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THE GUIDE TO EDUCATION AND CAREERS

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HOW I MADE IT KAL PENN, ACTOR AND CIVIL SERVANT



WHEN GIRLS RETURNED TO THE CLASSROOM

Having re-enrolled over 80,000 students, Safeena Husain credits community participation as the key to her success

BY SONALI ACHARJEE

After working for seven years as the Executive Director for Child Family Health International in San Francisco, Safeena Husain, 39, was ready to return to India in 2004. "At the time the G20 survey had just been released and it stated that India was the worst place to be born a woman. At the same time I read that there were 2.4 million NGOs operating in the country, yet not a single one was a large scale, replicable and high impact model focusing solely on reducing the gender gap in education," reflects Husain. Having grown up in India herself and now returning with two daughters, Husain felt that closing the gender gap in schools was the key to women empowerment.

In 2005, less than a year after her return, Husain set up the Educate Girls headquarters in Mumbai. "We contacted the Ministry for Human Resource Development for data on critical gender gap districts in the country. Since nine of these were in Rajasthan, we chose the state for our pilot run. The government gave us 50 schools to start work with in the worst-affected districts of Pali and Jalore," says Husain. Today, Educate Girls has a total of 7,500 schools in six districts (Pali, Jalore, Ajmer, Sirohi, Bundi and Rajsamand) under its wing. They have already re-enrolled 80,000 girls students in schools and have helped improve classroom conditions for over a million children in the state. "When we started in Pali, the gender gap was nearly 30 per cent. Less than six years later, it is now less than seven per cent," she adds. The project was one of the six winners to be felicitated with the WISE Prize, which includes a \$20,000 cash award and trophy, by the Qatar Foundation in Doha last month.

Giving the community a voice

To come up with a working structure for Educate Girls, Husain contacted several foundations and not-for-profits such as Pratham for classroom materials and UNICEF for their learning model. "I wanted to learn and use the best practices available at the time. What I discovered was that gender awareness cannot be spread in isolation. You need to target a cluster of districts at a time and must be the strongest presence there. Secondly, there is no substitute for community

participation," she explains. This is why at the heart of the project lies Team Balika, a 3,000-strong group of community volunteers representing each village under Educate Girls. The members scout their villages for out-of-school girls and then step in to encourage them to re-enroll for school. Renuka, 14, one such member of Team Balika from Bali block in the Pali district says, "My goal is to re-enroll all of the girls who have dropped out in my village. I want to be a leader who can give everyone a voice."

Once the girls in a village are re-enrolled, Educate Girls then maintains a database to track their progress in school. The project then contacts schools to ensure that classrooms are student-friendly. The model is also cost-effective, spending as little as \$3 per child, per year. "Reducing the gender gap in education is the battle of our lifetime. But you only need to break the cycle once. Studies show that an educated mother is 500 times more likely to educate her own child," she adds.

Working with and not against the system

Unlike other developing nations, Husain strongly believes that in India the education system is on the right track while the implementation is not. "Poverty is not the main reason that keeps children out of schools. In India, we spend almost \$25,000 per school, per year to provide free education but despite the investment, only 30 per cent children actually benefit from this opportunity. Our goal is to improve the existing system, not replace it. In the last six years we have ensured that every school in our six districts is working to its full capacity," explains Husain.

The right support

Currently Educate Girls is receiving funding from a number of charities and sponsors. Her Highness Sheikhha Moza bint Nasser, is one of the main co-sponsors of the project through her Education Above All initiative. The project also receives funds from the Fossil Foundation, Cartier, Vodafone, LGT Group and Prince Charles's foundation, the British Asian Trust. "Our aim now is to close to gap in 15 more of the worst-affected districts; impacting a total of 4.5 million children by 2018," commits Husain.

THERE ARE 2.4 MILLION NGOS WORKING IN INDIA. YET WE REMAIN ONE OF THE WORST COUNTRIES TO BE BORN A WOMAN TODAY.