

Educating Sheela



‘... there is no tool for development more effective than the education of girls’

Kofi Annan, United Nations Secretary General 1997–2006

Gender inequality

Like many teenage girls the world over Sheela loves to spend time with her friends. But, teenage-girl interests aside, the 19 year old student is far from typical. Sheela is achieving something remarkable for impoverished girls in her country: a higher education. Though great strides are being made in India, half of its female population is illiterate. In India, as in many countries in the two-thirds world, educating daughters is not a priority, particularly in impoverished homes. Investing in a son’s education takes precedence since he will carry on the family name and contribute to the family’s economic income later in life.

The unequal treatment and status of girls and boys is one of the major barriers that Compassion India is trying to overcome. Sumana Mani, Communications Specialist at Compassion India, says: ‘When there’s a girl in the family, there is a kind of stigma. The boy is the heir to the property, but the girl is the one who is married off and given away and always looked down upon. So in communities this is a very big issue and an underlying cause of illiteracy for girls.’



Twelve year old students take notes in class

Unesco estimates that 58 per cent of all children who work are girls

But it is not simply a case that girls are denied an education. The time that they should be spending in school is often spent at work. Unesco estimates that 58 per cent of all children who work are girls, but the jobs they do are often hidden from public view or simply accepted as part of a normal way of life.¹

Confident, extrovert Sheela could easily have become one of these children. But thanks to the work of Compassion, she is now a prime example of successful intervention among impoverished girls in her culture. 'I am studying for a business degree in accounting,' says the first-year student who attends Karnataka University in Bangalore. The 19 year old credits Compassion with helping her to fulfil that dream.

Compassionate intervention

Sheela is enjoying academic success despite her early childhood circumstances. In the impoverished neighbourhood where she was raised, a semi-urban community of 300,000 people located north of Bangalore, the average income is just £30 a month. More than 50 per cent of adults are unemployed and a similar proportion of children do not finish primary school.

While she was growing up, Sheela's father, a telephone operator, was the only source of economic support for his wife and two children. A quality education was not in the family budget for either of his children. But that all changed when, as a little girl, Sheena was enrolled at the local Compassion-assisted Goodwill Student Centre.

At the student centre, Sheela received financial assistance that enabled her parents to send their

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Girls washing up on a pavement littered with rubbish

Girls who attend school gain self-confidence, interpersonal and practical skills and a greater understanding of the world around them

outgoing daughter to school. And, through Compassion Sheela didn't just go to school: she and her family were provided with extra food and nutrition advice, healthcare and medication, social and emotional support; everything that Sheela needed to grow up healthy and happy.

It is also worth remembering that it's not just a good academic record that students gain at school. Girls who attend school gain self-confidence, interpersonal and practical skills and a greater understanding of the world around them. When these educated girls go on to raise their own families, the instances of HIV/AIDS, poor health and domestic abuse are decreased.²

Compassion

Kate Smith, Communications Manager at Compassion UK, says: 'Thanks to its Christ-centred, child-focused and church-based projects, Compassion is making dreams a reality for more than 800,000 impoverished children in 24 of the world's poorest countries. With the help of individual sponsors, Compassion works through local churches in the two-thirds world to release children from physical, economic, social and spiritual poverty. Compassion sponsors can give further encouragement to the children they support through writing letters to the child and praying for them.'

For more information about how you can sponsor a child personally, or with your class or school, for £18 a month visit www.compassionuk.org or call 01932 836490. If you would like to have a presentation about Compassion in your school please call 01932 836495.



Emotional support

Included in Compassion's holistic programme is much-needed emotional support from Christian adults. As all projects are run through the local church, spiritual guidance and support is on offer in abundance. Positive female role models are lacking in many impoverished communities across the world, but at the Goodwill Student Centre Sheela learnt of her true worth in Christ and found women she could look up to. 'Our Compassion teachers used to encourage us in whatever we did,' the college student recalls fondly.

India: a statistical snapshot

75.3% male literacy rate¹

53.7% female literacy rate¹

46% of girls are married before they are 18 years of age²

40% of girls attend upper primary school³

15% of children below the age of 15 have to work²

1 India national census 2001

2 Unicef (2006) State of the World's Children

3 United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (launched in 2000)

All Compassion projects are run in partnership with local churches. The local project workers know the needs of their community and are aware of the children, like Sheela, who live in greatest poverty. They are also great role models for young men and women.

One such role model is Singal Das, a social worker employed at the Compassion project. Singal grew up with her grandfather, after life became so unbearable with her alcoholic father. She knows and understands what these children are facing and her story of triumph has been an inspiration for girls like Sheela.

'I can see how my life was transformed through Compassion. When I see the children I really hope that they, too, will become teachers, doctors or engineers. Although they come from a very poor background, I firmly believe that their lives will be totally changed,' exclaims Singal.

In India, as in many countries in the two-thirds world, educating daughters is not a priority



A young girl recites the Hindi alphabet to her class at Pallikaranai Children's Centre, Madras

Sheela's academic skills flourished at the centre, but other practical opportunities are also available. Skills such as tailoring, baking, leatherwork or computer skills help young people to compete in an environment where it is not possible for every child to go on to university. These skills, coupled with the ability to read and write, really do help to change the world of these children, their families and ultimately the communities in which they live.

Dreams and visions

When Sheela graduated from high school last year, her outstanding academic record and leadership qualities, including her spiritual commitment, qualified her to become one of Compassion India's first Leadership Development Programme participants. These are young men and women from impoverished backgrounds who, in normal circumstances, would never have been able to afford a university education.

In turn this aspiring young business leader is now a role model for impoverished girls in her country. And it's not just in education: 'My future plans include telling the Good News to people who have not heard about it,' says Sheela. 'I want to help people who are in need!'

Sheela's vision is shared by Silas Balraj, Director of Compassion India: 'Many of the girls and women we help thought that the only thing they could do was to be a farmer or a casual labourer. The ministry of Compassion steps in and says if you have a dream, we will help you fulfil it.'

■ David Whitehouse (with contributions from Silas Balraj, Singal Das, Kate Smith and Sumana Mani)

David Whitehouse is a chartered engineer and was in business for nearly forty years. He is married to Janet, who was a teacher before leaving work to raise their four sons. David and Janet have two grandsons.

David is now retired and spends a lot of time promoting the work of Compassion. He was a Crusader leader for 25 years and is now involved in his church's pastoral work, leading a house group and volunteering with The Gideons International.



Footnotes

1 Unesco (2006) *Getting girls out of work and into school*, p10

2 Unesco (2006) *Getting girls out of work and into school*, p6