Resilience and Beyond!
Our Mission

Empowering girls to stand up for themselves by advancing their skills, rights, and opportunities to unlock their voice, choice, and potential.

Foreword by Eli Rai
Director of Programs

At Milaan, we are committed to building an equal and inclusive world where every girl is educated, healthy and safe. Nurturing the potential of girls and changing narratives to lead community action is central to our work. In 2015, we launched the Girl Icon program to build a movement of girl leaders and a thriving network of change agents in communities. Girls are changemakers and world shapers! They are one of the most powerful investments we can make towards building a better future - one that is just and equal.

We hope these stories of resilience, leadership and aspirations inspire you as much as they inspire us! As we celebrate 15 years of our work with and for girls, we dedicate this storybook to every girl who is changing the world, one day at a time and one community at a time.
Stories that Inspire Us!
“I want girls to look at me and think they can achieve anything they want.”

Rani has taken every opportunity to fulfil her dreams and support her family financially. Belonging to a dhobi community, Rani was expected to follow in the footsteps of her family to earn a living. But her dreams to pursue a career took her on another path. Then 17-year-old Rani joined the Girl Icon Program to become a role model and inspiration for girls in her community. With excelling in working with girls in her community, she also pursued extracurricular activities such as martial arts training, roller skating and singing, all while maintaining her academic records.

The leadership training further honed her skills to educate girls in her neighbourhood. Rani’s facilitation skills and ability to engage large groups of girls not only earned her a place in her community but also helped her earn a living by implementing youth programs. Her family’s financial status did not allow her to pursue higher education, but a champion at fighting odds, Rani solely paid for her graduation.

Her journey of overcoming these odds has been celebrated globally and covered by the Malala Fund. In 2019, the first-ever VR film of the development sector called ‘Girl Icon’ featuring Rani’s life, was globally released by Milaan, Malala Fund, ESPII Studios, and Oculus. Rani’s story of leadership and grit claimed global recognition in film festivals such as SXSW 2019 Film Festival, Tribeca Film Festival, etc. Rani also participated as a special guest at the Salesforce TDX event and was felicitated by their global team as a ‘Trailblazer’. Inspired by Rani’s actions, 100+ handwritten letters by salesforce employees were received by Rani from the USA.

Today, 22-year-old Rani works for a marketing and consulting company and lives independently in a metropolitan city. She has been working in Delhi NCR for over two years and financially supports her family. Rani was the sole earning member during the COVID-19 pandemic and supported her family overcome their financial crisis. Her aspiration to pursue a career made her break out of traditional roles and testament that girls can fulfil anything they set their minds to do. Girls in Rani’s community now follow in her footsteps to become educated and economically empowered like her.
“Education can end poverty for my family. I want to financially support my mother and continue educating my sisters”

18-year-old Akshata lives in a state-owned shelter home in Karnataka with her two sisters. Despite the adversities faced, her perseverance to succeed led to her selection into the Girl Icon Program in 2021.

Akshata’s determination towards her education and active participation in debate competitions held at district and state levels led to innumerable medals in her name. Akshata soon became a role model for children in the shelter home. The sudden demise of her father left Akshata, her sisters and her mother no source of safety and security. Her mother, with a meagre income as an agricultural tenant, was unable to support the family. The shelter home provided a safe environment to Akshata and her sisters while allowing them to continue their education.

Believing in her capabilities to lead change, Akshata’s teacher supported and guided her to apply for the program. The program’s leadership training that imparted critical knowledge and skills gave her the confidence to amplify her voice. Akshata mobilised and engaged over 100 community members and stakeholders to join her Social Action Project to promote girls’ education. Her voice on gender issues was given recognition by government officials, including the Commissioner, and she was soon invited to conduct a similar seminar in another district in the state. Armed with resources and tools, Akshata could confidently explore career choices and opportunities to pave the way for higher education.

Today she is pursuing a paramedical degree in Laboratory Sciences and aspires to become a nurse in the future. Akshata has changed the course of her destiny and is forging ahead towards a secure future for herself and her family.
Damini
“People in my community don’t value education. They look at girls as a burden and never encourage them to study in life. I don’t want this thinking to hold girls back from building their future.”

Determined to change the mindset of her community, Damini joined the Girl Icon Program in 2018. Deep-rooted cultural norms like child marriage are widely practised in Damini’s community. She recognises this as one of the key barriers to girls’ education and has dedicated her efforts to overcoming it.

21-year-old Damini is currently pursuing her first year of graduation and has been working as a girl leader for the last four years. Trained on design thinking principles through the program, Damini designed and implemented a street play (Nukkad Natak) with her peers to engage her community through social action projects. “The play had a great impact, and the message was loud and clear to the community. With my efforts, I have enrolled four girls back to school. Today, these girls are pursuing their secondary education; two are studying in 9th grade, while the other two will be completing 12th grade,” shares Damini.

In 2020, during the pandemic, Damini actively worked with government officials to fight the increase in child marriages and prevented four child marriages. An advocate for promoting girls’ education and ending child marriage, Damini became a part of the National Task Force by Niti Aayog Forum, representing the youth voices of north India.

Damini brought to the fore the lack of livelihood and upskilling opportunities and vocational centres for girls and women in rural areas. Her continuous efforts working with officials led to the opening of several Self Help Groups and vocational centres in her village. She further mobilised forty women in her community to participate.

“Milaan has given me the opportunity and identity as a Girl Icon to make a difference and stand for the rights of girls and women.”

Along with pursuing her graduation, Damini has recently applied for the position of Anganwadi Supervisor at an Integrated Child Development Centre. She is confident that her knowledge and skills acquired from the program’s comprehensive life skills education will assist her in fulfilling her aspirations. Damini also serves as a member of the girls’ advisory board at Milaan to strengthen the organisation’s mission.
Jyoti
“Every girl can do the same work a boy can. I, myself, have done it and seen it. Today, I am a role model for my village; like me, every girl can be a role model for her community.”

20-year-old Jyoti’s community is driven by deep-rooted patriarchal norms where girls are non-existent, and boys have the freedom to be educated and move around freely. After her first leadership training with Milaan, Jyoti, with support from her mother, enrolled four children (two girls and two boys) in school. As a Girl Icon, she chose to address the issue of menstruation and created awareness about it in her Social Action Project by conducting street plays and rallies in her village.

Jyoti’s creative ways of spreading awareness about menstrual health and hygiene in her community were recognised as a game-changer for breaking the social taboos and myths around ‘menstruation’ by Amar Ujala, one of the leading national Hindi news agencies in the country. During the nationwide lockdown due to the pandemic, unable to find sanitary pads for herself, Jyoti learnt how to make cloth pads at home. Cognizant of the realities of other girls and women, she further taught more girls in her peer group. Jyoti, with five more girls, went door to door in her community and surrounding villages and managed to train ninety women to stitch cloth sanitary pads, helping them menstruate hygienically and with dignity.

Jyoti actively took action during the pandemic and leveraged the medium of wall-painting to amplify government helpline numbers to fight the rise of domestic violence in the area. Jyoti helped three women seek help from authorities and saved one from taking her own life due to domestic violence. To instigate a behavioural shift in the community, Jyoti and girls in her peer group visit households with dholaks and sweets where girls are born to celebrate the birth of a daughter. “Now, people in my community look up to their daughters for inspiration and strength. Every daughter born in the village is now an occasion of celebration,” says Jyoti. Her success in driving gender equality in her community is a testament to the lasting impact she has created. Currently, a 2nd-year student of B.A., Jyoti aspires to complete her graduation and become a social worker or a teacher to continue working for girls and women at the grassroots.
“The Girl Icon Program gave me essential knowledge and the confidence I needed to pursue my career and fulfil my dreams.”

In 2021, 23-year-old Girl Icon Alumna, Rabiya, started working as an HR with the UK-based MNC in Bangalore, earning a secured income for herself and her family. She loves coding in python and is pursuing a Data Science course with plans to complete a PhD in Computer Applications.

But this was not the course of Rabiya’s life when we met her in 2016. Her own cousin's untimely death due to dowry and limited opportunities and choices for girls and women in her community motivated Rabiya to drive transformative change. For two years, Rabiya worked through the Girl Icon Program to change the status quo of girls and women in her community and advocate for equal opportunities. She advocated ending the dowry system and spreading awareness of domestic violence. Leading by her own example, despite the financial crisis, Rabiya made strides in her education.

On graduating from the program, Rabiya joined our thriving network of Alumni Girl Icons to explore pathways for higher education and employment. Our team supported Rabiya's aspirations and gave her the opportunity to pursue a Diploma in Software Engineering.

Determined to become economically empowered, Rabiya became the first girl in her village to complete an intermediate degree in Computer Applications and secure a job in a multinational company. Rabiya’s story is a testament to the potential of girls in changing their own destinies and that of their families.
“Girls can only achieve their goals by continuing their education. So, I want every girl to educate themselves and become self-reliant!”

In 2021, thirteen-year-old Pratibha, a 9th-grade student, joined the Girl Icon Program. Even before she joined the program, she had enrolled six school dropout girls in her community back to school with the help of her father.

Pratibha belongs to a small village in Uttar Pradesh, a state that accounts for the majority of school dropout girls in the country. She understands the importance of education and has advocated for it from a young age with support from her father.

Determined to build Pratibha’s capabilities further, her father helped her to apply for the Girl Icon Program. The program gave Pratibha the knowledge, skills and tools that enabled her as a grassroots girl leader to work with girls and her community at large. With support from leadership training and encouragement from her father, Pratibha raised awareness of girls’ education and child marriage. She leveraged wall painting and community participation tools such as Social Action Projects and the ‘Back to School’ campaign during the pandemic to ensure girls return to school.

Pratibha, with her collective, stopped a child marriage of a peer member, Radha. They persevered and negotiated with her family until the wedding was called off. Today, Radha is completing her secondary education.

Pratibha’s determination to work on the issue led to the enrollment of fourteen girls in school. Inspired by her daughter’s resolve to work on girls’ education, Pratibha’s 37-year-old mother decided to complete her schooling after a long learning gap of 17 years. Today, Pratibha’s mother is in 11th grade, pursuing her senior secondary education and is also the head of a Self Help Group in her village. Pratibha is currently studying in 10th standard and aspires to become an IAS officer to bring transformational change in the status of girls' education and end practices like child marriage.
“Having a space and time to come together made us stronger in overcoming our individual challenges collectively.”

16-year-old Eshwari from Karnataka is the child of a single parent. Her mother was forcibly initiated into the Devadasi system at a very young age and continues to work as a Devdasi. This practice is widely believed to have been abandoned decades ago but continues to operate in the overlooked rural patches of southern India. Taking care of Eshwari and her eight siblings became increasingly difficult for her mother as a sole earning member who received a meagre income.

This compelled Eshwari to join a state-owned shelter home, where she was introduced to the Girl Icon program. Eshwari’s perseverance to complete her education and her passion to achieve gender equality led to her rise as an efficient leader. Her facilitation skills when working with girls made her peer meetings a thriving space. Eshwari conducted sessions on reproductive rights, menstrual health and hygiene, career choices, rights and laws, etc., with her peer members on a weekly basis. She also ensured girls felt safe to discuss their problems and support each other.

The strength of her collective was evident in the Social Action Project they implemented through a street play on child marriage. The community project was attended by more than 150 community members and officials from the Child Welfare Department of Karnataka. Eshwari earned recognition from government officials and received support in further strengthening her work. A student in 11th grade, Eshwari aspires to pursue MBBS and become a doctor to cater to the healthcare needs of Devadasis. She wants to mitigate sexual and reproductive health issues prevailing in her community. She also aspires to become a cultivator of change by educating the young girls of her village and pulling them out of the Devadasi system.
Priya
17-year-old Priya cycles 16 km every day to reach college, where she is pursuing her graduation in Anthropology. She is one of the only girls from her village to pursue higher education. We met Priya in 2018, and her deep knowledge of the nuances of grassroots and gender-regressive norms led to her selection for the Girl Icon Program. In no time, armed with Milaan’s leadership training, Priya soon emerged as a voice for girls’ education in her community. She stopped two child marriages and enrolled four girls back in school. She also brought an 18-year-old girl to school. Due to her family’s negligence towards her and her future, she was not sent to school.

Priya also extensively worked around menstruation, a topic shrouded in shame, discrimination and lack of awareness. From being treated as “untouchables” to dropping out of school and more, the taboos around menstruation had adversely impacted girls in her community. Along with working with girls, Priya also involved critical stakeholders and community gatekeepers. This helped her build a rapport in her community and increase the girls’ participation in her community.

She implemented her Social Action Project on MHM in a temple to break one of the most dominant taboos around menstruation. Girls and women are not allowed to enter temples or prayer rooms as they are considered impure during menstruation. Priya’s unique choice of place showcases the confidence and critical thinking abilities she exhibited as a girl leader. Her grandmother and religious leaders supported Priya in her actions, leading to community mobilisation on a large scale.

Priya aspires to open a computer centre in her community. “I don’t know how to use a computer properly, but I want to learn and want others around me to learn as it is extremely important in today’s time to have basic computer knowledge for any job”, shares Priya.

Apart from pursuing her studies, Priya works as a part-time Project Assistant with Milaan, where she provides monitoring and guidance support to upcoming Girl Icons. The stipend earned from her work supports her higher education. Every evening, Priya tutors ten children in her community and saves the money earned to fulfil her dream of starting a computer coaching centre in her village soon.
Ruchi
“When I play, I feel the freedom, and I want all girls who dream, to be able to feel that freedom in their lives.”

In the fields of Damoh, in the vicinity of Madhya Pradesh, one can find 22-year-old Ruchi swinging her bat and tossing the ball right beyond the boundary of the cricket ground. Encircling her is a crowd, witnessing how their star champion fares the best.

But this was not the landscape of Ruchi’s life years ago when we met her in 2016. Hailing from a low-income family with four sisters, Ruchi has broken down a wide range of gender boundaries to create an equitable playing field. Her family did not accept the idea of a young girl stepping out of the house and venturing into a sport that is predominantly played by men.

Ruchi’s life was a reflection of social barriers that restrict girls from fulfilling their dreams. Her commitment to driving change in her life and the lives of girls in her community strengthened her engagement with her community members during her leadership journey.

At 19, Ruchi moved from her village to a city to fulfil her aspirations. With no financial support, Ruchi worked during the day in a departmental store to make ends meet while the nights were occupied with field practice.

Her determination brought her to the state-level cricket championship and brought acknowledgement, fuelling her community’s belief in the power of girls. Ruchi succeeded in breaking down barriers for girls in her community.

Today, working as a Project Coordinator in Milaan, Ruchi has bagged many medals to her name in Cricket, Kabaddi and Hockey championships at the national level. She has also won a token of appreciation from the Member of the Legislative Assembly of her constituency. She has trained a number of marginalised girls in Integrated Child Development Centres in Sports. She also strives to play for the Indian Women’s Cricket team and become a role model for millions of girls in the country.
Tusha
“Today, they all study together and often come to me for guidance and support.”

Aware of the realities of her village, Tusha knew that the girls in her community were keen to enrol in school, but their families weren't allowing them to join because they did not see the value in educating their daughters. Their lack of awareness about the importance of education for girls led them to only view them as domestic help.

Looking for an opportunity that would strengthen her voice and give her a platform to demand equal opportunities for girls, Tusha applied for the Girl Icon Program in 2018. She was in the second year of her leadership training when the pandemic changed everything.

Girls and women, especially those in marginalised and poor communities have been most affected by the pandemic. 20 million adolescent girls in the world may never set foot in classrooms again due to it. But evidence also shows that they have shown effective leadership, rapid response and socially inclusive solutions to tackle the challenges of the pandemic.

Tusha has made tremendous efforts to ensure girls return to school in her village despite the nationwide lockdown and other challenges. She carried out a door-to-door survey in the midst of the pandemic and identified households with out-of-school girls.

With her learnings on negotiation and communication from the training, she skillfully counselled and convinced 13 sets of parents to enrol their daughters in school. But that was not enough; pandemic-driven school closures meant that Tusha had to make several rounds to the school due to many challenges, from the unavailability of staff to a lack of documents for the girls. Mobility for Tusha and the girls to reach the school was yet another issue during the time, but Tusha finally succeeded in enrolling 13 girls to school.

Tusha has continued to work with girls and women, while her mother has played a critical role in strengthening her efforts toward community awareness and engagement. Tusha is currently studying in 12th grade and aspires to secure higher education and employment opportunities in the near future.
“I started coaching classes because I could not just sit and watch girls lose hope of achieving their dreams.”

Ruksar’s journey started with the Girl Icon Program in 2015 when Girl Icon Khushboo invited her to join her peer group. Ruskar’s struggle started from within her own family which did not allow her to pursue an education. Her journey as a peer member and support from Khushboo gave her the agency to convince her parents to continue her education.

Inspired by Khushboo’s actions who she fondly calls ‘aapi’, Ruskar followed her footsteps and applied for the Girl Icon Program in 2018 to take lead in her community and continue creating safe spaces for girls. Ruksar belongs to a conservative slum in Lucknow where girls are not even allowed to view outside the window. Ruskar has not accepted this fate for girls and continues to amplify her voice within her own family and outside. She has enrolled 20 children, especially girls in school and has shown proven abilities to lead transformative action.

With the onset of the nationwide lockdown, the majority of families in her community lost their livelihoods. Ruksar took action, cognizant of realities that a deepening financial crisis would place the needs of girls’ education even further below the priority ladder and disproportionately affect them.

Ruksar began coaching classes for girls in her community to continue fuelling their dreams and aspirations. She has also made steady progress towards her own education and is the first girl in her family to complete 12 years of schooling and pursue a graduate degree. Today, Ruksar is pursuing second year of graduation in Bachelor of Arts with the support of an educational scholarship. With Ruksar, her parents have also experienced tremendous growth in her. They support Ruskar in continuing her education and are confident in her ability to earn a living for her family.
Reena
“I want girls to understand the importance of taking a stand against what is wrong and how it will help them shape their future and careers, which is not limited to the kitchen.”

A farmer’s daughter, Reena, belongs to a tribal community in Madhya Pradesh. Added to her age and gender, she also stands at the intersection of deep-rooted casteism. Reena recalls, “I used to study in my village and didn’t realise we had financial issues until I was unable to pay my school fees and had been asked to stand outside the class. Even after continuous attempts, my father was unable to pay the fees, and I had to leave. I joined the government hostel to continue my education.” Reena joined the Girl Icon Program with support from her hostel warden in 2017 and designed her Social Action Project on alcohol abuse, a prevalent issue in her village. “I have seen women and children suffering because consumption of alcohol leads to domestic violence. It has become a very common scenario in our village. The men would drink in the evening and end up abusing the women and the children.”

Reena and her peer group members successfully organised a play, highlighting alcohol abuse from the families’ point of view and issues relating to domestic violence. Community members supported and reflected on the issue, and her own father slowly gave up alcohol. “It was not much but still a start for us. Ever since I’ve felt confident about our Social Action Projects.”

“I come from a place where girls are engaged in household work. If you happen to go around, you’ll see for yourself. They are trained to be good at household work. Whereas, their education and career growth come last in their priorities. I want to tell them about the different ways we, as girls, face discrimination in our daily lives and how we have become used to that as a part of our routine. I learned in one of our trainings how we have categorised roles based on one’s gender, and I’d like to work on breaking such stereotypes,” shares Reena.

Reena wants to be the driving force for girls in her community. She is currently pursuing a degree in Law and is keen to join the Police Force. “I want to be in the police to set an example for girls. I want to end violence against women, and I feel that being in that position will help me inspire many more girls to overcome barriers and be more than just ordinary.”
Sakkubai
“I am fortunate to attend school along with my two younger sisters. I want to become a role model for girls who have given up on their dreams, given a chance we can and will meet our aspirations!”

In 2018, 12 years old Sakkubai is one of our youngest Girl Icons from Karnataka. But eldest amongst her 2 sisters, Sakkubai was determined and preserved to build a future for herself and her sisters. Sakkubai lost her mother to domestic violence and was abandoned by her father. This resulted in Sakkubai joining the state-owned shelter home where she was soon introduced to the Girl Icon Program.

Sakkubai mobilised a group of 20 girls from different villages so that she could create awareness around girls' education widely. Sakkubai, especially took permission to collectivise girls in a school premises for her weekly peer meetings. Her teachers supported her action and Sakkubai conducted sessions with school-going and out-of-school girls. Her efforts led to the enrollment of 12 girls in school. And with the continued support of her peer group and teachers, she brought out other girls who are in adverse situations like child marriage and child labour.

Sakkubai’s commitment towards her education showed remarkable progress. Studying in grade 12, she actively participates in debates and academic competitions and has many trophies to her name at state-level competitions. Sakkubhayi wants to pursue a career in law and become an advocate for girls’ rights to create a just society for girls.
“Girls have a lot of potential, I wish girls have the same access to education and resources to build a secure future.”

In 2016, Saba joined the Girl Icon Program to inspire girls to pursue their dreams and prove to the world that girls are capable of doing great things. In Saba’s community, girls are not encouraged to study, especially engineering. But Saba aspired to become a Software Engineer and change the community’s mindset towards girls’ education.

During her leadership journey, Saba promoted girls’ education and tackled the issue of eve-teasing. She provided free tuition to girls in her community to encourage them to study. The training enabled Saba with the knowledge to increase her engagement with her community. Her elder brother has played an instrumental role in motivating her to explore her full potential and advocate for a just society.

In 2020, during the onset of the pandemic, Saba, with her three brothers, made short films on mobile to fight the stigma against COVID-19 health workers and families. They made consistent efforts to fight myths in their community during the pandemic. Their film was also shortlisted for potential national broadcast by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India. Passionate to lead change, Saba has participated in national forums representing youth voices and bringing to the fore issues faced by adolescent girls from low-income communities.

Today, Saba works as a climate change advocate and serves as a steering committee member and an advisory board member of a USA-based non-profit, ‘Shadhika’. She is also on the youth advisory board of 10 to 19 Dasra adolescent collaboratives. She actively strategize with gender experts, organisations and youth advocates on creating effective solutions to promote girls’ education. Saba is pursuing her Master in Computer Applications and is working towards securing employment. She aims to become financially independent and contribute to supporting her family and her younger brothers’ education.
“I will continue to amplify my voice towards equal opportunities for girls and women in my community.”

In 2015, Rajni became one of the first girls to be recognized by the Girl Icon Program and trained as a grassroots girl leader. Forced to marry at the age of 14, Rajni’s life stood at the intersection of her age, gender and caste. Born in a historically marginalised Dalit community, Rajni fought to stay in school and stopped her own child marriage in 8th grade. Her belief in the power of education was nurtured through training and Rajni continued to amplify her voice and took transformative action in her community towards girls’ education. She stopped six child marriages and enrolled twenty girls to school during her leadership journey.

Rajni managed to make the best out of government schooling and consistently held a good academic record. Passionate about education, when she realised that she wouldn’t have enough money to regularly commute to college, she decided to travel 60 km by bicycle on a daily basis. A known name in her community, Rajni has emerged as a role model by becoming the first postgraduate scholar from her family and community. As an active member of Mahila Samakhya and the leader of the Kishori Sangh in her village, she conducted workshops on equal rights and gender equality.

Rajni’s ability to scrutinise societal issues and norms is phenomenal; her understanding of the rights and responsibilities of governmentally run local bodies contributes to her logically sound local solutions, especially towards girls’ education. She has worked closely with police officials and earned appreciation for stopping child marriages.

Her story of fighting regressive cultural norms in one of the most marginalised communities has been widely celebrated nationally and globally by the Times of India, Malala Fund, CNN international, etc., to inspire action. Being educated and honing her skills and knowledge helped Rajni to earn community trust and recognition. In 2019, she started a community-based organisation to deepen her work in women’s empowerment. She actively worked during the pandemic and helped her community through social welfare schemes and ration distribution. In 2021, Rajni also contested for Panchayat elections. Rajni is consistently rising to change the fate of girls and women in her community. Today, her story as a women leader continues to inspire the endeavour towards an equal world.
Milaan empowers and educates adolescent girls through the ‘Girl Icon Program’ to become agents of change through the lens that girls are best suited to understand their unique circumstances and hence, must take centre stage in their own transformation.

Started in 2015, The Girl Icon Program is a girl-led leadership development program that invests in collectivising girls at the grassroots, delivering comprehensive life-skills-based education, and instigating collective social actions on issues that affect adolescent girls.

“The Girl Icon Program develops and fosters a series of self-positive behaviours that are essential for continued resilience and future leadership. Empowerment is a personal journey, as unique and diverse as the individuals themselves. Milaan’s Girl Icon Program provides essential empowerment training for girls as a stepping stone, exposing girls to structural gender challenges and encouraging girls to believe in their own abilities and to foster a sense of self.” - University of California, Berkeley.