Good Practices compiled in this document are something that have organically emerged during the ongoing work of Mashal in the villages of Sheikhpura district which focussed on the empowerment of girls from marginalized communities through education. They are the testaments of a beacon of HOPE and take us on a journey from **DESPAIR TO HOPE.**

BEACONS OF HOPE

Good Practices from UNICEF Project, "Empowering Girls To Lead The Way For Education In Bihar," Implemented by MASHAL in Sheikhpura district

Kinship and Neighbourhood Care: Creating a Strong Care & Safety Net for Left Behind and Migrating Children

Introduction: In the villages of Sheikhpura district, Bihar, economic hardship often forces people to migrate. Search of work takes them away to far off places like Punjab, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh or West Bengal. Many times, the wage earned by the migrating member is not so much that if he alone migrates, it would be adequate for family's survival. Under the circumstances, both the parents migrate and many a times the entire family. Family migration along with children is a trend observed mostly in those families which go to work on brick kilns. Whether both parents leave for work leaving children behind or whether entire family leaves for work with children, in both the cases, children's education suffer a lot. Once gone out, children's names are struck off from the school register, whereas children left behind are found to be working on farms assisting their guardians and thus dropping out of the school.

These stories were found by the field staff of Mashal in villages after villages. So, gradually, a unique practice of "Kinship and Neighborhood Care" emerged gradually through efforts of dedicated field staff of Mashal as an experiment to prevent school drop-out, increase children's attendance and retention in the schools. This practice has become a strong support system for children left behind or those children who once used to migrate with their parents to brick kilns, ensuring their safety, well-being, and continuity in education. Through the stories of Nandini and Manisha, we see how this practice has emerged, supported by the UNICEF, is transforming lives.

Case Example 1: Nandini's schooling continues under the care of her grandmother

Nandini Kumari, a ten-year-old girl from the village of Avgil, represents a powerful example of how kinship care can transform the lives of children left behind by migrating parents. Nandini's parents, Jasu Devi and Gopal Manjhi, worked at brick kilns in Punjab and Haryana, taking their children along on these arduous journeys. However, when Nandini was introduced to education through Mashal's Flexible Learning Centre, she faced a dilemma: how could she continue her studies when her parents were preparing to return to the kilns?

The solution came in the form of kinship care. Kanchan Kumari, the field worker of Mashal found that Nandini's grandmother lived alone in the village. If Nandini stayed back, she could continue with her schooling and her grandmother would also get some support. With the support and encouragement of Mashal's field animator, Kanchan Kumari, Nandini's parents agreed to leave her behind in the village. This decision was not easy for them, as they were concerned about her well-being in their absence. However, the trust they placed in Kanchan and the community reassured them that Nandini would be well cared for.

Nandini's grandmother provided the daily care and emotional support Nandini needed, while Kanchan continued to monitor her educational progress. This arrangement allowed Nandini to stay in school, where she thrived, moving from barely knowing how to hold a pencil to confidently reading and writing.

The strong kinship ties in the community provided a foundation upon which the field worker could build. The community's existing care structure made it easier for Mashal to re-enroll Nandini in school and support her

journey. Over time, Nandini thrived, no longer just surviving but aspiring to become a teacher. This practice was replicated with other families also which used to migrate with their children to the brick kilns. There are 10 girls in Avgil village alone who are staying behind under the care of their close relative or neighbours and continuing their education with support from Mashal's dedicated field worker. lose relative or neighbours and continuing their education with support from Mashal's dedicated field worker.

Case Example 2: Manisha's Transformation Through Collective Care

Manisha's story echoes a similar theme. Her parents, like many others in the village, were forced to leave home for work, leaving Manisha in the care of her *mausi* (aunt). But her mausi had to leave for work leaving Manisha alone in the house. While Manisha stayed with her aunt, she was not going to her school on a regular basis, thus becoming deprived of the education and facilties that the government school provided to its regular students. Manisha's potential was hidden beneath the weight of her circumstances.

However, it wasn't until Sonali Kumari, a dedicated field worker from Mashal, began working in the village that Manisha's life began to change. Sonali realized that she could use the strong feeling of kinship and community to leverage Manisha's formal education. She talked to her aunt and women in the neighbourhood who agreed to provide support to Manisha.

Manisha was initially resistant to change, finding comfort in the familiarity of her daily routine. But with Sonali's persistent efforts and the backing of the community, Manisha began to attend school regularly. The neighbors who once simply watched over her now took an active interest in her education, encouraged by the progress they saw. Manisha's story is one of transformation, where neighbourhood care provided the bedrock upon which her future was built.

The Emergence of a Good Practice: These stories of Nandini and Manisha highlight how "Kinship and Neighborhood Care" has emerged as a best practice in the face of economic migration. When parents must leave home to earn a livelihood, the community steps in, ensuring that children are not left to fend for themselves. This practice, though informal, has proven to be incredibly effective in safeguarding the well-being and future of these children.

Key Benefits of Kinship and Community Care:

- **Emotional and Psychological Support:** Children like Nandini, Manisha and others, received consistent emotional and psychological support from their extended families and neighbours, helping them navigate the challenges of their circumstances.

- **Safety and Stability:** The community is acting as a protective shield, ensuring that children are safe from the dangers of child labor, trafficking, and neglect.

- **Educational Continuity:** With Mashal's intervention, these children are not only kept safe but are also reintroduced to education, setting them on a path to a brighter future.

Mashal's Role in Strengthening Community Care: Mashal, with the support of UNICEF, has recognized the critical role that kinship and neighbourhood care plays in these children's lives. By working closely with these informal networks, Mashal has been able to formalize and strengthen this practice, ensuring that children who are left behind do not lag behind children living with parents and receive the comprehensive support they need. Field animators of Mashal have been key in integrating Mashal's programs with existing community care systems, amplifying their impact.

Conclusion: The practice of "Kinship and Neighborhood Care" in Sheikhpura is more than just a coping mechanism; it is a model of resilience and solidarity. As Mashal continues to work with these communities, this practice will not only continue to thrive but will also serve as a blueprint for other regions facing similar challenges. By nurturing this model of care, Mashal is building a sustainable framework for the long-term well-being of children in these marginalized communities.

Education and Hygiene Go Hand in Hand for Children

Introduction: The project of Mashal in Sheikhpura primarily focussed on Dalit communities, long relegated to the margins of society and subjected to exploitation and oppression for centuries. Along with educational backwardness, children and girls faced the drudgery of labour at home and in the fields, assisting their parents. This keeps children busy in household chores and at wage-based work with family members. As a result of this, they neglect the need to maintain cleanliness and personal hygiene. Further, these families suffer from lack of access to public sources of clean water like handpumps Supply of water in taps from the water-tank managed by the Gram Panchayats is also irregular. Circumstances like these force these families and children to adapt to the new conditions. Unfortunately, this forced compromise and adaptation results into maintaining poor hygiene and cleanliness. When children from such families go to school, their classmates coming from other communities make fun of their appearance and uniforms because of lack of cleanliness and poor hygiene.

In the centers run by Mashal, the field animators observed that children often came to the learning centers in dirty clothes, with unkempt hair, and little understanding of the importance of personal hygiene. Recognizing this challenge, Mashal's field animators took proactive steps to address these issues, leading to a significant transformation in the behavior of the children and also addressing the challenges they faced in accessing water.

The following two cases will help us in understanding how personal hygiene and cleanliness got integrated with education and both the issues were no longer seen in isolation.

Case Example 1: Kumkum Kumari's Journey to Cleanliness and Confidence

Kumkum Kumari, a small girl of 9 years from Budhauli village, was often burdened with responsibilities beyond her years. With both of her parents working outside the home, she was left to care for her younger sister, do the cooking and cleaning at home. This left little time for her own needs, including her education. After persistent efforts, Kumkum finally began attending the centre. Field animator Binita noticed that Kumkum was often unkempt—her clothes were tattered, and she frequently arrived at the centre unwashed. The other children, noticing her disheveled appearance, kept their distance and rarely interacted with her. This only deepened Kumkum's feelings of isolation and insecurity.

Binita recognized that Kumkum's lack of cleanliness was not merely a personal issue but was rooted in deeper challenges, such as the absence of basic facilities at home and the overwhelming burden of her responsibilities. Understanding the impact this was having on Kumkum's social interactions and self-esteem, Binita decided to address the issue with care and sensitivity.

She began by sitting down with Kumkum, gently explaining the importance of personal hygiene and cleanliness. Binita used simple examples and stories to make Kumkum understand how maintaining cleanliness could positively impact her life, both in terms of health and social acceptance. She spoke about the benefits of being clean—how it could help her make friends, feel better about herself, and even improve her focus and performance in school. Binita also encouraged her to participate in the life-skill workshop which focused on hygiene and cleanliness among other things.

Over time, the change in Kumkum was remarkable. Not only did she gain the respect and friendship of her peers, but her newfound confidence also led to significant improvements in her academic performance.

Case Example 2: Cleanliness and Education Goes Hand in Hand for Raja.

Raja, an eight-year-old boy from Puraina village, was trapped in a vicious cycle of neglect and isolation due to a speech disorder that led to severe bullying from his peers. He often spent his days rolling in muddy lanes, covered in

dirt, which further isolated him from other children who laughed at him for this act.

Munni, a field coordinator from Mashal, discovered Raja during one of her regular visits to the village. Despite the neglect he faced, she saw potential in Raja and took it upon herself to bring about a change. She began by gently coaxing him to the Flexible Learning Centre, where she taught him the importance of cleanliness through songs, stories, and live demonstrations in addition to getting him acquainted to the world of letters and numbers.

Daily, Munni would help Raja clean himself, ensuring he came to the centre in clean clothes. This simple routine not only improved his hygiene but also boosted his self-esteem. Gradually, the children at the center stopped teasing him, and Raja started participating in activities, slowly shedding the nickname "Bataah" that had haunted him.

Raja's transformation was remarkable. Munni's efforts to instill the value of cleanliness and hygiene played a crucial role in his journey from neglect to confidence. As Raja began to speak more clearly and engage with others, his life took a positive turn. With Munni's guidance, Raja was eventually enrolled in the local primary school, ready to embrace a brighter future with newfound hope and dignity. The Emergence of a Good Practice: The field animators' consistent efforts and patience were key to the success of this initiative. Another very important key to the success of this practice was the belief and value system that Mashal has instilled in each of its field workers. This is the value system of respecting human dignity and not blaming the individual responsible for her/his situation, but the circumstances and the structural inequity and inequality that the community they are working with suffer from till today.

They understood that behavioural transformation would take time and remained committed to gently guiding the children towards better hygiene practices. Further, they also involved the community and parents which ensured that the message of cleanliness was reinforced at home, making it easier for children to adopt these practices. During their meetings with Panchayat representatives and officials, they also raised the issue of lack of handpumps and irregular water supply from water-tanks. Moreover, realizing that poor hygiene and lack of cleanliness was an important issue to be addressed, Mashal integrated hygiene education into the life skills module for training of adolescents.

Key Benefits of Integrating Hygiene and Cleanliness with Children's Education:

- **Improved Self-Esteem and School Attendance:** Those children who used to complain of being the target of bullying for their unclean appearance or poor hygiene started getting acceptance from their peer. They started participating in group activities. This boosted their self-esteem and confidence. The school atmosphere was no longer unwelcoming. This leveraged regular school going by students.

- **Health and Well-Being:** Teaching children the importance of cleanliness and personal hygiene contributed to their overall health. Maintaining personal hygiene practices reduced the risk of infections and diseases, fostering a healthier environment.

- **Positive Behavioral Change:** The consistent focus on hygiene and cleanliness helped in instilling long-term behavioral changes in the children, contributing to their overall development and well-being.

Mashal's Role in Improving Hygienic Behaviour and Cleanliness Practices: Mashal, with the support of UNICEF, has recognized the critical role that hygiene and cleanliness among children can play in their overall development and well-being. By integrating this important component in its training programmes, life skill curriculum, and project activities, it made sure that the progress on this indicator is regularly monitored. The trained field animators of Mashal have been key in amplifying the impact of this practice.

Conclusion : The cleanliness initiatives led by Mashal's field animators have proven to be a successful practice in promoting personal hygiene among children in the project area. By addressing both the behavioral and practical challenges, the animators have helped the children and their parents develop lifelong habits that contribute to their overall health and well-being. This practice not only improved the immediate environment of the learning centers but also had a lasting impact on the children's self-esteem and their ability to succeed in education.

Engaging with Male Members in Community on Gender Roles and Perspectives

Introduction: In many communities, gender stereotypes have long dictated the roles and opportunities available to girls and women. These deeply ingrained beliefs often confine girls to domestic chores, depriving them of education and personal growth. In the Sheikhpura district of Bihar, this has been a significant barrier to girls' education. However, Mashal with support from UNICEF, in its mission to empower girls through education, has successfully challenged these stereotypes through persistent efforts at the grassroots level. This approach has been instrumental in breaking down gender barriers and creating a supportive environment for girls to pursue their studies.

Key Strategies and Emerging of a Good Practice :

Mashal's field animators realized that to effectively challenge gender stereotypes, they needed to involve the entire family, particularly male members whose opinions often dictate family decisions. The animators began by initiating dialogues with fathers and brothers, sensitizing them to the importance of educating girls and how it could benefit the family and community in the long run. Transformative gender approach was integrated into the life skill curriculum designed by Mashal. At the Flexible Learning Centre, stories that promote gender equality and do not reinforce stereotypical gender roles assigned to girls and women were selected for children to read.

Gender sensitization programmes were organized, focusing on changing mindsets and encouraging behaviors that support girls' education. These programmes were designed to:

1. **Highlight the Value of Education:** The programs emphasized the long-term benefits of educating girls, such as improved economic opportunities, better health outcomes, and overall family well-being.

2. **Challenge Traditional Gender Roles:** Animators used real-life examples and success stories to challenge the traditional gender roles that limited girls' access to education. They demonstrated how educated girls contribute positively to their families and communities.

3. **Promote Shared Responsibilities:** Brothers were encouraged to share household chores, freeing up their sisters' time to attend school and study. This not only eased the burden on the girls but also fostered a sense of responsibility and equality among siblings.

Another highly effective strategy was to organize morning dialogues with boys and male members in the tolas (hamlets) from where children were coming to the centre. The field animator accompanied by the project staff and an expert on gender and social behavioural communication visited these tolas and held discussions with brothers, fathers and uncles of the girls around issues related to gender roles, importance of education for girls and how few years of investment may give them rich dividends and take them out from the drudgery of centuries. Examples of girls and women who are doing well after getting education from their own village and nearby were discussed with them. The recent recruitment of a large number of female teachers by the state government further strengthened their case, reinforcing the gender sensitization programs aimed at shifting mindsets and encouraging supportive behavior.

The following two case stories present in brief the impact of this good practice.

Case Example 1: Priya: Journey of a Girl from being 'Marriage Ready' to 'School Ready'

For Priya Bharti of Bishahiya village, reaching Class VIII was being seen as a major milestone, signifying that the girl is "marriage-ready," which simplified the task of finding a suitable groom for her by the parents. Priya wanted to study further like her brother. But her parents' skepticism about educating daughters made Priya's future seem bleak. However, this status quo had started meeting a serious challenge with the opening of Digital Literacy Centre in the village by Mashal with support from UNICEF. Anil Kumar, a dedicated field worker and digital learning facilitator played a catalytic role in challenging such gender stereotypes.

Anil Kumar succeeded in convincing Priya's parents to send her to the Centre. This proved to be a turning point in her life. At the centre, she started learning lessons from the course books with active support from Anil. With the help of different digital applications, she learnt how to solve mathematical problems and understand difficult concepts. With the help of the Tablet that was provided to the girls by Mashal with support from UNICEF, Anil showed them motivational videos and animations raising her aspiration. She also attended sessions on financial literacy and learnt many things like opening of Bank Account, deposit and withdrawal of money, investments etc.

All these boosted Priya's confidence. She was the first girl in her tola to pass Class X. Again, the parents and her brother were skeptical in sending her to the Intermediate College in the town. But, eventually, they gave in when Anil shared stories of other girls who had benefited from education and how they had positively impacted their families. Priya's brother, initially resistant, began to see the value in his sister's education after several such discussions. Priya is a student of Class XII now.

Once Priya's marriage was the main topic of discussion in her home, but now the talks were concentrated on study, subjects, books, teachers and her friends from the college. Her transformation from a 'marriage-ready' girl to a 'future-ready' girl is an amazing story. Priya wants to serve her society by becoming a nurse.

Case Example 2: Empowering Kranti: Breaking Gender Barriers through Education

Kranti Kumari, a 13-year-old girl from Khorampur village in Sheikhpura district, was burdened by the expectations placed on her as a girl. Her life revolved around household chores, caring for her younger siblings, and supporting her family's daily survival. Though enrolled in Class VI at a government school, her attendance was irregular due to these responsibilities, depriving her of the educational benefits she was entitled to. The gender roles and stereotypes that dictated her life seemed unchangeable, keeping her confined to her home.

This narrative began to shift when Anita Kumari, a dedicated field animator from Mashal, entered Kranti's life. Recognizing Kranti's potential, Anita sought to enroll her in the Digital Learning Centre, but Kranti's father was resistant, questioning who would handle the household chores if Kranti also went to school.

Understanding the deeply ingrained gender norms, Anita, with guidance from her supervisors at Mashal, organized a village discussion on gender roles and the rights of girls. The programme, attended by Kranti's father, helped him reconsider his stance. This small step marked the beginning of a significant transformation. Kranti's time at the DLC introduced her to a new world of interactive learning through digital tools, sparking her interest in education. As Kranti's confidence and knowledge grew, her parents, once skeptical, became supportive and proud of their daughter's progress.

Through Mashal's intervention and Anita's unwavering commitment, Kranti's life - and the lives of other girls in her community - was irrevocably changed. Her journey from being confined to household chores to

becoming an empowered student serves as a beacon of hope, demonstrating that with the right support, even the most entrenched gender norms can be transformed

Impact and Benefits

- **Empowerment of Girls:** The interventions led to increased enrollment of girls in educational programs, breaking the cycle of gender-based educational deprivation.

- **Shift in Mindsets:** Boys and male family members became allies in promoting girls' education, leading to broader community acceptance.

- **Long-Term Community Change:** These efforts have begun to create a cultural shift in the communities, where educating girls is increasingly seen as valuable and essential.

Conclusion : Engaging with male members- fathers and brothers of the girls has been highly impactful. With this practice bearing positive results, the field animators have been engaging with male members of the community in all the programe and activities of the Centre. This is helping them understand how gender stereotypes have had a profound impact on the lives of many girls in Sheikhpura. The practice has emerged as a beacon of hope and aspiration.

Thoughts of Parents and Teachers for this Project

Sheema Devi- She is the mother of Arti Kumari, who is a student at FLC. She works as a seasonal laborer in others' fields during farming, and her husband is a daily wage laborer. She shared that before joining FLC, her daughter was never serious about her studies, and their family never emphasized the importance of education. However, after learning about the FLC program, Arti joined its classes, and the mother actively attended parent meetings.

It was during these meetings that they truly understood the significance of education. Not only did their family benefit, but the children in their community also learned about leading a hygienic life. People began to grasp the importance of education and cleanliness. She expressed,

''इस तरह का कार्यक्रम जरूर चलना चाहिए इस तरह के कार्यक्रम केवल अच्छी पढ़ाई ही नहीं बल्कि जीने का तरीका भी सिखाते हैं। आप लोगों को हमारे बच्चों को अच्छी शिक्षा देने के लिए बहुत बहुत धन्यवाद।''

"Such programs should definitely run because they not only provide good education but also teach a way of living. Many thanks to you all for providing our children with quality education."

Untishwa Devi is the mother of Rakhi Kumari, who is studying in the FLC class. She works as a seasonal laborer and belongs to a marginalized community. She shared that both her husband and she are uneducated. In their family, Rakhi is the first child who can read and write. Untishwa Devi feels proud of her; she mentioned, "We always feel neglected, but now, through Mashal, our children are educated, and they are studying well, being included in society. She expressed,

''उन्होंने यह व्यक्त किय, ''अब कोई भी हमें बेवकूफ नहीं बना सकता। मेरे बच्चों को पढ़ाई और आगे बढ़ने के बारे में कोई नहीं सोचता था, पर आप लोगों के द्वारा जो एफएलसी का कार्यक्रम चला, उसके कारण हम जैसे पिछड़े लोगों के लिए आगे बढ़ने का रास्ता मिला है।''

"Now, no one can make fools of us. No one used to think about my children's education and progress, but because of the FLC program run by Mashal, a path for advancement has opened up for us marginalized individuals."
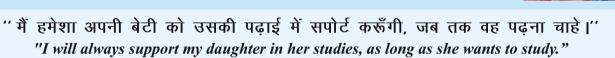
Sankar Manjhi is a development worker in the community; previously, he worked as a laborer. He completed the 10th standard. He aspires for his children to receive a good education and excel in their lives. He consistently encourages others as well. His daughter, Pratima Kumari, is currently studying in the Digital class and is performing well. Her dream is to become an IAS officer. Sankar ji, her father, said

''मेरे बच्चे, जीवन में मेरे से आगे बढ़े। मैं पूरा समर्थन करूँगा।
मैं पढ़ाई के लिए तैयार हूँ, बस वे लोग अच्छे से पढ़ें।

"My children, should surpass me in life.
I will provide complete support. I am ready for their education; they just need to study well."

Baby Devi is a mother of Manisha Kumari, who is studing in FLC class. She works as a seasonal labour belong to marginalized community. Her husband is working in Panjab as a Rajmistri.

Before joining the FLC class, she would always tell her daughter, Manisha, to study and go to school. Sometimes, she even used to resort to beating her for this. However, since joining the FLC class, she no longer shouts at her for studying. Now, her daughter has learned to live a disciplined life and regularly attends both school and the FLC. She is pleased to see her daughter, who can now read and write. She expressed,

'' मैं हमेशा अपनी बेटी को उसकी पढ़ाई में सपोर्ट करूँगी, जब तक वह पढ़ना चाहे।''
"I will always support my daughter in her studies, as long as she wants to study."

Mr. Kamal Krishna Ranjan, Principal of the Primary School in Purankama village, is pleased to see that Mashal is assisting the government in achieving zero dropout rates among children in the village. He appreciates that the FLC class and interface meetings with teachers and parents are genuinely helping in reaching the government's goals. He stated

'' इस तरह के प्रोग्राम की और जरूरत है, लोगों में अभी भी एजुकेशन के
लिए बहुत कम जागरूकता है।
लोग गरीबी के कारण पिछड़े हैं, पर एजुकेशन ही इस गरीबी के चक्कर को तोड़ पाएगी''
"Programs like these are needed; there is still very little awareness about education among people.
People are marginalized due to poverty, but education alone will break this cycle of poverty."

Conclusion: In conclusion, the project extends heartfelt gratitude to UNICEF for its invaluable partnership, which has been essential in driving the success of this initiative. We also commend the unwavering dedication of our field-based project staff, especially the Animators and Supervisors, whose tireless efforts have sparked real change in the community. A special note of appreciation goes to the School Heads and teachers within Sheikhpura District for their immense support and guidance throughout this journey. As we look to the future, we are confident that this Best Practices document will serve as a vital resource for both government and non-government organizations in implementing similar initiatives focused on empowering and educating the girl child in Bihar.