

OAK FOUNDATION

Child Protection When Communities Care



An essay by Andrew Wright

**To mark the 10th anniversary of Oak Foundation's
Child Abuse Programme**

Oak Foundation in partnership with
Emmanuel Development Association, Ethiopia and Reaching the Unreached Trust, India

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of Oak Foundation. The editors have tried to ensure the accuracy of this report but cannot accept responsibility for any errors or omissions.

The names of all children mentioned in this publication have been changed.

Contents

Preface	3
Note from Oak Foundation	4
Lemlem Kebede	5
Changing Times	5
Stitching systems together	8
Creating a chain of community support	9
When systems do not work well	11
Integrating formal and informal systems	13
From one individual project to...?	15
Protecting children: one component in community development	17
Education and abuse prevention	21
And sex education?	23
Community conversations	25
Awareness-raising: the need for a fresh approach	27
One family at a time	29
Emmanuel Development Association Ethiopia	31
Reaching the Unreached Trust	31

Preface

In many places where children suffer sexual abuse and sexual exploitation, formal child protection systems are either inadequate or non-existent. Efforts to protect children must therefore be rooted in communities. Over the last decade, the Oak Foundation has funded projects in over 30 countries – with a focus on East Africa, Eastern Europe, Switzerland, as well as on key global NGOs – with the aim of strengthening the ability of communities to protect their vulnerable children.

A lot has been learned. Many of the problems, and the ways of tackling them, cut across geographical and cultural divides. It increasingly seemed that capturing, distilling and sharing the experiences of some of our partners would be a worthy objective. But also a challenging one, as we are aware that our target audience of development workers are deluged with reading materials: “Not another publication,” would be an understandable response. We have therefore tried hard to produce an account of two of our partners’ work that is both engaging and readable.

Oak sent development writer, Andrew Wright, to spend time getting to know two partners whose work we considered representative: the Emmanuel Development Association in Ethiopia, and the Reaching The Unreached Trust in India. The story that emerged was then shared with Oak partners elsewhere, whose responses were incorporated to form the publication you are looking at now. It is written to mark the 10th anniversary of our programme on child abuse. We sincerely hope that it will inspire you to pursue your efforts for and with sexually abused and exploited children.

Caroline Turner
Trustee
Oak Foundation

Note from Oak Foundation

When Oak Foundation sent Andrew Wright to Ethiopia and India, the aim was to capture learning from two quite different though complementary projects: one that focused on developing and supporting formal systems of child protection in one community in Ethiopia, and the other that sought to mobilise men, women and children from grassroots upwards, to break taboos to support parents and to demand justice for abused and exploited children. Oak is not putting forward these projects as “good practice” in the emerging field of child protection. The aim is simply to learn from some of the field experiences we support and to share insights and practice with a wider public.

We had hoped to complement this information with inputs from many other partners around the world, validating what Andrew had found or alternatively contradicting outright the experiences he recorded. As you will read, there were about six to eight other partners of Oak that contributed reflections on the text. We are grateful to those that did take the time to read the manuscript early on and to share their organisation’s experience. Our thanks to them and to Emmanuel Development Association Ethiopia and Reaching the Unreached Trust are duly recorded.

Lemlem Kebede

Fourteen year old Lemlem Kebede* was abducted while walking back from school to her home in Atakilt, an impoverished rural community near the Ethiopian town of Debre Birhan. Her abductor, a 20 year old man from a neighbouring village, dragged her to his family's home – breaking her left arm as she struggled – where he tied her up, raped her, and held her hostage. This is not a rare occurrence. According to a baseline survey by the Emmanuel Development Association (EDA), as many as one in ten rural schoolgirls can expect it to happen to them.

What usually happens in such situations is this: the abductor's family calls in an intermediary, typically the local Orthodox Christian priest, to mediate with the girl's family, and this mediation ends with the girl's family agreeing that she should be married to her abductor. Why? Because local culture places a high value on virginity in a bride, and once it is common knowledge that a girl has been penetrated, the associated stigma means that no man will want to marry her. Except for one: the man who raped her. For any man too poor to be attractive as a suitor, abduction is a time-honoured and widely accepted way to secure a wife.

Changing Times

This case, though, unfolded differently. Lemlem's mother went to the police. After two weeks Lemlem was liberated from her abductor's home and, with the help of legal aid provided by EDA's Oak-funded child abuse project, prosecutors were able to get him convicted. This was no small achievement. Out of 27 cases supported by EDA, only nine have resulted in convictions; rural witnesses are reluctant to travel long distances into town to endure tedious court proceedings even if they're willing to testify, which many are not – they may have been bribed or intimidated by the accused, or they may not see much wrong with abduction. On the last point, some judges seem to agree: according to the statute books, Lemlem's rapist should have been sentenced to a minimum of 15 years, but the judge gave him only six.

*Not her real name – the names of all children have been changed.

Lemlem tells us that she and her mother are now ostracised by many of their neighbours, who sympathise more with her imprisoned abductor's family than with her. This is a global risk for children who report abuse; in small communities in Bulgaria, the Animus Association finds girls can be "mocked and humiliated, with suggestions that their behaviour was to blame; working with the child's relatives is of great importance, as the degree of psychological pain a child suffers is related to the degree of guilt she feels about the abuse". The ostracism can become so intolerable that there is no alternative for them but to seek a fresh start with extended family in a place where nobody knows them.

Now aged 16, Lemlem is relating her story during a break from her work as a day labourer – her hands are caked in the wet mud she is slapping onto the latticed wooden skeleton of a building – for which she earns 10 birr (around US\$1) a day. She has dropped out of school to work because her mother is sick, although she does express a hope that she may be able to afford to go back one day. Ironically, the building she is helping to construct is a classroom.

As they live rurally, Lemlem and her mother can at least supplement her cash income with a smallholding of vegetables, along with a couple of sheep which she bought with EDA's financial assistance. That option isn't open to Yodit Alemu* and her mother, who live in a one-room shack close to Debre Birhan's town centre. It has no water – they pay for access to a well – and no toilet, and costs them US\$2.50 a month in rent payable to a private landlord. Struggling to survive on what she can earn as a day labourer, Yodit's mother allowed her daughter to take up after-school work at the age of 12 as a house servant for a male neighbour, who raped her.

Yodit is typical of many young girls who are forced by poverty into domestic labour; it's a path that often leads to them dropping out of school to satisfy the demands of their employers, and which sometimes proceeds to sexual abuse and ultimately to prostitution. Again, this risk is cross-cultural: in Madurai, India, "most employers think that they have the right to abuse their employee girls sexually," says Oak partner Nanban, The Centre for Street and Working Children. Yodit's case, like

Lemlem's, ended in a trend-bucking conviction – and unlike Lemlem's, Yodit's neighbours were sympathetic; rape is less acceptable when the rapist isn't intending marriage. The judge was less sympathetic, as he sentenced her attacker to only three years.

**“He raped my daughter because
he knew we are poor.
He thought it wouldn't matter.”**

These two cases illustrate how sexual abuse and exploitation of children are exacerbated by “economic deprivation and its associative conditions”, in the phrase of Nanban. Societies of all income levels have their own deep-rooted cultural traditions that raise barriers to discussing and addressing issues of sexual exploitation and abuse. But poverty greatly exacerbates children's vulnerability – partly because it tends to be associated with other risk factors such as low levels of education, information and awareness, and partly because it disempowers. As Yodit's mother put it: “He raped my daughter because he knew we are poor. He thought it wouldn't matter.”

Debre Birhan lies 130km north-east of Addis Ababa, along a buckled asphalt road of the kind that seduces drivers into gaining speed then surprises them with a sudden pothole or adverse camber. The road is one of many in Ethiopia currently being upgraded by Chinese contractors, who can periodically be seen surveying the land from under wide-brimmed straw hats. On the outskirts of Addis an estate of luxury three-bedroom villas is springing up, which will sell at Western prices; soon after, the architecture settles into the more archetypal sub-Saharan African circular mud hut with conical thatched roof, often grouped into stone-walled family compounds.

Debre Birhan is a smallish town but a sprawling one. Although it has a newly-opened university boasting 10,000 students, many of its 80,000 inhabitants live in more rural-feeling communities at the end of rutted tracks traversed more quickly by donkeys than wheels. The rural mindset makes this among the most challenging places to work in East Africa: Oak's regional programme officer, who also oversees projects in Uganda

and Tanzania, observes that rural Ethiopian society is the most closed and conservative – perhaps stemming from the relative isolation that comes from having avoided a colonial past.

Lying at a confluence of trading routes, Debre Birhan plays host to a constant flow of long-distance buses and trucks; otherwise, traffic along the main road consists mostly of horse-drawn carts and NGO-branded Toyota Landcruisers, with a smattering of blue-and-white Lada taxis. The many small hotels that line the road testify to the town's popularity as a stopping-off point for drivers, as does the size of its population of prostitutes – officially estimated at 870, of whom 240 are thought to be under-18s. The town has its share of industry, notably a blanket factory. But, for most, life is hard: the land offers subsistence but not surplus, and with an altitude nudging 3000m, night-time temperatures regularly plunge below freezing.

Stitching systems together

As is often the case in developing countries, the functions of local government in Debre Birhan are only partially implemented by the local government itself. The slack is taken up haphazardly by a patchwork of both home-grown and international NGOs. These tend to be more attractive employers than the local government, offering higher salaries and freedom from political obligations. They tend also to be visibly better-funded: the decades-old typewriter in the corner of the justice chief's office contrasts with the laptops being used in EDA's headquarters. Time and again, discussions with the town's hard-pressed local government representatives involve references to which NGO they can approach for assistance in situations which they don't have adequate resources to resolve themselves.

As an example, take Debre Birhan's town's police chief. He has three officers assigned to women's and children's issues, and among the cases they encounter are young girls passing through Debre Birhan with traffickers who are taking them to domestic work or prostitution in Addis. Having rescued the girls, the police then try to send them home. But it

takes time to contact their police counterparts in the children's family's region; EDA can cover the children's medical costs, but neither the police nor any local NGO have dedicated funds to provide them with food or shelter. Sometimes the children don't want to go home; the police will then try to find them a home, but this becomes harder the older they are.

It's easy to see how vulnerable children can fall through the gaps in systems that are so deeply fragmented, and consequently why EDA's approach to child protection work in Debre Birhan is centred on trying to strengthen and stitch those systems together. EDA's project is overseen by a 20-strong steering committee, chaired by the head of the town's Labour and Social Affairs ministry and comprising representatives from the police, justice and women's offices, as well as from other NGOs, the religious community, the bus station and a hotel owner. Five sub-committees take responsibility for different aspects of the project; under them are nine further committees, which work at district level.

Creating a chain of community support

EDA's steering committee has unleashed plenty of enthusiasm. One of its members is Tesfaye Abebe, a security guard at the bus station. He has embraced the opportunity to distribute anti-trafficking materials for drivers to display in their buses, and borrows EDA's loudhailer for two hours every week to harangue passengers about looking out for children who may be at risk. Groups of two or three young girls accompanied by an adult may be being trafficked, he warns; single girls may have run away from their village after being forced into marriage, an escape which leads many into prostitution as they struggle to survive.

The police chief, too, is keen to capitalise on links with other steering committee members to improve the standard of policing he can offer. He was among the half of the committee who had, just before our visit, been on an information-sharing visit to another Oak partner in the town of Nazareth, as far south of Addis as Debre Birhan is north. There, the Ethiopian Child-Focused Association (ECFA) has travelled even further along the road of plugging gaps in the formal systems. They have

established a child-friendly court, with a CCTV link for giving evidence and an interviewer specifically trained in using dolls to help children relive their experiences with minimal distress. To encourage reports of abuse, friendly and professional contact points have been established not only in the police station but also, with the help of local community groups, in the hospital and the bus station where they are visible and accessible to children who are being trafficked. ECFA offers a free-to-call telephone helpline based with the police, which receives 20-25 calls a day, often from adults reporting their suspicions.

The links that ECFA has managed to establish between different governmental and non-governmental services enable it to offer a comprehensive response to sexual abuse victims, from medical care and testing to legal aid for pursuing cases through the courts. Debre Birhan's police chief is keen to tell us how impressed he was, especially with the shelter where children in Nazareth can stay after reporting abuse in the home and while waiting for the courts to hear the case. It is clear that he has no money from his own budgets for such a shelter in Debre Birhan, and that he would be delighted for Oak or EDA to provide it for him...!

Not every context in which Oak partners work, however, invites such close cooperation.

When 13 year old Rani Prabu was raped by a teenage taxi driver in the city of Puducherry, on the south-east coast of India, the friend she confided in told her exactly who she should contact. Her neighbourhood's community "animator", employed by the Reaching the Unreached Trust (RTUT) – a local partner of BICE**,¹ a long time partner of Oak – brought Rani to the safe house above RTUT's office and arranged for her to receive support including medical treatment and legal advice.

A case like Rani's would often be resolved informally. And as in Ethiopia, this would often involve a marriage: it is a decision in which, according to Indian tradition of families arranging marriages, the victim could expect

**French acronym for International Catholic Child Bureau

no say. It is conceivable that Rani would now be married to her rapist, but for the fact that her parents suffer from leprosy and were deemed unacceptable in-laws by the rapist's family. Instead, after consulting with Rani's parents, RTUT's animator ensured that the case was reported to the police. Persuading abused children and their families to involve police is a challenge for many of Oak's partners, and Rani's case exemplifies the reason: to begin with, the police showed little interest in pursuing the matter.

When systems do not work well

Why was this? RTUT's director, Dominic Xavier, observes that "India's laws are excellent, the police are professionally trained and well resourced, and the systems are all in place" – which explains why Puducherry's police are not as keen to establish formal collaboration with local civil society as their under-resourced counterparts in Debre Birhan. But just because the systems are in place, that doesn't mean they always work as they should. With the police focused on the threat of terrorism, child abuse can end up being shunted down the list of priorities. And corruption among individual officers is widely perceived to offer suspects the chance to prevent a case from being filed, or to slow down the wheels of justice once it is. That means child protection organisations have to be more subtle and creative in giving the system an appropriate nudge.

For RTUT, maintaining personal links with influential senior officers is helpful, as is the ability to pick up the phone to other individuals and organisations who can pressure individual officers: the Women's Commission, or local politicians. Rani's case is now being pursued by the police. But where does that leave abused children who lack a behind-the-scenes advocate like Dominic Xavier to gently encourage officials to act on their reports of abuse? It may be less than ideal to have to hope that the cumulative effect of such judicious informal nudges will be gradually to reshape the instincts of the formal system as a whole, but organisations can work only with the tools at their disposal. As for Rani, she is back in school and doing well.

The nature of its relationship with the local police is only one example of the broader way in which RTUT's way of operating differs from that of EDA. Rather than channel its efforts through committees of organisational representatives, RTUT has instead created a network of "animators" – women who are identified as being leaders in their local communities, given training and paid a stipend to act as focal points for RTUT's various community initiatives. And if RTUT works in a very different way from EDA, this is because Puducherry – with its population of 750,000 – is a very different place from Debre Birhan.

For a start, there is no need for NGOs to own a Toyota Landcruiser, as the roads are flawless: the nearest airport, 160km away in Chennai, can be reached by either a dual carriageway or a recently-built coastal toll road that serves beach resorts and fishing communities devastated by the 2004 tsunami. Within the city, traffic is an anarchic swarm of pedestrians, cycles, motorbikes and "auto-rickshaws", three-wheelers with a two-stroke engine and a canvas-covered frame that feels worryingly flimsy as you dart through a fast-closing gap between a truck and a bus. The back of each vehicle bears the message "sound horn", though Puducherry's drivers need little encouragement.

It is clear that the area is experiencing rapid economic development, and that not all aspects of infrastructure are progressing equally: impressive roadside adverts for nationwide high-speed mobile internet are incongruously juxtaposed with open sewers. And Puducherry is a city more visibly divided than most in India. Turn left from the bus station and it's two kilometres to the beach, through a pleasant enclave of French colonial buildings that now serve as hotels, restaurants and shops for Indian and foreign visitors; street corner signs vainly implore "No Horn", while the tourism department optimistically advertises "Peaceful Puducherry: Give time a break". Turn right from the bus station, away from the area covered by the map in the Lonely Planet, and you find districts a few kilometres from the sea where children have never been to see it.

Integrating formal and informal systems

These are the “town villages” in which RTUT works, a term which sounds contradictory but captures the sense of quietly coherent communities which feel further than they are from the city. Houses are typically rectangular one-room buildings made from clay with a thatch roof. Concrete walls, or a corrugated metal roof, denote families who are doing a little better than average; those doing a little worse live under an open-sided thatched roof supported by bamboo poles. Stagnant water sits in drainage ditches, while cows graze on piles of rubbish rotting by the side of the road. The nearest places to wash or use the toilet may be a long walk from the house, and are the scene of many of the cases of attempted abuse that come to RTUT’s attention.

RTUT’s six town villages are populated largely by Dalits, those who were traditionally deemed “untouchable” by the Hindu caste system. Though legal equality is now strictly enforced, the caste system remains surprisingly influential in smaller communities – especially in matters of marriage – and subtle discrimination remains a daily reality for many Dalits. There will, for example, tend to be “much more fuss if an upper caste girl is sexually assaulted than a Dalit girl”, according to Dominic Xavier. The word “Dalit” comes from a Hindi root meaning “oppressed”, and generations of subjugation have left many in today’s Dalit communities ill-equipped to seize the opportunities presented by India’s drive towards equality: much help is available from government, but it needs to be known about and actively claimed.

RTUT therefore focuses less on trying to improve formal systems than on empowering communities to take advantage of them. This can take the form of behind-the-scenes lobbying, as with cases like Rani’s, or more direct action. In two town villages, RTUT was instrumental in emboldening local women to stage protests against the non-arrival of standpipes to bring clean drinking water to their streets, for which funding had already been allocated. In both cases, the women protestors blocked the nearest main road into the city, were briefly arrested and released, and by the time they arrived home found that digging had already started.

If a community has evolved an effective informal network for temporarily harbouring trafficked children then building a more formal shelter might not help but undermine them.

The director is at pains to emphasise the need for such protests to be pre-approved by the police. “I am very clear,” he says. “When I oppose the government, I do it in an accepted way. I exercise my right to express opinions through the proper channels. I get permission for protests. I work within the system.” As worries about potential links with terrorist groups have cast a shadow of suspicion on some civil society organisations in India, he stresses that his relationships with government representatives have never been anything but excellent. “They know we do good work,” he says. “And they know we are patriots”: meetings of RTUT’s community animators close with a rendition of the Indian national anthem.

EDA and RTUT show how different local circumstances can dictate different approaches to a goal that underpins all the work Oak funds: to integrate formal and informal systems, so that families, communities and governments work well together to protect children from exploitation and abuse. Whether it is better to work closely with government agencies or keep them at arms-length, to focus on building organisational structures or identifying individuals who can inspire their neighbours, depends on personalities, attitudes, and what exists already: if a community has evolved an effective informal network for temporarily harbouring trafficked children, for example, then building a more formal shelter might not help but undermine them.

Whichever angle of approach is taken, grassroots projects should serve primarily as the finger on the pulse to inform efforts which aim for a more far-reaching and sustainable impact. Tempting as it would be for Debre Birhan’s police chief to build a shelter, donors’ funds will always be finite, and concentrating philanthropic resources on a few locations brings the danger of succeeding only in creating islands of concern amid a sea of apathy.

From one individual project to...?

One way to achieve broader and deeper impacts is through national-level training programmes, a priority for Oak's East Africa programme in particular. Such programmes can reach professionals such as paediatricians, who are well placed to spot signs of sexual abuse; police and prosecutors, who can encourage more reporting of cases by processing them speedily and sympathetically; and journalists, who can influence the public mood through their reporting. It can also be helpful to involve different professional disciplines in the same regional training courses: the Opportunity and Protection Association, an Oak partner in Bulgaria, argues for the importance of “common training of experts in different areas in a given region who work for child welfare. This can build up common understanding.”

Another way to increase the impact of individual projects is to inspire and harness the enthusiasm of governments to improve their own systems. Among the activities instigated by RTUT's animators are “tuition centres”, homework clubs for children whose cramped living conditions mean they lack the space or the quiet to study in the evenings; the municipality has been impressed enough to assume responsibility for five of these neighbourhood centres already. At a national level, RTUT is a leading voice among child-focused Indian NGOs in a network which is advocating for the government to roll out “medical-judicial” centres in hospitals, where children who have been abused can be interviewed in a safe and sensitive environment and be spared the subsequent ordeal of appearing in court.

**Specially trained officers and
community workers set up
in every police station in Addis
Ababa and an increasing
number beyond.**

In Ethiopia, impressive progress has been made by the Forum on Street Children in having “Child Protection Units”, with specially trained officers and community workers, set up in every police station in Addis

Ababa and an increasing number beyond – including Nazareth, but not yet Debre Birhan. Child Protection Units promote more sympathetic treatment of child abuse victims within the legal system: “The police and judiciary tend to do things by the book,” explains the Forum’s Teamer Misganaw. “They instinctively treat children the same as they treat adults.” Established only a decade ago, the Forum now works so closely with the authorities that its child protection coordinating office is located in the national police headquarters.

While the Forum on Street Children illustrates how formal systems can be improved at scale with patient engagement, sometimes significant one-off improvements can be made at little cost: Debre Birhan’s 14 prosecutors, who used to work in an open plan office, found that child victims of sexual abuse became much more willing to talk when they put up dividing walls to create privacy. A similar story comes from Bulgaria’s Animus Association, where training with magistrates and prosecutors led to the realisation that it didn’t require any change in court rules to erect a screen in the courtroom so that a child could give evidence without having to see the accused. Individual initiatives, too, can offer hope of wider future impacts: happy that cutting-edge developments are happening in his area, the regional head of justice for Nazareth’s area has become an enthusiastic advocate for child-friendliness within Ethiopia’s justice system.

Training with magistrates and prosecutors led to the realisation that it didn’t require any change in court rules to erect a screen in the courtroom so that a child could give evidence without having to see the accused.

Of course, to work through formal or informal systems is not an either-or. RTUT’s focus on working through community animators goes hand in hand with strong relationships with government hospitals, whose nurses regularly visit the creches animators have established to promote parenting skills and help mothers to find paid employment.

For EDA, a more formal approach still relies – like all grassroots work – on identifying individuals whose talents can be liberated: some local committees wither and die, while others take on a life of their own. Of the ten district-level community committees established in Addis by the Forum on Street Children, the fact that one is noticeably more successful than the others is entirely because it captured the energy of a particularly well-respected local opinion-leader.

Protecting children: one component in community development

It's hard to disentangle the sexual abuse and exploitation of children from broader issues of poverty, so it shouldn't be surprising that it's often hard to disentangle Oak-funded child protection work from activities that could reasonably fit under the rubric of a wide variety of development aims. RTUT's safe house for at-risk children may seem more obviously relevant to protecting children than encouraging protests to secure the installation of a standpipe. But that's not necessarily true. When the tap is in the street, children don't have to take the risk of walking to other areas to fetch water. And when a group of mothers and young women have asserted their rights successfully once, the boost to their self-confidence may easily help them to do so again.

The overlap with other developmental aims means there is much potential for child protection work to be taken on by NGOs already working in areas where potential synergies exist.

The overlap with other developmental aims means there is much potential for child protection work to be taken on by NGOs who are already working in areas with which potential synergies exist. EDA is one such organisation, and training street children in life skills and income-generating activities is an example of an activity worth doing for many reasons. From a child protection viewpoint, the reason is to promote resilience. Street children are among the most vulnerable to sexual

exploitation and abuse, and are more likely to be able to resist or recover when they are better equipped to take control of their lives.

There are an estimated 600 street children in Debre Birhan – defined as children who wander the streets during daytimes, rather than those who have nowhere else to sleep at night – and the project involved EDA selecting 45 of them for a one-week course in life and business skills. Several months on, they have gathered for a progress meeting with EDA's social worker, Zerihun Sebseba. The police are hosting the meeting – they have additional reasons for enthusiasm about this part of the project, as these are children not only at the highest risk of becoming abuse victims but also of taking up a life of crime. EDA has got the town municipality on board, too, providing rent-free operating space in the town's market.

It is a meeting that showcases the scale of the task. The sunken eyes of the street kids show the obvious scars of difficult lives. Their businesses are basic: some sell sugarcane, others hire out bicycles, still others are vending biscuits and tissues packed tightly into open-topped cardboard boxes hung on string around their necks. But each day's selling should reap at least a dollar, and most of the trainees have stuck with it. The most lucrative enterprise is selling lottery tickets, and the group's success story has already banked almost \$200 – and got himself a stylish new haircut. While the project does encourage these children to resume their education, it's an aim that must be tempered with realism, and it's a telling comment that an adolescent boy selling lottery tickets on a school day undoubtedly represents progress.

Supporting income-generating activities is also a growing part of RTUT's activities in Puducherry, though they are focused on mothers and grandmothers with the aim of improving their capacity to care for their children. An epidemic of alcoholism among men makes this especially important in the town villages where RTUT works. Whereas alcohol is heavily taxed or banned altogether in many other Indian states, in Puducherry both commercial brands and powerful illegal hooch are cheap and readily available. At a meeting of the RTUT-facilitated Child Welfare Group in the town village of G. N. Palayam, only one of twelve women has a husband who doesn't drink to excess – and he desists only because of

the doctor's warnings about his health. The others speak of husbands who don't give them enough money for food and return home every night drunk and abusive. Male life expectancy is estimated to be no more than 35.

Helped by their RTUT animator, the members of this Child Welfare Group have recently started a micro-enterprise that enables them to earn money while keeping an eye on their children: they are making rope from coconut coir, taking turns to form two teams of three on hand-operated looms in a covered courtyard outside one of their houses. The looms belong to a government training scheme with which the animator has put them in contact; after three months of training the looms will move on and they will need to buy their own, for which RTUT will make microcredit available. Like the standpipes installed only when the road was blocked to protest, this training programme is a state-funded entitlement which might never be taken advantage of without the prompting and encouragement of the animator.

RTUT's animators did not have to initiate community action from a standing start. Its child protection work built on existing structures of women's "self-help groups", saving schemes on the Grameen Bank model which also qualify for government aid. Groups of 12 to 20 women can register with the government having agreed on a monthly amount they feel confident they can contribute – typically \$1 or \$2; after six months, they can go back to the government with their bank book and the minutes of their monthly meetings, and the government will pay more into the account. The money they accumulate can be used for microenterprise loans, but is more commonly released when one of the members needs to cover medical expenses, to construct a house, or to hold a family event like a wedding or baptism. The members decide when and to which of themselves to lend, and social bonds create strong pressure for the money to be repaid.

From the government's perspective, this is an attractive way to channel financial assistance to women who have demonstrated the capacity to use it responsibly; the self-help group structure minimises the risk that husbands will appropriate it for drink. For the women, there is no downside – only the need for initiative and organisation. RTUT's animators have

encouraged women who were not in existing groups to form new ones, and in Arasur town-village we meet wives and mothers from five self-help groups, some long-established and others recently formed. Several of the new members, when asked to introduce themselves to the group, mumble shyly or collapse into giggles. Those who have been in groups for longer are more articulate, more self-confident – more animated, you might say. It's a striking illustration of progress.

Even more striking is the contrast between the generations. Back in G. N. Palayam, a dozen girls in their mid-to-late teens have gathered for a meeting of the Young Women's Association. This is a structure devised by the animators for girls who are too old for the activities RTUT organises for children, but not usually invited to join a self-help group because they are not yet married: as women move to live with their husband when they marry, self-help groups are more likely to be stable in the long term if all the initial members are married already.

The Young Women's Associations have meetings scheduled once a month, in the RTUT offices; this is an informal get-together at an animator's house, on a weekday evening after work. The stated purpose of the Young Women's Association is to give education about sex and personal safety that they might not get elsewhere; more generally, it makes it more acceptable for them to do what would otherwise be culturally awkward – to hang out with friends for an hour and chat about things they wouldn't tell their parents, before going back home to help with the household chores. The girls assemble consumer goods in factories, with no job security and for piece-rate wages that come to around \$30 per month; most dropped out of school and started work at 15, and if they follow the cultural traditions most will be married by 21 and mothers of three by 26.

The conversation ranges over the question of arranged marriages versus love marriages – if the boy is from the same caste, and his family are unobjectionable, a love match should be okay – to an animated debate about the future of the dowry system. These girls' fathers demanded a dowry from their mothers' families, typically a motorcycle. More emboldened to think for themselves, this group of girls seems to be summoning the courage to resist.

Education and abuse prevention

Education is a crucial bulwark against sexual abuse and exploitation, as children whose confidence has been boosted by learning and who know their legal rights are more likely to be able to stand up to abusers or speak out against them. Sometimes the challenge starts with getting children into school: the Centre for Inclusive Education, an Oak partner in Bulgaria, works with Roma communities where elders can be unconvinced about formal education. One solution: “The school can host typical Roma celebrations, showing the community that they are safe places.” And sometimes the challenge is to improve the content of education. RTUT sometimes succeeds in inviting itself into Puducherry’s schools to give talks about children’s rights and self-protection, but frustratingly infrequently: the education ministry does not have a policy of encouraging child-centred NGOs into schools, so it depends entirely on the personal interest of the teachers.

So RTUT gets the message out through Children’s Clubs – in each town village, and aided by the after-school tuition centres, the animators have encouraged children aged from around 12 to 16 to form clubs which meet monthly, in the RTUT office or in their villages. The clubs not only impart knowledge, they nurture self-confidence and break down gender barriers by enabling girls and boys to share their fears and aspirations. At the meeting we observe, each of the dozen children sat cross-legged in a circle are bright, engaged and confident talking to the group. The meeting is chaired with easy self-assurance by Mary; it would have been impossible to guess that the previous year she had been kidnapped and sexually abused by a friend of her parents.

In each town and village, and aided by the after-school tuition centres, the animators have encouraged children aged from 12 to 16 to form clubs which meet monthly.

In contrast, EDA has long established a strong presence in Debre Birhan’s education sector. The projects it implements for other donors include new

classrooms and materials for government schools and the construction of several “Alternative Basic Education” (ABE) centres. These offer an accelerated curriculum of early years learning to get children who have missed out on years of schooling into a position where they can join the formal school system at a later age. The ABE centres are constructed and operated in partnership with communities, who are expected to contribute volunteer labour to match EDA’s financial input.

EDA’s child abuse project includes the establishment of a new ABE centre in Debre Birhan town, aimed specifically at the 200 orphans and other young children identified as being in greatest need. At the other ABE centres which EDA has constructed, and also in the formal schools, the project has established a total of 20 “child rights clubs” and provided training for the teachers and students who volunteer to lead them. Their aim is to spread the word among other pupils about a child’s legal rights under Ethiopian law, by such means as drama productions and creative writing competitions, and to encourage any children who are being abused to report it. Many clubs have also decided to raise money to help disadvantaged children to continue their schooling, through selling school materials, growing vegetables on a plot in the school grounds, or approaching local businesspeople for contributions.

On the objective of encouraging children to report abuse, progress is slow. All but one of the principals of school and ABE centres we meet in Debre Birhan say that they have had no reports of sexual abuse, and the other – at the town’s biggest school, Biruh Tesfa, which has over a thousand pupils – estimates he deals with three or four cases per year, most of which he judges not to be serious enough to warrant police involvement. None are in any doubt that sexual abuse exists and the children are reluctant to report it; one school is attempting to tackle this by nominating student members of the children’s rights club as contact points for fellow pupils to report abuse. Biruh Tesfa’s principal believes the biggest problem lies with male pupils assaulting classmates on the walk home from school – but with so much silence surrounding the issue, it is impossible to estimate how many children are suffering sexual abuse and how many of the abusers are classmates, family members, domestic employers or neighbours.

Or teachers. I later suggest to Alemaz Kebede, a psychologist who serves as a counsellor to pupils at one local school, that it is not unknown for teachers to trade higher grades for sexual favours. She has no reports of this happening at her school, but recalls with a smile that when she first took up her position and announced the aim of encouraging children to report cases of sexual abuse, some teachers approached her privately and seemed suspiciously insistent about establishing if she was serious.

Midway through our discussion with the principal of Biruh Tesfa, there is an urgent knock at the door. A newborn baby has been found in bushes by the school grounds, the mother having given birth and absconded. While the police are called to pick up the infant, the principal observes that unwanted pregnancies have been increasing among pupils in recent years. An obvious explanation is suggested by the advertising hoardings that line Debre Birhan's roads: there are several USAID-sponsored posters optimistically exhorting people to abstain from sex, and no mention of condoms. But the principal insists it must be proof that rape is increasing.

And sex education?

A different story emerges from counsellor Alemaz, who is better placed to understand the hidden reality of teenage sexuality – with sex education not yet on the curriculum, and no teenage magazines offering advice columns, she is the contact point for pupils concerned about sex. Alemaz estimates that 70% of the teenage girls in her school are sexually active, and aware that they mustn't admit it as the resulting stigma would make it harder to marry. Why do men insist on virgin brides? They believe that previous sexual experience makes a wife more likely to cheat. The cruel irony, of course, is that the girls for whom this dubious conclusion is most obviously unfair – those who have been raped – are those most unable to keep their loss of virginity from becoming public knowledge if they have the courage to seek justice.

Nor is it just teenage sexual activity that is shrouded in secrecy and denial: according to a source with divorce counsellor friends, female sexuality in general is such a taboo subject in Ethiopia that it is rarely

discussed openly even when it lies behind the breakdown of a marriage. Despite some recent progress, the majority of girls in Debre Birhan still suffer female genital mutilation, which is intended to reduce a women's sex drive. This male fear of female sexuality lies at the root of many of Ethiopia's problems with child sexual abuse – if men didn't demand virginity, there would be no need for pre-pubescent girls to be forced into marriage, or for victims of sexual abuse to keep quiet from fear of social stigma.

Back in India, RTUT's town villages in Puducherry are slightly further along the path to gender equality in sexual matters – but only slightly. To promote birth control, the government offers mothers a reversible operation to block their ovarian canals – an opportunity almost all women take advantage of after bearing three children. But then their husbands worry that they could conduct extramarital affairs without fear of being betrayed by the evidence of a pregnancy, and are tempted to confine their wives to the house. Several of the women in the G. N. Palayam rope-making enterprise tell us their husbands were initially reluctant to let them start this work, acquiescing only after they had personally visited the worksite.

The women who suffer most from Puducherry's cultural sexual mores are arguably widows with children, as it is difficult for them to remarry – and, as one married woman explains, although her husband beats her, he at least protects her from being preyed on by other men. With husbands drinking themselves to early deaths, there are so many widows that RTUT has instigated support groups specifically for them. RTUT has also made concerted efforts to work with men, but found that few are willing to take even the initial step of accepting that drunken and violent behaviour are problematic: the greater success of self-help groups among women than men is not for want of male outreach on RTUT's part.

In other ways, though, the girls in Puducherry have better prospects than their counterparts in Ethiopia. Laws against child marriage are strictly enforced – and while communities do often informally recognise marriages of under-18s, this is most commonly a pragmatic response to an accidental pregnancy. Compared to Ethiopia, few underage girls

in Puducherry are forced to marry by families keen to be rid of them. Perhaps most significantly for the life prospects of girls who have suffered abuse, Dominic Xavier observes that more young men nowadays seem willing to consider marriage with girls who are not virgins.

This cultural shift is being led by the educated urban elites and slowly trickling down to smaller communities, courtesy of popular culture. In 2005, the popular Tamil film actress Kushboo sparked outrage by advising girls to take precautions against HIV/AIDS and remarking that no educated man should nowadays expect his bride to be a virgin. That her comments landed her with civil lawsuits shows how far this debate is from being won. But the comparison with Debre Birhan makes the fact of the debate itself refreshing.

Community conversations

Perhaps nothing would help to minimise child sexual abuse in Debre Birhan as much as gender equality in sexual mores. The sweeping changes in ways of thinking that this would require may be too ambitious a goal for NGOs to aim for; shifting attitudes about the acceptability of child sexual abuse and exploitation through awareness-raising is, however, among the most important objectives of community-level protection work.

Awareness-raising is easy to do, but difficult to do well. “The problem with holding untargeted awareness-raising workshops,” in the words of Ethiopia’s Forum on Street Children, “is that the people who come are the same people who came to the last one, so you’re not reaching anybody who’ll change their opinions. It can be a waste of time and money.” Oak’s regional programme officer concurs: “People do it because it looks good, but much awareness-raising is useless. We have learned that it works best when focused very specifically, for example to teachers or police.”

If awareness-raising is targeted, its effectiveness can be not only greater but also easier to gauge. In Bulgaria, Oak’s partner the Animus Association makes it a priority to assess which groups are most at risk and what their levels of awareness are before deciding what specific messages need

reach what specific groups – and inviting people to call their 24-hour hotline enables them to assess how many people have been reached by an awareness-raising campaign, and what their reactions have been. It finds that awareness-raising can be helpfully targeted at audiences ranging from men and boys down to children as young as kindergarten age, who are taught how to say “no” to unwanted touching.

When the aim is more generally to change opinions in a local community, quantifying results is harder – but Oak’s East Africa officer has no doubt that the ‘community conversations’ methodology developed by the UNDP is the best way of proceeding. Community conversations take a long time, anything from a couple of months to over a year. They proceed by identifying the most influential people in a local community, typically around 150-200 of them, and hold a series of discussions which will end with the adoption of a formal document such as a Memorandum of Understanding, effectively a set of local by-laws.

Who is involved must vary on a case-by-case basis, as often the most powerful opinion-shapers in a community are not the most obvious. But the elders are always involved, as are the local Orthodox priest or Muslim leader. The willingness of religion’s representatives to bless forced marriages of prepubescent girls, or the marriages that result from mediation between abductors and their victims, are crucial in allowing those practices to continue. But while that gives local-level religious representatives powerful potential to effect positive change for children, there are profound challenges: many such priests are relatively poorly educated and informed, and national religious leaders have only limited scope to change grassroots practices by issuing edicts about the unacceptability of blessing child marriages.

Belete Deribie Woldegies is the executive director of the Ethiopian Human Rights and Civic Education Promotion Association (EHRCEPA), an Oak grantee which works on preventing early marriages. He reports that priests can be “creative” in avoiding the public glare when community conversations succeed in raise awareness that early marriage is illegal – they often agree to hold marriage ceremonies under cover of darkness, or disguise them as other ceremonies such as the celebration of saints’ days.

Awareness-raising: the need for a fresh approach

Changing minds on such issues requires a delicately balanced approach. As Oak's social work consultant Shirley Fozzard puts it, "what doesn't work is for people like me and you to steam in saying we have all the answers." Directness can be counter-productive; people must be guided towards the desired conclusions, but allowed to feel they've reached those conclusions for themselves. At a community conversation in Ethiopia, a trained facilitators may begin by pointing out that under Ethiopian law such practices as early marriage, abduction and female genital mutilation are illegal. "Harmful traditional practices" is a more fruitful way of framing the issue than talking about universal human rights – the heads of two district-level EDA committees report considerable resistance to the concept of children's rights whenever they raise it at "coffee ceremony" sessions, a forum for awareness-raising that uses the traditional Ethiopian ritual of chatting while roasting, grinding and brewing coffee as a means of reaching out to people.

While they require patience and perseverance, it seems that everyone who has experience of the community conversations methodology has a story of progress to report. The community conversations led by EHRCEPA have proved so popular that neighbouring communities beyond the remit of the project have started them on their own initiative to develop their own sets of agreements. Beletshachew Agezew, head of the women's ministry in Debre Birhan and EDA steering committee member, reports that community conversations held by her office have resulted in practitioners of female genital mutilation agreeing to hand over their implements as evidence of a commitment to stop the practice. Facilitators need to be inventive in overcoming resistance: at a project in Northern Ethiopia run by Children Aid Ethiopia (Chadet), a hard-core group of Muslim elders persist in insisting that the Koran mandates early marriage. But they agreed they would change their mind if a certain Ethiopian Muslim leader said it was otherwise. An invitation has been issued to the leader in question.

Another example of lateral thinking in awareness-raising work comes from an Oak grantee in another rural Ethiopian community, where participants

in community conversations struggled to accept that girls who migrated to Addis for “domestic work” – and returned home for visits with small signs of wealth, that attracted other girls to follow them – could in fact be involved in prostitution. So Oak’s partner arranged a field visit for a group of elders, a 300km bus trip to the downmarket brothels in the Merkato area of Addis. There they not only saw that such places existed but found a girl they knew drumming up business at one of the doorways.

Even if individuals are willing to raise awareness, their audience needs to be ready to hear. Among the Oak-funded projects in Uganda is Speak Out, which encourages victims of sexual abuse and exploitation to speak publicly about it and become counsellors. These role models have been highly effective in bringing the subject into the open – but the willingness of Ugandan society to hear them may, ironically, stem from the way HIV/AIDS prevention had already established a precedent for talking more openly about sex. It would be impossible to imagine the same project working in Debre Birhan.

Or, at least, not yet.

It would be easy to become discouraged by the slowness of progress in child protection work. At the tuition centre in Gopalankadaipet, one of RTUT’s town villages in Puducherry, 23 children are sitting on the floor in a small room in a rented house, revising for an exam in the morning. When we disturb them to ask what they want to be when they grow up, they are full of boisterous ambition: Policeman! Teacher! Doctor! Would you trust a policeman if you had a problem, we ask? They shake their heads. Would you trust your teacher? They smile and nod. One child confesses another ambition: he has always wanted to be a pilot, and earnestly asks the RTUT director if it is possible. He answers diplomatically: Why not?

One family at a time

In reality, by the time these children turn 15 most will come under increasing pressure from their families to quit school and start earning money. Even those who manage to complete twelve years of schooling will struggle to access a place at university, not because their education or intellect are inadequate but because of lack of money. While government student loans are available, students need to put up initial collateral to access one, and that will be beyond the financial reach of most of these children's families.

The director's response is twofold. Firstly, "in a project like this, we're guided by the needs of the community. As those needs evolve, we need to find new ways to meet them." As the Children's Clubs nurture cohorts of bright and self-confident pupils, it becomes important to shift the focus onto helping their transition to adulthood and then to parenthood, passing their strength on to their own children. Vocational training, already a part of RTUT's other work with tsunami-affected coastal villages, will become more important – as will redoubled efforts to break the cycle of alcoholism. Government hospitals do offer de-addiction facilities, and while most men in the town villages have steadfastly resisted admitting they have a problem, some of their teenage sons are already vowing to stay off the drink. This creates more potential for young men's self-help groups to mirror the progress already achieved by women's.

**"I know we can change this
community family by family, and
I want my children to be among
the role models."**

His second observation is that "progress takes a generation. Remember that the mothers of our animators never learned to read." It's a point echoed by one of the rope-making women of G. N. Palayam: "My husband beats me every day," she says. "He has only bad words for my mother and family. I understand this is because he was not given proper values as a child, which is why I am determined to give proper values to

my children. I know we can change this community family by family, and I want my children to be among the role models.”

Above all, perhaps, the importance of looking to the next generation is a point illustrated by the Young Women’s Association, whose discussion on the dowry system leads to a final question: Could you imagine that your mothers would ever have had a meeting or a conversation like this? Uproarious laughter is enough of an answer, and it seems a fair bet that these girls’ daughters will be more assertive, articulate and resilient still.

Emmanuel Development Association Ethiopia

EDA aims to improve the socio-economic well being of marginalised children, youth & women through the promotion of rights-based sustainable child care development programmes in the area of education, training, enhancing organisational and technical capacity, networking, advocacy and research.

Reaching the Unreached Trust

The project aims at reducing the vulnerability of women and children to sexual abuse and exploitation through micro-credit, parenting support, community run kindergartens, recreational activities, vocational training for unmarried adolescent girls and Child Welfare Groups engaging women, men and children to support especially vulnerable children in Pondicherry slums.

Published by Oak Foundation
in partnership with:
Emmanuel Development Association, Ethiopia
Reaching the Unreached Trust, India

Geneva, Switzerland
October 2009

Oak Foundation, Child Abuse Programme
Oak Philanthropy Ltd • Case postale 115 • 58, avenue Louis-Casaï
1216 Cointrin, Geneva • Switzerland
Main : +41 (0)22 318 8640 • Fax : +41 (0)22 318 8641
www.oakfnd.org

