

A safety net for the socially excluded grown up children of Night Shelter

OUR ORGANIZATION

NISHTHA, a community- based women's organization was born in the mid-seventies with the aim to empower women and girls through awareness building on rights and strengthening them to demand for their rights. It was founded in 1974 by Smt. Preetilata Das. She saw her village go through a social holocaust. That very year, four young housewives committed suicide, six newly wedded girls were thrown out of their homes by their in-laws, and many little girls were married who were leading a distressing life. She realized that she must do something to change the desperate plight of women in her village and so she started a small women's centre. Primarily, the activities of the centre were limited to charity work for the women and offer a kind ear who could share their untold miseries. At the women's centre they could at least give voice to their innermost pain. Over the period, NISHTHA's leadership passed to Ms. Mina Das and a group of young associates. The younger leaders stressed a change in focus from social services to an approach aimed at social change and women taking control of their lives.

Nishtha currently works in more than 300 villages in 5 Development Blocks in the District of South 24 Parganas. The programmes of Nishtha are the reflection of continuous self-analysis & subsequent proactive revisions that made the organisation a participatory resource centre for community women, youths and elderly women.

VISION: Nishtha's vision is of a world free from discriminations, illiteracy, child labour, violence and war.

GOAL: Nishtha strives for ushering in a brave new world that would deny all discriminations on the bases of sex, class, caste, creed, religion or colour; where woman and man would have equal rights, equal opportunities and equal dignity.

MISSION: Nishtha's mission is empowerment of women to fight for equal opportunities, equal rights and equal dignity.

NISHTHA believes in collective leadership and practises for transparent endorsement of its policy and actions. Thus, Nishtha's most important work has been women group formation and building leadership among women. These groups are formed to ensure making the children gender sensitive from their early childhood and bring forward the women into leadership. NISHTHA has cohesive groups of different ages to bring about an all-pervasive change in the society in so far as attitude towards women is concerned. NISHTHA works with four tier pyramid structure of girls and women groups, namely Balak-Balika Bahini, Kishore-Kishori Bahini, Mahila Mandals and Baritha Mahala Dal.

Nishtha addresses different worst areas of sufferings of the women and girl children and provides support to other areas of development. The activities of Nishtha are designed in such a way so that the leadership of the women emerges and their leadership is accepted in the community. The major spheres of activities are mainly centred around education for girls,

intervention to stop child trafficking, health and nutritional support, drinking water and sanitation programme under women's leadership, youth and Reproductive Health and Reproductive Health Rights of women, Day Boarding for vulnerable girl child labourers, Night Shelter for children of sex workers, creating livelihood scope for women, Campaign and advocacy against domestic violence, child marriage, atrocities against women and girls, promote and protect human rights of girl children, free legal aid, etc. Nishtha also conducts training of different types including leadership and life skill development, vocational training on different trades, Communication, Group Formation and Management, Volunteer Mobilization, etc.

So, Nishtha's endeavours are service based, right-based, community-based and advocate policies also. Entire endeavours can be grouped thus;

- *Group formation & Leadership building*
- *Awareness generation to create public opinion*
- *Capacity Building & Training of leaders and group members*
- *Girls' Education*
- *Prevention of Child Marriage*
- *Trafficking prevention*
- *Awareness & service on Reproductive Health to youth*
- *Livelihood and income generation for women*
- *Advocacy and campaign for ensuring Women Rights*
- *Formation of male pressure groups, male sensitization, sensitization of stakeholders for eradication of gender discrimination, gender-based violence and injustice against women & girls and their rehabilitation*
- *Protect and promote Biodiversity and ensuring rights of women farmers through practice of organic farming*
- *Free legal aid to survivors'*
- *Day care for Special Children (having special needs)*
- *Safe Shelter for the children of Sex Workers*

Nishtha has been honoured with:

- *Ashoka Fellowship 1995 for promotion of groups of adolescents and women for their empowerment.*
- *Apeejay India Volunteer Award 2011 for extraordinary work in promoting volunteer work with over 4000 volunteer bases.*
- *Vivekananda Medal 2014 from The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture for extraordinary self-less work for the community.*
- *Best NGO in West Bengal for adolescent empowerment 2016 from CINI.*
- *Champion of Youth award received from EMpower, USA in the year 2017.*

BACKGROUND

It has been noticed that the children belonging to the commercial sex workers are often treated as untouchables by the normal families residing in the neighbourhood of a red light area. Normal families think it bad-omen to see the face of the children of the sex workers in the morning; hence if they are seen on the roads in the morning, people start misbehaving with them and forbade them to come in the roads in the morning. In one word they consider these children as street dogs.

In such a situation these children, having no other option, restrict themselves to their infamous lanes. It is here where they learn anti-social things and get addicted to intoxications. The boys are the ones who later become an offender, getting involved with criminal activities.

Very often these children get sexually abused and sometimes it crosses the limit and they need to be hospitalized. There are many children who couldn't resist such things and fled away from the place. Hardly those children could be traced any more.

Even in schools they face humiliation. No one treats them like normal children. Normal children neither allow these children to sit on the same bench, share the tiffin, play or share their notes.

The COVID-19 pandemic stranded many sex workers in cities, towns and districts, especially those working in 'Baruipur Puratan Bazaar Red Light Area'. They were refused rations and any relief since most of them did not have ration cards. Once their savings ran out, women were asked to vacate their rented rooms amidst the nationwide lockdowns. Women reported attempting to resort to desperate measures to return to their home but these sex-workers live in a world within a world and once a woman gets into this profession it is never easy for her to go back to her normal life.

The lockdown has escalated the risk of poverty and ill health for the sex workers, as there are no clients in the market. Moreover the clients with whom they deal with everyday are also those who absolutely collapsed soon after the lockdown was imposed due to the surging

Covid-19 pandemic. These clients include, rickshaw walas, van pullers, hawkers, and other people belonging to meagre income group category. The commercial sex workers we are talking about hardly generate income around 30 to 40 rupees per client. Therefore we can easily understand how difficult times they must be going through during this difficult time.

We often tried our best to provide them with some alternative livelihood opportunity but it was never easy. Once if somehow their identity is disclosed, nobody wants to take anything with their hands, see their face, or get in touch by any means. Moreover, most of them are addicted to some or the other bad things and therefore it becomes harder for them to live straight in the normal society. The most important of all is that their children are also neglected. When their mothers are busy with their clients, these children are forced to move out of their houses and then they are found roaming here and there in the roads, get addicted to alcohol or mix up with antisocial elements.

To stop these children from getting exploited for such wrong affairs, we introduced a Night Shelter in the red light area where they can stay for the entire day. Presently there are 40 children. This Safe Shelter also includes a crèche for the 6 infants. Once the children are beyond 14 years of age, we send them to government homes or residential schools. We continued doing the same thing this year too. Doing so is extremely important since they desperately require protection since these children don't even get their mothers to look after.

PROBLEMS FACED BY THE CHILDREN OF THESE SEX-WORKERS

The abuse, violence, hardships and inhuman treatment sex workers forced into the trade face, cause irreparable damage to their psyche. They are so broken and scarred that it takes years of counselling to come to terms with the trauma. They are stripped of their dignity, identity and endure a lifelong punishment for no fault of theirs. They are the untouchables and invisibles of our society.

Sex workers and their children, born into brothels, endure horrible living conditions, and lack nutritious food and basic medical needs. Each night the children are pushed onto the streets when their mothers work. They are extremely vulnerable and susceptible to abuse and violence themselves.

Most children of sex workers are denied an education because those controlling the trade believe this will hinder the sex trade in future. These children also have a stigma attached to them that makes breaking away from the profession very difficult. They have little identity besides being 'a sex worker's child' and their entire life is spent battling against it with neither hope nor a future. Most often they have no option but to "join this line of work" and live the same way.

Children born and brought up in red light districts are more often subjected to abuse within their "homes" and are ostracized in social spaces. The environment of the red-light district is not conducive to the well-being of a child. This was due to a plethora of reasons which ranged from the lack of space for children to issues of substance abuse. Due to the lack of space, it was recorded that they often slept in cramped terraces or makeshift spaces which are

covered with plastic sheets. The problem of drug and substance abuse is rampant too, with about a huge percentage of the boys having admitted to consuming addictive substances such as *gutka*, cigarettes and alcohol.

Due to the nature of the trade, girl children are particularly vulnerable. The focus group discussions revealed that mothers felt helpless when a client touched, molested or teased their daughters verbally.

Due to their early exposure to sex, children often use their own sexuality to gain attention from others, which increases their vulnerability to sexual exploitation. Children of Commercial Sex Workers (CSWs) are the victims of social discrimination, like their mothers, and suffer from inferiority complex, social alienation and lead a poor quality of life. Children of commercial sex workers are often deprived of education as educational institutions require the biological father's name for enrolment. Female children are groomed for the same profession while male children often perform casual work. Oftentimes, these children are overlooked and little effort is made to integrate them into the mainstream of society through education and meeting basic needs.

As per the Right to Education Act 2012, 25% of seats at school should be reserved for socially disadvantaged children. However, it is very difficult to determine whether the aspiration of this act is fulfilled in reality. The issue requires an in-depth investigation of the situation and corrective measures should be taken accordingly.

Regarding the education of the children of CSWs, the issue of securing admission in a school is very complicated. Some of them do not have birth certificates as the mother did not obtain one from the Corporation Office. Also, for admission to schools, the father's name and signature is a prerequisite. Most of the children do not know their fathers. Normally no CSW customer is willing to allow using their name for a child's admission in the school. Some of the CSWs prefer to conceal their profession because of social stigma. Because of the said reasons, most of the children of CSWs remain out of school.

Even the children who are able to get admission in the school use the name of somebody else as a father figure. In general, the children of CSWs experience a lack of support for going to school. Some of them are unable to pay tuition fees to the schools and some experience discrimination by the school. Lack of space during evening hours, when the mother remains busy in running her profession, is demotivating for the children as they may not be able to complete the homework and respond in class when the teacher asks a question, resulting in humiliation before other children in the class. Finally, these children become school dropouts after a few years.

NISHTHA NIGHT SHELTER – A SAFE HAVEN FOR THE CHILDREN

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It has been 10 years and today, the Night Shelter has grown into more than a drop-off shelter. Now occupying the entire building, it's a home for the kids, from 3 months infants living in a crèche to roughly 14-year-olds living in the safe homes. They can get help with their schoolwork and some basic health care as well as food and clothing.

Nishtha has not only engaged these children in formal education by getting them admitted in some prominent government schools but here in the Night Shelter our caregivers and teachers have played a very important role in monitoring the children and providing them guidance for study during evening hours. They have developed a schedule in discussion with the children for the whole day and insisted all the children follow it. Seeing them now even the teachers confess that these children don't seem to have come from such a background. These children have now given up evil practices, shunned using filthy languages and are putting efforts to study very hard to secure good results. They have not just improved their behaviour but also their way of wearing clothes, and making themselves presentable just like any other normal child. Coaching on social skills helped the children of CSWs to maintain proper social behaviour in schools and become well-adjusted with peers while cultural activities, as well as games and sports, had given them a sense of social acceptance since the children from the larger society participated with them.

INCREDIBLE ACHIEVEMENTS

Two girls who were part of our Night Shelter have completed their graduation and are presently working in one of the Government Organizations and getting a handsome salary. The best thing is both these girls are living a dignified life. Nishtha regards this as the most significant and remarkable achievement ever.

Apart from this we now have children who are studying in 8th, 9th, 10th, etc. hopefully these children will also complete their secondary examinations successfully and make themselves a way for a successful career.

We have seen an enormous strength in the mothers of these children. These mothers have rescued 9 minor girls who were forced into sex works by some men involved in sex trade and trafficking. Doing so in such a profession requires a brave heart but these mothers have shown their fearlessness and have taken an oath they will die but won't allow any girl to get into this profession forcefully. The courage that these mothers have shown is immeasurable and beyond the word of praise. How often we have seen any one going against their own law getting murdered but these mothers did not fear about their own lives and rescued those innocent lives. They contacted Nishtha and we immediately took the help of the Police and local administration to send them to the government home safely.

In spite of these progress we never consider this place to be a protected one for the children. Until these children are inside the premises of our Night Shelter, we can provide them with security, love, care, education, etc.; but soon when they go back to their mothers, they are absolutely unprotected and go out of our control. Though the fear now is less in comparison to before but still the tension remains with the grown up children of above 13 years; especially when it comes to the girl children. Hence every year we admit children 3 to 4 children belonging to this age group to paid hostels or government homes or residential schools as here they could get what they actually deserve.

Last year we provided admission to 4 such children. The cost borne per child was around 30000 per year which included onetime cost of INR 1000 during the admission, INR 1500 for educational materials, bedding charge of INR 1500 and a few other charges for their uniforms, hygiene kits, etc. Beside this there was also a monthly hostel charges of INR 2000.

Living here in the hostels, the children get the opportunity to go to Govt. schools, where they are provided with good education. Moreover; this is a peaceful and protected place to live in. Even the mothers' of these children get the safe atmosphere to meet their children as they are highly prone to become a victim of abuse or violence by any means. Apart from this, these hostels are much liked by us because of some other features too; here the girls get tutors who take care of their studies, behavioural development, etc. so that they can cope up with the other normal children without any hesitation. We also get their weekly performance results and are also able to ask if they have any problem whatsoever residing in the hostel. They are asked if their identifications have been disclosed, or whether they have been victim to any other problems like ragging, etc.

OUTCOME:

- *Unknown or outsiders are not allowed inside the hostel which cuts-off the chance for them being trafficked*
- *Their identification is kept secret*
- *Free from ragging and other such problems*
- *Get quite healthy and hygienic food*

- *Provide admission in formal govt. schools*
- *Get opportunity to live and mix-up with the normal kids and are never kept excluded because of their background*
- *The tutor teach them along with the normal children*
- *Are allowed to play and rejoice with every children normally*
- *Allow Nishtha to do follow-ups on weekly basis*
- *The very best part that they get here is to grow up in a normal atmosphere and do everything like normal children which allows them to learn normal behaviours and seek education normally that allows them to make a way to reach towards a better future*

Name of Organization : NISHTHA		
Name of Project : Hostel Support for the growing up Children of Night Shelter		
Budget for the Period : 1st April 2021 to 31st March 2022		
S.L	Particulars	Budget Amount
1	Programme Cost	
1.1	Hostel Charges	
	(Rs.2000 x 01 Girls x 12 Months)	24000.00
1.2	Educational Materials	10000.00
	(Rs.2000 X 05 Girls X 1 time)	
1.3	Uniform for 05 Girls	5000.00
	(Rs.500 x 05 Girls x 02 sets)	
1.4	Shoe for 05 Girls	1500.00
	(Rs.300 x 05 Girls x 01 time)	
1.5	Provide Hygiene kit to 05 Girls (Toothpaste,Soap,Napkin,Hair oil,Surf etc.)	5000.00
1.6	Bedding,Mosquito Net,Utensils etc.	7500.00
	(Rs.1500 x 05 Girls x 1 time)	
1.7	Tiffin for 01 Girl	
	Rs.200 x 06 Months (October to March 2022)	1200.00
	GRAND TOTAL	53000.00