

Almas Shafi: My tryst with Patriarchy

Almas Shafiuddin Virani – a Motivational Speaker, Trainer & Transformational Coach is also an Activist for Gender Equality. She, through her organization Xpress HER, is building an on line forum for collective feminist voices. She is associated with many feminist groups and was invited by the United Nations Refugee Relief Agency in Rwanda, Africa for World Refugee Day and was covered in the New Times Africa. She has been selected as Change maker by Change.org program, She Creates Change. She will soon be launching a campaign to fight patriarchy in the entertainment space for kids.

Below is her journey in her words

I come from a strong patriarchal family where most girls don't have the exposure and liberty to get educated beyond a certain point. The cultural and social society to which I belong are conditioned to believe that women have a space restricted to looking after the house, their husband and kids. Marriage is the ultimate goal of a girl and she is trained and conditioned to look good and behave well so that she can get a good groom and be a good wife.

I do not contest the idea of a girl being brought up to be a good wife and a mother but I do feel that boys too should be brought up to be caring husbands and responsible fathers. Moreover most importantly, I believe that it's important for both boys and girls to be raised to be good human beings and have an equal opportunity in attaining education and selecting careers. It is needless to say that there is a great bias against girls in this aspect ... Fortunately for me, my parents especially my mother was progressive and ensured that I went to a good school and college. It was because my mother made certain choices and gave me the right education I could make life decisions for myself.

In my interesting roller coaster story of ups and downs I was blessed with courage to take some important leaps of faith and God has been kind to me every time I mustered courage to build and re-build my life. I believe a woman has as much as a right to choose her life partner as a man does and that this right is given in the Quran – and she should be free to exercise her right. A girl should be free to make her choices and explore her potential as much as a boy.

The turning points in my life have helped me find my voice. When I decided to move out of a troubled marriage I didn't have much support from the patriarchal society. I had to find my wings and fly on my own for a while... It got me thinking, exploring and understanding a lot of things that created confusion in my head. I started studying Feminism as a subject and also went back to the roots of my spiritual and religious core values. I started studying women's rights in Islam and found a treasure of progressive feminism there. I realized that women had a lot of rights but the same have been twisted by the patriarchal society. A lot of truth is hidden under twisted laws of patriarchal interpretation.

I was born and raised in a Muslim family with strong faith. I was rooted in rituals and laws and believed in the concept of a Punishing God. My journey into understanding Islam and its spiritual dimension has humbled me and I realize that God is indeed Merciful and loving beyond our imagination. I found much treasure in the Sufi teachings of Islam. I realized the power of Gratitude and Surrendering, the core values in Islam and the importance of killing the EGO. I am a student for life and continue learning about how we can find the inner light within and experience a more fulfilled life. I found a lot of wisdom in knowing that I don't need to

control everything in my life but rather learn to surrender to a superior power that is taking care of me and my son. I understood the principles of love and grace and found the pearls of forgiveness and compassion in my spiritual quest.



Almas with her son Ayaan

Life is indeed a beautiful journey that we end up polluting with toxic thoughts and behaviors. Breathing moment to moment, stay in grace and love, meditating through Namaz 5 times a day and having the presence of God in my thoughts regularly are very central to me now. My son and I have started studying Arabic to understand the Quran in the language it was revealed. I think all of us get lost in translation and that is what creates major conflicts.

One of my objectives is to fight the right of equality of genders and for parity in education and life's choices through my organization Xpress Her as well as to motivate women to raise the next generation to be good human beings and be sensitive to gender equality

.In this respect I have a great responsibility as I have a son to raise. My endeavor is to raise a man that will respect and support the women in his life. I want him to grow to be sensitive- to

find his space to cry when he feels like. I want him not to consider that cooking and baking is not just a women's job- he too can do it and love it. Clean and do household chores because he wants a clean home. I want him to have the right to choose the colors he want to wear the colors he want and not be conditioned by patriarchal traditions. That is how I think mother's should raise their children: to give them the right to exercise their choice irrespective of gender . Boys should have the freedom to choose cooking, cleaning and dancing and refuse cricket and football if they want to. Similarly girls should have a right to make their own choices regarding education, employment, marriage etc .If boys and girls are raised with the right spiritual values of love and humanity we will be able to build a gender equal society where we have happier families and a progressive economy as we would explore the potential of all genders..

And so the journey for bringing about gender equality begins right at home with our sons. For a long time, the focus has been to raise 'honhar beti's' .It's time each mother focuses on raising 'honhar betas' . A mother has a major role to play in the conditioning of the child and raising good citizens . Let us all as mothers take. a pledge to break the stereotypes amongst our kids and raise them to be honhar human beings!