

# In Jogeshwari, the struggle for education continues

Managing a household. Working after college. Walking out on in-laws. Just some of the things a depressed neighbourhood's girls will do for an education

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**A**NJUM Patel scrambles awake at 6 am, gets ready, makes tea for her husband and in-laws. Then, she makes breakfast.

Then, she prepares for the second meal. By 10.30 am, lunch—*roti* and *salan*—is ready.

Then, she washes the utensils and wraps up her other chores.

At 5pm, Anjum teaches children from Class VIII and IX at local resident and journalist Syed Feroz Ashraf's home. She returns home by 7.30 pm, washes clothes, cooks dinner, cleans utensils.

Midnight: Anjum's day ends.

Anjum is 19, a student at a suburban college. She runs this gruelling day for only one reason: between 12.30 pm and 5 pm every day—when her husband is away selling handkerchiefs and her in-laws are resting—she can get herself an education.

"I agreed to get married," smiles the shy, burqa-clad teen, "only because Ammi said I'd be allowed to study."

In the narrow gullies of Bandra Plot Jogeshwari (East) or the chawls of Azeeb Nagar on the other side of the tracks, you will find dozens of Anjums, young girls who will do anything for that degree.

They will break their backs working at home, work before and after college hours and even walk out of their marital homes so that they can study.

Rahima Sheikh (22) did just that.

## WALKING OUT

When she was in the second year of junior college, Rahima was married to an air conditioner mechanic working in the Far East. After a lot of convincing, her husband and in-laws let her continue her studies. But the family and dis-



Every day, Ashraf has to give these girls and their families a pep talk to keep them going — Kevin D Souza

She got pregnant and was due to deliver just before her Class XII exams. "I went to my mother's place for delivery and continued to stay there after the baby was born," Rahima recalls. "I'd leave the baby with my sister-in-law so I could take my exams."

She passed, but her husband decided she didn't need to study any more. "I was accused of having loose morals because I went to college," she says bitterly. When she couldn't take it any longer, Rahima walked out.

She found support in Feroz Ashraf, a freelance journalist who runs free classes for children from the nearby chawls and slums. Ashraf goes door-to-door convincing families to educate their children. With help from individuals and trusts, he even manages to get the kids books and pays their fees if needed.

Once she was back home, Rahima's parents also needed convincing. "Initially they were supportive," she says, and her voice trails off. "Ashraf Uncle helped me continue my studies. I learnt typing and tailoring here."

Rahima is in her second year of college, and is working with an

advocate in the area. She wants to be a lawyer. But right now she is happy just watching her son attend kindergarten.

## THE FIGHT FOR RESPECT

Ashraf is proud of his girls. Just when he is treating them to *vada pav* one cloudy evening, Saeeda Syed (18), a first-year Bachelor of Arts student, storms in to discuss her admissions with him.

Saeeda supports her education by working at an STD booth. She lost her father some years ago and her mother makes embroidery patterns to earn a living.

Saeeda is the academically keen one at home. She helped her older sister complete Class X and chases her younger brothers each day trying to make them go to school. Saeeda wants to study but is facing financial hurdles.

"I want to do something in life and support my family," she says. "People pressurised my mother to stop my education but I just told her to have faith in me."

Saeeda's mother Saira and maternal grandmother Hajira support her dreams. "I don't want her to face the troubles I have," Saira says. "If she's educated, people will respect her," Hajira adds.

Saeeda's friend Afiana sits next to her and stares at the floor. Afiana is an orphan but her sister and brother-in-law—who works

at a powerloom in Bhiwandi—are pushing her to study. She gives tuitions to contribute to the house.

"People who don't let their girls study are harming themselves," says Rahima, confident and unafraid. Anjum looks at her with awe and nods. She wants to be a journalist. Just when she is talking about it her husband, Feroze (23), walks in to ask her for the house keys.

"She can study for as long as she wants to," he says looking at her fondly. "It's important and I will never stop her."

## THE BEACON

"I didn't know what the Muslim society was all about until I came here," explains Feroze Ashraf, a freelance journalist who moved to Jogeshwari (West) after the 1992 riots.

Ashraf has taken many girls fighting for an education under his wing. At 6 pm every evening, his modest home at Abba apartments, Jogeshwari (West) becomes a classroom. With his wife, Ashraf translates lessons for the girls so they can understand them better.

"They are all first-generation learners from Urdu schools," he explains. "I had to literally de-clay myself to enter into their lives and convince their parents to let them study."

