

NoVo Foundation

Latin: change, alter, invent

Press Release
For More Information:
Pamela Shifman
pshifman@novofoundation.org

NoVo Foundation Welcomes Clinton Global Initiative Spotlight on Girls and Women

September 24, 2009, NEW YORK. The NoVo Foundation celebrates the presentation of the 2009 Clinton Global Citizen Award today to Ruchira Gupta, president of NoVo's grantee and partner, Apne Aap Women Worldwide, a grassroots group that helps thousands of girls and women in India break the bonds of prostitution.

Presented before global leaders of government, business, philanthropy, academia and civil society, this prestigious award not only recognizes Gupta's visionary initiative, but it focuses the international spotlight on the unmet needs of exploited girls and women around the world.

"The problems of girls and women are universal," said Gupta, who emphasizes the importance of empowering girls and women to help themselves. "We want them to be able to bring about critical change, and to do that they need to find strength from each other. This is not just about rescuing them – it is about giving them the means to rescue themselves."

Since it was established in 2002, Apne Aap, which means "self help" in Hindi, seeks to break the cycle of inter-generational prostitution by getting children in red light districts out of brothels and into schools. By running community classrooms for children who have never had an education, Apne Aap earns the trust of their mothers – many of whom were forced into prostitution as young girls.

Using the education of their children as a rallying point, Apne Aap then seeks to empower the mothers themselves, teaching them about their rights and offering basic schooling and vocational training. By arming them with knowledge, skills and self-reliance, Apne Aap has enabled women who did not know how to count to open bank accounts and form collectives. Rather than selling their bodies, some of organization's 10,000 members are now running canteens, grocery stores, and making merchandise such as incense and handbags. More importantly, they now have hope for a future they could never have imagined. As one Apne Aap member wrote in the organizations newsletter, the Redlight Despatch:

"If you know the difference between heaven and hell you would realize the difference between the two worlds—inside the red-light area and outside. The basic difference between the two is in dignity. A woman's dignity is constantly shattered inside the red light area. Now I feel proud that I go into the red light area to work for a different cause. And not as a prostitute."

Since witnessing the work of Apne Aap earlier this year, the NoVo Foundation recognized that the two organizations share a vision of a world free from sexual exploitation, in which girls and women have assets and value beyond their bodies and in which girls and women can fully contribute to their families, communities and nations.

Founded by Jennifer and Peter Buffett, NoVo seeks to foster a transformation in global society from a culture of domination and exploitation to one of collaboration and partnership, empowering girls and women as the primary agents of change. Toward this end, NoVo focuses on improving the status of girls and women around the world, many of whom suffer from violence, poverty and discrimination because they are female.

“Investing in girls and women is not just a moral imperative, but a sound economic decision,” said NoVo Foundation co-chair Peter Buffett, adding that only half a cent of every development dollar is dedicated to adolescent girls. “Girls are an underinvested asset, and they represent a huge opportunity.”

The fact that the Clinton Global Initiative has placed the needs of girls and women high on the international development agenda is a welcome sign that global leaders are waking up to vast potential that girls and women can offer as agents of positive change.

“We feel like this is the year that the Clinton Global Initiative is really recognizing the power of girls,” said NoVo president and co-chair Jennifer Buffett. “Women around the world are truly marginalized, and people are starting to realize that this doesn’t have to be.”