



## CHILD MARRIAGE IN INDIA

Site Visit of President Ute Scholz  
October/November 2022

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Child Marriage is one of the worsts violations of human rights.

Globally, 21% of girls are married while they are still children, robbing them of their childhood and their right to an education.

Zonta International has supported ending child marriage since 2014 and is since 2018 partnering with UNFPA and UNICEF USA for the “Global Programme to End Child Marriage.”

UNFPA is the United Nations Population Fund,  
UNICEF USA is a U.S. nonprofit supporting the United Nations Children’s Fund.

In November/October 2022, Zonta President Ute Scholz took part in a site visit of this program in India and this presentation reports about this visit, so that Zontians and all donors of the Zonta Foundation for Women receive first-hand information about the effect and impact of these donations.

Sources: UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage programme documents and Wikipedia

# UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage

**end  
child  
marriage**  
A voice. A chance. A future.

**Phase I**  
**2016 - 2019**

Zonta joined  
2018-2020

**Phase II**  
**2020 - 2023**

Zonta continues  
2020 - 2022  
2022 - 2024

**Phase III**  
**2024 - 2030**

To be decided



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Zonta has supported ending child marriage since 2014, contributing US\$2 million to delay early marriage in Niger from 2014-2018. From 2018-2022, Zonta contributed US\$3.5 million to the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage.

For this biennium (2022-24), Zonta International has committed US\$1.2 million to UNICEF USA to support Phase II of the project.

## Currently 8 donors = members of Steering Committee

Governments of

Belgium

Canada

Italy

Netherlands

Norway

United Kingdom

European Union through  
Spotlight Initiative

and ZONTA INTERNATIONAL



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Currently there are 8 donors supporting the programme; they all are members of the steering committee.

As such, they receive reports about the outcome of the programme and will decide soon how the next Phase III (2024 – 2030) will be designed.

These 8 donors are the Governments of

Belgium

Canada

Italy

Netherlands

Norway

United Kingdom

the European Union through the Spotlight Initiative  
and Zonta International.

Zonta is the first – and, so far, only - private-sector donor to the Global Programme. This is a great honor and acknowledges the broad work and successes of Zonta International in strengthening women’s rights and empowering women worldwide.

Zonta has a very close connection to the United Nations and their agencies since the founding of the United Nations in 1945 when Zonta was one of the first NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) invited to partner with the United Nations.

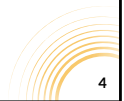
In this picture you can see representatives of the steering committee when they recently met in India for the site visit of the programme.

## Program's Priority

Engaging adolescent girls as key agents of change in 12 countries with a high prevalence of child marriage:



Bangladesh  
Burkina Faso  
Ethiopia  
Ghana  
India  
Mozambique  
Nepal  
Niger  
Sierra Leone  
Uganda  
Yemen  
Zambia



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The Program's priority is engaging adolescent girls as key agents of change in 12 countries which are listed here.

These are countries with high prevalence of child marriage and whose governments agreed to change this practice and to work together with UN agencies and NGOs to make a change.

## India – a colorful country

- Largest democracy in the world
- 28 states, nine union territories
- Fast-growing economy
- Cultural and linguistic diversity



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First, get a feeling about India as a subcontinent:

India is a very colorful country.

It is the largest democracy in the world and comprises of 28 states and 9 Union Territories.

India is a fast-growing economy with high cultural and linguistic diversity.

## India – a diverse country



- 22 official languages; Hindi most spoken (44%)
- Steep urban – rural disparity
- More than 2,000 ethnic groups
- Diverse castes and tribes and caste communities
- 80% Hindi, 15% Muslim, 2.3% Christians, and many other religions

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India is also a very diverse country:

There are 22 official languages, whereas Hindi is the most spoken language, spoken by 44% of the population.

There is a steep urban – rural disparity countrywide.

In India there are more than 2,000 different ethnic groups with very diverse castes and tribe communities.

80% of the population are Hindi and 15% Muslims, whereas the number of Hindi has decreased and the number of Muslim increased since the last decade; India has the largest Muslim population for a non-Muslim majority country.

The next largest religious group are Christians with 2.3% of the population. Below this number there is a huge variety of different religious minorities like Sikhs, Buddhists, and others.



## India – a populous country

- Second largest population globally, 1.38 billion
- 1/6 of the world population
- Highest number of adolescents: 1/5 of the population is between 10 and 19 years old
- Average age: 28.7 years



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India is a populous country:

India is the the second most populated country (1.38 billion) in the world behind China. There lives a sixth of the world's population.

India has the highest number of adolescents: around one fifth of the population are between 10 and 19 years old.

This is exactly the age group that is threatened by child marriage.

The average age of an Indian is 28.7 years.



# Women in India

## Indian Constitution:

Guarantees full access to education, sport, media, work, science, technique, equal pay for equal work for all women

Vast legislation and jurisdiction to protect women and women's rights.



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The status of women in India has been subject to many changes during history.

Nowadays the constitution of India guarantees to all Indian women equality, no discrimination and equal opportunities.

It guarantees women full access to education, sport, media, work, science, technique and equal pay for equal work.

There is a vast legislation and jurisdiction overall in the country to protect women and women's rights.

## Women in India

BUT:

India is the most dangerous country in the world for women, according to the Thomson Reuters Foundation, London, 2018



Although, India is very often called the most dangerous country in the world for women. This was for instance stated by the Thomson-Reuters Foundation in London in 2018 that focused on human rights and women's rights.

This demonstrates a huge discrepancy between the written legal situation and real life and customs, especially in rural areas.

## Women in India



- Status depends on family relations
- Hierarchical, patriarchic system
- Legal age for marriage:  
Girls: 21 years old  
Boys: 18 years old
- With marriage the bride moves to the family of the husband
- Majority of marriages are arranged
- Dowry from the bride's family

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The status of women in India is strongly connected to family relations.

In India, the family is seen as crucially important and in most of the country the family unit is multi-generational and a hierarchical and patriarchic system: The elder have authority over the younger generation and men over women.

The legal age for girls to marry is 21 years; for boys 18 years. This may surprise; it is a higher age than in most of the countries. Currently there is even a discussion to raise the age for boys also to 21 years.

With the marriage the bride is moving to live with the in-laws family.

Most of the marriages are arranged; family members are looking for a suitable spouse within their castes or tribes.

The bride's family must give a dowry.

## Women in India

- Highest number of child marriages
- Around 1/3 of all marriages are child marriages
- Currently 16% of girls between 15 and 19 years old are married and 15% of boys



India has the highest number of child marriages, which are marriages under the legal age of marriage.

One third of all marriages overall in India are child marriages.

Currently 16% of girls between 15 and 19 years old are married and 15% of boys.

## Women in India



- High rate of hidden criminality toward girls because of dowry
- However:  
Officially, low rate of divorces

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There is a high rate of hidden criminality towards women and girls because of the dowry tradition.

There are laws against dowry in India since decades, but in real life they are ineffective.

The dowry is a condition of the marriage; durable goods, cash or other kinds of property are given by the bride's family to the groom and his family.

Through dowry a recently married woman is tied economically and socially to the new husband. Dowry can be used as a threat or hostage type situation to receive even more money from the bride's family. Dowry related violence against women like fraud, cruelty, suicide of brides and dowry murder threaten the brides especially in northern and eastern India.

Although India has one of the lowest divorce rates in the world with around 1% of marriages ending in divorces. This may also be an indicator that women are financially less independent and are forced to stay in a relationship even if is a non-romantic or violent relationship.

## “Key driver” for child marriage in India

Social and economic pressures, caused by:

- Poverty
- Hunger
- Age-old tradition
- Illiteracy
- Dowry system



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Social and economic pressures caused by poverty, hunger, age old traditions, illiteracy, and dowry are the key drivers of early child marriage in India.

The participants of the site visit had the opportunity to talk to young adolescent girls about their experiences.

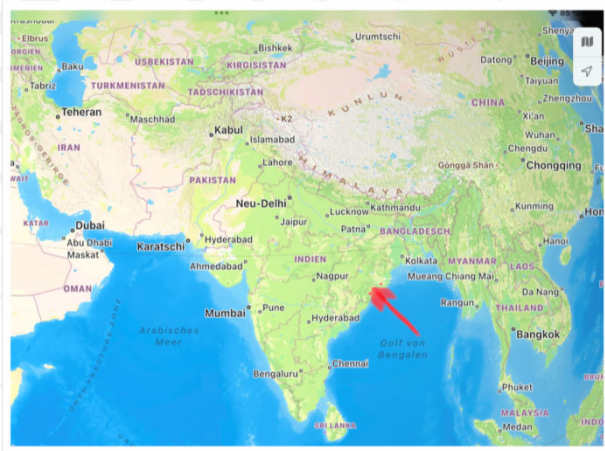
A typical situation that was reported from girls was that their father passed away, mostly because of COVID. The mother had to struggle to feed all her kids. Giving the child to marriage was a solution for her how to survive with the other kids.

Other girls reported that they are orphans and marriage was offered to them as a way out to join a new family.

In such a situations the girls were in danger to get married.



# The State of Odisha



- Population: 42 million
- Primarily rural (83%)
- Large tribal (indigenous) and caste population (3rd largest)
- Vulnerable through cyclones, floods, draught

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The members of the Global Programme to End Child Marriage met in the north-east of India, in Bhubaneshwar, the capital of the state of Odisha.

Odisha is the 8<sup>th</sup> largest state in India with approximately 42 million people.

The population of Odisha is primarily rural: 83% live in rural areas, whereas only 13% in urban regions.

There is a large tribal (indigenous) and caste population in Odisha, it is the 3rd largest in India:

40% of the population in Odisha are Scheduled Tribes (23%) or Scheduled Castes (17%). They are most often vulnerable to socio-economic shocks. The state is home to 13 particularly vulnerable tribal groups.

From the geography, Odisha is vulnerable through cyclones and floods in the coastal region. 11 districts in the western part are prone to drought.



## The State of Odisha



Only 69.5% of women  
and 84.6% of men  
can read and write



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Illiteracy is recognized as a key driver for child marriage, and it is also a consequence of when girls drop out of school.

84.6% of the men in Odisha can read and write, whereas only 69.5% of the women.

## Women and girls in Odisha

- Only 33% of women and 38.6% of men have been enrolled at school for 10 years
- 894 girls per 1,000 boys
- Fewer admission of female newborns to special newborn care units
- Anemia
- Only 2% prefer more daughters, whereas 13% prefer more sons



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Only 33% of women and 38.6% of men in Odisha have been enrolled at school for 10 years. 22% of girls drop out of secondary school.

There is an alarming number in sex ratio at birth in Odisha; there are only 894 girls per 1,000 males. This indicates a lower value of girl child in the state.

Odisha has the highest newborn mortality in the country (32 per 1,000 live births) with steep urban – rural disparities.

Gender inequity, especially a fewer admission of female newborns to the special newborn care units, is also a concern.

Anemia among adolescent girls and pregnant women is also a critical issue that causes many lives of women and babies.

Statistics show that people in Odisha have a higher preference for sons than for daughters. Only 2% of them prefer more daughters, whereas 13% prefer more sons.

## Women and girls in Odisha



Though,

- Teenage pregnancy has almost halved since 2005
- The number of child marriages reduced by more than half since 1995 to now 20.5% for girls and 13.3% for boys

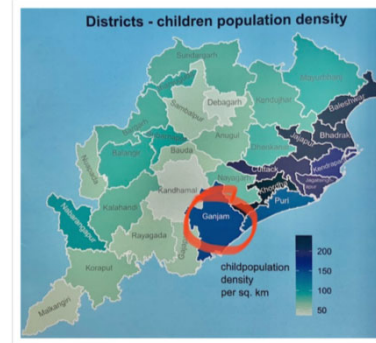
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But there is also improvement with regards to child marriage and teenage pregnancy in Odisha:

The number of teenage pregnancies almost halved in the 10 years from 2005/06 to 2015/16. Now it has been stagnant in the last 5 years.

And the number of child brides reduced for more than half since 1995 from 45.5% to now 20.5%. Even 13.3% of boys are married before the age of 18 years.

## A warm welcome in Ganjam/Odisha district



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From Bhubaneswar the site visit took the group to the rural district of Ganjam, circled on red on the map above.

All people in the village welcomed the visitors with festive attire and dance and music. *(The left picture is a short video with the rhythm of the music, welcoming the guests.)*

The guests were led into the community building to meet with adolescents and people from the village.

# Strategies against child marriages

## Strategic Action Plan

Goal: Declare the state child marriage free by 2030

How: Strengthen and empower

adolescents in cooperation between:

- All departments of government
- Civil society
- Communities and villages
- Families, schools
- UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage



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UNICEF and UNFPA worked closely with several departments of government in 2019 in drafting a multi-sectoral “Strategic Action Plan to End Child Marriage” to make the state of Odisha child marriage free by 2030.

How do they want to accomplish this?

This shall be accomplished by cohesive and convergent efforts of various departments of the government, the civil society, districts, communities and villages as well as families and schools, together with UNICEF and UNFPA in the Global Programme.



# ADVIKA – “Every Girl is Unique”

Girls as Peer Leaders (*Sakhi Sahelis*)

- Lead groups of girls
- Life-skills training
- Inform about child marriage, child labor, child trafficking and child sexual abuse
- WhatsApp group of peer leaders—keep contact, raise voice of children, inform



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A crucial component of this Action Plan is the “ADVIKA – Every Girl is Unique” program, that was launched in partnership with UNICEF and UNFPA on 11 October 2020, the International Day of the Girl Child. This program was converted to a statewide scheme; ActionPlan, a local partner of the UN agencies, supports the implementation. They work closely with communities and local administration.

ADVIKA reaches out to adolescent girls and boys and informs them about rights of children, sexual and reproductive health, gender, child protection, nutrition and more. Here in this picture, you can see adolescents who shared their thoughts and reported about their experience with this program.

Girls as Peer Leaders, called “Sakhi Sahelis”, are identified and skilled. They provide basic orientation in life skill components and key messages on child marriage, child labor, child trafficking, child sexual abuse, etc.

For promoting digital engagement during COVID, WhatsApp groups of the Peer Leaders were formed to engage girls meaningfully to ensure that they raise their voices and are reached out with the right messaging on the issues affecting them.

On the top right, you see the ADVIKA logo and tagline that was developed for visibility everywhere.

## And boys in ADVIKA



Boys are educated in:

- Reproductive health
- Child marriage
- Child rights

Hotline: Child Helpline

ADVIKA app

Boys are also included in the ADVIKA program.

They are educated in reproductive health, child marriage, child rights and more.

The boy in this picture is wearing a yellow ribbon to promote the “Child Helpline,” a hotline for children of risk and in danger.

This boy addressed child marriage very courageously and explained to the visitors why this is harmful for girls and boys and why he is engaged.



## The ADVIKA app

- Digital learning platform for girls to engage them digitally
- Curated courses on digital skills and employability skills
- Financial literacy

1/3 of adolescents have their own mobile

Mobiles available in schools and community houses



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In addition, the ADVIKA App has been launched with an IT partner for engaging girls and boys digitally and providing them a supplementary learning platform with curated courses on digital skills, employability skills and financial literacy.

Mobile phones are very popular in India; ca. one third of the adolescents have their own mobile. For those without access, mobiles are available in schools and community houses to connect all and to teach the target group.

## ADVIKA training



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ADVIKA training starts already at early age.

In the picture in the middle, a teacher shows a box with the ADVIKA logo. Children can use it as an agony box or as help tool for any messages they want to share.

On the left side, this young adolescent girl spoke about how she escaped from child marriage. She is practicing now Taekwondo and takes part in competitions. When she is an adult, she wants to become a policewoman to protect other girls.

Overall, 1 million adolescent girls and boys in Odisha were reached through ADVIKA and were informed about the rights of children and other key messages of ADVIKA including the adolescent calendar on every Saturday.

## Nirbhaya Kadhi – the fearless adolescent

Committees in villages to create awareness, track vulnerable adolescents, support social workers

Program for stakeholders, adults, traditional leaders

Honoring the “Leaders against Child Marriage”

Campaigns like mass pledges



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There are committees in the villages that create awareness on the issue of child marriage, track vulnerable adolescents, support the frontline workers.

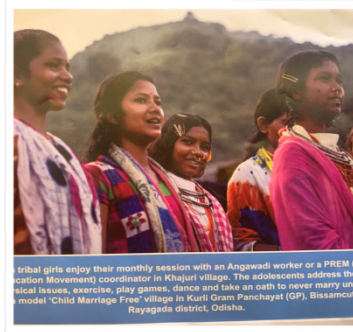
Every Saturday is declared as “Nirbhaya Kadhi Day,” and committees at all levels are responsible to engage and interact with adolescent girls in their field.

Regular sensitization sessions help to ensure the sustainability of the program. These sessions include essay competitions, debates, drawing competitions and awareness rallies, followed by an oath ceremony by the students.

Mass pledge campaigns among school students across the district are conducted as part of the Nirbhaya Kadhi program, the Fearless Leaders.

Students from primary schools and high schools participated in the oath taking ceremony as well as members of Women’s Self-Help groups, nurse midwives, and other workers at health care units.

## Fearless adolescents



Adolescents, girls and boys, who successfully prevented their own child marriage are honored as “Leaders against Child Marriage.” They also participate in various forums to share their story. In addition, a traditional leaders forum was formed at district level to ensure commitment of the concerned leaders to end child marriage and to empower adolescents.

The visitors had the opportunity to speak with these “Fearless Leaders” and to listen to what happened to them and how they escaped their child marriage. They demonstrated that their life skills training empowered them effectively.

## Empowering disadvantaged adolescents

- Scholarships for adolescent girls from tribes and castes
- Skilled and mentored as “Change Agent” in their community
- Life-skills program
- User-friendly learning tools in Braille, tactical books, video files for disadvantaged adolescents



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How to empower disadvantaged adolescents in Odisha?

Around 1 million adolescent girls from Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes were supported with scholarships to continue their education.

Tribal adolescents have been mentored to act as a “Change Agent” in their community through livelihood and enterprise promotion,

In order to reach out to adolescents with disabilities with information on their sexual and reproductive health and rights, UNFPA has developed user-friendly learning tools, training materials, Braille and tactical books and models, video files with sign language interpretation and scrolling text, as well as other communication materials for disseminations for special schools.



## The Day of Children

- On the 14th of each quarter
- Meetings of Child Protection Committees at district and village levels
- Review on issues related to children, strengthening child protection mechanism, implementation of schemes.
- Adolescent leaders join, share their issues



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The 14<sup>th</sup> of each quarter end had been declared as “A Day for Children.”

On that day, meetings of Child Protection Committees are held at district and village levels. A review is made on the issues related to children, strengthening of child protection mechanism and implementation of schemes.

Adolescent leaders are encouraged to join and share their issues in the meetings.

## Child marriage free villages

Joint strategy by

- Community and villages
- Adults, parents
- Schools
- Village leaders
- Tribe leaders
- Adolescents

to declare their village child marriage free



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The process of declaration of “child marriage free village” through mobilizing community and adolescents started in 2019.

The initiative started in one village. This was noticed by others! Other villages followed and also declared themselves child marriage free. The State of Odisha recognized this as a best practice and directed all districts to take similar steps and mobilize communities to take ownership in creating an enabling environment for children, especially girls, towards ending child marriage.

Here in this picture village leaders and teachers are explaining the reasons why their village will benefit from being child marriage free.





# Child marriage free temples



Temples declared themselves also child marriage free with written text outside:

“Marriage before the legal age is punishable and no illegal marriage shall happen in this temple.”

Also, the temples in the villages declared themselves as child marriages free temples. This is a big success because usually marriages happen in temples.

## Child marriage free temples

These religious leaders are proud to support their village in ending child marriage and to shift age-old traditions toward child protection.



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The visitors had the chance to talk to the religious leaders in a villages. They were proud to contribute and to show the visitors their child marriage free temple.

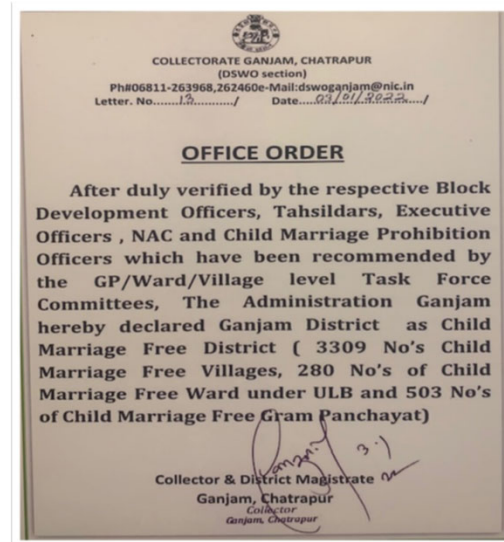
With this step a real shift in age old traditions towards child protection could be accomplished.

## Child marriage free villages and temples

On 3 January 2020, the administration of the Ganjam district declared the district as a child marriage free district.

Law Department Order: ban of child marriage at religious places

Now 10,000 villages are child marriage free



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On 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2022, the administration of the district of Ganjam finally declared the district as a child marriage free district.

In addition, a Law Department Order was passed in Odisha to display notice of ban on child marriage at religious places and institutions.

A verification of age proof for both parties before marriage is mandatory in all temples.

Now, 10.000 villages declared themselves child marriage free.

## Scope in the state of Odisha

- 100,000 peer leaders skilled
- 300,000 adolescent boys skilled
- Community training and transformation reached:
  - 1,156,429 women
  - 109,047 men
  - 239,086 adolescent girls
  - 61,067 adolescent boys
  - 3,000 traditional leaders



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100.000 girls were identified as peer leaders and skilled.

300.000 adolescent boys were reached out through ADVIKA.

UNICEF and its partner Action Aid provided technical support to the district administration of 15 districts in Odisha through awareness drives, capacity building activities and activities to change social behavior.

Overall, they reached out to a huge number of women and men, you can see the numbers on the slide, as well as to huge numbers of adolescent girls and boys and 3,000 traditional leaders.



## Scope in the state of Odisha

- Life-skills education program at 1,157 tribal schools
- 155 schools equipped with tools for disabilities
- 30,343 adolescents directly supported with cash assistance for higher education
- 1 million adolescent girls from tribes and castes continue school with scholarship



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In 1,157 tribal schools, life skills education programs have been implemented, reaching nearly 150,000 girls. The programme is equipping them with knowledge, skills and attitudes to lead healthy lives and address vulnerabilities including child marriage and teenage pregnancy.

155 special schools were equipped with special tools for adolescents with disabilities.

More than 30,000 adolescent girls and boys were directly supported with cash assistance for higher education and skill training.

Around 1 million adolescent girls from Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes communities were supported with a scholarship to continue their education

## With representatives from district and state

Feedback

Acknowledgment

Exchange

Questions

Answers



The group met with representatives from district and state for feedback and exchange.



## India government in Delhi: Ministry of Health and Family Welfare



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Travelling on the way back to the capital, New Delhi, the representatives of the donors were invited by the Indian Ministry of Health and Family Welfare to share their impressions and give feedback.

## Good results – thanks to good cooperation

- Less child marriages
- Less teenage pregnancies
- Between Jan – Aug 2022: 1,855 child marriages were prevented in Odisha (to compare, in 2019: 657)

Secret of success:

Ending child marriage turned to village-owned topic!



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The members of the site visit were very pleased to see the power and engagement of all parties on state, district and village level. By including the adolescents, they hear their voices, and they are a partner on eye level. This will enable them to grow to be resilient and self-determined adults.

Here you can see the group celebrating,

- that the number of child marriages in Odisha could be reduced consequently over the last decades
- and the number of teenage pregnancies could be halved.

Between January and August 2020, 1,855 child marriages were prevented in Odisha. This is a great success, compared with the numbers from 2019, when only 657 child marriages were prevented. This increase shows that the strategies that are taken are effective due to a good cooperation on all levels.

## Key to sustainable success

Started as goal on state level with an integrated program of empowerment

Shifted to a village-owned project with change of tradition and behavior



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What could be observed during the site visit is that the fight to end child marriage turned from a state's goal to a village-owned topic and strategy accompanied by other components like adolescent-friendly hospitals and a separate budget on state level.

It started on state level, and with support of UNICEF and UNFPA and their partners in the villages, the people in the villages adapted it as their own project to really set an end to this harmful practice and to protect children's rights sustainably. This may be the key to sustainable success and to a shift of age-old traditions.

The visitors were deeply impressed by this vision and energy of all partners.

## Debriefing at the UN House in Delhi



The site visit ended at the UN House in New Delhi with a debriefing meeting with many representatives from UNICEF and UNFPA based in Delhi.

For all participants, the fight to end child marriage globally is an important goal. This is one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations, that shall be accomplished by 2030.

This is why the donors of this programme, that were mentioned at the beginning, are financially engaged.

Among these donors, Zonta is a bit different. As Zonta International, we don't only support this programme with generous donations to our Zonta Foundation for Women. Beyond this, Zontians are worldwide advocates against child marriage, not only in these 12 countries of the programme, but around the world where Zontians are. This is an additional layer that Zonta can contribute to this programme to be even more effective.

Zontians raise their voice against child marriage also in Europe, Africa, America, Oceania and Asia and demand that actions are taken. And we can see that child marriage is no longer tolerated as a tradition, but that it is seen as what it is – a violation of women's and children's rights!

Together, we as Zontians can make a change to build a better world for women and girls!

Thank you for your passion to Zonta, for your activities, for the time and ideas you contribute and for your generous donations to our Zonta Foundation for Women. Without these contributions we could not raise Zonta's voice globally.

Thank you  
for your  
attention!



Thank you very much for your attention!