

SYEDA SHAGUFE HOSSAIN

A young woman dreamt of integrating marginalised students into mainstream society. It seems like her dream is coming true.

BY ANANTA YUSUF

Many of us view madrasa students as beings from a different world. They belong to an invisible community that we don't generally even think about. Moreover, madrasa students often feel shy or uncomfortable while interacting with mainstream society. Bearing the psyche of our society in mind, Syeda Shagufe Hossain is attempting to lift this invisible curtain that separates these students from the mainstream while providing them the visibility that they deserve on different national platforms.

In 2012 Syeda Shagufe Hossain read an article in The Daily Star titled, "Slates, Smiles and Ambitions". This story shed light on the issue of the exclusion of madrasa students from undergraduate programmes such as English, Economics, International Relations, Public Administration, and Women and Gender Studies in Dhaka University, despite their high ranks in admission tests. "After reading the article, I realised that there are some issues that need to be addressed to solve this problem of exclusion faced by madrasa students," she says.

She felt the urge to do something for the students of Aliya madrasa, who usually have barely any employment opportunities apart from serving at mosques and other religious institutions. With the help of a group of young people, she launched Leaping Bounds, an organisation that trains madrasah students on language and leadership skills.

Shagufe came to know about Harunu Rashid Khan Associate Professor and chairman of English Department of Southeast University who was working on a project called the Bangladesh Madrasa Teachers Training Institute. With his advice, she started her journey to represent the children, who couldn't do so on their own, in a larger arena.

At the beginning she thought English was the main barrier for madrasa students to enter into the professional world. Her perception changed when she got involved with the real world. Within a few months, Shagufe realised that the problem was

much deeper than was earlier perceived. "At the beginning, I was very inexperienced. And I thought that their basic problem was that they did not know English," she says.

However after working with the students, her ideas about the madrasa education system changed dramatically. Shagufe states that the Aliya madrasa students are "doubly marginalised." She studied the whole reading module and found out that they studied "secular subjects" in their institutions. However, the Qawmi madrasa and the mainstream education system failed to recognize these students as part of the society. "They are stuck somewhere in-between and as a result they face many social barriers," she points out.

It is not that easy to work within the institution of a madrasa, especially for a woman. "I went to the Mohakhali Hossainia madrasa as an individual who was trying to help them with educational support." Rashid Khan helped her to mediate with the madrasa authority. Working with that madrasa helped her understand the needs and problems of the students. She designed a project targeting three facets of education - Communicative English, Information and Communication Technology and Soft Skills which includes Effective communication skills, Emotional intelligence (EI) and Change management, Critical thinking and Problem-solving skills and creativity.

Leaping Boundaries is currently active in Nibras International Madrasa and Madinatul Ulum Model International Women's Kamil Madrasa. Apart from educational support, Shagufe also provides academic counselling to students of these institutes. Students from these madrasahs will be participating in mainstream events such as Spelling Bee, Olympiads and Leadership Summits from this year. The project is currently running on charity funds. For now, Shagufe's friends and family members are contributing to the fund. She believes that they are working hard to bring change and she points out, "We have to walk a long way to achieve."



Syeda Shagufe Hossain
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