

**Keynote Address delivered by Ruchira Gupta at NGO CSW Forum Consultation Day 2015 at the Apollo Theatre in New York. Sunday March 8<sup>th</sup>. Transcript.**

Namaste, I am really pleased to be here to represent the voices of victims and survivors of prostitution from my own NGO Apne Aap Women Worldwide in India and also voices of fellow sisters across the world.

According to the United Nations office for drugs and crime, there are more than 27 million people enslaved as I speak right now- for child labor, domestic servitude, and primarily in prostitution. Most of them are women and girls.

My own journey to address this issue began as a journalist. I was walking through the villages of Nepal, when I came across rows of villages which didn't have any girls from age 15 to 45 and I was really surprised and I began to ask the men who were sitting drinking tea, playing carom, sitting in the sun- where the women were. And the answer was shocking. Because they said: Don't you know, they are in Bombay. And as a good journalist, I began to look for the answer about how so many people could be in Bombay.

These villages were at least two hours away from the highway, and 1400 kilometers away from Bombay. To my horror, I found that the sex trade existed in my lifetime, in my generation, in my country. There was a regular supply chain which started with the local village procurer who could be an uncle, a neighbor, a husband, a father, a brother, somebody who gave poor starving farmers 50 dollars, 100 dollars, to take their daughters away. Sometimes they told them that they would give their daughters a job in the big city, sometimes marriage, sometimes even tell that it was prostitution but at least they would have a meal and a bed and send some money back home.

These farmers were so isolated and so innocent that they would let their daughters go. Then these procurers would take these girls to the big cities of Kathmandu, Biratnagar, clustered together, 3 or 4 girls, and then hand them over to another set of agents. These agents would take them to the borders of India and Nepal, “wink wink, nod, nod” and across the border they were taken and there on the other side of the borders were the lodge keepers who were running small shabby lodges with plastic sheets and corrugated cement sheets and these lodge keeps would lock up these little girls who were normally between the ages of 9 and 13.

For three or four days, beat them, starve them, and tell them that they were of no value to their families. And once the spirits were completely subjugated of these girls, they would hand them over to another set of transporters who would take these girls on buses, on trains to the brothels of Bombay, Kolkata, Delhi. And there, there were the pimps who negotiate the prices of these girls depending on their beauty. And by beauty I mean age- the younger the better. The youngest I have met is a 7 year old. By beauty I mean fair skin, skin was at a premium, voluptuous, docile, smiling- these were the qualities, which were defined by the buyers of prostituted sex.

And the pimps would negotiate the price of the girls based on the demand by the buyers. And behind that, after the pimps, the pimps would hand over these little girls to the brothel keepers and the brothel managers and there these girls were locked up for the next 5 years. Raped repeatedly by 8 or 10 customers every night who would pay sometimes 10 dollars and sometimes 30 or 40 cents over the years. And then, over a period of time, when these girls were no longer commercially viable, when they turn into their twenties and their bodies had been used up and completely broken, and they were disease ridden, they'd had a few children, they were dependent on drugs and alcohol to block out this experience of repeated rape. They were thrown out on the sidewalk to die a very, very difficult death because they were no longer commercially viable. And behind these brothel keepers, were

the landlords, the moneylenders, the financiers, and the organized criminal networks.

So as a good journalist, the first thing I decided to do was, I decided to tell their story. And I ended up making "The Selling of Innocents" which then went on to win an Emmy but making the documentary was a life-changing experience for me. Because I spent a lot of time inside the brothels of Bombay talking to the women in prostitution whose story I wanted to tell.

At one point, while making the documentary, somebody pulled out a knife on me inside the brothels and said "I'm going to kill because I don't want you to be telling the story." And I was saved by the 22 women in prostitution who wanted to tell their story, they surrounded me, they formed a circle around me. And they said that, "we wanted to tell our story and if you want to kill her, kill us first." And the man slunk away because he knew it would be too much trouble to kill 23 women. The documentary got made, I won an Emmy, and when I won the Emmy here in New York at the Broadway Marquee hotel- I felt that journalism was too limiting and I wanted to do something more.

I quit and got a consultancy with the United Nations to look at how women in prostitution were combatting AIDs in South East Asia. At the same time, I went back to the brothels of Bombay to show my documentary to the women and share my award. And they said, but you can't walk away, we have to do something and I said what can I do, I'm just a journalist and I just know how to report. And they said no you can read and write, you have education, you have access to networks, you know some people with money and influence. So why don't you help us? I said yes, that I can bring to the table but remember that you all saved me and rescued me and we can rescue each other and based on that, with those 22 women, I started Apne Aap Women Worldwide.

Apne Aap in Hindi literally means “self empowerment.” At the time we started Apne Aap, the women had four dreams, the first dream was they wanted an education, they wanted a school for their children. They said, whatever has happened to us, has happened but we want a different future for our daughters. We want to send them to school. The second dream they had was they wanted a job in an office, and I said- what does a job in an office mean to you all? And they said well, somewhere where we can work 9 to 5, there are fixed hours, where we have old aged pension, nobody shouts at us and beats us, and where we can be at peace. And I thought of course, yes of course you want a job in an office.

The third dream the women had was they said they wanted a room of their own. And I was an English literature student and this was really strange to me that I was hearing about Virginia Woolf in the brothels of Bombay. And I said, what does a room of your own mean? And they well something just this big, where nobody will kick us, beat us, nobody can walk in when they want to, our children can play peacefully on the floor, we can sleep when we like and wake up when we like. And I thought, of course you want a room of your own.

And the fourth dream was they said they wanted justice. And I asked them, I said, what does justice mean to you? Because they could not understand in this hell where women were being controlled, their bodies were being controlled, there was a whole system with pimps and brothel keepers and police and clients and so much going on and I said, what does justice mean to you. And they said two things. They said they wanted protection. When they were pulled out of school and sold into the brothels, there was nobody to watch out for them. There was no district superintendent of education who would come to their homes because they were poor, they were female, they were low-caste, and they were girls. They were disposable people. And I call them the last girls, they were the last girls. So they said they wanted to be protected, even when they ended up in the brothels of Bombay when they ran away, the police would simply send them back home saying this is your home, you are devalued because you have been sexually abused or used.

And the other thing justice meant to them was accountability. They wanted those who had brokered away their dreams, and they used these very words, that those who have brokered away our dreams- those who have bought us and sold us, they wanted them to be punished.

They wanted the pimps, they wanted the brothel keepers, they want the financiers, the landlords punished. But they also wanted the clients punished. And I asked them, we started to create an organization which would fulfill their dreams. So the first thing we did was that we rented a room in the red light area in a disused municipal school and hired a teacher. And we started preparing the kids for school. As soon as we started enrolling the kids for school, we got pushed back from school principals and parents, who said we do not want daughter of prostitutes in our school.

So the women organized as a group just as they had protected me inside the brothels. And they went out with Apne Aap staff to the school principals, cried and begged and said- our children need a future too. And that was their first self-empowerment group.

Today, from that school and from that community classroom, the dreams of the women moved. Because once they started seeing the change in their children, they began to say what about us. And to gain what they wanted, the jobs in the offices, the rooms of their own, justice. We realized that the woman had to organize as well. The first thing they had to organize for was, as low-caste people who were disposable, who were uneducated, who did not have access to anything was to get government IDs. They were undocumented people. So we campaigned and got government IDs.

And, in the long run, what that did was it got them government subsidies like low-cost food, ration, housing, and also made them citizens in the eyes of the law. So the next time they went to a police station to file a case against a trafficker- the police

would have to register the complaint, the judge would have to listen to them, the politician would have to listen to their demands. And in the next twelve years, now Apne Aap is fourteen years old, what slowly began to happen was that the women found a voice, but they also learned the purpose of collective strengths and circles, just as all of you in this room know.

And after the 16<sup>th</sup> December bus rape happened in New Delhi in 2012, it was the Apne Aap women who were out marching on the streets along with the students who were marching for stricter laws on all forms of sexual assault in India. It was at-risk girls, it was prostituted women, it was their friends and family and they were saying prostitution is commercial rape and we want those who buy us and sell us for prostitution to be punished and we did manage to get that into the law. The process of trafficking was criminalized for the purposes of sexual exploitation and prostitution in the Indian law. Now it is section 370 of the Indian penal code.

But at the same time what happened was that internationally, we began to get a push back. And we found that there were UN bodies who were trying to push back the laws and change and dilute what we had achieved with the UN protocol as well to shift the blame from the victim to the perpetrator. There were notes circulated, there were reports brought out. In 2013, UN women sent out a note when we as the NGO movement all over the world, sent a letter to UN women to lead women's issues and take up our issues with UNFPA and UN AIDS to say that we wanted a report which recommended the decriminalizing of pimping and brothel keeping to be retracted.

The UN Women sent back a note to us saying that they would not do so, that sex work was what was the choice of many women and they stood by it. And we wrote back to say yes, there could be multiple positions, but UN Women should stake neutrality as a stand and there were hundreds and thousands of women and girls for whom it was not a choice but absence of choice and the terminology "sex work" actually sterilized the exploitation in their lives.

Today, I'm here to speak to you on behalf of those last girls who are not just poor and female and low-caste in India but indigenous women in Canada, Romas in Europe, blacks in America who are the first line of people preyed upon by traffickers. I call upon all of us as a collective feminist family who is fighting to improve the status of women every decade, every year, every day to call on UN Women to withdraw this note and to take a neutral position in which all positions and all sides are allowed to co-exist.

I also ask the UN women to take the lead to implore all of governments all over the world to increase investment in the last girls so that we have more choices rather than less choices. Increase investment in education, in jobs, in livelihood training, in security and safety.

We can only walk the last mile if we stand by the last girl. We cannot even skim the top of the bottom, when we talk about the bottom third, very often in development paradigms and development agendas what we have found is that we are stuck with getting easy numbers quickly, big numbers fast and what we find is because of that we often end up skimming the top of the bottom and we ignore the last. But unless we include the last, we will never be able to bring about the paradigm change that we've been looking for.

Change begins at the bottom and transforms the top so I can appeal to think about all those girls and women who do not want to be prostituted, who do not want to be trafficked. And for all UN documents to include all the positions that women and girls reflect in this room today.

Gandhiji was once asked by a British reporter "Mr. Gandhi, why do you always travel third class?" And he answered "Because there is no fourth class." So similarly, I appeal to UN Women to think about how can we travel the third class when developing policies and agendas because we are all walking this path together and we have equal passions.

And we have an opportunity in CSW59, 20 years after Beijing. I was there as a young reporter and my dreams and my heart were on fire and it was with that hope that I started working on women's issues. Some progress has been made, more needs to be achieved and I look forward to us working together and not polarizing and not fighting but looking for something which I call the Third Way, which is to decriminalize women in prostitution. Because for many it is a survivor strategy or absence of choices. But criminalize the traffickers. Not to decriminalize pimping and brothel keeping, and advertisement of sexual services and penalize the John, educate the Johns. Fine them, give them punishments if they are repeat offenders.

We cannot create a culture of masculinity in which men get away with sexual exploitation if they pay for it.

In India, just recently, a documentary was released called "India's daughters" which was on the 16<sup>th</sup> December bus rape. The documentary makers managed to get inside the prison and talk to one of the rapists. And the rapist said that their plan was to go to GP road and "enjoy themselves" and GP road is where the red light district is in Delhi, in the brothels. But suddenly they found a woman on the bus with a young man and they wanted to teach her a lesson, the GP road plan was dropped.

One kind of crime is connected to another kind of crime. If we normalize the exploitation of some women just because they are poor, or low-caste, or women of color- we will normalize the exploitation of all.

And with those words, I want all of you to shut your eyes. And imagine the last girl. In Hindi, I call her the Antkanya. She is poor, she's female, she's a teenager, she's a 13 year old in a brothel who's raped by 8 or 10 customers every night. And how can we create laws and policies which she can access, which she can understand. Remember when we create something like a child line, she doesn't have a phone. When we write laws in English, she doesn't know how to access them, she doesn't understand English, it's a hodgepodge of places. When we create child welfare



systems, can her small feet walk there. Think about her and let us think about how as the consultation proceeds, we can include the last girl.