

Asha for Education

Site visit report: Prerana, 7th Lane, Kamathipura Municipal School, Shuklaji Street
Kamathipura
Mumbai - 400 008

By: Ashok Naidu – Asha – SV chapter
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Objective:

The site visit was conducted at the behest of Asha for Education, UC chapter to independently verify and validate the nature of Prerana's work, geographic reach and long term effects in the targeted areas of influence.

Prerna:

Prerna has been working in the core red-light area of Kamatipura, Mumbai since 1986. Currently Prerna has two main functions: service delivery and policy advocacy.

The core services Prerna provides are:

- Provide children of sex-workers with an opportunity to have Education, primary health care, nutrition, vocational training, recreation, health/ mental counseling.
- Prevent second generation trafficking of children of sex-workers in red-light districts of Mumbai.
- Implement Prevention campaigns, evangelizing AIDS education & health policy definitions at the state and local level to help children away from flesh trade in the future.
- Enable draft legislation & policy to enfranchise & allocate public funding to the victims of sex trade & their dependents. The activities being taken are in the field of legal reform, awareness raising, rescue and rehabilitation as well as health.

Infrastructure & delivery model:

- Prerna has 3 shelter homes: in Kamatipura, Falkland Road and Turbhe-Vashi (Navi Mumbai) and one resource center in Bandra. These are night care shelters, with recreation, food, bath, basic and special education facility in nearby schools.
- Other facilities include a weekly doc visit, councilors, lawyers and social workers.

Problem statement:

Trafficking of girls and women appears to have become a thriving industry in India. However, hard data is unavailable to the actual numbers involved in sex work or being trafficked across

borders. The Indian Association for the Rescue of Fallen Women estimated in 1992 that there are 8 million brothel workers in India and another 7.5 million call girls.

The lack of effective implementation of laws and policies aimed at ending trafficking is reflected in the low conviction rates for perpetrators of crimes of violence against women.

In this context, it is important to differentiate between trafficking and prostitution. Trafficking of people across boundaries is for a variety of purposes and not only for prostitution. The victims of both forms of denigration end up in Kamathipura amongst other locations, as dregs of society. The children born to these women are left unaccounted for by social systems, economic demographics or legal entities since they are neither documented at birth or provided for at any level. For all practical purposes these children don't exist.

The notion of Government protection is problematic when it comes to the practice of "protective custody". In Mumbai, when women victims of trafficking are rescued they are often sent to a government home for protective custody until their cases are heard or until they are sent back home. In many cases they languish for many years in these homes, forgotten by everyone. Protective custody is only marginally better than being in prison. Thus the sewers of society are cleaned up from one's backyard to another without really enabling or empowering the afflicted.

Not being a full member of society in legal terms prevents these female heads of household from being able to support their family. Having a roof over one's head in the formal sector may not be available or affordable and the family may be exposed to the vagaries of the informal housing sector. By disenfranchising the women for the provision of services, the Governments place women directly at risk of violence. Making access to education and health care more difficult by increasing prices, cutting subsidies, reducing personnel and closing facilities has direct effects on the health and well-being of women and girls. Where such unskilled women have to seek a job, they are most likely to end up working in the sex trade where they are very likely to be exposed to violence.

Extreme poverty encompasses lack of basic security and capability deprivation over prolonged periods of time. Kamatipura has an explosive mix of:

- income poverty,
- human development poverty and
- Social exclusion.

Kamatipura:

Kamatipura is located in the heart of Mumbai. To get to it, you hire a taxi from Churchgate station or Victoria Terminus & it would take you there in about 15- 20 minutes. Set up long ago by the British for their troops, it was their official "comfort zone". After the British left, the Indian sex worker took over. Kamatipura is bursting at the seams with people and garbage. Every inch of space is occupied; brothels exist in nooks and crannies. With a lack of institutional recognition or support the sex workers have to freelance and fend for themselves & one would not need to strain to see their presence dotting every street corner.

The locality is seemingly calm with shops & shacks spilling over onto one way streets & women competing with hawkers for street space to ply their wares. A communal mix of Hindus and

Muslims occupy the area in cramped quarters of shacks piled on top of each other making up quasi-floors & rickety stair cases that lead unto family living quarters that double up as brothels in the evenings/night. There is no sign of fright, flight or despair in the community – just the acceptance of a way of life predestined by one's birth & circumstance and going about life as usual. A public call office is situated right outside the Municipal school from where I call Ms. Preeti for starting the visit.

Visit scheduling & contact:

I scheduled the visit with Ms. Preeti Patkar who is the director of the project. We decided to meet up at the Kamathipura center which is the oldest running center by Prerana and whose proximity to the city center is convenient for a visit.

Facilities:

The project is located in the premises of the Kamatipura Municipal School that Prerana rents out. One half wing of the ground floor is occupied by children whom Prerana serves. The building is owned by the Government of Maharashtra. It has multiple iron sliding gates at various levels of entry & had a groundskeeper/security man living in a room at the entrance to the building. There were a couple of restrooms in each wing of the building with water, power & separate ones for boys & girls. The restrooms were clean & well kept.

The walls of the building were weather beaten with typical Mumbai rains – without any fancy school colors, the floors were clean & the playful shouts of the boys filled the air. Children were slowly trickling in, as school started at 5:45 pm. Some of the younger ones were escorted by their mothers while the older ones came by themselves. It was serene and pleasant in the evening around 5.20 pm as I entered the building and saw a bunch of kids playing cricket in the quadrangle of the school building. They ranged in age from 7 – 15 years, mostly boys. I was subsequently informed that Prerana also had indoor toys and tools for children to play with when it rained.

There was no playground along the lines of a classical foot ball field. One must remember, you are in the heart of one of the densest population of the world & that too a high risk community to top that; hence typical child rearing metrics need to be redefined for this environment.

I met up with Ms. Preeti in the evening at 5.30 pm who promptly invited me to the office which doubled up as the teacher's room. A 10x20 foot room with desks & space for teachers to keep their personal belongings and teaching material. A working computer was snuck in the corner – towards a window, which I presumed was for cooling/ ventilation purposes.

Staff:

The management team comprises of 7 trustees (none of whom is a noted celebrity), 7 project managers & 7 program managers. Each of the project managers manages the operational details

of a campus. The Kamathipura project is run by Ms. Sonali who has a Masters degree in History & converses in English, Hindi and Marathi very well.

Para-professional staffs (also called community workers by some NGOs) are recruited from the community and given community-development training, they work in the same locality in which they reside. This helps them build rapport with the community very quickly and they are constantly available to the beneficiaries of the area. Over the years with experience they have also been co-coordinating the entire activities of Prerana in that area. Prerana looks at these staff members as effective catalyst, which have deep insight into the community it serves, as well as trust and acceptance.

Problems in staffing:

Staffing pattern and policy is one of the weakest points of NGOs in this area of work including Prerana because neither do they have any grading or scales of pay nor do they have benefits like pensions, sick pay and staff development opportunities. With the rising cost of living and high inflation in urban metropolises like Mumbai; there is a staff turnover amongst the social workers.

There is also a scarcity of experienced effective skilled staff to work at the grassroots. There are innumerable problems in matching a person to a position in Prerana. Filling a position is not simply a mechanical process of identifying a person who has expertise to execute a position's required tasks. An effective person is not necessarily a person who has some kind of specialized expertise, for the work that NGOs do is broad and cannot clearly be framed in terms of narrow specialties. Their presence being at the heart of the red light district makes it tougher when female employees consider Prerana as a choice of employment.

Fresh graduates join Prerana, get trained and then move on to other international NGOs to earn significantly higher salaries and climb the career ladder faster. International funding agencies and Multi national companies seem to have gotten on the social responsibility bandwagon lately and are poaching on the best social workers for talent.

However, Para-professional staff is far cheaper and also remain longer with Prerana. There seems to be very much less staff turnover in this category.

Possible solution:

Prerana could have a tie-up with either a college or university to have a continual stream of incoming talent to choose & hire from. These students could have either a semester or a year as part of their curriculum to be conducted on Prerana's premises.

Community:

Commercial sexual exploitation of children and child sexual abuse, very often have undertones of gender discrimination against females. Girls are at greater risk of commercial sexual exploitation than boys because they face double discrimination and vulnerability, suffering on account of their gender as well as their socio-economic status.

Deep rooted inequality in structures and systems within families and communities, perpetuated by cultural norms and practices, are factors to consider in combating commercial sexual exploitation of children.

Traffickers often merge with the general population moving across open borders, and that traffickers frequently exploit the desire on the part of girls and women to migrate to escape poverty and discrimination at home. Therefore, while fewer victims are being kidnapped or abducted, an overwhelming majority are trafficked through deception and false promises. They are therefore 'active participants' in their own trafficking, at least at the beginning where the process includes recruitment and transportation. Prerana places such children & women in safe houses.

One of the very critical steps towards prevention and elimination of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse in India has been Public Interest Litigations by NGOs and NGO networks. Night shelters for smaller children of the red light district, educational support programs for older children, placement programs for job-seeking children, and other advisory services are some of the programs required by this target population.

- Prerana is well entrenched into the community through its field workers who have established trust in the local community by working closely with them for the past 16 years.
- This was visible by the happy and open manner the kids played around the teachers. I observed some of the mothers come up to the classrooms and drop the younger ones. The parents were comfortable chatting up with the teachers & the project manager. There seemed to be genuine trust built amongst them.
- The kids would be in the school premises from 6 pm until 8 am; while the mothers would be engaged in their business. Hence the trust to leave one's kids in Prerana's custody would have to be immense.

As I did not want to make either the parents or school personnel uncomfortable, I did not talk to the parents one-on-one.

Statistics:

A survey sponsored by the Central Social Welfare Board of India in 1991 in six metropolitan cities indicated that the population of women and children in sex work is between 70,000 and 1 million. Thirty per cent of them are below 18 years old. Nearly 40 per cent began sex work when they were under 18. Seventy per cent of them are illiterate. Strangely, only 43 per cent wanted to be rescued; the majority did not mind remaining as sex workers as they saw few other options. Conservative estimates of this number are 5 Million by year 2007.

Repercussions:

The average age of recruitment for sex workers in the 1990s was between 10 and 14 years old. Half of this population may be infected with HIV/AIDS. The Indian National AIDS Control Organization (NACO) estimates that 5.21 million people were living with HIV in 2005, giving an adult prevalence of 0.91%.

Prerana's School:

Most of the kids showed up by 6pm. They lined up for exercise & were lead by one of Prerana's teachers. The kids were enthused and followed instructions through the half hour routine. At the end of the exercise session, they were catered a small snack of "chanas & poha". While the rest of the kids ate, one of the younger ones came up to me and peeked into my notebook as I was taking down notes. She then picked up enough courage to ask me for my pen & started to wriggle on the page. I could sense that there was a passion towards books & learning.

After exercise, the kids went to their respective classes.

The classrooms averaged about 20 kids that were age appropriate and had a single teacher in each of them. The classroom comprised of a 10x12 foot room with clean floors, a blackboard, walls painted with instructional content such as the alphabet or numbers. The kids sat on floor mats & the teacher mixed with all the students equitably.

The content in grade 3 seemed age appropriate & the kids were studying Addition. The teacher had some single-digit numbers on the black board and asked the kids to add them up. As each of the kids came up to the board to write up the answer, they seemed excited to be doing their tasks. One of the student made a mistake and the teacher's annoyance at him was obvious. Ms. Sonali helped him out and eased the tense moment as the student walked back to his spot. I was taken into 3 classes by Ms. Sonali. (Grades 2, 3 and 4). Ms. Sonali informed me that the kids were provided a pair of clothes, school bags, books & stationary required for the school year by Prerana.

It was 9pm by then & dinner was ready. I walked up to the kitchen where hot cooked meals were being served to the kids who squatted neatly in the larger classrooms that doubled up as a dining room. This very room would serve as the bed room for the kids. For dinner the menu had rice, vegetables & dal "pulses". As I watched, a small boy walked up to me and invited me over for dinner. I was deeply touched that they had so little and yet offered whatever they had to a complete stranger.

I then talked to Ms. Preeti Patkar one-on-one. We discussed the management team, school functioning, community participation, challenges working within the community, funding, financial challenges, health-dental treatment, preventive care, legislative action, public funding, staffing, retention, where does Prerana go from here.

I found Ms. Preeti to be forthcoming in her views about Prerana and honest about the challenges facing the community and Prerana. She seemed to know how to engage with the community, had the inclination, experience & ability to lead. While there were many challenges that Prerana faced, we devoted as much time discussing on what could be done v/s the vast unknown/ non-doable.

As I left Prerana that evening at about 10pm, one of the kids about 4 years old came up to me and wished me goodbye. That child remains as a distinct memory as I tuck my own daughter to sleep every night to what life has to offer each of us.

Opinion:

Prerana largely operates on welfare models of service delivery.

Prerana currently lacks public or private funding on an ongoing basis which exposes it to significant risk of continual operations or effective long term planning.

Poor slum dwellers demand an increasing range of activities from established NGOs, as they have multiple problems and there is also greater expectation from NGOs. For many NGOs, the obvious strategy for increasing impact is to expand projects or programs that are judged to be successful or that are expected by beneficiaries.

Expansion raises difficulties, particularly in terms of organizational restructuring and issues of staffing have become crucial, as they are involved in the day to day implementation of projects and programs. These are the staff on whom effectiveness and success of NGOs is dependent. This path would probably disable Prerana from scaling up or replicating the success it has achieved elsewhere.

Prerana has had rapid ad hoc growth and expansion, which forces them into development roles (such as policy advocacy), that may not be a suitable expression of their own capacity or identity. This influences their mandates, encourages them to diversify into various activities. Prerana's ability to react quickly and adapt to local requirements could be undermined as the scale of operations is increased.

Prerana may therefore have to consider partnering with other NGOs in areas that are aligned to its objectives in areas that are not its core competency.

Work that Asha should encourage Prerana to conduct:

1. Asha should encourage Prerana to work towards social change by influencing attitudes, policy and practice, seeking to reform state services on the basis of its experiences.
2. Prerana could sensitize media on commercial sexual exploitation and child sexual abuse & its cost to society.
3. "Traffickers fish in the stream of migration". Nepalese NGOs estimate that between 5,000 and 10,000 girls a year are trafficked from Nepal to India every year. Prerana could work with NGO's such as Maiti Nepal, who are closer to the rural locales where the disenfranchised women & girls come from. They could have an integrated approach for prevention of sexual exploitation among certain groups where girls are 'groomed' for prostitution through education & income generating initiatives that eliminate the need to move to large cities to escape rural poverty.

4. The fast growing IT sector has led to rampant promotion of child pornography on the Internet. This leads youth with financial independence undertake risky behavior. Prerana could work with the Government towards building internet access/ security policies that discourage easy access to such material.
5. There should be seminars and workshops with Police & judges in the region to increase their awareness on issues relating to violence against women as well as to issues related to trafficking.
6. Co-operation between the Prerana & Government for new legislation to be enacted from a human rights perspective and not purely as a law and order issue. Legislation should be targeted; it should focus on trafficking and the punishment of traffickers, and not on the victims. It should concentrate on the problem of trafficking of minors and it should contain a comprehensive social welfare component based on respect for the economic and social rights of the trafficked woman
7. Prerana needs to build up a second tier of management & case workers to enable them expand their work.
8. Since there does not exist a trade school that teaches young students concepts in this area, Prerana could partner with local Institutes and offer either online or classroom courses as an area of specialty for Social workers.

Conclusions & Recommendations:

Prerana is doing seminal work in the area of sex-workers and their children.

The area of engagement and geographical location is on target.

The ability to work with the community & trust developed is strong.

I therefore recommend, without reservation - any ongoing/ Operational project that Prerana has proposed to Asha for Education.

About the Author:

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