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SEWA MUMBAI LAUNCHES THE LADIES WING

On 24th May , I was invited by Ghazala Azad , social activist and Karate Instructor – whose objective is to make girls self reliant by being able to defend themselves – to a launch of the Ladies Wing of SEWA a Voluntary organization in Mumbai, where the Chief Guest was the social activist , Shabnam Hashmi , sister of the famous Safdar Hashmi. Never a one to miss , the assemblage of women for a good cause –specially Muslim women which is indicative that they had the backing of their men folk, –I attended the function at Islam Gymkhana.

The function was to begin at 6 pm, but like most functions organized by Muslims, in the evening (as far as my experience goes) it was not going to begin in time. But the organizers, the President Marium Hingora who runs an NGO Maseeha and the Vice President designate , the charming Fabiha Shadab Patel – a social worker and Vice President of the All India Memon Jamat Federation who with her husband Shadab Patel , a Real Estate Developer with an NGO named after them , were there, and with them were a number of enthusiastic, well dressed , girl volunteers, smiling and welcoming the guests and registering their contact details . I introduced myself as Ghazala's guest and was warmly welcomed. I later learnt that Ghazala was among a number of prominent women who were to be honored by Shabnam Hashmi by an award.

There were quite a few awardees- they were educationist, social workers ,lawyers, dentists, doctors , make- up artist media persons, administrators etc – about 22 achiever. Quite impressive. There were no citations for the awardees– they had to introduce themselves and all were enthusiastic, committing their services for welfare of Muslim women. I was able to get in touch with three awardees Sheher bano Guller, Asma Rehmani, and Rubina Firoz who were engaged in educating children and empowering women– a brief write-up of their activities is given in MUSLIM WOMEN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT Shabnam Hashmi, as is well known is founder of ANHAD (Act Now for Harmony and Democracy) formed in the aftermath of the 2002 riots, had come all the way from Delhi .Her personality and style of dressing –she has short graying hair, and wore a simple cotton salwar suit with a stole wound around her neck , and the confident ,forthright demeanor was a striking contrast to the ladies who had either turned out in party wear with voluminous head scarves , or were in burqas with their faces covered.

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Figure 1 Shabnam Hashmi center with Marium Hingora on her right and Fabia Shadab Patel to her left

The compeering, by a journalist from an Urdu daily was laced with Urdu poetry, so were the speeches and some of the introductions by the awardees, that it was late – past 9pm when Shabnam Hashmi finally addressed the gathering. She gave a brief back ground of how she was initiated into social activism – it was almost accidental the way in which she found her true calling. She was on vacation in Delhi while studying on a scholarship in USSR, when a friend asked her to help teach in a welfare center in the slums of Nizamuddin East. There she met a few girls, whose dismal lives– there was one girl who had been married at 11, divorced at 14 with a child suddenly made her aware that by helping these girl –being able to bring hope in their lives was more meaningful than the degree she was pursuing and she decided to stay back and work with the under privileged and marginalized women.

Shabnam 's speech seemed to inspire many of the women specially the burqa clad ones and when I left after a dinner of Chicken Biryani, I found her ringed by a string of women in black .

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I don't know what their calling, education or profession was but hoped that they would be in line, next time for receiving the achievement awards.