

ONE DAY IN PRERANA

A social worker's perspective



ATC ORIGINALS, DECEMBER 2021



Ms. Neelima Pawar has been associated with Prerana since 2007. She has been a part of Prerana's Night Care Center team for 14 years as an Outreach Coordinator and has worked with children between the age group of 1- 5 and their mothers. She has worked extensively on implementing outreach in the red-light areas of Kamathipura and Falkland Road. She is popularly known as Prerana's go-to person to understand the process, challenges and know-how of accessing several social security documents such as Ration card, Aadhaar card, bank account etc. In the given below section, she shares her experience of intervening on her first case within the Institutional Placement Program.


On my way to office on 13th July, I didn't know it would be one of those rare long days. Keeping in line with my daily schedule, I went to the Falkland Road office and reached around 11am. As per my plan, my colleague Ms. Prachi Naik and I discussed about the 7 youth care leavers (YCLs) who are orphans and can now receive ration cards as per the GR released by Maharashtra Government on 24th June, 2021. However, the orphan certificates for these YCLs were under issuance and they had the death certificate of only the mother and not the father; both of which are mandatory documents to avail ration cards as per the GR. Due to this limitation, they weren't able to access the ration card services immediately. My colleague Ms. Prachi and I had discussed this issue with the senior team, who suggested to take it up with Controller of Rationing and Director of Civil Supplies. At around 2pm, I headed to meet the concerned officer with all the documents and case details. Upon reaching, I discussed all the cases in detail with him. He had shared that either an orphan certificate issued by the office of District Women and Child Development or the death certificate of both mother and father is mandatory to avail the ration card. After the meeting, I shared the updates with my senior colleagues and headed to the Kamathipura community for an outreach visit.



Kamathipura has 14 lanes and there was a time when there were brothels in all of those. However, a lot has changed now. There are very few lanes that have brothels and since the pandemic, things have changed even more. Now, it is difficult to term the houses where women live as brothels as defined in Section 2 in the ITPA Act, 1956. It is even difficult to identify a brothel keeper and a brothel manager. During the visit, I had tried to look for Priya's (name changed) mother, a child availing services at our Night Care Centre (NCC).

Priya's mother had not visited Priya for almost 4-5 days and she was growing angry and anxious. I had told Priya that I shall try to meet and request her mother to visit her soon. Since the second wave of COVID-19, we had again started to provide 24*7 service at our NCC Open Shelter. I tried looking for her mother in the community but could not find her. The women in the community told me that Priya's mother had been facing some health issues and had stepped out to the medical store to buy medicines. Later in the evening, she came to meet me at the office. Next, I went looking for Sarita's (name changed) mother in the 13th lane to discuss about Sarita's social security documents. After the outreach visit, I called and requested Salma (a woman in the sex trade and mother of Samir, Akbar and Arif) to meet me at the center in a while.


[1] <https://newsonair.com/2021/06/24/maharashtra-govt-decides-to-distribute-temporary-bpl-ration-cards-to-orphans-up-to-28-yrs/>



After I reached office at around 03:30pm, I started having lunch and thinking about Samir's and Akbar's (Samir's brother) case. A few months ago, I had a change in my job profile after which I started dedicating two days per week to the Institutional Placement Program. Samir's and Akbar's case was the first case that I worked upon under this program. Salma's eldest son Samir had been missing for a while. In July 2021, Salma used to go out looking for him and during that time her youngest son Akbar would be left unaccompanied. During an outreach visit with my colleague in July 2021, the women in the community informed us that a man on a bike had picked up two children. They added that one of those is Akbar.

Upon receiving this update, we tried to find Salma but she wasn't in the community, and we had thought that she had gone out to find Samir. Next, I went to the nearest police station to inform them about the missing child. Upon investigation, the police found out that the children had gone towards Kamathipura 1st lane. The police found Akbar there and brought him to the police station. They then enquired with me about Salma's whereabouts. After a while, Salma reached the police station as the women in the community had told her that the police had taken Akbar there. I explained to Salma that Akbar was young and that it wasn't safe for him to roam around in the red-light area without adult supervision. I further added that she could think about admitting Akbar in our Night Care Center to ensure his safety while she's away to find Samir or for work. She kept Akbar at the NCC for 2 days but he would cry every time she came to meet him. Therefore, she decided to keep him with her.

A knock on the office door marked an end to my thoughts. Salma came to meet me. Setting aside everything that I had been thinking, I started interacting with her. I again tried to make her understand the importance of adult supervision to ensure Akbar's safety, development etc. and asked if she would like to place Akbar in the NCC for the time being. However, Salma had refused again and shared that she wanted to keep Akbar with her, as Samir was already missing and her second child Arif (10-year-old) was placed in a Children's Home on 2nd June, 2021.



After Salma left, I had some time and I recalled how during another outreach visit in June 2021, I was informed by the women in the community that two children (later identified as Arif and Samir) had been roaming around without adult supervision. The women had also shared that both these children used to sleep in the cement concrete pipes used during the construction which was then happening in the 10th, 11th, and 12th lanes of Kamathipura. I, along with my colleague had conducted an outreach visit in the evening of 1st June, 2021, and had finally found Arif. However, Samir could not be found. Salma was also not found at that point in time. Since Arif's safety was at risk, we took him to the Kamathipura NCC wherein he freshened up and stayed for the night. I had called the Child Welfare Committee (CWC) to inform them about the child.



After I completed all necessary formalities, Arif was placed in a Children's Home on 2nd June, 2021, at the order of the CWC. Amidst all this, Salma was nowhere to be found. We had looked for her everywhere and had also informed women who knew her to contact us as soon as they meet her or hear from her.

Salma reached out to us a month later on 3rd July, and informed us that she had to rush to her village due to personal reasons. She added that Akbar was with her. She further narrated that she had booked tickets for Arif and Samir as well, but they went missing at the last minute and she had to leave without them. I then scheduled a visit for her to the CWC, and subsequently to the Children's Home where Arif was residing.

My thoughts broke when I saw the clock struck 04:30pm; I had to call the police station to follow-up if Samir had been traced. The police officer shared that Samir had been traced and that I could visit the police station. I went there and found out that the police had taken Samir for medical examination and the case was transferred to another Police Sub Inspector (PSI). It was around 05:15pm when I had called the now appointed PSI and she shared that her duty starts at 08:00pm at night, and that I should come then. Since there was time before she came and I live at walking distance from the police station, I had headed home. Until 08:00pm, I completed my household chores and this break acted as a relaxation time amidst a paused, yet ongoing long day. At 08:00pm, I called the PSI again and she shared that she would reach only by 09:00pm.

When I reached the police station at 09:00pm, I realized Salma and Samir had been waiting at the police station and had not had anything to drink or eat. I immediately requested the officer present to arrange some food, and they obliged. When the PSI came, she had taken Salma's and my statement and told Salma that if they handover Samir to her, he might go missing again. I wasn't happy with the way the officer presumed things and I brought it to her notice. Samir at that point had also shared that he didn't want to attend school, instead he wanted to work. I tried to help him understand that he was too young to work, and that he should focus on his education. However, I hadn't continued the conversation realizing that it wasn't the time and place to discuss this with the child who looked distressed. At this point, the PSI told Samir that she would put him in jail.

I then intervened again and assured Samir that he won't be put in jail. I also explained to the child that he wasn't in the police station because he had committed an offence. I observed that the appointed PSI wasn't interacting in a child friendly manner. At Prerana, we attend various sessions on child-friendly interactions and procedures, and the PSI's approach was contradictory to those learnings. At that point, I also thought about the necessity to conduct such sessions for the various stakeholders involved, including the police officials. I also realized that these sessions have to be ongoing and not one-time. Salma then requested me to place Samir in the same CH as Arif so that he doesn't go missing again.



Next, I had called a CWC member at 09:15pm to report the updates and seek suggestions on the next steps. He had suggested to place Samir in the same CH as Arif. He also assured me that he would call the CH and let them know about the situation.

I too followed up with the CH telephonically and they had shared that Samir could be brought there. I explained to Samir about these developments. He did not say anything. I assured him that I would come the next day morning to meet him and will also get his mother along. The police officials then took Samir to the CH, and I had planned to complete the remaining formalities and paperwork the next day.

I had reached home at 11:30pm, and that finally marked an end to this remarkably long day. On my way back home, I felt grateful towards my family who has been very supportive, understanding and appreciative of the work I do. I also thought about how the pandemic and subsequent lockdown had risked children's safety and had increased the probability of them being exploited. The pandemic had resulted in economic distress and women in the sex trade were one among those who were badly hit by it. To add to this, schools were shut and we were observing that children born to women in the red-light areas had become more vulnerable.



As of today, both Samir and Arif are safely placed in the CH, and Akbar stays with Salma. Salma visits her sons at the CH frequently. During our outreach visit, we also regularly assess if Akbar is safe in the community. While the journey was long and full of ups and downs, the ultimate goal of the safety of Salma's children added to the relief. As a professional social worker, that's what I aim for, and strive to achieve. For me, out of all, this one day in Prerana shall always remain significant for several reasons!

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Years of ATC

Documentation:

Shatakshi Saxena, as
narrated by Neelima Pawar

Review and inputs by:

Geetarani Lourembam
Priti Patkar
Mallika Mannadiar

Design by:

Shatakshi Saxena

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