

Interview

Lessons from Meghalaya: The Story of Hasina Kharbhih

Tamar Almog

Below is a profile of Hasina Kharbhih, an activist and social entrepreneur from northeastern India. The author uses insights from Kharbhih's life to reflect on how other women in the global south might become catalysts for change.

The world as we know it is based on given foundations of power, which are nurtured by social norms, and are often too difficult to alter. An individual's place of birth, nationality, and socio-economic background determine what the rest of his or her life will look like with greater probability than we would wish for. In a canonical paper, Peggy McIntosh points out that the term "privilege," specifically that of a white male, is "an invisible package of unearned assets,"³ paving the way to various professional successes. What then, may enable a non-white woman living in the developing world to become a social entrepreneur, both voicing her most relevant opinions and impacting many other people's lives? What would be her own "invisible package"?

Let us try and answer these questions in the best way I know of – telling a story. Hasina Kharbhih is a social entrepreneur in the field of child rights and women's empowerment, operating internationally. Her home is located in the center of Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya, one of the eight northeastern states of India. This area is known to be more tribal, and, as some might say, alienated from other parts of mainstream India. People here look, dress, and talk differently. Long Jainsens replace saris. Kharbhih's house is a traditional Khasi home. We sat together in her living room, decorated with artifacts she had collected from around the world and diplomas documenting her many achievements.

Hasina's long change-making journey goes back to her 8th grade

year, which served as a starting point. "We were to participate in a group called LTS - Leadership Training Services – that brings together young people from school. Every Saturday and Sunday we had time to do social work, and serve the communities – going to hospitals, cleaning up, storytelling with the elders, the street children. We had various activities and I just loved it," Hasina told me.

When high school ended, Hasina decided to take it a step further: "I felt so lost that this part of life was not there anymore when we have completed our school, so I decided to get a group of friends who were very much active with me, and said, 'Let's form an alumni group together. Let's get back to what we like to do.'" The group initially met in Hasina's home, trying to figure out how to form an initiative that had never been done before. After initiating a few successful fundraisers, Hasina had realized that there was a need for a more structured organization, and then came the birth of Impulse NGO Network, the organization that Hasina runs today, decades on. While the objectives and strategies had drastically changed, the main vision stayed intact: to promote the well-being of the weak and less-protected while raising awareness of the government's responsibility for its people's rights. Specifically, Hasina focuses on the prevention of child labor and human trafficking as well as on the promotion of child rights in Southeast Asia.⁴

Knowing that her parents wanted first and foremost to assure her academic success, young Hasina had to think and act creatively in order to continue her other pursuits without defying them. At the age of 17, during college enrollment, she made an unusual request to her parents: to study at a morning college, knowing that studying during early hours could allow her to work on Impulse NGO Network during the daytime. "I could have said that what I

3 Peggy McIntosh, "White privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," *Peace and Freedom*, July/August 1989

4 For further information about Hasina's venture, see <https://www.hasinakharbhih.com/>



Picture by Tamar Almog, India

started was so precious to me, and that I don't want to give up, but that was not something they would buy into. They have made their point clear: you need to do well academically. Therefore, I said that getting up for the 6 a.m. class would help me be even more productive; I will do better and will have more time to study." As we sit in her home now, Hasina's mother is smiling at us, sitting next to the fireplace: "My parents tried to support me, but they could not understand," Hasina explained. "It took them almost 8-10 years of my work to really understand what it is that I am doing here. Then they felt very proud."

When she was 18, another important event took place. Hasina came to the realization that a large decrease in child labor in Meghalaya could be achieved through the employment of mothers as female artisans. Hasina based this diagnosis on the idea that "if the village women's income would grow, they won't have to send their children to work." Hasina went forward and boldly sent a hundred letters to importers around the globe, informing them about locally handmade designs in rural Meghalaya. This fruitful

act not only turned out to be the starting point of her major economic livelihood initiative, helping rural women from three different countries to generate money from hand-woven art crafts, but it also taught Hasina a lesson about the results of a young person's determination: "When you are young, you don't mind making mistakes. You are always aiming to do better, overcoming obstacles. That is the nature of starting young, exploring, proving yourself that you can do, that you can make that dream a reality."

Hasina's story reveals the role of strong personal characteristics in becoming a social entrepreneur – persistence, creativity, willingness to work hard, a drive for change, and even bravery. These characteristics serve as protection in the face of professional and local challenges embedded in the multiple-marginal position of being born a woman in a tribal region in the global south. Yet, reading between the lines, we can identify two more major astory shows, starting young enables one to dream further, make mistakes and recover faster, and therefore critically change one's career path. Secondly, Hasina is a member of the Khasi tribe, known to be one of the only matriarchal societies in the world. Being the youngest daughter in the family, she was destined, by tradition, to inherit the family assets and take charge of the household, and therefore have more power compared to other women in the developing world. As Hasina puts it: "being in a Khasi society, the equality of men and women is there, women do well because you have equal opportunities in all fields."

"Hasina's story reveals the role of strong personal characteristics in becoming a social entrepreneur – persistence, creativity, willingness to work hard, a drive for change, and even bravery."

"I am coming from a small place. To do what I was doing, from the time that I was doing it, is still a big question for many people." As Hasina herself puts it, her story is inspiring and exceptional in a way that makes one question if it can even be repeated on a greater scale. Yet, an inductive analysis, unpacking the "invisible package" of this case, has revealed the effects of three influences: personality characteristics, gender dynamics in the community, and starting young. While the first two are difficult to alter, it is possible to create an atmosphere that will encourage young women to accomplish their dreams and become agents of change on their own, which could potentially catalyze the rise of female leaders across the global south. This insight should stand as a basis for interventions that aim for sustainability.

Tamar Almog graduated from Glocial in 2017. She is currently finishing her master's thesis at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.