



# Red Light Despatch

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The *Red Light Despatch* is a monthly newsletter published exclusively by Apne Aap Women Worldwide. It compiles articles, testimonials, speeches and interviews by women participating in Apne Aap's Self-Empowerment Groups (SEGs) and other initiatives, as well as by staff members, volunteers, and media figures. The central objective of the RLD is to offer a space for the unique voices of our girls and women. The particular writing style has been implemented to best preserve the original tone of the speakers.

## My Dream

### *I Want to be a Movie Star*

*By Jyoti*

I am a girl who lives in the world of dreams.

I often speak to the mirror.

I love dancing.

I used to be scared of my shadow and hated living in the noisiness of the red light area.

People would fight and shout all the time.

The boys would gamble and make comments on us.

I began to keep quiet so that I did not invite a quarrel with them.

My dream is to be a movie star and through my acting express myself.

I have so much to say and share.



## Mumtaz's Fight Against Evictions

*By Moumita Raychaudhuri*

I'm Mumtaz Bibi, and since my birth, I have stayed with my sister, brother and mother at Sealdah Station. My mother was a rag picker and also begged when she had no income that day. My struggle for life started when I was eight years old. My family's economic condition was the main hurdle in my education, which I couldn't cross. One day a man brought us to Topasia and offered a room for rent in shanties beside the railway track near Park Circus Station. The place was not so crowded as it is now. Initially we faced a teasing problem in the area. The boys drank every evening and taunted and ragged the adolescent girls like us. My mother was scared of such incidences but couldn't protest, as that might throw our family from the area. So she found my early marriage to be the best solution to the problem. And at the age of 14, I

was married to a man as his second wife and became a mother of three children. In the following years, I got three children more from my husband and it became difficult for us to feed six mouths at once. To meet the financial crisis, I started ragpicking again. We all together somehow were balancing our lives. But the notification of eviction snatched our peace. Farzana Chowdhury, then Councillor of Ward 64, wanted to build a park in this place where we are now staying. They threatened to throw us out of this area if we didn't vacate the place voluntarily. We felt helpless and scared for our lives. At the time I was engaged in uniting women to sit together and discuss their problems. During one meeting, we decided unanimously that we wouldn't vacate the place voluntarily, and if the local government used force and power we would resist.

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## My Battle Against the Sex Industry

*By Fatima*

**Forbesganj, Bihar:** I'm from a de-notified tribe, formerly nomads. My father is from a cotton-beating tribe and my mother is a snake charmer. My husband is from a tribe with intergenerational prostitution – the Nat, called by the British – that used to be dancers, traders and entertainers. But nowadays the mothers groom their daughters to be prostitutes and the fathers teach their sons to be pimps. I was married at the age of nine in a home-based brothel. I'm the third wife of my husband and we have

five children together. My husband used to beat me and I tried to run away three times. I felt low and spineless.

Eventually, I met Tinku Khaana and became one of the first members of Apne Aap in Bihar. I joined Apne Aap with a dream to end sex trafficking.

During the initial meetings, I invited the household women from non-Nat communities as well as Nat community women with an intention of raising awareness about the demand for prostitutes.

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# Start with the Last Girl

*By Jennifer and Peter Buffett*

Imagine if someone gave you one billion dollars with one condition: use the money to create positive change in the world. What would you do? That's exactly what happened to us in 2006, when we received a fax that changed our lives. Peter's father, Warren Buffett, had decided to award our small foundation with a pledge valued at approximately one billion dollars with that one, simple, enormous requirement.

As we determined where to focus our giving, we were reminded of Warren's own investment philosophy: Invest in companies that are undervalued in the marketplace but which have great potential for growth.

Adolescent girls — who are profoundly undervalued but have enormous potential— clearly met this standard. Girls worldwide are less educated, less healthy and offered less opportunity than their male peers. But if given a chance, they will improve their own lives — and the lives of those around them.

We have just traveled to India to meet such undervalued girls. Through the work of our grantee partner Apne Aap and its indefatigable founder, Ruchira Gupta we saw the realities of poor adolescent girls in Kolkata and rural Bihar. These girls are

*Entering prostitution at the median age of 11, girls are thrust into lives of unspeakable violence.*

born into economic and social circumstances where their bodies become their only asset. Entering prostitution at the median age of 11, girls are thrust into lives of unspeakable violence. Their human rights are denied from an impossibly young age. As we walked the streets of Sonagatchi, one of the world's largest red light districts, we saw what happens when girls and women have so little power. They become commodities, to be bought and sold. While the girls we met shared these harsh truths, they also shared their dreams and hopes. They described their powerful desire to remain in school to become teachers, doctors, actresses, and lawyers. Behind these dreams was always a larger ambition of giving back to their communities so that the next generation can live better and safer lives. And of course, not one of them named prostitution as an

aspiration. As Fatima, a survivor of commercial sexual exploitation told us, "What is the contract for this business where girls sell their dreams?" Around the world, we've seen what happens when we invest in girls' dreams. When a girl gains the assets of education, good health and a supportive

*If invested in properly, girls can be leaders in building a world where every person has the opportunity to fulfill her highest potential.*

community *before* she reaches the crossroads of puberty, her life path changes. Her health and well-being improve. So do the prospects of her future family, if she chooses to have one. If invested in properly, girls can be leaders in building a world where every person has the opportunity to fulfill her highest potential.

This world is certainly not a world that prostitutes girls before they have had a chance to thrive, trapping them in that deeply exploitative form of violence, the world's oldest oppression.

We have learned from both Gandhiji and his famous student, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. that no violence is inevitable, and that change starts with the most marginalized. Gandhiji said, "Recall the face of the poorest and the most helpless man whom you may have seen and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he be able to gain anything by it?"

At the NoVo Foundation, we seek to follow that instruction — although in our work, we are led by the last *girl*. Others see her as a burden at best, a sex industry commodity at worst. We see her as a source of power to lead us all towards safer and more just communities and nations.

We return home with a renewed commitment to the girl effect, and we call upon our philanthropic peers in India to see that effect for themselves. Investing in girls — one of the most powerful, untapped forces on the planet — is an investment worth making.



*Jennifer and Peter Buffett and a group of other influential figures took part in Apne Aap's "Learning Tours", conceptualized by feminist activist Gloria Steinem.*

# Sewing a New Life

*By Kristin Braddock*

**Dharampura, Najafgarh:** In Dharampura we work with a community that engages in intergenerational prostitution. Girls are married and then prostituted by their husbands and parents. For a villager who typically is uneducated the job options are very limited; potential earnings through prostitution are much higher than any other option. The money doesn't go to the women but goes directly into the hands of the husbands who don't work at all. You see them playing cards and drinking throughout the day when you walk through the lanes of the community. From a young age, these girls know that this is their future. They see their mothers and sisters engaged in it, which eventually creates their "culture". There is very little room for a young, unmarried girl to object to her future. If she does then she risks being removed from not only her community but also from her family and the only life she knows. The girls witness their mothers getting ready for the night's work. This overrides encouragement for an alternative future for the next generations. To quote one girl who comes to our centre (English translation), "Why would I want to study when I know I know what my future is? When I know my mom will stop my studies?"

Apne Aap has a centre right next the community where it provides sewing and English classes daily. It is a place for the children to escape the stressful

Column:

Volunteer  
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realities of home to dance and have fun while also learning, a part of the 3L model we use to reduce sex trafficking (Legal, Learning and Livelihood). We are starting an income generation program to give income empowerment to help reduce the supply. Our vision is to have a self-empowerment group (SEG) that is already working with Apne Aap of girls at risk of prostitution to have a steady Monday to Friday job making western-style kurtas in a safe environment that will eventually be sold and marketed. This SEG group would provide a steady income that would be a sustainable alternative to prostitution.

The women will enter an agreement with Apne Aap that they will join our three-month training program where they would sign an agreement to attend each daily training session. By joining the program they have taken a stand against sex trafficking and have agreed not to join or engage in any sex work while working in our training program. Each girl will be paid a stipend during training as she is taught how to save for her future. As part of the agreement she will have to attend school, along with personal development and sewing classes. By the girls being able to bring home money to their families we hope that they will be able to stand together as a group and be bold change makers in their community. Our first training session will start in the beginning of July and we are excited to see what it holds in for the community of Dharampura.




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## The World Outside: Girl's Story from Dharampura

*By Priyanka, Sunita*

**Dharampura, Najafgarh:** Neha belongs to the Perna community. In 2004, she was six-years-old, fatherless, and furious with the world in which she was living, despite having a mother and three siblings. She did not like having three siblings. Neha has lots of dreams to fulfill. She felt so unfortunate about not getting chance to go to school. However, a very hardworking, courageous girl, she learned at home by herself.

Neha has a feeling that she needs to prove herself in the community. Then one day in 2011, she happened to enroll into the Apne Aap Women Worldwide centre in Dharampura, Najafgarh. It changed her life and it made her want to live in a better environment. So she decided to pick up the broom and clean her life – figuratively. She swept away her ig-

norance, and dived headlong into the world of knowledge, soaking up everything like a sponge. There was a lot that her mother could not tell her about; instead, it was the Apne Aap centre that satiated her curiosity. The more she is learning, the more she realizes that her community needs to lift itself out of illiteracy and subsequent poverty.

Neha is now a student in cutting and tailoring classes with Apne Aap. She is going to take the admission exam in NIOS (8th) as well. She is really a good dancer and a member of the recently begun Dharampura Bhangra team.

Neha is 14 now. She is proud of herself and has proven herself in the community. Now, Neha is a source of inspiration to all girls. She is a good motivator, and now has the ability to be the voice of her community.



# Feminist Approaches to Combating Sex Trafficking and Prostitution

*By Gloria Steinem*

*Presented are excerpts of a speech delivered at JNU on 2nd April to mark Apne Aap Women Worldwide's Tenth Anniversary. To see the full speech, please visit Apne Aap's website at [apneap.org](http://apneap.org).*

Thank you for taking out time out of your busy lives to meet together in this room. The prophets of the Internet say that its very highest purpose is to get people in a room together — or in Liberation Square in Egypt or in Occupy Wall Street — because only with all our five senses can we truly empathize with each other. Only in each other's presence do the empathy chemicals get triggered in our brains. After all, the Internet can help us with information on how to raise a baby — but it can't raise a baby.

Also just before I left New York, one of our best feminist poets died — Adrienne Rich — who said, "The connections between and among women are the most feared... and the most potentially transforming on the planet." Knowing Adrienne, she would have included the men in this room whose shared purpose makes them Honorary Women.

Since I am here to talk about a needed change, let me remind us of deep changes of the past. When I was here as a student living in Miranda House, auditing classes at the university, there were many students who had not before been in a room or discussion with members of the so-called opposite sex who were not from their own families. Tension and self-consciousness were palpable. A couple of professors said it was unnatural and possibly impossible to learn with such sexual tension in the room, that co-education might work in other cultures — but not here. Now, I think it's possible in both our countries for women and men to actually be friends, whether or not there is any sexual or romantic vibe between them. That is a huge step towards our full humanity.

When I was here, both of our countries viewed some wife beating as inevitable, even deserved, since wives were supposed to obey their husbands, and men might be justified in physically disciplining their wives. In the US we, too, had no term for domestic violence; that would be invented much later by the women's movement to name injustice and suffering. Then, it was just called life, and the question often was: What did she do to deserve it? Or at least, why did she choose him?

When I was here, both of our countries tied instances of rape and sexual assault to what a woman was wearing, or whether or not she had been a virgin, or many other questions that focused on the woman who had been raped, not on the rapist. Now

that we have studied the men who rape, we have discovered in the US that the average rapist has raped 14 times and that sexual aggression is not a normal part of all or most men, but an addiction of some men to a vision of masculinity that depends on conquering women — even if they are very young or very old. Rape is *not* an inevitable part of human nature. The compulsion to prove superiority to females may be the cause of the rape even of infants.

We are now facing a global epidemic of sex trafficking. It is enslaving mostly women and girls, but also sometimes young boys, for sexual purposes. It is even bigger than global trafficking in enslaved labor, though that stretches from agriculture fields and domestic work to building the skyscrapers of Gurgaon. Together, sex and labor trafficking now enslave a larger percentage of the earth's population — of people who are being bought and sold like objects — than the percentage during the 1800s at the peak of the slave trade. I don't have to tell you that this group that profits from sex trafficking now rivals those from the global trade in weapons or that in

*We are now facing a global epidemic of sex trafficking.*

drugs. Indeed, they are often sold by the same network. In New York, one can buy a gun, woman, or a fix from the same underground.

Women's movements around the world have been fighting the sex trafficking industry for as long as I can remember. Laws and some enforcement of laws against trafficking of children have been the most successful, though even that degree of success has been pathetic. Since the average age of entry into prostitution is between 12 and 13 in the U.S. — and is between nine and 12 here — how successful can they be? Even if they were, how could one look at an 18-year-old who has survived this dangerous life for six or so years, and say sorry, I could have offered you an alternative yesterday, but today you are on your own? What is happening globally is that females in the sex trade are being pulled in younger — partly because of a perception that they are less likely to have AIDS — or even most surrealistic of all, that sex with a virgin will cure AIDS. Also preference for sons in places like China has resulted in a skewed sex ratio in the population, and that has resulted in deception and force to bring girls and women from, say, North Korea. Indeed, this importation of women takes place from south to north within India.

*(Continued on following page)*

# Women's Empowerment Rally a Great Success

By Manish K Jha

**Araria, Bihar:** To spread awareness about and check the rising levels of crime against women, about 500 women from red light areas and Apne Aap's targeted community of Araria held a rally.

The rally was brimming with amazing energy as hundreds of demonstrators took to the streets. Women chanted slogans and unfurled banners reading "Stop Sex Trafficking" and "It is our body that needs to be given respect; the buying and selling of human bodies is a crime and we vehemently oppose the oppressive system in which the law of the land punishes the women instead of the buyers of female bodies". Male colleagues of Apne Aap Women Worldwide and eminent local representatives also attended the rally, held in the city's Araria district. They included members of all sections of society, including army personnel and both media and social activists.

Well-known feminist figure Gloria Steinem, as well as philanthropy icons Peter and Jennifer Buffett, also attended the rally on April 7.

They visited Bihar on a "learning tour" conceptualized by Steinem and funded by the NoVo Foundation, which is run by the son and daughter-in-law of Warren Buffett. The team's tour in India began on April 2 with a visit to Gandhi Smriti in Delhi fol-

lowed by trips to Kolkata and Bihar's Araria district.

Apne Aap Women Worldwide, which organized the rally, asked the government of Bihar to immediately check crimes against women, such as trafficking, prostitution, child marriage, female feticide, dowry death, eve teasing and rape.

Bibi Roshan, a member of Apne Aap's "Mahila Jagran" self-empowerment group (SEG) said this kind of mass union gives hope to marginalized women like her who live in abject poverty and wanted to move up on the societal ladder. Other members, including Bibi Jamila and Bibi Jubaida, expressed similar views.

Manish K Jha, state head of Apne Aap, said that women will have to protect themselves, while hoping that the state government will make efforts to curb gender-based violence.

The demonstrators demanded security for women from the government of Bihar, and said that if government fails to provide them adequate protection, then women will be forced to come onto the road to defend themselves.

Ruchira Gupta, founder and president of Apne Aap, informed the team about the coming together of all the marginalized women on a common platform to raise their voices. ♀

## Feminist Approaches to Combating Sex Trafficking and Prostitution *(Continued from previous page)*

I cannot emphasize enough how the importance of the realization that *prostitution is not an inevitable or natural part of human nature*. Think of the eras before when, say, rape — or even monarchy or smoking — were considered inevitable or even normal. Now, what is succeeding are efforts to penalize those who buy another human being, and also to give them the facts of the harm they are doing to others — and to themselves.

We have reached a crucial place in history. We know that prostitution is not inevitable and that it is a function of unequal power and the cult of gender that perpetuates it. Yet in my country, there are girls and women — especially women of colour and Native American women, who are tattooed with a pimp's distinguishing mark so other pimps will be warned away — sometimes a tattoo that is itself a code.

*prostitution is not an inevitable or natural part of human nature*

We have a long way to go. And we must at listen and never think there is only one or even any pre-determined solution.

One of the reasons I have faith in change is coming to know original cultures — for instance the 500 or so native tribes that were on my continent before patriarchal Europeans took over or the Kuorthe San in Africa where rape and prostitution were unknown. Indeed, their language didn't even have gender. Women and men, people and nature, were linked rather than ranked. Women controlled their own bodies and fertility. That way of life accounted for 95 percent of human history. What we think of as inevitable gender roles accounts for less than five percent.

We can go back and forward to a time when sexuality was about procreation only if we chose, and when it was also about mutual pleasure and free choice. Sex was, is and will again become an expression of human freedom and community. Sex will be its own reward. ♀

## Diary of a Social Worker

*By Anupam Das*

**Sonagachhi:** “How much do you earn a day and how much are you required to pay as a rent to the landlord?”, Peter Buffet asked a prostituted women standing in front of a door that leads to one of the typical dark rooms of Sonagachi in Kolkata.

I was leading an international group comprised of well-known personalities from the business world in addition to media and social activists. They had come all the way from the United States to understand the situation of hundreds of women being sex trafficked to Sonagachi. Sonagachi is one of the largest red light districts in Asia, the final destination for women marginalised by society who are sex trafficked and forcibly pushed to earn their living through selling their bodies. Over the years, the number of prostitutes has continued to grow; only the voices of a few leaders are ever heard, and the age of prostitutes is seeing a continual decrease. Underage girls were forced to lie about their age, institutionalizing underage exploitation. This all leads to the promotion of the sex industry, prostitution and sex trafficking.

Daily life in Sonagachi seems quite normal; it is very difficult to make out any difference as one wanders by tea and snack stalls while fruit and vegetable hawkers selling their items and ongoing negotiations contribute to the atmosphere of bustle and noise.

One can see residents busy with their daily chores and children playing on the streets. Very frequently passersby will come across music floating from a room adjacent to the lanes, bringing on a feeling of nostalgia.

In the red light district of Sonagachi, business starts at 6 p.m. There was an emphasis placed from my side that we do not interrupt the daily business. It was pointed out that this tour is “unprecedented”, as Apne Aap does not normally bring groups into the area. Concerns were expressed for the group upon entrance and their potential welcome in the area. However, it is relevant to note the importance of such exposure, because the issues here are the very ones for which we work.

At around 6 p.m. the group, comprising of Peter Buffet, Jennifer Buffet and Beckie Masaki, entered Sonagachi through Durga Charan Mitra Street. Upon seeing the cluster of foreigners, the local brokers instantly drew towards us and started asking questions about the intention of our visit. It is quite normal in Sonagachi to come across brokers and pimps standing on both the side of the lanes waiting for probable customers and also keeping an eye on everyone who moves in and out in the area. It is likely that the very illegal nature of how things function in the area has made them extra cautious about everything.

*(Continued on page 7)*

## DMT: The Benefits of Movement and Music

*By Moumita Raychaudhuri*

**Forbesganj, Bihar:** It is realized that music and movement provide patients with benefits that are often restricted by traditional forms of therapy: a new method of healing when words prove inadequate. Dance, through its playful manner, is used as an effective tool to relax and open up reserved patients, as well as trigger experiences and memories that have been buried.

*a new method of healing  
when words prove  
inadequate*

Apne Aap supports the adolescent girls of Amantran Kishori Mandal with weekly Dance Movement Therapy (DMT). This time, these girls had an opportunity to participate in a children’s party at Raj Bhavan on 29th March 2012. The theme was “environmental-related issues” with a difference: a “phoolon ki Holi”. The focus was on awareness of

environmental requirements, such as use of nature friendly colours for Holi, climate change and conservation. The girls initially were scared to perform but eventually gained confidence for the program. The rehearsal refined their performance.

On the day of performance, many other organisations came to participate. Our performance was the last in the list. We all witnessed others’ song and dance performances. And at last when we performed we made no mistakes. We enjoyed our dance and made our dance teacher proud.

At the final stage we played together with flower petals with Sri M K Narayanan, Governor of West Bengal, and were also given young plants for planting. We named the small plant “Khusi”.



### **Mumtaz's Fight Against Evictions** *(Continued from Page 1)*

But our lives were also threatened, so we decided to inform the police station. But we didn't know under which police station our area belonged. All the families together we went to the Beniapur police station that was close to our place. But the officer refused to file our complaint and told us to go to Topsia police station. Hence all of us went to Topsia police station. The officer there sent us to Karaya police station quoting the same as the Beniapur police station. Ultimately, we moved to the Karaya police station. But the police didn't file our plight. So finally we decided to fight the eviction ourselves. On the day of eviction, Farzana Chowdhury's team came with a police force and bulldozer. All the women protested together against the eviction and

the mass stood before the bulldozer and the police force. The huge gathering of people forced the entire team to move back. We all took a deep breath of relief.

For the next couple of years, the local government didn't disturb us. But a few months ago we heard again of eviction. But none of us encountered any faces of government representatives speaking about eviction. An unknown person met a few women from our locality and offered them amounts of Rs. 10,000 each to leave the place. But they didn't accept and informed other women and families living in the area. Then we heard Mamata Banerjee, CM, Bengal speaking on a news channel that no common man will be evicted from any place without substitution or rehabilitation. Since then we feel relieved that our protest has reached the government and they are taking measures in our favour. ♀

### **My Battle Against the Sex Industry** *(Continued from Page 1)*

The women from non-Nat communities had the notion that Nat women were "so-called bad" since they were involved with prostitution. I told them that the men who came to enjoy women like us (prostitutes) are local people who stayed at home. Then I challenged them as to whether they respect those men who had raped their daughters. I also explained to them that the girls or women were not at fault, but were victims. Our voice against the buyers of sex agitated the men in community; I had to run into the Apne Aap building for protection when the villagers came to beat me. The next day onwards all the women came, ready for another meeting. They wanted to stand up to their husbands when they tried to beat them.

I also helped five prostituted girls in escaping from the red light area. Among these girls, one had a child. I ensured that the girl would escape with her child, as that child might otherwise be the scapegoat

for the girl to be forced back into prostitution. The sex trafficking nexus used the children to blackmail girls and women. From these five girls, two are now leading happy married lives and other three are continuing their studies in Nepal.

Another story is that the Nat women wanted access to the government-subsidized cooking oil. They couldn't get the proper IDs because they were in prostitution, so they tried to get it without the government card. They went to the dealer in the best neighborhood in a big group. They were about 30 women. The dealer denied them saying he wouldn't give it to anyone who worked in the red light district. They surrounded him, threatening to fight him, and he gave in. Now it is even delivered to their doorsteps.

Now these women and girls are coming forward to fulfill my dream of ending sex trafficking. I would like to be an example for those girls and women who still feel low and lacking confidence. I want to offer them an alternative option for earning a livelihood and leading a dignified life. ♀

### **Diary of a Social Worker** *(Continued from previous page)*

We had the chance to talk to a few women who were actually waiting for customers, displaying their attire and chatting among themselves. Seeing us, they gave us welcoming smiles; we greeted them and started a small discussion to try to understand more about their lives, the nature of the business into which they have been forced, the hardships they face while in Sonagachi and the dreams they cherish for their future. Soma\*, on being asked about her income, said that she earns an average of Rs. 250 per client. Irrespective of whether or not she receives

clients, she has to pay an amount of Rs. 1500 as rent to the landlord every month. She faces frequent difficulty in making ends meet, especially for the cares of her child. When she becomes ill she finds she must depend on the local doctor since she is unable to get herself treated in good hospitals. She is always worried about her daughter as she grows older, as she doesn't want her to be a prostitute at any cost.

The real life compulsions left a mark in the minds of the visitors. On the return journey, they continued asking amongst themselves what can be done to stop sex trafficking. ♀

# Sitting Down with Gloria Steinem

*Presented are excerpts from a discussion between feminist activist Gloria Steinem and Apne Aap president and founder Ruchira Gupta, shortly following Steinem's experience on the six-day Learning Tour in early April.*

## **Ruchira Gupta: What brought you to India this time?**

**Gloria Steinem:** I came to India on a Learning Tour with Apne Aap, an organisation I feel close to because I've worked with them in the past. I came here to see their work twice before, three and four years ago. The Learning Tour includes 10 other people — from Peter and Jennifer Buffett, to Sarah Jones, a genius performer who can inhabit people and their stories when she performs.

I'd been to Bihar and Sonagachhi before, and I wanted to see more people and learn more — to see the reality, not academic descriptions of the reality of being prostituted, but the experiences of the women themselves. Apne Aap's approach is a woman-centred one with workable solutions because women organise themselves in small groups and support and rescue each other. Anyone who has experienced something is probably more expert in it than the experts.

## **RG: What did you learn from this trip?**

**GS:** It was very life changing. It's going to take me a while to think more deeply about it, but I would say the main thing I learned from the girls in Bihar is that the human spirit can be even stronger than everything designed to suppress it. Here are girls from a group, the Nutt community, that have been prostituted for generations, with every girl made to feel she has to sell her body to support her family, never be educated, and face beatings and physical danger if she doesn't. Despite all that, the girls in Forbesganj I talked to have their spirit intact, and with even the slightest encouragement, fight for themselves and fight for each other. The one I spent the day with wants to be a social worker, and others wanted to be lawyers because they'd seen just how unjust the system is.

Now that I have come four years later, I've seen Aap has grown to 3,000 members in Bihar. They held a rally at the demand of the members, and their chant was, "If we are not free, India is not free."

I think they're right. They know from real life what we should know from history and study, that democracy in daily life, democracy within a family, is the predictor of democracy in the rest of society. Democracy has to grow from the bottom. Like a tree, it cannot grow from the top. If you have violence in the family, violence will also seem normal in public life and even in foreign policy. These young women understand that, and an abstract concept was no longer abstract.

In Calcutta, I saw members of the Apne Aap self-empowerment groups of 10 women each — for in-

stance, Mumtaj and Fatima. Under the worst circumstances, they carry on and they make change. Mumtaj is the second wife of her husband, and he already had three children, so she treated them as her own. But he was violent toward her, and only stopped when she not only stood up to him but became a leader in their community. She is a rag-picker and they were living under the bridge and facing eviction, so she organised the other rag-pickers to oppose the eviction — and they won.

Fatima is from the Nutt community, and was trafficked into prostitution in Sonagachhi when she was only nine years old. Now she is an organiser building bridges between women who've been prostituted there and poor women outside. Both of them were not only saving themselves, but they were organising many other women to save themselves. They are people who theoretically have no power. I can't imagine that anyone could put them in a novel and be believable, you could only put them in a documentary. You have to listen to them to know how extraordinary they are. The people who are at the bottom of society are at the top in terms of courage, innovation, problem-solving, energy.

## **RG: What are your initial impressions on sex-trafficking from your Bihar-Bengal trip?**

**GS:** It's very hard to look at girls and women lined up like objects in the huge red-light area of Sonagachhi, being inspected and purchased by any passerby, with no real power to reject any customer. When I and other women looked them in the eye as human beings and smiled, said *namaste*, treated them with respect, they seemed surprised at first, but then they smiled back. I didn't think about this because it just seemed normal, but afterward, one of the men in our group commented on watching these exchanges, and on how hard it was for him to be regarded warily, always as a buyer.

The point is: you may have a right to sell your own body, but you have no right to sell the bodies of others. We *must* stop arresting the victim. In Nordic countries, they fine and educate the customer, not just to embarrass him, but to give them the facts of human trafficking for which he is part of the market. The good news is that though the trafficking lobby and a few academics tell us there are only two alternatives, legalisation or criminalisation, we now know this Third Way actually works. It's not about being moralistic and anti-sex — on the contrary. It's pro-sex and mutual pleasure. We have a T-shirt that says, *Eroticize Equality*.



*To see a full transcript of the interview, visit The Telegraph at [telegraphindia.com](http://telegraphindia.com).*



## Spending a Day with Soni and Roshni

*During the first week of April, international partners of Apne Aap Women Worldwide had an opportunity to go on “girl-led journeys” in various communities. Over the course of the day, they played icebreaker games, shared their “life lines” (where they live, how many siblings they have, what they do, times they have been happy and times when they have been sad) and then were led by the girls on a tour of their villages. After the tours, the participants reflected on what they had seen and discussed many dimensions of the girls’ lives — economic, educational, and gender-related. Soni and Roshni, who both led tours of their homes, shared some of their thoughts with the participants, who included among them, Sara Jones and Emily Brew. Below, they share what they like and dislike about each of their communities.*

**Soni** ~ Forbesgunj, Bihar

When the participants asked Roshni what is the best thing about being a girl in Forbesgunj, she said it is the fact that she can deck up and look good and fight for women’s rights.

**Likes:**

- A school is established
- A girl from her village who is her cousin becomes an engineer

**Dislikes:**

- The dowry system
- Teachers who don’t show up to school in her village
- High school is far away

**Roshni** ~ Basti Vikas Kendra, Uttari Rampur

**Likes:**

- Those people who started sending their daughters to schools
- Families who are involved in some other kind of works, like opening a small shop or driving autos etc.
- Children who go to school

**Dislikes:**

- Families who still want their wives and daughters to do prostitution
- Men who beat their wives abusively
- Alcoholics or those with some other kind of addiction
- People who don’t send their children/daughters for an education

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