

Akhi's Journey of Escaping Child Marriage

My life was confined to a small house in the small village of Fatikchari. We are five siblings and my parents always struggled to maintain the bread and butter of our family. Poverty has been the only constant thing in our lives. My father is a CNG driver and my mother is a housewife. During COVID-19, my father's income became limited due to the lockdown. At the same time, my youngest brother was born. He has been very sick since his birth. He had to go through a hernia operation. And that required a lot of money. We didn't have any land to sell. We only have one Bhita (land with a small house inherited from our grandfather) where we live. My father had his own CNG and he sold the CNG to arrange money. Now his only way to income is by giving rent to an owner and driving the CNG. But that is not much! Because he has to give a big amount to the CNG owner.

I am the first daughter of my family. I had to sacrifice a lot for this! We are brought up with limited resources. If my younger siblings needed something, I sacrificed and let them take it. There were times when I needed money to do coaching or registration for the exam, my younger brother was sick so I never even asked for that. I started to get a lot of marriage proposals after I completed my primary school education. In my family, I have always felt like a burden that needs to be gotten rid of. Despite scoring high and being the first girl in my college, I never got appreciation from my family for my studies. My father and all my other relatives wanted to marry me off. There were times when my father left us with no money and no food for a few days to make me accept the marriage proposals. But my mother convinced everyone to let me study at least until HSC. She faced all the violence only to save me from that situation. She is the only person who encouraged me to study and become self-dependent. Because deep inside her heart she knew if she were educated, she never had to face those situations.

After my HSC exam, as my youngest brother was born and due to his sickness, the burden on the family increased. My mother could not do the household chores. So I had to cook, clean, and take care of the entire family. On top of that, the pressure of marriage was huge on me as I have already completed my HSC. The girls in my village do not study much, so HSC is more than enough! I was not given money to attend the admission coaching. Also, my family was short of money so I could not buy admission forms from all the universities or travel to attend the exam at other universities. That time was really difficult for me. A few months ago I had to face a horror experience when I rejected a marriage proposal. Because that family was rich. Their son had completed class 8, moved abroad, and started making money. From a village perspective that is considered a very good proposal and a very rich family. So when I rejected that, my father became really angry at me.

When I came to know about the AUW opportunity from my principal sir, I thought this would be my escape from the current situation. For me, just graduating was not enough. Given my financial situation, I badly needed a job right after graduation. And this opportunity seemed perfect to me as I would get a job as a college teacher. I immediately visited my college and wrote my name and contact details for this opportunity. When the officials of AUW contacted me I was having trouble filling up the online form. I took help from the college teachers and started preparing for the admission exam. I found the questions difficult, as everything was in English and the question structures were not similar to the public universities. I thought I would never get a call from them. But to my surprise, I received a call for an interview. It was on zoom and I was really afraid as I am not good at technology. I had trouble connecting audio for 15

minutes but the interviewers were so nice and patient! They allowed me to continue and overall it was a good experience. After the interview I was hopeful. I was asking Allah (SwT) to give me this chance. I thought maybe through this, I can redirect my life! And yes! When I got the confirmation, I didn't know how to express my happiness!

The journey of the latter part was not easy for me as well. Convincing my father to leave the house and go to study in Chittagong city was difficult. I also had to manage money for doing all the medical tests that were required to submit before joining AUW. It was hectic but I didn't lose hope, as I knew I was going in the right direction. When I came to AUW to complete all those formalities, my father accompanied me. I was going to stay at the university dorm, and study, and he was not so happy about it.

My father accompanied me on my way to AUW. He was warning me that I am a girl and I should not take such a daring decision. The distance from my home to AUW was 2 hours but it felt so long for me as I was eagerly waiting to get in there. When we entered the gate my father saw foreign students and he was so surprised that I had achieved the goal of studying at such a big institution. The admission team informed him that I got this chance with a full scholarship for this special program. Many students pay 15000 US dollars to study here. After hearing this My father was shocked. He realized his mistake. Now he has become a bit convinced that I should study higher to achieve my dreams. He is not forcing me to marry off at this moment. I am attending classes from international instructors, staying in the dorm, studying in the library, eating from dining, and feeling like I am leading the best days of my life. No one is giving me the feeling of being a burden just because I am a woman!

Being a student of AUW, I know now it is my responsibility to pay it forward. I want to study bioinformatics. And I want to teach Biology to students when I go back to my college as a teacher. The students of my village have probably never heard about bioinformatics before. I want to expand their knowledge and thought processes. I also want to prevent early marriage and empower the girls of my village. As a female teacher, I can convince more parents to allow their girls to study further. I believe everyone deserves to get a chance to achieve a bright future.



This life story is about Akhi Asma. I am 20 years old, born and brought up in a rural village of Fatikchari. Her hobby is reading Bengali novels.

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