

Twenty-four-year-old Geeta Saini, from Todaraisingh *tehsil* of Tonk district braved family pressure and social disrepute to “cancel” her child marriage. One of five children born to parents who were contract farmers, she was married when she was all of four months old along with her three sisters as the family wanted to save money. She and her elder sister were wedded into the same household.

Her parents had not expected Geeta to be a fighter. She would wear her brothers’ trousers and shirts and kept asking them to send her to school now that she had turned into a boy! Seeing her firm stand, her father enrolled her. Twelve-year-old Geeta studied happily with her 5-6-year-old classmates in Upper KG. She ignored their barbs and worked hard at maths and science.

When the time came for the sisters to leave for their marital home, Geeta refused to go till she finished her

studies. The parents had no choice but to send only the elder sister. The in-laws did not accept this and kept pressurising her father with dire consequences and demands for dowry. The situation turned acrimonious with both villages and their Sarpanchs getting involved. There was gossip about Geeta and her parents were accused of going back on their word. Geeta’s father took a stand and said that he would not send his daughters to a home where the father was a heavy drinker and abusive. The in-laws sent the elder sister back to her parental home. The experience made him understand the value of educating girls. He urged them to study and improve their lives.

Geeta completed Class 12 and then went on to get her BA degree. She did her Masters in Social Work from Tonk PG Government College and become the most well educated girl in the village. She joined Shiv Shiksha Samiti, an NGO at a salary of INR 6,000 a month.

“ **More girls are doing those things which earlier only boys used to. Girls now go out to buy provisions, purchase train tickets and negotiate with contractors for house repairs. It is encouraging to see parents without sons not feeling disheartened since their daughters are blossoming.** ”

24-year-old Geeta Saini, Tonk district, Rajasthan

When she got an offer to join the UNICEF-supported LAADO programme, being implemented by Pink City Cycle Rickshaw Chalak Sanstha (PCCRCS) in Tonk, she immediately said yes. As part of the programme focused on adolescent empowerment and preventing child marriage, she is instrumental in helping adolescents work through their issues and helping adolescent girls find their voices, fulfil their aspirations, join sports and participate in games like kabaddi. The circle of influence is expanding with more girls and parents propagating the value of bringing girls into the mainstream.

