

Tradition forces girls into prostitution



In some Indian villages, girls are sent into prostitution by their families - a tradition that began as religious obligation but is now continued for money. In "Trapped by Tradition," which airs Saturday and Sunday on CNN International, (viewing times below) "Slumdog Millionaire" star Anil Kapoor shows how Indian charities are trying to stop the tradition. CNN has changed Priya and Puja's names.

Bharatpur District, India - She's around 13 years old. She goes to school, loves to sing and dance, and between giggles, she says she dreams of being an actress one day.

Puja hardly looks like a fighter but beneath her smiling face is a steely resolve. She is the first girl in her family to go to school and is determined to finish it. Very few girls in her community have done that.

Puja's mother wasn't given that chance. Priya, now in her late 30s, was forced into prostitution when she was a young girl.

Stories like this are common in the Bharatpur district of Rajasthan state in Western India, where girls are sold to brothels, once they hit puberty.

Locals mark this rite of passage with a coming of age ceremony called Nathni Uturna – which translates as taking off the nose ring - that signifies a girl is ready to be sent into the sex trade, that she's considered ready to sleep with her first client.

Plan India, a charity working in the village to wipe out the tradition, says these ceremonies were once common but now it's getting harder to find families to admit they held one.

Indian film star Anil Kapoor, as a patron of Plan India, said: "A lot of the rehabilitated women are ensuring that the girls from their families don't get thrown into the practice.

"It's a small step, but one in the right direction. Changing the mindset of the people in the village is key.

"Now that the women themselves are taking a stand against prostitution, I am hopeful, optimistic, we

can end this tradition.

He took a CNN Freedom Project crew to the village in Bharatpur district where Puja showed us the progress.

Often, young girls are pushed into the sex business by their own fathers and brothers. The men see nothing wrong with it.

They say it is a tradition that has been passed down through generations. It began with the devdasi culture (devdasi means servant of God).

Under the devdasi system, girls were dedicated to a life of sex work in the name of religion.

Initially, they would serve upper class men in the local community. The girls would entertain princes and landlords with song and dance.

Gradually, this gave way to a life of prostitution. Many women, like Priya, end up in the red light districts of India's major cities.



Anil Kapoor

Money is key. In the sleepy village some residents make money from farming and others are daily wage laborers. But there is very little money.

It's an area of extreme poverty – so sending a daughter into the sex business is seen as a way for parents to unburden themselves of a child -and, it's lucrative.

A former prostitute told CNN she would earn as much as \$20 a day working in New Delhi's red light district. It's a lot of money for families in this area, many of whom live on less than a dollar a day.

Priya works in a New Delhi brothel. She lives there for a few months, earns handsomely and then returns to her village for a few weeks to spend time with her family.

She says she continues to work as a prostitute because she does not want her children to follow in her footsteps. "What we did, we don't want our children to do that," says Priya. "It should not happen to anyone."

Plan India and its local partner, Gram Niyojan Kendra, are bringing change to Priya's village -and she wants Puja to benefit from that.

Officials at the charities say they are making inroads; that the practice of sending girls into prostitution is gradually declining.

Plan India has recently opened four new schools in the area, and they are full of students.

"It's difficult to get women who are already in the sex trade to quit, because they get used to the income," says Bhagyashri Dingle, Plan India's executive director.

So the group focuses on preventing young children from falling into the same trap. Education is the key to change, says Dingle.

They offer counseling to the women and encourage them to find other ways of earning money. In some cases, Plan India-GNK helps them start a small business such helping to buy a cow so the woman can then sell milk.

Puja says she's delighted she's going to school. It gives her a sense of purpose and confidence.

When Kapoor and CNN visited her village, it was Puja who showed us around.

She proudly took us on a tour of the schools in the area. Small, bright classrooms that were packed with students and bursting with hope.

For Puja, the hope is she won't get trapped by tradition and is able realize her dreams - to finish school and to make her mother proud.

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