

The tales of two women

By Vrinda Dabas

"Whether I come home to be beaten up by my husband or to a quiet, unusual day depends on the food I cook that can save me from the ordeal. The portions of salt or sugar in my food, whether the curd I set curdled to accuracy, and if the chai was *kadak* (strong) enough, all determine how my day would go," says Neelam [name changed], a middle-aged woman living in the Hamzapur village of Nuh district, Haryana. An illiterate woman married into an orthodox, Muslim family, Neelam has lived her entire life bound by the four walls of her home. Her daily routine has been limited to the field where she labors the whole day, only to come home to fill her lungs with smoke emanating from the *chullah* (stove). Irrespective of her tiredness, she then cooks dinner for her entire family. "My husband?" she laughs, "He is very punctual in waking up every morning, taking a bath, and then setting off to the local shop to meet his fellow gamblers to enjoy a card game. He comes back home around late afternoon, sometimes only for an afternoon siesta, tired as he must be from such an exhausting day of playing cards."

"I have four daughters. My eldest, Shabnam [name changed], her schooling completed, now sits at home helping me with the housework. I wonder what these twelve years of education changed for her, what was the outcome? Similar to other girls from the village, she now stays at home and cooks food, washes clothes, and works in the field. She wanted to be a doctor. My husband and her *chacha* (uncle) forbade her studies, stumping her and cutting her wings off. They eventually succumbed to pressures from the villagers. Neighbors often made snarky comments and remarked that our daughters would fall under bad influences and run away or be kidnapped by the bad men out there. I wonder who was 'bad' in the scenario."

The daughter sitting nearby hesitantly expressed her plight, having to give up on her dream of becoming a doctor while her classmates were able to pursue theirs.

Seema, the third eldest, comes home riding her brother's motorbike with a bottle of cold drink for the guests. It is refreshing and slightly reassuring to see a girl ride a bike here, a village where stepping out of the house invites ridicule and bad-mouthing. However, acknowledging that also comes with a realization of how far women and humankind needs to go to obliterate such punitive parameters. Seema studies in the tenth grade and aspires to be a doctor just as her elder sister once did. Rumor has it that she too will be forced to quit school after she completes tenth.

Neelam's youngest daughter was never allowed to go to school and now studies Urdu at the local Madarsa. "I am guilty of not letting my daughters study further and pursue their dreams. But what else could I have done? How

could I support them all alone when the entire village and my own family stands against them? Even if I tried to leave all this behind, where will I go?"

Not very far away from Neelam's village, lives another woman named Zubaida in Sakras village in Nuh. "I have lived my entire life like a slave. I did not get the opportunity to study. We are five brothers and I—five boys and only one sister. I grew up seeing my brothers going to school while I stayed at home and did the chores. I often complained to my mother, saying that if only she had allowed her daughter to study, she would've learned how to spell *doodh* (milk)."

"I thus decided at a very young age that all my children regardless of their sex will get quality education. See where they are today!" she adds with a sense of pride in her voice. "My son is working as an engineer at a big firm in Gurugram, my eldest daughter is doing her PhD, another daughter is doing her bachelors in Education and another one has only recently graduated high school and now is applying to Jamia Milia Islamia University. It was not easy. I had tuned out my ears to the remarks from villagers year after year, simply because I took the bold step to treat all my children equally, especially when it came to their education. I remember the time when villagers gathered around my house every afternoon, just to ridicule me for educating my daughters. They said that my daughters would run away. Strangely, the same people today congratulate me for having raised my son and daughters the right way. Following the same path, villagers are now sending their own daughters to schools. It makes me proud for I feel I have made my own little contribution to improve the condition of girls and women in Nuh. My effort to educate my daughters created a ripple effect, for I now see so many girls from our village going to schools; a sight that would have been a rarity only a decade ago. I feel as though I've set an example for others to follow."

In the scorching heat of June, when the entire community sits inside their homes seeking respite from the hellish weather, young Shehnaaz walks in the door, returning from college, as her mother sits narrating what it is like to be a girl with a dream in Nuh. Taking off her dupatta with a huff, Shehnaaz does not complain of the hot weather in which she has to travel miles every day to go to college, she smiles and is only grateful that she gets to do it.

While Neelam and Zubaida are only two women, there are innumerable girls eagerly waiting to share their same tales of deprivation, subordination, and subjugation. The Indian society since time immemorial has viewed a woman as a commodity, bought and sold as she is in the garb of marriage. A girl's impermanence in her natal family makes her a "liability," which the parents must rid themselves off as soon as she ripens for reproduction. While a boy is an investment given his so-called "permanence" in his parents' house, making him the future breadwinner and thus making it imperative that he goes to school. This view has reduced a woman's role to producing and taking care of children, simply because she has a body capable of carrying a child.

The assumed duty of domestic work that rests on her shoulders alone is nothing but an extension of her image as the caretaker. This flawed perspective has stolen many dreams and will continue to do so if no one questions it. Educating our daughters is a step forward toward bringing about social change. While some may be successful like Zubaida, others may have a sad story to share like Neelam, a prey to the patriarchal system, forced to pull her daughters out of school and pushed back into the kitchen. Although only a drop in the vast ocean, Zubaida sets an example for many people to follow.

Education forms one of the primary tenets to attaining a better standard of living and breaking away from the social complications that hold us back. For any country to move forward, the first step is always a social revolution which may then be followed by other forms of revolution. Without education, no such change would ever be possible.

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