

Shaheen: A woman of substance

Shaheen is the youngest of five daughters born to a Meo family in Malab, a small village near Nuh, Mewat. Not being able to give birth to a boy had been a bone of contention for her parents. But Shaheen's mother was lucky to have the support of her husband. Shaheen's birth was no less than a miracle. All the near and dear and the village folk had suggested killing the fifth child if it was not a boy. But destiny had something else in store. Shaheen, the once-doomed girl, became a sparkling, brilliant young woman. She was fortunate to go to school and study until tenth standard. She did not get married as early as her sisters had. She would have a chance to work for the social emancipation of many more girls who had never seen the inside of a classroom.

Shaheen was married at the age of sixteen and is a mother of two. Her husband, though uneducated, has been supportive of whatever Shaheen wanted to do. He has been an equal contributor in the household chores and upbringing of their children. Soon after marriage, Shaheen expressed her willingness to work. She participated in a Food Processing diploma program conducted by Mewat Development Agency (MDA) and, after the completion, she was appointed as a trainer with MDA (2000-03). She subsequently joined Sehgal Foundation as a Life Skills Education instructor (2003-2005) of the course that caters to adolescent girls, teaching them basic literacy, stitching and embroidery, personality development, sanitation, and reproductive and child health.

Having developed expertise as an instructor, she wanted to work more on health and sanitation issues. After rigorous screening and testing, in 2008 she qualified to become a health specialist at Sehgal Foundation with seventeen villages under her leadership. Shaheen worked hard on preventive health that focused on mothers and children.



Today, she continues her work with greater commitment than ever, teaching villagers to adopt safe and healthy life practices. She has a special place in her heart for work on women's health. According to Shaheen, "God has given a woman the privilege to give birth to a new life, raise a family, and look after everyone. It thus becomes important that women remain healthy."

What began as a mere willingness for Shaheen became a passion that continues to expand at an unrelenting pace. Her work with the foundation has evolved over the years. As part of the Strengthening Village Level Institutions team, she is instrumental in the capacity building of panchayats (village councils), school management committees, village health sanitation and nutrition committees, and *mahila sangathans* (women's collectives). Shaheen's commitment and her achievements have made her stand out. She is an inspiration for many others who want to become leaders despite several odds.