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Mobiles ring in gender equality message

People including adolescent boys and girls, living in several villages of Nainwa block in Rajasthan's Bundi district, have been learning about social issues, such as child marriage, domestic violence and gender equality, over their mobile phones.

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 Deep Mukherjee (<http://www.hindustantimes.com/columns/deep-mukherjee>)
 Hindustan Times


Children take part in a rally in Rajasthan to create awareness against child marriage.(HT File Photo)

People including adolescent boys and girls, living in several villages of Nainwa block in Rajasthan's Bundi district, have been learning about social issues, such as child marriage, domestic violence and gender equality, over their mobile phones.

The initiative, titled Kishor Varta, fuses the age-old method of storytelling with modern-day technology to reach out to rural people and spread awareness about the issues.

A brainchild of the Centre for Health and Social Justice (CHSJ), a New Delhi-based civil society organisation, Kishor Varta is implemented in Bundi by Manjari Sansthan, an NGO.

“We have created a toll-free number on which the villagers can call to hear stories with the help of interactive voice response system (IVRS). At present there are four stories on themes of child marriage, domestic violence, gender equality and sex education,” said Rimjhim Jain of the CHSJ, also the Kishor Varta programme manager.

Kishor Varta has connected around 30 government schools in Bundi district where the state government is also supporting the initiative through the local administration. The four stories are Lakhanpur Ka Raju, Dada ka Gussa, Haldi Ki Jaldi and Dulhan Ke Batein.

“We have designed the platform in such a way that after the stories are told, listeners are also asked questions, which increases their awareness about the social issues,” said Jain.

After the initiative was launched in July 2015, the toll-free number received more than 55,000 calls within five months. Started as a pilot project, the toll-free call facility continued till March 2016 after which the stories were transferred to mobiles with the help of memory cards by ground-level volunteers.

“Ever since I was a child, I had observed that my mother would bring me a glass of milk everyday, but my sister rarely got her share. After seeing the Kishor Varta posters on gender equality a few months ago, I find that my mother brings milk for me and my sister,” said Adarsh Swami of Nainwa.

Apart from telling the stories, Kishor Varta volunteers discuss them with the villagers in sessions and community development workshops. “Our focus is on men and adolescent boys because violence against women would come down if the men become more progressive and aware about the significance of gender equality,” said Bajrang Singh of the Manjari Sansthan.

Kishor Varta was one of the winners of the Vodafone Foundation Mobile for Good Award (M4G) 2016, also sponsored by the NASSCOM Foundation.

“From January, we are again starting the toll-free mobile calling service, and looking to increase the number of stories and include more social issues,” said Jain.

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