

Syedah's Journey: From Child Marriage to Activist

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Syedah Binti Nur Husain is a women rights activist and community leader with the Rohingya Women's Development Network (RWDN). In her interview with Sharifah Shakira (founder of RWDN), Syedah shares her experiences from her childhood; the displacement but also the life as a Rohingya woman. This story is about an inspiring young lady, who is bravely trying to bring change in her community by empowering women to become independent.

She starts her story at the beginning. She was born in Myanmar during the on-going Genocide that has been taking place against the Rohingya community.

During the interview, Syedah was at first hesitant to share intimate and personal experiences with the world. She was not able to express her emotions without getting teary eyed, especially when she thought about her mother's struggle. It was apparent that the pain from this memory still exists in her heart.

The Myanmar government refuses to acknowledge the Rohingya community as citizens, even if they are born there. The United Nation have confronted the Myanmar's government, regarding the injustice taking place against the Rohingya people, who are one of the largest Muslim minority groups living in a predominately Buddhist country. The government has denied them their human rights and views them as illegal immigrants residing in their country. Buddhist and government supported groups have burned entire villages, actively engaging in genocide and persecution of

the Rohingya people. The Rohingya community are being treated inhumanely and are being abused physically, emotionally and mentally every day.

As she remembers this, Syedah stops the interview for a moment. She has experienced flashbacks of her journey and remembered the traumatic events of that time. This caused her to experience overwhelming feelings and she had to take a few minutes to gain her composure back in the interview. She kept apologizing for crying because she couldn't believe those memories still manage to prick her heart. To relive those moments which seem to be one's nightmare was an uncomfortable yet courageous decision. This discrimination and persecution towards Syedah and her family escalated into increasingly violent outbreaks, which threatened their lives. Eventually the decision was made to flee to a nearby country. Syedah's mother had no other option but to try to escape even if it meant putting their lives at risk.

Syedah embarked on her journey to Thailand, walking for miles and miles with her two daughters by her side. Syedah was very young at that time and barely recalls the journey. However, she remembers when she was crossing the sea by boat with her mother and sister heading to Malaysia. She was tightly grasping to her mother's hand while hoping to make it out alive, being deathly afraid of being separated from her mother or being caught by the police.

Along the way, she encountered many dead bodies floating on the water as she felt her stomach sink with terror. Finally, they reached the Refugee camp in Malaysia and were picked up by a relative immediately. She was relieved that they survived the horrific journey and was ready to put her miserable days behind her, only to face many more challenges ahead.

Her mother, she describes, is a fearless woman who escaped the persecution in Myanmar and saved her two daughters from harm. Little did she know that her mother would face emotional blackmail, disrespectful taunts and pressure to remarry by her relatives. If she did not they threatened to sell her off. Syedah remembers feeling anger and helplessness in that situation because she was not able to help her mother escape that forced decision. Eventually, her mother remarried which caused a rift between the mother and daughter relationship.

Syedah, aged around 15 years old, left her family home in Kuala Lumpur. She eloped with her new husband. She also could not accept her stepfather and was filled with rage due to what had happened. This event caused her to become distant from her family. She suffered depression and thoughts of suicide would often cross her mind. She started questioning her existence because she felt invisible and silenced. No one was listening to her and she felt like disappearing from everyone's lives. After some time the situation started to mend, and she welcomed her baby brother into her family. Living with her new family she realized her stepfather was a decent man. He always supported and stood up for them in their society, gradually her emotions softened towards him. She finally had some stability in her life and felt taken care of by her step-father.

Syedah attended a school in Kuala Lumpur

which was for refugee children, after 2 months she decided to stop attending because she felt demotivated. Refugees do not have access to primary or secondary educational institutions in Malaysia. This means they cannot access standardised curriculum nor testing to achieve recognised qualifications. As a response many NGOs, local community groups, religious organisations and refugee-led groups, supported the refugee communities to set up informal centres. These learning centres lacked recreational activities, basic school supplies, efficient teachers and students. The lack of continuity and structure made studying difficult for Syedah.

Her stepfather started teaching them at home, but it didn't last long. In the Rohingya community once girls reach the age of puberty, they are pressured into marriage. At the age of 11 Syedah's cousins were married. This felt like a normal occurrence to her. However, it was frequently pointed out to her that she was 15 years old and unmarried. She felt that she was delaying her marriage because everyone around her age was already married. Everyone she knew was getting married young, and her family were being pressured from others in the community. Her stepfather's friends were asking for her hand in marriage. At this point, she decided getting married with someone closer to her age was a better idea. In 2007, she decided to elope and get married despite her family's disapproval.

Although, once she was married, she started feeling like her life has become, nothing but a chain of obligations. She realized that she's just a child who wanted to escape from the burden she was carrying. She didn't know understand what her responsibilities were as a wife. The family and cultural expectations confused her. Living with her husband and her in-laws made

things much harder and the family had expectations of her that she could not understand.

They lived with the in-laws and she felt all her flaws were being picked on and constantly both husband and wife felt shamed. This led to



Photo Credit: Syedah Husain. Syedah was approximately 15 years old in this photograph.

domestic violence in the her relationship, which increased her depression.

When she was 16 years old, she became pregnant at and was unaware of how to manage her pregnancy complications. She didn't understand the process of being pregnant and felt dislocated from herself. Suddenly her stomach is getting bigger and she struggled to know what was happening. During her labour, the nurse asked her to push. But, she didn't know what push meant, and didn't know what to do. In many ways she felt like a child. She was embarrassed and confused because she didn't have adequate knowledge of her own reproductive system. Later on, Syedah experienced domestic violence and during this time, she felt miserable, suffocated and didn't know how to cope physically, emotionally or mentally. She was barely discovering herself when she became a mother for the first time. She did not have the emotional maturity or financial means to raise a child. She had post-natal depression, but like many Rohingya women in Malaysia she didn't understand what her mental health issue meant. Nor were there adequate services nor support available to help her understand or access therapy. She remembers feeling like a child who just got a new toy (her daughter) to play with, but she did not experience any motherly emotions or instincts. She was at a point in her marriage where she was contemplating a divorce from her husband.

She witnessed her cousins (who had originally been married at the age of 11) getting divorced and remarrying multiple times. They all experienced domestic violence in their relationships. They also struggled to know their responsibility as a wife and how to live by the Rohingya community rules. When Syedah was not able to cook, make her husband happy or

listen to him, then the abuse and violence would start.

The women have no role in the community, outside of their marriage. They are not independent, and have no financial resources of their own. They need to get married to be looked after by the husband.

Syedah eventually decided she will remain patient and work on her marriage instead. Fortunately, they were able to work out their marital problems. After leaving her in-laws home, both her husband and herself were able to speak to each other more easily. They were both very young when they got married and couldn't understand each other. After the baby was born and they had their own space, they started to understand each other better. Now, she says she has his full support for wanting to advocate against child marriages.

For Syedah there are many dangers of child marriage. It can destroy a person's life. As a woman she couldn't enjoy her life, or understand herself before becoming a mother. She felt forced into it by her environment, family and community. She lost her childhood and became an adult too young. If she had more information she would not have gotten married so young.

Now, she wants her community to understand these dangers of getting married at a young age and how it ruins and destroys their community. Though Syedah took it upon her shoulders to preach against child marriage, it is hard to get her community to listen. How long would Syedah, alone, continue speaking to a group of people refusing to change their minds about child marriages? Eventually, Syedah gave up advocating because she felt alone and hopeless. She decided to rather focus on raising her daughter and making sure she is empowered

through education.

In 2017, Syedah attended a training session at RWDN, (Rohingya Women Development Network) which is a Rohingya woman-led organization that tackles social issues, including gender equality, in their community. The workshop she attended was on mental health, and she realised this is what she was experiencing. Syedah observed how other communities have solidarity among themselves and that inspired her to feel empowered to start advocating for her community once again. Syedah decided to join RWDN. She started her training which would lead her to start teaching within her community. As soon as she joined the team, she took on leadership roles within the organisation due to her dedication towards her cause.

She is now the Community Leader in charge of creating awareness of social injustice within their community. She speaks Bahasa Melayu (Malay language) and English as well as the Rohingya language. This means she can reach out to the Malaysian Government for support, UNHCR and media to raise awareness on child marriage and domestic violence. She continues to try to educate her community on mental health, domestic violence and child marriage through arranging workshops, leading women to do crafts and livelihoods projects. RWDN's philosophy is that workshops on mental health or education alone cannot create change. Women must take active roles in their own empowerment and this means they must earn money and be seen for this by the family and community. During the COVID-19 pandemic time for the Rohingya community in Malaysia, many have lost their jobs and been unable to support their families. The women who have been able to work through RWDN's crafts and entrepreneurship projects however have been able to continue with their work. For the first



Photo Credit: Sharifah Shakirah. RWDN's Earrings Entrepreneurship Project with Rohingya Women Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

time becoming the main bread winners. For men, who have previously not seen women being able to help, this has been a big change.

Syedah journey has been a large success, in that she went from experiencing child marriage, domestic violence and depression to being able to speak on these issues. From attending RWDN's mental health courses, she now is leading them. In addition to these roles, she is also acting as a community counsellor. Counselling with professionals is difficult for Rohingya women, because they require translators, who may not be sensitive to their problems or may mistranslate. Community counselling means the women can share experiences and find solutions together.

Being such a powerful young woman and empowering women to do the same takes much

strength. Unfortunately, her role is not without challenges. People in her community who do not understand her cause or fear the empowered women. They instead try to bring your morale down by trying to slander the names of women leaders. It is challenging to work with a community who does not wish to change. Rumours against the female leaders are often used to discredit their agency and voice. It is hard to work for a community that seeks to work against you.

In 2018, Syedah gave birth to her second daughter and at that time, she experienced different emotions than she did with her first daughter. This time, luckily she no longer experienced post-natal depression. She was older and more mature, and she was able to cope with her maternal role.

Syedah was experiencing emotions that are commonly referred to as, “motherly instincts” which was an exciting moment for her, since she didn’t experience it with her first born.

She has now been married for 10 years and has two daughters, whom she dearly loves and wants to see them as empowered women. She has an open and friendly relationship with her older daughter, because she understands how important it is to know about your own health and about yourself before you get married. Syedah allows her daughter to help her at RWDN in her spare time, but getting her a strong education is her first priority. She wants to educate her daughters— and let them be successful. She says she will never pressure them into marriage. They will choose their own husbands,

men she hopes are also educated. She wants to stop child marriage by educating and empowering the women in her community, by giving women the tools to know themselves and to earn money .

From time to time, Syedah still has nightmares of her past because the events that she has experienced have been traumatizing to her. Nevertheless, Syedah believes in learning from the past, but focuses on the future, changing one life at a time.



Photo Credit: Sharifah
Shakirah, RWDN's Founder.

Photo Credit: Syedah Husain at RWDN. Selling the Earrings and RWDN's cookbook at the local refugee events in Kuala Lumpur

