



## *On the Record: Global Movement for Children*

### **Issue 4: When Prostitutes Go to Jail...**

#### **From the AP Editorial Desk**



...Sakuntala cares for their children.

Behind a small Hindu temple in Old Delhi, an impoverished and underdeveloped part of the city, the Joint Women's Program (JWP) is trying to make life a little easier for neighborhood children.

JWP runs a school for prostitutes' children in a three-story building that sits behind a walled lot on GB road, the capital's red light district. Outside, chaos lurks on every corner.

Old Delhi is a world away from the clean, well laid out traffic circles and boulevards of New Delhi, the Indian capital that hosts dignitaries from around the world and stands proudly as a monument to the country's emerging economic and political prowess. Old Delhi, by contrast, is laced with streets that are barely paved, extremely narrow and mottled with potholes. Cycle rickshaws, motor scooters, bicycles, goats, cattle and the occasional car cover every inch of pavement. Wooden carts pulled by bulls carry huge metal pipes to some of the countless auto and machinery parts stores that line the old city's alleys.

Young people under the age of 18 comprise at least one-third of the sex workers in major Indian cities such as New Delhi, Bombay and Calcutta. On average, the number of child prostitutes in India increases by at least 30,000 per year. There are currently some 100,000 child prostitutes throughout India.

The JWP school cares for an average of 84 children of prostitutes. The day that I visit is January 25—one day before India's "Republic Day" celebration, the country's most important national holiday.

In preparation for festivities throughout Old and New Delhi, security has increased and the city is being "cleaned up." Brothels on GB road have been raided. As a result, some of the regular students have not surfaced because they are either staying with brothel owners until their mothers are released from jail, or they've temporarily fled the area with their mothers.

"The prostitutes want their children with them," says Sakuntala, who has been supervising the school since it was founded in 1991. "If a prostitute is jailed, she won't tell authorities that she has a child because she doesn't want the child taken from her and sent to a foster home. These women either try to flee when they hear a raid is imminent or they leave their children with a brothel keeper or madame. This 'madame' isn't always reliable and often abusive. Prostitutes don't understand that the children would be safer at our school." So Sakuntala tries to locate each of the missing students and secure safe quarters for them until their mother is released.



Sakuntala has lived on GB road for decades and the brothel owners and pimps know her well. She goes from brothel to brothel in an effort to convince prostitutes to send their children to her school where they will receive regular meals and learning materials free of charge. "Neither the women nor the pimps want children around when clients are visiting," she says, "so I've been able to convince many of them to send their children to our school."

Today, in a narrow corridor in front of their classrooms, the children sit on cotton mats for a lunch of roti (Indian flat bread), vegetable curry, rice and dal (gravy made of lentils). The children are divided into three age groups: 0-3, 3-5, and 5-11. Two teachers come in the morning and two come at night. There are two classrooms – one for younger groups of children and one for the older group. In the first room, learning aids cover the walls. There are posters that display shapes, color, fruit and even great Indian leaders. Four posters depict moral ideals. One describes the ideal boy as one who wakes up early, prays, reads, eats well and works hard. Another lists a number of moral axioms such as "Hard work bears fruit; Union is Strength; Do not be Greedy; Do not give way to Flattery."

In the second room, where older children receive instruction, posters of birds, animals, the English alphabet, household objects line the walls alongside a blackboard. In a room behind this classroom, boxes of condoms fill a closet. Sakuntala distributes the condoms to prostitutes and brothel owners when she makes her rounds on GB road.

### **The Joint Women's Program (JWP)**



JWP is a Delhi-based NGO that was founded in 1977. It

runs some ninety community programs in thirteen states. The programs address and correct gender discrimination among underprivileged sections of society such as dalits (so-called untouchables), tribals, slum dwellers and landless laborers. The organization also lobbies the government to pass and implement laws that not only protect women and children from exploitation, abuse and violence, but also promote women's political and economic participation throughout the country. JWP social workers live in their community where they work to raise awareness about gender and child rights.

Daily lessons at the school cover social studies, English, Hindi, math, home sciences, drawing and basic hygiene. The younger children are taught to guard against abuse and resist pressure to have sex or take drugs from street or older children.

Children remain at the JWP school until approximately 11 years old or whenever they reach fifth grade. They are then sent to a government school located next door where every student is a JWP graduate. Once a student graduates from a government school, JWP places them in boarding school in a neighboring state, if their mother agrees. JWP continues to pay for the child's healthcare, books, clothing, food and tuition until the age of 18.

The child's family background is kept from school officials and mothers are generally not allowed to visit their children until they come home for the holidays. "This is how we save the second generation from a life of sex work," says Sakuntala. "We teach older children about HIV/AIDS, safe sex, and how to recognize and intervene in cases of physical or sexual abuse."

Sakuntala has also established a cooperative relationship with local police who intervene when a woman is being abused by a client, pimp or brothel owner. The police help to locate missing children and offer protection to school staff on the rare occasion that they feel threatened. And because the police are themselves perpetrators of crimes against prostitutes and their children, JWP runs workshops to sensitize police officers about this population and their needs and concerns.

Seventy-five percent of the prostitutes working in Delhi's red light district have been sold into the profession by their families, according to a recent JWP survey of GB road. Most come from nearby, economically depressed states such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. They are sometimes lured or tricked into working in the sex industry through promises of wealth and luxury.

Some sex workers even return to their villages in heavy jewelry and flashy saris, to lure other girls into the trade. "We try to teach the prostitutes vocational skills such as sewing and tailoring but those salaries simply don't compete with the income they receive as sex workers," says Sakuntala. And, she points out, these women have to pay off debts to pimps and brothel owners, or send money home to their families. That places even greater financial burdens upon them. Society is often reluctant to accept these women back into the fold of mainstream life, which makes it almost impossible for them to secure a mainstream job.

All this will continue, says Chatterjee, until someone addresses the root cause of the problem. Until then, Sakuntala and Aparna are busy reeducating the latest generation of children to end up on GB road.