

I AM | determined

MAYBE SOMEDAY,
BUT NOT *today*

A YOUNG GIRL SAYS "NO" TO EARLY MARRIAGE

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MUKESHWARI'S MARRIAGE WAS WRONG,
AND THAT SOMETHING HAD TO BE DONE TO STOP IT.

Legally, Mukeshwari's marriage should never even have been a possibility. She was only 15 years old, and the national age of consent for Indian women is 18. But Mukeshwari lived in Thuadabri, an isolated rural village where it is traditional to give girls in marriage soon after they reached puberty. And her grandfather insisted. "The boy is good; the family is good," he said. "This chance may not come again."

The groom was 20 years old, a driver living in a nearby village. Mukeshwari agreed that he might be a suitable match, but that was beside the point. "I didn't want to get married," she says. "I wanted to go to school."

Early marriage poses a host of problems for girls like Mukeshwari.

GIRLS WHO MARRY YOUNG ARE LESS LIKELY TO FINISH SCHOOL AND HAVE FEWER ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES.

They are more likely to undergo physical and sexual abuse at the hands of their husbands and in-laws. They often have little or no control over when they have sex or when they have children. And when they do become pregnant, adolescent girls

have a much greater risk of complications and death than older women.

Under other circumstances, Mukeshwari's parents might have intervened. But her family was poor, and her parents had left to look for work in the neighboring state of Maharashtra. So when she learned that her grandfather had arranged her marriage, she had no one to turn to but her friends – and Parwati Sahu.

Parwati is a CARE-trained volunteer health worker in Thuadabri. Though her primary responsibility and expertise is working with mothers and young children, Parwati and the other health volunteers CARE works with are also trained to be "change agents" – individuals who help transform the way their communities treat women and girls. Parwati had worked with Mukeshwari and other teenage girls in the village to discuss health issues, including family planning and early marriage. She knew right away that Mukeshwari's marriage was wrong, and that something had to be done to stop it.

Parwati went with Mukeshwari, her friends and other volunteer health workers to confront Mukeshwari's grandfather. But he was adamant: He had made an agreement with the boy's mother

and he intended to carry it through. So Parwati went to the panchayat, or village council, and presented the case.

Fortunately, Parwati and Mukeshwari had the law on their side. The panchayat voted to stop the marriage until Mukeshwari was at least 18. Faced with the community's overwhelming decision, her grandfather had to give in.

This was the first time an early marriage had been stopped in Thuadabri, but it won't be the last. With Parwati's help, the village formed a committee on early marriage. The committee visits the houses of families with adolescent girls, discussing the problems of marrying young and making sure no early marriages are arranged.

As for Mukeshwari, she's back in school and happy. "I don't want to marry anyone right now," she says. "I want to be a doctor. I'll come back to Thuadabri and make sure everyone here stays healthy."

It takes a lot of work, time and investment to become a doctor. But by staying in school, Mukeshwari has kept the opportunity open. With Parwati and the rest of Thuadabri firmly behind her, it is entirely possible she'll succeed.