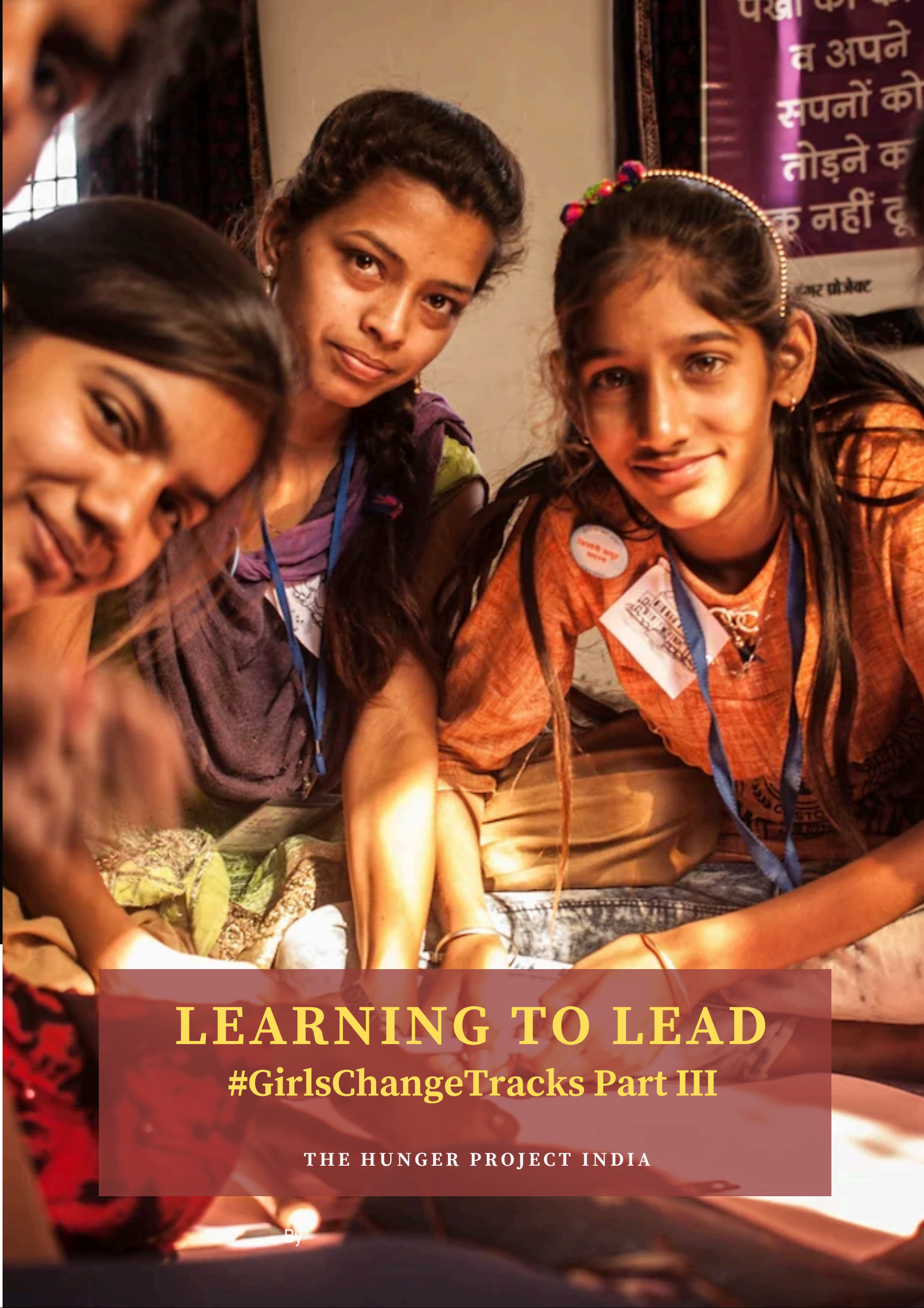


LEARNING TO LEAD

#GirlsChangeTracks Part III

THE HUNGER PROJECT INDIA

By

RESOLVE TO REWRITE FUTURES

Nita really hopes to pursue her dream to become a doctor. But she has to grapple with her father's fears of "her getting spoiled" and her mother's threat to marry her off. She is finding ways to confront these hostile attitudes because she feels she is meant for something more.

In this context, The Hunger Project India's work with adolescent girls is precisely geared towards empowering and fostering hitherto invisible voices, individual and collective, against the violence of regressive social norms, demanding accountability and access to rights.

In Rajasthan, safe learning spaces in the form of Kishori Sandarbh Kendras (common rooms in schools) and Kishori Balika Samuhs (girls' collectives) have paved way for consolidation of a unique identity with a strong positive bearing on girls' lives. We witness girls engaging in creative ways to claim their rights as citizens and hone their leadership qualities to address issues that shape their daily realities. In addition, the stand-alone Girls' Leadership Workshops (GLWs) as well as the bi-monthly meetings have enhanced their capacities and enabled them to recognise the value of education, challenge patriarchy, navigate difficult conversations with family, negotiate with other important stakeholders in the gram panchayat (village council). Supported by elected women representatives in all these actions, a vibrant ecosystem for a vital inter-generational dialogue is in the making!

This essay captures fervent stories of adolescent girls we met from two districts in Rajasthan – Sirohi and Rajsamand. The girls speak about their challenges, dreams and aspirations. Nuggets of these experiences are presented in the following quotes:

ENGAGES PARENTS IN A #CRITICALDIALOGUE



KAVITA, 17, CLASS XI: FOUGHT HARD, EARLY ON TO CONTINUE HER SCHOOL EDUCATION; LOVES SINGING.

My family was not in favour of me going to school. I would often be challenged by my parents about my strong resolve to study. I had to fight hard to convince them that I am seriously interested in pursuing an education, just like my brother. I eventually had to learn to engage my father in a dialogue. My good grades in class VIII and simultaneous recognition by the government changed their indifference into a sense of pride ... I believe we need to communicate our wishes to our parents, negotiate with them, by standing true to our dreams. If there is a strong will, there definitely is a way. Clarity of thought not only helped me persuade my parents to allow me to travel longer distances for my new school, but I was also able to encourage other parents to support their daughters' education. Today, we are a bunch of 7-8 girls who come to school together.

DONS THE HAT OF A #CAMPAIGNER FOR SAFE SPACES AND RIGHTS



LAAD, 16, GRADE XI: ASPIRES TO EDUCATE GIRLS TO CLAIM THEIR RIGHTS; WANTS TO BE A TEACHER

As a Kishori Balika Samuh member, I spearheaded campaigns in my Panchayat to ban all the liquor shops in my village with the support of a team of elected women representatives. Often it is the fathers' alcohol addiction which has forced many girls to drop out of school. I wanted to address that but also change the environment in public spaces. Child marriage is another urgent matter of concern. As a collective, we have found ways to raise awareness through organising street plays to educate girls and their families to stop child marriages. Our work in this area is supported by the active elected women leaders. Today, every adolescent girl's record in the panchayat is under our radar and we are trying to provide each one as much support as possible to voice her opinion, say no to child marriage and come to school. I want to become a teacher and continue educating girls about claiming their rights. I want to create a safe classroom environment where we can freely express, teach and share.

FINDS #STRENGTH TO FIGHT CHILD MARRIAGE



SHILPA, 17, GRADE XI: SAYS NO TO CHILD MARRIAGE;
TRAINING TO BECOME A POLICE OFFICER

When I was 16 years old, my parents tried to get me married, just like my other two sisters. I resisted and struggled to change their mind. With the help of elected women representatives, I tried to speak with my father about harmful consequences of early and child marriage. For him, it was a "successful achievement as a parent" and he did not agree with my definition of success, which is rooted in having a good education. I have been open and firm about my stand against early marriage despite continual family opposition. I aspire to become a police officer. I see the rampant violence against women and I want women to have access to justice. Attending girls' leadership workshop and learning skills about how to communicate and negotiate in a stressful situation gave me the confidence to engage with my father. It has been a long process, and today, my father has begun to acknowledge my needs and wishes. He accompanies me every Sunday morning when I go for my 5 KM run as part of my training.

#NAVIGATES SOCIAL PRESSURES



KAMLA, 16, GRADE XI: FIGHTS FOR HER RIGHT TO FINISH SCHOOL

Because of poor economic situation at home, I have to work at construction sites with my mother. Her income supports the basic household needs and I look after the education of my siblings and myself. When I was 7, my parents got me married but I hardly have any recollection of that. I still live with my parents and for some reason my in-laws have not asked for me as yet. But I have made it clear to my parents that I will not join my "husband" till I finish school. There has been a lot of family pressure to discontinue my studies. But I am resisting and holding fort. I save all the tiny cash gifts of Rs. 15-20 I get from people, to buy stationery. The Girls' Leadership Workshop has been extremely useful. It has opened a window into a whole new world of possibilities, how I can earn an income to live a respectful life, and maybe strike a balance between my aspirations and my family's needs.

GARNERS #COURAGE AND SEEKS SUPPORT



NITA, 17, GRADE XII: STRONG RESOLVE TO BUILD A FUTURE;
HOPES TO BECOME A DOCTOR

I always had plans to complete my school education. My parents were also supportive initially, but soon changed their mind under the influence of other people in the community. An indecent WhatsApp video was circulated around by the village boys. This gave my parents nightmares about the thought of me stepping outside the house. That's when I decided to address their fears. By purposefully stating my point of view and expressing my displeasure at their decision, I engaged them in a dialogue. My mother still threatens to marry me off if I continue going to school. I refuse to give up. I approached my teachers for guidance. They have been a great support in changing my father's mind. I really want to pursue my dream of becoming a doctor. What I am going through currently is strengthening my resolve to build a foundation for my future. Girls need to amass courage while taking bold steps in life.

#LEVERAGES COLLECTIVE POWER TO ENABLE CHANGE



DHAPOO, 16, GRADE XI: TAKES A LEAD TO ENSURE GIRLS HAVE ACCESS TO SANITARY NAPKINS

When menstrual hygiene was discussed in school, there were no sanitary pads available right away, so I reached out to the local government official with the support of an elected women representative to facilitate the process. Laad Devi, our village head, has taken a lot of interest in understanding the concerns of adolescent girls and today with her help, we have a common room and clean toilets for girls in the school. This has also given me the confidence to take the lead on my own in matters of shared concerns such as reaching out to families of girls who are forced to stop their education. In other cases, I would approach an elected woman leader to use their political agency to get things done. With our collective efforts, I have been able to link 16 dropout girls to the school and got some of them enrolled in the Kasturba Gandhi Girls' Hostel.

#STANDSUP AGAINST REGRESSIVE ATTITUDES



DHAPOO, 16, GRADE XI: TAKES A LEAD TO ENSURE GIRLS HAVE ACCESS TO SANITARY NAPKINS

My parents forced me to discontinue my studies abruptly. When I contested the decision, all my father would say, "What's the point of studying further? No other girls in this village are studying." My mother started taking me along to the farms to work. While all I wanted was to come to school. I resisted, I fought for my rights. My grandmother who has always encouraged me to pursue my dreams, helped me with the school admission and even paid the fees. I want to have all those freedoms as enjoyed by the boys in my village. My biggest challenge still remains, trying to have a conversation with my father. He constantly discourages my career aspirations. When I told him that I wanted to become a police officer and that I have been going to career fairs to get more information, working hard on my physical training, etc. he dismissed me by saying, "There are so many educated people in police who are struggling. Why will people entertain you?" I hope to change his perception eventually.



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