

Girls of HIV-affected families saved from marriage

International Day of the Girl Child



United Nations General Assembly has designated October 11 as the International Day of the Girl Child that promotes girls' rights and highlights gender inequalities that remain between girls and boys

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Kavitha (12), Padma (13), Sunitha (14), Lankamma (15) and so on ... whose parents died of AIDS ended up in marriages with disheartening lives, facing violence from husbands, trying to end life as they were unable to bear the shame and guilt associated with AIDS. Pressure mounts for early marriage on girl children from family members who fall prey to this particular disease.

"I cannot leave you alone while I am dying, there is no safety in the slum and none of our relatives will care for you, so you should get married" was the agony of a mother living with HIV with her 13 year old daughter.

"Once community knew that your parents were living with HIV, I might not be able to bring an alliance for you. Although you are not HIV positive still others have a doubt," says a distressed granny to her 12-year-old granddaughter at 12. While child marriages itself are deplorable, what is horrifying is that children of HIV affected parents are forced marry due insecurity and stigma after the death of the parents

This is the situation of girl children from HIV affected families even as of date regarding marriage. Vasavya Mahila Mandali of Vijayawada has come to the rescue of several such girls from the region through community driven initiatives Prasanthi (13), a tribal village orphan school dropout was forced into marriage by her uncles and grandmother as her father an agriculture labourer died of AIDS and mother left home in her infancy.

She saw her sister Kavitha married at 12 and her life pushed into turmoil. VMM reached Prasanthi in 2004 through a community outreach programme. She told the outreach worker of her plight and family decision of forcing her to marry. With her consent Prasanthi was admitted in a VMM's residential training in beauty care for three months in 2005 that was a signpost in her life.

She had an exposure to the other teenagers from HIV affected families and learnt crisis management and life skills. After the training she started working. She was affected with TB in 2009 and was later cured. She is now has a job and is earning, she confidently says, "If I wish to marry I will disclose the HIV status of my parents to the family in alliance hence one who is willing only will come forward otherwise if I hide the truth before marriage and it is known afterwards, the trust is lost and life would be hell."

"In our tribal colony many children became orphans as parents died of AIDS and now I counsel my relatives and elders that child marriage is a sin and crime, she says without hesitation." Revathi's life was a puzzle in 2003. She just completed VIII standard with marks but both her parents and younger brother were stricken with AIDS.

Her mother was worried that if she died who would care for her daughter's marriage. She was looking out for alliances. VMM came to know Revathi's plight. VMM project director took a staunch step in protecting the rights of children and at the same time balancing the sensitivities of the mother living with HIV. After consistent counselling of parents, Revathi was admitted to a residential education programme and came out with good performance in X standard. Later, she graduated with distinction from VMM's nursing school in 2006.

Now she is a social change agent by becoming a founder Member of Children Leadership Development Association, a community based organisation promoted by VMM. Revathi says that a timely intervention extended by VMM in her life has made me a productive citizen and now an ambassador to save many more innocents from the curse of child marriage.

These are only a few cases that VMM has been able to intervene and help these children and transform their lives. Society needs to do more. Education of women is the best way to transform their lives especially the rural and tribal areas.

Thanks to United Nations General Assembly for designating October 11 as the International Day of the Girl Child that promotes girls' rights and highlights gender inequalities that remain between girls and boys. Wish girl children live in gender equity through active support and engagement with parents, families, and the wider community.

The message is simple: girls' rights are human rights; the sooner in life girls know their rights, the greater the chance they will be able to exercise them.

(The writer is Technical Support Leader, VMM)

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