



Days of Activism
against Gender-based Violence

16 Stories
One global campaign

November 25 - December 10 2020

16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence is an annual international campaign that runs from 25th November, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, till 10 December, Human Rights Day. As part of Prerana's campaign under 16 Days of Activism, this year we are focusing on understanding domestic violence in the context of victims of sexual violence.

Day 1: Living Under the Threat of Violence

Madhuri Shinde

SUPERINTENDENT, NAUNIHAL HOME FOR GIRLS

Anusha (name changed) was admitted to Naunihal in 2019 as a missing child. She was soon restored to her family by the Order of the Child Welfare Committee, and Prerana was asked to follow-up on the case.

Through follow-up visits and interventions with the child, the team got to know that the child did not share a healthy relationship with her father. During the COVID-19 induced lockdown, Anusha's mother called us, sharing that the father and some relatives had got Anusha engaged to be married. Anusha was not willing to get married but her father was forcing her. The mother requested Prerana to help them out but not to disclose that she had revealed this information. The father of the child would often get physically violent, and the mother was afraid that if he got to know that she was trying to stop the wedding, he would physically abuse her.

The team spoke with Anusha, and her mother, and assured them of confidentiality.

Prerana reached out to the Child Welfare Committee, and the District Child Protection Unit to arrange a Home Visit. The DCPU visited the child's home to follow-up but did not mention the information they had received. They educated the family about the legal implications of getting their child married early, and how violation could lead them to be prosecuted. Following this visit, the family decided to not go ahead with the wedding for the time being. However, while a harmful situation was averted, Anusha and her mother live under the threat of violence each day. Her father is an eminent social figure, and they feel afraid to register a complaint against him or leave the situation.

This case was not easy for the team as they had to ensure that help reached the child but also had to avoid revealing how they knew of the child's situation. It was a tricky situation to navigate between helping the child but also upholding confidentiality. There are many like Anusha and her mother, who live in violent situations but are not always in a position to leave the abuser. In this case, while they navigated a violent situation through Prerana's assistance, they still had to live with the person due to social obligations.



Day 2: When Violence is (Mis)Understood as Love

Jyoti Jangir

PROJECT COORDINATOR, NAUNIHAL-SENTINEL

In our experience of working with victims of sexual violence, we have come across situations of violence where many times perpetrators or victims rationalize violence as an act of love. Nazma and Aarti (names changed) are victims of commercial sexual exploitation with whom the team has been following-up, who have been both facing situations of violence in the home.

Aarti stays with her elder sister (Sanjana). She is a minor and would be turning 18 in January 2020. Her elder sister is a victim of commercial sexual exploitation. Aarti and her elder sister do not share an amicable relationship and often are in conflict with each other. Aarti has often discussed her relationship and arguments that take place with her sister, with the social worker. Sometimes, Aarti leaves home only to return late at night to avoid interacting with her sister.

In her visit in October, the social worker met Aarti and her elder sister to help mediate the differences and provide them assistance. During the entire conversation, Aarti kept saying that she wanted to sever ties with her elder sister and wanted to be on her own. On the other hand, her elder sister accepted that she would hit Aarti and did it as it was her 'right as an elder sister'. She kept justifying the violence, saying that she did it to protect her sister. The caseworker explained to Aarti and Sanjana that violence was unacceptable, and definitely not a solution to their problems.

Nazma has currently been staying with her husband and his family. The team is assisting her in getting admission for her further education and linking her to a nearby library for assistance. In a recent visit, the caseworker got to know that Nazma's husband had been getting physically violent with her. The caseworker asked about domestic violence, and Nazma shared that her husband would hit her if she argued with him. 'It is often just a slap but no major incidents of physical violence have occurred' shared Nazma. She added that she believed that every parent had a right to hit their children, and so hence the husband had a right to hit his wife as both were providing for them, and did it out of 'love'. She kept insisting that it was 'just a slap' and that men get angry easily, and women have to bear with it. The caseworker explained to Nazma that violence cannot be acceptable whether it is being inflicted by a parent, sibling, or spouse.

In both cases, violence was being understood as a part of relationships. Nazma accepted violence as her husband's right over her. Aarti's sister was inflicting violence in the name of love and protection. The social worker asked both of them to understand how violence was not just about the physical pain but could leave emotional scars as well.

Sanjana was reluctant to accept that she was wrong in hitting her sister whereas Nazma agreed that while the society may have led her to believe that violence was justified but to live in the said society, she would have to accept it. In Nazma's case, she did not even consider a slap to be an act of violence. Such cases highlight that as part of interventions, there is a greater need to talk to the children and their families about how any form of violence anywhere was unacceptable in any circumstances.



Day 3: Partners in Crime

Azra Qaisar

DOCUMENTATION AND COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER, ATC

Inputs by Ms. Mugdha Dandekar, Project Head, NCC

Zahida (name changed) is one of the mothers whose child stays in our Night Care Center. She lives in one of the brothels in Kamathipura with her admi (fancyman). As is the case with many women in the red-light area, she also often suffers domestic violence at the hands of her partner.

In Zahida's case, the violence significantly increases when her partner's mother comes to stay with them. She tells the outreach workers that the mother instigates her partner to get more violent with her, and not 'tolerate her mistakes'. When the outreach workers meet her, she often does not even disclose that she has been a victim of violence. When the workers enquire about the bruises on her face and body, she just says "Seedhi se gir gayi bai" (I fell down the stairs, Bai). We respect her decision to not talk about it but the team has tried to get her assistance. Zahida, however, is reluctant to seek any help. She feels helpless thinking her partner may abuse her children too. The team has tried to convince her to seek help, but so far, she is hesitant.

Gender-based violence of any form is a structural product of patriarchy, and many times women can aid in incurring violence. Zahida's partner's mother was acting as a trigger for further violence. In Zahida's case, we observed that women are often unable to leave abusive situations as they worry for their children's well-being, and may also feel that they don't have the agency to take action.



Day 4: Reporting Violence amid Pressure from the Community

Azra Qaisar

DOCUMENTATION AND COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER, ATC

Inputs by Ms. Mugdha Dandekar, Project Head, NCC

If one takes a look at the recent reports on domestic and sexual violence, there seems to have been an exponential increase in the incidents amid COVID-19. Unfortunately, the conditions that are required to prevent the virus from spreading like staying at home, social distancing, are also conditions that make people vulnerable as they may be forced to stay with their abusers. This is Manisha's story, whose daughter was sexually assaulted amid the COVID-19 induced lockdown by a man from the brothel she lived in.

Four-year-old Shalini (name changed), lived with her mother, Manisha (name changed) in one of the brothels of Kamathipura. The child would regularly attend one of the Night Care Centers in the area but during the lockdown, she had been staying with her mother. One day amid the lockdown, Manisha needed to go out for some errands. She could not take her daughter along so she left her daughter with the brothel keeper. Upon returning, she discovered that Shalini had been sexually assaulted by the admi (fancy man) of one of the women in the brothel.

Manisha was deeply shaken but she resolved to take action. However, she was facing pressure from the community to not file the case. She reached out to Prerana, who assisted her through the process. An FIR was filed against the perpetrator, and after due process, he was arrested. Subsequently, a complaint was also filed against the *gharwali* (brothel keeper) and the partner of the perpetrator. While the team helped the mother take legal recourse, they also spoke to her about the need to focus on the well-being and safety of the child. They helped Manisha understand that the child needed to be presented before a Child Welfare Committee. They assisted her through the presentation, and eventually, Shalini was placed in a child care institution for her care and protection. Meanwhile, a partner organization has been working with the mother for legal assistance.

In this case, Manisha was in a difficult situation where filing a complaint could have had dire consequences for her. She had registered a complaint against three members from the brothel, all people in positions of power in the community. Her resolve to do what was right for the daughter, despite potential backlash is commendable. Fighting against violence is very challenging but when mothers join the fight, the path becomes easier to navigate.

Day 5: Leaving a Situation of Abuse

Aaheli Gupta

CASEWORK MANAGER, ATC

We often see people ask why victims of violence continue to stay with their abusers despite the harm that is being inflicted upon them. There could be many reasons for it – Payal's story highlights some key reasons that make it hard for young women to leave their abusers.

Payal is a victim of commercial sexual exploitation, with whom the Prerana team had been following up till she exited the juvenile justice system. She was forced into the sex trade by her mother, and after her rescue was placed in a child care institution by the Child Welfare Committee for her care and protection. After she turned 18, Payal got married to someone she fell in love with. While she had exited the juvenile justice system, the team at Prerana had informed her that she could reach out to them if she ever needed assistance. In January 2020, a social worker received a call from Payal. She had recently given birth to a girl child and shared that she was not happy with her partner. Her husband would often hit her. She added that he would often get insecure if she interacted with any other man. The social worker asked Payal if she needed assistance in getting out of the abusive situation. However, Payal was not quite sure about what she wanted.

Payal had stayed in a child care institution for a few years, and in an aftercare facility for a brief period before getting married. After she got married, her husband would take care of the expenses, and provisions for the home. Payal had little idea about being independent, or even knowing how to travel alone. She was quite afraid to leave her husband as she was unsure if she would be able to manage on her own. She was also worried about how she would be able to care for her child, who was only a few months old. She was staying with her husband for the sake of her child's well-being.

The social worker spoke with Payal and helped her understand how they could place her in a Group Home, and link her with job opportunities. She was reluctant but eventually, she agreed after knowing that she could also take her child along. Many times, victims tend to not move out as they fear for their child's well-being. Payal's story is indicative of how many times victims of violence want to leave their abuser but due to a lack of financial support, shelter support they are unable to do so.



Day 6: Understanding Violence in the Red-Light Area - An Interview with Prerana's NCC Team

Azra Qaisar

DOCUMENTATION AND COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER, ATC

Prerana's Night Care Centers (NCC) are safe shelters, located in the red-light area. At NCCs, children are provided safe shelter and care so that they are away from the brothels, the red-light areas during the night hours when their mothers are soliciting and are not in a position to provide parental supervision, care, and protection. The NCC provides services such as – safe shelter, wholesome nutrition, education support, safe play options, safe sanitation options, and opportunities for skills development, awareness sessions, and an overall platform for holistic personality development and growth. Through the course of their work, the NCC team often comes across many situations of domestic violence within the community. Ms. Mugdha Dandekar (Project Head, NCC), and Ms. Prachi Naik (Project Manager, Institutional Placement Programme) shared their observations and experiences on domestic violence within the red-light areas.

Through your work within the red-light areas, what has the experience of the NCC team been regarding domestic violence?

Mugdha: When a woman is brought into the red-light and sold to a brothel keeper, she is subject to violence right from that moment. If she resists her exploitation, she is beaten up, starved, even burnt with cigarette stubs. The violence is perpetrated by the men, as well as the brothel keeper. The admi (fancy man/pimp) exerts a lot of control on the woman and is often violent. I remember a case where a woman managed to escape, tried to get out of the sex trade, changed her phone number, and but the admi found her and brought her back.

The women face a lot of violence but often do not talk about it. We ask them when we see bruises on their bodies, and faces, to which they say "Seedhi se gir gayi" (I fell down the stairs). When we persist, they share that they were beaten up by the admi. They say " Kya karein didi, admi haina toh marta hai" (What can I do, didi? He is a man so he beats me). '

Prachi: Children also suffer violence at the hands of the pimps. I remember we had this case a few years ago, where the admi would beat the child a lot. The child used to come to the Night Care Center and asked us to help. He wanted to be placed in a child care institution. When the mother got to know, she was not supportive of the child and seemed quite angry at the child wanting to be placed at a shelter home. Few days after the child was placed at the child care institution, she visited us and told us that she wanted the best for her child but was afraid of her admi and hence, objected in front of him.

What is the role of the admi (pimp) in the woman's life in the red-light area?

Mugdha: The influence and fear of the admi are so high that we have come across instances where mothers allow the admi to take all decisions related to the children. These may not even be the biological children of the admi who is controlling the woman. He controls every aspect of the woman's life. When Prerana started working in these red-light areas, mothers were largely absent from the decisions about her child. It was mostly the brothel-keeper or the pimp whom many women refer to as admi, who would be at the front. We insisted that we would only interact with the mother, and continue to do so. Even now when women come to the Center, the admi may follow them to check their whereabouts and ensure that they do not run away. The admi also checks her phone, to keep a tab on her communication.

Prachi: The admi acts like a pimp and also provides the illusion of security. If we go for outreach visits to meet the mothers, the admis tend to linger around to monitor our conversations. The emotional violence that the women face is very high. If you ask a woman in the community if she faces violence by the pimp and the brothel keeper, it is unlikely that she will tell you the truth initially. Gradually, as we build a relationship with them, they open up. I remember a case where a woman was eight months pregnant and was forced to solicit by the brothel keeper. She gave in, but the customer did not seem satisfied. He, along with the brothel keeper, started beating the woman. They beat her so badly that she had a miscarriage and the child was born dead. The women hardly have any say in soliciting even if they are menstruating or pregnant.

When women face violence, are they able to seek help and medical attention?

Mugdha: The OPDs in most hospitals function during the morning, and the women in the sex trade are active in the latter part of the day. We have observed that most of the time women are subjected to physical assault in the evening. It could be over the tip given by the customer, to the admi accusing her of being 'over flirtatious', not showing the required 'frivolous' behavior while soliciting. If the assault has resulted in severe harm, they are not taken to public hospitals. There is also the fear that it would result in the matter being reported to the police. Apart from this, they often go to local private doctors or quacks to seek treatment. Sometimes the brothel keeper also takes them to the doctor. However, she does it because she needs the women to earn, which they won't be able to do if they are hurt. The brothel keeper does not pay for the treatment. If the woman does not have the money, the brothel keeper lends the money and further adds to the debt of the woman. Violence has consequences for women in the red-light area, beyond physical and emotional harm.

Do you think that women in the red-light areas are missing from the discourse of domestic violence?

Mugdha: When we look at situations of women facing domestic violence, a key step is to make them financially independent to reduce their dependence on the partner so they can manage their life on their own. When it comes to women in the red-light areas, there is an ill-informed perception that they have a lot of money and are financially independent. The reality is far from it. There is indebtedness to local money lenders. The women are not literate and often do not know how much they owe the money lenders. Amid COVID-19 induced lockdown, many of them owe nearly 60 thousand in rent to their brothel keepers.



There is a refusal to accept the violence that they face as a violation because of their being in the sex trade. I come across people talking about the 'legalization' of the sex trade but I hear few voices talk about the violence in the sex trade.

Prachi: Even if the woman manages to have savings, she sometimes gives it away to the admi if she feels he needs it. In a recent case amid the lockdown, one of the women was helping her admi start his own business. He was not quite aware of how much savings she had till then but when he got to know that she had money to spare, he started beating her up to seek more money.

Mugdha: Previously also, one woman was extorted by her admi into paying him 1.5 lac rupees to see her son, that he had kept away from her. Financial independence is not a reality for the women in the red-light area, and the current circumstances have made this problem worse manifold.

How do you think we can work for the better?

Mugdha: Women do not report for many reasons, and one reason is also a certain level of attachment to the admi. They say "Mera admi haina, jane do" (He is my admi, let it be). There is a need for repeated discourse with the women in the community on the importance of reporting violence. We can assist them when they consent to file a complaint.

Prachi: It would help if there were organizations and legal aid clinics that would actively work on the issues of domestic violence within the red-light areas. We have many organizations who exclusively cater to their medical needs, child protection, perhaps we need such initiatives to tackle violence within the community too.



Day 7: Raising the age of marriage - A Counterproductive Proposal

Priti Patkar

CO-FOUNDER, AND EXECUTIVE SECRETARY, PRERANA

Over the past 4 years, I have been working closely with many adolescents (all between the ages of 16 and 18 years). Many of them had run away from their homes, primarily due to irreconcilable differences between them, and their parents. Many of them left from situations of despair to hope. When the police would trace them, their first response to the police would be that they did not want to go back to their families. They would then be produced before the Child Welfare Committees (CWC, the competent authority under the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act 2015), and later by their Order, admitted into a Children's Home.

During their interaction with the caseworkers, most of these girls would narrate the following - that her family was planning to get them married to someone the girl did not approve of, that she had chosen her partner, and their family was against her choice. In one case, the girl was very keen to study further but her parents wanted to marry her off as the elder sister was getting married. The family wanted to get her married as well, to save money which would be incurred by arranging two different wedding ceremonies. In another case, the family came to know that the girl was talking with a male friend on WhatsApp, and decided to get her married 'before some 'immoral' incident took place'. They were more concerned about the 'honor' of the family than understanding what their child wanted.

Impact of COVID-19

The situation brought about by the pandemic has also caused many parents to consider child marriages. In a recent case during the COVID-19 induced lockdown, 15-year-old Varsha (name changed) called us, saying that her family was planning to get her married to a man who was 10 years older than her. This person was supposed to be a prospective groom for Varsha's older sister. However, when he visited the family, he saw Varsha and liked her instead. Fearing ostracization by their community, the parents agreed. In another case, 17-year-old Jeena's (name changed) father wants to get her married because of the uncertainty brought about by the pandemic. "I want to fulfill my responsibility of marrying my daughter, while I am alive. Who would marry her off if COVID-19 kills me?" he asks.



Meera (name changed) is a single parent. She is HIV positive and her health has been deteriorating by the day. Since the lockdown, Meera has been struggling to make ends meet. Like Varsha's father, she wants to get her 17-year-old daughter, Neena (name changed), married before something happens to her. Neena wanted to study further and reached out for help. She was referred to us. Since then we have been working with both the mother and the child to ensure that Neena can pursue her education.

It is important to acknowledge the link between low-income households and child or early marriages. The increase in child marriages amid the pandemic is also due to many families feeling that there would be 'one less mouth to feed' during the current economic crisis. They also believe that the demand for dowry would be less if the girl is young. Other reasons that are driving parents towards child marriages have been - the stigma attached to women being unmarried, young girls being involved in 'affairs', eloping and bringing 'shame' to the family, and fears of premarital pregnancies. Parents don't want to take risks and prefer to get their daughters married "before it is too late". Before increasing the age of marriage, these and many more such ground realities should be taken into consideration by policymakers.

Concerns over Agency

With the increase in the age of marriage, parents might use the law to punish their adult children for exercising their agency and choosing their partner. Young men will be criminalized for sexual assault as well as kidnapping for marrying an "underage" girl/woman. Women will become even more vulnerable to parental control and backlash if they choose to marry against the wishes of their parents or elope. Adolescents and young women may not be able to raise their concerns, or get information and help with reproductive care. They may also not be able to access health care facilities with the fear of their partner and family being criminalized, making them more vulnerable to exploitation and ill health. We must consider the high possibility of unwanted pregnancies, illegal and hence dangerous abortions including those which lead to mortality and consequent infertility. Today, we are already seeing this with the way the POCSO Act of 2012, is misused by parents to teach their daughters a lesson for exercising their choices. Our police system is also quite enthusiastic in cases of elopement and consensual sex, as compared to taking action when cases of forced child marriages are reported.

Another factor that policymakers should consider is the vulnerability to emotional and physical abuse in families. Our on-ground experiences have also shown that when young girls and women make choices on marriage, the older women in the house, particularly, the mother, also face a backlash very often in the form of physical violence. The mother's parenting skills are questioned and she is attacked for not being able to keep her daughter 'in control'.

With no opportunities for education, no income, the proposed increase in the age of marriage would mean that the girls and women will have to stay for more years in the family, creating a possibility of more physical and emotional abuse from the family, due to being seen as a 'burden'. We fear that this would drive the lower strata of society to a higher resort to female foeticide. In a country where girls are considered a burden, if families have to take care of them for an extended period now, and especially guard their 'chastity', it would give them another reason to not have them at all.

With the required legislation existing in the country like the Prevention of Child Marriage Act, 2006, Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children Act, 2015) we have not been quite successful in preventing early marriages. It is important that policymakers consider and reflect whether another legal provision of extending the minimum age for marriage would be doing any good to the existing framework and structures? Or do we need to think beyond the law and punishment framework to address a social issue that deeply affects the progress and development of young individuals in our country?

The below are some suggestions to consider before increasing the age of marriage (the list is not exhaustive)

- We presume that increasing the age of marriage will reduce the rates of maternal mortality. The incidence of maternal mortality is closely linked with the poor nutritional levels among women from the lower economic strata. A piece of legislation cannot fix this problem. To reduce the maternal mortality rate and increase nutritional levels, India has to invest in providing high-quality health care during and after pregnancy and combating malnutrition. Spending more on creating awareness of nutrition and reproductive health care and knowledge around the rights of young mothers would also be a positive step in reducing maternal mortality.
- Preventing early marriage goes much beyond creating a piece of legislation that penalizes early marriage. Young women need better avenues to invest themselves. It is important to create safe workspaces for young women, fair wages, and also establish safe working-women's hostels. Women need to be provided a fair impetus in the form of jobs, fair wages, and safety to prevent them from being married at an early age.
- Reaching out to children is important, especially when there is absenteeism in school. There should be a focus on supporting families so that both boys and girls are in schools, at least up to the 10th standard. Basic compulsory education from age 14 to 18 years and the provision of free education to girls for lower socio-economic communities beyond 18 years must be ensured. There should also be more, decentralized, and safe educational hostels for girls.

- It is also necessary to strengthen the ICDS and ICPS program by increasing the funding for these programs, training of the staff, and conducting 3rd party evaluation to identify gaps, and suggestions for the way forward. There is a need to ensure effective implementation of Ward level and Village Level Child Protection Committees. The local elected representatives should ensure the mandate of the committee is met, and that they are answerable for the safety and development of children and adolescents in their constituency.
- Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram (RKSK) is a progressive program but currently not accessible to some adolescents as it is conditional to take the route of the criminal justice system because of the increase in the age of consent in POCSO Act 2012.
- Effective implementation of existing laws and policies should be prioritized, over creating new ones that do not address the issue at hand and may create further challenges. The proposed law reform should be read along with other legislations like the Juvenile Justice Act 2015, POCSO Act 2012, CPCRA, IPC, The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006.
- Schemes like Aadarsh Vivah Scheme in Karnataka, which incentivizes delay in marriage need to be considered while ensuring that as soon as the girl turns 18 the money received is not used as a dowry.

There is a need to be inclusive in our approach. We must work to make young girls and women part of the solution, understand their aspirations, their suggestions to achieve the goal of reducing maternal mortality, and improving nutritional levels among women. Let them suggest ways to ensure that marriage is not forced on them but is a choice they make without fear of negative consequences. There is also a need for openness in discussing issues around sexuality and reproductive health, both with boys and girls. The legal route alone is not a solution. What is needed is the allocation of resources to develop an ecosystem that supports the safety, creates negotiation opportunities, education, vocational training of girls and young adults, opportunities for them to start their enterprise, along with safe workspace options, fair wages, better provisioning for improving her nutritional status, and creating broader awareness about gender equality.

It is also important to take into consideration the fact that by and large child marriage is not a concern among the middle and higher-income groups. The curse of child marriage is related to hand-to-mouth subsistence, and the low social status of women in general in India. The Government of India in a gazette notification issued on 04th June 2020, set up a Task Force to examine matters on the age of motherhood, imperatives of lowering MMR, improvement of nutritional levels, and related issues. Such laws may rarely meet their stated goals but they certainly end up hurting only the poor and the vulnerable the most.

Day 8: Vulnerability Due to Lack of Support Systems

Aaheli Gupta

CASEWORK MANAGER, ATC

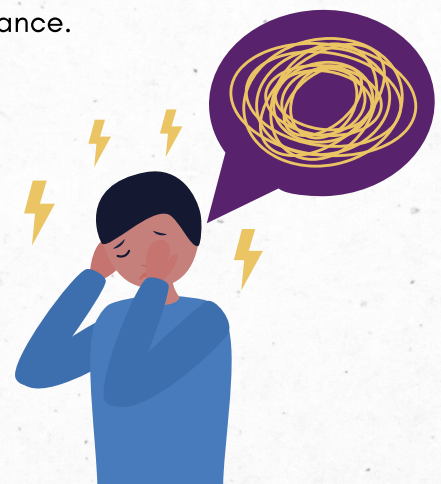
Jasmeet (name changed) entered the juvenile justice system as a victim of child sexual abuse. She currently stays with her parents, and Prerana follows-up on her to check on her well-being. Jasmeet's family belongs to a low-income household. Her parents worked as street hawkers before the COVID-19 lockdown but had to find alternative means of income later. They are often busy making ends meet, and are unable to find time to look out for their child.

Amid the COVID-19 induced lockdown, a social worker received a frantic call from Jasmeet's mother. She was crying and sounded quite worried about her child. She shared with the social worker that Jasmeet had not been keeping well, and was facing violence from the person who she was seeing.

Jasmeet has been in a relationship with a boy, Hari, from her community. She often does not stay home and prefers to live with him. Hari, however, is physically violent towards her. He has been trying to end the relationship and is engaged to be married to someone else.

A victim of abuse goes through a lot of trauma and may get dependent on people who support them through that situation. When Jasmeet was sexually abused, she went through a deeply traumatic experience that changed her. The social workers have observed Jasmeet feels that Hari had stood by her then, hence is unwilling to recognize his current actions as violent. Jasmeet's trauma makes it harder for her to be able to leave her abuser. During the lockdown, Jasmeet also got pregnant with his child and subsequently went through a medical termination of pregnancy. She has limited support systems and has also started exhibiting self-harm tendencies.

Jasmeet's story indicates that there is a need to acknowledge the intersection of different forms of violence when working with victims. Her vulnerability was heightened after she was abused, so did her need for support systems. The team has been trying to help her and provide psychosocial assistance.



Day 9: Living under the Control of the Abuser

Azra Qaisar

DOCUMENTATION AND COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER, ATC

We have often discussed that the names of women in the red-light area are frequently changed. Sometimes, they are compelled by circumstances to change their names. In many cases, the aadmis (fancyman/pimp) insist that the women change their children's names and very often their religion as well. The names of the children change again if the mother changes her aadmi, Gulnaz (name changed) is one of the women whose child stays in our night care center. In our interactions with her, she has shared that she is married to her aadmi but the team has not been able to verify the same.

Gulnaz's aadmi often beats her. She is concerned about her child's future and wanted to open a bank account for him and start saving money. However, as mentioned above, many residents of the red light area have different names. Often, their documents have different names that make it challenging to get bank accounts or other benefits. In this case, Gulnaz's name on her identity documents and her name on her child's birth certificate does not match, making it hard for her to create an account in his name. She tried to get her name corrected in the documents but when her partner got to know, he got violent again. He does not want her to open an account, or change her name.

At present, the team has been following-up with her. They have informed her that whenever she is ready, they will assist her through the process of getting her name changed. Gulnaz's story echoes with many women in the red-light area who dream of better lives for their children but due to the strapping control by their perpetrator, they are often not in a position to exercise their agency.



Day 10: Emotional violence in a Children's Home

Priya Ahluwalia
COUNSELOR ,ATC

Sanchi (name changed) is a victim of commercial sexual exploitation and has been in institutional care since 2018. During the early phase of the COVID-19 lockdown, she struggled to stabilize due to fear over the uncertainty of the future. Her distress was only worsened when she was transferred to another Children's Home and lost contact with her closest friends in the process.

In the new Home, Sanchi struggled to come to terms with the loss of the comfort of her friends and the familiarity of an institution she has been residing in for two years. She sought to form new bonds to alleviate her distress and gradually formed a close friendship with Siddhika (name changed). Their friendship offered Sanchi the much-needed comfort and support she had lost in the past few months. Sanchi started to flourish, her mood improved and she started to show interest in new activities. However, as they spent more time together, rumors about their friendship evolved. The fellow residents of the institution labeled Sanchi and Siddhika as 'lesbian type'.

Many residents began to tease and taunt them. Sanchi shared that she was deeply affected by these comments. Sanchi began to question her identity and often reacted aggressively to these jibes. Sanchi's mood began to plummet as she began to withdraw from people and activities that she once enjoyed. She grew hopeless and often stated 'there was no happiness or comfort for her here, there was no point in seeking happiness now'. Thus, a friendship misconstrued as sexual orientation caused significant emotional distress to Sanchi. While the institutional staff did not cause distress in Sanchi's case, their responses were critical to the child's experience. Many times, the Home staff may worsen the situation by further taunting the children or scolding and punishing them for their alleged misbehavior. It is crucial that the in-house staff is trained to respond to such incidents in an empathetic and non-judgmental manner.

Children with experiences of trauma, living away from families often seek comfort from their friends. Within child care institutions, this friendship is often misunderstood, labeled by the staff and the children as an 'immoral sexual attraction'. As a result of it, children who are friends and sometimes touch each other or share a bed, walk hand in hand, etc are often maligned and ostracized. As this misunderstanding festers within the institution, it creates an emotionally unsafe space for these children. While responding to such incidents, we must acknowledge the hurt and pain caused by such statements but also hold space for normalizing sexuality and other non-conforming behaviors. The aim of these conversations should be to de-stigmatize gender and sexuality, while the children living in the institution continue to follow its rules. Through these conversations, we not only assist them in stabilizing but also assist them in widening their understanding of the world.

Day 11: Facing Violence at the Police Station

Deepali Mistry

PROJECT MANAGER, SANMAAN

17-year-old Radhika (name changed) lives in one of the communities, where Prerana's Sanmaan team works. Sanmaan works to enroll the local children in school, conducts outreach programs, links the children to organizations for educational and vocational support, and also holds awareness sessions on social issues in the community.

In October 2020, we received a call from a community member, informing us that Radhika had been missing since she had left for her work as a ragpicker. The caller added that her family had approached the local police station to file a missing person complaint.

On the same day, that we received this information, Radhika returned home late in the evening. She shared that she had been unconscious, woken up in an unknown place, and somehow managed to reach home. She added that she had had an argument with a stranger in the morning when she was headed to work. The man had accused her of stealing his things and had also gotten violent towards her. She shared that, she remembered seeing him before losing consciousness.

The next day, when Radhika went to the police to report the matter, the police responded in a harsh manner. They accused her of running on her own accord, with the Investigating Officer even slapping her to force her to say that she had run on her own, and then returned home. Radhika shared this with the social worker, adding that the police had threatened to file a case against her and her family if she would consent to a medical examination. However, despite the violence, the child was determined to get a medical examination. The social worker presented Radhika's case before the Child Welfare Committee, and subsequently, by their Order, the examination was done. The CWC also asked for an inquiry against the official who had slapped Radhika and appointed Prerana to provide psycho-social support to the child.

We often come across people being afraid or sceptical of approaching the police for help in cases of violence. As observed in Radhika's case, when the police themselves pressure the child and her family and perpetuate the violence, it makes it more difficult for a victim to seek assistance. This also acts as a deterrent for the aggrieved to seek help and justice.



Day 12: Triggers of Past Trauma at Home

Aaheli Gupta

CASEWORK MANAGER, ATC

Violence at home does not always have to manifest itself in a physical form. Emotional and verbal abuse can be quite detrimental and scarring for people as well. Anita (name changed) is a victim of commercial sexual exploitation, with whom the Prerana team has been following up. She exited the juvenile justice system after turning 18 and shifted into an aftercare facility. During the COVID-19 lockdown, she moved back in with her mother.

Anita came into the juvenile justice system, as a child in need of care and protection whose mother wanted her to be placed in an institution. The mother felt that the locality in which the family lived was not safe for the child. She had also come across incidents where Anita was found with items stolen from her neighbors. She had observed that the child's behavior was getting aggressive, and felt that the child would be safer in a child care institution.

After Anita's case was referred to Prerana, through regular interactions, the child gradually shared that she had been a victim of commercial sexual exploitation and that the perpetrator lived in her community. When Anita had been forced into the sex trade, the abusers would also force her to consume alcohol, causing issues of substance dependency in her. She struggled with alcohol and drug addiction, and would often exhibit withdrawal symptoms when she was in institutional care.

During the lockdown, the conflict between Anita and her mother increased significantly. As per her mother, Anita would smoke at home and seems to steal things from others. Anita, on the other hand, appears to be troubled by her mother shaming her for being exploited. Her mother is aware of the trauma that she has gone through but often is often reactive and insensitive to Anita. She often does not come home anymore, to avoid conflict. Her mother tells the social worker that she wants nothing to do with her daughter anymore.

Victims of sexual violence are more vulnerable to recivitimisation and emotional abuse. In this case, emotional violence took a heavy toll on the victim, pushing her further away from her mother. Anita's mother thinks she is well-meaning but her behavior has caused emotional harm, amplifying Anita's trauma and vulnerabilities.



Day 13: Working with Victims of Sexual Violence - An Interview

Azra Qaisar

DOCUMENTATION AND COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER, ATC

Prerana's Sentinel team works with minor victims rescued from commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking. The team works with children through referrals from the Child Welfare Committees in the districts of Mumbai-Suburban and Thane. Through their work, the team has come across many situations of violence within the home or violence in intimate partner relationships. Ms. Aaheli Gupta (Casework Manager), Ms. Jyoti Jangir (Project Coordinator), and Ms. Priya Ahluwalia (Counselor) from the Sentinel team shared their observations and insights on the link between domestic violence and the vulnerabilities of victims of commercial sexual exploitation.

What has the experience of the Sentinel team been regarding domestic violence, through its work with victims of commercial sexual exploitation?

Aaheli: We come across situations where a child who has been restored to her family, or a young adult who has exited the juvenile justice system is facing violence at home. We had been following up with a girl, Fiza* for a few years while she was in the juvenile justice system. After her exit, she got into a romantic relationship with a man from her neighborhood. From our interactions with Fiza, we could gauge that the relationship was both physically, and emotionally abusive to her but she did perceive the behaviour as harmful. Earlier this year, she was pregnant with his child, and he had pressurised her to go through an abortion. She did not terminate the pregnancy and did not end her relationship with this man. In another case, Arushi* is a victim of commercial sexual exploitation, who has exited the juvenile justice system. She has been staying with her mother amid the pandemic. She does not share an amicable relationship with her mother, which often manifests in her mother shaming her for having been a victim of sexual violence. The mother has exhibited emotionally abusive behavior towards her daughter after the restoration.

Jyoti: In Fiza's case, while she has been facing violence by her partner, she has been perpetrating it onto her younger sister, Aisha*. She often beats Aisha and says that she does it out of 'love' as she does not want her sister to go through the same trauma that she had. Fiza does not recognize and accept violence as abuse in both the relationships - neither with her partner nor with her sister. Aisha on the other hand is also a victim of sexual assault with whom we have been following up. The sisters are orphans and do not have any family except each other so even though Fiza is violent, Aisha shares that she would rather be with her than be placed in a shelter facility.

Are victims of sexual violence more vulnerable to domestic violence?

Priya: Emotional and verbal violence can lead to violence towards the self or self-harm, especially in children living in child care institutions. Through my interactions with children in counseling sessions, I have observed that there may be a greater vulnerability in children who belong to communities like Bedia, Banchada who practice intergenerational prostitution. They are de-notified tribes that have a history of selling their daughters into the sex trade. They internalize violence at an earlier age, and may not be able to recognize it as a violation. For many victims, it is challenging to understand that a slap or a beating is also an act of violence.

Many times, as Jyoti mentioned earlier, people conflate love with violence. They think that if a partner is hitting them, it is a part of the relationship. What have your experiences been in this regard?

Priya: This is a classic case of conditioning. I have heard our clients say things like “Woh marta hai magar phir pyaar bhi karta haina” (He hits me but also showers me with love after that). The love, or its manifestation in the form of a hug or a present, after the act of violence, makes it acceptable to many victims. It also conditions them to believe that one will follow the other.

Trauma response also plays out in such situations. If a person feels lonely and craves affection, there is a possibility that feeling any emotion, feels like a better alternative than numbness. Another important thing to note here is that victims may start weighing and comparing acts of violence to one another. If their parents were abusive to them and made them feel that they did it out of love, it is possible that when their partner exhibits the same behavior, the person will accept it as love as well.

Jyoti: I agree with Priya. Victims may compare the violent behavior of their partner, with the one shown by their father, and rationalize it as the norm. In many marginalized communities, the violence may be such an everyday occurrence that it is challenging to help them associate the same with the violation.

Aaheli: There seems to be this belief at play that the partner has the right to hit because the parent had the right to hit. Violence is accepted as a legitimate expression of love and victims of violence due to their background and circumstances are willing to accept this form of love.



Have you come across cases where a woman was perpetrating domestic violence on a male victim?

Priya: In my limited experience, I have not witnessed this but I think women do not tend to be physically violent and may resort to emotional abuse. They may respond to a situation of violence by using their words, rather than their hands. First, they may feel helpless as victims, and one way to respond would be by using hurtful words. It is a protective mechanism for them. Second, they may also realize that if they actually resort to physical violence, the man may beat them more.

How do you think that we can do better as a society, especially for victims of sexual violence?

Jyoti: In our Naunihal Home, we equip the girls with the knowledge of what counts as violence. We facilitate workshops on the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, etc, to equip them with the necessary tools to navigate their way once they leave the institution. A strong suit for Naunihal is the amount of social exposure that the girls receive – be it interacting with certain experts, professionals, or just participating in diverse programs and events. When children themselves experience the changing perceptions and mindsets, they might be able to reflect on their own beliefs and values better and inculcate the necessary changes in their lives better.

Aaheli: I think it is important to talk to the child about domestic violence in the exit sessions. We should give them situations and examples to help them understand it better. For children that are restored, we have to work with families to help them understand that they cannot revictimize or shame the child for the trauma that the child has faced.

Priya: I think we, as a society, tend to normalize violence a lot, and the media has a fair share of roles to play here. Language plays an important role too. I have heard adults tell children “Maar kha kar hi sikhegi-ye”(She will only learn if gets a beating). When we talk to children like this, they normalize violence. I also think that patriarchy crushes the self-esteem of women and if we are to work on preventing violence, we have to build that self-esteem again. Gaslighting women who raise issues has to be stopped. We have to make women and girls feel that they are worthy, and valued, and do not deserve violence. We also need to actively build a culture of consent, with young boys and girls. For young boys especially, we need to make sure that they know – “I am important and so is the girl next to me”. It won't happen in a day but these are some ideas to start the conversation at least.

Day 14: Working with a Child Victim of Sexual Violence - A Case Study

Azra Qaisar

DOCUMENTATION AND COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER, ATC

Prerana's Sentinel team works with minor victims rescued from commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking. The team works with children through referrals from the Child Welfare Committees in the districts of Mumbai-Suburban and Thane. The team also works with child care institutions to assist in the rehabilitation of the victims after their rescue.

During a routine visit to the child care institution, a social worker came across a child, sitting alone and crying. The child, Zara (name changed), seemed visibly distressed and was incoherently speaking about how something was disturbing her. The social worker sat with the child for a while and helped her calm down. The social worker later followed up on this case with the Probation Officer at the institution, and brought it to the notice of the Child Welfare Committee (CWC), requesting for Prerana to be appointed to work on the case. After due consideration, Prerana was directed to submit a Social Investigation Report (SIR), and subsequent follow-up on the case to help the child in the process of rehabilitation. In January 2019, Zara's case (name changed) was referred to Prerana.

Through interventions, the team got to know that Zara was a victim of child sexual abuse, and commercial sexual exploitation. Her case also highlighted the challenges of working with children struggling with severe mental health issues and sensitization of caregivers and families to mental health concerns. [Read more here.](#)



Day 15: When Help appears to cause Harm

Megha Gupta

PROJECT COORDINATOR (ATC)

Faiza (name changed) is a victim of commercial sexual exploitation. She was placed in a Children's Home for her care and protection, after her rescue. Our Sentinel team had been directed to follow-up with the child and assist her with her rehabilitation process.

Faiza was interested in pursuing an education and wanted to join her school again. The staff of the Home appreciated the child's interest in joining a school and was of the opinion that if the family was not the accused in the case, she could be restored earlier than planned, to ensure that she is able to join her old school from the next academic year. They further suggested that an educational venture could assist Faiza in pursuing her education.

The educational venture that the staff had suggested was offering options to pursue career options like journalism, law, and social work. If a victim of sexual violence was interested in pursuing one of the courses, she would be also provided with a monthly stipend and linked with resources near her residence to help her prepare for the same (like being enrolled in a coaching class or a school/college, etc). Faiza's mother was not stable financially, so this could have proved a good opportunity for the child to pursue. The staff had spoken to Faiza about the same, and she seemed to be on board with the idea.

A few days later, Faiza seemed to be emotional in her interaction with the social worker. She was very worried about the involvement of the educational venture. According to the child, she was being asked to sign a paper consenting for assistance from the organization. She had also been informed that her photo and/or video would also be recorded by the staff of the organization, and could be displayed on their social media platforms as success stories.

The staff of this organization had informed Faiza that there were victims open to disclosing their identity, accepting and narrating the ordeal they went through, and how they eventually wanted to pursue one of the given options to work against gender-based violence. Faiza seemed quite distressed at the thought of stating her ordeal of being a victim of sex trafficking, who is now on her way to rehabilitation. She did not feel comfortable at the thought and started crying while talking about it. The social worker tried to make the child understand that she has the option of not opting for something that she is uncomfortable with.

Additionally, Faiza was interested in becoming a teacher or a writer. She also shared that the in-house counselor had informed her that Faiza was too young to be able to make a decision, and she should pick one of these options provided. Faiza did not feel comfortable with this either. It seemed like Faiza felt cornered into collaborating with the organization. According to her, she was pressured into signing the consent form at the earliest. She was 17 and was scared of making a decision about the future on her own. She was so nervous, that she even mentioned how she does not want to attend a regular school if this was a condition to access that. The social worker helped the child calm herself, and helped her understand that she had a right to ask for confidentiality.

The social worker suggested that the child request a meeting with her mother and the Child Welfare Committee to provide her with the information and clarity she would require in making the decision. Faiza seemed to feel better with this decision.

In Faiza's case, the mere thought of voicing her ordeal before a camera revictimized the child to the extent of giving up her desire to pursue education through a regular school. Collaborating to provide assistance in rehabilitation is always important, but it is also necessary to be aware of the collaboration is coming with a cost that is not in the best interest of the child. Victims of violence may not always be open to sharing their stories, and making that a condition to rehabilitation can cause harm to the aggrieved mental health.



Any organization disclosing the identity of a child declared to be a child in need of care and protection as a success story goes against the principle of the right to privacy and confidentiality and the principle of a fresh start as envisaged in the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015.

Day 16: Twitter Chat on Addressing Gender-based Violence - Highlights

Azra Qaisar

DOCUMENTATION AND COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER, ATC

On the 10th of December, we concluded our campaign on 16 Days of Activism with a Twitter Chat on "Addressing Gender-based Violence" with partners who work in the field of gender-based violence. We were joined by the following partner organizations –

- [Breakthrough India](#)
- [Sayfty](#)
- [Majlis](#)
- [Ugender](#)
- [Save the Children India, Mumbai \(STCI\)](#)

We asked the partners five questions on addressing gender-based violence. Here are some of the key responses that were shared –

Q1: This year has brought unique and unprecedented challenges. #COVID19 also led to a shadow pandemic of gender-based violence. How do you think #COVID19 has affected #ViolenceAgainstWomen?

Majlis: The constant presence of the perpetrator made it difficult for women to reach out for help even over the phone, email, text message, etc. They had no window of opportunity (eg: dropping the child to school, going to the market) to alert someone about the violence

Breakthrough: Women found themselves unable to leave abusive households, lost long-fought freedoms and agency practically overnight. With resources focused on fighting the pandemic, many women in abusive and violence households had no way to leave.

Sayfty: according to @UN_Women, its global cost is estimated at approximately 2% of global gross domestic product (GDP), or US\$1.5 trillion. That's a a big cost we are paying!

STCI: Further, since Protection Officers under the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act were not considered essential workers during the lockdown, it prevented prompt action and reporting that further worsened the problems.

[***Read all responses here***](#)

Q2: #Day16 #COVID19 forced many people to stay with their abusers amid lockdown measures. What are your thoughts on situations that make people vulnerable to violence within the home?

Prerana: In our experience, there may be a greater vulnerability in those who belong to communities like Bedia, Banchada who practice intergenerational prostitution. They internalize violence at an earlier age, and may not be able to recognize it as a violation. #16Days #HumanRights

Ungender: Rigid gender roles within the household, therefore lack of agency, loss of jobs and/or little to no financial independence, lack of support systems can make women and children vulnerable to violence at home.

Majlis: Patriarchal and sexist views of abusers along with normative expectations of femininity and masculinity legitimize violence to ensure the dominance and superiority of men.

Breakthrough: Any situation where women lack power or are unable to talk openly about their needs, desires, fears etc is an unequal situation and contributes to creating an abusive household and makes them vulnerable to violence at home.

Sayfty: Since the outbreak of #COVID19, reports & emerging data from those on the front lines, have shown that all types of violence against women & girls, particularly domestic violence, has intensified. More needs to be done to prioritize addressing VAW

[Read all responses here](#)

Q3: We often hear people ask why the victims don't leave their abusers or situations of abuse. Do you think it is challenging to leave situations of abuse?

Prerana: In our experience in the red-light areas, the pimps often follow the women to check their whereabouts and ensure that they do not run away. They also check their phones, to keep a tab on their communication, making it hard for them to leave. #fighttrafficking

Ungender: Lack of financial independence, limited access to material resources, lack of psycho-social support from immediate family and friends, culture of 'koi nahi beta, thoda seh lo' can all make it extremely challenging to leave situations of abuse

Breakthrough: In a culture where women are shamed for even talking about domestic violence, it makes it difficult for women to openly express their desire to leave their abusers, which in many cases is their spouses or members of their spouses' families.

Majlis: Misconceptions about the law, their legal rights, time frame of a legal case, the cost of litigation & outcome of the case. Often, media highlights negative stories of women who have accessed the justice system which prevents other women from reporting as they fear the same fate.

Sayfty: There are many reasons why a victim might not be able to leave their abuser

- Lack of financial independence
- Lack of family support
- Some chose not to leave because of children
- Don't know how & where to get help from
- Social stigma & shame

Read all responses [here](#)

Q4: If a person is able to get out of the situation of violence, What are the legal & psycho-social support systems that are available to a victim of domestic violence?

Majlis: For Legal advice and assistance you can call Majlis on 022 26661252 / 2394/ +917506732641 or send an email: majlislaw@gmail.com

Breakthrough: Under the PWDVA, women can also approach a protection officer who can help with various orders like residence, compensation etc. Read more about the PWDVA and how it can help here: <https://bit.ly/2KfHrc8> #IgnoreNoMore #16Days

Sayfty: The Sayfty Survivors's Toolkit & the #MyAmbar app provides an All-India directory of legal, psycho-social support of service providers for survivors <https://t.co/T0QNF6zxMY?amp=1>

STCI: Through our anti-trafficking & enabling initiatives, we support victims of gender violence. We work with many governmental agencies to ensure legal counselling, support & legal representation for victims to prosecute their abusers.

Read all responses [here](#)

5: This has been a very insightful conversation. We end with our last question for the day - How can we do better to prevent gender-based violence?

Ungender: Imp to remember, gender-based violence happens on the internet through cyber bullying, harassment & revenge porn- all of which can happen at workplaces, esp when working from home. POSH compliance by orgs is essential to ensure we're covering one big legal ground. #16Days

Majlis: It is essential that we create awareness about gender based violence among girls and boys, women and men. Challenging attitudes of children (girls and boys) from a young age is very important

Breakthrough: Violence against women is a systemic and cultural issue. As a culture, we have accepted that violence against women is normal. This has to be broken. It can start with us refusing to ignore the next time we know someone is facing violence at home.

Sayfty: Households must

- * practice consent culture & teach it early to their children
- * stand up against toxic masculinity
- * have a zero-tolerance for violence against women & girls
- * not perpetuate gender stereotypes.
- * Hold boys accountable for their actions

Prerana: We have observed that it would help if there were organizations and legal aid clinics that would actively work on the issues of domestic violence within the red-light areas. #16Days

STCI: Unfortunately, all interventions to prevent violence against women or to empower women have largely been designed to be implemented sans the realization that its culturally & socially sanctioned privileges given to men that lead to discrimination & violence against women.

[Read all responses here](#)

The chat ended with Prerana thanking all the participants for their insights, and observations.



@INBreakthrough

ungender

@UngenderTalks



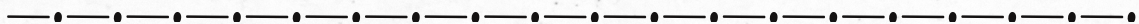
@MajlisLaw



@SayftyCom



@STCI_Mumbai



Field Team:

Madhuri Shinde, Jyoti Jangir, Priya Ahluwalia,
Aaheli Gupta, Priti Patkar, Deepali Mistry,
Mugdha Dandekar, Prachi Naik, and
Megha Gupta

Design and Campaign Lead:

Azra Qaisar

www.fighttrafficking.org

*Your trusted knowledge partner in the fight against
human trafficking*

20 
Years of ATC

December 2020

Our mailing address is:
fighttraffickingindia@gmail.com

Copyright © 2020 Prerana, All rights reserved.