



MAINSTREAMING THE MARGINALIZED



COMMUNITY BUILDING IS A CHALLENGE, MAINLY BECAUSE INCLUSIVENESS IS ONE OF ITS FUNDAMENTALS.

Since 1986, we at Prerana have been working with women and children in the Red-Light Areas (RLA) of Mumbai and Navi Mumbai – a section that has been absent in the discussions about inclusiveness at every level.

Although, human trafficking is increasingly being recognized as a heinous offence globally, its victims are still decades away from finding a place in the mainstream.

Unable to find a way out of the dark and dangerous world of RLA, the women and children are often stuck in a vicious cycle of exploitation and abuse.

Breaking the culture of violence is a difficult task, but not impossible. The solution lies in collective action and sharing of best practices, methods and approaches that organizations in the anti-trafficking space employ.



The case below follows the journey of a mother and a daughter, Parveen and Fatima, and gives a glimpse of the complex situation of the victims of the sex trade, which is characterized by institutionalized or naked and multi-layered violence. Furthermore, it shares our technique and process of working and ensuring that the child moves past the trauma, and despite of the grey background, finds her/his place in the outside world.

CULTIVATING STRONG RELATIONSHIPS

OUTREACH AND ASSOCIATION

We met a six-year-old Fatima and her mother, Parveen, in the year 1999 during one of our daily outreach visits in the red-light district of Kamathipura. As it was our first encounter with Parveen, we cautiously tried to know more about her situation. Parveen, who hailed from the Indian state of Karnataka, told us that she had been brought to the city of Mumbai with the promise of marriage. She was not ready to disclose that she was sold into sex trade. Besides this, she did not want to divulge any more information about her past.

One of Prerana's core principles is respecting the choice of our women and children to not disclose their identity or information they are not comfortable with sharing. During the course of our work spanning three decades, we have come across innumerable women and children who confided in us that they did not like their identity and background disclosed to anyone.

As a part of the admission process at the Night Care Center (NCC), we are required to keep document the personal background information of the mother and the child. At that time, women do state that they live in the brothels in the red-light areas but work as cooks, cleaners or baby-sitters. They remain silent on being prostituted women.



THE DISCLOSURE

With time, after a degree of confidence and rapport building, women share with us the fact of being a prostituted woman, and subsequently her story of having been trafficked into the sex trade.

Parveen's reaction was no different. When approached during the outreach, she claimed to work as a cook in the brothel, earning Rs. 15/ to Rs. 20/ per day. It was later that she revealed of being sold into the sex trade when she was barely 14 years old.

Even then, Parveen did not share all the details with us. She wore a bead around her neck which we knew only the Devadasi women wear, a detail she hid from us.

Devadasi is a temple based system of prostitution and evil social custom in which pre-pubescent girls are dedicated to gods, goddesses, and temples. They are considered as having married to the god. Once they reach their puberty a social ceremony is organized and a village elite who bids for her (usually the highest bidder) gets to have sex with her which is the deflowering event. He then keeps her exclusively as his sexual partner and eventually she becomes a public woman and finally gets dumped in the metropolitan sex market. Devadasi wear a bead around their neck which they are required to pass on to their heir without which they are told they would not get salvation. This blind belief leads them to get a child of their own or fetch one with illegal means.

NEED-BASED PROGRAMMATIC INTERVENTION

Almost every child in the red-light area was engaged in running errands for the brothel keepers, pimps, and customers as well as helping with brothel related chores. That was our commonplace observation in the days when we just started working in the Kamathipura RLA.

Since Fatima had already turned six years old, our priority was to convince Parveen to get Fatima enrolled in a school. Parveen agreed and subsequently also agreed to send Fatima to our Kamathipura NCC.

Usually, the brothel-keepers play a very important role in these decisions. In those days, the brothel keepers used to be confident that the children of the prostituted women were free and captive recruits for the sex trade. What worked in our favor was that these brothel keepers saw an educated English speaking girl as a means to fetch them better paying customers. As a result, Parveen's brothel keeper did not object to Fatima's school enrolment.

Towards the end of 2000, Parveen's health began to deteriorate. She began falling ill very often and hence needed Fatima as her caregiver.

Once when Parveen came to fetch Fatima from the NCC, we found her crying. We had an idea about the reason. Earlier that day during our community outreach, the other women had informed us that Parveen's *admi* (fancy man) had beaten her.

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 thus functions as the pimp.

However, when we asked her about it, she asked us not to intervene. She feared it would make him more violent and that she would handle him her way. She lightly mentioned that her *admi* was well connected.

Upon further inquiry, we found out that her fancy man was in the Home Guards. Despite the incidence, she regularly sent Farah to the NCC. No matter the situation, our mother's in the Red-Light area want the safety of their children.

The Indian Home Guard is an Indian paramilitary police force. It is a voluntary force, tasked as an auxiliary to the Indian police (Source: Wikipedia)

Perhaps, she felt her daughter was not safe in that space. After a few days, Parveen came to the NCC to drop Fatima who was now a 2nd standard student. Bruises and swelling on her face and hands were quite visible. We knew it was her *admi*'s work, a clear case of Gender Based Violence (GBV). Avoiding eye contact with us, Parveen gave us another excuse; this time she had 'fallen off the staircase'. Later, the other women confirmed that Parveen had been beaten up by her *admi*.

In the exploitative world of the Red-Light District, women are broken so often, that their will to survive takes precedence over their will to fight.

Parveen's failing health made her take a loan. With no easy access to any kind of social security or non-exploitative credit source, she went for the first option at her disposal - the brothel keeper.

The deteriorating health affected her attending the customers which in turn drastically reduced her already meager income. She was unable to repay the installments to the brothel keeper within the given time.

The problem further compounded as her *admi*, too, had taken a heavy loan from the same brothel keeper, which also had not been repaid.

As a result, the brothel keeper lodged a false complaint against Parveen at the police station. Parveen was summoned at the police station and thrashed black and blue.

When we learnt about this and rushed to her rescue with an offer to intervene, Parveen declined any help from us by calling it a personal matter.

She linked the harsh treatment meted by the police to her *admi's* connections with the police. Her belief that he was no ordinary man grew, and so did her fear. One day the brothel keeper threatened Parveen to take Fatima away and keep her as a pawn till the entire loan was repaid with interest. Meanwhile, our efforts to convince Parveen to narrate the case at the Police Station continued. But, her fear from her 'well-connected' *admi* from the Home Guard continued.

Amidst the whirlwind, Parveen's health took a steep dive. During such a dark time, the only positive factor was that Farah had settled well in school, attended the NCC regularly and grew very fond of reading and painting.

Between 2003-2004, Parveen was shifted to another brothel in the Falkland Road RLA and then moved yet again within a matter of months. Despite the shift, Fatima continued to go to school and come to our Day and Night Care Centers. This was Fatima's space, away from the brothels, where she could have engaged in various developmental activities.

In 2005, Parveen informed us that she had "rented" (a polite way to say she was moved to another brothel) a house in the 1st lane of Kamathipura RLA and hence there was no need to keep Farah in the DCC.

It only took a couple of months to change her mind. Her illness had returned with force. Parveen partly gave up her denial and shared with us that she was HIV positive. She earnestly requested us that in case of severe illness or death, we should take charge of Fatima and protect her from falling in the sex trade.

Firmly, she said,

“I don’t want what happened to me to happen to my daughter. I want her to lead a life of dignity”.

Ill health, being HIV positive and inability to pay the rent, all led to the brothel keeper pressurizing Parveen to vacate the brothel. The brothel keeper was desperate on adding some more young trafficked girls in her brothel. Parveen had nowhere to go!

That year Fatima reached her puberty and started menstruating. Some evil elements in the red-light area pressurized Parveen into organizing a ‘coming of age’ ceremony -a sinister plan to induct Fatima into the sex trade. A fearsome big time pimp of that area named Abbas took the responsibility for sponsoring and organizing the ceremony. Abbas and his wife gifted Fatima with an expensive sari worth Rs. 1000/-which was a lot of money back then.

Around that time, Parveen’s brothel keeper evicted Parveen and Fatima. Through our sources, we learnt that she had sold Fatima to Abbas. Neither did we have any evidence about such a “transaction”, nor was anyone willing to make a statement. Soon, Abbas took Parveen and Fatima in, gave them shelter. As we feared, Fatima dropped out of school and discontinued coming to the NCC. Any attempt to approach the family and intervene was met with threats of dire consequences by Abbas.

During one of our outreach and follow-up visits, Abbas confronted us and warned us against trying to trace or approach Parveen and Fatima. The mother and daughter also stopped communicating with us during our outreach visits. All throughout this time Parveen’s health kept deteriorating.

It was our observation that since the advent of HIV quite a few sex traders had suddenly become eager to extend help to the HIV positive women who were in a moribund condition. That was their way to have access to and eventually possess their young adolescent daughters.

PROCEDURAL AID

Child Welfare Committee (CWC): A semi judicial body under the Juvenile Justice Act 2015 empowered to take decisions in the case of the children in need of care and protection.

Since Fatima's disappearance from the Red-Light Area, we reported the matter to the Child Welfare Committee (CWC), a semi-judicial body instituted under the Juvenile Justice Act 2015. The CWC summoned the police and ordered them to look for Fatima. The police could not find Fatima anywhere. We stepped up our search for Fatima.

We then contacted the State office of the Home Guards and found the address of Parveen's fancy man, Mr. S. When we approached Mr. S to inquire about Fatima, he mentioned that Parveen's brothel keeper had taken away Fatima since Parveen had failed to repay the debt.

From the other women in the area, we learnt that Mr. S had gotten his loan waived off by returning Fatima to the brothel keeper. Perhaps, Mr. S also received some money over and above.

Subsequently, the other prostituted women informed us that the brothel keeper had planned to sell Fatima. With the police, we made our way to the brothel where Fatima was supposedly kept; we could not find her. We intensified our vigilance. One day on a reliable tip-off, we took the police to a brothel where we found Fatima. Only thirteen years old, young Fatima looked older than her age. She was dolled up too!

On 13th September 2006, we legally rescued Fatima with the help of Police. On her part, Fatima refused to greet us. She looked upset; according to her we had her 'taken away' from a place where she was loved. Once placed in a Children's Home under the Order of the Child Welfare Committee, the resentment persisted. Fatima did not communicate much with us.

PSYCHO- SOCIAL SUPPORT



For Fatima, we had separated her from a woman (the brothel keeper) who loved her, cared for her, gave her a variety of gifts and treated her like her “own daughter”. It was very difficult for Fatima to fathom that the end purpose of this affection was to win her trust and sell her into the sex trade for a huge price. Showering Fatiman with “love” and gifts was only a way of grooming her for the life of a prostitute.

While she was in the Children’s Home temporarily, we kept in touch with Fatima and continued interacting with her. We tried to put forth why we had ‘rescued’ her. Gradually, after several counselling sessions, Fatima started appreciating our point of view. As she understood that we had her best interest at heart, she opened up about her life with her mother’s admi, Mr. S, the Home Guard. She said that she had to work in order to support her mother’s health bills. She also disclosed that once when her mother was hospitalized for 3 days, Mr. S raped her.

In the subsequent counseling sessions, Fatima revealed that even when her mother was at home, her *admi* would fondle Fatima. While initially she mistook it for a kind of ‘fatherly love,’ Fatima soon began finding it disgusting and felt quite uncomfortable.

She confessed that she did not raise an alarm against it as she was not sure if anyone would trust her; she carried the fear of Mr. S being from some 'police-like office'. Fatima's concern was also that if Mr. S threw them out of his house, they had no place to go.

As the psycho-social counseling progressed, Fatima felt more confident to narrate the incidence to the police. This led to the arrest of the Home Guard Mr. S. As we probed further, we realized that Mr. S had shared the information on Fatima's whereabouts only because he was unhappy that the brothel keeper was going to reap the benefits alone by selling Fatima.



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In 2007, we finally found a placement for Fatima in a Mumbai-based shelter home for long term care. Fatima resumed going to school after having lost out on education for almost two years. Fatima successfully cleared her 10th standard in 2012. She appeared for the 12th standard exam in 2014, however, she could not clear it. Through participation in various sessions at the shelter home, Fatima realized her aptitude for cooking and went on to pursue a course in the hotel industry. Her superintendent at the Home described her as a leader and a facilitator.

When we were approached by Vital Voices (VV) to suggest the name of a survivor to participate in the Hilton Global Freedom Exchange, the very first name that came to our mind was - Fatima.

Excited, we shared this opportunity with Fatima. She responded with a question,

Since the rescue and the disclosure of sexual abuse, neither had Fatima spoken about her past, nor had we brought it up. It was all about moving forward in life and empowering Fatima to build a safe and self-reliant life.

“Would I be required to disclose my identity and my past?”.

Any girl who attempts to reintegrate with the society after being rescued from, or stepping out of the sex trade is consistently vulnerable to stigmatization.

Since the rescue and the disclosure of sexual abuse, neither had Fatima spoken about her past, nor had we brought it up. It was all about moving forward in life and empowering Fatima to build a safe and self-reliant life.

When asked what would be her message during this opportunity and post her visit to US, she said

“ I feel there should be an early intervention to protect young girls from having to endure violence; it has to be stopped before it begins! Prevention should be supreme, as once the damage is done, healing takes long. A lot of damage is irreversible too! I was lucky to get the necessary and timely support, but there are many who don't get it.

She strongly feels that no society should give up on its children. The society should persuade every child to access education. Education is the key to progress.

At the September 2015 VV workshop at Washington DC, she initially introduced herself at meetings as 'a student and chef', but she gradually on her own changed to introducing herself as 'a second-generation survivor.'

Upon return, she resumed her course in Bakery and Confectionaries at Hotel Four Seasons in Worli Area of Mumbai. After three years of hard work, Fatima has successfully completed the three-year course in February 2018. She continues to work at the Four Seasons Hotel and has moved into a Group Home, thus living an independent life.

Every two months, we ensure that we follow-up on Fatima. We want our children to be safe, even if they leave our safety net.



COLLABORATIVE SOLUTIONS

Gender based violence inhibits or nullifies the enjoyment of a person's full human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the:

1. Right to life
2. Right not to be subjected to torture by cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment
3. Right to equal protection according to humanitarian norms in time of international or internal armed conflict
4. Right to liberty or security of person
5. Right to equal protection under the law
6. Right to equality in the family
7. Right to the highest standard attainable of physical and mental health

In Parveen and Fatima's case, the collaboration of civil society organization (Prerana) and the stakeholders involved in the rescue and protection of women and children was crucial. While Parveen's lack of cooperation, in the beginning, held back our efforts, we are glad that Fatima was not subjected to a similar fate and rescued to lead a dignified life.

In order to ensure that girl victims of sexual abuse are not ill-treated by the society is essential. All children deserve their space, their opportunities to shine and live a life where surviving is not an everyday struggle. Every child deserves a second chance!

