

# COMPLAINT BOXES IN BENGAL SCHOOLS TO COMBAT TRAFFICKING

Relevant for: Government Policies & Welfare Schemes | Topic: Rights & Welfare of Women – Schemes & their Performance, Mechanisms, Laws Institutions and Bodies

In March 2018, two sisters studying in Class 7 and Class 8 of a school under the Mathurapur police station in West Bengal's South 24 Parganas district suddenly dropped out. Their absence went unnoticed until school authorities found a letter in their complaint box: it said that the girls had been taken to Kashmir without their consent and married off there.

The letter was written by a school mate who lived in the same village and, from conversations she overheard, got to know about the whereabouts of the two girls. Chandan Kumar Maity, headmaster of the school, tried to trace the girl's parents. It did not take him long to realise that the girls had indeed been trafficked to Kashmir. After a lot of effort from the school authorities and the local police and non-governmental organisations, the girls were rescued and sent to a government home. The parents, it turns out, were involved: they had received Rs. 1.3 lakh for the girls.

More than a hundred schools in West Bengal's South 24 Parganas district have installed boxes on their premises under the Swayangsiddha scheme, which encourages girls to report stalking or harassment faced either by them or anyone known to them.

## Communication channel

During a recent event to extend the scheme to other districts of West Bengal, Inspector General of the State's Criminal Investigation Department Ajey Ranande (recently transferred from the post) emphasised on the important role played by schools in dealing with organised crimes, like human trafficking.

"Swayangsiddha boxes have been set up in schools, where girls can put chits (complaints)," Mr Ranande said. Not only schools of Mathurapur but also those in areas like Metaibruz on the southwestern fringes of Kolkata are benefiting from the installation of these complaint boxes.

"These boxes have opened a new channel of communication for girls in our school. We have received several complaints of stalking and have involved locals as well as the police to ensure that girls do not face any problem coming to school," said Durba Sanyal Bhattacharya, headmistress of the Rabindra Balika Vidyapith.

Rishi Kant of Shakti Vahini, who has been associated with the scheme ever since it started in the district in 2016, pointed out that *Swayangsiddha* means self-reliance and one of the important aims of the scheme is to make girls aware so that they are able to make informed choices.

"We are trying to ensure that State-run schools across West Bengal have such boxes. This can go a long way in preventing trafficking, not only of the girls coming to school but also in their villages," Mr. Kant said.

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