

A School and a Dream

Zubaida Jalal

I had barely completed my eighth grade when I first became a school teacher. My father had set up a school in our village in Turbat. A primary school for girls. This was the first girls school in the entire Turbat District, the first community-support school run on a self-help basis. This was in 1982. Turbat then was very different from what it is today. No one had heard of a girls' school. The Imam of the local mosque announced that we were opening the doors to *Jahannam* by opening the doors of education to these little girls. We trudged right ahead. My sister and I were the first and only teachers at the school for ten years. It was next to impossible to find educated women who could teach in our village.

The Turbat of today is different. The school now has 25 teachers. Teachers from Karachi and Quetta are also recruited now. They are offered higher salaries and the facility of a hostel. School enrolment has grown. Girls are now reading the translation of the Quran and finding out what their rights actually are. People may still be living in a small hut off a shingle road, but they are aware of family planning options. In an area where girls would normally be married off at the age of nine or ten, now single women in their twenties are working as social mobilizers, community health workers and teachers.

It all started with one school, two teachers and a dream.

The liberation of the soul started that afternoon in the compound of my father's house. This was the first time that girls had had a sports day in my region. Respecting our customs, we arranged for it in the walled compound where all the male servants had been forbidden to come. Hidden from all, Baluch girls took part in sack race and potato race

and relay race, just like children anywhere else in the country or in the world do. We got little gifts for winners, simple products that were locally available. When we had invited the then EDO to our event, she had been incredulous. How could Baluch girls have a sports day? She, along with some students' mothers came to attend the event. Once the mothers saw it with their own eyes they realized this was the most natural activity for little children to be engaged in.

From then on we also started a regular sports period in the school.

.Doors were slowly opening to let in the light of knowledge.

School absenteeism can be caused by several reasons. In the case of our school, one reason was that the girls who did not have many clothes or nice clothes like the other girls did, felt embarrassed and would sometimes miss school for this reason. It was time to have a school uniform. We announced to the children that soon they would all come to school in similar clothes.

This perturbed some of the parents who knew that school uniforms in other schools of the country were shalwar suits. They approached us with their concern: "We are not going to send our girls to your school if you expect them to come to school wearing shalwar suits and not our traditional Pashk (frock like garment)." Mindful of the local traditions, which were also our traditions, we had planned to have a sky blue Pashk with white lace as the uniform. To this day that is what the uniform is.

The girls school, an innovation for the region, could only survive if it was rooted in local tradition and if the people running it were not seen as icons of an alien culture. For this reason my sister and I have tread very carefully, in our dress and conduct, lest

anyone point a finger at us and say, “Look what education does to a Baluch woman.” To this day I proudly wear my traditional Pashk.

The tribe from which I hail, the Mand tribe, is very conservative. This added to the impact I was able to make in changing mind-sets. Other tribes felt that if girls from the conservative Mand tribe can get an education, may be education for girls isn't something that violates our customs and traditions. This was why I had to be extra cautious in my behaviour, because people were making decisions about their daughters' education based on how I had benefited from education.

I remember once I was talking on the phone to a government official. He made a remark that I found funny and I gave out my typical full-throated laugh. My mother was sitting nearby hearing my conversation. The next time I was about to leave for a meeting my mother gently told me, “Zubaida, you must be very careful. What you say in your innocence can be misconstrued by men. You must guard your words and your reputation.” I understood what my mother was referring to. As role models, as one of the few educated Baluch women, I had a heavy responsibility; one careless word and it would be women's education that would get maligned.

When my father started the school, it was my mother and my married sister who went door-to-door, convincing people to send their daughters. While the farmer and servant classes readily agreed, it was the notables who offered the most resistance. In observance of our customs, I, who was unmarried then, did not accompany my mother and sister as an unmarried girl is not supposed to go out of the house.

With my father's magnanimity and support I did go to offices to have meetings with male officials. It was my father's strength and verve that took that pressure off of malicious gossip and never made that a hurdle in my way.

Change in Turbat was made possible by showing people how local customs and modern education can co-exist. For change to be deep and permanent it has to be embedded in the soil, it should breathe as one with the spirits of our ancestors.

The author has been the Minister of State for Education. She has worked extensively for girls' education in her constituency, Turbat Baluchistan. She is currently a Member of the National Assembly