

Lancio della Girl Declaration
Roma, Sala delle Colonne, Camera dei deputati
15 ottobre 2014

Intervento di **Mohammed Shafkat Alam**

Sponsorship Program for Destitute Girls supported by AIDOS

Good evening everybody. I'm Shafkat Alam from the local organization Tiljala Shed. I live in Kolkata, India. You saw the video of the project director Salma who is my beloved wife. She could not be with us to-day as she is pregnant. The slum in Tiljala which you saw in the video is a very densely populated area and people here are involved in many trades such as rag picking, rickshaw pulling, fruit sellers, vegetable sellers, maidservant, etc.

Tiljala Shed is a non-religious and a non-political developmental organization working for women's and children's development. The Sponsorship Program of Tiljala Shed supported by AIDOS started in the year 1995 and since then it has been a milestone in the history of Tiljala Shed. The program has played a significant role in the upliftment of destitute girls / women through education and has empowered them to meet the challenges from a male dominated society.

Education is the weapon that AIDOS has provided to all the girls through Tiljala Shed. The association supports Tiljala Shed's initiative of providing comprehensive educational support to destitute girls. The other aspects of the project include medical support, supplementary nutrition for the malnourished girls, self defense training, protection from exploitation and abuse, yearly excursion, awareness on gender issues, family counseling, vocational training for older girls, family maintenance allowances to meet extraordinary and emergency expenses, access to library facilities which have been setup for the girls of the project inside the slums.

We also organise excursions, sports, health camps, awareness meetings. Some of the girls are living in hostels and they are also getting full support from Tiljala Shed. Regular dance workshops are being held for expressing their talent and emotions and we have created a dance group called TARANG. Leadership training is also key for enhancing the self esteem of the girls.

AIDOS, through private donors, has been supporting this project for quite a long time and as a result it has made a significant impact on the lives of the beneficiaries. Because of this program hundreds of girls were able to complete their education and many have found work

and are supporting their families. The stereotyped male dominated society now feels that even a woman can contribute to the wellbeing of the family. Now more and more families are coming forward to educate their girl child which is a positive impact of our project. We feel that we still have a long way to go and slowly and steadily the families especially the traditional ones will change their mindset that the girl child too needs to be educated. The project has enhanced the capacity of the girls to find employment. A whole generation would otherwise have remained illiterate.

Tiljala Shed strongly believes in the philosophy that **“Tomorrow is too late”** for this destitute girls. In the digital age where touch screen and ipod have helped people reached millions and it marked a new era of modern science and technology. On the contrary girls living in developing nations still face gruesome violence by the hands of their male peers. In some countries the situation is alarming. In India large cases of domestic violence go unreported and there are millions and millions of women getting abused or facing violence in their day-to-day life. Some women have taken the daily violence as a part of their life. Tiljala Shed raises their voices against those oppressed souls and has taken a strong initiative to improve the situation of the girl child. This program has impacted a considerable portion of Kolkata as people now understand the value of educating their girl child as now they believe that nothing is better than investing in girl.

In one critical case AIDOS has also provided support for legal services for women in distress. We have also faced an extremely sad accident. One of the sponsored girls Nikhat Kauser who was just 19 was married by her family without telling the project staff. Problems started after marriage as the in-laws were demanding dowry from the girls’ family. The girls’ family belongs to a very poor class, her father, a rickshaw puller and her mother, a maid servant, could not fulfill the demand of the dowry. One day they got the news that Nikhat was burned alive and she was found dead. Her family believes she was killed by her husband’s relatives and with the support of Tiljala Shed and AIDOS, a case was started in a court of law. The husband’s brother-in-law and sister-in-law have been arrested. Her husband who was working in Dubai has also been arrested from the airport on his return to Kolkata. All the accused are now facing trial in a court of law. This is very unfortunate as these kinds of crimes are easily manipulated with the help of the police and legal experts and in many cases the accused walk free out of the court. Tiljala Shed has also persuaded the Women Rights commission and the Human Rights Commission to make the case stronger and to fight for justice. We are leaving no stone unturned to fight for justice.

The Gyan Azhar Library is another important component of the project exclusively meant for the destitute girls. It is a new direction and guidance for the girls. All these years the girls who have been unaware of the professional world are now much more aware and knowledgeable because of the easy accessibility of the internet and availability of a wide variety of reference

books. The location of the Library could not have been in a better place than the present location as it is situated inside a slum and is within easy reach of our beneficiaries. Though there are some shortcomings of the Library and there a lot of things which needs to be added or upgraded, the Library still stands tall and is catering to hundreds of destitute girls. The Library has been functioning since 2008. Through our interactions with the community we came to know that there was a dire need for a Library in the slum with all the modern facilities including the internet. All thanks goes to AIDOS and La Feltrinelli for extending their support for making this dream come true. The library is not just a place to come and borrow the books or browse through the internet but a place of mental relaxation as well. The members of the library come also from nearby slums, squatters and pavements; the size of their dwelling place is very small and congested hence a visit to the Library is like a paradise to these girls. During the day some students spend more time in the Library than in their houses.

The staff of the library is selected from among the sponsored girls supported by the AIDOS project. The sponsored girls have become the librarians and they are running the project very efficiently. With their small salary they are able to contribute some financial help to their families. These young girls have been empowered and will be the leaders of tomorrow in their community. They have been widely accepted in the community and even respected in their own families. The financial independence has brought them respect in their families and society at large. The girls are constantly been counseled by the senior staff members of Tiljala Shed to move ahead in life. The Library-cum-internet hub has now become one of the busiest centres in the locality. We have regular film shows in the library for the children and older girls and we also have regular dance workshops to promote talent and emotional development of the girl child.

The members also suggested expansion of vocational training courses to enhance their chances of employment. We plan to make this Library into a centre of excellence.

I would like to end my intervention by thanking AIDOS and its supporters for their most valuable support without which this journey had not been possible. We plan to bring more change in the hearts and minds of the people so that our girls can respectfully live in this unjust and unbalanced society to make a just and equitable world for both the genders.