

Community radio stops child marriage

by: Teje Brandsma

Sukhi Akhtar is a 13-year-old girl from Baliatali village in South Bangladesh. She would have been someone's wife by now if local station Lokobetar Radio hadn't warned against the practice of child marriage. BNNRC, Free Press Unlimited's partner in Bangladesh, supports 16 community radio stations including Lokotabar.

Sukhi Akhtar is a student in class nine at Babujanj Junior School. Her father, Dulal Sarkar, had decided to marry her off. Bangladesh has one of the highest child marriage rates worldwide, and the highest rate of all for girls under 15. Child marriage is most prevalent in rural areas, where 71 percent of girls are married before the legal age of 18, compared to 54 percent in cities.

Sukhi refused to marry, as she wanted to continue her education. She needed a way out, and thought of the program on early marriage she had recently heard on Lokobetar Radio, her local community station.

Local radio station intervenes

Sukhi discussed the matter with one of her teachers, who had taken part in a discussion panel about child marriage on the radio. The teacher informed Lokobetar's station manager about Sukhi's situation. She in turn warned the local police and through their interference the marriage was prevented.

Lokobetar produces programs aimed at preventing child marriage. It promotes and encourages early intervention, which is supported by the police. Lokobetar thwarted 55 child marriages in 2016 alone. On International Women's Day in March 2017, the station received an award from the local administration for their contribution.

100s more prevented across Bangladesh

"We have had remarkable success in preventing child marriages via community radio stations," says Mohammad Kamaruzzaman, program coordinator for Bangladeshi NGO Network for Radio and Communication (BNNRC). "They have been blocked on hundreds of occasions in different districts."

BNNRC

Through its local partner, the Bangladeshi NGO Network for Radio and Communication (BNNRC), Free Press Unlimited links community radio stations and supports them with knowledge and training, including sessions on fund-raising, management and the production of radio programs.

Training new reporters

The BNNRC also trains and mentors new reporters. In a country where few women get the chance to work outside the home, BNNRC encourages women and girls, including those from lower castes, to apply for the training program. At the end of their program they receive a press card, which gives the women proof of their occupation as well as recognition of their abilities.

Serving communities through radio

The BNNRC helps organise talk shows and live debates on the radio between citizens, local authorities and NGOs on child marriage, local budgets, land rights and other topics. And it connects stations with local law enforcement and executive authorities during

cyclones and other emergencies. As an umbrella organization, BNNRC has helped organize the regulation of community radio stations, connects the stations with local governments and civil society organizations, and actively lobbies for legislation that supports community media.