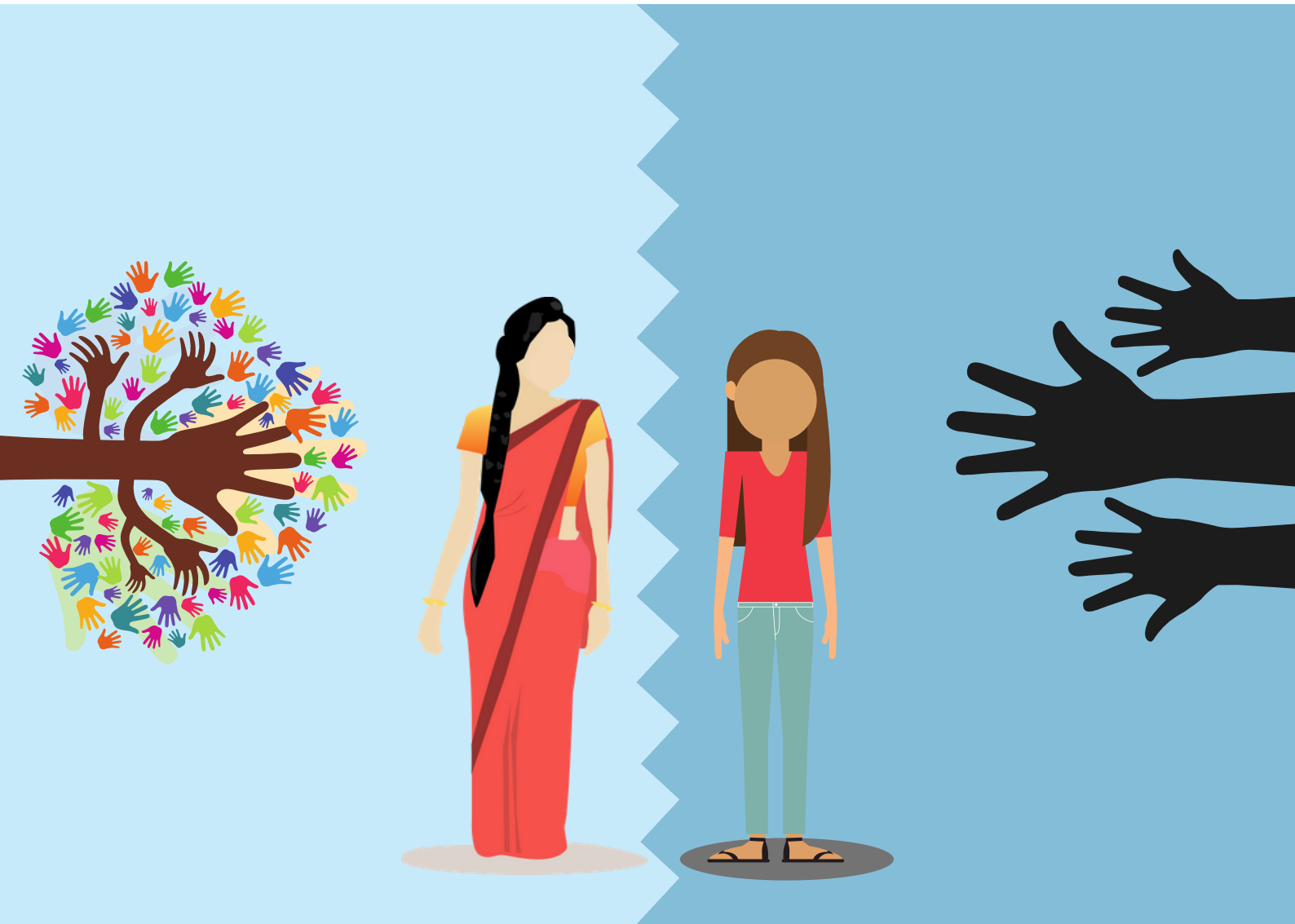


# Prerana's Anti-Trafficking Center



## Scaling in Depth

The link between missing children and sex trafficking



When a child who has been missing from home, is found by the police or other relevant authorities, it is important to gather preliminary facts of the case before restoring the child immediately to the family. In the case given below, Ashima (*name changed*) a missing girl child was found by the police and produced before the Child Welfare Committee (CWC). Once the primary facts were presented before the CWC by the Police, the CWC wanted to get better informed on the case since they suspected it to be more than just a child running away from her home, and hence it passed a temporary Order to place the child in a Child Care Institution (CCI). Once the child was placed in a CCI, it was revealed that there was a lot more to the case than what met the eyes prima facie.

## **A Missing Child**

Ashima's case came to the team of Prerana (*hereafter referred to as 'the Team'*) in October 2017. It was referred as a case of a 'missing child' and no one had approached the authorities to claim Ashima's custody. The child had been presented in front of the CWC by the local police station, and the CWC placed her in a Child Care Institution and also referred the case to Prerana for conducting her Social Investigation. After Ashima's initial interaction with the Probation Officer (PO) at the CCI it was revealed that she had been a victim of commercial sexual exploitation. Following that, a First Information Report (FIR) was filed at the police station, and Ashima was also transferred to another institution that worked specifically with victims of commercial sexual exploitation.

After the case was referred to Prerana, a social worker from Prerana met with Ashima. During the interaction, Ashima spoke of how she had been exploited by a woman from her neighborhood, whom she had met during the Navratri festival. The said woman, Misha *aka* Damini, had forced Ashima into the sex trade, and upon resistance from the child, had threatened to cause harm to her family. The child had felt helpless and had given in. Misha would take the child to various clients and would also starve her if she did not comply. Misha also forced Ashima to consume narcotics and alcohol to the extent that when the child was admitted into the CCI, she was exhibiting withdrawal symptoms like emotional outbursts and mood swings.

## **Comprehensive Social Investigation**

Following the interaction with Ashima, the Team also met with Ashima's family as part of the Social Investigation {under Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act 2015}. Ashima's family comprised of her mother, Aradhana (*name changed*), who worked as domestic-help, and her two brothers. Upon meeting the mother, the Team came to know that she was not keen on taking Ashima's custody. The Team also realized that Aradhana was aware of the child's presentation before the CWC. She told the Team that in the past Ashima had been an obedient child and a good student, but of late her behaviour had become inappropriate. Through the interaction with the mother, the Team got to know that the mother had been through a series of difficult experiences herself. She had been married off at a young age and had a strained marital life. Eventually, she had left her husband, started life anew with her children, and began working as a domestic-help.

Aradhana spoke of observing an evident change in her daughter's behaviour after Misha had started influencing the child's life. She had stopped attending school and was allegedly involved in small thefts around the neighbourhood. When her mother would see her with belongings that were not hers, Ashima would claim that they belonged to a friend. Her mother was quite worried about her behaviour but since she had to work throughout the day, she had little time to keep a vigil on her daughter. Ashima's older brother also tried intervening but to no avail. Ashima would also disappear for days and the mother would be worried, looking out for her everywhere. One time, when Ashima went missing for a long period of time, the mother, with assistance from her employer, Anne (*who the social workers met with as well*), went to file a police complaint. The police, however, refused to lodge a complaint and told her to look for the child herself. They asked her to bring the child to them once found. These experiences had also caused the mother to harbour a mistrust in the police.

When Ashima did return home after some time, Aradhana took her to the police station. This time around too, the police refused to look into the matter. At the police station, the mother, however, refused to take custody of the daughter as the daughter was no longer safe in the area. The police then presented the child in front of the CWC where she was placed in a CCI.

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As part of Ashima's rehabilitation, she was provided counseling at the CCI. However, she was not ready to talk about her trauma. The counsellor encouraged her to write about it and Ashima managed to document her experiences. She gave the counselor one copy and kept one for herself. It so happened, that she lost her own copy. Incidentally that particular counselor had left working at that CCI. The Team tried its best to connect with the counselor to retrieve the document. The document was eventually retrieved. Ashima hopes to show the same to her mother someday.

Ashima is also keen on pursuing formal education, she recently appeared for the 10th standard Board's examinations. She passed all subjects except one, for which she is getting ready to reappear. Apart from that, she is also undergoing a course in basic computer literacy. At present, she is residing in an Aftercare institution as she has crossed 18 years of age. Through various consistent mental health interventions, Ashima has now begun to understand what safety means to her. After she turned 18, the child had an option to go home but she chose to live at an Aftercare institution as she felt that would be safer for her.

Ashima also received compensation under the Manodhairya scheme in January 2019. (*Under the Manodhairya Yojana, set up by the Maharashtra state government through a government resolution (GR) in August 2013, on directions of the Bombay High Court, there is a provision of financial support for victims of rape, child sexual abuse, and acid attacks.*) The compensation was much needed for Ashima to help in her rehabilitation.

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## Strengthening the Family

A child in need of care and protection {under the Juvenile Justice Act (Care and Protection) 2015} cannot be rehabilitated solely by placing them in a CCI. In cases, where there is scope, and benefit of working with the family, family strengthening becomes an important component of rehabilitation. Regardless of whether the child has been placed in a CCI or restored to the family it is necessary to work with the family. In some cases, the child's vulnerability stems from the family being vulnerable because of its socio-economic condition. In those cases, it becomes all the more important to empower the family, so that it can help the child.

Since the time of referral of the case to Prerana, the Team has undertaken many interventions with Ashima and also helped in strengthening the family. The Team realized that the child harboured resentment towards her mother as she felt that her mother was not willing to take her home, even after she turned 18 (*a child can stay in a Child Care Institution only till it attains the age of majority i.e. 18 years*). In this case, the mother, being mostly busy working to provide for the family, could not look after her daughter. She was worried about Ashima's safety. She was also fearful of the family of the accused as they would harass the mother whenever they would see her in public. Thus, she did not want Ashima to be back in the same vulnerable situation.

Prerana worked to facilitate a better relationship between the mother and the child. The Team tried to get the child to see the mother's perspective and also got the mother to visit the child. The Team ensured her mother's presence at the periodic Parent's Meetings at the CCI. Prior to these meetings, the Team would talk to the mother and the child separately and make them understand each other's perspectives and build empathy for each other.

The Team undertook several other family strengthening interventions. The child would often be worried about her siblings and her mother. The Team would visit her family and get regular updates to convey to the child. This immensely helped in building the child's trust in the Team. The Team also undertook capacity building interventions with the mother. The accused would often threaten the mother. Given her prior experiences the mother had become quite fearful of the accused. She was also hesitant to approach the police. The Team helped her approach the Police and register a complaint against the accused. Anne was also instrumental in encouraging the mother to go to the police and in providing support to the family. This case also highlighted how the community around the child could help.

Ashima's relationship with her mother had improved considerably through consistent interventions to bridge the communication gap, build empathy and strengthen their relationship. However, since she has been transferred to an Aftercare facility after she turned 18, their relationship took a downward turn. There is a communication gap between the mother and the child. Since the rules of an aftercare institution are different from that of a child care institution, there has been a gap in communication between the

family and Ashima. Aradhana finds a support system in her employer, Anne who had been helpful to her in the past. However, over a period of time Anne, began participating in the family decisions excessively. Due to this, Ashima started disliking this interference by Anne in her life. Anne over a period of years, has influenced Ashima and her mother and their personal beliefs and has been a support to the family. However, during this period, Anne has also shared some of her troubles and thoughts about Ashima and her general conduct with Aradhana, furthering the distance between the mother and the child.

In the month of May 2019, the team introduced the Aradhana and Anne to Family Counselling. The Team is intending to continue to work on strengthening the relationship between the mother and the child through family counselling. It would be important to make Ashima's mother accept that Ashima is an adult and should be trusted and informed well to make her own decisions. The dynamics between Anne and Ashima's mother would also be addressed in future counselling sessions with an aim to facilitate a healthy relationship between Ashima and her family.

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**P.S. We are sure that most of you must be doing such data gathering and analyzing exercises at your end too. If you are, please do share the same with us. We shall be more than happy to share it on our website**

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*Your trusted knowledge partner in the fight against  
human trafficking*

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