

## Women Of Pure Wonder - A Book Review

By

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Women Empowerment is recognised today as the surest way of transforming the fortunes not only of the families of the empowered women but also destinies of communities. Now, not only governments and non-government organisation are recognising the achievements of empowered women, even corporate are lauding their efforts. Recently Roli Books published a 176 pages hard cover, size 10 X 8 inches coffee table book titled *Women of Pure Wonder* subtitled *Struggle/Survival /Success* replete with colour pictures with a price tag of Rs1,495, sponsored by Vodafone Foundation with the objective of sharing the success stories of 60 remarkable women so as to provide inspiration to thousands of other women across the country. The proceeds from the sale of the book are to be used for empowerment of the girl child through the Naz Foundation.

The text of the book by Ruchi Chanana and Tanya Luther, expresses graphically the aspirational power these 60 women found in themselves. Many of these women are unsung and unheard and from marginalised sections of society and seeing their lives etched in a glossy coffee table book is indeed a wonderful surprise.

The 60 profiles are neatly divided into six sections with ten in each section: Entrepreneurs, Teachers, Leaders, Healers, Safe keepers and Women of Renown. Of these ten portraits were of well known personalities such as Priya Dutt, Indu Sahani, Zarine Screwalla, Aruna Roy, Shehnaz Hussein, Kiran Mazumdar Shaw etc but it was the other profiles: of a potter, a waste picker, a farmer, unlettered housewives who have established businesses which make for astonishing narratives and which lends such remarkableness to the book. Many of these women are from marginalised sections and have excelled in the roles as teachers, healers, basti builders and through sheer grit and fortitude have transformed their lives and brought about change in their immediate environment and have become the role models to be emulated, to be honoured.

The opening quotation of by Swami Vivekananda sets the tone of the book. It states: "The idea of perfect womanhood is perfect independence." And the Forward by Shayam Benegal, the Director who projected extraordinary gutsy women in films such as *Manthan* and *Bhumika* was indicative that many of the personalities which the book would highlight would be empowered women from the bottom of the Pyramid.

Though each profile is a story of extraordinary struggle, survival and success, there are some which stand out such as the story of Laxmi, the acid attack victim, Anita Kumbhar the potter who is doing her MBA, Chhavi Rajawat, the Sarpanch of

Soda in Rajasthan who gave up a lucrative corporate career for doing public service , and the eight Muslim women who had to fight greater odds than their compatriots to achieve such remarkable success.

Out of the 60 portraits, there were 9 from the Muslim community, if one included that of Shahnaz Hussein. These women have become role models for their community in various spheres of activity such as teachers , healers and safe keepers.. Among remarkable teachers there is Hasina Anand, Gulafshan Khan and Saffena Hussein. The leader's space is occupied by Noorjehan Kaladgi ; of the Healers by Asma Rahim and Fehmida Malik and of the Safe keepers by Noorjehan Dewan and Sulekha Ali .

Though Safeena Hussein , Asma Rahim and Fehmida Malik hail from fairly well-to-do Muslim families , the other five are from under privileged sections of society and therefore their success is even more noteworthy .

Sulekha Ali is from Ahmedabad .She had taken refuge in the Shah Alam camp during the Gujarat riots .Here she became aware of the trauma the children went through and which had a lifelong impact on their psyche, breeding hatred and violence against the members of the other community .She therefore founded ARZOO which besides imparting education, skills training and health-care for children from under privileged sections also tries to inculcate the right values , to promote and encourage communal harmony.

NoorJehan Dewan, grew up in a religious family of bearded Muslim men and burqa clad women and married Abdul an autorickshaw driver at age 17 and lived a life like her mother and grandmother: wearing a burqa and looking after the house and children in Juhapura, till a visit to the nearby refugees camp in 2002 changed her forever. Despite her husband opposition to her working with the relief agencies (he even beat her once and threatened to divorce her) she continued her work. Today she is Co-ordinator of Anhad and president of the Gujarat branch of Bharatiya Mahila Andolan, which is fighting for women's rights and her husband is her biggest supporter.

Fehmida Malik came from a family where girls were educated and her mission in life was to look after the mentally disabled and towards this end did her Masters in Clinical Psychology. However a visit to the Vatwa camp housing the victims made her realise the need to empower women of her community whose vulnerability was worsened by their seclusion and lack of financial independence. Not happy with the functioning of the NGO's she encountered , she founded Sambodh Trust in 2004 with the help of Indo –Global Social .

In the initial stages , the biggest hurdle were the men : they refused to let their wives speak to her .But slowly her efforts paid off and the Co-operative Credit Scheme launched with a deposit of Rs 50 per month per participant picked up and gradually women were able to take loans .With savings , they started thinking about

health and education and then the men too came around. Today she through her Trust has empowered nearly 2000 women from the slum community. Fehmida has decided to stay single and dedicate her life to the community.

Noor Jehan Kaladigi is a basti builder in Miraj. Married at 12 she was a teen mother and by 26 she was a widow with two children. Till then her life was confined to her jhuggi and her Basti and if she did go out, it was in purdah in a rickshaw pre-arranged by her husband. His sudden demise left her totally unprepared to face life and she and her children had to go hungry for two days. She then took up two part time jobs as a cook and gave up the burqa. For this she was excommunicated by her community and severely criticised by her relations.

Undeterred by the criticism she started working for the upliftment of the basti by getting better toilets. Her work for building the basti and provide it with all amenities intensified after she lost her 17 year old daughter. Today she feels a sense of fulfilment that her efforts are recognised. In 2011 she addressed the Women's United Nations Meet on gender issues in New Delhi. Her message to women who live in abject poverty in slums is: "You have immense strength. You will be able to become a force to reckon with. Support your children fully, and serve others with genuine compassion."

But it is the courage and commitment of 19 year old Gulafshan Khan which makes her a teen agers heroine. She is one of the five siblings of a family ejected from Nizamuddin to a dump heap at Bhalsawa outside Delhi where they had no access to toilets, electricity and clean drinking water. The place was a jungle and when they dug the ground to build their shelters they found bones. But Gulafshan's never say die spirit held on. In 2011 she heard of the NGO, Magic Bus, which works in the areas of education, health and hygiene and reproductive health and she signed up for the community youth leader (CYL) programmes. Her enthusiasm impressed the co-ordinator of Magic Bus so much that they persuaded her parents to agree to continue her education and she travelled 40km to complete her school education. Despite taunts from the community she continues her work at the Magic Bus and does tuitions to fund her education to qualify for a teacher.

Once you finish reading the book *Women of Pure Wonder*, you would agree with Marianne Williamson in her book *Woman's Worth*

***"When a woman rises up in glory, her energy is magnetic, and her sense of possibility contagious."***

