

CASE STUDY & REFLECTION

BETWEEN PROTECTION AND TRUST

A Reflection on Preventing Child Marriage



A Support Person's journey of navigating ethics, law, and human connection.

Documented by Smriti Mishra
Assistant Program Manager, Aagaaz

“Protecting a child is not only about preventing harm. It is also about expanding the range of futures the child is genuinely able to imagine and choose.”

Building Trust Before the Crisis



I have been working as a Support Person (SP) under the POCSO Rules 2020 with Prerana for over three years now. As a Support Person, our role focuses on assisting the child during the investigation and trial. During this time, Prerana was referred to the case of Sakshi in the capacity of a Support Person, and I started intervening with the child and her family. Each follow-up visit was an opportunity to understand how the child and her family was navigating the aftermath of the crisis and whether they were moving closer to stability. One such follow-up led me to Sakshi's new home.

I had learnt that the family had recently shifted to a different locality. Although it was not very far from their previous residence, the unfamiliar neighbourhood meant I had to rely on Sakshi's family over the phone to help me navigate the lanes until I finally reached their doorstep.

A month and a half earlier, we had spoken outside a makeshift tarpaulin shelter, our conversation carried along by the sounds and movement of the settlement around us. This time, I stepped into a one-room pucca house, more settled and secure than their earlier dwelling, though the room held a certain stillness. Light filtered in through the gap left above the door for ventilation, partly illuminating the room. The space seemed to hold its breath.



We began, as we usually did, by talking about everyday life, how everyone had been managing, Sakshi's routine, and the family's day-to-day struggles. Almost hesitantly, Sakshi's mother shared that the family had begun discussing the possibility of arranging Sakshi's marriage within their circle of acquaintances. For a brief moment, I found myself sitting with the silence that followed. Before offering solutions, I needed to understand the fears that had brought them here.

Over the next hour, our conversation moved back and forth through layers of uncertainty, and hope. Sakshi's mother spoke of financial insecurity, the fear of social stigma, concerns for her daughter's safety, and the constant pressure of making decisions in circumstances where every option seemed difficult. As she spoke, it became increasingly evident that the proposal for marriage was not born out of celebration or aspiration, but of something far more complex.

Before exploring and delving deeper into the family's concerns, I felt it was important to acknowledge what the law required. I explained to Sakshi's mother that, since Sakshi is **16 years old**, solemnizing her marriage would constitute child marriage and could invite legal consequences for everyone involved in facilitating it. From there, our conversation gradually shifted to what could still be done to **prevent the marriage** from taking place. I began exploring the family's concerns one by one. Together, we reflected on what marriage might mean for Sakshi at this stage of her life—not only in the immediate future, but also for her education, emotional recovery, autonomy, and long-term well-being.

The Alternative Paths Explored



We imagined an alternative path: one where Sakshi could continue her education through educational sponsorship facilitated by Prerana; where institutional support could be mobilised through the Child Welfare Committee (CWC); where the family could be assisted in securing essential identity and entitlement documents, including facilitating their ration card linkage; where they could be linked to welfare schemes such as the Bal Sangopan Yojana and effort could be made to expedite the follow up under Manodhairya Yojana to help ease some of their financial pressures; and where support could be extended to help Sakshi's mother explore stable livelihood opportunities.

As I stepped out of their home that day, I found myself replaying our conversation. I wondered whether, even for a brief moment, it had widened the mother's view of what might still be possible. Had we managed to open a window to a future where Sakshi's life could be shaped by her choice rather than fear? I did not know whether the family's decision would eventually change. That uncertainty stayed with me.

When the Possibility Became Imminent



The morning of 19th March 2025 began with a phone call that I still remember vividly. Sakshi's mother called to tell me that the family had decided to solemnize Sakshi's marriage the very next day, on 20th March 2025. In the same conversation, she asked me to share the Investigating Officer's (IO) contact details so that she could "settle the matter" with him. Sensing the urgency of the situation, I informed the IO about the family's plans. Although he was away on official duty, he assured me that another police team would visit the family and assess the situation. Before ending the call, I requested him to keep me informed of any developments.

When no further information came through from the police, I decided to make an unannounced visit (along with my colleague) to Sakshi's home the following day. The moment we saw Sakshi, we noticed her hands were covered with mehendi (henna). When I gently asked her about the occasion, she confirmed that both her haldi ceremony and the wedding were scheduled for later that day. I also asked Sakshi how she felt about the marriage and whether this was something she wanted. After a brief pause, she responded that she was "okay with whatever her family decided" for her. Her response seemed less like an expression of choice and more like an acceptance of decisions that had already been made around her.

Recognising that there was little time left to act, we immediately discussed the situation internally within the organization. We decided to mobilize the District Child Protection Unit (DCPU). Together, with the DCPU team we proceeded to the Police Station to formally report the attempted child marriage and seek intervention. From there, accompanied by the police team, we made our way back to Sakshi's locality in police vehicles. As we travelled, I found myself preparing for what lay ahead. As we drove towards the locality, I found myself mentally preparing for the intervention ahead. I anticipated that the family would resist our efforts to stop the marriage; after all, we were intervening at a deeply personal moment. **What I could not foresee, however, was how the events would unfold and with what intensity once we arrived.**

THE INTERVENTION



The arrival of multiple police vehicles drew the attention of the neighbourhood. People slowly emerged from their homes, some watching quietly from their doorways, others peering through windows or exchanging hushed conversations, trying to make sense of the unexpected presence of uniformed police officers in their locality.



As the police entered the house, I remained back outside, mindful that my presence along with the police might intensify the family's reaction, especially since they had entrusted me with the information they had shared. From where I stood, I could hear fragments of the conversation inside. The police began by asking a series of questions. Was a marriage about to take place? The family did not deny it. The officers then asked the bride's age. The response came promptly: she was said to be eighteen years old. When the police requested documentary proof, Sakshi's mother explained that they did not possess any age-related documents because Sakshi's previous school had not released her records due to unpaid fees. Voices grew louder as family members attempted to justify their position, while the officers continued seeking information that could establish Sakshi's age.

Sakshi's mother stepped outside partway through, and the moment she saw me, her expression changed. **The restraint she had maintained until then gave way to anger and disappointment.** She confronted me directly, accusing me of betraying the trust she had placed in me by disclosing the family's plans. Her words reflected a deep sense of hurt, and in the heat of the moment, her confrontation became both verbal and physical. She repeatedly threatened me, holding me personally responsible for the police intervention.

Recognizing the intensity of her distress, we consciously maintained physical distance at all times to de-escalate the situation. Remaining calm, we gently told her that while we understood she was upset, threatening or physically confronting me was neither appropriate nor necessary. It was evident that this was not a moment for explanation or persuasion. Any attempt to revisit the reasons for involving the authorities would likely have been futile at this point, as her anger and sense of betrayal had understandably eclipsed any possibility of dialogue. Rather than responding to her anger, we focused on ensuring safety while allowing her the space to express her emotions.

Following the intervention at the residence, Sakshi's mother and father were taken to the police station along with the DCPU and we accompanied them. The police then proceeded to her last school to verify her age through her School Leaving Certificate (SLC). The school records confirmed her date of birth as 20th June 2008, establishing that she was 16 years and 9 months old at the time and therefore still a child.

Throughout this process from the intervention at the residence, to the police station, and after the subsequent age verification, Sakshi's mother remained visibly distressed and continued directing her anger and threats towards me.

As the procedural steps unfolded, discussions took place between the Support Person, the police, the DCPU, and the Child Welfare Committee members over phone calls regarding Sakshi's immediate safety. Considering the heightened emotions, and the risk that the marriage could still be solemnized, it was decided that Sakshi would be placed in a children's home for the night. She would be produced before the CWC, the following day for appropriate directions regarding her care and protection.

The next morning, on 21st March 2025, I along with the DCPU and Sakshi's father appeared before the CWC. Before the Committee, I submitted a detailed written application tracing the sequence of events from the disclosure made by Sakshi's mother about the proposed marriage, to the coordination with the Investigating Officer and the DCPU, and the preventive intervention that followed. After hearing the matter and considering the circumstances, the Committee decided to restore Sakshi in the care of her parents and directed Sakshi's father to submit a notarized undertaking acknowledging the attempted child marriage, affirming his understanding of its legal implications, and assuring that no such attempt would be made in the future.

RETHINKING AGENCY

Choices Within Conditions of Vulnerability



The intervention in Sakshi's case opens several layered and uncomfortable questions, especially in contexts where chronic poverty, gender inequality, violence, and institutional limitations intersect. While the prevention of the child marriage can be viewed as a legally and ethically necessary intervention, the process through which it unfolded reveals the complexities that accompany crisis-based intervention. Through this reflection/documentation I resist a simplistic understanding of "right" and "wrong" and instead demand reflection on the grey areas through social casework practice.

Whose Choice? Children's Agency Within Family Decision-Making



The absence of resistance does not necessarily signify the presence of choice.

One of the foremost points lies in understanding that Sakshi, having grown up within a context shaped by economic precarity, gendered expectations, and strong family authority, may never have been encouraged to view herself as an active participant in decisions concerning her own future. In many households, decisions affecting children are understood as **collective family responsibilities rather than matters of individual choice**. Her response therefore did not communicate a desire to marry; instead, it reflected an acceptance of her family's authority in deciding what was best for her. Such deference is interpreted as respect, obedience, or good upbringing. However, the absence of resistance does not necessarily signify the presence of choice. Rather, it may reflect a deeply internalised understanding that decision-making authority rests with adults, leaving children with little space to imagine or articulate alternatives of their own.

When Marriage Appears to be Protection

The mother's decision wasn't merely an act of disregard for the law, but as one emerging from cumulative social and economic distress. The mother appeared to be functioning within a deeply unstable marital environment shaped by her husband's dependence on alcohol, domestic violence, and lack of financial contribution. In many such households, women often become the sole emotional and economic anchors of the family while simultaneously having limited access to support systems and decision-making power. Within these circumstances, marriage of the child may begin to appear as a survival strategy. It appears to reduce one immediate responsibility in a context where resources are scarce, safety feels uncertain, and the family's capacity to cope is already overstretched.

This does not justify the act of arranging a child marriage, but it complicates how the act is understood. During the discussions, the mother shared that she borrowed a substantial sum of money from her relatives/friends to organise this marriage. The mother's expenses incurred in the wedding, despite financial hardship, suggests that the decision may have been shaped by desperation, social pressure, and a perceived lack of alternatives. Within a patriarchal social structure, marriage may also be viewed as a means of securing a daughter's "future" rather than as an interruption to her childhood. In such contexts, it is often normalised as a responsible parental decision and, at times, even perceived as an act of care and protection, particularly when families believe they are safeguarding their daughters from social stigma, insecurity, or future uncertainty.

The Support Person's Dilemma: Between Ally and Statutory Actor



Another important point emerges in relation to the role of the Support Person (SP). SP in cases of sexual violence against children, are often expected to simultaneously occupy contradictory roles—that of a trusted ally, a guide, and at times, also an enforcer of statutory mandates. In this case, the SP initially occupied a position of trust within the family. The mother herself disclosed the wedding plans to the SP, perhaps assuming empathy, confidentiality, or understanding. However, once the SP involved institutional authorities to prevent the marriage (which was the responsibility of the SP as a part of the child protection system), the relationship shifted. The mother's perception of betrayal, her behaviour towards the SP and subsequent hostility reflects this rupture.

This raises difficult ethical and emotional questions for the Support Person's role. Can genuine therapeutic or rehabilitative relationships survive once coercive systems are activated? When the state intervenes through institutional action, the Support Person may no longer be viewed as a source of support but rather as an extension of state surveillance and control. The hostility directed towards the SP was therefore not only personal anger, but also a response to a larger system that the family may have experienced as punitive and intrusive. Yet, refraining from intervention would have meant allowing a child marriage to proceed despite clear legal and developmental concerns. The ethical burden of this responsibility can be significant. The intervention may save the child from immediate harm while simultaneously destabilizing SP's future engagement with the family. This can leave practitioners questioning whether they have genuinely facilitated long term/sustainable change or merely interrupted a harmful act temporarily which may or may not result in positive change in the near future.

Can Deterrence Create Change?

The question of whether punitive action alone can produce sustainable change is another important nuance. Legal intervention may create immediate deterrence, but deterrence does not necessarily transform underlying beliefs or circumstances. Families may comply outwardly due to fear of legal consequences while internally continuing to endorse the same patriarchal norms that led to the marriage attempt.



There is a possibility that punitive interventions may even deepen distrust towards institutions and support systems like the civil society and thus reduce the likelihood of families seeking help in the future.

This is particularly relevant in cases involving public intervention or spectatorship. The arrival of police during the haldi ceremony inevitably transformed a private family event into a public spectacle. Such visibility cuts both ways: it can send a powerful message that child marriage carries real legal and social consequences, challenging its normalisation, but it can also produce defensiveness, shame, and resentment, pushing families toward secrecy, quieter ceremonies, or relocation to avoid detection in future. Visibility, in other words, does not always transform behaviour; sometimes it only changes the methods by which harmful practices continue. It also raises the question of whether communities witnessing such interventions come to see the state as protective or merely punitive and if the latter, whether that reinforces an adversarial relationship between marginalised communities and child protection systems.

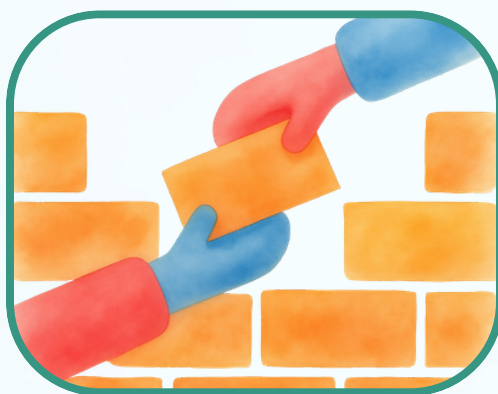
Beyond Individual Responsibility: Rethinking Accountability

Accountability, too, deserves a wider lens. It is often individualised and placed primarily on parents or caregivers, and families must certainly answer for decisions that place children at risk. But responsibility is also socially distributed: the intervention mentioned above to stop child marriage highlights how state and institutional systems tend to respond once situations escalate into visible crises, rather than addressing the long-term vulnerabilities that precede them. Therefore, accountability must extend to the systems that fail to provide economic security, accessible welfare, quality education, protection from violence, and social support. Similarly, patriarchal cultural norms that continue to control and devalue girls' autonomy cannot be treated as peripheral factors; they are central to understanding why child marriage persists despite legal prohibition. These norms shape not only community expectations but also the range of choices families perceive as available or acceptable.

Unanswered Questions

My subsequent efforts of ruffling the feathers of my thought made me realize that perhaps there are no entirely clean or uncomplicated interventions in such contexts. In Sakshi's case, the marriage was prevented, legal procedures were initiated, and the child was placed in immediate safety. Yet, even after the intervention concluded, difficult questions remained: What futures are available to girls when education remains fragile, households remain violent, and survival itself is uncertain? What choices do caregivers truly possess when welfare systems remain difficult to access and social legitimacy continues to be tied to marriage? And how do practitioners continue to build trust with families while simultaneously carrying the responsibility of statutory intervention?

Rebuilding Trust, Continuing Support



The intervention did not conclude with the CWC's directions or the prevention of the marriage. In many ways, it marked the beginning of a different kind of work. Since the trust that had been built over months of regular engagement had fractured during the intervention, my continued involvement was likely to impede, rather than facilitate, the family's rehabilitation journey. Recognising this, our team reflected on how best to ensure that the family continued receiving support without allowing the rupture in our relationship to become a barrier to their access to services.



The transition, however, was neither immediate nor easy. It took considerable time for the new Support Person to establish rapport with the family and rebuild the trust that had been lost. Progress was slow, requiring repeated visits, patient conversations, and sustained engagement before the family began accepting support once again. Only after this relationship had been carefully nurtured could the work of rehabilitation resume in a meaningful way.

The new Support Person supported the family in accessing financial assistance, educational sponsorship for Sakshi, and school linkages for her two younger siblings. The family was also assisted with opening bank accounts, following up on identity and social security documentation such as Aadhaar, and accessing welfare entitlements. Looking back, this phase of the intervention reinforced another important lesson for me. In social work, sometimes, preserving the objectives of the intervention means recognising when a relationship has been altered and creating space for someone else to rebuild it.

In Sakshi's case, stepping aside ensured that although my relationship with the family had changed, their access to support, rehabilitation, and opportunities for rebuilding their lives did not end with the intervention to prevent the child marriage.

Contact Us



414, Bhaveshwar Arcade Annexe, Opposite Shreyas Cinema, LBS Marg,
Ghatkopar West, Mumbai – 400086



contact@preranaantitrafficking.org



preranaantitrafficking.org



fighttrafficking.org



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