

There were those familiar beats repeating themselves and the fifth time would be my cue to enter from stage left. My skirt was so heavy with sparkling stones, sequins and exquisite gold embroidery that it was drooping from my waist. My eyes were rimmed with kohl, the glitter from my armfuls of bangles was starting to cover my arms, and my silver anklets hummed as I walked backstage. That day I realized that I was about to make a difference by doing what I loved most, performing Indian dance in front of hundreds.

The dance ballet “Desi Girl” tells the story of Aditi, an American teenager who goes to India to fulfill her dream of becoming a Bollywood actress. She faces rejection and challenges, from both the harsh and uninviting film industry and from her family. In spite of this, Aditi perseveres and receives a role in a well-acclaimed production. I, too, had aspired to become a Bollywood actress, so I was excited to live out a shared childhood dream through Aditi.

My road to this stage, though, had been a strange one. As I browsed in a bookstore one day, I came across a book by a woman named Zainab Salbi: *Between Two Worlds*. I leafed through it, and then finished it that very night. No book before or since has had a greater impact on me and I do not know if another ever could. Zainab Salbi is the founder of Women for Women International, a foundation whose goal is to empower women, particularly women in conflicted or post-conflicted areas, by helping them to rebuild their lives and restore their self-confidence. Fascinated by Zainab Salbi, I tried to learn more about her. In a clip of her speaking at a recent conference she said, “Silence will do anything but keep you alive.”

I felt that I was in fact silent and not doing what I was capable of doing to help others. Memories of trips to visit family in remote villages of India suddenly flashed before me; I had seen the social discrimination and lack of opportunities firsthand. I had seen things that I hoped never to see again. However, when I saw them with Zainab Salbi in mind, I knew I needed to look at them with my eyes wide open. That night, I realized that I wanted to find a way to help oppressed women and children right now. I just didn’t know what I could do.

Then I realized what I *could* do—what I already knew how to do—dance. I had spent nine years mastering two forms of classical Indian dance and performing at an international level; I could use this platform to dance for these people around the world who needed aid. With this in mind, I started by finding the play “Desi Girl,” put on by an organization called CRY (Childs Rights and You). On the opening night alone, we raised over \$30,000 for an organization committed to giving children all over the world the right to an education. It was Zainab Salbi’s life that inspired me to look for a way that I could give back.

Since finding Women for Women International and playing Aditi, I have kept searching for ways to help women and children in need. I have researched universities that have impressive programs in Women’s Studies and Middle Eastern Studies, places that can help me with my goals. I am now planning an event at my high school for Women for Women International, with the goal of increasing awareness in the Seattle community for women’s rights around the world. It is my aspiration to one day work at Women for Women International. Recently, I realized that throughout all of this, I have been following Women for Women’s very motto, that “One woman can change many things.” Though I may be young, I believe in this dream: to end the oppression of women around the world.