

### **A story of a girl who strives against the discriminatory practice in her community.**

Malikova Zarnigor, is a 14 year old peer educator from small village Chek-Abad located near Kyrgyz Uzbek border. This year Zarnigor joined a course “My Safe and Peaceful School” and is string to get new knowledge and skills every day that she truly believes will empower her. Her mother, a single parent supports her daughter’s desire for education. Zarnigor is lucky girl because her mom creates all prospects for her daughter to be educated in spite of the pressure of her family members who are against that Zarnigor gets education. Zarnigor’s mom had to stay at her husbands’ relatives house after her husband tragically passed away. Since that time, Zarnigor as many rural girls of her age in her community experienced challenges and life hardships - decreased opportunities to take active part in education, losing her chance to get necessary in life skills. Her cousin, who is elder Zarnigor for a couple of years is to be married off this spring. The arranged marriage of her cousin made her think about the ways how to empower young girls and speak up for their rights. Moreover, Zarnigor’s father always dreamt of her studying in one of best universities in the city and become a professional. The dream of her father made Zarnigor feel more confident in her desire that will make positive changes in the lives of girls in her *mahhalla*.



The tremendous change happened in her life this summer, when she joined the course provided by UN Women in her school. Zarginor was supported by a group of her peers who believed that Zarnigor can change things for better at her school, in the community she lives. Later, Zarnigor attended a training organized by UN Women where she mastered her knowledgebase on human rights, including the rights of women, how to conduct advocacy campaigns to protect the rights of girls. Back to school, Zarnigor started to teach her peers the knowledge she received. As she says, her classmates now have the opportunity to speak up about their concerns, and by doing so, they also gain confidence. Zarnigor really likes to teach the girls in her community, as she truly believes that education is a powerful tool to make healthier changes in the traditional communities where she lives. She dreams that one will come and every girl in her community will have a voice which would affect the mindset of her villagers and everyone will stand against wide spread discriminatory practice-early marriages.

As Zarnigor particularly enjoys theatre performances, she and her peers presented a forum theatre performance in front of their classmates, school administration, parents on prevention of early marriages. Zarnigor played the role of a victim of early marriages, a young girl who was about to get married. Zarnigor's character had to convince the parents to stop the wedding from happening and to send their daughter back to school instead and continue in higher education.

The issue of early marriages among Uzbek families is quite problematic in the southern Kyrgyzstan. Zarnigor and her peer mates had to use many arguments to explain why girls should get educated instead of being married off so early. The story had a great impact on the audience and parents had something to recount at the end of the performance. Since UN Women has started its components in 2015 in Zarnigors school, more than 100 girls have been trained as agents of positive changes, as future leaders. These young girls grow up educated and confident, with knowledge and skills that will help them throughout their lives.

Since the play was performed, the tears appeared in the eyes of parents, as the peers voiced out a striking statistics of suicides among girls who were forcibly married off. Zarnigor also mentioned her cousin's marriage and the fact that her cousin is not attending school any more. The classmates of her cousin visited Zarnigor's house several times to talk to parents of her cousin. After much persuasion of classmates, the parents of her cousin have finally agreed to send their daughter back to school and cancel the arranged engagement. Now Zarnigor and her cousin walk to school together and work on various initiatives that prevent girls from being married off at their early ages.

Zarnigor is happy, because she made an attempt to persuade parents that it is important for girls to get education, that a girl should not be an "object" of free force at home, of both domestic and farming duties. She also shared her own story, that her mom is her greatest support and the first to encourage Zarnigor to apply herself to her studies and pursue her educational ambitions.



Strikingly, the boys who attended the performance, actually do not believe in educating a girl, however, they drastically changed their mindset after the forum theatre. They realized the importance of girl's education, that the young men should not risk the lives of under aged girls with an adolescent pregnancy, force them to work at home and serve to members of his extended family. The school director also expressed his positive feedback that the course led by UN Women, gives school students an opportunity to fully realize their potential. A special gender sensitive approach to education mobilizes boys and girls in communities to take a stand against gender disparity. It involves parents, school administration, community leaders, local government, law enforcement agencies to decrease the cases of discriminatory practices against young girls and ensure increased enrollment and retention of girls in schools, and improved learning outcomes on gender empowerment for rural school students. "We believe that by empowering village community residents to prioritize education, more girls can be educated at a larger scale. If more girls are educated, then their health, income levels and overall livelihoods improve, having outstanding effects on the surrounding community and the traditional society as a whole" concluded director. To sum, Zarnigor's story is an example of what can be achieved when a girl is given a chance to be educated and empowered to voice out her needs and interests.

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