

## 'It was time she stood up': Afsar's Story

Cholapur, Uttar Pradesh, January 2017



Living in a community that curbs the opportunities for education of women, Afsar, a 20-year old girl, and her family has a different ideology altogether. Coming from an impoverished background, her father who is a taxi driver in Varanasi city makes sure that all of his five children get equal and quality education. Afsar was 10 years old when she was selected for the Vidyagyan Scholarship from the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation with the help of SSK (Sahbhagi Shiksha Kendra). With a scholarship of ₹500 per month, she not only managed to complete her education, but also saved money to buy a bicycle, which was her dream as a young girl.

Afsar gained a lot of confidence at a young age due to the support from her family as well as through obtaining a good education. When she was 17 years old, she joined SSK's program in Cholapur block focusing on female literacy and women's empowerment, wherein she actively attended the weekly meetings organized by SSK in their village. It was during a SSK meeting that she came to know about the Kadam Badhate Chalo (KBC) Program. The idea of spreading awareness among the youth about the topics of Gender equality and Violence Against Women (VAW), appealed to her and she became a part of the youth group to tackle this issue within her own community.



Afsar had been a victim of eve teasing during her middle school days and she did not have the strength to tackle this problem. She shared such incidents with her mother, who often asked her to ignore these incidents to stay out of danger. After joining the KBC program, Afsar gathered a lot of information about how VAW does not only mean physical assault but has many other forms. She also learned about how boys and girls are equal in all means of life and deserve the same respect in the society. During the KBC phase 2 Sports Leadership Workshop, Afsar shared an interesting incident on how she handled a similar situation of eve teasing a few months before. She said,

"I and my friends were coming home from Varanasi when two young boys in the bus passed unwanted remarks over my dress so I asked them in disgust, 'Do you have any problem? Don't you have a mother and sisters at home?' To this they replied 'Yes, but they are not as attractive as you'. I warned them to mind their language (*in English*) to which they replied, don't speak in English we also know English. My reply to this was that you have brains to learn and understand English, but not how to speak with a girl. Hearing this they abused me, and despite warning them to stop, they continued being aggressive. I then slapped one of the boys in front of everyone in the bus. My friends were all scared of the repercussions, but I thought that if today I let them go unpunished, they will treat me and other girls like me the same way for their entire life. After getting slapped, the boys threatened me and said this isn't over and vowed to get back at me when I am alone. I replied to them that don't think I'm alone, as I have people who will support me - so I am not scared of your threats. The bus conductor came and brought the situation under control. Till

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date those boys avoid eye contact with me whenever they see me”.

*\*The above story has been translated in English, from Hindi, in which it was originally narrated.*

This conversation with Afsar ended with some chuckles and also a lesson on how information can help a person reinforce their confidence to help themselves and others.

Afsar is a sports loving person. She likes to play hockey and badminton the most. When she came to know that in KBC Phase 2, a sports leadership workshop is being held, she became excited to attend the workshop. Afsar's energy and enthusiasm during the workshop was remarkable. She learned how sports can be used to bring together young people of opposite gender, and help them in understanding as well as tackling issues of gender and equality.

Afsar believes that in order to become a leader in the community from where she belongs, she will have to face a lot of challenges to make the youth and their families realize the importance of having equal rights for boys and girls. But, she also believes that these are the places which need this awareness the most. Her leadership traits, utmost confidence and outgoing nature make her a very strong contender to drive change within her community.

