



Room to Read®

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*Stories
of change*
FROM INDIA



Room to Read



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PARTNERSHIP WITH IKEA FOUNDATION TO EMPOWER GIRLS TO LEAD SUCCESSFUL LIVES – PROJECT VIJAYI

Life skills education is central to Room to Read’s Girls’ Education Program (GEP). Room to Read believes that when girls have life skills, they can more effectively negotiate life decisions, including the decision to stay in school. These skills equip her to take charge, to effectively respond to life situations and identify best solutions along with a path to get there. Room to Read’s Girls’ Education Program is therefore designed to improve learning and life outcomes.

Since 2018, Room to Read, with support from IKEA Foundation has been implementing an innovative Girls’ Education Program which aims to empower approximately 70,000 girls through a life-skills based intervention. The project will help girls from economically weaker communities complete their education, acquire critical employability skills and negotiate key life decisions that lay the foundation for successful lives for themselves, their families and ultimately for future generations. This three plus-year intervention is unique, as it covers both – the direct implementation of GEP by Room to Read (Room to Read) in selected government schools and also the scale-up model which extends elements of Room to Read’s GEP across all (360+) residential institutions of the states of Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh.

A BRIEF SNAPSHOT OF BOTH INTERVENTIONS IS CAPTURED IN THE TABLE BELOW –

KEY ELEMENTS	DIRECT	SCALE-UP
No. of schools / institutions	83 schools	364 institutions
No. of Girl scholars	Approx. 5,000	Approximately 65,000
Grades	6 th – 12 th	6 th – 12 th
Life skill sessions are conducted by	Social Mobiliser of Room to Read	Government teachers/ warden of residential institutions
Training of government teachers	Not applicable	Conducted by Room to Read
Room to Read staffing	1 Social Mobiliser for 80-100 girls	1 Program Co-ordinator for 18-20 institutions
Education materials provided by Room to Read	Yes	Yes

In addition, Room to Read continues to assist both state governments by providing technical assistance on key initiative as required including the recently organized GEP campaign #HarKadamBetikeSang (with daughters at every step) which aimed at ensuring that girls continue to get the required support to continue their education. Also, Room to Read has been working to strengthen government systems such that governments will be able to sustain the intervention beyond the project period and scale to all regular schools across their respective states.



CHHATTISGARH



NO MONEY, NO FOOD, NO PARENTS

While cooking every evening, the fumes emanating from the smouldering coal accelerate Teejan's tears flowing down her cheeks. Teejan is a grade 10 th beneficiary of Girls Education Program of Room to Read from Tilda block of Raipur District in Chhattisgarh. The lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic bequeathed a strange landscape to her life.

Teejan's life came to a standstill after the lockdown was announced on 22 March, 2020. She was not able to contact her parents who had gone to Pune, Maharashtra for work. She frantically tried to contact them but as there was no news, her heart sank and she did not know how to handle this situation. Scarcity of food and responsibility of her sibling, along with that of an old grandmother, drained her out emotionally as well as physically.

One day, her younger sister developed cramps in her abdominal area and she was in extreme distress. In the beginning, Teejan panicked as it was the middle of the night and her sister was scared. She missed her mother most during a crisis like this. Teejan recollected her thoughts and remembered her life skills training given by Room to Read about menstrual health. She helped her younger sister understand the cause of the pain. Her younger sister calmed down and thanked her for her guidance.

Days passed by and it was almost a month with still no news of her parents... hope started to deplete soon and so did the food and essential items. Teejan contacted her relatives and neighbours for some help for food and some financial support but they turned their backs on them. Every day Teejan got up with a hope to hear from parents but days turned into months and the hope of finding her parents became bleaker by the day. After two months, the relatives and neighbours started telling her that their parents won't come back. They went a step ahead and started suggesting that being the eldest in her family, she should get married. They passed comments that they needed a male in the house to look after her and her younger sister along with the grandmother.



During this situation where Teejan was thinking of giving up hope of finding her parents, she received a phone call about her general wellbeing from her social mobilizer (SM). The conversation boosted her confidence and rekindled hope to find her parents. Essential to Room to Read's program are the social mobilizers who are local women hired as mentors to work with girls and their families. They ensure that girls stay in school and navigate the challenges of adolescence with the ability to make their own life choices,



Teejan confided in the SM and discussed the precarious situation her family was in. After the discussion, her anxiety subsided and she no longer wanted to cry every day. Instead, she found new courage.



Teejan's perseverance paid off...she managed her home in the most difficult times and averted her early marriage.

She decided to show everyone that marriage was not the only option to support the family. She kept in touch with SM didi. The SM had suggested that she visit the village gram panchayat and share her immediate problems of getting food supplies. Teejan's perseverance paid off and she managed to get regular food supplies for her family. She quietly celebrated her success. Fortune took a new turn as the village local government finally traced Teejan's parents. On hearing the news shivers went down her spine and she cried inconsolably... Her eyes were longing to see her parents and she wanted reassurance of their existence. Her parents reached the village after two and a half months...she wanted to hug her mother and cry her heart out... she will have to wait for another 14 days as they were in quarantine.





FIGHTS FOR HER MOTHER

Mohini's heart sank as the policemen arrested her father and brother. She could never have thought that one day she would have them incarcerated. As the police jeep rumbled away into the night, the young girl could not help but weep to herself.

A student in grade IX at the Govt. Higher Secondary School in Tilda block, Raipur in the state of Chhattisgarh, Mohini had lived a charmed life. She had everything she could wish for. She was good at her studies, inquisitive and vocal in her classes and an enthusiastic participant of the Girls' Education Program. At home, she had a loving father Tekram who worked as a carpenter and took care of her homemaker mother Raahibai and five siblings. Though not wealthy by any account, the family had just enough to get by. And then came COVID-19 and the consequent lockdown.

At first the family faced this new danger with fortitude but as days went by things seemed to get out of hand. The family's meagre savings dried up. There was hardly any income now as Tekram could no longer ply his trade, so he turned to taking loans to meet the household expenses. Soon the debts piled up and with no relief in sight, each day seemed to become even more insufferable, Tekram turned to alcohol as an escape from the frustration of daily life.

He wasn't alone. Komal his eldest son too gave in to alcohol being unable to cope with the stress of life in lockdown. Alcohol had gained another addict in the family. Mohini who had until now only heard of the ill-effects of addiction was soon to bear the full brunt. Every evening now found Tekram and Komal inebriated. They would no longer be themselves, instead Mohini saw them use crude and hurtful language and violence became routine in the household.

Mohini's first reaction was one of numbness, she'd never thought of seeing her father and brother in such a state. What she was witnessing in her home would have been inconceivable for the little child. But she knew escapism was not the answer.



She recalled the lessons she had learnt in the life skills lessons. She would have to stand up for herself and her family, she would have to stand up for herself she resolved. Mohini recalled the sessions on legal awareness where she and her friends had interacted with law enforcement officials from the neighbourhood police station, she knew she could approach them but then she was also concerned of the implications of such a drastic step, what would people think of their family? More importantly Mohini was worried of her mother's reaction.



Mohini therefore approached the mentor she knew she could trust – her social mobiliser (SM) Yamini appointed by Room to Read.

It was with her SM's advice the Mohini first approached the village panchayat. The village elders were sympathetic to the young girl and promised to speak to her father. Indeed for the next several days things went rather smoothly – there were no fights and on the odd days that her father and brother got drunk, they kept their calm. But bad habits die hard and soon things were as bad as they had been. The fights somehow got even worse with her father and brother brawling in the street as the neighbours watched. Nobody would intervene and Mohini stood there sorrowful and embarrassed. One night the screaming and shouting got so loud that Mohini decided she had had enough and called the police. She also called in the Village headman who was already familiar with her predicament.



For Mohini the situation seemed surreal, it was as if she was watching all this happen to someone else. She saw her father and brother stand abashed in-front of the policemen. She saw the headman briefing them on the problem at hand. She saw her mother wailing, her siblings crying as the police took her father and brother to the police station.



The policemen understood the peculiarity of the problem they faced. To arrest and imprison the duo would mean a permanent end to the family's income and perhaps even destroy any hopes for the young man's career. These were no hardened criminals and perhaps what they truly needed was some firm counselling with a night in the lockup to instil in them a healthy fear of the law. The next day the Tekram and Komal sober and abashed were released with a warning never to repeat their behaviour.

Mohini's father is a reformed man now, looking back perhaps he realised the faults in his behaviour and as the lockdown lifted he immersed himself in work in order to get some much needed money for the household. Recalling the incident, he still blushes but praises Mohini for her courage, "Mohini has learnt to stand up for what is right," he remarks with a smile.



Her brother is another story altogether. Though Komal no longer drinks, he is still a little resentful for being sent to the lock-up. But Mohini is sure he will come around, "In any case it is my responsibility to look after myself and my family, I have to think for myself and take action when circumstances demand it."

Mohini has always wanted to become a police officer and the events of the past few months have only strengthened her determination. She is sure of achieving her dreams she'll tell you if you ask her.





I DARE TO STRUGGLE, I DARE TO WIN

Living in the tiny village of Muchnar, in the remote forested interiors of Dantewada district in Chhattisgarh, 15 years old Rambati had resigned herself to the struggle and drudgery that she saw around her every day. Frustrated by financial difficulties and misfortune she had given up on her aspirations, a remarkably bleak prospect for any teenager. But today, Rambati pursues her dream with renewed vigour.

Life in Muchnar has always reflected the stark surroundings. The people, a mix of different tribal groups such as Maria, Muria, Dhurwa, Halba, Bhatra and Gonds have for ages tried to reap a living off hard, back breaking agriculture. To them a smartphone is a luxury, and comforts like cars, air conditioners, even 24x7 electricity are seen only on the television. This is where 15 years old Rambati lives. But even in these bleak surroundings, Rambati would have to face challenges that were greater still.

Rambati was only 8, when her father passed away in 2013, leaving her mother, elder sister Shyambati and a younger brother in dire straits. Rambati's mother, a homemaker until now, took on the task of supporting her three children. The going was hard, but the family managed to eke out a living. But just as thing seemed to be on the med, disaster struck. In 2017, a freak storm hit Muchnar and the surrounding areas. When the storm had passed, Rambati's small home stood decimated. The family had nothing left and nowhere to go. Rambati and her sister, it was now decided, would be sent to a Porta Cabin in nearby Gumda, while her mother and brother sought refuge with their relatives.

The Porta Cabin is an innovative educational initiative for building schools with impermanent materials like bamboo and plywood. The initiative has helped reduce the number of out-of-school children and improve enrolment and retention of children since its introduction in 2011. The main objective of the initiative includes enrolment and continuous retention of out-of-school children by bringing them to the mainstream society through formal education.



It was here in 2018, that Rambati first came across the Girls' Education Program when Room to Read in partnership with the IKEA Foundation started Project Vijayi and brought the Girls' Education Program to Gumda village. As part of the project, wardens were trained to become life skills instructors and would serve as mentors to girls and guide them through their challenges.

Rambati, now in grade 8, was an enthusiastic participant in the life skill sessions that were regularly held at the porta cabin. She seemed to be coming into her own, gaining confidence and performing well in her studies. Her sister Shyambati, was however not so fortunate. The family's financial conditions had failed to improve and their mother had to take the painful decision to call her back to Muchnar, to help with planting paddy on the family's fields. Things took a turn for the worse when two years later, their mother's health deteriorated and she succumbed to health complications.



This was perhaps the most difficult time in Rambati's life. At the tender age of 15 years, Rambati resolved to discontinue her education and help Shyambati back at home. She would support her sister by helping with the domestic chores or work as a daily wage labourer in construction work and paddy harvesting. She would have gone through with her plans but for the presence of her warden Ms. Sarita Kamal. Trained by Room to Read in Life Skills, Sarita took it upon herself to dissuade the young girl. In the life skills sessions that followed, Sarita and Rambati discussed the problems extensively. They explored the consequences of her actions and the opportunities that would be wasted. Rambati they decided should not leave her studies altogether. Instead, she could opt for a short leave, go home and support her sister and come back to pursue her education. In the days that followed Rambati returned to her village, she took up a job as a daily wage labourer and together the two sisters staved off the problems that plagued their household.



It was in these tough days, when Covid-19 Pandemic hit India. It disrupted lives everywhere, brought the economy to halt and forced the education system to shut down. Fortunately for Shyambati, she had with her the support of her guardian angels – her sister Shyambati and the warden Sarita.



Rambati must continue her education even in the isolation of her home, they insisted. The elder of the two girls, Shyambati resolved to work harder and even brought home a smart phone so that Rambati could continue her education online.



Rambati stands strong today. The difficulties that she's faced have made her stronger and determined to succeed no matter the circumstance. Backed by her warden, the support of her elder sister and life skills, Rambati aims to complete her secondary education.



“Life skill sessions provided me with the answers to all questions like Who am I? What is my identity? Why is it important to complete education? Etc. These sessions have helped me develop many qualities like communication skills, assertive communication, critical thinking and leadership qualities. These have helped me survive through many challenging situations and made me strong enough to support my family while also continuing my education. I aim to complete my secondary education and help all other girls like me who are facing challenges with their education due to family problems.”





CHANGE MAKER IN MAKING

The preparations of a Sangeet (Musical ceremony) and Mehandi (Henna) Ceremony were in full swing when a police vehicle with a wailing siren screeched to a halt in front of the house. The cop knocked on the door of the Shah family bringing the preparations within to a screeching halt.

This cascade of events was put into motion during lockdown when Roshni, a grade IX student from the Girl's Education Program of Tilda Block of Raipur district of Chhattisgarh started spending time at home discussing various topics with her mother. One day her mother informed her about the upcoming marriage of a girl in their village. Roshni got lost in her thoughts about Mehandi, sangeet, and good food... something to cheer about during the boring lockdown.

However, her excitement was short-lived when she came to know that the prospective bride was a minor and sister to one of her juniors from school. She started thinking how could anyone think about the marriage of a mere 15-year-old girl and why? Is she happy with this marriage or has anybody even tried to know her feelings or willingness? Did the parents know that this was a legal offense? Thinking about all these questions, she had a sleepless night.

Wondering how to save the 15-year-old Ragini (name changed) from child marriage, she spoke to the to-be brides's sister, her friend. The sister confided that she felt helpless as she was not able to do anything to stop this marriage. Roshini decided to take action.

Roshini requested her father to accompany her to meet the Sarpanch (Village Elected Representative). She tried to convince the Sarpanch to intervene and stop the child marriage. But the Sarpanch said, "the child marriage trend is common in migrant communities living in that village. The joblessness and abject poverty inflicted by the pandemic is forcing many parents to give off the minor girls in marriage. The families are exploiting lockdown restrictions to conduct low-cost ceremonies secretly".



Hearing his response, Roshini felt that the Sarpanch would stop the marriage now. However, as the fateful day drew nearer with frantic preparations in earnest, Roshni began to feel restless. With only a day to go, and realizing the futility of the meeting with the sarpanch.

Roshni decided to call her Social Mobiliser (SM), a mentor appointed by Room to Read to nurture girls' scholars from the Girls's Education Program. She narrated the whole story about the child marriage of her neighbor. The SM guided her to call Childline (toll-free child helpline number) and police with a request to keep her identity confidential. Roshni was nervous and with trembling figures dialed the ChildLine number and narrated the entire story.





Roshni dreams of becoming a police officer. She states, "life skill education has equipped me to help my classmates during difficulties. I would like to become the change-maker of my village." Little did she know that she has already become one. We need more changemakers like Roshni...

The police swung into action and informed the Child Welfare Committee, an institution created for children in need of care and protection. The Police, Childline, and CWC members went to the house of the girl and asked the parents to stop the marriage or face legal consequences. Looking at the legal hassles, the girl's parents decided to call off the marriage of their minor daughter. The groom's family was not happy with the police interference but decided to keep mum. Police appreciated Roshini's efforts and kept her identity secret. She was thrilled to apply her life skills to practical use to stop child marriage.





INTROVERT TO EXTROVERT

Living in the small village of Khukri Raipur in Balrampur District of Chhattisgarh, the chance to study meant the world to Manita. The third child in a family of 7, she had witnessed the struggles of her father, a farmer. She had grown up looking up to her elder siblings, Munni-the eldest had already finished her schooling and planned to study further while her elder brother Vijay too seemed on course to finish high school. When Manita got the opportunity to study at the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV), Ambikapur in Sarguja, she seized it. But she also felt intimidated.

Having finished her primary grades at the village school in Khukri Raipur, life in the KGBV was a difficult transition for Manita. She had never lived away from the comfort of her home, added to this was the fact that Manita was an introvert by nature. Where she may have been a boisterous child at home, she was shy and rarely spoke to anyone at school. She was unable to stand and speak in front of group of people. Simple acts like answering questions in the classroom, sharing her thoughts or even asking for help were difficult. Not surprisingly, this took a toll on her life at school.

The only bright spot were the life skills sessions that were regularly organised at the KGBV under Project Vijayi, a collaboration between Room to read and the IKEA Foundation. It was here that she came under the wing of Mitali, a teacher at the KGBV. Mitali had been trained under Project Vijayi to guide and mentor young girls at the school. Manita's struggles had caught her attention long ago and she acted to resolve the problems. Every life skills session, Mitali would present Manita with opportunities to speak, to think aloud. In this safe space, Manita finally seemed to let go of her inhibitions. She would listen carefully and with concentration and spoke her mind on issues. Sessions like "Who am I," gave her the opportunity to think and analyse about her qualities and identify areas of improvement.

The effects of the sessions were soon visible. In the course of a few months, Manita was a new person. She was now confident and no longer shied away from standing up and speaking in front of the group. Soon, she was participating in quizzes and even an oratory competition. She also seemed to have found new interests and took up model making. Lo and behold her model was selected to represent the school at a district level competition and then for a national level competition in Kolkata where she won the second prize.



The shy introverted girl from Khukri Raipur village came to the big city and won. But perhaps Manita's biggest victory was over her own fears and self-doubt. She has discovered her own abilities and identified her goals. Today as the school remains shut due to the pandemic, Manita, spends her time participating in online sessions of Tinkering Lab (for model making in science). Her dream is to become an IAS Officer and to contribute to the society. Manita has tasted success and she wants more.



RAJASTHAN



JOURNEY OF CHILD BRIDE

Room to Read's Girls Education Program Project in a small town of Alwar, Tijara, equipping girls with life skills , the confidence to make their choices. And the story of one-woman Poonam herself a child bride , who walked out of a marriage made for her in childhood ... funded her studies by doing tuitions, is now a post graduate and a B. Ed ...and supports the education of her younger siblings and is a warden in a government hostel. Inspiring other young adolescent girls at a government school in Alwar... on informed choices and how crucial it is to make their lives ... dictated not by social customs like child marriage but by education and empowerment.

In Alwar's Shahbad girls at this govt school in Tijara, learn an important lesson, more important than academics. A lesson that will equip them to make empowered choices , a lesson to determine their own lives and leading the change, 28-year-old Poonam, married off at the age of 16, Poonam struggled to make her own life choices. Annulling a child marriage, choosing education over home. She funded her own studies by giving lessons to other children. Today she is a post graduate (MA) and a B.Ed. a qualified teacher and a warden at this hostel determined that young girls like her should not have to go through what she did.

“I came back because of domestic violence. Young girls are unprepared for marriage but we see them pushed into it all the same. Child marriage should be avoided because every girl has the desire to achieve something for herself and child marriage stifles these dreams and potential”.



Poonam's father is a daily wage labourer, her mother works in the fields. The family can barely make ends meet. But Poonam is determined her younger siblings should study. She funds their education and helps her family financially.

“The first thing I changed with Room to Read's training was myself and only then did I set out to change other. Today I am able to support my family and my brother's education. As for myself I take coaching classes and work a full time job as well”.





At the Kasturba Gandhi Hostel where she is a warden, young Sarabjeet was to be married off when she was barely 16 and in class 10. But Poonam's intervention and counselling of Sarabjeet's family helped change mindsets.

“The life skills sessions in my school helped understand the consequences of child marriage. Marriage can wait till children grow up and are mature, ma’am had advised us” - Sarabjeet

Teaching life skills is as important as education and literacy and this project by Room to Read is touching the lives of over 20,000 school children across 257 schools in Rajasthan. The project also seeks to empower 440 wardens like Poonam in 31 districts across the state so they can in turn inspire school children to make the right choices ... in their lives ... and in society.





POCKET MONEY- NEEDS OR WANTS?

The tyres of the cart are almost flat and the cloth which used to cover the fresh vegetables flutter in the slow breeze exposing dried remnants of vegetable refuse. Mitthu Lal, the vegetable vendor and his wife Yashoda look out of the window in despair, the eerie silence of the narrow street provides no solace. With every passing day, losses add up for Mitthu Lal in geometrical progression making life increasingly difficult for his six member-family in the locked down Beawar in Ajmer district. Puja, their daughter, was promoted to grade 10 without any exams as schools were closed due to the Covid pandemic. Puja is one of the sincerest students of the school and the eldest of four siblings. She tries never to miss any of the life skills sessions provided by Room to Read in her school. The Social Mobilizer didi from Room to Read who conducts the sessions was also concerned now, as she was aware that Puja's father was a vegetable vendor dependent on daily earnings. Puja could sense the agony of her parents as the money required was not enough to tide over the lockdown period. Her parents put on a brave face in front of the children and act as though everything was fine.

One day, Mitthu Lal was waiting to go out to a nearby shop during the relaxation hours announced by the local administration. Inside, Yashoda was looking frantically for coins and whatever money was available in the small cash box. She looked up pensively at her husband; in the small room that they all stayed, the pain in Yashoda's eyes could be read by all. Puja opened her pencil box and offered her mother the money she had kept there. Her parents were surprised; where did she get the money from? "I have saved Rs 2500 for my grade 10 education from my pocket money; I never ate wafers and Imali (snacks) during the school recess", explained Puja.



Tears swelled to the brim in the big tired eyes of Mitthu Lal and an inconsolable Yashoda hugged Puja. 'We cannot take this money...' she said, wiping her tears. "Mother, I will fulfill your dream and complete my education, come what may", said Puja. She further added, **"I learnt in my life skills session, how to save money and the difference between wants and needs. At present we 'need' this money for all of us..."**



FINDING ONESELF

Her family is everything to Anshulit Singh, a grade 12 student at Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya, Muhana, Jaipur. Hailing from a large family with 9 members from Bagru Village on the outskirts of Jaipur, Rajasthan, life for Anshulit has always been about others.

She grew up watching her father, an artisan at a handicraft company, toil everyday to provide for her family. She grew up witnessing a thousand small sacrifices on part of her mother, a homemaker, who would give up everything for Anshulit, her four sisters and two brothers.

She knew of the dreams of her brothers, the aspirations of her sisters but oddly enough she had honestly never thought about herself. Asked about her plans for when she grew up, she'd tell you that she frankly didn't know. She did not know herself, it seemed, she knew nothing of her talents or abilities. All this changed when she attended a life skills session at her school.

Participating in the sessions that were a regular feature of the Girls Education Program at her school, Anshulit for the first time discovered herself. The sessions like "Who am I" helped her explore her own identity. She learned about "Self". At home, she had seen her parents dedicating their lives for their kids, not thinking about themselves as individuals. Though she understood their reasons, there had to be more to life she had reasoned.

"I am confident enough now how to talk to my family about my career and dreams." – Anshulit said.



"Happiness is the right of every individual, independent of their race, caste, and creed; therefore, we must do things that not only create happiness for ourselves, but others as well," she had noted to herself and resolved to do everything to be able to take informed decisions regarding her likes, dislikes, ambitions and aspirations.

The revelations changed Anshulit's outlook on life. She now takes better care of herself. She creates plans and discusses them with her peers and mentors before taking a decision. She has also taken to planning and strategizing to get better grades in the school examinations. These, she'll tell you, help her avoid stress and enable her to perform well. She also follows some relaxation techniques: taking long breaths and thinking positive in each circumstance before giving an exam.



Anshulit wanted to become a doctor, however financial difficulties meant that she was unable to get coaching and extra classes for the entrance exams. Instead, she is pursuing a Bachelor's in Science (B.Sc.) and revising grade 11 & 12 books to prepare for the NEET exam. Anshulit is not dismayed by her circumstances, instead she is using them to her advantage and is confident of her chances in 2021 exam.



“Life skills helped me to know myself better, as well as doing away with worries related to my career.” - Anshulit



LIFE SKILLS TO NEGOTIATE

The COVID-19 Pandemic and consequent lockdown came as a shock to Urmila and threw her life in turmoil. Her father, a driver by profession, was stranded somewhere near the Nepal border. And this worried her endlessly. At home with the rest of the family, she found herself alone, isolated. She could no longer meet her friends or even go to school. Worst of all her education had become entirely dependent on online classes which needed access to the single smartphone in the family.

The online classes were long and her family would think that she'd just be whiling away her time on the Internet. Her mother decided to keep a tab on the smartphone and asked her brother to take charge of it. Now, her brother would scold her whenever she asked for the phone. Soon they wouldn't even allow her to use it. Urmila tried talking to her father, but her mother had already complained to him and he was quite unhappy about the whole situation. To her horror, her father even talked about asking her to drop out of school.

Urmila tried to approach the problem in a calm, level-headed manner as she had learnt in the life skills training by Room to Read. To begin with, she took care not to antagonize anyone which would only lead to more trouble. She also asked her Social Mobilizer didi to talk to her family.

The next day the SM contacted her father who told her about his concerns. The SM, in turn, explained to him the online measures being taken by the government during lockdown and that in using the phone Urmila was only trying to continue her online lessons. Needless to say her father was convinced.

He assured the SM that he would not force her to drop out of school. Not just that he would also ask Urmila's mother to give the phone back to Urmila in order for her studies to continue unhindered. Urmila, too, assured her father that she would use the phone only for her studies.



From then on, Urmila regularly attendant the online classes. At the same time, she also shared these lessons with her friends who did not have a smartphone...



REALIZATION

You must've heard the proverb, "It's never too late to change" I recently realized how true it is. I am Sanwar Lal, a farmer hailing from Liddi, a small village near Ajmer. Most of the people in Liddi, are farmers from various communities. Our village is around 40 kms from Ajmer and lacks proper transportation facilities. To reach my village, you will not find any buses or other means of transport, the only way to come here is by a personal vehicle.

I work on a farm to earn a living and take care of my five daughters. About three years ago, a tragedy struck our home, when my youngest daughter (Khushi) was just one year old, my wife passed away. She was working in the field and fainted suddenly, I took her to a nearby hospital, but couldn't save her. After her sudden demise, me and my daughters were heartbroken and shattered.

My daughters had only one question- what would they do without a mother? But with some effort and courage, I started raising my children, continuing to teach them. But this courage did not work for long, I was the only one to handle all the work at my house and 2 years ago when my elder daughter (Manju Chaudhary) was studying in class X, I thought that she should leave school and take care of her little sisters now. After she passed class 10th, I decided to get my daughter out of school and got her TC right away. My daughter cried a lot, but I was desperate, and I thought that she would help me look after the farm and the house. My youngest daughter needed someone to look after her, when my daughter understood the need to take care of her sister, she left her school. My daughter was very sad, I also felt her pain, but I was bound by responsibilities.

Today in 2020, the world is suffering because of the pandemic; schools, colleges, market, everything is closed. My daughter Saroj, who is a student of Government Girls' Secondary School, Liddi, studies in class 9. She is associated with Girls' Education Program run by Room to Read and to support her education, we are receiving calls to ask about our well-being, interesting stories are being sent online and various activities and reading material is also shared.



One evening, when I was sitting with my daughter and listening to the story of Manju from Jodhpur whose grandfather Gomadramji went the extra mile to support her education. Gomadramji worked in NREGA to ensure his granddaughter continued her studies. Even in the worst of times, he didn't lose hope. Gomadramji talked about the importance of education in various community meetings.



While listening to Gomadramji's tale, I found my daughter Manju's story in it and realized that this could have been our story, only if her father didn't lose hope and let her study. I saw my daughter (Manju) stealthily looking at me with tears in her eyes and I couldn't hold back my tears. I regretted my decision and felt disappointed but didn't say anything then. Next day, I told SM Didi, a worker of Room to Read, that I wanted to rectify my mistake and get my daughter (Manju) enrolled again in 11th class. I did not understand what to do to send her to school again, so I asked for help. She suggested that when the schools re-open, she will come and meet me to go to school and get my daughter enrolled.



I am grateful that there is an organization like Room to Read in our country which is encouraging people like me and doing such a commendable job. I heartily thank Room to Read for making such efforts for the education of my daughters, and hope that more parents like me will become aware and try to rectify their mistakes. I am glad that my daughter will be able to read again, I guess it is never too late to mend.

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