

REPORT ON VISIT TO SHELTER FOR CHILDREN OF SEX WORKERS

AT NISTHA ON DECEMBER 29, 2008

On December 29, 2008 Monimalika Day visited Nistha along with some of her family members. We first stopped at the main center in Baruipur. We met with the secretary Ms, Mina Das and one of the social workers Ms. Mimi Das, they provided a brief overview of Nistha's current efforts and major issues encountered by the organization. We were offered tea, local sweets and fruits. Then we visited the drop –in center and one of the villages.

Key issues mentioned in the conversation:

Visit to the drop-in-center

We arrived at the drop in center for children of sex workers at about noon. About 16 children were present at the center, ranging in age from toddlers to teenagers. Some of them proudly displayed their drawings that were put up on the wall. The children performed songs, dances, and recitations. About 10 mothers were present during our visit. I was impressed to see the mothers participate in the songs and recitations. Many of them urged the children to perform and made specific requests for songs or poems. This was really noteworthy as I did observe such participation during my previous visit. Also , this suggests that many of the mothers are now taking an interest in the children's learning and are aware of some parts of their curriculum.

Afterwards we sat outside the center and had a conversation with the mothers. I recognized many of them from my previous visit in 2007. One of the mothers holding a little infant in her arm talked about how she entered the profession. She said her parents were well off and she completed 9th grade education after which she got married. Her parents gave her a good dowry but her husband squandered most of what was given and finally brought her to the brothels of Puratan Bazaar in Baruipur. He now works as her "Babu" (pimp). She has four children including the baby in her arm. The baby has a cleft palate and has difficulty feeding. A surgery is needed to rectify the problem but she does not have the means to follow through.

I asked how many women have been to school and five of them raised their hands. Two among them had attended high school.

The mothers emphasized the importance of extending the hours of the drop in center to cover the daytime hours. They especially talked about drug dealings etc that happen during the afternoon. They expressed concern that the money from ASHA had not arrived and were worried that the program may be discontinued. However, this issue was resolved in the next few weeks as ASHA arranged to reissue the drafts and Nistha received the money around January 15, 2009.

We were also told that the women earn Rs70-Rs 100 per day from their clients. However, from this money they must pay the “mashi” (madam), the “babu” (pimp) and the police. As a result, they have Rs. 20-Rs. 30 left for themselves. Asked about HIV and AIDS they said they were aware of these diseases and try to use condoms. CINI (The Child In Need Institute) has a clinic right next to the night shelter. The community workers of CINI discuss womens’ health issues with the sex workers. We met to the community workers during this visit.

The building of the center is not in good condition, especially the roof needs to be renovated. In addition, the existing area used as a toilet is in very poor condition and it is best to construct a toilet for the center. Food is cooked in a passage and it is difficult to maintain hygienic conditions in this narrow area.

In general, Nistha is currently working in 170 villages in 4 blocks including Baruipur, Mograhat and Bishnupur in the South 24 Paraganas. Current work force:

Total staff -170

Total volunteers-150

I conveyed to Ms. Mina Das that ASHA and AID were confused about the allocation of funds. She explained the distribution of funds and has since forwarded a budget clearly identifying the funding source for each activity.

Next, we visited a village nearby about 10km from the drop in center. Approximately 70-80 children had gathered here. The children were members of the Kishore Kishori Bahini and the Balak Balika Bahini. We watched a debate on the legal age of marriage. Currently, the legal age for marriage of girls is 18 and for boys it is 21 years. We were told the government is considering lowering the ages to 16 and 18 respectively. The children were very articulate and rational in their approach, they carefully provided evidence to support their cause. Following the debate they debriefed and critiqued each other. I asked for a show of hands on how many children were in each grade. The number became fewer as I called out the higher grades. The drop out rate for girls is 72% in this region.

Also, a group of elderly women visited us. They had made various kinds of “pithe” special sweets that are made during the winter months. They talked about their plight and some of them said they have no one to care for them. Two of the women were in tears as they spoke. They asked us to provide support and repeatedly requested us to visit again.