

Eighteen-year-old Susheela has recently sought re-admission in Class 10 under the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS). As part of UNICEF's work on adolescent empowerment and ending child marriage, the implementing partner Urmul has been encouraging girls to join Open School in select blocks of Bikaner district in Rajasthan. For multiple reasons it is common for students, especially girls to drop out of school. The reasons could range from her wedding getting fixed, family pressures or distance of the school from home. There is no fixed age for sending girls to school and parents rarely know which class they are in or what they are studying.

However, a girl getting re-enrolled in school is not a common occurrence. Re-enrolments are increasing in Bharupava village of Badrasar gram panchayat in Bikaner ever since Urmul staff began making house visits to convince parents to get their daughters admitted in Open School if sending them to school was not feasible. More than re-enrolment, perceptions surrounding girl child education are changing. Previously, none of the community members had heard of NIOS and that students could return to school even after a gap of some years.

So impressed was Susheela with the Urmul visits, that she decided to join them as they went door-to-door to survey homes, collect data, make line lists and talk to parents and children to complete their education. Today, she champions the cause of girl child education, in the process facing the negative attitudes of some opposing parents with a smile on her face. Trained Urmul staff handhold the girls as most find the form filling process to be cumbersome. They have worries like, "I do not have my birth certificate" or "How will I mobilise school fees year after year?" or "I will not be able to keep pace with others since I have forgotten whatever I had learnt." To each of these concerns, the team had solutions. Girls were even guided to a local coaching school where free bridge classes were held to update them.

Susheela was pleasantly surprised to find that most parents were not against schooling for their daughters. Many had never been informed about the benefits of educating girls. When they began to see how education could transform their lives, the majority agreed to send girls back to school. Susheela's work has been fulfilling and helping bring steady change in her village.

**“ Being educated is like being a free bird. It opens up so many opportunities. You are no longer dependent on anybody and you do not have to quietly listen to others out of the fear of being abandoned. ”**

18-year-old Susheela  
Badrasar gram panchayat  
Bikaner district, Rajasthan

