

# STANDING TALL IN ALL SIX YARDS OF A SAREE

**I** THINK GOING to an all-girls convent school run by Irish nuns helped to break the glass ceiling and show me that girls can and must rise to the top. Studying and developing in an all-girls school helped to hone in leadership and management skills from a very young age, especially when it came to managing other girls,

which has translated today into managing teams of women. It is one thing to be good at studies and extra-curricular activities, but it was another whole world to be in leadership positions — House captain, school basketball team captain, girl guide leader, school vice-head girl and then, school captain of another school.

In addition my father Surrendra, was a liberal and as we were growing up, gave us lots of mental exercises, projects and jobs to do that were probably way beyond our capability but re-enforced the message that we were expected to perform and excel even when thrown into the deep end. My father always believed in us and our capabilities and told us that he expected us as women to achieve what he would expect of any son. That's a great re-assurance growing up in India.

Books can certainly make a difference. Reading and understanding different experiences and learning through reading the stories can reaffirm our feelings or make us bold enough to step higher. My son Kais just read for school, *Esperanza Rising* — the tale of a rich Mexican land-owner

who had to flee Mexico during the revolution and arrive in California and pick fruit to support her family. He then read about Syrian girl refugees and the hardships they face trying to escape. So, I feel that books can open up the world to boys too, which in turn influences how they feel about women.

When I was in my last term at MIT, Cambridge, dreaming of being an architect, I received a call one day saying that my father had been assassinated by an ULFA terrorist. So, instead of working as an architect, I ended up feet first,

running the Apeejay London office — working in a very male-dominated world of shipping.

So, it was literally 'swim or sink'. I think it would have been indulgent to think of myself as a young woman, working in a male-dominated job and that too as the head of the company. So perhaps, it was the courage and bravado of youth, but I decided not to make those things an issue, but concentrate on the job of running the company and doing it well.

I remember often finding people startled, when 'Mr Paul' (because my surname was Paul, they would often assume I was a man) turned out to be a woman, clad in a saree — all six yards of it! I visited shipyards in Gdansk (Poland) where there were *no* women, to negotiate a dry-dock deal or 100 hours hard bargaining with poker-faced

Korean ship builders while ordering a ship where they did not give away anything, but complimented me on my business suits. **BW**



Why we need to de-learn what we learn in the classrooms to break the glass ceiling...

The author is director, Apeejay Surrendra Group