

'Bihar tops in child marriages'

ROOT CAUSE Poverty and lack of education

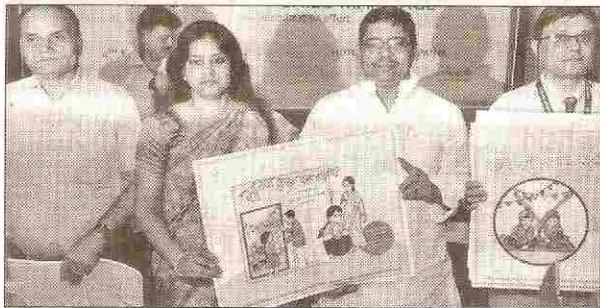
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PATNA: Clad in white shirt and navy blue skirt — the school uniform she loves to flaunt — sporting two neat plaits, Durgawati Kumari, 12, had taken leave from school on Wednesday. It was not without reason though that the petite Durgawati had given her classes a miss at the Prathmik Vidyalaya, Ramsagar, in Bhojpur district. She had come to imbibe something not usually taught in government schools — lessons of life.

Durgawati was not alone. Khushboo Kumari, 10, a student of government primary school in Jandaha (Vaishali) was giving her company. They were the only two inconspicuous, uninvited guests at the state-level consultation on prevention of child marriage. But the impact the conclave had on the two children was more than any of the 150-odd adults attending it.

Having sat without catching a catnap at the nearly eight-hour opening day session, Durgawati and Khushboo seemed to have emerged much wiser. "Of course, I will not marry before I turn 18. I want to study and become a doctor,"



■ Posters against child marriage being released in Patna on Wednesday.

AP DUBE/HT PHOTO

said a coy Durgawati, shrugging off her jitters, as she spoke to the Hindustan Times sitting next to her mother Vidya Devi.

Echoing Durgawati's sentiments, Khushboo said: "I will also motivate my friends not to marry early." The two girls had heard with rapt attention a cross-section of people — right from the minister to the pandit (priest) and religious gurus — all talking about the detrimental effects of child marriage and how traumatic it was for girls to turn mothers in their teens.

In its effort to stem the social malaise, the Women Development Corporation (WDC), co-hosts with the UNICEF of the two-day programme, announced to launch a pilot project in Nawada, Gaya and Vaishali districts, covering 20 blocks, 240 panchayats and 853 villages. Gradually the project would be scaled up to cover

the state.

WDC managing director N Vijayalakshmi said: "Though there was no concrete figure on child marriages, Bihar tops in child marriages as most cases go unreported. But against 47 per cent national average, 67 per cent girls in Bihar get married before they attain 18 years of age."

Earlier, minister for social welfare, Damodar Rawat, blamed poverty and lack of education as the two salient reasons for the social evil. He said that Motihari and Madhepura alone reported 60-70 per cent cases of child marriages. "Even in Patna, which is considered to be a literate district, 40 per cent child marriages have been reported," he added.

State head of Unicef, Yamin Majumdar, identified socio-economic reasons like gender discrimination and social norms

as also weak local governance system at panchayat level as root causes of child marriage.

State convener of Bachpan Bachao Andolan, Mukhtar ul Haque, painted a grim scenario when he said that in Kishanganj, girls were sold off to Punjab cheaper than animals for pecuniary gains.

Santwana Bharti, a social activist, narrated how cops, due to sheer ignorance, had supported in solemnising a child marriage in Bochaha (Muzaffarpur).

Additional Director General of Police, CID, Rajbardhan Sharma, however, negated the belief that cops were ignorant about the child marriage legislation. "It is how seriously they take up the case and what priority they accord to it, which decide how successfully a law is enforced," he added.

Suchitra Rao of the women and child development, government of Karnataka, spoke about the initiatives in her state to curb child marriages. Among them was the Baghyalakshmi scheme for BPL families in which a girl gets Rs 1 lakh from the state government on attaining 18 years of age if her birth was registered within a year register and all development indicators — immunisation, nutrition, education, etc. — were followed.

WDC project director Irina Sinha proposed a vote of thanks.