

WOMEN we SHOULD *Love*

This year, *Hi! Blitz* commemorates the spirit of International Women's Day by showcasing women who are society's change-agents, transforming the world in fresh and exhilarating ways. They go beyond the traditional taxonomy of the power elite, striving to create a new idiom for the underprivileged through education and empowerment. Meet this year's Real Power Women!





CHALK BEFORE CHOOOLAH

Safeena Husain, Founder and CEO of Educate Girls, has worked with about 5,000 government schools in Pali, Jalore and Sirohi districts in Rajasthan, the organisation benefitting 5,67,812 girls with 99 per cent enrolment in schools. She says her biggest reward is when the girls in the villages tell her, "My education is what is really mine that no flood can sweep away, no fire can burn and no one can steal or rape it out of me. It is mine forever!"

Safeena Husain's bio reads like a resume—Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Educate Girls, Chief Executive Director for Child Family Health International, Board Chair of the International Development Exchange in San Francisco, Advisory Council of the Center for Global Development, with a degree from the London School of Economics and Political Sciences. But what drives her is not capital economics, corner offices or accolades. It's making sure every girl gets an education, especially if it means going against societal grain.

After graduating from LSE and during her stint in the Silicon Valley where she was well on her way to achieving every young graduate dreams of,

a 'lingering emptiness' and the need for 'something more meaningful' led her to join Child Family Health International, her first foray into the development/non-governmental sector. This gave her the opportunity to work with the marginalised and underserved rural and tribal populations in Ecuador, Mexico, Bolivia, South Africa and India, and the much-needed motivation to move back and realise what she wanted to dedicate her life to.

With her father's unflagging support (he's a Shia Muslim from a small village in UP; yet he allowed her to live in an ashram, read scriptures, follow her own path and is the ultimate hero in her eyes), she began to test a model that empowers the

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community to educate girls in 50 schools in Rajasthan under the umbrella of the Rajasthan Education Initiative. Educate Girls was then registered as an NGO and won government approval to start a pilot in 500 schools in Rajasthan's Pali district.

Battling constantly against gender inequality, dowry, child marriage, low caste status of women, Safeena explains their strategy. "We work towards empowerment and ownership of schools by the communities who have traditionally been opponents of girls' education, in order to usher in a mass perception shift towards girls' education. By giving these communities the power to make changes in their own schools, we are creating a model that is sustainable, scalable and cost efficient—we are helping them realise the benefits of girls' education."

And the benefits are plenty: reducing the spread of HIV, earning 10 per cent higher incomes and passing on education to future generations. But in characteristic humility, Safeena attributes this success to her wards. "We have innumerable stories of girls who have stood firm against family and community pressures, managed to get an education and have taken it upon themselves to bring every girl of their village to school."

So what motivates her every day? "I have two little girls and I want the world to be a better place for them when they grow up. Education is something they can hold on to forever. That to me is the true power of education."

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