

Empowering girls in India

A new charity launched in Australia seeks to educate young girls in rural India and turn their lives around



At the age of five, Mariyam, a village girl from Rajasthan met with a terrible accident in which she lost her right leg. When Mariyam turned seven she decided she wanted to go to school. Her parents were helpless as the school was quite a distance away, and they could not carry Mariyam to school daily. They also feared she would get hurt at school. Mariyam felt dejected because of her situation.

When not-for-profit charity iIMPACT opened a girl's Learning Centre near Mariyam's home in Mahua Bas village, her life changed forever. After a few years at the centre, today Mariyam is a confident girl who reads well and loves to recite poetry.

Still, Mariyam missed out on running around and playing games like the other kids. She shared her feelings during a team visit by iIMPACT members. Within a few days, an iIMPACT member had arranged for an artificial limb replacement for Mariyam. After an operation in 2009, Mariyam was able to walk again. By 2011, Mariyam could run faster than many other children at the upper primary school where she was enrolled by iIMPACT.

Recently, Mariyam participated in iIMPACT's 10-year anniversary celebrations at Gurgaon in India, where she was awarded for her courage and achievements.

On August 9, in light of its 10-year celebrations, iIMPACT was formally launched in Australia at the City Hotel in Sydney. Since its foundation in 2002 by the 1978 alumni of the Indian Institute of Management, iIMPACT has had the vision 'to transform the lives of women, families and entire communities in India by the education and empowerment of the girl child'.

The mission of iIMPACT is 'to mobilise and motivate non-school-going girls, aged 6-14, from economically and socially backward rural areas of India, and put them firmly on the track for formal education through quality primary education'. iIMPACT has established over 760 learning centres and has educated over 30,000 girls in India.

iIMPACT gives priority to villages with no existing educational facilities and the highest amount of out-of-school girls, where female literacy rates are extremely low.

During the Sydney launch, iIMPACT India Trust CEO Nirmala Tandon made an emotional appeal for support via Skype video-link from her offices in Gurgaon. She said that the greatest strength of iIMPACT learning centres is that they are within easy access of villagers. The lack of commute equals less hesitation for villagers to send their daughters to school. The average distance a child has to walk to an iIMPACT learning centre is 120m. The average walking distance to a government school is 1.8km.

Nirmala emphasised that iIMPACT is different to other NGOs, as the organisation remains connected to the girls even after they graduate from the learning centres. It helps integrate the girls into the government education system so that they can go to university after finishing their primary education at the learning centres, which are then handed over to the community.

Such networks, like those created between iIMPACT and the girls, has the potential to unite the whole country. Chief guest at the launch, - Mr Arun Goel, Consul-General of India in Sydney said, "We need a level playing field for progress. Poor people need to be given the opportunity to shine".

He emphasised iIMPACT's goal to empower women by providing them with the ability to read and write, so that they can gain more respect and determine their own future. iIMPACT also differs from other charities in that 100 per cent of donations go directly towards benefitting the education of girls.

Nirmala stated that there is a high level of transparency in the financials and accounts of iIMPACT, saying each corporate sponsor receives complete statements regarding spending every quarter. Internal audits are also conducted every three to six months. iIMPACT works with 18 partners including the Bryan Adams Foundation and Give India.

President of iIMPACT Australia, Dilip Rao, said that it costs each girl Rs 2500 per year to attend the learning centre. There are 30 girls in each learning

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centre, and there is currently a 75% attendance rate.

"Educating a girl can transform a community," said Rao, "Rural India is suffering from a problem of exclusion".

76% of the girls that graduate from iIMPACT learning centres continue onto higher education, with 16% of the girls in college. These girls are daughters of landless farmers who were once vulnerable to child marriage and human trafficking. According to Nirmala, the girls want to leave their villages and go find a better quality of life in the city after being educated. Some even become teachers at the learning centres, she said.

iIMPACT is currently in talks with organisations about imparting vocational training to girls, which goes hand-in-hand with their primary education. Its goal is to educate 60,000 girls by 2016, in response to the growing demand for schools in India.

"For this goal to be achieved, \$13 million needs to be raised over the next four years," said Nirmala. "This milestone contributed to the decision to launch iIMPACT in Australia, as dollars have more leverage over rupees. The first cheque from Australia would go towards funding a learning centre in Delhi".

If you are interested in educating the girl child in India, visit iimpact.org.au. A donation of just \$50 can educate a child for a whole year and significantly improve their quality of life.

