talk about child marriage, harassment of girls, domestic abuse, what being a man means, gender equality and loads more. The meeting goes on for two hours and our teacher Ravindra is a social worker at Ashok’s organization, IHMP.

“It’s important that we talk about these things because girls have it much harder than boys here. Child marriage is still something that affects girls, for example.

“At the club, we learn that it’s illegal to force a girl who is under 18 to marry, but that some families do it anyway. If a girl is married off as a child,

she has to quit school and look after her husband instead. It shouldn’t be like that. All children should have the same opportunities to get out into the world and enjoy life. If you want to achieve your dreams, you have to go to school first.

“And also, a young girl isn’t ready to have children. Both the girl and the newborn baby

Wants change

“Discrimination against girls isn’t right. I joined the Boys Club to gain more knowledge, so that I could work with others by getting involved and influencing people and changing behaviour,” says Sagar.

Here the boys are being taught by Ravindra from Ashok’s organization, IHMP.



Sagar helps fetch water and wash clothes, which means his sisters Baisheli, 13, and Arati, 12, also have time to do their homework, meet up with friends and play.

can die during the birth. And if they survive, the girl still isn't ready to look after children and a family. By stopping child marriage, you're actually saving girls' lives."

A real man

"It used to be that a 'real man' was a big, strong guy who beat his wife. He was the woman's 'boss' and she had to obey him and do whatever he commanded. At Ashok's Boys Club, we learn that a real man respects girls and women, treats them well and sees women as equals.

"A good man gives his sons and daughters the same amount of attention and chances in life. He does good things for everyone in society and the village. Basically, he's a good person.

"I want to be such a man when I'm an adult, but I'm trying to be like that already. At home I fetch water and wash clothes. I want to help, so my mum and sisters don't have to do everything. It wouldn't have been right if I bossed my sisters about and ordered them to do things. Now it's

fairer because they often help with the cooking and cleaning.

Girls used to do everything at home, but it's got a lot better here after the Boys Club meetings, where we learn about gender equality."

Boys need to be on board

"Us boys need to learn about girls' rights and about gender equality if the situation for girls is to get any better. It's no use just having Girls Clubs, we need clubs for us boys too if girls are to be treated with respect.

"Without Ashok's clubs, arranged child marriages would have carried on being a common thing here. But we're starting to see a difference now. Girls are going to school and being treated with greater respect, and I think life is going to be good for everyone in the future." 🌐

Sagar's list of how boys abuse girls' rights

- Men force girls and women to do all the work in the home.
- Boys harass girls on their way to school. They say stupid things and force girls to look at porn on their mobile phones.
- Men force their daughters and sisters into child marriages, which means they have to quit school.
- Girls are harassed and abused in their homes by their dads and then by their husbands.
- Boys subject girls to rape and other sexual violence.



Ashok a role model

"Ashok is a man who treats girls and women with respect, like fellow human beings. He is an important role model and I want to be like him," says Sagar.

TEXT: ANDREAS LÖNN PHOTOS: JOHAN BIERKE

