



GENDERHOPE
WORKING TO END GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Interview of the Month **Safeena Husain, Founder and CEO, Educate Girls, India** **June 2014**

1. GenderHopes: Can you tell us a bit about Educate Girls, the organisation which you founded and are CEO of?

Safeena Husain: Throughout India, gender disparity remains a significant barrier to education. The result is alarming - more than 3.7 million girls across the country are out of school, the third highest number in the world.

With a focus on Enrollment, Retention and Learning, Educate Girls (EG) aims to provide quality education for all underserved and marginalized girls by mobilizing and leveraging public, private, and community resources to improve access to education and school quality. EG started with a pilot in 50 government schools in Rajasthan in 2005. It scaled its intervention from 500 schools in 2007 to 2,342 schools in 2010, reaching over a quarter of a million children in Pali district, out of which approximately 120,000 were girls. In 2011, EG signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to enter Jalore district and work with an additional 2,083 schools. Now, with a MoU in place for the Sirohi district, EG has expanded its reach to more marginalized girls in some of India's most challenging geographies.

EG's innovative "comprehensive model" for school reform and cluster approach creates depth of the program and allows EG to leverage its impact to enable grassroots change. Furthermore, by leveraging the government's existing investment in schools, EG delivers measurable results to a large number of beneficiaries at an extremely low cost and avoids duplication or parallel delivery of services. In the last six years, EG's enrolled over 59,000 girls and over 560,000 children have benefitted from improved education infrastructure.

In 2014, EG is expanding to 3 additional districts (Ajmer, Rajsamand and Bundi) for which the process of signing the MoUs with the Government of Rajasthan is underway. With this expansion, EG hopes to create an impact on over 950,000 children in over 7,500 schools in the above mention districts. By 2018, EG hopes to scale operations to 15 districts across India, reaching out to over 3.8 million children.



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2. What inspired you to launch Educate Girls and how did you develop its innovative approach to education?

From the very outset, I had a strong personal motivation to make a change in India's education system. As a young girl, my father, a Shia Muslim from a small village, allowed me to live in an ashram (monastery), read scriptures and follow my own path. This gave me a very grounded and wholesome perspective of Indianess, mythology, life, gender, and education.

After graduating from the London School of Economics in early 90s, I joined an internet start-up in the Silicon Valley. Everything was going great but I found myself wanting to do something meaningful and impactful. Increasingly, I found myself getting drawn to the social development sector. That is when I started volunteering and after a year with the start-up, I quit it and joined Child Family Health International in San Francisco.

I worked extensively with rural and urban underserved communities in South America, Africa and Asia. From 1997 to 2004, I was the Executive Director for Child Family Health International in San Francisco, managing and supporting a range of development programs in the area of health.

After spending 15 years in Ecuador, Mexico, Bolivia, and South Africa, I returned to India to drive the agenda closest to my heart – that of girls' education. With practical, firsthand experience of working with communities and understanding how educating women can impact some of the most pressing root causes of poverty, particularly health, I along with a local team, conducted a 50-school project in Pali and Jalore districts in Rajasthan. This was launched under the umbrella of the Rajasthan Education Initiative and following its successful test phase, I established Educate Girls India as an NGO in 2007. A year later, the organization won government approval to start a pilot project in 500 schools in Pali district. I have since been in-charge of Educate Girls, scaling the organization from 50 schools to over 5,000 schools, serving over 560,000 children

Apart from being the Executive Director of the organization, I make it a point to spend some time outside of work to spread awareness about gender equality, girls' education and Educate Girls. I also devote some time at the grass-root level, ensuring that those who implement the EG model in the field—volunteers and community members—are well-equipped and supported in their work.

Now, I am a mother to two beautiful little girls, and am fully committed to make this country and the world a better place for my daughters through education.



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3. You must have heard many inspiring stories through your work at Educate Girls. Can you share some with us?

There are countless inspiring stories to share. I particularly like Meena's story. Meena comes from Tipari village in Rajasthan and is the eldest daughter in her family. While her parents labored for a living, Meena stayed home and took care of her siblings. At the age of 8, Meena was forcibly engaged and became the victim of an age-old custom of brother-sister exchange marriages (marriages linking a brother and sister of one household with the sister and brother of another).

It was few days later that a Team Balika member identified her and tried to convince her parents to break-off the engagement and send her to school. After weeks of persuasion, her parents finally agreed. Today, Meena not only enjoys going to school but is also the Health Minister of the Bal Sabha (Girls' Council) in her school. The Bal Sabha empowers girls with essential life skills such as decision-making, problem solving, assertiveness etc. Meena uses her position in the Bal Sabha to motivate her schoolmates and girls in her neighborhood to eat healthy and asserts the importance of hygiene.

Meena's parents are slowly but surely understanding the benefits of education. They have decided to educate her and get her married only after she is 18.

You can read more inspiring stories of young girls on EG and GenderHopes' website.

4. What do you see as the biggest challenges to overcoming gender equality issues and empowering girls in India and also globally?

Gender disparity is a mind-set led issue. People across the world and particularly in India don't perceive girls at par with boys. So, if one intends tackling gender disparity, one needs to target perceptual and behavioural traits that arise from deep-rooted social-cultural belief systems. At EG, our aim is to achieve behavioral, social and economic transformation for all girls towards an India where all children have equal opportunity to access quality education.

5. What is in the pipeline for Educate Girls in 2014 and beyond?

At the program level, we are expanding to 3 new districts in Rajasthan i.e. Ajmer, Bundi and Rajsamand comprising over 3,000 villages and over 4,000 schools. With this expansion, our cumulative reach would swell to over 950,000 children in over 7,500 schools.



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With regards to our budgetary pipeline, we have a budget of US\$3.2 million this year. We have a group of dedicated donors comprising venture philanthropists, foundations, HNIs, corporates who engage with us with multi-year grant commitments. For 2015 and beyond, apart from a robust pipeline of donors, we are exploring the world's first Development Impact Bond in education and social franchising as other options to maintain financial sustainability.

6. How can our readers get involved and support your organisation?

We will be glad to receive all support from the readers. We are always on the lookout for talented professionals who can devote some time with us via volunteering or providing specialized services. Apart from this, if readers wish to donate, they can visit our website and donate. If readers are curious to know more about Educate Girls, they can email us at info@educategirls.in.