

A second chance

Husain, whose Educate Girls became the first Indian NGO to win the Ramon Magsaysay Award, tells **Ranjita Ganesan** how an education system designed with girls in mind actually works better for everyone

Safeena Husain and her two daughters were on a road trip in Uttar Pradesh some years ago, passing through Chitrakoot, Sonbhadra, Robertsganj, all the way up to Kushi-nagar near Nepal. It was more a lockdown mission than family vacation. The pandemic was forcing girls out of schools and Husain's NGO, Educate Girls, wanted to ensure they returned to the classroom.

Amid teaching out of tribal homes and fixing families up with steady rations, Husain had to tackle a new emergency. Her younger one, Rihaana, fell ill in a particularly remote area. "So I took her to the only place I could find. A *pashu pakshi kendra* (animal, bird centre)." She chuckles, recalling the veterinary staff's astonishment: "They were expecting some cattle, a goat, or at least a chicken. Not my teen."

Husain, 54, knows how to make lemonade from life's lemons. Lemonade, incidentally, is also the only thing she calls for at Pondichery Cafe, where we meet for our interview. It is one week after Educate Girls — which she set up 18 years ago — was declared the first organisation from India to ever win the Ramon Magsaysay Award. The last few days have been hectic, but she agrees to lunch at the buzzing lobby restaurant in Mumbai's Sofitel Hotel. Though not feeling well enough to eat, she never wastes a chance to discuss the nonprofit.

I linger over my plate of vegetable salad, and catch glimpses of some traits that likely help her mobilise 55,000 volunteers at the grassroots

and bring two million rural girls back on the education track. Commitment, zest, ease, humour.

The seeds of Educate Girls were sown in Husain's childhood in New Delhi. She grew up in erratic circumstances. Part of her childhood was spent in tony Pamposh Enclave and Curzon Road Apartments, and another part in low-income housing around Saket and Paharganj. During a particularly tough phase, marked by poverty and an abusive stepfather, her education was paused. Noticing that Husain "looked like death warmed up" at the time, a family friend, Mahe, took her under her wing. "She lived in London and had a small job stamping entitlement checks at the social security office. It was a big decision to take on an additional child," Husain recalls, her tone a mix of affection and gratitude. Getting that second chance

allowed her to be the first in her family to study overseas, at the London School of Economics.

"All I had to do was replicate from that lived experience." She moved back to India later and set out for Pali, the pendant on a necklace that Rajasthan's poorest districts seemed to form on the map. The idea was to identify girls who were being denied education or made to drop out. Husain was no stranger to remote communities, having worked with NGOs in some of the farthest reaches of Ecuador and Mexico after university. But in Rajasthan, doors were shut in her face. "People could tell I was an outsider from my language and way of dressing," she says, ges-

turing at the sleeve of her blue silk *salwar-kameez*.

It became clear the effort would have to be driven by trusted locals. A '*balika-prerak*', or student-mentor, model worked better, where compassionate adults from the same village volunteered to enrol girls in school. It also became clear that the *prerak* need not always be a woman. Men advocating for girls' education were often taken seriously. That may sound like another symptom of gender inequality, but Husain says the young men stepping forward to help had sincere reasons. They had suffered child marriage themselves, or observed how dependent women around them became without an education. Male volunteers make up about 65 per cent of the volunteer base now.

At home, Husain's father and husband have been he-for-she champions, too. The late Yusuf Husain, who ran a travel agency before turning to acting in his 50s, referred to her as "my son, my daughter, my everything". Husain is married to filmmaker Hansal Mehta, who listens every time she carefully deconstructs matters of gender. The best way for those with relative privilege to understand the issue, she observes, is not to separate themselves from it. "It's easy to say it's these villagers who do this. But patriarchy stains everything; the shades might be a little bit lighter here and darker there."

Husain's responses contain digestible wisdom, a consequence, perhaps, of frequently having to acquaint the uninitiated with ground realities. For instance, she boils down the bottlenecks in education to three Ps: Poverty, patriarchy, and policy. Three urgent repairs — in aspiration, confidence, and support — are



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

needed for girls to thrive. According to her, two policy shifts are proving helpful: The Right to Education Act, for establishing neighbourhood primary schools within a distance of one kilometre and middle schools within 3 km; and *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* (save the girl child, educate the girl child), a phrase that is a conversation starter.

The Magsaysay recognition, Husain says, is a validation of Indian homegrown models and innovation. Educate Girls seems to experiment with technology and financing almost like a listed company. By 2015, when it had expanded into 5,000 villages across Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar, Husain wanted to test if they were making a real difference. Before scaling further, the NGO introduced the world's first development impact bond in education. Such bonds bring global investment, but also come with tough targets and impact assessments. "Everybody said you can't do it in India. The country is data poor. Who will believe your results?"

At first, the team failed to meet some targets, but not for a lack of data. Volunteers achieved adequate enrolment through a "Census-like" door-knocking exercise, guided by an algorithm that pinpointed regions where intersections of caste, class, and remoteness created a critical gender gap. But the girls struggled to read and do maths at the expected levels. That brought pause. "We had to break the regular pedagogy down even further. Because our children suffer many life shocks from social and economic marginalisation, they have special needs." After a teacher specialising in autism and Down syndrome was called in to revamp the curriculum, the girls' performance exceeded expectations.

"I would fail 10 times to get an insight as good as that," she exclaims. The new pedagogy has been helping boys in those villages perform better, too. Systems designed for everybody

don't necessarily work for girls, Husain realised, but those designed for girls tend to benefit all. Husain's ambitions are growing, enthused by this special curriculum and growing infrastructure — more girls' toilets, women's hostels, and female teachers have increased in India in the last two decades. Eager to reach 10 million learners in 10 years, the NGO is planning government partnerships to

spread the model in other states. Last year, it entered the Social Stock Exchange.

Husain shares many stories of colourful ways in which problems are solved on the field. Volunteers negotiate with bus operators to change times to suit school hours, coax and counsel families, even graze goats to

free up girls for studies. Besides getting school-age girls enrolled, they are also looking for women who dropped out of school long ago. So she regularly receives WhatsApp updates from the field of volunteers babysitting children while their mothers attend class, and of women in bridal wear giving tests on the day of their wedding.

Some girls she taught have proceeded to work in *anganwadis* and panchayats, while others face the world with financial awareness and digital skills. A seventh grade student recently told her she had decided to make a career in real estate. An older student she met at the learning camps cleared the board exams at the same time as her teen son. Her scores were higher, she informed the founder, laughing that he will respect her now.

With every fresh start and second chance, the girls show a shift in self-esteem that Husain knows only too well.

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