

BREAKING THE MARGINS

THE TALES OF THE UNSUNG HEROES

*Murshida Khatun is the headmistress of
Debkundu Sheik Adbur Razzaque Memorial
High Madrasa in Murshidabad.*

*She works relentlessly and sincerely with girls to
fight and overcome social stigmas and taboos, paving
the way for women's empowerment and freedom. She
uses sports along with studies to enhance and develop
women's capabilities.*



Murshida Khatun- Mission: No Girl Child Left Behind

'I had told my students who were appearing for their Madhyamik examination to excuse themselves from fasting. The logic being simple- Ramadan is an annual celebration but their school final examination was to happen once in their lifetime. I didn't want my students to underperform because of hunger. I remember telling the girls that Islam has the provision of taking a break from the fasting ritual and fasting later to compensate the number of fasts missed. But the girls went back and told their mothers that Murshida madam will beat us if we fast. The message was passed on their fathers. One day, a number of men assembled before my house, just after the namaz (prayer). However, they didn't want to talk to me but to my husband. I somehow persuaded them to listen to me. After a lot of efforts, both Rafiq and I were able to convince them,' recounts Murshida Khatun from Murshidabad.

Difficult road to tread:

The rude behaviour of the locals might take you by surprise, but it's nothing new for Murshida, Principal of Debkundu Sheikh Abdur Razzaque Memorial High Madrasah (DSARMHM), Beldanga, Murshidabad. Being a changemaker in this rural belt of Bengal, Murshida had been using her courage and sensibility to tackle such issues since she was a child.

Born in Mirzapur, Murshida's first proposal for marriage came when she was only five years old. Thanks to the sensibility of her mother, the proposal was quashed and the toddler was encouraged to study. But that was just the beginning. Born in a rural belt where child marriage is a norm, Murshida's mother bravely turned down 13 such proposals.

By this time she clearly understood that education was the key to her becoming independent. With a determination to pursue her higher education, Murshida began giving private tuitions to support her Education.

However, with every rung of the career graph that she climbed, she had to face jibes of her neighbours who often talked about her returning home late, many even wondered if she would get married, as for them she had crossed her prime. Determined to fight for her rights, women empowerment and more in a society that is still so backward, she trudged forward, facing all obstacles with a smile.

Being the change maker:

She took on the responsibilities of DSARMHM in 2010. At that point of time, she had only 78 students coming to her school. Nine years down the line, she now has around 1200 students enrolled, but now her biggest challenge is the number of teachers on the pay roll. With only eight teachers to teach the girls, the teacher-student ratio is skewed.

However, that doesn't make her either compromise on the quality of education or stop her from fighting issues that plague the society. When it comes to fighting child Marriage, Murshida is a champion.

In 2010, she founded a group in association with the Madrasa that she works in to fight the evils of child marriage. 'I believe education is the key to empowerment. Hence, I have knowingly rescued many girls from their wedding aisle, following which, these girls have studied really hard and some have even made a career out of it.

In some cases, if my students are secretly married off, then I establish contact with them and counsel them to pursue their education after marriage. But our main struggle is to fight The ideology of the society, which even today believes that Muslim girls studying beyond a set norm is rebel in the making, As she might stop sporting the hijab or might have to work for late hours,' says Murshida in a sullen tone.

Seeking government help :

Realizing that her army comprising students and their mothers would need stronger support, she has been smart to have taken the government into the loop to tackle the issue of child marriage. Building a rapport with the BDO and other government officials, Musrhida no longer counsels the girls only but their mothers too. When she finds the mothers missing the awareness meets, she makes it a point to visit them at their residence with her group members. Moving from one locality to another, this educationist seems to be on a mission of making her area child marriage free. Her dedicated work and enthusiasm has earned her the title "Fearless Girl".

'The fact that the girls of our locality are wearing shorts to play kho-kho and badminton is a historical achievement. Almost a decade ago, the very idea of girls cycling in shorts or participating in a science festival would have been a remote dream,' she adds.

Nurturing sportswomen of the future :

Perhaps it's her persistence and hard work that made it possible for girls from her Madrasa to win three cycle race championships and emerge as kho-kho champions once. What makes it more commendable for Murshida is the fact that in 2017, her school had cent per cent performance during the Madhyamik examination, an achievement for which her school had also been felicitated by the state government. Her job as an educationist doesn't end with her students graduating. She remains in constant touch with her students, counsels them and even encourages them to participate in contests.

It was because of her perseverance that two of her students were selected as grassroots reporters in the year 2017. Her sustained efforts made it possible for her girls to win the Kanyashree Award and Participate in activities like Mock Parliament, Best Child Cabinet and other such events. Making her difficult journey seem brighter was the award that her Madarsa got from the district education department of Bengal.

Poverty, the biggest enemy :

However, even today, the biggest nemesis for Murshida is poverty. Most of the inhabitants of this district are daily wage labourers. Acute poverty and lack of resources makes it impossible for the families to support the education of the girl child in particular. With a mission and agenda in place, Murshida even shells out a chunk of her earnings to support her diligent students. She doesn't stop at That and even arranges for funds for students who need aid.

Her students are well aware of the efforts of their teacher. They value it and perhaps it gives them a push to do things with more conviction and dedication. Take the example of two of her students, who are bending all odds to make it big in life. Donning the mandatory hijab they leave for their school, from where they travel to Behrampore to practice in their sports attire.

Once done with the practice session, they rush to catch the train to reach back to their school. Many a time, if they get hurt they hide it from their parents, for they very well know that it would be the end of their sports career. One of them aspires to be a nurse and the other wants to join the army and Serve the nation.

Decoding the child cabinet:

On being asked about the child cabinet of hers, she explains, 'The child cabinet is a group of school going girls who regularly meet. If one of the members goes missing for a couple of meets, the girls approach their friend in her house to know the reason for her absence. On realizing that their friend is all set to get married, they approach their headmistress or principal for help.'

Understanding the stigma associated with Madrasa education system, Murshida makes it mandatory for her school to observe Bhasha Diwas (February 21), Independence and Republic day along with a celebration to mark the birthday of Sister Nivedita of Missionaries of Charity. 'These cultural celebrations were a taboo for the Muslim community, where even boys are barred from dancing or giving a stage performance. Hence in such a society, it was extremely difficult to make my students (girls) dance, sing and perform on stage. But given our determination we have been successful in making the environment conducive. Guess what? We have even performed on stages meant for jalsa (an Islamic event where the clerics give religious discourse on the stage). My hard work has paid off as now most of the parents believe that girls too are humans and at par with men. But still we have a lot to do in terms of spreading mass awareness and sensitizing the society to let the daughter study And carve out a career first. Marriage can wait,' sums up Murshida.

'Breaking the Margin: Tales of the Unsung Heroes', an initiative of West Bengal Minorities' Development and Finance Corporation(WBMDFC) , presents examples of inspirations, hopes, and accomplishments. We are pleased to present the the stories of individuals drawn from the minority communities, who fought all kinds of odds and broke the barriers of stereotype. They triumphed over deeply entrenched poverty to set the examples for emulations. The first aim of the series is to capture the journey of different individuals, what were the enabler and triggering points that moved these heroes to embark upon the path travelled by a few people. The second principle guiding our this effort is to tell the stories of these unsung heroes to motivate others, especially those who come from similar backgrounds. One of the common threads running across every profile is the story of grit and determination.

Sustain the stories: Nominate your own unsung hero

There are many such stories of unsung heroes that remain unheard, this is the first attempt of this kind, we urge people to share such stories for another edition of this series. Your little effort can enlighten a large audience of an extraordinary achievers, and encourage a thousand of aspirants to emulate the stories who have cross the hurdles.

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