



## Webinar 20

**Praxis -Voices from Margins series on the Role of Community Based Watchdog Mechanisms to curb Child Labour and Trafficking**

**June 17, 2020**

**With Leher, Save the Children, Vaanavil**

### Panelist Profile

**Kanimozhi** hails from Perundurai, Erode Tamil Nadu and she has completed her education till 11<sup>th</sup> standard. Since 2017 she has been a member in the Adolescent Girls (AG) Group and Village Level Child Protection Committee (VLCPC) in her village. Prior to her experience of 4 years in an AG group, she also had the experience of working with an informal group in her village that discussed the various issues and needs for child protection. Through her AG group “Kalpana Chawla Mandram” she has been conducting meetings and is working with 15 adolescent girls in her village regularly. She will speak in Tamil

**Mamata Sardar** is a Child champion, 16 years old, she working as child champion for past six years in 14 villages under Sarberia Agarhati Gram Panchayat, Sandeshkhali Block II, North 24 Parganas, West Bengal and she is a resident of village Bhatipara under the same GP and block. She along with her peers led the campaign against child marriage and supported in prohibiting more than 100 child marriages in the area and has also rescued children from trafficking (approx. number 91) under her leadership within 2 years. Mamata has participated in the Gram Sabha development planning meetings with Panchayat Pradhan and advocated for street lights in the area. In some parts of her GP, street lights have been installed as part of the children’s demand. She was nurtured by none other than Anoyara Kahtun of Save the Children (who was the recipient of prestigious Nari Shakti award from the President of India and was also the runner-up in Kidz Rights International Peace Prize. Anoyara is her big idol in fighting for the rights of children. Both of them are trying relentlessly for crusading child rights violations with a focus on child trafficking for the purpose of engaging them as child labor or early marriage. Their ambition is to nurture and develop more child champions like them who can voice their support in upholding child rights in the area. She will speak in Bangla.

**Sumitra Devi**, a resident of Biashanpur, Rajnagar block, Madhubani (Bihar), comes with 35+ years of working with Self Help Groups at the village level. She has and continues to be one of the most dynamic and active members of the Village Child Protection Committees (VCPC) across Rajnagar, raising issues of the child at the panchayat level and block administration. She has been the VCPC Secretary for the last 5 years. She will speak in a mix of Maithili and Hindi.

**Mala**, is an ASHA worker, and is an active member of the Village Child Protection Committee (VCPC) for the last 2.5 years. A silent worker, Mala, in addition to performing her role as an ASHA and VCPC member also takes time out to pursue her own studies and help children in the village with their studies. She will speak in a mix of Maithili and Hindi.

**Bishnupriya Poddar** is VLCPC member of Sarberia Agarhati Gram Panchayat of Sundarikhali village under Sandeshkhali Block II of North 24 pgs district, West Bengal. She is also leading SHG of the area and is a member of Panchayat (local self-governance) for the past 10 years. Siberia Agarhati Gram Panchayat received National award in 2019 for being the best Child-friendly GP in India and she is one of the prime members in the local governance representing women of the area. Sarberia Agarhati is one of the VLCPC that has demonstrated evidence of good practices of their functioning in keeping close vigilance in the communities against child rights violations and appropriately address them. Some of the examples of their work include the prohibition of child marriages, addressing child trafficking, and gradual withdrawal of child labour. Thanks to their good work that has steered the development of State Guidelines for VLCPC in West Bengal immediately after the visit of MoS Hon. Dr. SashiPanja, WCD, in the year 2014. The concept was duly acknowledged in the State Guidelines for VLCPC which is considered a significant step to establish CBCPM across West Bengal for addressing Child Protection issues. She will speak in Bangla.

**Jayashree** hails from Erode, Tamil Nadu, and during her childhood, she basically worked as a child labourer at a Spinning and Textile Mill. Since 2004 with her experience she has been working in the field of Child Welfare and Child Protection. Through CARE she has been working on the issues of child rights with emphasis on leadership training for adolescent girls and boys, coordination with VLCPC, and District Level Child Protection Committee. She will speak in Tamil.

**Anindit Roy Chowdhury - Director – Programmes & Policy Save the Children India**

Anindit comes armed with extensive technical expertise in the areas of Programme Development & Implementation, Grant Administration, Policy Advocacy, Fundraising and forging of Strategic Partnerships. Before coming on board as Director – Programmes & Policy at Save the Children, he worked as Programme Manager (Global), Gender Justice and Human Rights at C&A Foundation. At C&A Foundation, he steered the development and management of the investment portfolio of the organization in the area of Gender Justice and Human Rights (focusing on human trafficking, forced and child labour in the apparel supply chain). Prior to C&A Foundation, Anindit served as the Director of International Planned Parenthood Federation, South East. At IPPF, he took a lead on strategic planning, leadership mentoring, programme implementation, policy advocacy, and strategic monitoring and programme evaluation. Anindit has also had enriching stints with UN Women, Sanlaap and International Youth Foundation. At Save the Children, Anindit heads the Programme & Policy department and ensures that robust programmes are implemented to address the various needs of children. Anindit has a Master of Science in Management of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) degree from the prestigious London School of Economics and Political Science.

**Anindo Banerjee - Head, Programme Initiatives, Praxis Institute for Participatory Practices**

Anindo has been associated with Praxis and has anchored a range of initiatives in the domains of public policy and community-led development. His areas of interest include affirmative action, democratic decentralisation and child protection

**Tom Thomas, CEO, Praxis** Welcomes all participants to the 20<sup>th</sup> webinar that focuses on the voice of the margins during this pandemic situation. Over the last 19 webinars Praxis, in collaboration with its partners have tried to bring out the voices from margins ranging from De-notified tribes, adolescent girls, people from North-East, students community, app based workers, victims of child trafficking to entertainment workers. It is very important to recognise them who have been attending and appreciating this webinar series as it encourages us to organise such webinars further. This 20<sup>th</sup> edition is brought together by Praxis, Save the

Children, Lehr and Care. In this panel, we have Child Champion and other representatives of other organisations who remotely work with for child protection, as well. If there is one indicator of global health organisation, to me, it is not the GDP or HPI ranking but the well being of a child. Nation that cannot protect its children, definitely has serious issue that needs to be introspected and our country is one such that needs both introspection and action. This pandemic is add on to the prevailed dreadful situation and many of our studies are pointing that there is a high risk of both child trafficking and child labour. So this webinar is focused on both the importance of monitoring mechanisms as well as challenges involved in it.

**Kanimozhi:** In my village VLCPC was started in 2017. I was a member of the CRC Group in 2017 and later joined the Adolescent Girls group. After joining the group, I was elected to lead the AG group in my village. Based on my interest with the group through CARE I joined VLCPC. My work in VLCPC is to regularly monitor the work of CRC and to work with children in meetings. There are two postings in my village - Puratchi Pen and Ezhutchi penn. We had named our groups as this and I was elected for this. I conduct AG group meetings regularly in my community. There are many issues in the surrounding village including child labour, child marriage, bonded labour, Sexual Harassment, Caste and TASMAL. These 6 issues are the major issues for us and with the lockdown in place the number of child marriages has escalated.

Previously children started using Cell phones, Since children are being influenced by it there are high chances for adolescent girls or boys falling in love affairs. This is also one of the causes for child marriage and the other major reasons would be the influence of peers or neighbours near our households.

Child labourers were high in our village. Even before corona during our interim holidays after exams our parents used to take us to work with them or send us to work for the small period. People go to work due to their financial position and to support their education. After the lockdown was relaxed now the supervisors from these companies have been brainwashing our parents to send their children to work for them. As we are unable to say anything to our parents there are also situations where we agree to work. Children below my age have also been becoming child labourers. It's been 3 months since schools were shut down due to the lockdown but even though schools are open there are higher chances of dropouts. In case of bonded labour, children working in rice or cotton mills on contractual basis are not being paid during the tenure. But still there are children working in mills. As we do not know any other work we go for it. We receive less amount than the one agreed to it in the contract. But due to our financial problem we go for work. TASMAL is an important problem as many are suffering with health and financial problems due to it. During the lockdown with the shutdown there is no income for my father and we are managing with my mother income

During the lockdown with the shutdown of TASMAL for a month my father and my friend's fathers were kind and supportive to us. He used to hit me before it. But after the TASMAL reopened the same issues started to happen again. Caste is another issue in our village. In case a person from upper caste asks our parents to send their child for work, the parents cannot disagree to it just because they are from the upper caste. Mostly the children are required for coolie work and we also agree as we cannot disagree with our parents. We live in a state where we cannot talk against them. Recommendation - the schools to be opened and TASMAL should be closed and the income should be increased for our parents.

**Sumitra:** My name is Sumitra. I am secretary of VCPC. After the outbreak of Corona, all (men , women and children) have been put together in quarantine centres. There are no proper arrangements for the people staying in these centres. We, the VCPC members get into touch with the BDO and with the help of the ex Mukhiya we arranged basic amenities for the people

staying in quarantine centres. The women and children were put into aanganwadis and the men were kept in school separately. People have come from outside. The people are kept in the quarantine centres for 14 days. Due to corona, all the schools are closed and the education is mobile-online based. The young boys and girls are now teaching the children. There is no availability of the work for the general people. Also children are not working. MNREGA is also not working. With the loss of livelihoods now people are facing hunger and poverty.

**Mala:** I am Mala from Pandaul Block. I am working in VPCPC from past two years. Immunization was not happening due to corona that we have been able to regularise. We also have contacted BDO and ensured that people get ration from the outlet. We keep monitoring the status of children and check if any instances of child marriage, child labour or children being indulged in intoxicants -such incidents don't take. We have also distributed the sanitiser and masks among people. We generate awareness among people from our village and other villages too and particularly during this time we make people aware about the precautionary measures for Corona- social distancing, maintain hygiene. I teach the kids and also study at the same time. Nirmala didi has given us free books and we have distributed them among the kids.

**Mamta:** Hi, I am Mamta. I live in Sarberia, Agarhati. I work as a member in childrens' group. North 24 parganas is such an area where trafficking is quite prevalent. Now, during the time of Corona, schools are closed. Because of lockdown and Amphan, many people have lost their houses. Schools, colleges, educational institutes have closed down. As a result, children are facing lots of problems- especially physically and mentally. They are witnessing quarrels at their own houses. Children are not able to go out and meet others and that is also causing their mental health issues.

Many other unknown people are also entering our village along with the migrant workers during this time. We are trying to monitor this situation to resist child trafficking. The risk of child trafficking and child labour are very high. We are also trying to talk to people who are suffering through domestic fights. Because of these, they are not even talking to their own family members.

**Bishnupriya Poddar:** Since 2012, I am working as a VLCPC member. I get the drop out children enrolled in vocational centres and thus helped them to get back to mainstream. We, the members of VLCPC have tried to rescue these children and could get them back on track. Besides that, we support women in SHGs. We have made groups of women aged between 18-24 and built poultry farm or any self help activities for them. VLCPC members work along with Gram Panchayat, local club members, school teachers etc. to protest against child marriage and trafficking. We always keep an eye on the strangers who come into our villages. We try to collect information about them. We have been awarded for our work in VLCPC. We also make sure that the migrants who are coming into the village are quarantined for 14 days. We do not allow anyone to meet them before 14 days are over. We look into the matter of hygiene and cleanliness where we specifically ask them to wear mask, sanitize their hands and wash them too. Maintaining social distance, we visit the schools where people are kept isolated to give them ration. We also cook for them sometimes.

Because of the storm Amphan, more or less all of us are affected in our district. We try to visit all the houses in our area to understand their problems. Apart from this we are in constant touch with ASHA workers to get information about migrant labourers. If the migrant workers come in a group of 10-12 people, we send them to the isolation centre. We make sure of that none of them are in touch. Because of both Amphan and COVID19, people are highly affected.

But all these are deriving from poverty and ultimately this is causing trouble for children. They are not getting proper atmosphere at home to grow into.

**Jayashree** hails from Erode, Tamil Nadu, and during her childhood, she basically worked as a child labourer at a Spinning and Textile Mill. Since 2004 with her experience she has been working in the field of Child Welfare and Child Protection. Through CARE she has been working on the issues of child rights with emphasis on leadership training for adolescent girls and boys, coordination with VLCPC, and District Level Child Protection Committee.

From 2018 we have been a member of VLCPC in 23 villages ideally while performing we have several issues that including the addiction of children in drugs, child marriage. In 2019, through ICPS project we strengthened the VLCPC in 6 villages by conducting various training programs. The other major challenge was in recording the problems faced by the children and following up on the same. Even if it was a DCPU office or Police Station or at village level they did not follow up properly. But the major challenge for us was that after the training the VO's would be transferred rotationally and there was no panchayat leader. Only now a panchayat leader has been appointed and there are instances where these leaders might be unaware of VLCPC's. Most of these cases will get stopped midway as all the departments do not have authority that extends to all. Only after the initiation of ICPS we were able to strengthen the VLCPC's & BLCPC's. Till 2019 the VLCPC meeting were conducted and no further meetings have been initiated. Everyone has been focusing on the pandemic and not on the issues of children. The influence of Sumangali Scheme had been reduced but after this it would definitely increase. Most of the inter-state migrants had come to the centre's here with their children. There has been only one centre and most of their children were also child labourers. Since 70 % of them have left and the brokers are from the same village so they would manage to replace the children from their village. Even if these children are given Rs.100 as wages they would be willing to work for more than 8 hours. Love affairs and child marriages are high in our village and an AG group of girls who was a part of the VLCPC training for 4 years has been married off by her parents. Even in police station when reported the police neglect the problem saying that if the child was 12 years then it's an offence as she is 17 it makes no major difference. Parents are also struggling to repay the loans borrowed. The district level child protection, VLCPC's and BLCPC's should be strengthened. This will enable the panchayat member monitoring committee to ensuring child rights & child welfare. Only when this is done, changes can be brought about & the information should be brought to notice the collector. Even now in DCPU office only 2 people are present and this has to change.

**Mr. Ramendra Mohanti** is the DCPO of south 24 Parganas, West Bengal. The district is leading for trafficking and other child protection issues. He is working closely with save the children and other NGOs to address the issues.

In the present context of COVID 19, everyone is suffering, be it physical or mental. The most impacted are the children. In such circumstances child marriage, child labour and other child protection issues have increased. In our district we have set up a child protection committee as a defence mechanism. In 29 blocks, 4882 VLCPCs and 151 ward child protection committees are there. We mostly depend on this Child Protection Committee to resist child labour or child trafficking. In the year 2019, a project was initiated in schools, colleges and among community members. We started an awareness drive against the child marriage which has brought changes. We have been organised different awareness programmes in schools, colleges, and in the community in district to eradicate child marriage and child trafficking. We are getting the results now and it can be said that we could stop child marriages in our district completely. We got the news of 2 missing children and that also have been rescued and they are now in their respective homes with proper counselling. Child line also has a very strong presence here and they are well equipped to provide support to the needful.

Apart from this, we are suffering from the aftermath of the storm Amphan where we have tried our best to distribute the relief for the families and children. We have rescued one or two most suffered kids in this process and kept them at home. Moreover, we are working our cent percent in our district to help and support everyone.

**Anindit Roy Chowdhury:** I think, I would primarily talk about the transfer of ownership of Child Protection from Civil Society Organisation to the hands of communities. While working with organisations like Child Champion and VLCPC, we get to know about the ground reality. Despite the present condition, we have achieved quite a bit. Child Protection is a law enforcement subject that moved under the civil society organisations and now in the community ownership. Though this is an evolution, but I would say that it is not that one group stops functioning because the other one takes over. It is a subject that needs multiple stakeholders whether it's Government or law enforce or any individual at the community level or Panchayat level. So the first point is we should not look for one individual responsible organisation as it is important to work together. Wherever more than one organisation are working for child protection, we do notice a better result and for example we can of course talk about North 24 Parganas, West Bengal.

Secondly, CSOs are must work out with their jobs. If we continue to be the doers rather than being the facilitators, dependency of communities would increase toward us. We need to work toward a mechanism where we are not needed further in the future where the Government and communities will be taking care of these issues. With regard to ownership, I think it is important to share that ownership as if not, then who else? As the experience of that particular community is more close to the reality as problems are at personal level. The other thing that I find important is when we look at the problems we put more responsibilities to the community members than what we have already. There is a probability of doubling the burden as it is happening with them. so, we need to be conscious about while talking about ownership to not to make the members feel exasperated. This is worrisome as an organisations that work with the issue of child protection, might make them feel over burdened during the process. This is an addition to what they are already doing.

Lastly, I would say that child protection in any scenario should be dealt with the issue of livelihood as they are interrelated. There is a higher chance of being dead due to hunger or poverty than COVID19. Food security should be there as just awareness programmes are not enough for them to survive. We need to look at families with monetary issues or that who are likely to drop their daughter out of schools because of poor financial condition and send them for work. It is not good enough to just look at child protection but the areas revolve around it. We need to understand child, family and community as one unit and that is why there is a need to look at all of them together.

**Anindo Banerjee:** So far the discussion has looked at the challenges of child protection especially in the context of this pandemic situation. The availability of leadership in the local level suitable arrangement makes a huge difference. Now the key question is, what is the best kind of a local level arrangement best suited as watchdogs or custodian of rights of children? It is quite evident from the discussion and experience that for a structure of a village level child protection committee, a committed role of local organisation plays a very crucial role. For an organisation like VLCPC to response and support the community, the responsibility of the community is important which otherwise would have been left to its natural process. To work in community level, the composition of the organisation and ecosystem of the community need to be considered thoroughly. then the question rises that how do we trigger the role of the primary stakeholders or communities? So, we have been working in collaboration with group of communities and some likeminded partners such as, Plan India, Chetna Vikas etc. in the areas of Jharkhand, to explore what makes a community to response to an issue that is not seen as

any. In this process the primary intervention is continuous space, dialogue and reflection where no external judgements are made about if the issue is good, bad or desirable. The intent is to create an opportunity to public stakeholders who make up holistic judgement about their options, examine their practices if it's certainly natural or adopted. Also to see their natural appetite for change, examine the scenario, potential leadership who would extend naturally to the process and then employ that leadership in a way that can make a choice in various circumstances. This needs be done to seek their choices, seek for partners locally, local service providers, institutions such as Gram Sabha or Panchayat and then seek a most rational response out of it. So here the role of facilitation plays a very important role to stop a process which is very subtle in its character. The intention is to not judge, not lead or control the process in any way. We realise during the process that it is important to play a role of solidarity if need. It breaches the gap and increases the responsibility and acceptability of the facilitators. It also helps to have a good understanding of the community and local politics of the area. Continuous dialogue and interactions with groups play an important role for studying community ownership and to build a natural ownership. We need to make sure of a clear change in vision occurs. We also realise the importance of the design of participatory research where the structure is non-intrusive and overpowering. So, basically it should be a process of facilitating where people can access to their options, make inform choices, not make value judgements especially about the people who are not in a position to make apparently rational or pragmatic choices. It is important to work with them and explore them without taking charge of them.

## **Questions and answers**

### **Link between different stakeholders on child protection**

**Question to Kanimazhi** – How strong are the ties between adolescent girls groups and self help groups of -Mahalir Manrams? What does she think can be done to win their support to push forward the recommendations she spoke about?

**Answer – Kanimazhi:** In our village, Adolescent girls and boys group we have the power to protect our village from job contractors. This happened only with regular meetings but now we are unable to do this now due to the lack of connectivity. We work along with SHG members. We have a village level committee which have a mix of different members including adolescent girls and SHG members.

**Nirmala** – I am Nirmala from Madhubani. I work with Leher. Basically, our focus area is adolescent girls and children in the village. The adolescent girls groups and VCPC are now working together on a range of issues - Child marriage, child labour and other issues. Most of the marriages are happening in the age of 15-16 years. The adolescent girls' groups are closely monitoring the children to check if any minor is getting married, pushed into work or any untoward incident. The groups then inform the VCPC members. Wherein, the VCPCs take action. In our project areas, the groups work along with VCPC. We also try to get the support of the administration.

### **Different approaches to child protection**

**Question for Ramendra Mohanti:** What strategy will you adopt to prevent child marriage and orientation of VCPC?

**Answer – Ramendra Mohanti:** We have been training NGOs in block-level identified by BDOs who train the CPCs. In the year 2019, a project was initiated- in schools, colleges and among community members we started an awareness drive against the child marriage which has

brought changes. We have formed Kanyashree club too to stop child marriage. Apart from this as a strategy we closely work with police and other Government bodies too to monitor the situation.

**Question to Anindo** – I agree with the participatory process oriented approach that you explained based on what you are doing in Jharkhand, but how many agencies NGOs/CSO, and the funders are willing to adopt this approach? Have you been able to influence this kind of thinking, if so to what extent in the state to begin with?

**Answer – Anindo:** We have had the luxury to work with donors who appreciated our work and involvement with the base of the communities that invest sufficient time, not having blocked the process. It is very important for the donors to understand the situation and help in facilitating such process from its roots in a sustainable manner. In the case of Jharkhand the process was inclusive towards various communities, understand them and then engage with them to facilitate such process that is necessary. We have been in touch with donors who have this sort of understanding that serves the purpose. I do agree that there is a need of more engagement.

**Question to Anindo** – How do you think that we can make the CPCs and VLCPCs sustainable even when the project under which it has been formed as a part of the activities that closes? Do we have any SOPs which have been advocated by the Government to make the structures part of the system?

**Answer – Anindo:** I think it is important to make the structure around the primary stakeholders. Organisations like VLCPCs should work towards building natural community leadership who are the best to take decisions in any thrust of an intervention like child protection in a community. In terms of sustainability, it is important to being able to create organisations like VLCPC and wider community and governing institutions such as Panchayat or Gram Sabha. There is a need to make such conscious investment in these areas.

**Tasha Koshy from Leher also adds** – I would like to add to what Anindo said about the sustainability of VCPCs. This needs to be done from the beginning of the formation of the VCPCs. Each issue with regard to child labour or child marriage need to be looked after and analysed in terms of how the decisions are taken, and how the simplest of issues are dealt with. Then it is also necessary to think about how we take these issues up with the administration. In Madhubani, 5 years of routine work with the Anganwadi workers and schools, now they are able to identify problems without any support per se. This is something needs to be built from the beginning.

### **Challenges in implementation**

**Question to Ramendra** – In the absence of block-level CPCs in states like Jharkhand especially, efforts to curb child protection remains unfulfilled. Despite establishment mechanisms such as community cadres by Save the Children, efforts some time go in vain because of systemic issues in child protection sphere. So, how do we address these?

**Answer – Ramendra:** If there is no child protection committee in the block level, it is more difficult than usual to work there as work is done primarily by them. We just monitor the situation. If there is no block level committee or any substitution as such, we include one official personnel from block office to look into the situation. In West Bengal, we have trained block level female staff and this has been done in both district and state level too.

**Question to Anindit** – How do we ensure community-level high risk child protection cases reach the appropriate authority for real time action from their side as we do understand and know that everything cannot be solved by the VLCPCs.

**Answer – Anindit:** I couldn't agree more to this as it is not entirely upon the VLCPCs to ensure and look after this issue and there is a need of involvement of law enforcement to this. VLCPCs are not there to replace the law enforcement system per se. At the end of the day law enforcement system of this country is responsible to protect its children. It is unfortunate that the child protection cases are not in the priority of the law enforcement system, but when we have communities, panchayats backing it, it brings back hope.