

**Dear All,**

**Greetings on World Day Against Child Labour!**

**“Unaware of what is in their best interest, children are most susceptible to face exploitation. That's why it is necessary that child rights reaches every child.”**

Says Meera Yadav, CII Foundation Women Exemplar who has dedicated 25 years of her life to working against child labour and fighting for child rights.

Being located in Faizabad, Uttar Pradesh (UP), Meera's parents were worried about her future amidst the rampant child trafficking in the city. It prompted them to send 3 year old Meera to their relative's family in Varanasi (UP). Little did they know that her childhood was still not secure. Though Meera was allowed to pursue her education, it came at the cost of doing numerous house chores and other labour. Slowly the discrimination and mistrust grew into physical violence and abuse. Under these circumstances, all Meera wanted was to get away from her wretched life and marriage seemed like the only way out. At the young age of 17, she married a man who was separated from his first wife and worked as a daily wage earner. Unfortunately, Meera's desperate urge to come out of the cycle of violence pushed her into another dreadful cycle of poverty and oppression. Within 3 months of her marriage, she was pregnant. When her husband's family was unable to provide basic nutrition during her pregnancy, Meera's determination to be financially independent began and only grew stronger once her child was born. Meera fought against social conventions and stepped out of her house to teach in a small private school and attain financial stability.

Every day on her way to school, Meera saw children from the nearby slums engaged in rag-picking. Speaking to some of them, she realized that dropping out of school was common and these children were exposed to major health risks. Coming from her own lived experience of facing child neglect, the situation motivated her to start teaching children from the nearby slums. This was Meera's foray into the world of child rights, where she reached out to 700 children directly for classes. Meera knew that these children were most susceptible to being trafficked and easily pulled into abuse and poverty. She shares,

**“It was difficult to teach the children who pick up garbage in the settlements. It was critical to foster an interest in the children to pursue education, else, they would have dropped out. Not only did I teach the children, but also took their parents to the schools to show them how the world of education is.”**

Meera worked relentlessly with these children, their parents, and the stakeholders like local NGOs and Government institutions to provide them with safe spaces and access to scholarships for better education.

It was Meera's doggedness and understanding of the social fabric of the city that slowly led to measurable changes. Aware of the fact that the Dashashwamedh Ghat in Varanasi was a prime site for child beggars, violence, and trafficking, Meera made multiple visits to the ghats to create awareness of child rights among the local community. She sensitised the local police through sessions and one-to-one meetings. Finally, one day to her surprise, the child help desk at the Ghat Police Station in Varanasi called her to assist in reuniting 40 trafficked children with their families. This has been Meera's favourite achievement so far, something she wears on her sleeve even now.

Woman exemplars like Meera have created safe spaces for thousands of children who are victims of child labour, drug addiction, child marriage and child trafficking.

Meera transformed into a champion of change against child labour, impacting 18,000 lives through awareness generation on child rights across Varanasi.

As Meera speaks of bringing child rights to every child, she aspires to open a learning centre where she can have a library, toys, and basic learning kits. The learning centre will act as a bridge and connect vulnerable children to scholarships, Government aid, and safe spaces.

To help Meera live her dream of 'No child should be left behind' please reach out to us, and support Meera with donations and collaborations to develop a model learning center in Uttar Pradesh. Contact:

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