



## INTERVIEW

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### Safeena Husain

All photographs courtesy Educate Girls

Safeena Husain is the Founder and Executive Director at Educate Girls – a non-profit organisation that aims at tackling issues at the root cause of gender inequality in India's education system.

After graduating from the London School of Economics, Safeena spent 15 years working with grassroots projects in Ecuador, Mexico, Bolivia, South Africa & Asia. Back in India, Safeena chose the agenda closest to her heart – girls' education. Along with a local team, she conducted a 50-school project in Pali district, Rajasthan. Post its successful test phase, Safeena established Educate Girls as an NGO in 2007. With focus on enrollment, retention and learning, in the last seven years, Educate Girls has metamorphosed into an 8,500 schools program where over 390,000 children have demonstrated improved learning outcomes and over 2.8 million have benefited from its interventions.

Under Safeena's leadership, Educate Girls has received the prestigious 2015 Skoll Award, 2014 WISE Awards, the 2014 USAID Millennium Alliance Award and the 2014 Stars Impact Awards as well as the India Development Marketplace Award in 2011 from the World Bank. Moreover, in 2013, she received the British Asian Trust's Special Recognition Award from HRH Prince Charles for outstanding contribution in education.

Safeena is married to award-winning film writer-director Hansal Mehta.

People who go abroad, rarely return to India, but you did...

Staying abroad or returning to your home-country is largely a matter of priorities.

For me, nothing in my life was ever planned – from spending several months in an ashram in the Himalayas, to taking up a course at the London School of Economics, to working in the US, every move that I made was the best option I could pick at that point in my life.

During my work with grassroots projects across America and Latin America, I was exposed to the concept of social entrepreneurship and community mobilization. India, as evinced by various experts, is not only the world's largest democracy but also home to one of the largest populations of under-served communities. I did always plan on returning back to India but needed to find the cause that I would focus on.

The turning point for me was when I was setting up a clinic in Nainital (Uttarakhand, India). We (my father and I) happened to cross a village and the women there asked my father how many children he had. "This is it. She is the only child I have!" he replied, pointing to me, and those women started lamenting as if it were such a curse to have just a daughter. In several communities you are not really counted, if you are a female child. I could have seen this particular incident as just another field experience and could have walked down that mountain and back to a world that was full of opportunities, a satisfying career, and money. But I thought, what about the girls in that particular village

and millions of others like them? This is where I picked gender-equality and girl-child education as the core issues to work on in Indian communities. Educate Girls was subsequently born.

Why the focus on girls alone? Children across the country are illiterate.

The focus, really, is on bridging the gender-gap in education. If India awakened tomorrow and said that there is no difference between boys and girls then we wouldn't be thinking of girls' education or of gender equality. But the fact of the matter is that the male preference is extremely strong in patriarchal societies and that's why the gender bias exists. Education is a great equalizer; it's the only substantial key that can open doors for girls and that can bring in the potential for equal opportunity. I know I can achieve gender equality by bringing girls into school.

Having said this, it would interest you to know that the activity-based creative teaching that we do in classrooms, and our efforts to improve school infrastructure are gender neutral – both girls and boys benefit from them.

The toughest challenge you've faced thus far in your journey?

I believe when you run an NGO that partners with the government on one hand and works on bringing the community together to fight the issue on the other, everything from getting government approvals, to arriving at a precise and scalable model, to finding the right people and training them, liaising with local opinion makers and

influencers, to running the programs as per the planned calendar – everything seems like a challenge. But yes, I think raising funds is the toughest of them all. Because our model does not have the potential to generate income, there is high dependency on funding. Sufficient funds at all times is a must in order to effectively implement current activities and plan for future expansion. And this is not just about bringing in more money; it's also about finding the perfect partners who are equally invested in the cause.

Working in India is a different ball game from working in America. Please share your experiences.

From my experience, I can say that a lot of tasks are much easier there in terms of setting up an organisation, getting taxation certificates and setting up the legal and compliance framework. The processes are well defined and very transparent. This can be extremely wearisome in India. However, on the flipside, the people and employees are a lot more understanding, patient and co-operative here, and that makes work such a pleasure at times. I remember having a real rough patch right at the beginning where we ran out of funds and were strapped for money but my team went on without a salary for 5 months, and no protest. I don't think this would have been possible abroad. So I guess every country has its own set of positives and negatives as far as entrepreneurship is concerned.

Education and literacy are not the same thing...

Literacy is acquiring basic skills in language and numeracy and education

is the ability to understand, question and apply what you learn. Education is what empowers you. One can be literate and not really educated and empowered. However, basic literacy does form the baseline for education. We live in a world where information comes mostly through the written medium and therefore one must know how to read and write. Having said this, I strongly believe that the academic curriculum at any level should go beyond books and encourage experiential learning. Education is a process where one must continually learn-apply-observe-question-understand-apply-observe!

What is your vision of what education can achieve for the girls under your care?

We bring them both literacy and an education. With our robust model that empowers not just the girls but also the communities to take a stand against gender inequality, we aim to achieve behavioural, social and economic transformation for all girls.

How do you measure the impact of what 'Educate Girls' does?

We bring girls into school and give them an opportunity to have an education. The impact of educating girls is profound. There is a phenomenal multiplier effect of girls' education on all human development indicators, be it health, nutrition, employability or GDP growth. Educate Girls has brought over 80,000 young girls into school and retained them in formal education. With only a few years of education, these girls today speak about health, hygiene, career

and employment. The impact is evident even if it is not measured. You can only imagine the transformation they would bring in their personal lives and in their communities over the next few years. But we do have a highly skilled M&E (Monitoring and Evaluation) team that conducts base-line and end-line studies and tracks over 40 parameters to evaluate the impact of our programs.

What do you think NGOs achieve vis-à-vis Government policies?

Strong government policies for legal framework, governance, taxation, foster a more conducive environment for positive NGO contribution to development. One must not forget that development of communities is a collaborative effort between the government and the NGO. Certain NGOs align their model to a certain government policy, thereby accelerating progress and bringing about greater impact. Educate Girls rests upon the Right to Education (RTE) Act that mandates free and compulsory education for 6-14 year olds, is adapted to ensure that no children in this age group remain out of school, and that they all study in age appropriate grades. Since we focus on enrollment of girls, we also bridge the gender-gap in education.

We know you educate girls... but what have they taught you in your journey so far?

I think there's so much that one learns from the girls in the field. If I had to pick one thing, it would be the level of hard-work and tenacity that these girls put in for something as basic as being in school. In my pensive moments I always



remind myself of the countless stories of strength that I have come across. I tell myself, "If these little girls continue to fight for an education every single day, I know I have hope and I must continue with my movement!"

Plans for the future?

We added 3 new districts in Rajasthan in 2014-15, scaling up our interventions to over 8,500 schools in over 4,500 villages. We are in the process of adding 3 more districts in 2015-16. We want to be able to expand operations to communities in other states of India and our goal is to improve access and quality of education for around 4 million children living in under-served communities in India by 2018.

A million lives touched positively by your work... your feelings?

It has definitely been a very gratifying journey but there are millions of lives still waiting to seize the opportunity of an education. Our base-lines are still very low and the fight for gender equality is not even close to an end. Bringing about a change in mind-sets is a long process and I have 'miles to go before I sleep!'

