

WOMEN IN PROSTITUTION AND THEIR CHILDREN IN KAMATHIPURA

Prostitution is one of the oldest professions of the world, practiced since the birth of an organized society. Society however has since changed its attitude and approach towards sex workers. The government of India as a signatory to the U.N. Convention is committed to the abolition of antiquated and unjust laws and regulations that further marginalize women in prostitution. However, without the political will and society's support these laws will remain on paper alone.

Trafficking in women and girls is done in an organized commercial way for the benefit of a third person who may be either a man or woman. Although brothels are run on a commercial basis, there is no law to guarantee the workers a minimum income and decent conditions of work. Exploitation by the clients continues unabated. The law prohibits commercialized prostitution and therefore, it logically follows that the state does not feel the need for a law for regulating relationships in a brothel. Inmates are given a meager share of the earnings gained and all they get in return is their maintenance. There is no special security scheme and after the women has ceased to be a source of profit, she is left on the streets with her meager resources.

The children of women in prostitution are the most vulnerable. Due to lack of awareness and the ignorance of alternatives as a means of livelihood, the children enter the profession at a very young age unaware of the exploitation, violence and abuse they will have to face. Many of them have been forced into the profession at a very tender age, their voices of protest often remaining unheard.

The advent of HIV infection has led to a paranoia, which unfortunately has accelerated child prostitution. There is also a myth that sexual intercourse with a virgin leads to cure of STDs/AIDS. The process of "conscientisation" is to raise the sex worker's awareness towards protecting herself from exploitation and uphold her rights as a human being as also the rights of her child. No mother, being a victim of circumstances herself would want the same for her child. But, often, she is ignorant about options and the child is left with no alternative.

CCDT believes that the children are the future of our world and they have a right to a healthy and happy childhood. Project ANKUR was designed to have a planned program of development for these children. Project ANKUR-ASMITA is especially for the daughters (6-14 years of age) of the sex workers of Kamathipura and Worli. Kishori Vatika CCDT's Night Shelter for the girls is supported by FHI-USAID.

It needs to be understood that the brothel and pavement prostitution exposes the child to the grim realities and the dynamics of prostitution of a marginalized community very early in life. Helping the child share his experiences and comprehending the situation is a task that requires professional skills. A social worker and child counselor can attend to the psychological development of the child. Children are often abused and feel insecure in an environment that has been cruel to them. "Institutionalization" of children in boarding schools, away from their environment appears to be a viable alternative.

However, not all children can be institutionalized due to various reasons. A non-formal education programme at the day care center provides motivation for the child to enter mainstream education programmes. The children are referred to local schools. Vocational guidance and skill training are imparted to children who cannot cope with the formal educational system. Opportunities to develop other skills are provided with professional guidance. Most of the children have never been out of the area. Exposure programmes to life in the city, educational tours to the museums, zoos, other schools etc... help them grow. Education on the rights of the child and issues affecting them are taken up. Empowerment mechanisms to protect them from physical and sexual abuse are to be established.

A high protein diet through 3 meals is provided for the children at the ANKUR day care center. The health status of the child is monitored and promotion of personal hygiene and care for one's environment are addressed through the child-to-child programme. Bathing and caring for oneself is part of the programme. The children will be taught to care for their mothers.

The day care center is open to children between the age groups 3-8 years. The night shelter is for girls (of mothers in prostitution) 6-14 years of age at risk. At present we have over 50 girls in the night shelter and 70 children in the day-care center.

Mother-child bonding is encouraged as it plays an important role in building up emotional stability in the children that will hold in good stead for the future. The growth and development of the child depend on the interest and care of the mothers.

It must be noted that sex workers are engaged in the sex industry and they too have rights that need to be upheld. Ignorance and lack of awareness are often the cause of their predicament. As victims of circumstances they need to be made aware about their rights as human beings and empowered to fight against exploitation whether it is the brothel owner or the client.

A sex profession has serious health implications. Hence minimal health care and referral services will be used as an entry point. Further, medical and psychological counseling through interpersonal contact as well as group meetings are essential. Regular health education and family life education are to be imparted in the centre/community.

Motivating the sex worker to pursue an alternative profession by supporting skills training is an important component of the project. This will be supported by measures to build self-esteem and confidence without being judgmental in the messages imparted. Solving problems that the sex workers face is a major step in building rapport and trust. A nutrition package is provided to those who are seriously ill requiring special nutrition.

The youth club provides an alternative for the youth to give vent to their energies constructively. Games, vocational guidance, basic literacy and skills development are initial activities that the club provides. The youth are motivated to participate fully in the project and take on other activities like community education, health awareness, etc. The Kishori Vatika, Night Shelter brochure attached for relevant information.