**Institute of Social Work**

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The Institute of Social Work (ISW) is an NGO based in Kolkata, West Bengal, which works to provide better opportunities to underprivileged women and children. ISW, which was founded in 1978, works in the greater Kolkata area on several types of projects that fulfill its mission, including primary and middle school education, vocational training for women, and promotion of awareness among women of social and health issues.

Asha Cornell supports two of ISW’s education projects: one at Barasat which comprises elementary and middle schools (Sishu Vikas Bharati and Kishore Vikas Bharati), and another at Khidderpore where the Institute runs a non-formal school and a coaching centre for girls. According to ISW, the parents of the children of served by these projects work in various occupations that provide meager incomes, such as vegetable vending, casual labor and rickshaw pulling. Of the children who attend these schools, more than half are girls.

***The Schools***

The Barasat school was founded in 1982 with 33 dropout children and voluntary teachers. Today, the school has nearly four hundred children in classes from nursery to eighth grade. Apart from the head of the school, there are nine teachers who teach Bengali, English, Mathematics, Science, History and Geography. Though not formally affiliated with it, the school follows the syllabus prescribed by the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education. Students also participate in a variety of extra-curricular activities such as dance, music, poetry recitation, sports and crafts.

In January 2011, I visited the Khidderpore school. Khidderpore is an industrial and port area on the eastern side of Kolkata. The school is located in a slum with a large Muslim population. We were greeted by Sushmita Bhattacharya, who manages day to day activities at this school and also teaches English to the students. From the main road, we walked down a narrow, winding lane to reach the school, which is located on the upper two stories of a three-storey building.

Classes are held in small rooms and there is a basic office or staff room in an even smaller room on the second storey. When we visited, there were four types of class in session – two vocational training classes -one in tailoring and another in doll-making -, a coaching class for girls, and a class to prepare young children and drop-outs for entry or re-entry into regular school. The coaching class caters to about 35 girls for whom English and Bengali instruction supplements their school education. The preparatory class has a roll of 40 young children, who are given basic instruction that helps them get into and stay in regular schools. The approximately 20 girls in the vocational training classes are 18 years and older, most of them having left the school system between 8th and 10th grades. Talking to the three teachers present, it was apparent that it was frustrating at times to fight the local bias against educating girls and allowing them to work. They were optimistic though, saying that an increasing number of parents were sending their daughters to school.

In the vocational classes, the girls are older: many of their families do not want them to work in a mixed gender environment, or even outside the home. Tailoring allows them to meet these family expectations while still earning an income. The school had arranged with a small doll-making business to train and employ other girls in similar situations. When I asked some of the girls about their education, I sensed a slight wistfulness. Most of them were only a few years younger than me, and as I was talking to them, I wondered if they were thinking the same thing I was: that had they been born in a family like mine, their circumstances would have been very different and they would not have been there.

While the girls in the vocational training were quiet and shy, I was struck by the confidence of the girls in the coaching class. They seemed eager to do well in school and to continue their education by going to college. I found it very encouraging to see their enthusiasm in the face of such difficult circumstances. The younger children were a lively bunch even when the teacher told them somewhat sternly to be quiet. They cheerfully greeted me in sing-song voices and asked me my name.

I came away from the school with mixed emotions. While it seemed clear the older girls could not aspire to careers beyond small-time tailoring and doll-making, it was good to see that they were at least able to earn an income thanks to ISW’s efforts. With the younger children, I hoped their enthusiasm would not be dimmed by the difficulties they would be bound to face as children from poor families. When I saw the determination of the young girls in the coaching class, however, I felt hopeful that they would try their best against the odds.

***Challenges Faced***

The children attending ISW’s schools come from economically disadvantaged families, and several are also forced to supplement the family wages by working. Malnutrition is a common problem. Domestic abuse is not uncommon but is seldom reported, and children are either victims or witnesses. Since in many of families, the parents themselves have had little or no education, they are unable to help their children with their academics. To discourage and deal with absenteeism, ISW’s teachers visit the homes of students who have been away from class for an extended period of time..

***Achievements***

The efforts of ISW’s teachers to engage parents by holding parent-teacher meetings and by visiting the homes of absentees appears to have paid off in terms of increased attendance at the schools. Some of the graduates of the Khidderpore coaching centre have gone on to attend college. In my previous visit to the Barasat school as well as this visit to Khidderpore, the children seemed very enthusiastic and happy to be there. Many of them expressed the desire to study further. The teachers, most of who are from the local community, came across as being very dedicated.

***Asha Cornell’s Role***

Asha Cornell’s association with ISW dates back to 2000. In 2009-2010, Asha Cornell funded ISW $5772, which provided for the salaries of the teachers and other staff, as well as for rent and administrative expenses. At our recommendation, Asha Portland funded the construction of one of two new roofs needed at the Barasat school. This year ISW was one of the projects in Asha foe Education’s Work an Hour (WAH) campaign in 2010. Nearly all of the expenses involved in teacher’s salaries, rent and administrative expenses for 2010-11 and in the construction of another roof, will be funded through WAH.