

A Letter from Kolkata

Inspired in part by Sold, in 2007 a BookBrowse member went to visit the Apne-Aap center in Kolkata. Apne Aap (which means self-help in Hindi) is a community-based initiative that began in the red light area of Mumbai in 1998.

On her return, she sent a letter to the many friends and family who gave contributions for her to take with her. This is what she wrote:

I'm back!

It was an incredible journey in India and a memorable moving visit to Apne-Aap in Kolkata (Calcutta). While in Kolkata I also visited the slum areas and the red light district, where Apne-Aap has community centers. I had hoped to be able to share some pictures but understandably that would just be another invasion of their privacy. Instead, I will attach a picture of the surrounding area to provide a context for this discussion.

The organization was extremely grateful for your contributions. It is planning on using the contributions to help mitigate the circumstances of those caught in prostitution. It offers leadership activities, education, and skill building to help prevent inter-generational prostitution. It also seeks to build bridges between grassroots activism and policy makers on issues related to ending sex-trafficking. In the community centers of Apne-Aap that I visited, they provided one hot meal a day, health and hygiene checkups (and referrals as needed), literacy classes, vocational training, work on admission into mainstream schools, after school help with homework to help stay in the schools, dance and art therapy to deal with the trauma, and a safe haven at night to protect children from buyers of prostituted sex. Without the latter, the children must sleep underneath the beds while their mothers are having sexual relations with the clients.

The workers of Apne-Aap also have an outreach program to those children in the slum areas who are at high risk of becoming prostitutes or whose mothers are trapped in the vicious cycle of prostitution.

One of the classes I attended at Apne-Aap was a biweekly training about embroidery, candle making, painting eyeglass cases, and creating jute bags. The dance therapy classes were not only to help the children to learn dance but also to respect their bodies, which they have seen being disrespected in their community. Other workshops included computer training, self esteem workshops, and educational workshops on AIDS, violence, and sexually transmitted diseases.

One girl that I spoke with through an interpreter said that she was trafficked by neighbors when she was barely 8 years old and then sold into a brothel. She escaped at age 18 with two young daughters but was re-trafficked to another red light area. She escaped a year again and through Apne-Aap has started her own "betel" shop (a digestive snack). She is now determined never to be forced into prostitution despite her poverty and volunteers in the center. People have branded her as a witch and several times have tried to loot her shop. However, she has stood firm through the confidence building and skills of Apne-Aap and tries to educate young girls in the red light district as well.

What was particularly heartwarming was the open forum given to children of prostitutes through art therapy. At one class, children were talking about how they had never had an open discussion with anyone about HIV and AIDS. Many thought their families were breaking the law by contracting HIV/AIDS and were relieved to know that the violence and trafficking of their mothers was a crime. Over half of the kids said that before they came to Apne-Aap, they did not

know that women and children could not be bought, sold, or raped legitimately.

On the other hand, walking in the red light area was a major eye opening experience. Many of the women in prostitution (WIP) find it difficult to trust anyone given their own experiences of exploitation by people they have trusted. In addition, the streets were lined with pimps, brothel owners, and liquor suppliers, many of whom have strong connections with the police, politicians, and mafia. They are obviously distrustful of the Apne-Aap workers because they don't want the women to be aware of their fundamental rights as the balance of power could quickly change away from them.

The area was dilapidated, dingy, and unhygienic, with no proper drainage system, toilets, or bathrooms. Young girls from about 10-25 years of age were lined up on benches in brightly colored saris but looked tightly wrapped in an emotional cocoon. One girl told me that after she was trafficked, the woman who bought her took all the money for the first 6 months. She serviced about 7-8 men per day. The rate was one dollar per "visit" and \$4.50 if the client spent the night. Now she earns about \$2.50 a day. Of this, the brothel madam keeps half, she spends 25 cents a day on food, and spends 50 cents on medicines and alcohol. She tries to save 13 dollars a month to buy clothing, makeup, and some money to send home to her son. Even though she is taking classes at Apne-Aap and meets daily with counselors, she is still too afraid to refuse drunk clients or those who won't wear condoms, for fear of physical retaliation and loss of income.

What became clearly apparent is the need to focus on sexually trafficked girls specifically before they reach their mid 20's. These girls are forced into slave-like conditions and serve up to 15-20

buyers /night with only one meal and often talk about wanting to go home. The older girls (20-25) appeared to be in a new phase where the socialization within the brothel has made the girls dependent on drugs and alcohol. The brothel owners make sure that they have children so they can't think of returning home anymore. Because of the repeated violence and psychosocial trauma, they begin to see the small mercies meted out by the kidnappers as larger than life. Despair, depression, and disease seem to lead to a sense of hopelessness and the girls do not see a way out. As these girls age, malnutrition, drugs, and alcohol dependency decrease their earning capacity. Even if they want to leave prostitution, they don't have the life skills or physical health to do so.

Apne-Aap works with all these women. It was a privilege to view their work. On behalf of all the women and children I thank you for making a difference in their lives.

For more about Apne-Aap, please visit [apne aap](#)

Works Cited

"Reading Guide for Sold by Patricia McCormick." *BookBrowse.com*. Web. 16 Mar. 2016.