

Changing society through digital media

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By Sana Amir, Written for UPI

New Delhi resident Tehzeen Fatima, 17, desperately wanted to continue her studies but her parents wouldn't give her permission to make that dream come true.

Her life seemed dismal. She said she felt trapped in a cultural nightmare, which meant a future of uncertainty. To make matters worse, she couldn't forge her own path because she wasn't allowed to step out of her home unaccompanied to pursue her education.

"There were many problems," Fatima said. "I did not have a voice at home."

She didn't give up, however and her family finally relented to her pleas. Now, she is completing a bachelor's degree in social work at Indira Gandhi National Open University.

Much to her delight, Fatima recently joined the Aseem ASHA Foundation, an organization dedicated to train underprivileged children in the production of digital stories, advertisements, graphics and animation and game design.

The program focuses on young women, helping them to not only find their voice but to speak for others living in difficult circumstances.

"This center has given me a platform to discuss my problems and find solutions," Fatima said. "It also boosted my confidence. It feels good to have an identity and presence now."

After learning new skills, the eager student was able to tell the story of her sister, Shaheen, a widow, who was thrown out of her home after the death of her husband. She was illiterate, unemployed and poverty-stricken before taking shelter in a nearby non-governmental organization where she is learning embroidery.

"With the help of training in digital media, I want to make a short film on my sister's life," Fatima said. "I want society to know the importance of education for girls."

The foundation has helped other young women as well.

"This center has developed my personality a lot," said Iqra Amin, a student who completed her certificate course in design communication from Kalpana Chawla Media Resource Center, one of the programs offered by the foundation, in 2010. "My views have changed. Earlier, I used to think of marriage but now I want to become independent."

She works as a marketing executive for a London cosmetic company.

Founder Aseem Asha Usman always has had a particular interest in helping young women break the chains of gender bias, strengthen their values and empower them to take on new roles in society.

"Girls never got an opportunity to interact with boys," he said. "They never had this healthy atmosphere. The outdoor works also gives them opportunity to understand the society and its elements. Whenever we go out, I make boys do the daily kitchen chores. I want them to break the stereotypes which deteriorate the aesthetics of society."

Kiran Rai has benefited from his philosophy. She is responsible for editing and directing small films and concentrates on domestic issues such as financial dependence of women.

"I hate stereotypes," Rai said. "If a veil is for respect then it is good but when it is used to pull girls backward then it becomes an issue. The male gender is the core reason for all the problems which arises for girls."

The Aseem ASHA Foundation is open to males, too.

Mushtaq Ali joined the Aseem ASHA Foundation when he was 13 years old. He used to study in a local school that had poor education opportunities. He wanted to learn more and develop a healthy earning potential to help his family.

The foundation showed him hope by training him in digital media. Now, in his early 20s, Ali enjoys editing and directing films.

"Paani Paani Paani Re" was one of his many films featured and screened at various national and international film festivals. The film also was shown at the 2010 Water International Film Festival, in Bangalore, and the 2011 CMS Vatavaran Film Festival, in Delhi. He was trained in video editing by Meraj Siddiqui of the Maya Academy of Advance Cinematics in Delhi.

Mushtaq recently received his first paycheck, which, he said, he gladly gave to his mother.

Usman said he is concerned helping all his students succeed. It has been a struggle to find a place to house the classes but the local community arranged for the funds, space and essential inventory needed to make sure the foundation was able to continue.

"I ask them to dream but about the things which are possible and approachable," he said.

It's no wonder that Usman's mission has gained worldwide recognition.

"Simple words cannot convey how deeply impressed I am with Aseem's tireless efforts," said Michael Orlando Yaccarino, author, journalist and statistician for a major nonprofit organization serving the New York arts community. "One of the major goals of his valiant work is to expand the horizons of underprivileged children in his community through technical education and arts awareness. In all of this, Aseem demonstrates continually how he is guided by a deeply spiritual and selfless spirit in expanding horizons while making them brighter."

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