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ASIA

Entrepreneur's Quest to Bring Girls Back to School in India

Entrepreneur Safeena Husain builds a model for girls' education in rural India

By Eva Tam And Lukas Messmer

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Growing up in India, Safeena Husain was long concerned about the status of women in her country – the rate of girls out of school was high, the rate of sexual abuse was high, and “any indicator you pick out, India is one of the worst,” she says. So Ms. Husain, who operated an Indian health clinic, started a nonprofit in 2007 to enroll girls in school in poor, rural areas in northern India.

As awareness of the value of girls' education rises around the world, Ms. Husain says her Mumbai-based nonprofit, Educate Girls, has grown to 600 employees and 4,500 volunteers, making it one of India's biggest NGOs for girls' education. Still, some villagers have resisted, saying they want to keep their daughters at home to help with farm and housework, and fearing that an education might expose them to Western, liberal values.

Ms. Husain, 44, talked to The Wall Street Journal about her efforts to enroll and retain the girls in school and the challenge of constant fund-raising. Below are edited excerpts:

Why do some families keep their daughters out of school in India?

We have a very strong patriarchal society, and a deep-rooted caste system. Caste, class, and patriarchy merge together, making it much worse for a woman. One of the things we encounter all the time in rural areas is that a goat is considered an asset, and a girl a liability. A goat is something a person can sell, and needs to have for their livelihood, but a girl is a burden.

Educate Girls works to improve the facilities of schools in rural India to make them more suitable for girls, and reduce dropout rates. What exactly are you doing?



Safeena Husain at the offices of Educate Girls in Mumbai, India. PHOTO: EVA TAM

When I began working in [the northern state of] Rajasthan, only 40% of government schools had separate girls' toilets. So there was no thought of girls who are coming into the school system, and who might need a bathroom to go to. I have two little girls, and I would not send them to school if there wasn't a bathroom for them to use. The problem is that there is no gender sensitivity. Nobody is seeing the world through a girl's

eyes.

What other measures do you take to improve retention and keep girls in school?

We actually divide the whole year very carefully, based on this. July to September is the time we spend on enrollment. The rest of the year is completely devoted to retention and learning activities.

For retention, we work with school administration and management committees to make school improvement plans, and to make sure all of the infrastructure and facilities are in place. Every quarter, we map the number of children in school and total enrollment to see if there are any dips, and then we actually investigate and find out why kids are dropping out. We try to immediately bring them back into school.

After September intensive learning activities kick in three days a week and continue until the end of the academic year, and the real focus becomes keeping the children in school.

What skills are important for your staff and volunteers to have?

I hire extensively, and 99% of the hires are local staff from the same critical gender-gap districts we work in. That means every time we have 200 or 300 people coming into the organization, they are bringing the same prejudices and gender insensitivity with them.



We have to be really vigilant about our values and culture. To bring them on board, what I'm looking for is empathy. If they don't have that, then they won't be able to do this work. We didn't have the self-awareness to actually recognize this early on. Now, especially with all of our senior management, we do psychometric testing through our partner firm to be able to filter for values before anything else.

What impact does finishing school have on girls' lives in rural India?

Girls who finish school are likely to have healthier children, and marry later. They are 40% more likely to immunize their children, and the woman's family income will be 10% to 15% higher for each year of education that she has. It's not simply about getting a job at the end of their schooling. We know that the benefits multiply, and are very beneficial for their entire village and district.

Now we have young girls who are standing up for elections for village chief. This year we had Navli Kumari. She stood for elections and won, which is incredible for a 22-year-old tribal girl, to win and become the leader of her village.

How do you operate Educate Girls?

We are 100% grant-funded. However, because we work within the government school system, we are extremely cost-effective. Our cost per beneficiary is about \$2.80 a year.

We work with a million children across 9,000 schools, so we have huge economies of scale that are built in. We also have a cluster model of operation. So if we go into a gender-gap district that has 1,067 villages, we will be in all 1,067 villages. In addition, we don't run our schools. We're actually taking government schools, and making them better, for female students especially.

How much funding do you need to keep Educate Girls operating year-to-year?

That's a very difficult and stressful question for me. Because our program nearly doubles each year, our budget doubles each year. This year our budget is about \$4 million for 1 million children across seven gender-gap districts. We'll be covering 4,500 villages in total. We would like to be present in 8,500 schools, and next year have 3,000 more villages, so our budget will double to nearly \$5.5 million. By 2018 we plan to be in 30,000 schools, and we're looking at a budget of about \$9.5 million.