

Like a Rainbow...

Sudha Pillai

The stark white room is echoing with dreams. "I want to become a doctor... I am engineer... I want to become a nun... (this evokes a riot of laughter) I want to become a dress designer... My dream is to become a social worker I want to study only English..." These are the dreams of the children sitting in front of me. The youngest is five years old and the oldest is 15.

Each one of these children has a story to tell. A story that will make our stomachs churn and hang our heads in shame as adults. These children have been subjected to the most traumatic experiences in life that -no child should be made to go through. These are the children of sex workers. Some of them are child sex workers too. Some are afflicted by STDs and some are HIV positive. However hard I try, I couldn't find one reason why these children had to suffer this plight, for no fault of theirs. As adults we are supposed to care for our children, protect them and guide them. But we have failed them. Has this world become such a cruel place that there was no one to protect little eight-year-old Kavitha, a victim of congenital disease, while she was being sexually used and abused by every Tom, Dick and Harry after both her parents died of AIDS?

Wait. There is still hope, for these children and for the rest of the world, say the members of Jagruti, an NGO that cares for these children. Jagruti was established in 1996. It is the brain child of Renu Appachu, Chitra Dhananjay and Sanjay Govindaraj. These social workers were earlier working for HIV/ AIDS awareness among prisoners, HIV/ AIDS prevention programme for sex workers/ transsexuals and counselling HIV+ patients. "During the course of our work we realised that a large number of young children were brought into the sex trade," says Sanjay. "The negative media hype about the disease and the theory that adult sex workers are mainly responsible for the spread of the disease led to more and more clients turning to children for pleasure. These men were not looking at condoms as a solution - they merely changed their preference from adult sex workers to children." Disgusting, yet it is true. "So we decided to change our focus to children. Giving a child sex worker a condom and educating her about AIDS was not the solution. Children need extra care, protection and help. After all they are still children," explains Chitra.

"Many NGOs expressed their desire to work with us. They said, you identify the children and bring them to us, we will take care of the rest. But when the time

came that was not what happened. They didn't want to take these children due to various prejudices. A lot of these people had preconceived notions about the children being in prostitution and felt that these kids might be a bad influence on other kids in the institution/ homes. Moreover, they feared that these children might be HIV positive and they were not able to come to terms with that."

Finally, the three social workers were left with no option but to start a home of their own. This resulted in the setting up of Jagruti, Home for Children in Crisis. "We call it so, because we don't want these children to be branded because of their past."

Setting up the home for child sex workers was no easy task. "For many people it was taboo to have these children lodged in their property. Since some of the children were HIV positive, the landlords feared that those kids might die in their homes and that would be a bad omen, some were not too keen to compromise on the rentals even for a good cause. And some house owners thought it would be a difficult task to evacuate an NGO from their property when they wanted to."

Finally, Jagruti found a home for the children in the suburbs, it is in a relatively isolated area, with plenty of space for the 15 odd children to get back to the business of normal living.

Jagruti mainly cares for four types of children: children of sex workers, child sex workers, children with STD's and HIV virus, and children orphaned by parents who died of AIDS. Apart from which they also have another programme called the Panchayathi Raj for women in rural areas.

How do they identify the children and bring them to the home? "We have limited field staff and peers who help us to reach out to these children," says Chitra. Peers are none other than adult sex workers who are willing to help little children from entering the trade. "These are women who have been in the flesh trade for more than 3-5 years. They feel they cannot quit the trade now because they are branded and will not be accepted by the society. Many of the sex workers who were rehabilitated and given a job elsewhere found that they had to offer their services for free in an office set up. Moreover these women earn a lot of money and are sometimes not willing to forgo their rich lifestyle. Most of them are addicted to drugs and alcohol. These substances help them service umpteen clients a day. However, these sex workers also feel that if they had been helped when they were new to the business they could have straightened up their lives. And that is what these peers are willing to do to child sex-workers in their respective areas. Catch them young and set them right"

These children are well cared for by the resident staff of Jagruti. They are given medical treatment and counselling, well-fed and clothed and made to take part in a lot of activities to bring out their talents in them. They are made to exercise, go for walks and play in the morning, followed by studies, art classes, etc. "These are very smart children. They have immense talent. They have skills that can match any other children. Above all their life has made them savvy and determined unlike other children. And they are very sure what they want in life. In fact Kavitha has already made up her mind that she would become a dress designer in life. So we had to get a teacher to teach the basics of tailoring. Now she is tutored twice every week. These are highly capable children. All they need is education, a little guidance and love," says Sanjay. As a proof of these children's skills and talents, the walls of the Home are adorned by the paintings of these children. There are some exceptionally good ones done by eight-year-old Rekha, who was found at the Bangalore railway station covered in nothing but a sack with two holes for her emaciated arms. Rekha's paintings also adorn the walls of Jagruti office in the city. However, Rekha is going to her parents in Ranchi, thanks to Jagruti.

"Once we get a child, we always, try to reunite the child with her family. Sometimes it is easy because the child remembers some details, at other times it is difficult because the children forget their past entirely," explains Chitra. "Most of the times parents don't want their children back, because she has been in the flesh trade. Sometimes the child does not want to go back home for fear of not being accepted by her family. But we always try to reunite the child with her parents. We even counsel the parents," says Sanjay.

The children at Jagruti have given entrance examinations at a local school. Based on their performance they attend various classes this year. They are all very enthusiastic about going to school, even as the members of Jagruti are apprehensive. "We don't know how they will react to other children because they have never been in association with other normal children. As a precautionary method we will inform the school authorities about the background of the children," says Renu. "Otherwise there is no need for other children or anybody else to know about these children. In spite of all the knowledge and awareness and education about sex workers and AIDS, the afflicted persons are still persecuted. If others come to know that these were child sex workers they will be branded, there will be a stigma attached to them. And these kids do not deserve this." And rightly so, for these kids did not deserve the life they had lived in the past.

It was time for me to leave. But the children were reluctant to let me go. One child brought me her neatly written homework for me to see. "Lovely handwriting," I comment: "But I cannot read Hindi. I don't know the language," I

reveal my handicap. She replies with all the enthusiasm of a nine-year-old, "I can speak Kannada, Tamil, Hindi and a little bit of English too." A linguist? If she has the opportunities that I had as a child maybe she would turn out to be a genius one day (unlike me!).

Chitra points to an 11-year-old and says, "She is a mathematical genius. She can calculate, do everything in her head." Radha's numerical abilities are mind-blowing. But she wants to become another dress designer in life. As I step out of the gate, she calls out happily, "The next time you come I will stitch you a dress." These children still carry within them the innocence of childhood. It reveals itself every now and then, like a rainbow in the sky. It will not be long before they learn to lead a normal life, which is their birth right. But will Jagruti be able to find the necessary funds to fulfill the dreams of these children? The going is certainly not easy for Jagruthi. They received a one time grant from Levis, which will last till November. There are no sponsors on the horizon so far. Yet, Jagruti is adamant that it will carry on with the work. "We cannot abandon our children now," they chorus.

Can't 15 children be given the basic necessities in life in a country of a billion people? The children's refreshing, innocent smiles reveal that they have already forgiven the world for what it did to them. But what are we going to do? All that these children and the rest like them need are for our hearts to expand a wee bit more to accommodate them.

For details, contact:

**Jagruti,
Jyothi Complex, C-3, IInd Floor,
103/1, Infantry Road
Bangalore - 560 001. Ph: 2860346.**

Sumitha's Story

Some children are so badly abused sexually that they have temporary memory loss. Nine-year-old Sumitha was handed over to Jagruti by the police. She knew nothing about herself or her parents or her life, apart from her name. She had cigarette burns all over her body. She had forgotten how to perform the basic functions in life, such as brushing her teeth, going to the toilet, wearing cloths and even how to eat. "She will continue eating until we tell her to stop. The same with drinking. She didn't know the difference between rice and curry." However, what was heart-wrenching was that Sumithra would discard her underwear every ten or 15 minutes and would then come stand in front of the people in the room to indicate that she's ready for the job. It is anybody's guess how much this kid was abused at an age when she was supposed to laugh and play, dream and worry about nothing.

A Special Bond

These children share a special bond with one another. The suffering in their life is the unifying factor. Sometimes, it is still a free-for-all when a fight erupts. They turn abusive and throw the past at each other. They are even suicidal. While one tries to attempt suicide the others might egg her on, all for fun. But the staff are very vigilant and do not take lightly to any threats. "These children are not themselves. They threaten to commit suicide and indulge in other attention-seeking activities. Still, we take into consideration all their actions and give them the necessary attention," says Chitra. Sometimes the children don't trust one another. But they are fully aware that each child in the home is there because of what happened to her. And that it was not her fault. They care for one another and look out for one another. When Sumitha messes up the hall instead of using the bathroom because she doesn't remember how to use the toilet, the other kids are supportive and patient. While one cleans the mess the other tidies her up. They-wash her clothes, help her to carry on with her day to day life. They don't know the nature of her suffering but they all understand how those cigarette burns have come to be on her body. With all their love and support and the care of the staff at Jagruti, Sumitha has now learnt to smile and says a few words, after only a month's stay in the Home. Somebody has to still see that she wears her clothes all the time, somebody has to still monitor all her actions carefully, but it is all worth it when the child turns around and gives you her 100-watt goofy smile.

Little Adults

These child sex workers are not only children, they are adults too in many ways. The hard life on the streets and their association with unrelenting pimps make them street smart and ruthlessly savvy. They have a mind of their own. "So, we do not force these children to come to Jagruti right away. It always takes more than four meetings to get the child to come to our home, during which time the child's activities are monitored and we strive to build trust in the relationship. It is very difficult to get these children to trust anyone. This behaviour is understandable. We invite the child to come and see the home and allow her to make the decision. We are aware that these are only 9 and 10- year-olds but it is inevitable that we let them make their own decisions, if we pressurise them they will run away. And we will lose them forever," explains Sanjay. Most of the kids come, see and decide to stay on. However, this does not signify the beginning of a rosy life. Initially, the children are very violent and, abusive. Physically they are afflicted by sexually transmitted disease, scabies and HIV virus. Their childish bodies bear the marks of cigarette burns and other abuses. They are emotional wrecks. It takes months of counselling and tender love to get these children to behave like any normal child.