



**DISCOVERING
THE
STRENGTH
WITHIN**

In Prerana, we hear several stories every year. Some hopeful, some full of courage, but, mostly all heart wrenching. Neerja and her daughter Vini's story is no different.

At a young age, Neerja was married off to an alcoholic and a wife-beater. Unable to bear the daily torture, she fled to Mumbai where a lady provided her shelter in the Falkland Road Red Light Area (RLA). However, this kindness didn't last long. The woman eventually forced her into the sex trade. Thus, her life in the red-light area began.

It was 2006 when Prerana's Educational Support Program (ESP) team met Neerja's daughter, Vini, during one of the frequent outreach visits. The more Neerja talked to our team, the more she believed we had Vini's best interest at heart. Later that year, Vini was admitted to Prerana's Night Care Centre (NCC) and Balwadi at Falkland Road.

When Vini finished her pre-school education at the Balwadi (Indian Preschool for economically weaker sections) in 2007, the team enrolled her into the 1st Standard at a local municipal school. She regularly attended the school and soared academically. Such a matter of joy for both, the mother and the child!

Sadly, the happy moment was short-lived. Vini was in 2nd Standard when Neerja became very sick. Vini had to constantly take care of her mother and this affected her school attendance. As a result, her academic performance suffered and she failed the 3rd Standard.

It was a very difficult time for the family, as both, mother and daughter were unwell. With Neerja's ill health and inability to take care of Vini, our team took up the responsibility to look after Vini. They partnered with a hospital to closely monitor her health, and her Anti Koch's Treatment (AKT) was initiated in December 2009. Special care was also taken at our NCC to ensure she receives a high-protein diet of milk and eggs.

Six months later, the treatment was completed and Vini was back to full health. Our team ensured constant check-up of Vini. They took measures to make sure her attendance in the school and the Center remained regular, so they could properly care for her.

By regularly attending the NCC and the ESP, Vini cleared her 4th Standard exams and was promoted to the 5th Standard.

Vini loved the opportunity to learn and actively participated in every activity undertaken at our center. She particularly excelled in regular sessions on life skills education, personal safety, sex education, stress management, problem-solving, decision-making, and lateral thinking. Vini's learning and participative spirit helped her understand her own situation better; she transformed into a mature and confident young girl.

The Prerana team constantly follows up on the wellbeing of the child. As a result, the team was quick to notice Vini's rapidly deteriorating health. She was falling ill with bouts of raging fever. Vini was taken for a diagnosis where she was found suffering from tuberculosis.

Finally, in October 2012, Neerja recovered. Soon, she moved to Sion-Koliwada with her 'admi' without any intimation. Although, the mother-daughter stayed within the eyesight as Neerja came down to Kamathipura to solicit every day. The move, however, affected Vini's schedule. She had to commute all the way to the Kamathipura Municipal School from Sion each day.

When Vini informed our team of their move, we immediately paid a migration visit to her new place in Sion. Suggestion to admit Vini in a school near home was put forth to Neerja. It took an entire year of counselling and follow-ups, and finally, Vini was admitted to a school near her home the following academic year.

The children in our centers often build close and trusting relationships with our team. Vini had known Prerana's team for almost eight years at this point. This is why, in time, our team picked up on the fact that Vini was not at all happy about her family's relocation to Sion. She began confiding in us about her discomfort staying with her mother's 'admi'.

The team spoke to Neerja asking her to consider moving Vini to a residential Child Care Institution (CCI). At first, Neerja strongly protested against the decision. She argued that she needed Vini around due to her own poor health. A few counselling sessions with the team convinced Neerja to place Vini in a CCI. However, subsequently, she and her 'admi' managed to manipulate Vini into refusing to go to a shelter.

From June to November 2014, Neerja was hospitalized twice. As Vini would have to stay alone at home in Sion, the team suggested Vini could move to Prerana's NCC and Day Care Center (DCC). Neerja agreed at first. However, eventually she refused under the same pretext - that Vini had to help her with chores till she feels well.

Admi - a regular customer of a prostituted woman who acts like her husband and hence has free sex with her and controls her finances. He arranges for the customers and this functions as the pimp.

Upon Neerja's discharge from the hospital the second time, her 'admi' insisted she and Vini move with him to his village in Himachal Pradesh. Vini was not interested, but they were bent on taking her against her will.

From Vini's relationship with Prerana, she had learnt to appreciate the rationale behind our team's suggestions. Every time Vini came to the center, the team encouraged her to think and express herself freely, ensuring her their constant support. This motivated her to put her foot down in the argument with her mother and her 'admi'

On the day she was meant to leave Mumbai, Vini came to our NCC by herself to ask for help. At this stage, Vini disclosed all about how the 'admi' attempted to sexually assault her in the absence of her mother, but wasn't successful. Under no circumstances was she willing to go to the village with them as she could foresee the dreadful things that would follow.

Our team listened to her and told her she would be required to tell her story in front of the police and Child Welfare Committee (CWC). *She did so, very bravely.*

When Neerja and her 'admi' found out about this, they stormed into our office, verbally abused the team, and threatened us with dire consequences. The 'admi' even brought four henchmen. They were all calmly directed to the police station and the CWC.

On the orders of CWC, Vini was moved to a shelter facility in Raigad (a neighboring district to Mumbai), where she has been successfully pursuing her education and living in harmony.

Initially, despite of informing her mother about the 'admi's' attempted sexual assault on Vini, Neerja chose not to believe. Eventually though, the drunken 'admi' confessed about molesting Vini; Neerja immediately left him. While Neerja calls her daughter every Sunday, Vini has never expressed a desire to return to her.

Today, Vini is a happy and content child. A natural leader, she runs the magic training group at the shelter and is actively involved in different committees such as health, nutrition, library, child protection, cultural and the like. She always enthusiastically participates in every activity at her disposal, especially dance and yoga.

It is a good thing that her life experiences have not killed her spirit to learn, but only strengthened it. She is environmentally conscious and passionate about animals.

In March 2018, Vini appeared for her 10th Standard exams. She aspires to become a fashion designer. At Prerana, while we stress on keeping the child close to the mother, the safety of the child is a constant priority. And luckily for us, most of these hear wrenching stories are transformed into stories of hope, trust, courage and self-belief.

