



Young Women

CHANGE THEIR LIVES

LEADERSHIP, GENDER & TECHNOLOGY

Young Women Change their Lives

Leadership, Gender & Technology

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Supported by A.J.W.S.

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Background and Vision

The Muslim Women Leadership Programme

Since the year 2013, Sadbhavna Trust's basic leadership programme has initiated 157 young women and girls from Muslim and other marginalised communities into discovering a new meaning of leadership for themselves, in their families, workplace or community.

The program emerged within certain socio-economic developments in the mid 2000s that gave the program its framework. A primary impulse was to reclaim the meaning of leadership for young women from the neo-liberal paradigm, which looked at leadership as an individual phenomenon. There was a need to set forth an alternative, feminist paradigm, which reasserted the power of the collective, and enabled leadership to emerge from communities, and remain rooted within those communities.

This leadership model enables the trainees to challenge power as it lies in gender relations, and renegotiate their place within their worlds. Given

the rise of the digital as a structure affecting young women's lives, the model ties digital training with perspective building, and technical skill development with the knowledge of navigating a fraught digital domain, which is also full of possibilities. Looking at digital not just as skill building, but as perspective building, enables young women to participate in a changing world in an empowered way, to further their educational, personal or professional pathways.

Continuing Sadbhavna Trust's work in empowering low-income urban communities in Lucknow, the program enables girls and women between the ages of 16 and 30, from the mohallas of Lucknow to engage with structures – physical, social and digital – from a position of strength. The program, over its iterations and evolution, hopes to change the larger discourse of what leadership could mean, through the journeys of our local thought leaders.

Leadership Training

As explained by Hameeda Khatoun, Field Programme Coordinator



Hameeda is presently Field Programme Coordinator of Sadbhavna Trust. She has been instrumental in developing and holding the leadership course over the last 13 years.

at a glance

Perspective Building

- Understanding patriarchy
- Gender and Identity
- Sexuality
- Current Debates around Gender Politics
- Exercises, Games, Role Plays, Group Work

Technical skills

- Basic Computer Skills
- Basic Typing
- Photography
- Video

Community Engagement

- Making Community Level Profile
- Identification of Local Problems
- Entitlements and Schemes
- Practical activities at community – running sessions
- Participation in Campaigns

Pedagogy

- Experiential
- Practical Skills
- Media Literacy
- Creative use of videography and photography





The Leadership Training is divided into three central modules.

- Perspective Building
- Technical Skills
- Community Engagement

Perspective Building or Nazariya Nirman, is the central foundation of the course, which opens up the world through a brand new set of parameters: gender and sexuality. “These are girls and women who have stepped out of their homes for the first time in their lives, and we start by talking to them about how gender frames their lives,” says Hameeda, Field Program Coordinator. “How does gender influence identity formation, how does it tie in with the equality discourse, how does it inform our social conditioning?”

A combination of theory and ‘games’, this part of the course allows young women to investigate notions of power within their families. Who has it? Who keeps it? At what cost? “Which, then, allows us to connect power to patriarchy. When we investigate power at home, and their gender identities within families, we naturally move towards *niyantran* or control. Who controls the resources within the family? What do we consider resources anyway? And then, how does this control turn to violence?” says Hameeda, flagging the central questions that shape the course.

The conversations around violence, or gender-based violence, are further connected to constitutional rights, and the history of achieving these rights. Domestic violence, sexual violence, economic violence, natal family violence, and its

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connections with state violence is explored. “The fact that political is personal, and the ability to recognise violence and view it politically, has to be learned...because we are conditioned to accept and even propagate it,” explains Hameeda.

The gender and sexuality module also delves into histories of feminist movements, for example the battle to revoke Article 377. Opening up of the sexuality discourse is bolstered through the nuts and bolts of legal frameworks, and tied with how these frameworks inform our social vocabulary.

The particular history of the psycho-social location of the women, as young Muslims growing up in contemporary India, is integrated within the perspective building part of the course, to help them locate their own realities through a political, social and historical lens.

Technical Skills

Technology, as tool and text, is deeply integrated into the course. Mindful of the visual culture the women are growing up in, the emphasis on computer skills, typing, videography and photography comes with some larger questions. “How do we integrate technology in our lives such that it opens up some new alternatives, in how we approach our professional lives?” While the ICT (Information Communication Technology] piece opens up the computer, the internet and all allied software in friendly ways, the photography and videography sessions attract the maximum registrations. “In fact, we have a full fledged production studio started by fellows from this course – three Muslim women who started shooting weddings and other Lucknow events. It’s called the Sanatkada Film Studio.”



Since the pedagogy around camerawork necessitates the girls stepping out into the streets with a different kind of claim and control, these 'skill-based' sessions turn into something far deeper. "The piece of technology in their hands becomes a *zariya*, a conduit into talking about their place in the world – and how technology helps mediate a possible new identity, even as it opens up new vulnerabilities," mulls Hameeda, even as the nature of technology and its impact on gender identity mutates at lightning speeds.

The examination of media or media literacy is essential part of the theory. "Especially advertising; how does the market economy shape our identities as women? Could the images you see be shaping the patriarchy you inherit? We open up these questions through various film screenings and discussions, and also examine the visual imagery in magazines and advertising etc. Why is there a woman in that ad with men's shaving cream?" explains Hameeda, as way of questions that get the most insightful laughter.

Community Engagement

To help move the learning out into the field, and test it for its ability to push boundaries, the final module of the course asks the girls and women to go back to the very neighbourhoods they came from. "Because what we taught them was within four walls – but how to take the voices that emerged in the safety of a room – back into sites and the areas where they grew up? That is the true test."

The strategy they use is of campaigns. The girls and women discuss the issue they would

like to take up – whether its roads, sanitation, scholarships – and are encouraged to start with something basic that can help get the larger community together. "So, they go out there and experiment with what they have learnt," says Hameeda. "They are working for and with the community and are also building their own practice. How to speak to the administration, the local authorities? How to unite various stakeholders under a common vision? And do it with a self-confidence that is deeply built on a feminist view of the world...that is the true test, and also the most incredible part of the course for the trainers to see unfold."

Community engagement unfolds over two to three months where the girls and women hold events within communities as part of their campaigns, engage in public speaking, and also invite people from all walks of life to see the kind of impact one year of leadership training can build in someone's life. "These public events help make the model visible, so that increasing number of girls and boys, men and women, state representatives and local leaders can see, that there are so many more ways to grow besides jobs and marriages. The confidence these girls leave with...they can go anywhere. Because they now have the tools to help make meaning out of their lives."

Impact

Basic Profile

PARAMETER	INFORMATION
AGE	Range: 16-30 Years Average: 22.5 Years
EDUCATION	Range: - Vth (Primary) to MA (Post Graduate) Post Grad - 5; Grad - 56; Higher Sec (XIIth) 35; Sec (16); Middle (VIIIth) - 6; N/A - 1 45 Girls (37.5%) restarted education after the training
MARITAL STATUS	Unmarried - 89; Married - 20; Single - 9; Widow - 1; N/A - 1 Age at Marriage: Under 18 - 4; Btw 18-20 - 8; 21 & Above 13 - 13





Work
(Economic Empowerment)

PARAMETER	INFORMATION
WORKING (PAID)	52 (43%)
TYPES OF JOBS	Social Sector - 5 Commercial - 24 (Eg. Call Centre, Shop, Computer Operator, Property Agent) Teaching - 9 Nursing - 1 Stitching - 8 Media - 4 (In The Social Sector)
OBSERVATION	Significant number have sought and got employment though not an objective of the programme & majority in commercial sector

Perspective (examples)

PARAMETER	INFORMATION
MARRIAGE Girls should be able to decide on their marriage partner	Agree - 103 (86%) Disagree - 17
VIOLENCE Should not speak out about domestic violence as it is a personal matter	Disagree - 95 (79%) Agree- 24 NA-1
MASCULINITY Real men don't cry	Disagree - 115 (96%) Agree- 5
GENDER NORMS Girls invite trouble if they wear 'provocative' clothes	Disagree - 94 Agree - 16
TRIPLE TALAQ The Triple Talaq decision is in favour of women	Agree 120

OBSERVATION: Changes in perspective (gender) clearly visible

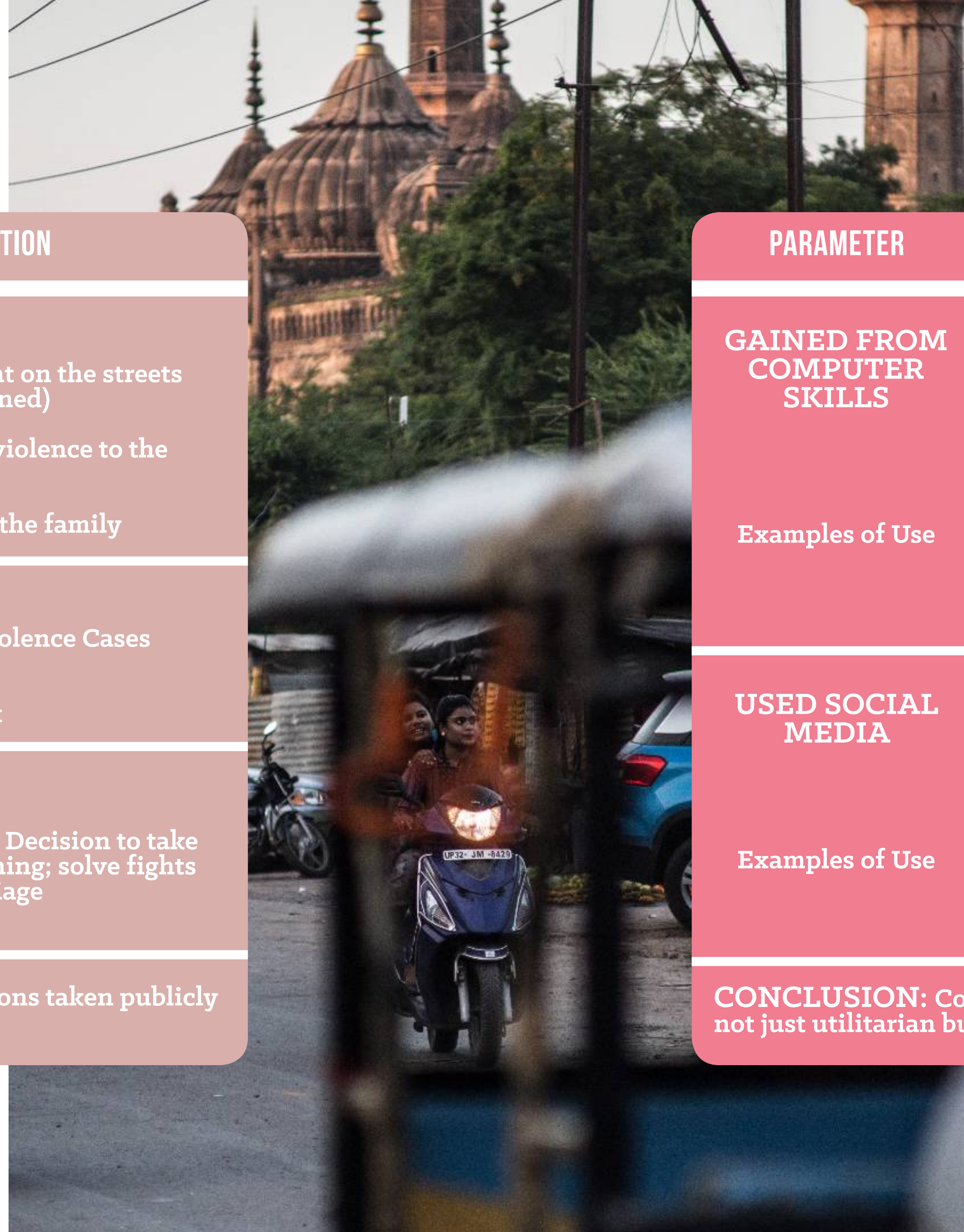


Leadership

PARAMETER	INFORMATION
EXPERIENCED GBV & STEPS TAKEN	<p>Yes - 63 (52.5%)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sexual harassment on the streets (spoken out, explained) - Brought cases of violence to the office - Stopped fights in the family
BEEN TO POLICE STATION	<p>Yes - 26 (21 %)</p> <p>Types Of Issues: Violence Cases (Family & Job)</p> <p>Sexual Harassment</p>
WITHIN FAMILY - GIVEN OPINION & THAT HAS BEEN ACCEPTED (EXAMPLE)	<p>Yes - 101 (84%)</p> <p>Further Education; Decision to take job; to join the training; solve fights in the family; marriage</p>
CONCLUSION: Strong indication that actions taken publicly & within family	

Technology & Social Media

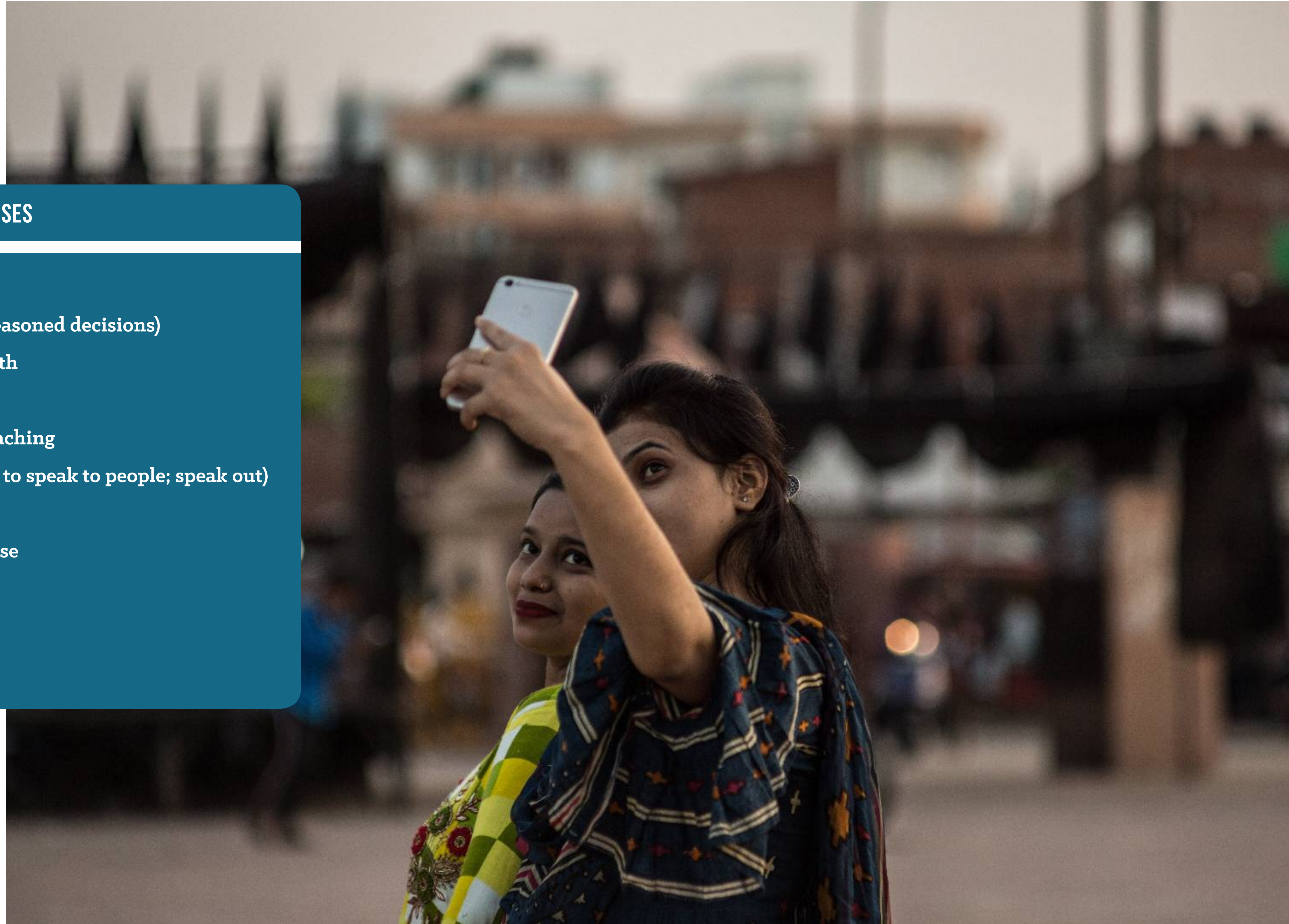
PARAMETER	INFORMATION
GAINED FROM COMPUTER SKILLS	<p>Yes - 115 No - 5</p>
Examples of Use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Various Online Forms - Access Information (Google Search) - To Get A Job And Use At Work - Taught Others - Social Media, Internet, Email)
USED SOCIAL MEDIA	<p>Yes - 106</p>
Examples of Use	<p>Facebook & Whatsapp – Chats, Make Friends To Express Self Youtube, Instagram; Download Videos (For Entertainment)</p>
CONCLUSION: Considerable enthusiasm; being used; not just utilitarian but for personal use	



Areas of Change

FROM THE QUALITATIVE RESPONSES

- Internal change
- Decision making ability (reasoned decisions)
- Self confidence and strength
- Self identity
- Interest in learning and teaching
- Loss of fear (Mobility; able to speak to people; speak out)
- Increase in Information
- Able to question and analyse
- World beyond home
- Perspective change
- Able to restart education



A woman wearing a black headscarf and a light blue dress with black floral patterns stands in profile, looking down. She is in a dimly lit room with a white wall. To her left, there is a window with a decorative lattice of oval cutouts, through which bright light is streaming. Several black wires are visible on the wall above her. The overall mood is somber and contemplative.

“I should also have an identity.”

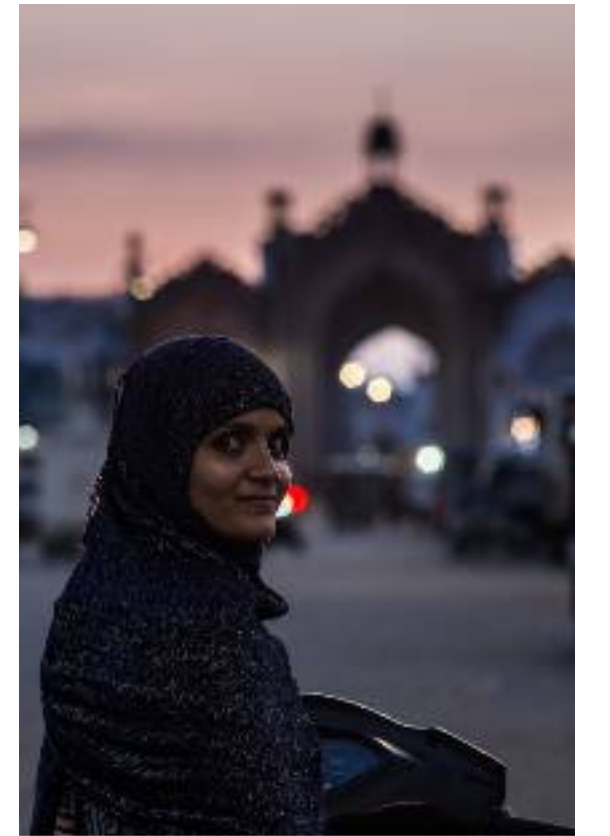
BUSHRA SHEIKH



“You know what the best part is about working? I mean having a job?” asks Bushra, rhetorically. “You don’t waste your time thinking about *faltu* (useless) things.”

As a video editor, social media manager and all-round “technical person”, one could argue that Bushra is underselling herself a bit. “Okay, seriously? I love being self-dependent. I don’t have to ask anyone for anything. I spend, when I have to. I have savings. I contribute to my household ...and people ask me for advice. Who would have thought?”

Bushra, all of 23 and three jobs down, has a quasi sense of relief at the part of her she’s left behind, albeit tinged with nostalgia. “My own *soch* (thinking) was why go out and roam about. All I cared for was *khelna-koodna* (sports). Ammi would force me even to go to school, and I really couldn’t care less; I only cared for *kancha* (marbles), Ludo, *rassi koodna* (skipping), though I liked playing *kancha* the best. But I had the same routine; forcefully go to school, learn nothing, then forcefully go to the madrasa,



then forcefully go for coaching. I used to wait for Sundays, so I could play kabaddi and kho kho.”

One of five siblings, and daughter of Yasmeen and Abdul Sattar, Bushra bristles at the idea of school. “See, I wasn’t very good at studies, and it’s not that I didn’t realise the importance of studies. I knew it was necessary. Everyone said a degree is necessary. But why study? No one could explain that to me. What *farak* (change) will that bring in me?”

Subconsciously seeking a connection between knowledge and identity, Bushra found herself convinced by an *apa* (older sister) who came to her house, with the promise of free computer training. “So, I learned the computer, yes, but I also learned gender perspective, videography, photography.”



Dheere dheere (slowly, slowly) I thought I should also do something. I should also have a *pehchaan* (identity). Until then, I would only understand *pehchan as falana ki beti, biwi, ma* (so and so's daughter, wife, mother) But who am I? I think that was the biggest thing for me during the gender training – to be able to think about who 'I' am. Here, for the first time in my life, I started thinking.”

Bushra went on and did the Advance Leadership Course, and realized that her love was “*har kuch technical mein*” (in every thing technical). So, she found herself as an intern at the Sadbhavna Video Unit, where she shot, edited and helped script small non-fiction works. “I also came to Delhi for a gender training. I started thinking about *khud ki pehchan* (my own identity).” Looking back, she thinks she paid special attention to the lucky coincidence of enjoying and being good at, “all things technical”. “I thought I am doing this well and there are very

few girls who do this work. So, I felt, if I do this well, I will have an *alag pehchan* (distinct identity).”

It was, in fact, during her videography training, that she discovered leadership, or as she likes to put it the fact that “I can manage.” It was to do with having limited computers to edit on, and managing a number of girls with multiple kinds of footage, and “time boundations”. Bushra stepped up, “quite automatically”, and took charge. “I made sure that each group had enough time to shoot, enough time to edit, and it turns out that nobody had any complaints, and the groups were satisfied with the process. During that experience, I did feel I know how to manage time and people, and I could help people organize themselves, take everyone along, while keeping the end result in mind. We worked hard, and had a lot of *masti* (fun). I knew then, that I could do this – lead people in some way.”

Bushra was the girl who volunteered to stand in the middle of the room for, what turned out to be, her most memorable ‘lesson’. “I stood there and each girl, about 35 of them, had to come and tie a cloth around a part of my body to denote a ‘should’ in a girl’s life. For example, ‘a girl should not go out at night’ – would be one cloth tied around me, ‘Should speak less’, ‘Should keep emotions to herself’ etc. would each be a strip of cloth. Before I knew it, I was tied up like one of those Egyptian mummies...” she says, still in thrall of the moment, when she first saw herself in the context of her gender. “That tied up body was an *achchi aurat* (Good Woman). That image changed everything for me. From then I started thinking – that can things that happen at night, can’t they happen in the day? Does sexual violence not happen at home? Then why this constant pressure on women to stay at home?”

After working with the Sanatkada Film Studio (an independent film and videography unit

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that Sadbhavna Trust facilitated) for a over a year, Bushra felt a need to push herself, “going beyond her own *seemaon* (limits), do something more, understand the real world. I had to learn for myself na, how people tease you, how people judge you, how they behave with you.” So, after interviewing with various media channels, she got a job at a local news channel as a social media manager. “Social media wasn’t even on my CV but they asked if I could handle it, and I said yes,” she says, with her characteristic gumption. “I ran their Facebook, Twitter and wrote for their blog. Then I assisted on news edits. I learnt about content. I learnt how to work in shifts, and realized that people who handle social media need to work at night because people are active on social media at night. I did this for eleven months and I wanted to move into editing. But I had to learn new software to be able to do it. The sir there said, stay back after 8 pm, after my shift, to learn. But I couldn’t. I commuted 14 km one way, daily, and I couldn’t stay back even later at night.”



After eleven months, Bushra started looking around for a new job, mostly because of the *mahaul* (environment) of the channel. “There people focused on *dharam* (religion). You can’t eat meat, which is my favourite... If you are a non-Muslim [woman] then you can’t wear short sleeved clothes, and without sleeves *bilkul hee nahin* (absolutely not). And as a Muslim, I wasn’t allowed to wear a hijab. Once during winter I had wrapped a stole around me, I guess it looked like a hijab; the HR person told me, ‘What is this *kattarpanti* (fundamentalism)?’ So, later I went up to her and said, this company should put up a board with two columns – what Muslims are allowed to wear and eat and what non-Muslims are allowed to wear and eat...”

Today, Bushra heads Sadbhavna Trust’s social media team and dreams of running her own Youtube Channel. “I want to think creatively, and bring people together through the channel. And also earn from it,” she says, slightly incredulous at how far she’s come. “If you talk to my mother, she will say I was a “*rondhu*” (crybaby). I would cry at the drop of a hat. And today, I am self-dependant. At home I understand what’s happening – whether it’s *sahi* or *galat* (right or wrong). I give advice. I’m asked to lead decision making because my family can see that I have gained real world experience. I think that is the biggest change in me, in my life – that I can help shape my family’s future

2019

Bushra has led Sadbhavna Trust’s social media and communication response to the COVID crisis.



“It’s like someone gave me a pair of glasses and I started looking at the world differently.”

ANAM BARI



The last time Anam remembered being free was roughly at age 11. “What can I say, my childhood was perfect. I was a single child and I was loved.”

But then, she turned 12. “Things started changing when I got my period. An eye was kept on me. Where I go, whom I talk to...then I was admitted to an all girls college right next to my house. During summer vacations, I was asked to do *silai-kadhai* (stitching and embroidery),” she says, with a hearty laugh. “They said, *yahi kaam aayega, baaki sab toh...* (only this work will be useful, the rest...). So, by the time I was 23, I had resigned myself to a life I felt no connection with. I told myself, my mother lived this life, she lived it, didn’t she? Then, well, I will have to, too.” She races through her words, in semi disbelief at a life she almost lived. “If I hadn’t come to the Sadbhavna Leadership course, my mind could never have even imagined any other possibility.”



At 23, Anam heard that there is a place that gives free computer training. “Everyone does ‘graduation’ [BA], after that? ‘Life’ where is it going? What should one do? Who will I learn from? Who will guide me?” she asks emphatically, on behalf of millions of young women growing up in small town India. “I was always fascinated by the idea of working, like having a job. I never like doing *gharelu kaam* (housework) much, but I thought I’d have to do what every woman does. Toil all day at home and when asked what work do you do, answer *kuchch nahin* (nothing). I didn’t say or hear that.”

The computer was learned, but alongside, over a year-and-a-half, Anam found herself moved,

at multiple points. “You know that feeling? That your eyes have opened. It was that ‘feeling’, *kaise bataoon* (how can I explain it)”. Anam, like Bushra, remembers the training activity where she saw a trainee being bound up by society’s rules. “That’s when I started seeing things, I think for the first time.” She sticks up her index finger and rotates it, “We are bound so tight, and we are fooled into thinking it’s our *marzi* (our choice). But we are living according to someone else, not according to ourselves.”

This was six years ago. Having mastered Word, Excel, Power Point, Anam went on to work in non-governmental organisations, in Lucknow, and in far away Delhi, in roles that increasingly became more about who she was, than what she could do. “I went there [to attend the course]

When I see any preference given to a male employee, I speak up, to their face. I ask them, is there anything missing in the quality of my work, or in my person? Are the men doing anything special?

thinking that I will learn computers for free and then I also got so much else... I think it’s about *nazariya* (perspective). It’s like someone gave me a pair of glasses and I started looking at the world differently. Whether it was through the gender trainings, the sessions of sexuality, technology, videography, patriarchy...I felt I was accessing a new part of me. Suddenly, I had an imagination for a life different from my mother’s. I started feeling that I can take my life to any platform, I can stand up. I can become somewhat ‘self-depend’ (independent).

Anam moved from NGO to corporate, and now finds herself in a rather unusual profession for a young woman from a mohalla in Lucknow. “Real estate. I’m a team leader and I manage 1200 people - from the ages of 20 to 63 – under me. I’m the first female in the company to get this post, and all my peers are male. It’s a huge challenge for me. Girls don’t enter this field easily because of the travel, late timings, how much you have to talk to people, you have to make deals, make property visits and inspections, you need a lot of patience. Also, there’s no fixed salary, so many girls don’t want to jeopardise their family situations for a financial risk.” She negotiated all of these, chipping away at structures thrown at her. “Initially, people would look at me with disbelief, especially clients – what is she going to explain to us?! But, after I start speaking they understand that I know my work. They see me as mature and sensible.”

For Anam, *nazariya* (perspective) is a favourite word. It has helped her make sense of her space in the world, in the negotiations she makes, and what she thinks she can ask for. “My work is in a male oriented company. So, for the same work

that I do, a man is rewarded more, paid more. I see it again and again and again,” she repeats surprising calm. “When I see any preference given to a male employee, I speak up, to their face. I ask them, is there anything missing in the quality of my work, or in my person? Are the men doing anything special? And they listen. Some things have changed; I’m included in meetings and bigger decisions. Each time I have felt things need to be said, I have said them. This, for me, is a huge change. I have grown up believing that men are supposed to be ahead of women in all spheres.”

Another word she discovered and made her own is the one she always associated with others. “Leader *shabd* (word)...what does a leader mean? Someone who can get people together and give them a *nazariya*. After the *Sadbhavna* course, my perspective changed, and now I try and initiate the younger girls in my family to think for themselves. To let them know that there are other ways to live, there are many possibilities. ... a leader must take all the *cheezein* (things) she has learnt, *samet* (filter and consolidate) these and take others ahead.”

Anam is the sole breadwinner of her family, and lives with her mother, who seems to be on a new journey herself. “Whatever used to happen in the training, I would come and share with my mother, and somewhere she realised that that’s the kind of life she had led.” Anam causes quite a stir in the neighbourhood, but her mother has her back, a hundred per cent. “She wanted me to do what she couldn’t do.”

To map a person’s life, how she changes, is rarely a steady graph. But for Anam, she found some



plot points to pin her story on. “I think of myself as being very different from girls my age. I come from a family that does purdah but I don’t. There are many rules that I don’t follow. I wear western clothes. I live according to my rules, my wishes. I’m self-dependent. I changed the financial condition of my family. And because I am self-dependant, I don’t need to listen to censoring voices. That helps.”


Anam has held off on her decision to get married, despite mounting pressures. “I have put my marriage on hold because until now, the other part doesn’t agree that I can work after marriage. But I will work. I will talk to others, I will go out, I will have fun. I don’t want *roktok* (barriers), I don’t want that ‘boundation’. Managing this is a challenge but I will continue fighting. I am apprehensive about a ‘brake’ in my life ahead. What if my life comes under the ‘control’ of others?”

She counts that as her only fear, and for the rest, imagines her life five years from now with a “I want to do a world tour, be financially strong enough to do it, not compromise with the freedoms I have earned, and encourage more girls to come out of their homes. What I have learnt, the changes in my life and soch, which is the ‘feminist *tareeke se sochna*, (feminist way of thinking) right? I want to share that with others, maybe set up my own organisation where I share this knowledge with young girls so that they can do something for themselves.”

2019

Anam now holds a top management position in her company.



A young woman with dark hair, wearing a dark blue headscarf and a light blue top with red trim, is shown in profile, looking towards the right. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with a brick wall and a white structure. Overlaid on the right side of the image is a quote in white text and the name 'MASSARAT' in red, italicized text.

“It was the act of stepping out
with a camera.”

MASSARAT



“We presented ourselves to the world in a way, that we girls can also do all this work. We can handle technology. It’s not just men, or famous people, or rich people. Even girls like us can do this, occupy space like this.”

Massarat starts to cry the minute she mentions her mother. “You think this is bad? You should have seen how much I used to cry when my mother would drag me to this course,” she says, an uncontrollable giggle puncturing her tears. “At 19, I was youngest in my batch, *aur sabse zyada darpok mein hee thi*. The most fearful.”

Massarat wears a ubiquitous sartorial mix of tights with a dress, in the exact shade of her headscarf; she says it looks “formal and proper”, suited to her job as a Data Entry Operator at the local hospital. “Sometimes, I can’t believe it either. To think that my mother had to sit with me through the first month of the leadership course because I was petrified, I wouldn’t let go of her. But she would say, that unless you step out of the house, learn, meet people, present yourself to other people, only then something will change. If she hadn’t motivated me, I wouldn’t be here.”



Daughter of a transport operator and homemaker, sister of two brothers who also work as drivers, Massarat was never supposed to work. “That’s been the biggest thing for me, I think. That I have a job. Because is my family, girls are not allowed to have jobs. But after the Sadbhavna course I had decided that I have to do something. I can’t come this far and then go back. So, even though my brothers said you don’t need to work, and my sister-in-law said, ‘Why work? Don’t you get everything at home?’, I said, I need to stand on my own two feet, *kisi ki manzoori ho ya na ho* (whether someone agrees or not).”

Massarat laughs easily, especially when she says something positive about herself. Pointing that out, she laughs harder. “See! It’s because you didn’t see me five years ago. I was a person who would cry constantly because I didn’t want anyone to even look at me. Today, I support myself.”



When she looks back at the course, it's the questions that have stayed with her the most, even more than the answers. "What is gender? Why do people behave the way they do with transgendered people? What are the various forms of violence? The fact that so much is dependent on people's mentality...how is people's thinking shaped? And most importantly, how do we change this thinking? That was really brought into focus. What I liked the most was that there was an emphasis on changing and improving ourselves first – only then we will be able to

influence change elsewhere. *Kyon ki samaaj kis se milkar banta hai* (who makes up society?) It is all of us, together. Unless we change ourselves, how will we bring change into the world? This thought really affected me.

Masarrat hasn't picked up the camera to take a photograph ever since she left the course. But counts Photography and Videography as her favourite sessions. "To take a camera in your hand, and to look at the world with your perspective, it's a very powerful feeling. Although, for me, it wasn't the actual act of

taking a photograph; it was the act of stepping out with the camera. When we went out to shoot, the way people were looking at us...as if they had never seen anyone taking photographs. But basically, they had never seen girls with cameras," she says, in a measured manner. To make sure the apocryphal moment, when these girls stepped out into their mohallas with a camera, was sinking in, she continues, "How do I explain that moment? We presented ourselves to the world in a way, that we girls can also do all this work. We can handle technology. It's not just men, or famous people, or rich people. Even girls

To take a camera in your hand, and to look at the world with your perspective, it's a very powerful feeling.

like us can do this, occupy space like this. Which means, that if people like us get an opportunity, we can do a lot."

Masarrat is preparing for multiple exams, for government positions. "You know, I like people in high positions, in senior posts because I feel I need to reach a position where I can help others, too. Maybe, I won't become an IAS officer, but I want to do something similar. *Achchi post ho, achcha ghar ho - isse hum apni ammi ke liye sab kuch acha kar ke rakhe* (A good post, a good house – with these I could take care of all my mother's needs)."


You know, I like people in high positions, in senior posts because I feel I need to reach a position where I can help others, too

What has surprised her is her favourite part of her job, 'handling people'. "See, my job could be exciting on days and terribly boring on the other days. But, the fact that I meet so many kinds of people, and have to work with so many kinds of people has really helped me. I've learned how to handle people. And when people praise my work, it feels really good."

Leadership, for Masarrat, is a hard-learned instinct. "Presentation of your ideas and to be able to stand up for others. That's what a leader is for me. Maybe able to make decisions on other people's behalf. But you know, even raising a voice for your own self is leadership right? So, in that way, I think I am a leader. I have learned to speak for myself."

This interview was conducted in 2019.



A woman in a pink dress with a white shawl is looking out of a window. In the background, another woman in a green patterned outfit is sitting on a balcony, working at a sewing machine. The scene is set in a simple, possibly outdoor or semi-outdoor, environment with a concrete wall and a satellite dish visible in the distance.

“I know I’m a leader because
I’ve done it the hard way.”

MANTASHA



I'll tell you the one thing that's changed about me. Now, if I have dressed up to go somewhere – whatever I have worn – jeans etc, no one can make me change my clothes, or stop me from going out in them.

“Neither my husband, nor my mother, nor my mother-in-law. If I have dressed up, I will go out. Even if it is just to sit on the scooty and take a round of the mohalla. If I have dressed up, I'm going out.”

Mantasha, all of 25, mother of six-year-old Ashifa, married at 19 (“I married SO early, straight after Inter. But I loved him, *voh meri pasand ka tha.*”), says her story is a bit of a case of a future foretold. “It's my name, you see. Mantasha means *apni mann ka karna* (to do what you wish). So, the way life turned out... I do whatever my heart says.”

Mantasha, diminutive enough to surprise you with her feisty outtakes, or what others may call biographical notes, carries a definite sense of history. “See, I had a lot of dreams pre-marriage. I wanted to be a designer, a fashion designer. My mother used to do tailoring and my father was



a designer, too. He was with an export house in Delhi and now he's in Gomti Nagar,” she says with barely disguised pride. “He does wedding clothes.” Like Sabyasachi, we giggle. “No, he's huge, see that's what...to be a real designer I knew I needed guidance, a degree, money for that degree. Fashion designing is a challenging career, and for girls like us it's even more challenging because girls are not supposed to leave town, or work late, or study in a different city. And honestly, learning fashion designing in Lucknow would have been a waste of time. *Yaha par wahi tumhara sikha denge, cheap sa, silaiwalai* (They would have just taught you cheap tailoring hacks here). I didn't want to do that. Mujhe top designer banna tha (I wanted to be the top designer).”

Mantasha talks fast, words compete for attention, a trait that belies some serious behind-the-scenes reflection. “I told you I had a love



marriage right? I was still studying. Everyone was against him, but I was convinced about him. So, I married him. But, I dropped out – there was so much to do at home; endless cooking of food. But my husband is fond of studying, and he was keen I study, too. So, I went back to college, and when I was in last year of B.Com, I heard of Sadbhavna.” After clearing a competitive selection (“I was chosen from 15 girls!”), now a permanent member of Sadbhavna team, Mantasha leans back in her chair and asks, “You want to hear what my day is like? I take eight classes a month on everything from gender to computer training, I shoot videos, I take photographs, devise activities to make engagements richer and honestly...I manage a month’s work in ten days, I swear!”

With a similar sleight of hand, she picked up photography. “That first time we went out to take photographs...bas, I knew it I was good at

this. Just standing in the marketplace with a camera made me feel like a leader!” But when probed on the ideas around leadership, especially as she started getting trained for it, she cuts to the chase. “When new girls join, I am the one who talks to them, I am the one who sees them through that hesitation – new place, new people, how to negotiate with your parents, orientating them to the organization, building a sense of camaraderie and ownership within the batches – all this is difficult. But I do it quite easily, and I love doing it. And at the end of the day *mujhe apne upar proud feel hota hai* (I feel proud of myself).”

Mantasha, she who always does what her heart desires, cooks breakfast, lunch, feeds her child, packs tiffin for her husband, and makes sure her in-laws are fed and taken care of before she leaves her house in the morning. “I know I’m a leader,” she says, “because I’ve done it the hard

way.” Taking a moment to calculate her place in the world, she continues, “Honestly, *mein apne sasural mein bhi leader hoon* (I’m a leader even at my married home), because what I say is what happens, and what I say is usually right.”

Mantasha disarms you repeatedly, with a take-no-hostages confidence. “I wasn’t always like this. I wanted to be like this, but I always failed in the matter of decision-making. What is right? What is wrong? I would remain confused. But this leadership course somehow cleared that up for me. I know in my gut what’s right. Ek dam clear.” As clear as her reading of how power works. “Now, any decision that needs to be taken at home, my advice is seen as most valuable. I got my daughter’s admission done. I got her Aadhaar card and also got my husband’s Aadhaar card done. I handle all documents related government work for the whole family. *Toh ab yeh lagta hai ki haan, ab to thoda sa leader jaisa aa gaya hai* (Now,

Now, any decision that needs to be taken at home, my advice is seen as most valuable. I got my daughter’s admission done. I got her Aadhaar card and also got my husband’s Aadhaar card done.

I have started feeling a little bit like a leader). There’s a passion, and a style to my decision making that has developed.”

Mantasha, she who has such a way with words that “can convince anybody to do anything”, rather prophetically, had zeroed in on gender and language, as her favourite session in the leadership course. “I learnt words for things!” she exclaims. “I mean people get married and don’t even know what their genitalia are called! Language is so important, no?...When you can’t even name your body parts, how do you begin talking about things that are important, or the feelings that you may have?”

It might be appropriate to note here that schools in Uttar Pradesh have no sex education curriculum.

Now that she's older ("*poori badi ho gayi*"), Mantasha looks at her ability to negotiate as a key skill she's developed post leadership training. "I used to fight and cry. Now I put my point clearly, make a proper case for my point of view. It has surprising results." Like that when she wore jeans. "My mother called up my husband and complained, see, she's gone out in jeans. So, he called me. *Toh humne kaha koi pareshani?* (I said, any problem?) You are the one who bought me jeans, you didn't say it was to keep it locked inside the cupboard? I didn't have to fight or argue after that."

Mantasha nods quietly, the first time since she started talking, when asked if she considers herself a feminist. "Feminism is what made me believe that what I was doing was right. That its right to ask for what is yours, and that's what I tell women when they come to the organisation. That okay, your husband beats you up, what do you think you will do to make him stop? Do what's right for you. He will never stop." She gets up quickly, helmet in hand, time to go tend to her daughter. Do you continue to do all the work at home, one asks. "*Haan, abhi bhi karte hai. Iss wajha se main apne liye jee paati hoon...*" (Yes, I do. That's why I can also live for myself). What's that they say? To win some you have to lose some?"

This interview was conducted in 2019.



Where We Are Today

SBT's Leadership Development Programs *at a glance*

Buland Iradey, Naye Kaushal, Nayi Raahein and **Bekhauf Nazrein** are our flagship programmes. The purpose of these programmes is three-fold: to build perspective on women's rights and gender equality, to impart and consolidate digital skills, and to provide experience in community action. The programmes also use technology to build leadership among marginalized young girls and women – those who combat patriarchal barriers every day. We put to work technology, the great enabler of our age, to both help these girls access information and acquire the skills that help reduce the digital gender divide and make silenced voices heard.

Our mission is also to build community level leaders. The learning from the programmes builds confidence in these young women, enabling them to first challenge gender norms at home. Subsequent access to employment opportunities and the intellectual and emotional means to push back against gender-based violence or discrimination transforms their lives. And change in individual women's lives leads to change within the community.

We launched **Buland Iradey** (which translates to 'Firm Resolve'), our first leadership building programme in 2013 with girls and young women in Uttar Pradesh. Between 2013 and 2017, a total of 127 girls completed the year-long course.

The course is an immersive experiential learning experience, which uses a range of pedagogic tools such as games, role play, group discussions, hands-on assignments such as taking photographs and making short videos, running training sessions and conducting surveys. Gender perspective-building is woven into the technical training sessions.

Our pedagogy aims to build the confidence of young women who may have internalized inhibiting stereotypes (such as the statement "girls are not technologically capable"). Our community level action revolves around providing participants the opportunity to experience field work, and hence opening up the option to join the social sector.

Our alumni have gone on to successfully pursue their own careers and make their own personal choices. Many now work in a range of professions. Others have fought to continue their education, taken steps to combat violence in their homes or voiced their opinions in the typically familial preserve of deciding marriage partners.

We initially invited external resource persons but now have an internal training team drawn from our alumni pool. In fact, most of the Sadbhavna team is drawn from this pool.

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Naye Kaushal, Nayi Raahein: Technical Skill Development Programme

An employability readiness course.

This technical skill development course – ‘New Skills, New Paths’ – builds on the basic leadership course. This year-long course, started in 2018, is conducted with young women who want to enter the world of work outside the home. It was designed specifically to address the aspirations of young women who repeatedly expressed their desire to become financially independent. Between 2018 and 2020, a total of 50 girls have completed this course.

The programme offers job and technical skill development along with feminist perspective-building. Sessions include career counseling, developing communication and interview skills, digital and social media management (photography and basic graphic design), résumé writing, spoken English, basic computer learning and gender justice. Participants are given job market exposure and practical training through internships. Once the young women enter male-dominated spaces in their areas of employment – as call center or computer operators, at administrative jobs, as nursing aides or shop assistants, as teachers and tutors – they are able to navigate them fearlessly and create their own professional identities. Women interested in entrepreneurship, such as setting up small online businesses, can likewise apply these skills in those ventures. All graduates continue to be mentored even after completing the course.

Bekhauf Nazrein: Advanced Leadership Building Programme

An advanced community leadership course.

The advanced leadership course, Bekhauf Nazrein (‘The Fearless Gaze’) is conducted with young adult women who have emerged as leaders and become mentors for girls and women in the community. The goal of the programme is to further nuance their understanding of feminist practice and give them opportunities to act as influencers. Three batches, with a total of 53 girls, have completed this programme since it was started in 2016.

Apart from advancing the work of previous courses – gender perspective-building and technical skill-development – an important aspect here is field work. This is where the women put their knowledge to work by training young girls at our Kishori Mohalla Manch centers, helping them make connections between their individual lives and larger issues, including the broader women’s movement. The aim is to empower the girls and women – all from marginalized communities – so that their voices are heard in mainstream debates and policy deliberations.

Lucknow Leaders

‘Lucknow Leaders’ was a recent initiative to make the voices and opinions of young women from marginalised communities heard in the digital space. Helmed by graduates of our leadership courses, it was started during the Covid-19 lockdown in 2020 as an online series held on social media platforms such as Facebook, Youtube, WhatsApp and Instagram.

The stories of these women’s experience of living through the pandemic, invariably absent from mainstream media, were finally aired through this initiative.

As each wave of the pandemic caused these young women to become more isolated - kept out of school and colleges and restricted to their homes - Lucknow Leaders became increasingly popular. A second series was launched during the pandemic’s devastating second wave in the summer of 2021.

Young Women Leaders’ Initiatives in the Field

In the first and second waves of the pandemic, relief work also took place where we distributed ration kits and hygiene kits to the communities. The entire initiative was taken by 25 young women leaders for the advanced leadership course and other volunteers. They identified the people who had lost an earning member in the family, families that suffered from Covid but did not have the resources to get proper treatment and the people who lost livelihoods and dropped out of education. Dry ration kits, hygiene kits, health kits were distributed to girls and women in the community. Cash transfers were made to families so that they can restart girls’ education and re-establish women’s livelihoods. Covid-19 Vaccination campaign, 16 Days of Activism campaign and International Women’s Day campaign on issues such as deteriorating standard of women’s health, social security, safety, education, and livelihoods were addressed by these young women leaders along with the organisation’s team, neighbourhood forum girls and women and leadership course participants.

Dangal

Power of the Alumni

True to the times we live in, the girls and young women who have graduated from SBT's Leadership Courses have built a robust alumni network on, where else, Whatsapp. A support group, a pleasure group, a mobilising force and an information sharing network the group started five years ago. The girls chose the name themselves since they felt it represented their new found status as decision makers and leaders in their own families.

This, then, is a glimpse into their tremendous banter.



Chat 1:

- Rubeena Khadra: Asslawalekum 22:40
- Koi Bata sakta hai k Adhaar or pan card me kitni bar amendment karwa sakte hai 22:41
- Nagma Shop: Walekumassalam 23:20
- It depends tum kya change karwa rahi ho 23:21
- Naam lifetime me sirf do baar badla jaa sakta hai wo bhi minor changes Ya shaadi ke baad sirname add karne jaisa 23:21
- Date of birth/ gender lifetime me ek baar 23:22
- There is no such limit of changing address on a aadhar 23:22
- Hope this article is helpful 23:22
- Please like share and subscribe 23:23
- Rubeena Khadra
- Nagma Shop

Chat 2:

- Adaab!
- Aap sabhi ki jaankari ke liye batana chate hai ki aaj (Sanatkada Film Studio) Aisha Appi ke Papa ka Intiqaal hogya hai. aap sabhi se guzarish hai unke Magfirat ke liye dua kijiye 12:39
- Shukriya Bushra 12:58
- Sumbul New 21: Inna lillahi wainna ilaihi rajioon 13:00
- Samreen Haq N: Inna lillahi wainna ilaihi rajioon 13:01
- Nisar Try: Inna lillahi wainna ilahi rajioon allha unke ghar wall ko sabr de 13:04
- Sumbul New 21: Inna lillahi wainna ilahi rajioon allha unke ghar wall ko sabr de 13:04
- Nisar Try: Inna lillahi wainna ilahi rajioon allha unke ghar wall ko sabr de 13:04
- Ameen

Chat 3:

- Rubeena Khadra: Asslawalekum 14:18
- Agar adhar card khoh jae to dobara banwane ka Kya process hai 14:18
- Or FIR karwana padti hai 14:19
- Shifa Ansari: Online site pe Jake nikal lo 14:19
- Rubeena Khadra: New nikalta hai 14:19
- Shifa Ansari: <https://uidai.gov.in/> 14:19
- Rubeena Khadra: Ya same adhar number 14:19
- Shifa Ansari: Same 14:19
- Adhar 14:19
- Nikal aayega 14:19
- Rubeena Khadra
- Shifa Ansari: Same

Chat 4:

- Shabnam 2: Agar ense school me context karna ho to kis no per kare 10:49
- Contect kis no pe kare 10:50
- Samreen Husainabad: G ap name or number De dijiye 10:54
- Kon kon karna chahta hai 10:54
- English pr acchi pakd honi chahiye or ane jane me koi dikkt na ho 10:54
- Shabnam 2: Ok 10:55
- Name: shuhaila Ershad Contact no 8933960106 11:06
- Ye job me interested hai 11:07
- Samreen Husainabad: Jo bhi sathi teaching job ke liye ready ho chahe apme koi sathi ya sathiyon ke koi bhi relative krna chahti ho to apna phone number name or qualifications likh kr share kr den 11:13
- Rubeena Khadra

Chat 5:

- Parul Hasan: Assalamualaikum appi aap kaisi h 14:41
- Rubeena Khadra: आदाब सभी साथियों को, कैसे है आप लोग? आपके घर सब खेरियत है? मौका मिले तो जवाब लिखिएगा। 16:45
- Asslawalekum . alhamdulillah sb theek hai .aap kaisi hai .or Ghar me sb log kaise hai 16:45
- Sathiyo aap logo ka chahekta huwa chehra apki likhawat par nazar aa raha hai. Acha laga ap logon se baat karke. 17:20
- Aap logon me se kisi ko English class karni hai? Agar jisko bhi karna hoga wo yaha par bata sakta hai. 17:21
- Arshi Ansari: आदाब सभी साथियों को, कैसे है आप लोग? आपके घर सब खेरियत है? मौका मिले तो जवाब लिखिएगा। 17:22
- Assalamualaikum Appi jee hum or humari family bilkul theek hai. Aap bataye. 17:22

Chat 6:

- Sumbul New 21: Hello sathiyon, kya aaplogo ne apne samuday mein ya aaspaas ya apne rishtedaron ke yahan k... 18:46
- Hello Samreen,
- Hamare yahan to koi jhoola nahi kyyki hamare area me sirf road aur charo taraf pakke makan hai. Jab chhote the to ghar me hi chacha se zid kar ke jhoola dalwa lete the ab hamare sath sath ye zid bhi samajhdar ho gai hai! Haan lekin piche ke mohalle me shayad hoga aisa jhoola kyuki wahan ek bada maidan hai beech me jisme bade bade neem aur peepal ke ped hain. 18:46
- Samreen Husainabad: Thank u sumbul agr vha pr jhoola hai to please pta krke bta dijiye 18:52
- Sumbul New 21: Acha dekhte hai ham 18:53
- Sumbul New 21: Thank u sumbul agr vha pr jhoola hai to please pta krke bta diive

Chat 7:

- Samreen Husainabad: Adaab sathiyon, Kya apme se koi bhi front office ka job krna chahta hai 16:50
- Agr han to please apna name de de. Ap sab kusha di ko jante hi hongee unke hi office me job hai. 16:52
- Teaching Job Opportunity
- Role and Responsibilities- Teacher Admission related work, dealing guardians and parents, Teach students.
- Requirment- Knowledge about English Speaking Skills reading skills and writing skills, also knowledge Hindi And math. Salary- upto 8000 If 5-6 girls are interested then they have give a pick and drop facility from school. If any girl want to stay in campass this facility is also available.
- Location- Hera public school Hardoi road malihabad 19:26



SADBHAVNA TRUST

Sadbhavna Trust is a community-based development organisation that promotes grassroots interventions, social justice, and the empowerment of women and girls.

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