

Interview with Princess Salimah Aga Khan

Sameera Gokal: Could you please start off by telling us your name and what cause you support?

Princess Salimah: My name is Salimah Aga Khan, and I was asked to be the first International Ambassador for SOS Children's Villages. I had already been devoted to SOS Children's Villages since 1995.

Sameera Gokal: What exactly is your role as an ambassador for SOS?

Princess Salimah: It is ... to do as I'm told (laughing). My role is to be a bridge between SOS and local authorities, and also to go see the villages and mothers. I think it's a role which I need to be in the field because I need to see the children, how things are panning out for them in both the new and old villages. For example, in Pakistan, we have villages that are 30 years old, and then there are brand new ones. Obviously, each country is different. We're [SOS] in 132 countries; I think that's over 65,000 children in our care at the moment, and hundreds of thousands of children who've been through our care. To me, each country is different, but the principle is the same everywhere: it is never to separate siblings, but to give them a mother, an education and skills to be able to become independent and support themselves and their own families when they reach their adulthood.

Sameera Gokal: As a woman, do you find it difficult to be the first ambassador?

Princess Salimah: Not at all, because I think it's very much a wonderful title, but it's always the same work; it doesn't matter if you're a woman or a man, it wouldn't make any difference. It's always the same principle that makes me want to continue to be a tiny part of this organization, because I really am. I think of the 10-12 million supporters and all of the people in the field who really do the work, like Souriya [President of SOS in Pakistan]. She's been doing it for 33 years. So, I feel really infinitesimal to be beside the people who've been in this great work for so long. After all, SOS started in 1949.

Sameera Gokal: Wow, that's a very long time.

Princess Salimah: It is.

Sameera Gokal: I understand that you said there's a SOS mother, there are children as well, there is a staff – now with all these different people playing a part of the village, do you find any problems with ethnicity?

Princess Salimah: Not at all. For example, in a village in Cairo, you cannot tell the religious denomination of the children's houses, which illustrates the complete lack of bias in all of our villages. We have no political or religious bias in any direction; we are just there for the children.

Sameera Gokal: What are the dynamics between the mothers and the children?

Princess Salimah: Each house has a mother, and each mother would probably have a trainee mother-to-be. Families are never separated. So, it could be a family of ten children or it could be a family of five children or it could be one child alone. Yet, there will always be in each house a mother with a family; if the children don't have brothers and sisters they will be put into the same house with other children. They are growing up with a normal family atmosphere. And if there isn't a school in the locality, we will build it, and the local children from the vicinity will go to that school. Basically, our children are not kept as a separate entity, sort of behind closed doors. Our children are going to arch, and through our programs the local children will come in. So, it is to keep all the bridges open; the children should not be put away or forgotten as orphans.

Sameera Gokal: Each house has children and a mother – why not a SOS father?

Princess Salimah: Because Hermann Gmeiner started this after the war, and there were so few men and so many widows. His very first village was in Austria. There were always children who were starving, and it was a very hard time. He found local women and went door-to-door to raise the funds to build this first village—which is still standing, still operational, and in which there is now a home for retired mothers. SOS never gives up on its children or its mothers. Often in the structure of each village, there is a village director who will usually be a married man with children. I think, traditionally, it started with women because, after all, who is the one who really mostly gives dinner when the child cries at night? Usually?

Sameera Gokal: The mother.

Princess Salimah: Usually. (smiling)

Sameera Gokal: Why should people get involved in sponsorship, and how can they get involved if they want to sponsor a child?

Princess Salimah: It is such a huge organization that I think if you google it or if you go on the internet, you will find all the addresses, what we do, where we are. I think there's a menu there for people who would be interested. Some may be like yourself based in America but who still have relations or know children in Pakistan or Egypt who would need help. We have villages in 132 countries. If you google us, you will see that maybe you would want to give money to a village in Pakistan or maybe you'd want to give it somewhere completely different; so it's all very open.

Sameera Gokal: How many villages does SOS have in Pakistan?

Princess Salimah: Eight villages. This number changes all the time because there's always something being built. (laughing)

Sameera Gokal: Do you see a lot of Muslim children getting aid?

Princess Salimah: A lot. And, of course, it depends on the country. As I have said, we don't have anything to do with religious bias or any kind of critical bias. Our children all come for a

different reason—either they are abandoned or they’ve been judiciously taken away. It’s not children that just come by chance; they’ve come because there’s no where for them to go and no one for them to go to. Every SOS child, you see, has actually had the hardest beginning you could think of. There isn’t a child who’s come in because “granny’s getting tired, and we’ll just give it to SOS.” It’s NOTHING like that! And they are not for adoption. These are children we keep and raise.

Sameera Gokal: And then they move out on their own when they are settled?

Princess Salimah: (Nodding head). When they can...when they can. They’re never abandoned.

Sameera Gokal: Do you see any challenges being faced with the families or with the children themselves?

Princess Salimah: Like every family, there’s always going to be ups and downs. It’s a totally normal, normal life. Obviously, you can have a good child or you’re gonna have a really, really bright child who could be a scientist. Then, you can have one who would be much better doing something equally important, which is to be a plumber, or a carpenter, or a shepherd; it doesn’t really matter as long as they step forward in life.

Sameera Gokal: Does SOS provide education and health services in each village?

Princess Salimah: Absolutely. Absolutely. In every village.

Sameera Gokal: Do you plan on staying in the current role that you are in?

Princess Salimah: It’s nothing to do with me. (laughing). This is the thing. It’s just that I feel very honored and privileged that I’ve had this role. I wouldn’t know; I mean, I didn’t ask to become an ambassador. I put my heart in this work in whatever capacity I can. I would always have my heart in the work that is done, forget the title.

Sameera Gokal: Exactly. I definitely agree with you that we should always go out and help children or help the less fortunate who are not able to help themselves.

Princess Salimah: Yes. But of course, doing it with a solid structure, you could do more good than if you went and distributed something one day somewhere. It’s not going to make the build up of the solid base of SOS which is, after all, taking time to prove itself and continues doing so each and every day.

Sameera Gokal: Princess Salimah, thank you very much for joining us.

Princess Salimah: Thank you, Sameera. It’s been a pleasure.

(The interview continued with Princess Salimah Aga Khan, along with the addition of Souriya Anwar, President of SOS in Pakistan, and Rubina Ali, Executive Secretary of SOS in Pakistan.)