



Too Many Names But No Identity

**The Reality of Children
in Red-Light Areas**

February 2019

For victims of commercial sexual exploitation, loss of identity goes way beyond a layman's understanding. Victims of commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking (VOCSET) lose their families and the bond of trust that often binds us as individuals to the larger society.

When a victim is exploited sexually, especially in a commercial context, she is often given different names, to hide and change her identity when she is frequently sold from one brothel-keeper to another.

A victim of sex trafficking gets sold and resold several times and on every such shift, the sex traders ensure that she is given a different name. Name being an important parameter of identity of a person, this is done for a variety of reasons – the fear of law and enforcement being prominent among them.

The stigma and discrimination about selling of sex is so strong that it makes the victim hide her true name from everyone, including the customer so as not to let her family and community back home know about her being in the sex trade. That is not all, the pressure of getting exposed is so persistent that even after she is rescued, as tutored by the sex traders, she hides her true identity starting from her name and address.

Fake names and identities are adopted by the victims or attributed by her offenders also for one more reason, the gross lack of sensitivity of the duty bearers in the post-rescue domain. It is often found that a policeman in uniform accompanies the girl straight to her house in a village, thereby, abundantly announcing how the girl is rescued or arrested and what she had been involved in.

The victims, often in the search of emotional support, get lured by “fancy men” who almost always act as their pimps and live off the earnings of these women. In different parts of the world, it has been found that the exploitative among the regular customers exploit the emotional state of the victim woman and her yearning to live like a mainstream family woman by making her believe that they are her husbands. That way they get free sex, and more importantly control her finances. In reality, they are pimps posing as husbands. To convince the woman of her marriage, they make her change her name and even that of her children's if any. It does not stop here, they also change her religion if she belongs to a different one. The woman and her children change their identity every time the fancy man changes. Besides being an emotional and psychological struggle for the victim, these changing names lead to multiple discrepancies in the documents related to the identity and residence of such victims. This struggle continues to be part of the lives of the children born to these victims.

Besides the destruction of their psychological self, the changing identities leave the victims with absolutely no proof of political or social belongingness. Post-rescue victims are often asked to prove that they belong to a particular region, either through proof of residence or through a letter from the local self-government bodies.

Victims, who are trafficked from across states and national borders, have no way to prove that they originally belong to a particular district or village. Without an identity and residential proof, such victims are often left out of the social welfare programs and do not benefit from state or Centre's welfare and development schemes. Their children grow as stateless children and face great difficulties even if helped by civil society organizations to acquire an education and vocational training.

At Prerana, Mothers' Meeting is a step towards extricating prostituted women out of exploitation, restore their rights and dignity, and to empower them to build a safety net for themselves and their children.

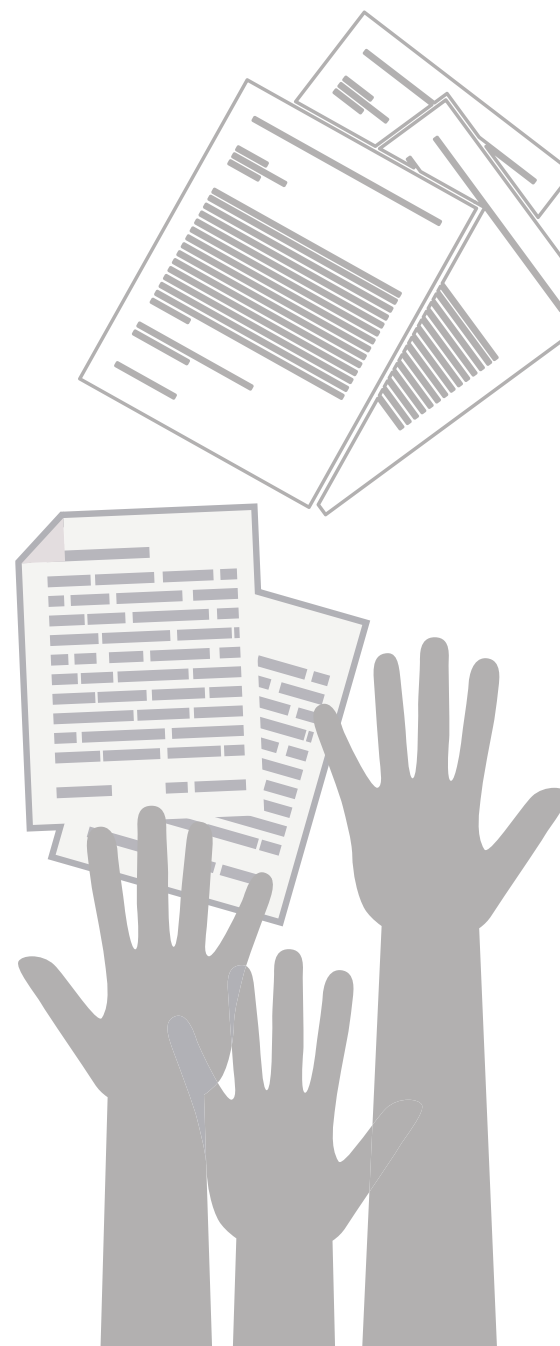
In August 2018, 42 prostituted women – all mothers of children who avail Prerana's services – gathered at Prerana's Falkland Road center in Mumbai for the meeting. The discussion that ensued spoke volumes about the mothers' persistent struggle for identity of their children.

Struggle for identity

During the meeting, the common concern that came to the fore was the lack of a valid identity document for the children of the prostituted women in the red-light areas. What we are talking about is the legal, socio-cultural political identity established through a legally laid down procedure and recognized by the central authority of a country and international community of nations. Several documents such as birth certificate, school-leaving certificate, caste certificate/tribe certificate, domicile certificate, Aadhar card, ration card, certificate of belonging to scheduled caste (SC) or scheduled tribe (ST), or De-Notified (DNT) or nomadic tribe and passport, among others are essential to establish the identity of a person.

Most of the mothers complained that their children were not being allotted Aadhar Card or not being able to open a bank account due to the lack of basic identity proof.

The mothers did admit that they had registered the name of their children differently in different documents such as school certificate and birth certificate. Their own names, too, were registered differently in different documents.



The phases of changes in name & identity

She was trafficked to Mumbai in 2012 from a village in West Bengal. Her name was **Romi* Soddar**. Being forced into prostitution and held captive in a brothel in Mumbai's Falkland Road red-light area, **Romi** constantly faced the threat of police raids at the brothel. The police, also under a simultaneous pressure to hunt down illegal migrants every time a raid was conducted, demanded an identity proof of belonging to India. Following constant harassment by the police, she paid a bribe of Rs 8,000 and got herself an identity document under the name **Romi Gopal Sardar**. She changed her Bangla surname, as often victims hailing from Bangla-speaking states are suspected to be Bangladeshis despite being Indians.

Romi had come to Mumbai with her seven-year-old daughter **Mapiya***.

In her initial days after being forced into prostitution, **Romi** was completely under the influence of her *aadmi* (fancy man) **Billa Sheikh**. She relented when **Billa** asked the school authorities to admit **Mapiya** as **Moppy Billa Sheikh**, introducing his name into her name. This time, in the school, the mother registered herself as **Romita**, which was different from her name on the earlier documents.

Mapiya's name was registered as **Moppy Billa Sheikh** in her Aadhar card too.

Problems began when six years down the line, a passport was to be made for **Moppy**. By this time, the *aadmi* was long gone, but **Moppy** still had his name. Realizing the hiccups that were imminent, Prerana approached the school and requested them to give **Moppy** her mother's name as the middle name. The school sought mother's PAN Card and Aadhar card, but both these documents had only **Romi** as the mother's name, while she was registered as **Romita** earlier in the school. After much hassle, several rounds of the offices of various authorities, requests for affidavit and documents from **Romi's** village, and constant follow-up, she finally got the name **Ramita Gopal Sardar** in her ration card, which was finally submitted to the school. The name **Ramita** was preferred over **Romita** to avoid any confusion in future over pronunciation – while the former sound Hindi, the latter has Bangla accent – writing in Devanagari script or mistaking the mother to be a Bangladeshi. Finally, six years after being trafficked, the child got an identity with the name **Moppy Ramita Sardar**, and the mother **Ramita Gopal Sardar**.

The key impediment of lack of identity to acquire the passport was, thus, addressed. Not only did it require concerted efforts from Prerana's outreach staff, tedious paper work, but a constant counselling and discussion with both the mother and the child to help them understand the importance of uniformity in the identity documents. This also involved explaining the importance of pronunciation.

The lack of uniformity in identity also deprives many children in the red-light areas of their financial rights such as years of bank savings by their mothers. There have been cases when a child has a name different from that of his/her mother's just because the child gets the aadmi's name. At times, even siblings have different surnames as each time there is a new aadmi, he gives his name to the child. Consequently, the children have no valid proof to stake a claim over their mothers' savings.

Sharing his identity: Who is an aadmi? A protector or a perpetrator?

Before a woman is commercially prostituted, she is tortured and tormented inhumanly. She is singed, beaten up, held captive, starved and repeatedly raped to break her spirit. At a time when she needs massive emotional, psychological and social support, exactly the reverse happens with her. With a very bleak understanding of what's happening around, she becomes more vulnerable and submissive. Her need for a protector is then gravely abused by the customers and pimps, who disguise as her patrons. These men, called “*mera aadmi*” by these women, become their fancy men and act like their husbands. The latter trick the women into believing that they care for them, love them and will be by their side forever. But in reality, they exploit the women and thrive on their earnings. They arrange for customers and control the women's finances.

In most cases, the prostituted women do not realize the emotional and sentimental labyrinth they are being pulled into. They become gullible and mentally heavily dependent on their *aadmis* for their safety and security. The children address them as “papa” (father), only to realize later that once the man has his share of gains, he flees.

“Wo aakey humko bolta hai ki wo humsey pyaar karta hai. Wo humko sapney dikhata hai, bolta hai tumko red-light area sey bahar nikalega, poora fayda uthata hai, lekin jab saath khadey hone ka time aata hai, wo bhaag jata hai (He comes and says he loves us, sells us dreams, promises to take us out of the red-light area, exploits us. But when time comes to stand for us, he flees),” said 31-year-old Seema, recalling how she was exploited by her *aadmi*.



Changing names: How it becomes an aadmi's bastion?

If one looks deeper into the modus operandi of sex trafficking, a prostituted woman is sold and resold several times like a commodity by the perpetrators. Every time a new pimp or “*aadmi*” buys her, he gradually convinces her to introduce his surname into her and her child's name in all the official documents possible. He tricks her into thinking that he is actually accepting and including the duo in his family by giving them his name. But, in reality, it is his long-drawn plan to exploit the mother and her child. By this means, he solves his two key purposes: Firstly, practising his sense of entitlement or control over the woman and her earnings. Secondly, his path to “groom” and exploit the child – to become prostitute if it's a girl and pimp if it's a boy – in future becomes easier.

Unfortunately, the women – most of who are uneducated – are unaware of the intention behind *aadmis'* plot.

Lack of identity in red-light areas: Why the recurrence of cases despite intervention?

The constant shifting or migration of prostituted women within the red-light areas – be it within the district, city or state – is as vicious as the trafficking cycle itself.

During the course of trafficking and being forced into prostitution, a woman is made to highly depend on her *aadmi*. As the latter manipulates her to suit his interests, the woman also shifts as the pimp changes places. Therefore, as far as prostituted women are concerned, they become a floating population. At a given time in a particular red-light area, the populace of prostituted women may not be the same as it was few months or years ago. Hence, the issue of lack of identity, despite all efforts and interventions by several agencies, becomes perennial.

The way out

With stringent government laws regarding identity proof, any discrepancy in documents has a long-term effect on a child's future. At the meeting, it was reiterated that mothers should enrol their children only in their names and not in their *aadmi's* name. This is because, in future, in front of authorities concerned, the man can easily claim the child to be his and even accuse the mother of being a bad influence on the child. Since similar incidents had been reported in the past, the mothers were asked to be cautious. The mothers, too, were explained about the importance and the need to keep their names uniform at every registration situation and in all documents.

Mothers' Meeting: How involving them breaks the cycle of inter-generational trafficking?

Most of the mothers, who take part in such meetings, had been trafficked into the sex trade at 15 to 17 years of age. As they are often forced to undergo identity transformation, their children, too, inadvertently become part of the vicious circle of identity crisis, neglect, abuse, exploitation and eventually the sex trade and the allied activities.

Through Mothers' Meeting, Prerana helps the women in effective parenting skills to ensure that their children's rights are protected, including the right to an identity. The meetings primarily serve as a platform to share information and facilitate discussion on various matters that concern the mothers with regard to their children. It helps mothers enhance their interaction with schools, deal with behavioral difficulties encountered by children and build healthy relationship with them. The mothers are encouraged to get actively involved in children's educational development. They are also made financially, educationally and socially aware. This process helps to break the cycle of inter-generational trafficking, as besides the active intervention by Prerana, the mothers themselves ensure that their children do not suffer the same fate as they did due to their special circumstances. While Prerana becomes their pillar of support, mothers are placed at the forefront to give their children a dignified life away from the adversities of the red-light areas.



In the meeting organized in August 2018, some of the other topics discussed were importance of checking the legal status of a “boarding” (Children’s Home), abuse of children in non-registered “boardings”, notification of the same to the Child Welfare Committee and the Juvenile Justice Act.

A story of fight for identity

The *Bhartiya Patita Uddhar Sabha*, an organization founded by Khairatilal Bholia in 1984 for the welfare of prostitutes and their children, moved the Supreme Court on January 21, 1988. Then, the children of prostituted women were denied admission both to the private and government schools as they could not furnish their fathers' names. The petition sought to prove that such denial of admission was "arbitrary, discriminatory, unconstitutional, unreasonable and unjustified" and "against the principles of natural and social justice."

Eventually, in a landmark judgement, the Supreme Court granted permission for the admission of children of prostituted women into schools without stating the father's name, which was mandatory for admissions.

The order was a step closer to the empowerment of prostituted women.



While, it's been nearly three decades ever since the landmark judgment came, lack of a valid and legal identity is still a socio-cultural issue deeply entrenched in the world of trafficking, prostitution and red-light areas. With every new generation of traffic and prostituted victims, it is a fight afresh. A fight for identity and rights.

*Note: The names of the cases described here have been changed to protect the identity of the victims.