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Sonagachhi: A Background

This is an excerpt from a UN story about Munni, a commercial sex worker from Sonagachi, the largest red-light district in Kolkata, India. Sonagachi, translated as Golden Tree, has several hundred multistory brothels built in the winding lanes and is home to some 10,000 sex workers.

Can you tell us how you came to be here at such a young age?

Munni: All I remember is I am from Bangladesh and I came here when I was ten years old...I am sixteen now but I tell people I am twenty years old. I have been here for five years and this is my home. I have no family. 'Ma' (the lady pimp) is my family. She looks after me, feeds me, and even gives me money to buy saris (dresses) for Durga Puja. But she means business and I have to work. When I was little, a man came to my house and said he will keep me in a palace and that I will marry a prince but I have to do as he says. He brought me to Kolkata and left me here at one of the dirtiest brothels promising to return but never showed up.

Were you treated well in the first brothel?

Munni: The brothel was owned by a fat woman and we called her 'aunty' in Bengali. First she bathed and fed me. I was given a bed to sleep and clean clothes. I felt happy to be among kind people. Then on the third day she put make up on my face and made me stand along with the 20 other girls, for the men to pick their choice. At first I did not understand what was happening and thought we would be selected to go to a new home. When I understood what was happening I tried to escape. I was caught, locked in a dark room for a week and beaten with a thick wooden stick. They made sure not to hit my face, chest, thigh and stomach as customers would not choose me. One night aunty was drunk and sleeping and her brother was in another brothel. I ran away as fast as I could. I saw a police man on the road and told him my story. He promised to help me. He and his three friends raped me. I returned to Sonagachi and found a new aunty... In this brothel there are 20 to 24 girls and 10 rooms... Since business is slow these days, we parade the streets from 11am onwards. Competition is high, as almost every day 'dalals' (traffickers) get 5 to 10 girls as young as 7 years old. The brothels are filling up and we are forced to move elsewhere in search of business.



A Reflection:

For me, Sonagachi is raw and sad. The main street is perhaps 400m long with side streets running off perpendicular. It is not like Phuket or Pattaya in Thailand where there is rock n' roll playing with an effort to create a "party vibe." Instead, it is wall to wall women dressed in saris standing in two big, long lines – with men walk down the middle between them choosing whomever they may desire.

By western standards the place is very unhygienic with open air urinals at both ends of the street. There are pimps, gangsters, mama sans, drug addicts and dealers, dogs and little children running around while thousands of women carry out the old euphemism of "standing in line".

Stories From the Villages: How Girls Drift Into Sex Work.

Economics: West Bengal is one of the five poorest states of 28 in India. Murshidabad district - one of the poorest districts in West Bengal - has an estimated 4.2 million rural poor out of a total of 6 million people.

Murshidabad has minimal large-scale industry which means that there is little opportunity for employment outside of the agricultural sector. Unemployment is high. Only 34% of those in Murshidabad are associated with any kind of economic activity outside of agriculture. For women, it is even more woeful at just 10%.

With high unemployment and low wages, villagers look outside their communities to fulfil basic needs. Many girls who are involved in the sex industry leave their children with family members and enter the sex trade so they can send money home to feed their loved ones.

Society brands these women as "bad" when, in fact, some are heroic, empathetic and just plain desperate.

Apart from rice cultivation, one other source of income for the family is from the Indian Central Government's scheme known as **One Hundred Days Employment** every year. This is where each year, the family receives 100 days work where they are paid at a rate of 150 rupees/day. Thus they can receive a total wage of 15,000 Indian Rupees (USD\$180). In reality, according to The Times of India, the families only received on average 48 days work per year. Apart from these two sources of income, there is not a single day of employment available in the rural villages for them. So, naturally this makes teenage girls vulnerable from traffickers who offer a seemingly better life.

Of course, normally farmers are not able to secure loans from banks, so instead they must go to the money lenders. Generally, they are the big landlords who own the rice fields surrounding the villages. The rate of interest charged can be as high as 40-50% per annum. Only in lenient cases can it be 30%. It is well known that many farmers, simply out of desperation commit suicide. In this case, the debt simply passes on to the next generation.

Case Study 1: Bal "Bal" is an innocent village girl from Murshidabad, the poorest district in West Bengal. We came to know about her family through our contact person in the village. Her father passed away when she was reading in grade 5. Her mother is illiterate and did not know where to go to find help. When we contacted them, we found out that Bal was a brilliant child, but we considered that her family was vulnerable, so we offered to help.

Economically, Bal's family was/is extremely poor and especially so because of Bal's mother's illiteracy - this separates her from any kind of economic progress. Her mum earns the family's daily bread from the menial labor that she carries out (over a period of no more than 2 months) during the seasonal rice cultivation. Also, it is impossible for a landless woman with no money in hand to plan any type of micro-income project or take cultivation land on lease. There is no way out. Bal's mum will always go through tough times unless Bal can find a way to assist the family. Bal's mum has such little choice for the future of her family and especially for her adolescent daughter.

We, the board members, worried for the future of Bal's family. We felt that their situation may well force Bal to marry or be sent to the city to work. These are the two most common practises of poor villagers. So, we decided to share the burden of the family by taking Bal into our home. Without us, we felt that she might have been easy prey for the traffickers.

Case Study 2 Apa: Apa is from a small tribal village in Murshidabad district, West Bengal. Under mysterious circumstances, she left home. Her parents made a thorough search everywhere all to no avail. They assumed that she may have been kidnapped. Yet her father deliberately kept on searching and searching until finally, after one month, he tracked her down in a neighboring district.

Her father was extremely worried that she might run away again. He said to me, *"I am not able to give her any hope or future. Finding just the daily food for our family is a great struggle. I am still very worried that Apa could go missing anytime. We are lucky she has not fallen into the hands of traffickers."*

He confided, *"I planned to marry her off soon because I could not feed three daughters, I am too poor."* This is believed to be the main reason for Apa having made the extreme decision to run away - she did not want to marry.

Then most likely she met somebody who pretended to be offering her better opportunities for her life. This is a common tactic of pimps and traffickers.

Apa's family income is via seasonal farming. Apa's parents work as tenant farmers on a small paddy field. They must pay $\frac{3}{4}$'s of their harvest to the landowner as the rental cost for the land, leaving them just $\frac{1}{4}$. This is all they receive for a whole year. But this will not feed the family for even half a year.

Many who have left home for better job and life opportunities have ended up into the sex trade and other forms of slavery.

[EMPOWER INTERNATIONAL works with Link Trust to rescue and empower Bengali girls at-risk to sex trafficking.](#)