

EDUCATION PLUS

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“Education was transformative in my life”

Safeena Husain, founder of Educate Girls and winner of the WISE Prize for Education 2023, talks about how and why she helps girls to go back to school

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Safeena Husain grew up in adverse circumstances. “Poverty, violence, abuse... my family circumstances were difficult,” says the first Indian woman recipient of the WISE Prize for Education. At one point, she had to drop out of school. Her family was keen to marry off the adolescent girl. But, with the support of an aunt, Husain went on to graduate from the London School of Economics.

“Education was transformative in my life,” she says. After working abroad, she returned to India in 2007 to found the non-profit organisation Educate Girls, which identifies girls between five and 14 years in rural and educationally backward areas and gets them into schools. In the last 16 years, Educate Girls has led 1.4 million girls back to school and has expanded its reach to work across Rajasthan, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh.

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Post the pandemic, a road trip across UP showed Husain that an entire generation of girls were being robbed off education. “Marriage was a cost-effective solution during the pandemic. We wanted to create a second chance for them,” she says. So the first phase of Project Pragati was launched in Rajasthan in 2021, with 300 girls between 15 and 25 years. In two years, 7,000 girls re-enrolled in schools with 61% successfully clearing the Class 10 exam in the first attempt.

In 2023, Husain won The Hindu businessline Changemaker Award in the Social Transformation Category and the WISE Prize awarded by the Qatar Foundation. Excerpts from an interview:

You have worked across four states for over a decade. What is the status of education for girls in India?

According to government figures, 66 million girls will not be attending high school and in 5% of India’s villages, 40% of girls are still out of primary school. The enrollment rates have increased at the primary level but the problem has shifted to older girls, as the



drop out rates going into secondary education are high. Girls are still battling with household chores, family responsibilities, discrimination and patriarchal mindsets.

What was Educate Girls’ roadmap when it started?

There are seven lakh villages in India. I got a list of 26 red districts with a critical gender gap in education, of which nine were in Rajasthan. I started in 2007 with 50 villages in Pali district as a social experiment. Now we work in 25,000 villages across Bihar, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh.

What is your modus operandi?

We work in partnership with the state governments leveraging the existing educational infrastructure to identify, enrol and retain out-of-school girls and improve their foundational skills in literacy and numeracy.

We have a robust network of 3,000 employees and 18,000 volunteers drawn from the villages and trained in community ownership: My Village, My Problem, I Am the Solution. These gender champions do door-to-door survey, convince families and ensure girls are enrolled into the nearest government school

and also help them with remedial classes in English, Hindi and Maths.

How challenging has it been to address the issue of education disparity and social challenges?

We started our pilot phase in pre-RTE (Right To Education) days. We did not want to miss out on a single girl but access to people was difficult.

Doors were shut on our faces, as parents felt their daughters were better off learning and doing household chores in preparation for marriage rather than wasting time, energy, and money at school. There are people who

still believe a goat is an asset and a girl a liability.

How did the change come about?

After RTE came into effect in 2010, people became more aligned to the thought of educating girls. Once we got that access, we could authoritatively ask people to send girls to school because it is their right. We could also give the girls extra coaching. We had to work differently in every region.

What is the difference now?

There has been progress. The drop-out problem at the

primary level has shrunk considerably. But secondary education has new hotspots because the older girls are at risk of never completing their studies due to being over-age or married with children, or facing academic setbacks. However, compared to 15 years ago, girls are gaining confidence now and have aspirations.

Is that why you launched Project Pragati?

Yes. We found girls are vulnerable and take a lot of shame on themselves. The girl’s education becomes the first casualty of any calamity that strikes the family, from illness to debt. We are helping older girls restart their lives by writing the Class 10 exam and following it up with ITI skills and training that will fetch them jobs of nurses, Anganwadi or ASHA workers,

or schools teachers.

What do you foresee for the girls who fall off the education map?

It took us 10 years to enter homes and convince families. The mindset is changing, but very slowly. Learning has to be gender-neutral. But when you do not have the gender lens, girls get missed. If we have all the tools of their transitioning and equip our girls with education, then their transformation can be rapid.

Your work has won global recognition. What’s next?

Never to lose sight of our primary objective: to enhance the access to and the quality of education for over 15 million children by 2025. To impact the lives of 10 million out-of-schools girls over next 10 years under Pragati scheme.

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