

Linking Self Help Groups with international and local business houses: Providing sustained livelihood options to survivors – Initiatives by Apne Aap

Trafficked women and children can seldom exit situations of exploitation, because there are very few survival options available to them. They live in ghettos inside red light areas and slums, they are isolated, branded and stigmatized and have no access to dignified livelihood options. At the same time, small family-owned businesses located in villages, towns and communities need skilled and unskilled employees in their own localities, to sustain their businesses.

Apne Aap Women Worldwide has created Mahila Mandals (Self-Help Groups) for 1500 women and girls, who are at risk or have been trafficked into prostitution in Mumbai, Kolkata, Delhi and Bihar and has linked them with locally-owned small businesses and international markets.

Several steps were followed to set up the Mahila Mandals in each of these areas. The process started by holding small group meetings and enrolling members into Apne Aap. Each member was entitled to a common safe space to sit, sing, chat or sleep in the community centre that Apne Aap set up in the heart of the red-light area or slum. Each member was also allowed to admit her children into the Apne Aap crèche at the community centre. These members were initially formed as Mother's Committees to oversee the welfare of their children. As a next step, they were transformed into Mahila Mandals with their own office bearers, elections, minute-book and cultural activities. Slowly, income-generation activities were introduced into the groups.

At this stage the small locally-owned businesses were brought into the picture. Apne Aap Board members, staff, friends and well wishers looked for small family-owned businesses that wanted to contribute something to society. They were requested to provide technical training to the Mahila Mandals based on their own strengths and expertise.

For example, a premiere Kolkata sari boutique, Paridhan, decided to train the girls in embroidery and stitching skills. The owner, Rajni Gupta and her colleague Kusum Khemka held a series of workshops with the Kidderpore red-light area Mahila Mandal to train and ensure quality control. The women produced bags and scarves which were then marketed in the US through Goody's chain of stores under the label of 'Made by Survivors'.

Another example is the Mahila Mandal in the Delhi Harijan Migrant Worker's colony Subhash Camp, supported and trained in jewelry making by a local designer, who then links the Mahila Mandal with stalls at different cultural exhibitions, to sell the jewelry.

In Mumbai, Apne Aap has supported older women in prostitution in Kamathipura to set up a soup kitchen. The women were first taught by local restaurant owners on purchasing, cooking and distributing food on a mass scale, on a daily basis. They have now learnt how to run and manage a professional kitchen.

Many members of these Mahila Mandals have been able to leave the brothels and rent a small room from the income generated through these projects. Some are still in the brothels and others are on the pavements, but they are now able to feed themselves due to these interventions.

Each group elects its own office bearers – President, Vice-President, Treasurer and Secretary and is trained by Apne Aap staff to constantly assess, articulate their needs and evaluate their programs. Some of the programs are overseen by the beneficiaries. Each member gives a monthly membership fee to the organization. After two years, the women's group of each community centre is transformed into a self help group.

These self-help groups are given legal support and training to register and open a bank account, run the group, assign roles and responsibilities. The process of transforming

mandals into self-help groups is difficult as many of the women are illiterate and sometimes staff develop a vested interest in keeping the Mahila Mandal under their control by not opening the bank account. It is very important to conduct constant team building meetings and communication and information-sharing meetings with both groups. The process is continuing as it will take another year or so for the self-help groups to become fully functional and independent.

These girls have also been trained on book keeping, stock keeping, procuring raw material, basic computer skills and English so that they can manage their own income generation programs with minimal assistance from Apne Aap. Coordination with local businesses like Paridhan and Jyotirmayee Sreepriya Exports has helped. The sponsorship of stalls at local melas during cultural festivals to sell jewelry designed by top designers from New York, Delhi and Kolkota, has given women access to local markets as well. The women manage the stalls and sell their products, independently.



Around 1000 pieces of different kinds of products made by these women and girls, under income generation activities, have been supplied to the USA and Canada. These include scarves, bags, purses and paper packets. The organization has s u c c e s s f u l l y trained almost 100 women and girls in its three centers at Topsia, Khidderpore and the Subhash Camp. With intensive training from Apne Aap and the help of Institutes such as Sarojini, Nalini and Paridhan, the organization provides

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Apne Aap has also sought the help of designers such as Asha Veza in Mumbai, Fatima Tomar in Delhi and Paridhan in Kolkota to help in training these women and girls. This has enabled them supply well-finished products to a growing market, enhance their own creativity in designing and helped them gain practical knowledge about the availability of raw material, marketing, accounting, etc. A continuous earning opportunity has further increased their self-worth and the confidence to resist exploitation.



“I am now sitting with a group of adolescent girls in Midnapore, and discussing Child Rights and Child Trafficking with them”, says T, a 17 year old from Darapara Topsia.

T’s father used to have a regular job and the family was comfortable till the day he lost his job and they were suddenly confronted by a financial crisis. T’s mother started working as a maid in some neighboring houses. T who always wanted to study, was going to school until her parents could no longer afford to send her. When her father managed to get another job, T joined the Topsia Apne Aap Center with her mother’s support.

In the beginning she was very nervous, avoided eye-to-eye contact with everyone, and could hardly speak. After psychological counseling and motivation for participation and involvement in different educational and skill building programs, there was a dramatic change in her personality. Now she is confident, has developed immense leadership qualities and plays the role of a peer advocate for other girls in the Center. Her resilience and determination are clearly visible in the way she conducts herself. She wants to be economically independent and become a role model for other girls like her.

Her parents want to marry her off but she has clearly stated that she will not get married until she is economically independent and empowered. She also says that after her marriage she will continue to play the role of a peer advocate at Apne Aap.

As a junior advocate of the Apne Aap delegation at the Indian Social Forum, T will speak on the ways and means of combating trafficking and child abuse. She has also learnt embroidery and works in the NIOS production unit.