

# RED LIGHT DESPATCH

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RELEASING SIMULTANEOUSLY FROM DELHI,  
KOLKATA, AND FORBESGANJ (BIHAR)

## My Dreams

Ishrat Khatoon

**Uttari Rampur:** I live in the red light area of Uttari Rampur with my mother, *mausi* and three children. My husband is an alcoholic and rickshaw puller. He stays at Forbesganj and does nothing to take care of me or our children. My mother is HIV+ and my *mausi* cannot work anymore. Entire family is dependent on me. I used to work in a house and earn Rs.30 to 40 everyday. When I got pregnant I could not continue work. My *mausi* is a part of Apne Aap 's Mahila Mandal and took loans from there to feed us. There was a lot of pressure from the community to put me in prostitution but my *mausi* has always resisted. She took me to Apne Aap. They are very kind and took my mother to the hospital when she was very ill. I became a part of the Mahila Mandal. Seeing my family's situation, Apne Aap and my group people who work with Nomi Network took me there. Since last 2 months I am working for Nomi Network as a cleaning staff and earn Rs.1500 a month. I will also learn to stitch and from next month. I will get a stipend of Rs.800. My *mausi* will also get the same stipend as she is also a part of it now. So we will be able to feed my children and ailing mother. I feel much more confident and happy now. I feel I have a sort of security that was never there in my life before this.

## Panel Discussion and Photo Exhibition on Rape Cultures

Varsha

**Dharampura:** A photo exhibition and panel discussion was held at the Press Club of India at New Delhi. I attended the event along with Priyanka *didi*, Alok *bhaiya*, Rita and Kajal. I was very happy to be there. When we were asked us to light the candle for inauguration I got very excited as it was the first time that I was going to inaugurate any function. We felt really important.

After that we all attended the panel discussion about rape- how it is a bad thing in our society and what could be the various ways to put a check on such a thing. I have heard of rape so much these days on television. We all went to protest in *Jantar Mantar* earlier this year to fight for the protection of women and girls. Abhilasha ma'am, our Director talked on how women are exploited and are treated badly even though they are the one who become victims of rape.

She said that rape is increasing and Delhi has become very unsafe now. There were people from different political parties and they talked about how women are treated in our country and how our own families treat boys and girls differently. They said that the police should also become strict and such people should get punishment. All discussion was in English but I understood few words and the rest Priyanka *didi* explained to us. We also saw the photos which were taken during the time of the protest at India Gate. They were in black and white and Soumya *didi* told us about the photographs and what was written under them.

Before this I never heard about the Press Club of India. We live far from it in the *Perna Basti* at Najafgarh. It is because of Apne Aap that we are getting a chance to visit such places.

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## Topsia Eviction : Our struggle continues

Mumtaj Begum

**Kolkata:** Last year in November around 383 families living under Topsia No.4 Bridge near Park Circus were evicted without any prior notification. Before the eviction we were continuously threatened and abused. The excuse given for the eviction – not by the government but by the goons in charge was that a flyover was to be constructed in the area. We were not provided any rehabilitation and paid a paltry amount of Rs 12,000 per household as compensation. All these 383 families had been living at that place for the last 30-40 years. Most of us

have voter identity cards, ration cards, *Aadhar* cards etc of the very address from which we were evicted. There has never been any political or administrative willingness to understand our plight or to provide them better living condition. The families are currently living under the open sky with constant threats of rape and murder from the local hoodlums and criminals. Incidents of trafficking have increased. After the initial shock, the evicted families – led by the women – decided to fight back for justice. We

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## Reserving Judgments

Garima Sharma

*“What I love most about them is the ease with which they embrace each other’s company; there is no conscious appraisal of a person’s background, her parent’s association with prostitution or how well off (or not) her family may be.”*

I penned down this thought in my journal on the 8<sup>th</sup> day of my two month stay in Forbesganj, and its verity with respect to the girls at the *Basti Vikas Kendra* continues to astound and inspire me even after I have said my goodbyes to them and to Forbesganj. Among the most significant revelations from my time with Apne Aap has indeed been that uncalculated acceptance of a person’s circumstance sans sympathy is the first step towards a cognizance of and respect for their human rights.

‘What would you like to change around you?’ I asked the girls one afternoon. ‘Prostitution of my friends’; came one reply. ‘Men getting drunk and beating their wives’; ‘People gambling away their wives’ and mothers’ hard-earned money’; ‘Forcing a daughter into marriage before she has attained 18 years of age’; ‘Refusing to allow a girl to study.’

Then came the disclosures: ‘*Didi*, I wish my father was not as violent.’ ‘I

wish I was allowed to stay out as long as my brother. Why should he get to spend so much more time with his friends?’ ‘My parents are always chiding me for being friends with boys.’ ‘My brother is perpetually asking me to iron his clothes and perform chores for him!’ ‘My

### Column **Volunteer Journal**

parents want me to be married and I am barely 14. They cannot afford a high dowry, you see.’ ‘I wish I were still in school.’

And through the afternoon of admissions, empathy and anger (yes, anger) at the general state of affairs, not once did the girls offer each other pity. Instead, their compassion was reflected in the act of proposing solutions to each other’s predicaments—‘Perhaps we could all talk to your parents about the merits of a good education?’ and even, ‘You should negotiate chores with your brother in return for keeping his girlfriend a secret.’ In refusing to ever become the pitied and in partaking as equal stakeholders in each other’s everyday troubles, the girls preserve their sisterhood and the dignity of all its

members.

My time in Forbesganj was rife with revelations, unforgettable experiences and undeserved love (from community members, girls and staff members alike) and while countless blog posts would make worthy contenders for how I decide to describe my time working with Apne Aap in Bihar, it was that afternoon of collective venting (and subsequent brainstorming) I must highlight- for even at the risk of confirming every cliché about a summer intern, I cannot help but concede that it taught me the most important lesson of my life—reserve judgment, especially if it leads you to pity. We can never help by doing someone the indignity of wanting to ‘save’ them or thinking that you can.

Now I know what Ms. Watson meant:

*“If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time; but if you are here because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”*

*Garima was an intern with Apne Aap at the Forbesganj field office. Her interests lie in the areas of gender and human rights.*

## Ten Minutes to School

Sanjana

**Forbesganj:** I want to share a very fascinating event that recently took place. It has been a very interesting experience of my life but there were many problems also because I had never done something like this before. I was in a shooting for a film. It was like a dream. But I was a bit tired of giving a number of re-takes. It was very hot and at times very

exhausting. But I was very happy with the completion of the shooting after 3 days. It is then that I realized that I am the main protagonist of the film and the film has been shot on me! The way my school teachers and principals participated in the shoot was very surprising for me. I was feeling a bit proud with so much attention. All the girls were

looking at me. I felt very happy then.

Lyn, a foreigner had come to shoot the film. I enjoyed working with her. When I would get tired shooting for the film, she would give me encouragement and would give me time to rest also! She would often make funny faces; behave like

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## Op/Ed Ruchira Gupta

When I read about the rape of a 23-year-old photojournalist in Mumbai, I thought, here we go again. On December 6, 1992, when I was a 29-year-old reporter covering the demolition of a mosque in northern India, I was attacked. I wasn't raped, but my attackers sexually assaulted and then tried to kill me. Someone dragged me to a trench outside the mosque and pulled my shirt off. But a passer-by jumped in, fought off my attackers and saved me.

When I appeared in court to testify against the attackers, their lawyers asked me questions that implied I was responsible. How could the daughter of a good family have gone to cover the demolition? Did I smoke? What kind of clothes was I wearing? Did I believe in God? The judge did not stop them. It was a demoralizing and toxic experience, but one that is not unknown to women in India who choose to speak out against sexual attacks. They are silenced by a process that heaps shame, fear and guilt on them.

In rural Rajasthan in 1992, a judge dismissed charges filed by a low-caste, or Dalit, grassroots social worker, Bhanwari Devi, who said she was gang raped. She had been campaigning against child marriage. A judge said, "a middle-aged man from an Indian village could not possibly have participated in a gang rape in the presence of his own nephew." A judgment like this not only deters other women from testifying against their rapists, it also emboldens the attackers, who know that they will get away with it. Most women say they would never tell the police about an at-

tack, afraid that they would be ignored or even abused by the cops themselves.

In June, 13 anti-rape protesters were arrested outside the home of the West Bengal chief minister and detained for more than eight hours. Ironically, they were protesting the lack of police protection for women in the state following the rape and

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murder of a 20-year-old college student whose body was found lying near a river near the outskirts of Kolkata, and that of a 14-year-old girl who was raped and killed in the town of Gede, 90 miles away, only three days later.

Few women want to appear in court only to be stigmatized and traumatized -- unlike treatment of the suspects. While India's legal framework has improved for women over the past 20 years, the people implementing it are mostly male cops and lawyers who live in a deeply patriarchal society. Incidents of rape have gone up by 873% in India in the past 60 years. On average, each day, three Dalit women are raped in some part of our country. The conviction rate for rape cases in 2011 was 25% -- although some estimate only one in 10 rapes is reported. The conviction rate for men accused of raping Dalit women

is almost nil. The National Crime Records Bureau's annual report of crime statistics also reports disturbing findings: a woman is raped somewhere in India every 20 minutes, and the number of children raped has increased by 336% in the past 10 years. This culture of impunity is certainly one of the reasons rape has too often become the weapon of choice for frustrated young men who blame women, increasingly visible in the workplace, for their unemployment, and who hope to regain jobs by frightening women back home through sexual violence. The desire to blame women is fed by a cult of masculinity promoted by corporate and political leaders who serve as role models for the rest of society.

In the course of my work with Apne Aap Women Worldwide, I have seen the steady creeping of a rape culture into the fabric of India. We work to organize women in prostitution to resist their own and their daughters' rape. The biggest challenge we face is the attitude of politicians, senior police officials, heads of foundations and even policy makers who view rape as a normal part of society. Many have told me: "Men will be men." Recently, when National Crime Records Bureau pegged West Bengal as the state with the highest incidence of crimes against women, the chief minister contested the bureau's statistics rather than tackling the problem. Continually, budget allocations to the Ministry of Women and Child Development are reduced.

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## Absence of Choice

*Sudipta Dasgupta*

**Kolkata:** Every day that I interact with a girl and women who work in prostitution, I get surprised. They are like me in flesh and blood, they are like my sisters, but they live their lives without any dignity or respect. Few people avoid them and most just want to use them for sex. They continue to live their life with pain and a difficult smile. They want to leave this trade, but they have no other option for an alternative livelihood. They are also not accepted by their own families.

I met Reema (name changed) there. Like most other women, she was tricked and brought to Sonagachi. After facing domestic violence in her married life, she took her two children and began looking for a job. A man in her village promised her one. He brought her and several other women in a car to Kid-dipure and with the help of other men sexually assaulted her. She was thrown out of the car and sustained injuries. She found herself in Sonagachi and it took her almost two months to recover. This was the absence of choice she faced. This is

the unfortunate situation faced by the other girls and women who are brought to be sold in Sonagachi. They all have no option, they all have no choice.

I started my journey with Apne Aap in 2012. I started working with women who are in prostitution and

### *Column* **Diary of a Social Worker**

women who are at a risk of prostitution in Munshigunj and Topsia, Kolkata. When I first started working at Munshigunj, I had no idea about the kind of issues that I was going to come across. They did not talk to me initially stating that they have no time to talk to us. And even if they talked with me, they would only emphasize upon the kind of profit which they would have gained. One could feel and see that they did not trust anybody. Behind their anger they faced deep pain, every day. It made me feel utterly helpless. However, with great support from my team I could over-

come this situation. It took me sometime but I won their trust. Now they are like my friends. Sonagachi is one of the toughest places to work in. Whenever I entered this area I can feel that every pair of eye is on me- they look at you without any dignity and only with suspicion. It becomes very easy to see and understand that the girls and women, who live and work here, face resentment. It was here that I came to learn about their lives and their struggle to survive.

Reema is a great fighter. She wants to live with dignity and wants to protect her children. Her son is now admitted in Rama Krishna Vivekananda Mission School through Apne Aap. Like her, I try to meet as many women and try to enroll their children in schools so that they can aspire for a different future- where choices will be available for them to seize with their hands.

*Sudipta works with Apne Aap as Project Officer in Kolkata. She travels to Sonagachi to learn about the*

*(continued from page 1)*

I also gave interview to a reporter there on increasing rapes and crime against girls and women. Women are looked down by men. But women are very strong and they can achieve anything. I also sang a song - *Inhi logon ne pabandi lagai hai, bai umar me har ladki satai hai...*

*Varsha is 12 years old and in 6th grade. She has been with Apne Aap since an year and half.*

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## My First 'Dignified' Earning

*Basanti Das*

**Kolkata:** I am member of a SEG (Self-Empowerment Group) called Sonar Bangla Group (Prosperous Bengal). We, the seven women, survivors of sex-trafficking living in Munshiganj's Red Light Area in Kolkata formed this group in 2009 in search of an alternative and dignified livelihood. Through our group meetings and discussions in the group, we have decided that we would start a canteen where we can sell cooked food for people working in offices near Khidderpore area.

As we all are getting old, so it is tough for us to do physical hard work or concentrate and we are too old to learn any new skills. But we all love to cook and through this we found good work to supply cooked food. We think it will be successful because there is no good canteen in and around the area where lots of people come to work in offices. I was in prostitution for a long time. After joining Sonar Bangla SEG, I felt that I made friends with whom I can share my sorrow and happiness. I was never good at cooking, but after joining this group and working together I developed my skill. I learnt some new recipes also. I am so happy with these. When we have meetings or when we all sit together and cook for any order of food, I just enjoy that time. During the cooking we all divide our work among us. Being in a group many times we face conflict in making decisions among us but through proper discussion and suggestions from our Secretary we overcome these situations.

We are doing this food supply activity and cooking from January 2012. We also participated at an exhibition in Kolkata where we sold our cooked food. We are very happy that the people loved our food. But during the exhibition there was a

time when I really felt that I should be with the group for helping others members but I was forced by my *malkin* to sit for the customers at the door. But as soon as she left I rushed to the cooking place and to my group. It is very tough for me to express my feelings when I got the money after all this hard work. The money that I earned was without any exploitation and with dignity. Through these events as a group, we all earn a good amount of money and we all shared that amount among us and also deposited in our group bank account. These days we face little problem of getting a regular customer base. But on that issue also we are working. We are now making our menu list and we are planning to distribute that after printing it.

We invited the office staff of Apne Aap, Kolkata at the Munshiganj community center for lunch. We did not take any amount from the people. We all collected money from our own income and arranged lunch for them. Through this one year we got many opportunities of showing our skills to the people outside the red light area and we got appreciation from customers for the taste of food. We earned throughout the year during events and exhibition. We invited Apne Aap staff for lunch as this earning means a lot to us as we earned it without any exploitation, violence and with respect.

*Basanti Das is the Treasurer of Sonar Bangla Canteen Group, Munshiganj.*

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Debates to ensure equal power sharing between the sexes through the Women's Reservation Bill have gone nowhere.

But no amount of violence and intimidation is going to force women back into their homes. In fact, homes are often the places where females are in the most danger -- from the time they are conceived to old age. An average Indian female could likely be a victim of foeticide, infanticide, malnourishment, dowry, child marriage, maternal mortality, domestic servitude, prostitution, rape, honor killings and domestic violence -- simply because she is female.

Equipped with better education, women are courageously taking their place in the public sphere as doctors, lawyers, journalists, bankers, politicians, farmers, teachers and more. They are signing up for social justice movements to end the growing inequality and unemployment in our country. As yet another gang-rape victim suffers in a Mumbai hospital in India, we have to recognize the need to overhaul the criminal justice system. In December 2012, India and the world were shocked by the brutal gang rape and beating aboard a moving bus of a 23-year-old physiotherapy intern, who later died of massive internal injuries. It prompted desperate calls for reform, protests and close examination of India's attitudes toward rape. But after the initial outrage, it seems that the law has only changed on paper. The rape in Mumbai might not have happened if the culture of rape was truly overcome and sexual assaults were taken seriously.

## Participating in a Drawing Competition

*Kareena*

**Dharampura:** In the Sapera basti, a centre started in 2011 and girls from our community started going there. When I used to see the girls studying and doing interesting activities, I also felt like joining the Centre but I couldn't go. Then one day Mumta madam came to our house and explained to my parents and me about the Centre and the various activities it does. She told me to attend the classes at the Centre but I refused as I was very shy in the beginning. But she came to convince me even after that day also.

I went with her to see how the Centre functions and why girls are so excited to go to this place. I found some girls working on tailoring machines and some doing some drawings which I found interesting. I started going to the Centre regularly and enrolled myself in the remedial and drawing class. Later on I also got enrolled in the six month long computer class. I became very ac-

tive girl and participated in almost all the activities and events happening in the Centre because of the support of the *didis* and *bhaiyas*. They were very helpful and encouraging.

We used to get opportunities to participate in events outside the Centre as well and it happens to be a lot of learning and fun. We get an opportunity to see the outside world away from our community. We all participated in the demonstration held at Jantar Mantar after the gang rape in December last year to demand protection for women and girls from sexual harassment and rape.

Recently I participated in a drawing competition held at Sri Ram Chandra Gehlot Charitable Trust and I got prize for one of the best drawings. It was a competition held on the occasion of Independence Day and I painted an Indian flag and the some images of freedom fight-

ers. My drawing was much appreciated and everyone came and talked to me. After joining the Centre at Apne Aap, I have got a lot of appreciations and have met lot of people and have made me realise how beautiful life would be. This has helped in build confidence also. I used to be shy and nervous but now I feel I can talk to other people also. In our community we are bound by lots of restrictions like caste, traditions, being a girl and not a boy- so we are unaware of the outside world as we are not allowed to see it or we don't get to interact with anyone else. But now I am getting to know the world which is new and very fascinating for me.

*Kareena is 10 years old and in 5th grade. She lives in the Sapera basti at Dharampura and has been attending classes at Apne Aap's Centre for two years.*

*(Continued from page 1)*

knocked the doors of many a government bodies and authorities to consider rehabilitation, but were met with suspicion, hostility and non-recognition of the issues. Moreover, we are continuously threatened and harassed for fighting for our rights.

Apne Aap started working here in 2003 as they witnessed an increase in number of trafficking cases there. Most of the children did not go to school and were earning whatever they could as rag-pickers. It was only because of Apne Aap and a couple of other organizations that the children started going to school. Apne Aap organized a public hearing of the evicted people on 6<sup>th</sup> June, 2013 at Rotary Sadan. The objective was to create a forum so that support could be garnered for the victims. We wanted an impartial assessment of the case by civil society members and their suggestions to take the case forward through written presentations, legal inputs and social action.

We, especially the women, re-organized ourselves and have been fighting for justice. We have been deprived and marginalized of our lives and livelihoods. Our children and women are under threat and in grave danger of being sexually exploited and/or trafficked. We approached different government officials and peo-

ple's representatives including State Human Rights Commission, National Human Rights Commission, National Commission for Women, State Commission for Women, Minority Commission, Chief Justice of India, and Chief Secretary of West Bengal. Some of them responded positively. National Human Rights Commission has asked for a report from Chief Secretary, Government of West Bengal on the eviction within 40 days. At the same time Minority Commission also asked the Commissioner of Police, Commissioner of Kolkata Municipal Corporation and chairman of Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority to submit a report on the eviction and rehabilitation.

In response of the letter Commissioner of Police and Deputy Commissioner of Kolkata Municipal Corporation submitted a report to the Chairman of Minority Commission and we are expecting some other responses. These will be available very soon which will help us get justice as well as prepare us to file a Public Interest Litigation (PIL).

*Mumtaj Begum lives besides railway tracks near Park Circus railway station with her husband and son. Her two daughters were shifted to her relatives house for their safety after the eviction.*

## Re-integration of DNTs through Land Reform Policy

*Beenita Mehr*

Apne Aap is committed to work with de-notified tribe (DNTs) who are forced into practising inter-generational prostitution. They follow this in order to accommodate two square meals in absence of a choice towards a dignified livelihood. This eventually traps them into the heinous trade of prostitution.

Rectifying the British regime of Criminal Tribes Act 1871, the Government of India officially de-notified these stigmatized tribes in 1959. They were originally notified as 'criminal community'. This legal rectification was not enough to bring their socially dignified livelihood source back. Their future generations have carried this burden and are still socially stigmatized.

Many nomadic tribes have lost their primitive livelihood sources due to the development course of globalisation and got added in the list of de-notified tribes. Besides various reasons, acute poverty and vulnerability have been the prime

causes for female members of a family to be prostituted and male

### Column **Did You Know?**

members to play the role of a pimp or getting involved in criminal activities.

Land Reform Policy, August 2013, brings hope for these nomads and DNTs. In India, owning land is significantly important in establishing a social status along with a secured livelihood source. Such tribes are now eligible to get at least five acres of cultivable land with assured irrigation and at least 10 cents of house site in accordance with the 'Right to Minimum Land Holding Act'. This provision secures access and rights over common land by providing exclusive rights to a community and not to individuals. This would greatly aid in the process of cultivating the required raw material for their handicrafts and other artefacts such as baskets, brooms,

traditional cloth, mats etc. Along with this establishing centres for livestock rearing is another significant aspect of this policy. This will greatly help in paving the way for the DNTs in joining the mainstream with dignity.

Furthermore this policy emphasises the land right to women; all new farm land distribution/regularisation to landless families will take place in the women's name and not in joint titles with husbands. This will help in filling the gap of Tenancy Act where women's access and control is over the 'asset' rather than over the 'income' from the asset. Ensuring proper implementation of this just and equitable policy in the states will help to create livelihood options and more than that facilitate the process of mainstreaming the DNTs.

*Beenita is Program Manager at Apne Aap. Her interests lie in the area of equity and rights for de-notified communities.*

## Dance Competition at Vishwa Yuva Centre

*Kashak*

**Dharampura:** I started attending Apne Aap's activities with my elder sister Momal and joined the dance class which she conducts. She is really good at dance and after seeing her dance, I developed an interest in dance too. My mother is the bread winner in my family and she works hard to bring us up. She is very supportive of us and wants us to be independent one day

From Apne Aap I have been taken out to participate in several events. Once I went to this place where there were huge buildings and a park which had swings close by. I wanted to go and play there but we all were preparing for our dance competition and we were very nervous. We practiced our dance num-

ber and it was from a movie called ABCD (Anybody Can Dance) which is a movie focused on dancing. There was a huge crowd for the event. Some people were participating and the many other people came to motivate the participants and the rest were the organizers.

### Column **The World Outside**

There were five judges who were giving scores for each performance. It was my very first time that I was participating in such a show and it was so big, so I was feeling really good. We won the second prize for

the dance and I was extremely happy. All my friends were also happy and we all came out of the auditorium and danced in joy after the programme. At the same time, I saw some other performances which were even better than us and I realised that we should practice more. It was very exciting to see others who were as excited as us. People came and appreciated us and we felt very proud. I felt like I have developed a confidence and I can participate in any programmes from now on and I will not be as nervous as I was that time.

*Kashak is 11 years old and a very active member at Dharampura Centre.*

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a child to make me laugh! I felt giving the interview separately after the shoot. I was a bit nervous as there were many questions but some of them were very interesting. I was asked what I would ask if I get to meet the chief minister of Bihar. I was very amused with the question. In my reply I said that I would ask him to work for girls of our area as they face severe violence and can not go to school for various reasons.

The best part was the surprise gift that I got after the shoot from Lyn *didi*. She gave me a bicycle. She had kept the bicycle hidden somewhere in Apne Aap's office and when she was taking me there, I was a bit surprised as to why she was taking me round the office. Seeing the bicycle, I did not realize that it was mine, but when she explained me that, I was so happy that I could not believe it!

*Sanjana is 12 years old .She has been with Apne Aap's Kishori Mandal at Uttari Rampur, Forbesganj.*



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*Organizing communities to end sex trafficking—every woman free, every child in school*