



# Red Light Despatch

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NEWSLETTER

## My Dreams

### No One Will Die Because of Poverty

By Durga Kumari , 13 years

**Khidderpore, Kolkata:** I love to read, play with my friends, sing, dance and paint. But above all, I love going to junior school. However, my Mum told me that she couldn't afford my education for high school.

I dream that one day I will become a Doctor. I'll establish a hospital and every morning I'll check-up the poor for free of cost. I'll give them medicine so that no-one will die as a consequence of their poverty. Many poor people live in my area and I have seen many of them die because they were not given proper medicines and treatment. I want to become a doctor to make sure that this does not happen to anyone. Thanks to Apne Aap I can now earn my own money by the income generation scheme they run. I stitch clothes and the money I earn will go toward my higher education so that I am one step closer to becoming the professional that I desire to be.

## If We Know our Rights, We Can All Be Powerful

By Renu Devi

**Forbesgunj, Bihar:** I am the secretary of a Self Empowerment Group named "Sita". This group is functioning at Kuber-tola, Forbesganj. I am a very active part of this self empowerment group and I am very happy and proud to be a part of it also. I am extremely grateful to Apne Aap for organizing such legal training. I had never heard of anything like a legal training and did not know how this could help me or anyone else in my group.

I have been very shy before joining this SEG group. I used to hardly talk to anyone and used to stay at home as much as possible. I did not even know how to talk about anything to people I did not know very well. I could not even talk about myself. Now I am feeling confident to speak in front of my group and also to those who visit the group. I could never

think that I would be able to talk about things like empowerment and leadership. But I am able to do this with not much difficulty. I even enjoy talking to women about these things because I can see that they are as interested as me to understand and use this in our lives. The activities happening in the SEG have always inspired me to move forward. This legal session was also one of this. It gave me lot of information on our fundamental rights and our entitlements. I never knew that there were so many rights which I had. I wish I had known sooner. But now that I know I feel more powerful and more independent. I have also come to know that there is no difference between a rich or poor, high caste or low caste when it comes to rights and entitlements.

*Continued on page 8*

## No one Wants to be Associated With a Prostitute

By Purmaitra Sarkar

**Sonagachi, Kolkata:** My name is Purmaitra Sarkar and I live in Kolkata's largest red-light district, Sonagachi. I am now nearing seventy years old and have spent the last fifty five years of my existence living in a small lane in Sonagachi's backstreets and being prostituted from there. My life wasn't always like this, nor did I expect this from my life. I was born in the Barishal district of Bangladesh from a well educated and well off family. You might say that I used to live a "normal" life, the way any middle class family live their life. I used to spend my days undergoing lessons at school, learning music and when I had free time playing with my brothers and sisters. I had many hopes and dreams about my life. There is so much I wanted to do. But dreams just remained dreams because my life turned out to be nothing close to what I thought it would. *(Continued on page 7)*

## My Kishori Mandal Group Gives Me Confidence

*By Seema Kumari, (14years)*

**Khidderpore, Kolkata:** I am an active member of a Kishori Mandal in Kidderpore in the Munshigunj area. I like my Kishori Mandal group a lot. At first when we started the group I did not know what it was about and I was quite unsure of what to do but in a few days we were having so much fun and learning lots. The name of my Kishori Mandal group is 'Amantran' which means 'Invitation'.

Amantran is a group of young girls aged 12-19 yrs. Once a week we get together and in the presence of Chaitali Aunty and we exchange our experiences from life. If someone from our group is facing a problem, we encourage her share and then we try to solve the problem together. What we discuss in our group is only between us. The group are almost like my family. We discuss various issues like; problems at school; our parents having little money; child marriage; and our careers and ambitions. All the girls in Amantran love these sessions so much that none of us ever miss a session.

Last Saturday we decided to do something to celebrate Independence Day. First, we got permission from Chaitali Aunty to use the Apne Aap centre for our performance. Then we got together and sat down to plan for the programme. Rekha, another Kishori girl, said that she would write down a small skit for all of us to perform. Six of us decided to perform a group dance. We also selected a song to sing. Chaitali Aunty was there for supervision and suggestions. We practice twice a week – it is so fun!

Most of meetings at Amantran, along with being fun, help us to learn a lot. Such meetings help me to acquire knowledge and skills necessary to manage my own life. From each and every meeting I learn something new.

### Volunteer Journal

## Their Bravery Inspires Me

*Column*  
*By Francesca Tarant*

Prior to my volunteer work with Apne Aap in Delhi, my understanding of the problem of the modern day slave trade was in terms of numbers. For instance: two to three million - the number of women and girls estimated to be in prostitution in India alone. Thirty-five - the percentage of women forced into prostitution as children; and finally: twenty-seven million - the approximate number of people enslaved in the world.

The numbers are harrowing and yet I wonder if repeated exposure to the numerical magnitude of the problem of human trafficking ironically

drives us to inaction due to the number appearing far greater than the power of a single individual. So instead, I offer my own much smaller numbers, based on my experiences of the community-level response to extreme poverty and forced prostitution at the Gender Resource Center- Suvidha Kendra (GRC- SK), operated by ApneAap in partnership with the Government of India in the National Capital Territory of India. Twenty two - the number of villages in the area surrounding New Delhi that have come to rely on and benefit from the GRC-SK's seven programs, vocational training, health services, nutrition camps, legal services, literacy training, self-help groups,

and social empowerment activities; ten - the number of vocational classes— sewing, IT/ computer application, accounting, geriatric care, child care, nursing, house-keeping, catering, retail, and sales and direct marketing— available at any given time to women over the age of 16 to create employment opportunities and assist with job placement. And perhaps most importantly, eight: the number of educators, service coordinators, and community outreach and social workers present at the GRC-SK on the day of my visit, who tirelessly dedicate their time to empowering local women.

*By Ruchira Gupta*

GENDER is perhaps the most restrictive force in Indian or western life and goes beyond the question of who must be in the kitchen and who could be in the House. In the West women are groomed to accept that they may get fewer job opportunities than most men, may get lower wages than their male colleagues, and will most likely hit a glass ceiling when it comes to promotions. In India women are unequal in more stark ways. A woman is not safe from birth to death: she could be the victim of amniocentesis or feticide after she is conceived; kept at home and given food last while her brother gets the best education and food; be married off as a child; might die of maternal mortality from early pregnancy; be widowed and thrown out of the house so that she does not inherit property; could end up begging in our pilgrim towns and then simply fade away and die.

Routinely women in the West or in India are asked to sacrifice their own desire for equality in the interest of ending other injustices. Examples come from Muslim, Christian, Hindu, and secular societies. In the face of global threats to Islam, Muslim women, frightened for themselves and/or their families are made to believe they are the custodians of their culture and can protect themselves and their families by wearing the veil. They are conditioned to say that this is their 'choice'.

'Good' Hindu women in India allow their freedom to be curtailed, suppress their sexuality, have limited access to contraception and abortion, agree to remain in social isolation and hand over control of reproductive decisions to their husbands, religions, governments or all three in 'defence of their

culture'. These women agree to be socially controlled so that they will raise heirs to power, while women of the 'inferior' group 'agree' to be sexually exploited so that they will do the work of raising cheap labour – as well as being cheap labour themselves. Witness the silence of women in spite of the spate of honour killings, amniocentesis/ feticide of girls and the sex trafficking of at least three million females as per CBI (Central Bureau of Investigation) figures.

The CBI in India recently admitted that there are more than three million prostituted girls. They live in absolute terror. They are raped by nine or ten men every night. Many of them are between the ages of nine and thirteen. They die by the time they reach their thirties. Yet, we have not been able to amend the Indian anti-trafficking law to punish the rapists and protect the young women and girls. If a similar number of men were killed or violated in an ethnic massacre, India would have found the resolve to pass an ordinance through Parliament immediately. Is this because anything that affects males is seen as more serious than anything that affects 'only' the female half of the human caste?

Only last year, a Supreme Court judge observed that if so many girls and women are prostituted, maybe we should just legalize prostitution and regulate the sex industry. Nobody considered the plight of the little girl while making the observation. In the recent Commonwealth Games, when thousands of young women were trafficked to Delhi to supply the male demand for prostituted sex, nothing was done to prevent the violence to the girls, but hundreds of condom vending machines were placed all over the

city to help the buyers of sex. Apne Aap: Women Worldwide has been running a campaign in India to have a law that punishes the johns and provides education and jobs to the girls and women. Expectedly, in running this campaign, Apne Aap: Women Worldwide has come up against some entrenched interests. Ironically, the opposition to punishing johns and protecting the girls and women has come not from the sex industry but from civil society foundations working to reduce HIV/ AIDS. The HIV/AIDS management projects funded by these international foundations work in red-light areas and hire pimps and brothel managers as 'peer educators' to gain easy access to the brothels for the purpose of condom distribution. They turn a blind eye to the little girls and adult women kept in a system of bondage and control who cannot refuse unwanted sex, let alone unprotected sex. They are more interested in protecting male buyers of prostituted sex from disease rather than protecting women and girls from the buyers. These are the same solutions that colonialist powers used to control syphilis in the 18th and 19th centuries.

If we truly believe in equality, we must work to create a world in which women do not have to face conflicting choices between sacrificing their rights to equality when faced with demands of the caste, race, religious or class struggles to keep the home fires burning

## Married to be Sold

*By Sushma Kayal*

**Khidderpore, Kolkata:** I am from a poor family. My father was a carpenter but suffered horribly from TB so could work very little. My mother had to work in his place to provide for the household. We earned very little and we were many people to feed. My brothers and sisters and I never thought of going to school, we had to care for the house and our father. In the evenings, after work, my mother tried her best to teach us all she knew. I learnt very little.

When I was eleven years old I got married. My parents wanted to marry me off early so that they would have one less person to pay for and feed. I did not have any say in the matter and also was too young to say anything. I left my family and moved to Kolkata to be with my new husband. From the very beginning I was separated from my husband. In the evenings he used to go out and not come back until morning. Sometimes I asked my mother in law, when will he be back?

I did not get any answer.

I was just made to do household work in my in-laws house. They made me work very hard.

One day I was taken to my mother in-law's sister's house. She told me that she would train me up for family life. After that I stayed with her and did not go back to my in-laws. After two nights a middle-aged man, a stranger, came to my room. He raped and tortured me. I could not go back to my in-laws. I understood why I was sent there.

Now I am a professional woman - a prostitute. I still have to face days and nights of torture. I earn 15,000 rupees a month which is just enough to put my three children through school and provide them with a safe place to live. My only wish for my children is that they will grow up with the skills to make them someone in society. Only then will I be able to leave prostitution and forget my past. Right now, I have to take care of my children and keep them safe.

## It's HER Life Too

*By Saptami Das*

**Khidderpore, Kolkata:** I heard from one 'Chokri' (a new coming girl being prostituted in the brothel) that a programme was going to be held at a nearby house. Some people were coming from outside who wanted to meet us and talk to us. Even at that time I did not know what this was about but the idea of meeting new people was very interesting. I had not gotten any customers that day so I was quite free and rested and I could take the time to go to this programme. Also, they were providing lunch, meaning that I wouldn't have to spend money on eating. I told another woman in my area and took her with me as well.

After attending the programme for few minutes, I started to feel different. I started to realize that I did not need to feel ashamed here because I am a prostitute. I had nothing to worry about. I was very comfortable there. So far most places I go

to, I feel very bad because everyone treats me badly for being a prostitute. Here, no one made me feel like that. I was like everyone else. No one made me feel bad for being a woman. I was equal to any other man. It was a very good feeling.

I am a prostitute because I need to feed my child. In doing that, am I doing anything wrong? I need to take care of my child, to feed him, to give him a house. Didi says I have done nothing wrong. Women like me are always exploited.

Many things were discussed in the gender training. Until now I thought that it's only me who faces lots of calamity in life, because of my misfortune. But now I realize that it's not like that.

Even the women who have studied a lot and have respectable jobs face lots of trouble because of gender

difference. It is our society who gives such a lot of authority to the men and of course this is what we have made it. Society is very unfair to us women.

It is now our job to change the society. We have to change perception and we have to change society. We have to make sure that we women get the rights that we deserve. We have to get it. Too long we have lived like this. It's time for things to change. That's all.

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# Apne Aap Gave Me a New Beginning

By Sabir Ali

**Khidderpore, Kolkata:** I am 19yrs old and I belong to a Muslim family. I have 2 brothers and 1 sister. My father works as a security guard and he is the only earning member of our family. But he earns a very little amount of money. We are very poor. The money which my father earns is so little that it hardly fulfils our basic family needs. I always want to help my father, but as I am living in a slum area there are so few chances to find work anywhere, and even if I find work it pays very little.

Dadi (grandmother) works for an organization. It's named as Apne Aap Women Worldwide. Sometimes I go there to meet my Dadi. Once there I heard about a course, which provides job placements to those who are less educated. I have completed my class X examination but it was not enough for me to get the good job that I want.

I want to study more. But, because of the poor economic condition, it

was difficult for me to continue my education. My father could not pay to send me to school anymore. I was very unhappy because I felt that all my life I would be stuck in these kinds of jobs which pay very little and have no respect. So, I decided to try the Apne Aap course and see if it can help me get a good job and get more education

The course was very good. They taught us English and computer. The best part is that Apne Aap charges us nothing for this course. It was all free. In a few days time, I was speaking quite good English and I also was learning how to use computer for small and basic things. I can calculate on computer, type, draw and many more things. After joining here, I feel more confident. This course has helped me to improve my communication skills. After finishing the six months the course,

Didi told me that I had an interview with the company Westside. I was very excited and nervous. I

knew Westside was a big shop that sold lots of clothes and other things. I was very keen to get this job but I was also scared. But the Didi was very good; she helped me prepare for the interview and practiced several times so that I was confident for the final interview. With their efforts and blessing I got the job at Westside. It was a new beginning for me.

I have been in the job for six months now. In this time, I got a promotion from Westside. My salary is increased. I am very happy. Now I am able to help my family financially. I am very grateful to Apne Aap for helping me to find a new path to success.

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## Inspiring Leadership

“The thing women have yet to learn is nobody gives you power. You just take it.”

~Roseanne Barr~

“Because I am a woman, I must make unusual efforts to succeed. If I fail, no one will say, "She doesn't have what it takes." They will say, "Women don't have what it takes.”

~ Clare Boothe Luce ~

“How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.”

~Anne Frank ~

“Well-behaved women seldom make history.”

~ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich ~

“We don't accomplish anything in this world alone... and whatever happens is the result of the whole tapestry of one's life and all the weavings of individual threads from one to another that creates something.”

~ Sandra Day O' Connor ~

# Diary of a Social Worker Interventions in the Red Light Area

By Sahana Dasgupta

**Khidderpore Kolkata:** When we started working in the Kidderpore Red Light District, we first tried to reach out to the women in prostitution in that area in order to discuss their problems and needs and to try to share some possible solutions. After some time or persisting from our side, the brothel owners agreed to let us speak with the women, who started to trust us and share their experiences with us. Their major request was for basic education. According to that requirement we set up classes that operated from inside the brothel and taught basic skills. In time the women requested that we expand these classes to include cutting, stitching and wool knitting. So we went on to create tailoring classes that also operated from within the brothel. We also set up a bi-weekly medical clinic that offered health checks to the women and their children. As our relationships with the women of the community strengthen and we formulate a better idea of their needs, our community interaction with them has evolved significantly. We began to organize meetings for the women to discuss the rights of women in society. This brought forth an initiative from the women themselves in the form of a women's group named Mahila Mandals. The group meets regularly to discuss the women's problems and collectively plan for their future. A fantastic outcome of the group has been that many women have elected to enroll their children into the Apne Aap Centre for Education. The group had also started attending Open Mic Nights that provide a platform for the women to share their stories in an attempt to spread awareness about their situation. The Mahila Mandals also tirelessly campaigned to secure ration and voter ID cards for the women of Khidderpore in order to provide them with the basic human and political rights they deserve. With the help of Apne Aap, these women finally have access to education, medical and legal help and employment orientated skills training that they need.

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## **No one Wants to be Associated With a Prostitute**

When I was 14 years old a major conflict between Hindus and Muslims began in my area. My father feared for the family's safety. We received threats and a warning from a local Muslim family telling us to leave. Eventually we panicked and leaving everything we owned behind we fled to India.

To begin with, we stayed in a camp in very bad conditions. One kind man began to help my father. After some time I became very close with him too. We fell in love. We loved each other a lot. My family also supported us since we were all indebted to him for everything that he had done for us. One day I went out with him without informing anyone. I did not think I needed to tell anyone as I trusted him completely. He took me to Sonagachi where I was prostituted out to clients. Initially, I was so shocked that I did not even believe that this was happening to me. Once I realized that this really was happening I knew that I was stuck and I did not know how to escape.

After many years of forced prostitution in Sonagachi, one man began to protect me. He used to save me from clients and even argue with the brothel owner to keep me from being prostituted over and over again. In time I came to respect him as my husband. He searched for my family on my behalf and finally bought me the news that

he had found them. I bought new clothes for everyone in my family and sweets to surprise them. I was so excited that I would be meeting them again and I knew that they would be extremely happy to see me after so many years. When I arrived to meet them, my father told me that I had willingly accepted a life of prostitution. He told me that as far as he and my family were concerned their eldest daughter was dead. He then said that if I showed my face in their community again he would commit suicide.

Hurt and shocked again, I had nowhere to go. I had no option but to go back to Sonagachi and accept the life that I could not get away from. Even when I tried to get out of prostitution, I was not able to because nobody wants to have a prostitute as a family member or a friend or a mother.

Nowadays a Didi comes from Apne Aap and I requested that she teach me English. We work together to improve my skills and she is very kind to me and does not treat me like a prostitute. For me, she is my only family and only friend.

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## Interview

# When My Own Country is Doing Nothing, Will Other Countries Help Me?

**Dharampura, Delhi:** Francesca Zoppi, in pursuit to writing her book “Voices of Indian Women”, speaks to a woman, Bubli in Delhi, who is victim of intergenerational prostitution.

**Francesca:** Hi, my project is to bring to the West the tragic reality of some women in India. We want to speak to you to understand the problems that you face in your day to day life as a woman who has to prostitute herself for a living. What is your name?

**Bubli:** Bubli

**F:** Can you Tell us a little more about yourself?

**B:** My husband’s name is Ravi. He works in the field. I am around 35 years old. I have 4 children. I have 2 girls and 2 boys. My children used to go to school but they dropped out. They left because I got them married. They had grown up.

**F:** How do you spend your day?

**B:** I have to spend most of my day taking care of my household and my children.

**F:** Can you tell us a little bit about the women in the community?

**B:** The women in this village don’t do any proper work. Most of them are doing the same work that I have to do. It is not a good work. I wish that they would open some kind of a factory over here where women like me could work. Even the girls could work so that they could be saved from doing this work.

**F:** How has your life since you got married?

**B:** I used to be so thin when I got married. Now I have put on so much weight, my health is not good. I have to get a few abortions done as a result of which my health deteriorated.

**F:** Did anyone force you to go into this profession?

**B:** No. No one forced me. I went by myself. I had no money. Nothing to feed my children. What else could I do? I don’t know how to read or write. I don’t have any skill. I had to do this to get some money.

**F:** How did your journey in this profession start?

**B:** After I got married, I had my first child. My husband and in laws wanted me to have my first child after which I started in this profession.

**F:** Do your children know? and your husband? What do you feel?

**B:** No they don’t know. I used to make some excuses to them every time when I had to go out to service clients. As my elder daughter and son grew older, they understood. The younger ones don’t know. My husband also knows that we have to do this for money so he does not interfere.

**F:** Do you have to go far? What time do you go?

**B:** I don’t have to go very far. Just in the neighbouring villages. There is this one area where most of the women from my community go. I also go there. There are many women like me there. I generally go early in the morning like at 4am and come by 7 am.

**F:** You don’t like this work. Then why did you not try and get out of it and try a different means of earning money?

**B:** I did not try any other work because once I have gotten my hands dirty in this profession, it is better to stay stuck there. What is the point of doing any other work now?

**F:** Can you tell me a little bit about your clients?

**B:** I don’t know too much about them. They don’t say anything. They are generally middle aged men and they must be earning quite a bit of money to be able to afford prostitutes. Some young boys also come but I don’t entertain them because I know that they don’t have money to pay. Some of the men have become regular customers.

**F:** What about your elder daughter?

**B:** She is already been married but I have not sent her to her in laws place yet. I won’t send her till then next 4 years. Her husband right now earns nothing. My hands are dirty but I will make sure that my elder daughter Muskaan does not have to bear the same fate as me. I did not make too much of an effort to look for a job when I needed money and went into this work because it was easy and others in the village were also doing it. But for my daughter, I will make sure I find her work or at least some ways of earning money before she is sent to her in laws.

**F:** Is there anything else you would like to say?

**B:** I appreciate the effort you are taking to help women like me. But when my own country is doing nothing for me, will people from other countries really care to do anything?

# My Life Feels Empty Without School

By Hasina (14years)

**Dharampura, Delhi:** I am 14 years old. I live in the Dharampura area of Najafgadh district. I have 2 brothers and 4 sisters.

My father does nothing. He does not work. I used to go to school. I used to like school a lot. All my brothers and sisters also used to go school with me. But we have all left school. I had to stop going to school because I used to fall ill very often. My legs would ache and my head would ache and I needed to walk more than a kilometer to get to school. All my brothers and sisters were made to leave school. I was made to leave school the earliest. The others left in 5<sup>th</sup> grade I had to leave in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade because of bad health.

I used to like school but now I can't get my name onto any school register. In fact no one in this community even goes to school. The neighbours and other people in the community told my parents that I was too old to go to

school now so they did not give my name to any other school. Now I have to spend my entire day doing nothing.

*“I was made to leave school the earliest...because of bad health”*

My brother works at the metro station. He is 18years old. I want to work there but my mother won't let me go so far away for work. She won't let me work or study.

If there would be some stitching training that started near my house, I would want to learn how to stitch.

When I think about my life I don't want to become anything. I have no idea about what I want to be I really don't think I want to be anything. I wanted to

become a school teacher but I can't even read. I can never become a school teacher now. I will always be nothing.

If We Know our Rights, Can All Be Powerful  
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We all have equal rights. This information gives us more confidence and it boosts our self esteem. I have decided to spread this information among my friends in the community who have not attended this session. This is something that everyone should know so that they also can become stronger.



## Red Light Despatch

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