Meet Shabnam

11th Grade (Age 17)
Rajasthan, India
Scholar since: 2006
Engineering a Better Future

In the Mewat region of India, where Shabnam lives, the female literacy rate is only 6 percent. Most girls in Mewat do not receive a formal education and are expected instead to remain at home—looking after siblings or their own children. Shabnam made history in 2011 when she became the first girl in her village to graduate from 10th grade. She joined school after completing an intensive bridge course set up by Room to Read and our local partner organization, AMIED, and she has been thriving ever since.

INTERVIEWED BY: NOOR MOHAMMED, FOUNDER OF THE ALWAR MEWAT INSTITUTE FOR EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT (AMIED)

Noor Mohammed: How would you describe the village you grew up in?
Shabnam: In Mewat, education is hardly given any importance. Girls are not allowed to study at all. The general mindset of the community is that girls have to look after household affairs and bear children; school is never prioritized. At least, not until you and AMIED started working here—visiting our homes and talking to the elders in the community.

NM: So tell me, how have things changed now?
Shabnam: Well, we definitely have more girls coming to school. Also, no one in the community ever wanted to talk to our didis (social mobilizers). Now they are treated with great respect.

NM: What about your own family? Do they support your education?
Shabnam: My parents work on the farm all day and there are six children in my family—three boys and three girls, so there is a lot of housework to keep me busy in addition to my studies. I have to clean the house, cook, look after my siblings and help my mother feed the buffaloes in the field.

My mother has supported my education the most. Neighbors have told her that letting me go to a co-educational school and interact with boys is against the conventions of Islam, but she always supports me.

During my 10th grade final exams, my father was completely opposed to letting me travel the 20km (12.4 mi) to the exam center. He said I needed to finish my household responsibilities first, and my brothers refused to help out on the farm if he continued to allow me to study. It was very difficult to negotiate with them and explain how life-changing these exams could be for me. The results would determine my admission into engineering college, and I had imagined a new future for myself—one where I would earn money, have a job and be able to take care of myself. It has taken many years to convince my father, but slowly he has started to come around.
NM: Now that you are in the engineering college, what is a typical day like for you? Has anything changed?
Shabnam: The biggest change is that I live alone in a one-bedroom apartment. I wake up, cook food for the day and wash my clothes. Then I study for an hour and leave for my engineering classes, which are about an hour's walk from home.

Classes end at 3:30 p.m., and I usually stop by the market on my way home to buy vegetables. Then I finish household chores and try to study before work. I don't get a chance to see my parents very often because the village is far away.

NM: You are so independent. Are you scared of anything in the future?
Shabnam: There is no fear. A lot of girls didn't get an education before, but now things are changing, and girls have an opportunity to prove themselves. I do think sometimes about what would happen if I were not able to study.

You know, my family sacrifices a lot to pay the rent for my apartment. I just pray that I am able to finish my education. I have this dream of being in an office, sitting in front of a computer!

NM: So what exactly would you say education means to you?

Students:

Education is the tool through which I can become independent—both financially and emotionally. Through education, I can judge right from wrong. It helps me solve problems, express my opinions and stand up to my brothers and father. I can tell them, “look at what I am capable of achieving!”

Shabnam: I will get my bachelor's degree in technology and become an engineer. After school, I will pursue a government job so that I can help build facilities and infrastructure in my village.

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I know a lot of girls look up to me for inspiration now, so I feel I have a responsibility to succeed in life and help them. When I am an engineer, people in the community will be convinced that girls can study and have a right to build a future for themselves.

About the interviewer:

Noor Mohammed, founder of AMIED

My parents were farmers here in Alwar. As a child, I managed to complete my education at the local village school despite many hurdles and went on to achieve both a bachelor’s and a master’s degree. Girls were not allowed to go to school, and in my heart I knew I had to change people’s mindsets and attitudes about that for the betterment of us all.

In 2004, I resigned from government work to start AMIED. My objective was to improve education in the Mewat area, which lies between Delhi and Rajasthan. Room to Read and the Girls’ Education program have helped me do this.

Change is slow, but it is definitely starting to take place. The community is beginning to understand that upholding gender biases and not educating girls will not take them very far. I’m proud of Shabnam and the other girls we have worked with. I remember when her college fees had to be paid. There was such strong opposition from her neighbors and even her own brothers. She was the only girl who would stand up for herself and say, “I want to be an engineer.”