

CHAMPIONS of Adolescent Empowerment

Courage is her middle name

A passionate spokesperson for adolescent empowerment and prevention of child marriage, Sona Bairwa works closely with adolescent boys and girls in 75 villages in Tonk district in the capacity of a Facilitator with the NGO Pink City Cycle Rickshaw Chalak Sanstha (PCCRCS).

In her 26 years she has experienced many ups and downs in life, and the root cause for these was child marriage. Illiteracy and poverty led her parents to marry her at the tender age of six. Being so young, she did not even know the meaning of marriage. After marriage she continued to stay with her parents and kept going to school, since her *gauna*¹ was not done.

But as she became an adolescent, Sona's in-laws started putting pressure on her parents for *gauna*. Though very young and impressionable Sona was extremely distressed at the thought of leaving her home to go and live with her in-laws and husband. Leaving home meant leaving school. Despite her unwillingness, her father started relenting to pressure. As a last resort, Sona approached her school principal and sought his support. He

encouraged her to study and convinced her parents to delay the *gauna*. Having got the opportunity to continue her schooling, Sona immersed herself in studies.

But, this was not the end of her struggles. Her in-laws kept building pressure on Sona's parents for *gauna*. As they had done earlier, Sona's teachers and her school principal stood in her support and opposed her *gauna*. So much was their support that they helped Sona get admission in Bhimrao Ambedkar residential school in Bhilwara district, to help her study without any distractions. Proving herself worthy of the confidence her teachers had in her, Sona graduated from school with a commendable first division.

Once back in her village, Sona again started facing pressure from her in-laws, but this time even the village *zamindar*

¹ Gauna is a ritual of leaving parental home for in-laws' home. This is followed by consummation of marriage. This custom is prevalent in many states in India, especially when young girls are married. The child continues to stay with her parents after marriage, till *gauna* is done.



joined them in pressurising Sona's family. Sona had dreamt of finishing her college education but parents could not support that dream hers due to their weak economic situation. Thus, Sona agreed to go to her in-laws place, on the condition that they would allow her to finish her Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) and become a teacher. Though her in-laws promised that they would take care of her demand, they did not keep their promise. As a last resort, Sona went on a hunger strike and refused to eat until allowed to continue

her education. This forced her in-laws to send her back to her parents' house. Once back, Sona was completely invested in her studies and got her B.Ed. degree.

Today, Sona is a committed social worker, working closely with the community on the issues of child marriage and adolescent empowerment. Once Sona shared her story with Ladli Samman Campaign² it got published in several newspapers and she became a beacon of light among the villagers.



She has also been awarded with the Garima Balika Sanrakshan Evam Samman Yojana of the Government of Rajasthan to honour her courage and efforts.

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GARIMA BALIKA SANRAKSHAN EVAM SAMMAN YOJANA

was launched by the Government of Rajasthan in 2016 to reward and give recognition to various individuals and organisations for their commendable work in the field of protection of a girl child. Its objective is to recognise, reward and inspire individuals as well as organisations to prevent violence against children and exploitation of a girl child at various levels.

The reward includes cash along with a certificate of recognition and memento given on National Girl Child Day being celebrated at the state level on January 24 every year.

² A UNICEF supported programme, which honours and felicitates change makers in the community especially girls who have fought against child marriage, child labour and other forms of violence against children



Having helped himself, he now helps others with his knowledge on child rights

Twenty-one-year-old Vinod Panchal from Darda Hind village in Tonk block has used the knowledge that he gained as a member of the Child Rights Club in his school to his own benefit and also help other adolescents in his community. He was an active club member in school and absorbed a lot of information on issues related to child rights, violence against children and child labour. Armed with this repertoire of information, he began with changing the mindset of his own family.

Once he passed out from school, his family started putting pressure on him to get married at the age of 20. Though it was a slow and difficult process, he was eventually able to explain to them that according to the law he was underage. Once he was able to stop his marriage, he also succeeded in convincing his parents to delay his sister's marriage as she was underage as well.

Having brought a change in the mindset of his own family, Vinod has started working at the community level with full fervour. Though he has passed out from school, he has expressed his keenness to be associated with any activity of the Child Rights Club at the school or at the community level.

In our neighbourhood, if we get to know that a child marriage is taking place, we counsel the family that it is against the law and they can be punished and jailed for two years. We also explain that the caterers, horse owners etc. can be fined and punished, if they provide services for the wedding of an underage girl. Then we motivate the girl who is about to get married to say 'no'. At times, we also take our school teachers along to talk to the family.

Vinod Panchal
ex-member of Child Rights Club
Darda Hind village and gram panchayat
Tonk district



We convince those who are out-of-school or have dropped out of school to join back. Some 3-4 girls have recently joined school because of our persistent efforts. For example, Pooja dropped out of school as she did not feel like studying because she was a slow learner. We assured her that we would help her in her studies if she did not understand something in the class. This helped in bringing her back to school.

Om Kanwar, Class 8
Government Girl's Secondary
School
Palana village and gram
panchayat
Bikaner district



Photo Credit: © UNICEF/2019

A leader in the making

Om Kanwar is an active member of the adolescent girls' groups in her school, as well as her village. For a 14-year old, she packs a punch with her confidence and articulates her thoughts with clarity. It is with this clarity that she avers, "child marriage is wrong and I would make any effort to stop child marriage in my village."

She is extremely committed to keeping her adolescent groups together. A leadership role comes naturally to her. At school or in the community, Om puts in an extra effort to help girls who are not able to understand anything discussed in the group. She helps girls in their studies as well. For example, if there are girls who have not understood some lessons in mathematics, she is quick to form their group and ask others to help them. Taking these initiatives consistently, her efforts

are helping bring out-of-school girls back to school.

Om is also interested in sports and likes to play kabaddi. Her dreams are big and she would like to become the prime minister of the country one day! She is thankful that her family has provided her a supportive environment, which helps her make her own decisions. This helps her face any opposition from community members with confidence, while working towards helping other girls. She is joined in her enthusiasm by her 66-year-old grandmother, Pushpa Kanwar, who quietly claims, "My parents taught me to be fearless, and I have taught the same to the children in my family." Om Kanwar is making steady progress in working towards being a role model for adolescents!

UNICEF's adolescent empowerment programming in Rajasthan focuses on increasing opportunities for education to reduce the vulnerability of girls and building their life skills to empower them with an enhanced ability to speak against early marriage and for child rights.

To this end, UNICEF is providing technical assistance to the Department of Women and Child Development, Department of Education and Department of Social Justice and Empowerment to build awareness, sensitisation and capacities among frontline workers and mobilise communities to make them active partners in planning and decision making. UNICEF is also strengthening the alliance of civil society organisations towards ending all forms of violence against children and women.

In its adolescent empowerment efforts, UNICEF has also actively worked for inclusion of child protection programming in schools of Rajasthan and for out-of-school children, with components such as strengthening of adolescent forums in and outside schools, self-defence trainings in schools and by giving an impetus to the enrolment of dropout girls in Open Schools. UNICEF's programming is facilitating access to various government schemes and programmes influencing children's education, among economically weaker sections, to ensure that entitlements reach all children and they can continue their education.