

# Youth contribution

## Negotiating everyday life in a Delhi slum as a Muslim girl

*Samiya Zarif*

India's capital, Delhi, has skyscrapers, bungalows and unauthorised *bastis*/slums. I live in one such *basti* known as Gandhi camp situated near popular *Okhla mandi* (*mandi* means a wholesale vegetable and fruit market). In this *basti*, many families are daily wage labourers and their livelihood is fully dependent on the *mandi*. There is no holiday for them; one day with no work means one day with no meals. All the families have migrated to Delhi from the northern Indian states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

I, Samiya, an 18-year-old adolescent girl, have been part of Butterflies since 2015. Butterflies is an organisation (NGO) founded in 1989 with the goal of protecting and supporting children who are poor and live in difficult and challenging situations to be admitted to schools, complete our high school, learn life skills and to aspire to change our lives for the better. What I appreciate about Butterflies is that the approach is democratic; adolescents and children have the right and space to be consulted and have our views taken seriously. It believes in children's rights and supports families to stay together.

I came to know about Butterflies when I saw a yellow bus (later I realised that it was a mobile school for children) in which there was a library, laptops and interesting videos. Gradually, I learnt more about the organisation and became part of all of its programmes – education, children's cooperatives,

sports, theatre and media. I participated actively in *Bal Sabhas* (Children's Council) where children come together, share their issues, discuss them and resolve them. This Council gave me the platform to express and share my views, to negotiate and to listen to other opinions, and then take decisions. These processes taught me the value of participation and how I can exercise agency to be democratic and support others. Earlier, I was afraid to speak my mind, but now I have the confidence. I have not learnt these values at school.

My parents were initially reluctant when I joined Butterflies. They feared that I would indulge in wrong activities. However, my mother, when she started attending meetings organised by Butterflies for parents, realised that I was at the right place; more so because I was provided with post-school support without any cost, was attending health sessions and had opportunities to participate in workshops, sports and theatre. Gradually, my parents allowed my siblings to be part of Butterflies too.

The children's cooperatives programme run by Butterflies is close to my heart as it has seen us as active agents rather than objects. Every aspect of this programme gives an opportunity to children and adolescents to assess their needs, devise solutions, and shape strategies and carry them out. It changed me, as it has taught me the importance of saving for one's health and of a cooperative way of living. In cooperatives, since we work collectively, everyone pays attention to our voices. For example, in my community, there were open drains and one day a child fell into the drain and died (this happened three years ago). The open drain was dangerous for children playing on the streets. No one seemed serious about this or cared about it. This disturbed us children and we brought this issue to our *Bal Sabha* meeting, and we discussed and decided to petition the local administration, and we did that. The local administration was surprised that this issue had come to them through a group of children and adolescents. As a result, work started and the drains were covered. I think a single person would not have managed this, but it was cooperatives and children and adolescents who came together and made it possible. That is the power of the cooperative.

When Covid-19 first appeared, I could use the cooperative approach to help families in dire need. Covid-19 has robbed families of their livelihood and daily wages, even my family was one of them. All were worried about where their next meal would come from.

The Delhi government initiated a service during lockdown to provide dry rations to people who do not have ration cards by registering on an e-portal. Unfortunately, many were not aware of this information. Some of them knew about it, but they could not do anything as they lacked digital skills and some did not have a smart phone. Since we are part of a cooperative, we knew our community and families who did not have ration cards and needed

help. I called up my three friends on their parent's mobile phone to prepare a list of such families who needed help to register on the e-portal.

There were some families who hesitated to share information about their individual members. Then, we reached out to the Child Social Protection Committees, which are present in each of the communities where Butterflies works. These committees are a Butterflies initiative, and have many members ranging from parents, school teachers, primary health care workers and local administration officials, and even elected representatives and children as members. The committee members talked to families that were hesitant and convinced them to ask for help. At last, we had the list of 22 families who needed urgent support. I met each family and uploaded their details onto the e-portal using my father's smartphone. You need a smart phone to register the details on the e-portal. Within a week, those families got a message from the Delhi government on their mobile phone and by showing the message at the distribution centre, they received the dry rations for three months. Their smiles of gratitude were an acknowledgement that our cooperative matters, and can make a difference.

Doing all this was not easy given my gender and that I am from a working class Muslim community. I had to struggle right from childhood when I told my parents that I wanted to continue my education, because in my community many girls are married off once they complete 10th grade. My older sister also could not pursue studies after 12th grade because of these social norms but I persisted and succeeded as I learnt to negotiate and exercise agency – which means I can think about myself and my future. Today, all my siblings are pursuing studies and they are poised to dream.

When I was with my friends and started helping families who needed rations, one or two men would call my father and say, 'What is your daughter doing, visiting families in the neighbourhood? Control her!' But my father knew and stood by me, and when we were able to get rations for a few families, all the prejudice vanished. Other families even came and left their documents at my home so that I could register them on the government e-portal and help them.

Today I have started teaching a few children in my community and often I remind their parents that they must educate their children. They listen to me with grace and share that they will do so. Right from my home to the community, I believe that I have understood the importance of my voice, and people heard it too.



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