

BELIEVE

Basera-e-Tabassum

“At age 22, I have 50 kids!”

She didn't speak their language, she didn't have much of an education and she was a teenager, yet Salima took on the role of warden and mama to more than 50 children orphaned by militancy in Kashmir. Purabi Shridhar finds out what it takes from the gutsy 22-year-old



Salima and her girls, after a day in school. The girls have their hair cropped when they're little, it makes life more manageable at bathtime

Salima Akhter Bhat says she had a “selfish” reason for choosing to work as warden in a rehab home. “I didn’t know what the work would be; I just needed to earn money.” This “selfish” work involves protecting and taking care of the most vulnerable of

Kashmir’s people. Salima manages Basera-e-Tabassum, a home for girls orphaned by militancy in Kupwara District. The name is Urdu for ‘abode of smiles’ and this young woman has played a large role in making it one.

Kupwara gets into the news for all the wrong reasons: the devastating

earthquake in its Uri sector in 2005, and the ever-present spectre of terrorism. Basera-e-Tabassum was set up by the Pune-based Borderless World Foundation (BWF) and, at 22, Salima is in charge of the well being of the more than 50 children who live at the home. >

PHOTOGRAPH BY DMF

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Salima says, "I have a relationship with the girls that I cannot explain; it comes from my heart and mind." It's a deep bond thanks also to the fact that Salima grew up alongside the children. Her journey is as remarkable as theirs.

"When I first came here, I was sad. But Salima didi made me forget everything and be happy. You will never meet anyone like her. My sister, Shenaz, is here too and she's in kindergarten."

Rubina, 12

"WHEN I STARTED, I WAS SO SCARED, I ONCE RAN AWAY!"

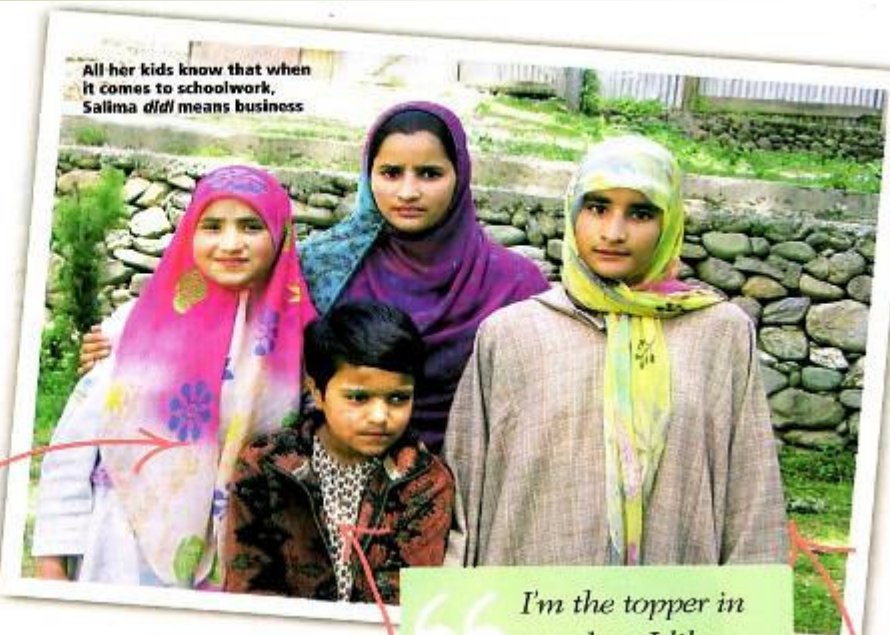
"After sid IX, I needed to support my family so I went to Basera-e-Tabassum looking for a job. I only spoke Kashmiri, no Urdu. I was very scared; I didn't know what work I could do. But the chairman of BWE, Adhik Kadam, spent a lot of time explaining the functioning of the home to me.

"A couple of weeks after I arrived, the chairman had to leave for Pune. A month later, the cook left too. I felt completely helpless, so a few months later, I ran back home to my family."

"I CAN'T THINK OF MARRIAGE"

"It was then that my older sister explained to me that I could not leave that way; I was given a responsibility and I had to see it through. I came back the same day. After that, I have never once thought of leaving. Today I'm not scared. Even the local community here stands behind Basera-e-Tabassum and its cause.

"Last year, my family was very insistent I go back to get married, but



All her kids know that when it comes to schoolwork, Salima didi means business

"Salima didi plays with me and when I have trouble with schoolwork, she helps me out. I really like it here, I don't want to go back home now."

Rukaya, 8

"I'm the topper in my class. I like staying here; Salima didi looks after our studies, food, clothes, everything. When required she is strict too, though I have never seen that side of her."

Jamila, 13

I refused outright. I can't think of marriage. I might have come here for the money, but now my work is a relationship. I'm *badi didi* (older sister) to the girls."

"ALL MY KIDS GO TO SCHOOL"

"A month ago, five-year-old Zahida came to Basera-e-Tabassum. She wouldn't smile or even talk; she missed her family and cried a lot. When they are first brought here, the girls tend to be very withdrawn. I sit down and talk to them, explain that we are here for each other; that we're in this together. Now Zahida enjoys going to nursery school, she smiles all the time and plays with the other children. The other day, when someone came to take her back, she refused to leave.

"I don't like it when anybody calls the girls *yateem* (orphaned) and I hate it when they call this a hostel. This is a home. Girls who have lost their families come here and find another, bigger family. They come from all over Kupwara region. Some are victims of the earthquake and others have lost their parents to militancy.

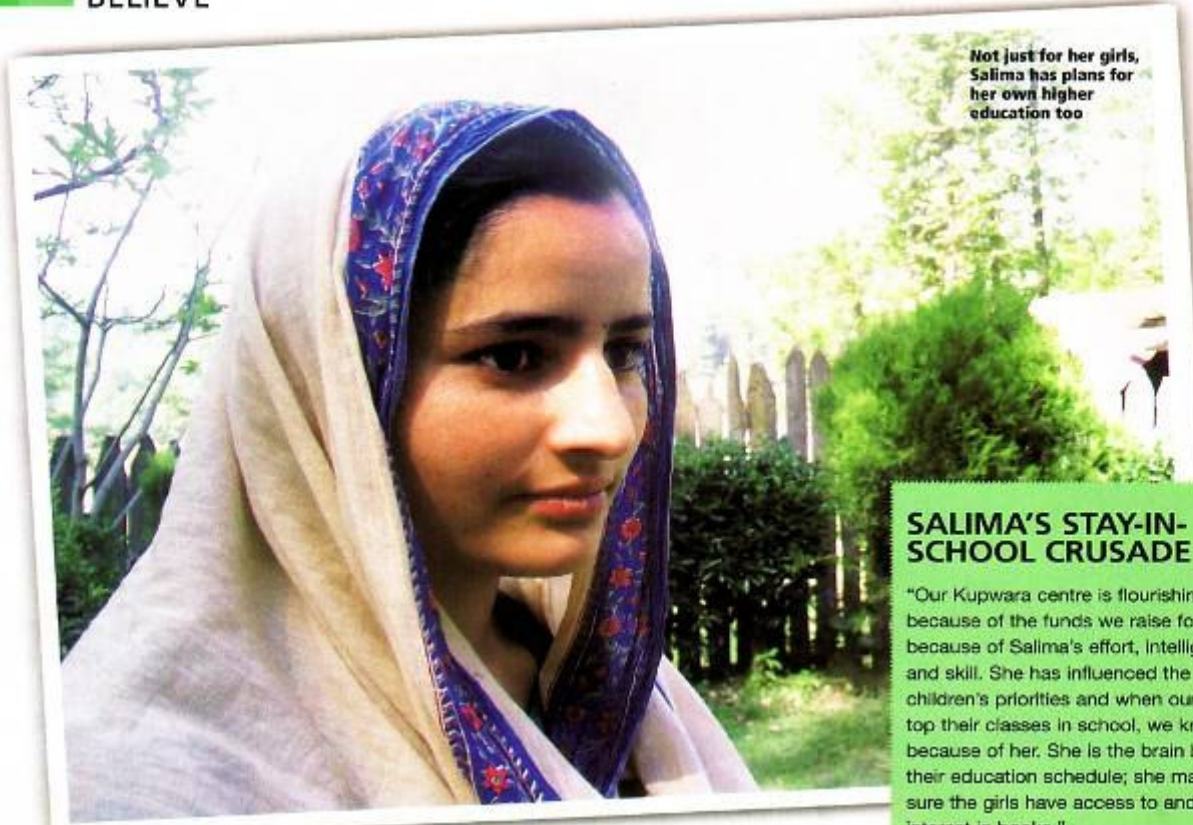
"The girls who come here from very remote areas need special attention. They aren't interested in school and don't know much about hygiene. We work especially hard with these children. All my kids go to school, each and every one."

"WE LIVE A SIMPLE LIFE HERE"

"I'm up at 5.30 am and then wake up the girls. After ablutions we say *namaz*, have tea and by 9.30 am, the girls leave for school. The older ones >

PHOTOGRAPH: JAVED AH-MAD LONE

BELIEVE



Not just for her girls, Salima has plans for her own higher education too

SALIMA'S STAY-IN-SCHOOL CRUSADE

"Our Kupwara centre is flourishing not because of the funds we raise for it, but because of Salima's effort, intelligence and skill. She has influenced the children's priorities and when our girls top their classes in school, we know it is because of her. She is the brain behind their education schedule; she makes sure the girls have access to and an interest in books."

Rotarian Mohan Audhi, senior advisor, BWF, finance and project planning

"I want to study further too. I'm doing a computer course and plan to complete my graduation. After I came here, I resumed my studies and cleared the std XII exams. I'm planning to do a BA in political science, in Urdu medium. And when I first came here, I didn't know a word of Urdu!"

Salima Akhter Bhat

“ Girls who have lost their families come here and find another, bigger family. Some are victims of the earthquake and others have lost their parents and homes to militancy”

walk the younger ones to their classes. They're back by around 5 pm and then it's time for tea, homework, play and one hour of TV. Sometimes the children fall ill. Recently one of my girls had to be admitted to a Srinagar hospital for three months with TB."

"WE'RE ALWAYS LOOKING FOR A BIGGER HOUSE"

"Early this year, we took the children to Pune and Mumbai. It was the first

time we stepped out of our world. We visited Elephanta Caves, Essel World and R. K Studios. In Pune, we went to a school for the visually disabled and were inspired to see those children living such independent lives.

"I make sure to discuss what is happening in the world with the children. We discuss the news. We talk about what is going on here in Kashmir and how it makes us sad.

"Basera-e-Tabassum started off with nine girls; today we have 50. We have two cooks, one watchman and a boy who comes in daily to run errands. My biggest challenge now is to find a house of our own. In the last five years, we have changed houses thrice, we keep needing bigger houses. A house will make us feel secure.

"When I came here, I never ever thought that one day I could shoulder such a responsibility. But when God sets you a task, he also gives you the strength and courage to make it happen." ■

What you can do to help

- Adopt/sponsor Basera-e-Tabassum or a similar centre in Kashmir. There are four such places currently. Sponsoring a child works out to Rs 1,200 per month and Rs 14,500 per year.
- Provide books, computers and clothes or help set up a library at the centre.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:
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