

## Site Visit Report to Nishtha - December 16, 2011

I arrived at Nishtha around 10AM on the morning of December 16, 2011 and met with Ms. Mina Das, Secretary of Nishtha. After a brief discussion about Nishtha and its history, Mina Das or Minadi as she is fondly known and I set out to visit the Asha sponsored night shelter for the children of sex workers. The shelter houses roughly 32 children born to the sex workers of the surrounding brothels. Following my visit to the shelter, I also visited two of the neighboring brothels to get an idea of the conditions that the mothers live in. An average brothel consists of a courtyard enclosed by tiny rooms all along its perimeter. Each sex worker lives in a room roughly 6 ft x 6 ft consisting of a bed, a prayer altar and a small nook for cooking. What struck me was that the only piece of furniture in the room often was the bed, raised on stones, to keep it from getting flooded during the lengthy monsoon season.

Prior to the establishment of the night shelter, the children lived with their mothers in these windowless rooms often sleeping under the bed while the activities of the brothel flourished until the wee hours of the morning. Most sex workers are addicted to alcohol as part of the entertainment they provide involves drinking alcohol, often forcedly, by their many clients. The children grew up amidst the crime, poverty and squalor of the brothels, without any opportunity for basic education or any understanding of health and hygiene. The children were usually malnourished with many of them frequently abused, physically and sexually by the clients. In general, children of the brothels do not have any opportunity to escape their environment and even when presented with one, are unable to cope as they lack the basic skills to adapt. Most children are exposed to crime, alcohol and drugs at a very early age and the significant majority of the male children grow up to lead a life of crime. The stigma of growing up in a brothel prevents the female children from being accepted in society and almost 100% of them are either sold by their mothers to wealthy clients or are raped and forced into prostitution.

Nishtha first started the night shelter for the children of these sex workers approximately 10 years ago with support from local donors. After running for three years, the shelter was near closure due to lack of funds when Asha for Education, Atlanta Chapter stepped in to support it from September 2006. The night shelter, in addition to being a safe haven, provides emotional and nutritional support, clothing and recreation in the form of games and story-recitals to roughly 32 children in age group of 2.5 to 14 years. Some of the children after extensive training have been accepted to local schools through strong negotiations by the staff of Nishtha. The night shelter also provides non-formal teaching support to the children with their home work.

The children come to the shelter in the evening and stay till the morning thus escaping from the brothel during the hours when their mothers are working. In the morning, the children attend cleanliness class followed by Morning Prayer, before leaving for their schools. The children briefly visit their mothers after school at a time when the mothers are usually sober, getting ready with their make up as they prepare for the evening ahead. Upon returning to the shelter, the children work on their homework with help from Nishtha's staff from 5pm to 8pm. The creative classes take place from 8pm to 9pm followed by dinner and prayer before bedtime. The night shelter remains open seven days of the week and a former sex worker acts as an outreach staff to ensure no child misses their attendance to the shelter owing to playing, watching TV in the neighborhood etc as any child left unprotected immediately becomes a prey to the neighborhood pimps and clients visiting the brothels.

When we arrived at the shelter, most of the older children had left for their schools. Outside the shelter a math class was in session for a number of kids. I noticed that the age group of these children ranged from 4-5 years to roughly 10 years. Upon enquiring, I was informed by Minadi that these children were lagging far behind the curve, making it very difficult for them to be absorbed into formal schools. This was the case for many of the older kids who are either children of transient sex workers in the area or had trouble staying in school due to their background, causing them to drop out. For such kids, Nishtha runs classes at the shelter teaching them math and science to give them some structure and training. For the younger kids who don't go to school, creative classes such as singing, reciting rhymes etc are conducted by the staff of Nishtha to keep them engaged during the day. I got to meet these younger kids and they performed a number of rhymes for my benefit.



Some of the children of the Asha-Nishtha night shelter. The beds where the kids sleep can be seen in the background



While I was at the shelter, I got to meet with Rinki, who attends formal school as an 8<sup>th</sup> grader. Her mother is a sex worker who abandoned her as a child. Rinki was raised by other sex workers in the neighboring brothel and has lived at the shelter since its inception. Now that Rinki has grown into an attractive young girl, her mother has decided to come back into her life and from what we learned, has sold her to a wealthy client of hers. At present another sex worker whose daughter Loki is attending college (thanks to Asha SAC) has taken Rinki under her wing and is negotiating with Rinki's mother to keep her from taking Rinki away. I visited the brothel where Loki's mother works and was assured by her and other workers that they would do their level best to keep Rinki from being delivered to the client who bought her.

Nishtha relies heavily on support from the local sex workers to work for their cause. The sex workers form an integral part Nishtha's network, encouraging women in other brothels to send their children to the night shelter and to formal school. Many of the mothers realize that education is the key to breaking this vicious cycle and provide part of their earnings towards the education of their children. Nishtha also works actively with the local brothel owners and pimps to encourage them to prevent child trafficking. They also educate them on the need to treat the sex workers humanely and fairly and conduct regular medical checkups through a local doctor. I met with Monida one such brothel owner who works closely with Minadi to resolve any disputes with other brothel owners and pimps. He is also actively engaged in negotiating with Rinki's mother to keep her from trafficking Rinki. While, I will be keeping track of Rinki through Mina Di, what will become of Rinki's future is only to be seen.

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