

Aspire to Inspire — six successful ladies breaking down invisible barriers

The human mind is such that we always dream of a world where gender equality simply exists. We sing about it, build stories around it, and yet somehow, we are nowhere close to our considerations. Even after so many years of progress per se, we solely blame patriarchy for every shortcoming, when in reality it's every one of us who don't want to take the responsibility, break the shackles and live in a new world, defying the rules of yesterday— rules that need to be modified to suit our development.

But all is not lost; there are handfuls amongst us, as there have been all throughout time, to question the norm, defy the archaic rules and live life to their own terms and not by the rules that have been dictated to them, because it suits the rest of the world.

Here's the story of few such torchbearers who take every day as a challenge and light-up the pathways for the next generation — showing them that it is okay to be different. That different is normal and not evil like the way society depicts it to be.

Meher Afroz Shaon, the famed actor, director, playback singer and an architect laugh at the word 'evil' as she narrates her story to us.

"I am the evil queen then, because my life has been anything but normal. At least I did not follow the rules by any means, I did what my heart directed me to do and that's religion to me— *manobdhormo*," she said.

Shaon added on few more gratifying words to our conversation.

"I am requesting people in general to stop writing my stories for me, and just let me be. Just because I am dressing up does not mean I am having an affair! I can dress for myself – that's my personal right. At this point in life, it really does not bother me though, because I have become very strong mentally but this 'vile act' may actually hinder the progression of others, including people of the younger generation, who are yet to begin their journey. We should all change ourselves for that one person, and just let them be," relayed the actor.

Sohana Saba, actor and TV personality voices a similar opinion —

"These people, the ones who make nasty remarks are pretty unsuccessful in their own lives, so they hide behind the invisible veil of social media and make hateful comments. If they were not anything but unproductive and unsuccessful, they would be busy working outside, making attempts to uplift others or do something productive that benefits the society. So, my request to the youngsters of today and tomorrow would be not to pay any attention to these mean people and carry on doing great work — because at the end of the day, that's all that matters."

Azra Mahmood, renowned model,

fashion choreographer and television presenter joined in with her views.

"We learn about good manners from an early age and yet, we display the audacity to comment on other people's personal lives— even when we are not welcome; oddly – even to people who are absolute strangers! I don't understand the culture behind this.

"We comment on others randomly for every subject under the sun — when they should get married, have children or even maintain a certain height or weight, why should it be like that at all? What makes anyone think that they have the right to dictate other's lives? My lifestyle is my

My personal belief is that all of us need to learn to be content on our own and only then will we be able to spread love to others," said the veteran model.

All the ladies at the rendezvous agreed to an important fact that it was no use singling out the men because non-progressive women also join the bandwagon of degrading others, and try to drag-down everyone around.

Syeda Samara Mortada, a feminist activist, a writer and a mother as she proudly calls herself, reverberated in the same tone.

"I think a woman can do everything a man can do and that's what I am trying to

Ayreen Khan, researcher, founder — iCan Foundation — agreed to all the narratives with a silent nod.

She added, "I believe in humanity – it's as simple as that! Till date I haven't heard anyone say that – 'you can't do this because you are a human or you can do this because you are a human.' Instead they specify the gender. It's not about the gender at all, it's always about humanity, and that's what I believe."

She went on to say, "Harassment at any sector, including the workplace, should be dealt with courage and firmness. Because if you let go of something today — thinking that it is insignificant and would make you too uncomfortable to deal with, would only encourage the perpetrators to continue, increasing their level of aggravation every time. So modestly put, we must find the courage within ourselves to draw the line — 'this simple act' will put a halt to many untoward incidents in the future, if not to all," said Khan.

At the end of it all, the six ladies laughed on the insecurities that they once had. These ladies may have learnt it the hard way, but the obstacles actually made them the strong women that they are today— each successful in their profession and personal lives, following their own set of rules.

Tanzir Dilshad Ditan, the founder of KrayonMag and the initiator of the campaign revels in her achievement to get the stories of these wonderful ladies out there.

"The stories may be few but even if it reaches a handful of youngsters it would mean a lot. This would be a tiny way of encouraging these youngsters to be free, from imaginary shackles that they build around themselves. I would keep on working in this field, as long as I can, to let the next generation know what it means to live a life based on passion and free-will; free of inhibitions and full of courage," said the storyteller, as she loves to call herself.

At the end of our conversations, all the ladies put one point across — change lies within own selves. If we start with the change, then there's bound to be others to follow.

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own choice, I can do anything with it, as long as I am not hurting others or doing anything harmful to myself. I can have children whenever I want to or not at all. It's my body and my own choice, no one can dictate the terms for me," said Mahmood.

Bulbul Tumpa, model, choreographer, and a media personality spoke in the same light.

"Everybody around me has an opinion on my marital status. The opinion that I want to put across is that I can be happy alone; I can live wonderfully without a man in my life, if that's what I want. As long as I have not changed my opinion, others should not dictate it for me. This is the 21st century; a woman can do whatever a man can do. And 'NO' we don't have to rely on the other gender for 'money, companionship or even mental strength.'

teach my 7-year-old daughter. I want her to think that the horizons are wide enough for her, to be anything at all, from an astronaut to a police officer. The sky is the limit and all she needs to do is find her passion and pursue it," relayed Mortada.

The activist also pointed out a fact that it was time for the modern woman, to fight against oppressors and perpetrators collectively.

"It's not right for people to pinch us, push us, and touch us, all because we are sitting in a public transport or walking on a public road. It is our right to do so, and everybody should learn to respect that. And these teachings actually begin at home. Teach your children that both men and women have equal civic rights and there's no other alternative to the thought process," she said.