

Careers Up Close: Ananya Tiwari on How Education Can Deter Early Marriage in India

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Ananya Tiwari, a PhD student studying educational psychology with an emphasis on developmental sciences at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, cofounded and runs the [SwaTaleem Foundation](#). This international nonprofit works to enhance the educational outcomes of adolescent girls in India prone to early marriage.

- **Current Role:** Cofounder of SwaTaleem, 2018–present
- **Education:** PhD in educational psychology, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2018–present; postgraduate diploma in liberal arts, Ashoka University, India, 2015–2016; master’s in psychology, Kanpur University, Kanpur, India, 2013–2015; bachelor’s in chemistry, St. Stephen’s College, New Delhi, India, 2007–2010

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From Chemistry and Neuroscience to the Classroom

I majored in chemistry in my undergrad, and then I transitioned into neuroscience. I was in a hardcore brain research space for a while, but on the side I engaged in education and volunteer work, and then I transitioned into that for good. For two years, I was a schoolteacher in rural areas back in India. I was working in classrooms, interacting with the families of the children, working with the leadership of the schools to better understand how resource allocation takes place.

I think those were very crucial years for me to understand more deeply how the classroom environment really works. It really made me very confident as to what works in reality and what doesn't, and my own set of experiences in low-resource settings. One thing that I really learned during this time was how to address power differentials in spaces with low literacy but huge levels of local contextual knowledge. Everything sort of boils down to working with people on different projects—we try to emphasize a lot of co-creation in our organization.

Starting SwaTaleem

Child marriage is practiced in a lot of places. There are 223 million child brides across the globe. Specifically in India, there are still 102 million, according to the United Nations. We wanted to work with these girls to improve their academic outcomes, build socioemotional skills, and ultimately delay these marriages.

For us, there were two parts to starting a nonprofit. One is the internal commitment that you want to start working in this area and you want to be in this for the long term. The other is the development aspects for the organization you have to take care of externally.

Support SwaTaleem

SwaTaleem is running a crowdfunding campaign to support continuing education in rural communities during COVID-19.

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SwaTaleem (meaning “self” and “owning your education” in Sanskrit and Arabic, respectively) took a lot of gestation time. I cofounded it with Vaibhav Kumar, who is currently operating from India. Both of us have been in the international-development sector for a while, and we’ve also had very immersive field experiences in low-resource settings. Just understanding the sociocultural context of adolescent girls who are prone to early marriage, understanding the educational processes for them, developing expertise in terms of pedagogy and also the life skills and socioemotional skills required to work in this area took time to figure out internally.

Once that was done, of course, a lot of things followed, including our legal status and incorporation, fundraising plan, operational model, and recruitment. I think the first and the biggest thing is having that conviction that you want to start this. This is an area that’s extremely complex, and it will take a lot of time to see the effects. When the young girls grow up, their life outcomes will actually reveal how effective we’ve been, and that will take time. You have to prepare yourself for that kind of impact.

Ananya's Advice for Starting a Nonprofit

Passion. It's going to be a lot of work, especially in the early stages. There is a lot to consider with respect to just maintaining accountability in terms of finances. Once you are running an organization, you cannot shy away from that.

Collaborate. One thing that makes nonprofits or early-stage startups fall apart is a misalignment between cofounders. I worked with Vaibhav Kumar for six years before founding SwaTaleem. I know him well, I know his value system, and the same goes for him toward me. I think that really helps, because there's a lot of trust between us; there's a lot of ways in which we can minimize or address communication gaps—small, nuanced, but very, very important things.

Patience. Take time to grow. I want SwaTaleem to be there for the long term. Especially for social impact, it may take a while to see results. It's not like we are distributing math kits or school bags; that can happen in a day. When you're changing mindsets and behavior, it is going to take a long time. So one has to be patient.

Socioemotional Skills Take Root

Child marriage is really a complex intersection of sociocultural layers. There's this huge gender aspect to it. Theoretically, boys can also get married at younger ages, but early marriage disproportionately affects girls. Another aspect is rural spaces. Generally, families from rural settings are much more likely to get their daughters married at an early age. There's an angle of low economic status; class and income also play a role. Then there's a correlation with education: Girls with low levels of education are very likely to get married at an early age.

Now, when we sort of zero in on education, there are two aspects to it in terms of what works in this scenario. One is that just by design, if we keep girls in schools—here we're not yet talking about the kind of education that they are getting there, but just that in residential schools they are away from their families—we are sort of pulling them away from child marriage as time passes.

Secondly, we focus on what's happening in the schools—the quality of education. There is a huge component of foundational literacy. The girls' cognitive skills, subject-based aptitude skills need to be developed. Socioemotional skills are the beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors that allow everyone—children, youth, adults—to manage themselves and to manage relationships with others, to make responsible decisions. These skills have been tied to academic outcomes, and also with long-term life outcomes.

These skills have spillover effects for girls as well. What they learn within the classroom doesn't tend to just stay in the classroom; it manifests itself in family negotiations as well, such as when they're speaking to their fathers about when they want to get married or what their aspirations are in general. Girls have been able to persuade their families to delay and cancel engagements because they've been equipped with such skills.

At a societal level, when people see healthy, educated, and safe adolescent girls who are unmarried, who are leading their lives normally, it also sets a new normal. People want to see more and more such girls around them, and it can really change societal perceptions in that manner.

In our work, we let the stakeholders choose the educational challenge they want to work on, so it's the government officials, the teachers, and the girls acting in a cross-functional community framework. Currently, what they've chosen is working on English as a second language. I feel in the long run, that is what gives sustainability to initiatives. Tomorrow, if we are not there, the teachers will still do things, or the parents will still do the things that we did together.

Building Belonging

One of the ideas I am passionate about is longitudinally mapping the socioemotional skills of adolescent girls who are prone to early marriage. A very, very limited amount of literature on socioemotional skills is available, but even when we look at socioemotional skills in a broader global perspective, only about 14% of research studies were done in the Global South. This creates a huge gap when you want to understand populations at global levels. This is a quantitative piece of work where I'm basically trying to create measurement models around concepts like self-esteem, sense of belonging, perseverance, growth mindset, effort, beliefs, and learning orientation.

This project also led into a more qualitative piece of work on sense of belonging. When we think of girls in these situations, they have subtly but day in and day out been told that "Your only job is to get married early—you may be going to school, but you will never be able to work." I really want to understand how this construct manifests itself for these girls when they may have a high sense of belonging within the school premises but at the same time are extremely aware that in society, they have less space. That they cannot go and buy milk at 8 p.m., but their brothers can. They may not be allowed to use mobile phones, but the father and the brother, the men in the house, can. What sort of implications does this have when it comes to, "Hey, this is my space and I belong to the space"? And, in the larger context and exploring sense of belonging as a citizenship discourse, "Hey, this is the government I want to vote to power, because this is my country or my district."

Pivoting Amid a Pandemic

I'm sure a lot of my contemporaries are having an equally hard time, but we were able to pivot and find ways in which our work could continue during COVID-19.

With respect to the work in India, the schools have been shut down and the girls have gone back to their homes. Consultations from different organizations and even voices on the ground have told us that the likelihood of them getting married, of them being sent to the fields to work, of them being abused, both physically and sexually, has increased because of this.

Our biggest fear right now is that whenever the schools reopen, some girls will not come back. We don't want to lose them. Internet penetration is 11% in many of these low-resource settings, so reaching them online is not working. We are taking a multilayered approach that involves community radio stations, interactive voice response systems, texting, and phone calls to reach out to them and their families. That's mainly to engage the parents, but also to adapt content so that educational engagement keeps going for the girls. We are also looking at how to incentivize parents to let their girls study more during this time. We have started getting buy-in from teachers, schools' leadership, and government officials to carry this forward. We are very, very hopeful that we'll be able to navigate this.

Biggest Challenges

Taking Time to Reflect

One of the biggest strengths of this work is that I'm conducting research but also engaged in practice and application. That's a huge blessing. I can apply things that I'm working on, and the feedback loop is really good to advance this kind of work. That is also challenging, because what I've realized, at least for myself, is that I'm so occupied that there is less time for reflection, and there's less time to deliberately think about the learning that is taking place. A lot of times this doesn't happen by default, so you have to create time for that.

Gaps in Funding

I've received four to five grants and awards for this work, and they all have financial components, so my work has been supported. But when you do international work, and when you are an international scholar in the United States, you will experience gaps in funding. A lot of scholarships, fellowships, and grants can be very U.S.-focused; eligibility often requires you to be a citizen of this country. Basically, you get filtered out right then and there. People who want to do this kind of work need to be aware that this will happen. There are ways in which you can navigate this, but the options will be comparatively fewer.

Bias

The other thing, and I think this adds to the larger conversation around people of color and women, is the skewedness around gender, both here and in India. I think you have to work harder to earn people's respect. I don't see it as a challenge because I'm used to it now, but you need to be aware of it and not let it bog you down. You'll find supporters who believe in you and ways in which you can change people over time.

Energizing Entrepreneurship

SwaTaleem's work and my own research make me work hard for the sake of it, for the thrill. I'm just full of gratitude in that sense. I feel like this whole experience is also bringing a lot of perspective. Getting a PhD is extremely difficult, strenuous work over a long period of time. You'll go through many ups and downs, but when I put the challenges of the girls in front of mine, mine just disappear. That gives me a lot of strength, and it makes me work harder, because you're working for something that is larger than you. That's something that gives me a lot of joy.

The last thing is people. I love working with people or spaces that are energetic. I've been very fortunate both in India and the U.S. to find people who just liven up the environment. The other things I can take care of, but it's the people also who support and encourage you in your work.