

Smt. Nighat Shafi

Recipient of the Award for Development and Welfare of Women and Children – 2012

Born: January 16, 1951

Smt. Nighat Shafi exemplifies a mother figure – composed and warm, yet stern. She spent most of her life shielding her children from the militancy that hit her home state of Kashmir. But when she moved back to Srinagar from Delhi in 1995, and saw how it had torn families and children, her life took a new turn. She realized that the scars left by the ugly killings of the militants and the army were very deep.

At a time when hardly anyone, especially a woman, would have stepped out of her home for fear of their life, let alone for social work, Smt. Shafi started visiting inmates at Srinagar's sole mental institution and tried to improve conditions there. That is when she saw that apart from the physical damage, the conflict had ripped emotional lives in the valley. Since then, there is nothing that she has not done to help women and children in Kashmir recover from the trauma of violence, and enjoy laughter, arts and education and live fulfilling lives.

With the objective of providing a helping hand to women and children affected by the violence in the strife-torn valley, Smt. Shafi instituted HELP (Human Effort for Love and Peace) Foundation in 1997. The prime focus is to provide education and mental health counselling to women and children.

Smt. Shafi runs an orphanage called Shehjaar in Inderhama, Hazratbal, in Srinagar, which is home to 30 boys who have been victims of violence. She calls these boys special children. While they attend regular school, a range of activities are organised to help them and other children. The HELP Foundation conducts regular theatre classes and these children have performed plays in several cities like Kolkatta, Delhi and Chandigarh. The Foundation has also been organising children's film festivals in Srinagar, workshops on communication and individual growth and recently organised an animation workshop. The objective behind introducing theatre in 2000 was to explore the potential and talent in the children and to lessen their stress levels with a therapeutic perspective. This also helped to eliminate the dictat which forced people to have no entertainment in the region. This exercise greatly helped bring normalcy in the life of the special children. This gave them a sense of contentment and achievement and made them feel like other children. HELP keeps organizing productions and performances every year with assistance from the Sangeet Natak Akademy and the Delhi School of Drama.

Smt. Shafi's orphanage Shehjaar, which means the shade of a (Chinar) tree, is a cool, comfortable and happy place that she has created for the conflict affected children of the valley. It also houses a women's empowerment centre, health centre, drug de-addiction facility and computer centre. HELP runs several clinics and camps with psychiatrists and doctors to help identify and work with children and women. Drug dependence has become a painfully common way for women to deal with the unusually high stress level. The Foundation also runs three libraries in Srinagar and Kupwara districts.

Under Smt. Shafi's guidance, HELP focussed on working in Kupwara, which was the worst militancy affected district in the valley. She set up the Shah Anwar Memorial Secondary School in Khumeriyal village in 2000 and the HELP Foundation Model School Mawar, in Handwara in 2006. Several hurdles had to be overcome to run the school in a remote border area. It is encouraging to note the school had a 100 per cent graduation rate, last year. Nearly half the students at the schools receive scholarships. The school building in Khumeriyal was funded by Moulana Azad Education Foundation under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment and Action India. Of the 667, 256 are orphans. Girls and boys receive co-education from junior KG to higher secondary level. They then pursue their higher education in different cities in and out of J&K state. A few are studying MBBS, Engineering, MBA, MA, Law, etc. The teachers of the schools are professionally qualified, passionate, free and frank to express their thoughts. Students receive full scholarships for their fees, supplies, books, travel and accommodation for specialized and higher education. Teacher and children workshops are conducted by eminent personalities like Feisal Alkazi, Paro Anand and others. They are taught photography, script writing, film making and more. Interaction is encouraged with elite children of Delhi, Kolkatta and other places. Smt. Shafi believes in bonding between different sections of society.

She also conducts a range of initiatives to teach women skills and help them generate livelihoods.

The vocational training centre focuses on activities that will make the women self reliant, especially those who are victims of violence and have lost the wage earners of their families. Smt. Shafi facilitates the women with embroidery and tailoring classes, in Srinagar and Kupwara and a food processing centre in Srinagar. Products are sold at their store in the city.

The Foundation also gives out low interest micro finance loans to women in the valley. This is supplemented by imparting skills required for livelihood projects, in association with SEWA Ahmedabad. Microfinance beneficiaries have been provided. The total umbrella cover by HELP Foundation including finance by banks like J&K Bank (to 250 women) and SBI (to 100 women) is for training, production, market and other support. HELP gets support from NABARD, Save the Children, Sir Dorabji Tata Trust as well as from friends and contacts. With a modest start in the late nineties, the benefit of the work of HELP under Smt. Shafi's leadership and guidance has changed the lives of thousands of women during the last one and half decades.

Smt. Shafi has been working predominantly and extensively in rural communities of Kashmir and Jammu region. In the politically charged environment of Kashmir, Smt. Shafi has carved out a space for humanitarian work that is not aligned to the government or separatist groups. She also responds to natural disasters and conflict related issues outside the purview of HELP's traditional areas of work. She has worked for minority communities like Kashmiri Pandits, Sikhs and other vulnerable sections of society. Her work covers children and women from Jammu province as well.

Smt. Shafi will stop at nothing to wean the next generation of Kashmiris from violence. Last year, through her guidance, HELP introduced Childline, a national helpline number for children in distress in Srinagar. Now, children call 24x7 asking for educational aid, counselling or even relief from abuse. They are then connected to various state agencies and HELP's resources. They also conduct road shows and regular street plays to create awareness of social issues.

The Foundation also organizes breakthrough workshops in partnership with Management Foundation for Organisational Research and Development, to help the beneficiaries attain clear communication, interaction, organization and performance as well as individual growth.

Over the last decade, over 500 orphan girls who have no extended family, or destitute young women with no income, have been given financial assistance for their marriage.

The work of Smt. Nighat Shafi has impacted the lives of hundreds of women and children. She is looked upon by one and all as a mother figure and an idol for many. We can only imagine how it feels to strive relentlessly for years against a backdrop of bullets fired from all directions by militants and armed forces. Smt. Shafi is courage personified.

Awards and Recognitions

Smt. Nighat Shafi was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005 along with 1000 women for peace around the globe. For three consecutive years, i.e., from 2005-2006 to 2007-2008, she was awarded the Stree Shakti Award by the Government of India. In addition to the several other recognitions presented by the civil society, Smt Shafi is also the recipient of the Asian Peace and Mehjoor Awards. HELP Foundation, of which she is the moving spirit, was given the State Award in 2010.

Contact details

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