



COVID-19 AND THE GROWING VULNERABILITY OF CHILDREN: A CASE STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

When the COVID-19 induced lockdown was announced in 2020, women in sex trade were pushed beyond the margins of survival. With no source of income and mounting debts, they were further trapped in exploitative circumstances at the hands of brothel keepers or their *aadmi*/pimp. Further, the lockdown also put at risk the safety of the children of these women, making them more vulnerable to the dangers of inter-generational trafficking. It aggravated the situation of the women in the red-light areas, who were already victims of various forms of violence. The constant pressure of their *aadmi*/pimp on almost all women for money added to their distress, and put them and their children into life-threatening situations. Through this document, Prerana's social worker highlights one such case wherein the woman grew helpless due to the lockdown, and how it risked the safety of her children.

The document sheds light on the role of the child protection system in ensuring her and her children's safety. It also provides an insight into the role of professional social workers in facilitating participatory and holistic discussions between the stakeholders.

BACKGROUND

Kruti¹ was brought to Mumbai from Bangalore seven years ago by a friend, under the false pretext of a job opportunity and was sold into sex trade. For the first three years, she was held in captivity in a pinjra (closed brothel/gated brothel) of Falkland Road red-light area. It is only in the last four years that she was allowed by the pimp and the brothel keeper to move unaccompanied. The pimp, who was also physically violent kept moving Kruti from one brothel to another. She once tried running away from the clutches of one pimp only to end up with another whom she thought was sympathetic towards her circumstances. She has two children, Kartik (2 years old) and Aryan (three months old).

On 7th May 2021, Prerana's Youth Volunteer ² (hereafter referred to as PYV) reached out to Prerana's staff and shared that one of her friends had overheard an argument between two women in his building. She heard that a woman had agreed to sell one of her children to clear her debts to the caretaker, with whom the child was living in the same building as the PYV's friend. Prerana's social worker immediately intervened, gathered more information about the case and approached the local police station. The social worker also informed the Child Welfare Committee (hereafter referred to as CWC) about the case on the same day. During the intervention, the social worker further learnt that Kruti (the mother) was going to sell her older child Kartik to the caretaker.*

The social worker found out from Kruti that she and her aadmi/pimp were living in the same brothel in Kamathipura. She had kept Kartik with Purvi, relative of a brothel keeper, who was living in the Falkland Road red-light area. Kruti paid her INR 250 per day to look after Kartik. The pandemic had adversely affected Kruti's income and she was unable to pay the brothel keeper and her pimp. They then started harassing her for money. She was unable to pay Purvi as well, who started threatening her that she would sell Kartik if her dues were not cleared. She also didn't have enough money to support Aryan's needs as her income had reduced to barely 20 to 30 per cent of her earnings prior to the pandemic. Under distress, desperation and lack of any form of assistance, Kruti gave in and told the lady to sell Kartik. She added that the lady could keep the amount of the dues and give the balance to her.

[1] Names have been changed for confidentiality purposes

[2] Youth who have been associated with us, and have attended our awareness sessions, who later while living in the society are able to observe if their surroundings better, and report anything that seems suspicious.

INTERVENTIONS AND REHABILITATION

After Prerana's social worker reported the incident to the CWC on 7th May, they passed an order for Prerana to conduct a Social Investigation and submit a report. The social worker, along with the police and PYV, visited Purvi's place of residence on the same day and found both Karthik and her. The social worker's intent was to ensure that the child was safe and in good health. The caretaker was hesitant to handover Kartik to the police but eventually gave in. However, Kruti could not be found immediately. The local police later found Kruti and the aadmi/pimp in the evening and brought them to the police station. The people present at the police station included the social worker from Prerana, the PYV's friend, Kartik, Kruti, Kruti's aadmi/pimp, and Aaryan. In front of the police, Kruti denied that she had told the caretaker to sell Kartik.

The social worker from Prerana introduced themselves to Kruti and made an attempt to get her to trust them. The social worker also tried to assure her that they were at the police station to help her and her children. They discussed with her about the available support systems and provided emotional support. The social worker also helped her understand the purpose behind police intervention, about the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 and the CWC. They further elaborated that the child will be produced in front of the CWC and that she can seek their help if she was not in a position to look after the child. Further, the CWC could arrange for temporary or/and long term care of the children depending upon the circumstances and the need.

At the police station, Kruti's aadmi expressed his anger. He started yelling that Kartik must be killed. Since the aadmi was creating commotion, the social worker requested the police to keep him in a separate room and the police obliged. After initial attempts of interaction, Kruti opened up and shared her distress. She narrated that she was spending roughly INR 9500 on paying monthly rent to the brothel keeper and INR 250 per day fees to Purvi. She expressed her love for both her children and explained her helplessness. She shared that she had no money and there was too much pressure on her from the brothel keeper, her aadmi and Purvi to pay them. Due to lack of awareness of the support system and the current pandemic-related distress, she finally decided to let go of one of her children. The social worker assured her that they believed her and helped her think about what she could do to keep her children safe. Further, they also explained how the social worker could assist her to achieve it.

As a first step, the social worker assisted her to think about the safety needs of her child and an immediate plan to ensure those. The social worker also encouraged her to think in the best interest of her child and discussed with her about Kartik's temporary admission in a Children's Home (hereafter referred to as CH). They assured her that she would have complete parental rights over Kartik while he would be at the CH. The social worker also explained to her the rules she would have to comply with, once Kartik is admitted into the CH. Further, they helped her understand that due to the pandemic, her physical visits to the CH will be limited but she could stay in touch with Kartik telephonically. Upon understanding the process of shelter based rehabilitation, she found the option of keeping Kartik in a CH appropriate and safe. However, she wanted to keep her younger son Aaryan with her for now as he was only three months old.

The social worker also tried to understand how else they could support her and during that interaction, Kruti confided to the social worker that whenever she and her aadmi had a fight, he would threaten to run away with Aaryan. Kruti also shared that when she is with a client, she hands over Aaryan to some other woman and if no one is available to look after Aaryan, she places him in the same room where she entertained the clients. The social worker assured her that together they could work on a safety and care plan for Aaryan as well.

Kartik was admitted in a CH at the order of the CWC after a general medical examination was conducted on 7th May 2021. Kruti didn't have any identification documents of Kartik except a photocopy of the hospital discharge slip that she had received post-delivery. Kartik's case was again presented in front of the respective CWC on 12th May, 2021 and through their order, he continued to reside in the same CH. Kruti visited him and also video-called him once. While the CWC didn't pass a follow-up order to Prerana, they passed an order for Kruti to visit Kartik once in every 15 days with Aaryan. The CWC also informed Kruti that whenever she feels that she is unable to adequately look after Aaryan, she could approach the CWC for assistance. Prerana's social worker continued to conduct follow up visits to check on Kruti and Aaryan's well-being. The social worker also planned on working with Kruti regarding a safety plan for her and her children. During one such follow-up visit, the social worker was informed that Kruti had started to keep Aaryan with another woman caretaker who claimed to not wanting to get paid for looking after him.

The social worker updated the CWC regarding these developments in a follow-up report. The CWC asked Prerana to check the credentials of this caretaker and also to assess if the child was safe and being well looked-after. Throughout follow-ups and outreach visits, the social workers provided her with psycho-social assistance, ration relief and encouraged her to take decisions in the best interest of her children. Through the interventions, Kruti also attended *mehndi* classes conducted for the mothers Prerana works with, at the Night Care Center.

There was a constant effort to help her understand parenting to ensure that she effectively communicates with her children. The social worker also ensured that Aaryan was safe with the caretaker and that Kruti had been visiting him frequently. However, one day Kruti asked the social worker if it was possible to place Aaryan in the same CH as Kartik, as she recalled the CWC informing her about it. The social worker, after understanding her concerns about mounting debts and the safety of Aaryan, approached the CWC. After interacting with Kruti, the CWC passed an order on 2nd August for Aaryan to be admitted to a CH.

Kruti seems to be financially and emotionally dependent on her aadmis. She does not have a support system and it seems that she easily succumbs to the pressure from her brothel keeper and her aadmi/pimp. The pandemic induced lockdown further pushed her beyond the safety net, making her more vulnerable to harassment and threats. Prerana's social worker is also aware of the strong trauma bonding that exist between victims and their traffickers/pimps. There are times when positive interventions may not be viewed by the victim as help. The social worker informed her that she could reach out to them if she wanted to discuss anything about the aadmi and their relationship. The social worker aimed to ensure protection of Kruti's children and enhance Kruti's ability as a parent to support and care for her children. The social worker also tried to assess and understand the impact of violence on the mother's mental health and her parenting skills. In the next two months, Prerana's social worker plans to work with Kruti on discussing parenting skills and the violence she experiences in her relationship with her aadmi and developing a safety plan for her. The social worker shall also discuss her safety, take sessions on boundary setting and assist her to acquire social security documents of herself, Kartik and Aaryan.



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