

A girl who silently erased an invisible boundary of her community

I am eighteen years old. I belong from a Chakma community from the southeast corner of Bangladesh. To some, I am referred to as a member of an ethnic minority group, indigenous to others, and Bengali as a national. It is rather unusual for a girl like me to just come out of my community and study at a university like that without any fuss. In fact, it would not be exaggerated at all to say this to be an eventful journey so far. Why? I would ask myself the same question sometimes. Why is it not usual or typical for an indigenous girl to pursue higher studies? The answer might eventually appear if I start telling my journey; the journey from a small hilly village in Rangamati to the campus of Asian University for Women in Chittagong.

I am the second child of my family. I have two more siblings; one elder sister and one younger brother. When we were little, it was my mother who taught us first how to read and write while my father used to sit beside us silently, carefully listening to us. Seeing us study was his favorite thing to do after work. Every day, he got up real early, worked from dawn to dusk in our paddy field. My mother worked with him too. It was hard for me see them work relentlessly. All of it. To see my father working hard day after day in the field to bring us food. To observe him how he comes back home at the evening and sit immediately for preparing Ayurvedic medicine to add a little extra income to the household.

When I was in class nine, I saw my father borrow money to buy me books and pay for my registration fee. It took a heavy toll on him to make the ends meet for our family and continue bearing the educational expenses for all three of us. Despite the odds, he never made us feel the hurdles he went through. He never let us compromise anything. Ever since we were adolescents, it was my father who bought sanitary pads for me and my sister. The hardworking and sensible man that he is, he could inspire anybody. I am no exception. His determination to provide for us, make us educated kept me going. He kept my spirit alive. I always wanted to make sure the proud happy faces of my parents when they see me stay forever.

Apart from my family, my physics teacher inspired me a lot. He took special care of us and helped us learn the basics of ICT and English apart from his own subject whenever he got some spare time. He was everyone's favorite. Everyone in my class wanted to be like him. We learned the definition of a good teacher by seeing him how passionately he teaches us even after overcoming myriad of problems that we had in our college.

In our class, the number of girls were much more than that of the boys. We were total one hundred and fifty to two hundred students in one single class. Most of the time, we girls had to stand outside of the classroom because of the limited space and seats inside. Many of my friends used to bunk classes saying there is no meaning listening to a class from outside. But this did not stop me from attending classes. On the contrary, this made me feel determined that someday I want to be the person who would solve this problem. One day, I would make sure no one stands outside of the classroom like I did.

I was daydreaming of all these things that I wanted to do in my life. The reality, however, hit hard when I found myself end up admitting into a national university after college. Simultaneously, too many opinions were coming from different directions at that time about what I should do next. Some were saying I should try to get admission into a nursing college in Rangamati. That way I will get a job really soon. Some were advocating for the national university my sister was studying, comparatively near to home. All because my father couldn't afford to pay for the coaching fees I needed to prepare myself to sit for university admission test. Nor could he manage to take me to different cities to give the test. It was way too expensive to travel for such things. I lost almost all hopes.

Then one day, a news came from out of the blue. I received a call from the principal of our Shajak College. He told me to apply to a university named Asian University for Women (AUW) where I would not have to

pay for anything. At first, I could not believe it. I wondered, even if they do offer scholarship, why they would give it to me. My English is also not good. Among thousands of these types of fear and uncertainties, I applied and got selected. And that was it. That moment was undefinable. I still have difficulty finding the right words to express what I felt at that very moment. Yet, there were things left to be dealt with.

It takes almost seven good long hours to travel to Rangamati city from where I live, Borodurchari, Marissha. Boat is the only medium of communication. Very few, mostly manipulated information reach in there. People live their lives based on assumptions or misconceptions. No one wants to do anything they have not heard before. Majority of these people misguided my father that he should not send me to a university so far from home. They poisoned his ear with misinformation. Both my father and I were confused. Afraid too. I saw him making several calls to verify some information about the university. At last, my father got assured that the university was actually doing something good for marginalized girls like me.

I was all set to begin my journey for higher studies. That too outside Rangamati. I was thrilled to just imagine that I get be the first one to become an example for other girls in my community. This has driven me the most. My college principal told me the same. He wanted me to take the first step. No one from my community ever stepped into a university before me. Till date, their reach is as far as Rangamati city. As if, some one has drawn an invisible boundary that girls are forbidden to cross. I erased that boundary line.

My name is Keya. I am a student of Asian University for Women. And this is my story. I learned the benefits of being educated as a child. My father wished me to have what he could not have when he was young. Education. From then on, I grew this immense urge to educate others in my community. All I wanted was to become a teacher. And now my university is helping to be one!



Picture: 1 Keya Chakma is from Marissha, Rangamati. She loves to teach children in her free time.

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