



MS. SOPHIA SHAIK

Recipient of the Award for Development and Welfare of Women and Children - 2022

Born: November 11, 1971

Ms. Sophia Shaik started her career in social service at the age of 15 years, under the tutelage of her father Sk. Abdus Salam (popular as Salambhai in the social service sector in Odisha). She has been continuously taking guidance and inspiration from her father since then, in her endeavour to serve the poor, underprivileged and destitute sections in the society through her NGO named Society for Weaker Community (SWC) which was established by her father, in 1987. Till date over 50000 women and over 60000 children (boys and girls) have been benefitted with her work.

A life-threatening attack on her father, when Sophia Shaik was hardly 14 years old, made her go on a hunger strike clamoring for the arrest of the culprits. Despite the grumbling of the older members of her community, she defied 'purdah' and they accused her of having become a 'kafir' (one who doesn't believe in God and conceals the truth). But nothing could break Sophia Shaik's iron will. She flouted all customs that tethered her inside the four walls of home and jumped over the threshold to put her father's attackers behind bars.

Thus began her rebellious journey 35 years ago in Bhadrak district in Odisha. Now women from other districts and other parts of the State seek her help when everything else fails. They know Sophia Shaik or their adorable 'Guddi Appa' will get them justice. Fighting relentlessly for the rights of women and children, the 51-year-old Sophia Shaik embodies 'Shakti' or the female power. Though she is mainly considered as a 'messiah' for women and children in distress, Sophia Shaik has the distinction of being the first crusader against the practice of 'Triple Talaq' in Odisha. Her efforts have been instrumental in compelling the clergy and gentries to mediate and arbitrate cases of domestic violence including that of talaq victims, in a humane and just manner. Since then, Sophia Shaik has come to the rescue of many wives who have been victims of persecution.

Her daredevil effort has helped in rescuing girls from sex trade in the dead of the night and put the accused through rigorous imprisonment. Sophia Shaik's efforts also maximizes the outcome of the work by systematically following a process in association with the local administration, law and order and the legal support system.

As of today, Sophia Shaik has been actively taking up the causes of bidi rolling women, providing shelter to helpless women and elders, settling family dispute, protecting street children, getting the unwed mothers, young widows and divorcees married, rescuing girls from trafficking, imparting life skills and skill education to underprivileged girls, intervening and campaigning against child marriages, rescuing & eliminating the practice of child labors, getting neglected children enrolled in schools, promoting women self-help groups (SHGs) for their empowerment, promoting women entrepreneurship, educating people to adopt small family norms, and conducting anganwadi training centers under Integrated Child Development Scheme.

Women from nearly six thousand families were earning their livelihood by rolling bidis and their teenage daughters too helping mothers in rolling bidis, tying, bundling, packing, and delivering to the merchants. Their numbers were almost double their mothers. All women were Muslims, who preferred bidi rolling even for meager wages because they could roll bidis in their homes. They are now receiving

welfare benefits; house building assistants and their school going children are getting scholarships through SWC initiatives. After taking charge as Secretary of the organization, Sophia Shaik is striving to withdraw women and children from the hazardous sector of bidi rolling. She focused on 413 bidi rolling families of Bishnupur village and trained their daughters and young women in tailoring who are now self-employed. So far, nearly 200 women/girls are engaged in stitching and earning around eight thousand rupees a month each. She drives initiative for women empowerment by building entrepreneurial mindset in them, and by providing them a source of generating income and sustainable livelihood and by facilitating marketing linkages through SHG mode. Similarly, there are many women SHGs which are now rearing goats, doing fishery, producing honey, cultivating mushroom, vegetables, pudina (mint) and edible grasses in their courtyards. A group of 30 women producers involved in terracotta work are marketing their products by opening outlets/shops and through local exhibitions (mela). The group as on December 2021, had earned a net profit of above two lakh rupees. Many are also running their own grocery shops, stationery shops, tailoring shops, tea, and betel stalls, in their villages. Quite a few helpless women have been engaged as domestic help, in cooking, and some are working as saleswomen in business establishments.

Sophia Shaik's energy and effort is also utilized to educate and empower every girl child, with an aim to free Bhadrak district from child marriages by the year 2030 and will be keeping a check on trafficking and school dropouts. She is promoting community vigilance groups, Balika Sangha and Gaon Kalyan Samiti at village levels, with an aim that these groups will not only identify children in need of social security, but also establish a tracking system for prevention of early marriages, trafficking, or any kind of child abuse. The daughters of the Muslim community in the region, are now studying in schools and colleges, in a large number. Women reach to Sophia Shaik for their grievance redressal, getting relief, besides getting encouraged to voice against the odds they are facing. 'Unless they voice, they will not be empowered,' asserts Sophia Shaik.

She represented India in the Youth Summit in Sao Paulo, Brazil in 2005 and Bangladesh in 2006 and is regularly invited to various national level seminars, workshops and for motivational talks. Sophia Shaik also fulfils her work responsibilities being Chairperson/Member in various departments including the District Level Task Force on Child Labour, District Level Criminal Injustice & Relief-Rehabilitation Board, District Level Monitoring Committee on Labour and many more. Sophia Shaik regularly finds place in the media to address various issues affecting the women and children in the society. She has been honoured with awards and accolades such as the Godfrey Phillips National Bravery Awards at the state and national level, Nari Mukti Award, Best Social Activist Award, etc.

She is very dynamic and fearless, and strongly advocates women empowerment and gender rights. Ms. Sophia Shaik's belief in her thoughts and commitment to the betterment of women and children of the community, has brought a sea change in their lives, and has become a role model for them.

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