Nishtha Jagaran

Site Visit
Anuradha Bulusu
December 22, 2013

Mission: Empowering women and girls through education, opportunity and self-reliance

Background

The South 24 Parganas district in West Bengal is the sixth most populous district in India. The significant majority of the villages that constitute this district sustain on agriculture as their primary source of income. With agriculture being a primarily male-dominated vocation, the women and children of these villages are economically deprived and vulnerable due to the lack of opportunities for self-empowerment and employment outside of agriculture. As with the mindset that dominates most traditional and conservative families in India, female children are treated as a burden and are barely allowed to study beyond puberty following which, they are forced to drop out of school to care for their siblings while the parents work in the fields or married away. Many times, they themselves are made to work in the farms and help the family. Child marriage is still extremely rampant in the villages despite the Sarada Act of 1929. Most marriages are performed in secret with the girl and her mother having absolutely no say in the decision. Given that most girls are treated as a burden, domestic abuse (physical, mental and sexual) is very rampant in the villages with most families accepting abuse as a way of life. West Bengal being a border state with significant trafficking of minors across the border, many girls are also sold into the sex trade by their husband and in-laws for money.

Action:

Since the seventies, Nishtha has been working with women and children in more than 300 villages in the South 24 Parganas district organizing numerous educational and empowerment programs and providing the necessary age appropriate gender equality and empowerment training.

Girls’ and boys’ groups – Balika and Balak Bahinis
Adolescent girls’ and boys’ groups – Kishori and Kishor Bahinis
Adult women’s groups – Mahila Mandalas
Education of girl children from the various villages

Support from Asha for Education

Since 2008, Asha for Education (Birmingham, DC and Atlanta chapters) have been supporting numerous programs including the cost of educating nearly 100 girls from two villages Damdama and Phingedhauri (school fees, books, uniforms, supplies), salaries of social workers who conduct the various training programs mentioned above etc.

Site Visit, December 2013

I visited Nishtha on the morning of December 22, 2013. Upon my arrival, I was greeted by Minadi, the able and courageous leader of Nishtha. Within minutes she updated me on two extremely disturbing stories of dowry related harassment death of a Nishtha girl named Bunty in October, 2013. Bunty was aged around 19 years, had passed out of Class 12 with Nishtha’s support and was a Presidential Medal Awardee for outstanding community leadership. She was secretly married off by her father as he could
not afford to take care of her. Soon after marriage, she was harassed for dowry and jewellery by her in-laws and abused for being too independent in her thinking and not conforming to traditions. Since she had two younger siblings, she did not wish to return back to her parent’s house and become a burden on her parents. Her friends also told her that abuse is common in a marriage and asked her to put up with it. Eventually, one night, barely 3 months after her wedding, she was brutally murdered by her husband and in-laws. The in-laws thought they could get away with the murder and the police too let them go citing lack of evidence. Nishtha organized a community rally and with fierce agitation by the local villagers and threat of legal action by the District Additional District Magistrate (ADM), the in-laws and husband were finally arrested and booked on murder charges. The case is currently on-going and Nishtha has promised to stay on top of things to ensure justice is delivered.

A second disturbing case was that of a 14 year old girl who was also secretly married away by her alcoholic father. This girl was motherless and was constantly abused by her husband and in-laws. Her husband also tried to pimp her and sell her into the sex trade but each time she fought off efforts and managed to save herself. Once during a visit to her father’s home, she managed to inform some friends of her abuse who then informed Nishtha about her situation. The women of Nishtha’s Mahila Mandal went to the husband and warned him of dire consequences of abusing her. Enraged by her defiance of his wishes, the husband one night suffocated her to death in her sleep.

The above two incidents highlight the significant challenges that lie ahead in the quest to empower the girls and women of rural India. It is evident that while educating girls is a significant step forward, the significant majority of the deaths appear to happen in cases where the abused girls are unable to escape their current situation due to a lack of financial freedom. The girls, despite being educated to class 12 are unable to gain any employment and are living under the financial support of either their father (who considers them a burden) or their husband who considers them as an object.

**Visit to Damdama Village**

We left Nishtha to visit Damdama village which is about an hour’s drive through a dirt road from Baruipur. Here, I was met with the girls of the Kishori Bahini group and the women of the Mahila Mandal group. Most of the girls who are members of the Kishori bahini group are children of the women of the Mahila Mandal group highlighting the fact that an empowered woman raises empowered daughters. The girls greeted me with rousing enthusiasm with chants and slogans of girl empowerment. The atmosphere was nothing short of electrifying!! I recognized many of the girls and the youth leaders from my previous visit in December 2011 and was heartened to see them here two years later still pursuing their education and participating with Nishtha. The older girls are now in classes 11 and 12 (about 26 girls) while a significant number of girls are in classes 6 – 10. About ten years ago, this situation would not have existed as most girls would have been married off by the time they reached puberty. It is a testament to the work being done by Nishtha by counseling both the mothers (through the Mahila Mandal program) and the fathers that the girls are being allowed to study until class 12. I was amazed at the number of girls who stood up to speak fearlessly in front of their peers to tell me about how their lives have changed now that they don’t have to constantly worry about being married off by age 12 or 13. All these girls attend the local government school where the quality of education is sketchy at best. Despite that, many of the girls spoke good English and communicated to me how much they look forward to seeing me again. It was truly an emotionally gratifying experience.
I met with the mothers of the girls (the women of the Mahila Mandal program). These women performed a skit highlighting the evils of dowry harassment and domestic violence and promote the message of how women must collectively work to eradicate dowry harassment of their daughter-in-laws by raising their sons to respect women. The mothers expressed to me that now that many of the girls
are in class 11-12, their greatest wish is to see their daughters get jobs where they can sustain themselves financially so they are not dependent on their husbands like they currently are. I told the mothers that it would be a challenge to find vocational training programs or jobs for the girls in Baruipur and that they may need to be sent to Kolkata (about 2 hours away) for any such endeavors. The mothers acknowledged the challenge and agreed to send their daughters to Kolkata if we could house them safely and under the guardian of an older woman as a chaperon.

The women of Mahila Mandal perform skits to promote the message on the ills of domestic violence and dowry harassment

Next Steps

The immediate next steps upon discussion with Minadi is to

(1) Provide additional after school support to the children of classes V-XII. These girls study in the local government school where the quality of education is rudimentary. As such, these kids will not be able to compete with the quality of education provided in private schools.

(2) Provide vocational training program for the girls who pass out of class 12. Minadi is currently looking to provide the class 11 and 12 girls with English and computer skills. In addition to these programs, additional vocational training in the form of nurses training, cashier, receptionist, beautician training etc that could help the girls get jobs will be most useful.

Asha Atlanta needs to focus its efforts on ensuring support to Nishtha in the form of financial support to provide after school coaching for grades V-XII. Moreover, we will need to talk to other NGOs and pursue avenues in the South Kolkata region to provide vocational training for the older girls. The need of the hour is ensuring financial independence for the girls without which dowry harassment and abuse will continue unabated and we would have failed in our mission of empowering the girls of Nishtha.

Thank you for your attention.

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