Girl Icons are empowered agents of change; in their own lives, communities and the world. These grassroots girls leaders use their voice, choice and power to advocate for Girls rights to create a gender equal world of opportunities.

This book is our endeavour to capture their inspirational stories so that girls everywhere maybe inspired to fight for their rights.

We hope these uplifting stories continue to inspire all of us. Share these stories to encourage more girls around the world!
Milaan Foundation is a non-profit, social development organization, which envisions an inclusive and equal world, where every girl has the knowledge, skills, and social environment to pursue her dreams and explore her full potential. Over the last 11 years, Milaan has worked with over 25,000 children through its various educational and leadership building programs across India.

Our lives are driven by stories. Stories of common people driving uncommon change in pursuit of creating a better world. When these stories are of adolescent girls from some of the most challenging social, economic, and political backgrounds; it especially fuels and impacts a belief towards nurturing girl leaders to create a more equitable world.

**Vision**
Milaan envisions an inclusive and equal world, where every girl has the knowledge, skills, and social environment to pursue her dreams and explore her full potential.

**Mission**
Building a movement of girl leaders who will drive self and others, individually and collectively, to create an equitable and inclusive world.

**Goal**
Milaan will empower 10 million girls across India and build a movement of girl leaders with a thriving ecosystem of changemakers and networks. This movement of Girl Leaders will contribute towards the fulfilment of India’s commitment to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

The Girl Icon Program is a leadership development program which invests in collectivizing girls at the grassroots, delivering comprehensive life-skills based education and instigating collective social actions on issues that affect adolescent girls.
Gender equality and girls’ empowerment is at the heart of what we do. We launched the Girl Icon Program in 2015 with an aim to empower girls as leaders of tomorrow and amplify their voices of change. 114 powerful grassroots Girl Leaders in their teens leading 2,280 girls in their communities speaks volume of the passion, courage and hope of girls to fight for their rights and unleash their full potential.

The Girl Icons have shown us what it means to be a fighter. They have fought for their rights to get education; they have fought against harassment; they have challenged the social norms that restrict girls’ independence; they are the extraordinary rebels! When we build a movement of confident girls, their strengthened voices allow them to speak up and be heard; they can make their own choices and own decisions that shape their future. When given the right support and direction, girls have the power to channel their energy to bring a lasting change.

I am inspired everyday by the actions of the Girl Icons. Through every hardship and struggle, they’ve picked themselves up and shown us that no patriarchy, no discrimination, no barrier can stop them from achieving their dreams.

Each Girl Icon is working towards driving change and creating a more just society for everyone around them. Every Girl Icon has a unique story to tell: these stories are of their fight for a better world for themselves, their families and their communities. Each story tells us about why it is important to invest in girls and why there is a need to give them the chance to raise their voices.

Our work is dedicated to changing lives and helping girls achieve their full potential. Stories That Inspire! is dedicated to every girl who is doing her bit to change the world like a girl, to every donor and partner who has supported us and to all our well-wishers.

Stories matter and are a powerful tool to encourage and inspire people around us. For us it is a way to take the voices of the Girl Icons to every part of the world to create a larger impact.
STORIES THAT INSPIRE US
“Education is extremely important for girls. It is a tool to break free and be independent,”

Rajkumari comes from a village called Faridpur where she lives with her parents and five siblings.

“Being a girl, I have always felt I didn’t have an identity of my own: I had always been known by my father or my elder brother’s name,” says Rajkumari. This is the reason why Rajkumari aspires to become a District Magistrate so that people know her by HER name.

When this 18-year-old came to the Girl Icon program two years back she lacked self confidence. Rajkumari comes from a feudal community where women do not enjoy the same freedom as men. Initially she was not allowed to travel alone outside of her community.

“Being a Girl Icon has given me the strength and confidence to fight for my rights. I can travel alone now because my family has the confidence in me and most importantly because I have confidence in myself and have become courageous,” says Rajkumari.

Rajkumari has passed her Class 12 examinations. She wants to pursue higher education but her elder brother discourages her. However, with her father’s support, she knows she will get into a good college.

“Milaan has been very supportive. They are a family. They not only support me but they are counselling my parents and helping me to identify colleges. Because of Milaan I can continue my education,” says Rajkumari.

Rajkumari feels she has gained a lot of knowledge around health, gender and rights through the Girl Icon trainings. Her learnings and exposure during the trainings have helped her facilitate better meetings with her peer members. As part of her larger initiative as a Girl Icon, Rajkumari has helped girls in her community go back to school.

“I have helped 16 girls from my village to go back to education. It was tough to convince the families, but I was not ready to give up.” The girls are now enrolled in Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya, Bulandshahr, Uttar Pradesh.
Khushboo was fortunate than most girls at her age when she was enrolled in a private school when she started her schooling. However, things changed very drastically when her father fell gravely ill. Faced with financial crisis, Khushboo was pulled out of school. "I studied in the Aganwadi for 2 years. My mother later enrolled me in the government school from where I passed my class 5," says Khushboo. "I had to drop out of school again because there was no money to support my education." However, Khushboo was lucky to receive help from a local NGO Tareeq who supported her by paying half her school fees. "I could go back to school again."

Khushboo comes from a conservative community where girls are questioned on the simple choice to wear a pair of jeans or even when they look outside a window. She feels girls in her community are constantly discriminated.

She has also faced questions from the community during mobilization of her peer group. "People would question my actions. They tried to provoke my parents too." However, Khushboo did not give up. She is a strong advocate for girls’ education and gender equality. She feels that it is time for girls to speak up. As part of her Girl Icon social action project, Khushboo organized a street play with her peer groups in her community to raise awareness on the importance of girls’ education. "The play had a positive impact because two girls from my community were enrolled to school after. It was a proud moment," says Khushboo.

A born activist, her outspoken nature has earned her quite the reputation as someone who is not afraid to speak up. She once had 4-5 boys put behind bars for eve-teasing. "It is vital for girls to be educated in order to stand up for themselves and for their rights," says Khushboo. "I want to tell our society that if they give freedom to girls, girls will be able to achieve something in life."

"My dream project is to educate adolescent girls, who have never been to school, to a level where they can join regular school in class 5."

Khushboo is a second-year student at Vidyant PG College in Lucknow pursuing Bachelor's degree in Commerce.
“I want to fight against injustices faced by girls.”

Uzma is passionate about girls’ education and gender equality. “It is important that the society invest in girls’ education.” She feels education is imperative to survive and thrive in a competitive world; it is the means to a better life.

“On one side the society talks about giving equal opportunities to girls, while on the other, they still oppress girls and restrict their freedom,” says Uzma. She wants to use her voice to speak up for the rights of girls. “Girls should be allowed to move about in their community instead of being restricted because of their gender.” Her goal as a Girl Icon is to build her confidence in order to use her voice in public for social change. She looks up to her courageous mother who has been a rock in the family despite the absence of her father. “Our family was torn apart when we found out about our father’s affair.” Uzma strongly stood by her mother’s decision and was ready to face the society.

“I knew the consequences, the societal pressure and stereotype our family would have to face without the presence a father. However, we could not let that define our future,” says Uzma.

Uzma has been an immense support not only to her mother but to her two younger sisters. She is hardworking and honest in her approach. To support her education, Uzma used to provide tuition to children at her home when she was in school. In college, she took up a part time job as a receptionist in a school. “I took the job because I wanted to work on my communication skills. I wanted to improve my English because I feel it is extremely important,” says Uzma.

In addition to speaking out against restrictions for girls in her community, Uzma loves to write stories that are connected to social change. Her writing allows her an outlet to convey her ideas in her own voice. Uzma also wants to promote hygiene and sanitation. She organized one of her social action projects at Vallabh Vidyapeeth School in Varanasi on the importance of cleanliness. “The school toilet was dirty and hardly accessible to girls. But after the project, the toilet is open for girls and is cleaned at least three time a day,” shares a proud Uzma.

“Being a part of the Girl Icon program has given me a chance to do better. The learning grants has helped me provide for my education. It has given me an identity and a space to share.”
“It is necessary for girls to be independent - something that is possible only through education”

Rupali is a 20-year-old entrepreneur who is the sole bread earner of her family. She runs a tailoring business from her home. She has been looking after her mother and four sisters since her father’s death in 2014. She’s a feisty young woman who also goes to college. She is in the second year of her Bachelor’s at Can Societies’ Nehru PG College, Hardoi in Uttar Pradesh.

“My peer group is highly supportive and independent, there is a lack of knowledge and many taboos attached to menstruation in our village, each girl from my peer group reached out to women and girls in neighbouring villages to discuss on the topic and break the long standing taboos related to menstruation. I feel proud of them,” Rupali shares with a sense of pride.

Rupali shares “I am a role model to my peer group and their parents as well, they all come to me to discuss their further education and subjects as well” she encourages girls to go to school and promote their education. She believes that education would create awareness and without education people would not have access to information.

“I want to be an IAS Officer to encourage people to make informed, rational and right decisions.”
“Everyone is equal and should be treated equally.”

Bharti recalls a time when her mother fell seriously ill. She was in class 8. They faced a lot of financial constraints. “Since I’m the eldest daughter, I had to look after everyone’s needs. I was worried because I was too young to take care of everyone.” However, she didn’t lose hope.

Bharti is an inquisitive 15-year old from Chhindwara in Madhya Pradesh where she resides with her parents and two younger siblings – a sister who is in class 7 and a brother in class 1.

Bharti is always intrigued and eager to learn. When she was studying in class 5, she developed an electronic model. She aspires to become a Software Engineer. Someday, she wants to start a computer lab for children because she feels these days every individual should have access to technology.

“I have faced a lot of gender discrimination, I used to think only girls should be given more focus but then the focus should be equal. Boys are given more freedom but girls are more suppressed, she wants girls to enjoy the same independence.”

Bharati is determined to fight and bring an end to any form of discrimination. Over two years Bharati along with her peer group has worked actively in her community. Together they have organised Baal Mela in her local school, where a day long “fair” was organised, and different sessions were conducted through play and speech.

She also actively works against dowry system which is still prevalent in many parts of India. She conducted a play in her community on dowry system, the play reflected the consequences of dowry practice and how it affects a girl’s life.

She also loves cricket and is an avid player. She wants to start an all-girls cricket team in Pandhurna.
“I want to stop addiction in my society.”

Priyanka hails from a small village in Khandwa district. She resides with her parents and a younger brother. She is a first year student pursuing her graduation. Growing up Priyanka had an alcoholic father and saw numerous people with the same addiction in her community leading to violence and abuse. “In my opinion, a way to check addiction is to put a ban on it; we need rehabilitation centres too.”

Priyanka happily shares “after becoming a girl icon, whatever I used to think, I am able to achieve now.” Priyanka and her peer group wants to root out domestic violence and alcoholism from their area. They do regular efforts with the help of local NGOs and Sangathan’s to make the community sensitive and aware on such issues. Together they have been able to shut down three places selling alcohol in their community and also appealed for a rehabilitation center.

As a Girl Icon she also actively advocates for Girls who have been forced to stop their formal education. She and her peer group members dream to see every girl child in school “If Girls are able to continue their education they will become confident and aware to stand for their rights and dreams just like me.”

Strong and feisty Priyanka works with an organization called Educate Girls as field coordinator and uses her income to supports her college education. She also aspires to open her own NGO to continue to work in her community. “With my new identity as a Girl Icon and the support of my peer group girls I can see this dream coming true, I am able to work much more effectively in my community than before,” shares Priyanka.
“Educated girls will bring positive changes in the society.”

Varsha resides with her parents and two younger brothers in village Raahat in Madhya Pradesh. She is currently studying in college and pursuing her graduation. Varsha is a vocal girl who is determined to inspire her community on the importance of educating girls. She says, "Once girls are educated, they will be able to raise their voices against any atrocities, and follow their dreams. Girls are always discriminated and are not treated equally. At my home, girls and women are not allowed to take part in any religious rituals." Varsha condemns this act. "Everyone should be treated equally."

Varsha runs a community library and take sessions on issues surrounding child safety/protection at her home. Varsha mentioned that after becoming a Girl Icon, she feels more confident and independent. "I used to go out only with my friend or family members but now I move around independently."

In her initiative as a Girl Icon, Varsha conducted a rally in her community on adolescent health and promoting menstrual hygiene management. Varsha shares, "Girls remain unaware of the concept of using sanitary pads and it’s disposal. Usage of cloth, comes with a lot of hygiene maintenance which also makes them prone to infections." She also actively uses social media to spread her message on adolescent health.

Varsha is passionate about social work and working for the rights of children. She aspires to start an NGO that focuses on working for disadvantaged children.
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