My Dreams

I Love Art, Love to Study and Will Become a Doctor Someday

By Damini

Dharampura, Delhi: I am 14 years old and I love to study. I really enjoy going to school and am always top of my class because I’m so good with studies. My teachers are very fond of me as are my friends in school. Not only do I do my own work very well but I also help my friends and my brothers and my sisters with their school work. I want to be a doctor when I grow up.

Apart from being good at studies, I like many more things about school. We play games and it’s great to play with my friends. I like singing and dancing also. But most of all I love drawing and painting. I do a lot of drawing at school and even manage to do some at home. It is nice to go to the Apne Aap centre in Dharampura where I can do lots of drawing with other girls at the centre. One day a new lady came to teach us drawing. Every Saturday Irene didi would come to the centre and teach us. It was really interesting. Since I like drawing so much I was one of the first people to go to the class. It was a new experience as this was drawing and painting like I had never done before. (Continued on page 7)

My Eyes Filled with Joy to See My Daughter’s Future

By Bhagwanti Devi

Munshigunj, Kolkata: My name is Bhagwanti Devi. I was brought to this Munshigunj when I was only 14 years of age. I remained a chukri (young girl in prostitution) for a long time. Then I became adhiya. Now I am working as a maid servant and am also a member of a Self Empowerment Group (SEG).

I have one child named Reshma Khatoon. I admitted her to the night crèche run by Apne Aap Women Worldwide. Later on, she got admitted to Ramakrishna Vivekananda Mission Ashram for continuing her education with continued support of Apne Aap. Now my daughter is doing very well regarding her studies.

Mataji, the Principal of Ramakrishna Vivekananda Mission invited me along with other guardians to celebrate the birth anniversary of ‘Maa Sarada’ on 25th December 2011 at the mission ashram. Along with other parents, I reached Uttarpara ashram at about 2 p.m. on the day.

Mataji was very kind to us. We all became very emotional when we saw our daughters beaming with joy and heard about what they do every day and what they have learnt. Along with the other mothers, I participated in the activities. We saw that the temple of Maa Sarada was decorated with different kinds of flowers along with other decorative pieces. We saw the puja of Maa Sarada that was offered by one of the priests of the temple. We all participated in the puja and afterwards the priest offered us prasad. (Continued on page 7)

After Leaving Prostitution, I did not Earn a Lot but I Had my Body to Myself

By Jamila Khatoon

Forbengunj, Bihar: I have spent most of my life fighting against many troubles and problems, the memory of which still makes me shiver in terror. I have gone through so many difficulties that now I feel strong facing any other problems in life. I was in prostitution but then married a man who was very nice man and a driver. My decision of quitting prostitution led to a lot of problems.

I had to leave my accommodation where I had been staying and had to search for a place where I could stay in safety with my husband. After a lot of effort I found a place to stay. I had to invest my deposit in renting the house and had to start a small business of my own, from which I could earn a small but respectful income. My neighbours from the Red Light Area used to warn me, that if my husband went away and left me alone I would suffer. Somehow these taunts made me much stronger and I promised myself that I would never go back into the profession. (Continued on page 6)
Apne Aap is Trying its Best to End Prostitution

By Claire

Forbesganj, Bihar: It felt like walking through soup. The air in Forbesganj at the height of monsoon season was thick with heat, dust and humidity. I was in Bihar to interview women and girls who had been trafficked on behalf of Apne Aap Women Worldwide. The organization's goal is to end the trafficking and prostitution of women in India by empowering the victims to "self help" with tools such as support groups that eventually lead to self-advocacy.

In order to conduct interviews with these women I had to gain a threshold of trust with them. I had to adapt my comportments, my dress, my actions as well as my language in order to reach out to these women and help them have the agency to speak out against the injustices done to them.

After one focus group interview I conducted an individual interview with a particularly curious particip-ant. After she had answered my questions, I told her she could ask me anything she wanted. The young woman quickly realized that we were the same age. She started drilling me with questions: How many children did I have? Where was my husband? How did I get here? How did I get here? Why had I come here? With the help of the translator I tried my best to answer every question as fully as I could. I had no husband. I had no children. My university had paid for my trip. I was there because I wanted to help the women in Forbesganj. After my last answer there were a few terrible moments of near silence. She looked up and said very sternly that she would never leave this place. I could leave, she told me. I would leave, I didn't have to stay in Forbesganj; I was free. But she would stay there for the rest of her life.

This was the most humbling moment I have ever experienced. This young woman understood exactly how unfair the circumstances were. She saw how artificial the differences were between our two situations. I can only hope that she understood in my ineloquent response to her observation that a part of me remains in Forbesganj. How could anyone ever truly leave behind such a profound injustice?

I Never Knew There Were So Many Legal Facilities for Me

By Durga Prasad

Khidderpore, Kolkata: My name is Durga Prasad and I am a resident of Nitya Ghosh Street, Kidderpore, Kolkata. I have been coming to the Apne Aap centre for study and skills training for the past seven years. I read in class IX now. I found out that on 20th December 2011 a training session on the rights of children was being organized in our Munshigunj community centre. I was very interested. I, along with a couple of friends, decided that we would participate in the session. I participated in that session along with my friends Puja, Seema, Sita and Dolly.

In that session we learnt many things about the rights of children as protected by Juvenile Justice Act from Sarfaraz Sir. He told us that according to the JJ Act, children are divided into two categories - Children In Need Of Care and Protection (CNCP) and Juvenile in Conflict with Law (JCL). He also explained that a child can be in JCL or CNCP unless and until the child attains majority i.e. becomes 18 years of age. According to Sir, CNCP are those children who have no one to look after them properly, do not have any proper shelter and they do not get any opportunity of education. They are also children who are being or likely to be grossly abused, tortured or exploited for the purpose of sexual abuse or illegal acts. He also told us about children under CNCP who have parents or guardians who are unfit or incapacitated to take care of the child. I also learnt that a child who is victim of any armed conflict or natural calamity is also under CNCP. It is the duty of the government to look after them and provide appropriate support for their upbringing. Children under 18 years of age who have committed any offence like theft, murder etc. will also come under this Act. In this case, the child will be sentenced to community service or will be sent to a special home. They allow the juvenile to go home after advice or admonition following appropriate inquiry and counselling to the parents or guardians. (Continued on page 3)
Acceptance Speech on Being Awarded the Karmaveer Puraskaar

By Ruchira Gupta

New York: I would like to thank iCONGO for giving me the Karmaveer Puraskaar not only because I am honoured by getting an award from fellow NGOs who understand the difficulties in working against corruption of working against inequality and working for social justice but also because this makes the issue of sex trafficking and prostitution much more visible in our country.

Today the CBI says that there are 3 million prostituted women and girls entrapped in different brothels all over the country. This means that 3 million women and girls are being raped every night. In the work that I do I find that the girls are raped sometimes 9 or 10 times a night. If we multiply 3 million into 10 that is 30 million rapes every night. As a country we have to do something about it. These are our girls, our women who are being entrapped by profit makers who want to make a profit from this modern day slavery and it is up to us to do something about it.

Apne Aap Women World, my NGO is also honoured to be picked for this award. I today represent not just Ruchira Gupta but the victims and survivors of prostitution who are members of Apne Aap. It is because of their courage that we are able to make a difference against the traffickers, against the pimps, the clients, the customers, the brothel managers, the transporters, the recruiters who are constantly trying to prey upon these girls who are poor, who are low caste. They go into their villages and seduce, trick, force their parents into letting their daughters go. They then place them in the brothels of Mumbai, Kolkata and Delhi so that they can be raped repeatedly. It is because of their voices that I was able to get their voices out. It is because of their courage, in saying no to these pimps and Johns that we were able to get their daughters into school. We were able to get these women in Kolkata, Mumbai, Bihar and Delhi to be able to access livelihoods, to access bank accounts and legal protection, to testify against traffickers and get them into jail.

Today Apne Aap is growing. We are working inside the brothels of Mumbai, inside small Red Light Districts in Bihar, big Red Light Districts in Kolkata and inside the border of Delhi and Haryana where there are communities, who were criminalised by the British, called a criminal tribe who were so marginalised that they were stuck with inter-generational prostitution. Here prostitution is being passed down from mothers to daughters. I appeal to all of you in this audience to help us so that no daughter has to be told by her mother that your family wants to prostitute you because otherwise your brother will not be able to go to school, otherwise your father will not get a meal.

In our country we have to make choices available for women and girls so they have the right to education, the right to a safe and dignified livelihood, a right to housing and the same choices as their brothers, husbands and fathers do. We need to make an India which is based on equality between women and girls, men and boys. We need to move forward otherwise we will have an India where we will have only numb girls who are being exploited repeatedly and numb boys who are exploiting them. Is this the country we want?

So on behalf of all of us who have hope, all the victims and survivors of prostitution who are members of Apne Aap and all the activists who are in the room today, I thank you and I receive this award, the Karmaveer Puraskaar. I hope I can continue this journey to change the law in India so that the perpetrators, the Johns and the victims are treated differently. The Johns are punished and the victims are given budget allocations to start new lives. Please join us in a campaign to sign a petition to the President of India to change the law so that Johns are punished, traffickers are punished and women and girls are protected.

I Never Knew There Were So Many Legal Facilities for Me (Continued from page 2)

On the other hand, in cases of juvenile trial, they are detained under observation at home or under the observation of guardians. He also told us that if any person commits any offence to protect himself or his family members or property then it would not be considered as offence.

I also came to learn from that session that if child marriage is organized by parents or any other person then there is a helpline phone number available.

This session has helped me understand what my rights are and how they are protected. I now know what I should do if my rights are violated. I have decided that I will not get married until I become self-dependent.
Upasana describes her experience of the efforts made by Apne Aap to form Self Empowerment Groups in the Rawta Modh village.

Dharampura, Delhi: Despite my exposure to various forms of rural and urban poverty all my preconceived notions took a backseat when I first visited Rawta Modh along with Apne Aap’s community mobilisers. A homeless person, living on the pavement, without a roof over their head is not an uncommon sight in our country. Sadly, nor are the shanties that one comes across at construction sites and the slums by the metro stations. In fact the shanties in the construction site areas violate all kinds of rights of a child including unsafe and unhygienic conditions and lack of proper educational facilities.

Rawta Modh is a village in name only as most of the families live in shanties on an open field and are migratory in nature. Every time I visited the ‘village’ at least one family had moved out and the house/space was occupied by another family. Most of the families live in shanties with a tarpaulin roof standing on four poles. Many times I have seen the entire family of three generations sitting on an Indian cot under the tarpaulin roof, which represented the total area of their ‘house’. Rawta Modh houses about 35-40 families, of which about seven families belong to the Perna caste and the rest from the Sapera community. The Pernas suffer from intergenerational prostitution which means that the honour of the daughter-in-law of the household is sold for money every night. The Saperas are traditionally snake charmers but with the ban on snake charming by the government they have extremely hard hit. The women walk for miles to gather firewood while the men gather herbs to sell as traditional cures.

Most of the young women and men are illiterate. The young children are first generation literates and some drop out as soon as they have to graduate to a high school which is too far from their village. The villages do not have access to safe water nor do they have proper drainage-after all they are situated in agricultural land.

When I visited the women would be sat in the sun, engaged in quilt work, making beautiful patterns with needles and pieces of cloth. It is sometimes a joint effort with each woman working on a different end of the quilt lending her own personality and preference to the creation.

We thought it would be a wonderful idea to help them become self reliant using the skills they already had. For more than 6 months now our community mobilisers have been visiting them, befriending them and advising them. After many months of legwork by the mobilisers the women agreed to form their own self empowerment group (SEG). This was easier said than done. We forgot that the women have their own dynamics. Some of them would, all of a sudden, refuse to sit or interact with the others, due to personal differences. All our excitement at the first taste of success seemed to be in vain as the women were yet to resolve their internal dynamics.

However, this was only a slight drawback, for the men and women now greet us with smiles replacing the cold stares and abuse that was hurled at us in the initial months. The SEGs are a work in progress but in the mean time we can share hot chai as we sit with the women in the cold winter afternoon watching them create patterns in the their quilts as they talk about their daily ordeals, their hopes and dreams.

Taking the First Steps Towards Change

By Sita Devi

Munshigunj, Kolkata: I am Sita Devi, a resident of Munshigunj Road, Kidderpore, Kolkata. When I came here I was only 16 years of age. First few years I had to work as chukri and then as adhiya. I am now 56 years old.

I sent my granddaughter, Monika Singh, to Apne Aap Women Worldwide in 2004 when I learnt about the various activities like singing, dancing and painting being taught at the centre as well as studies. After considering the activities of organisation, I became very much interested in participating in activities myself which could also be beneficial. So I, along with other three or four members from our community, approached Apne Aap and then they suggested that we should form a self empowerment group. I had mobilized another eight women from the community to form a group. So we were successful in forming a group. I learnt from the Apne Aap team that each group should decide on a President, Secretary and Treasurer from within the group and select a name. Our group name became ‘Dhobi’. (Continued on page 7)
Society Assumes Only One Name for People who Work in Red Light Areas

By Chunni

Forbesgunj Bihar: My name is Chunni and I was born in a Red Light Area. Society assumes only one name for the work done by women in the Red Light Area and I was one of those women. All my family members started to die one by one. My brother was murdered and my mother and sister succumbed to a long-term illness. In the end, I was left alone in my house. My neighbours wanted my property. I could feel darkness and helplessness around me. I stayed at home for some time and then started to do odd jobs.

I am not literate but I got the opportunity to go the Apne Aap centre in the area and began to learn many things. I tried to participate in all assessment tests held at the centre as well. In my free time I would observe student in the nursery and made a lot effort to understand what was being taught to the children. For some time I have been trying to teach the poems and games that I have seen in classrooms to the kids in the Red Light Area. Having done this, I started thinking about my life and what I could do with it.

People made fun of me when I started to visit the centre to learn skills. People laughed at me and some of them also taunted me questioning me. “Are you trying to become a teacher, at your age and after the kind of work that you used to do?” I knew the kind of reaction I’d get from people regarding what I wanted to do in life. I was prepared to take the derision in my stride but it became very unbearable on many occasions.

Sometimes, people would judge me because I led the life of a prostitute and they would not acknowledge other work that I was doing to improve my life. The journey at home and from home to the outside world has been full of strife for me. But I decided to improve my life and lead it according to my wishes. I wanted to answer back to those who criticized me by proving myself successful at work and by moving away from my life in the Red Light Area. Today I believe that I have the power to do what I want to do. I have so far done that successfully and I now will continue to carve a strong identity of my own.

I Had No Choice, I Had to Provide for my Family

By Rumi Das

Munshigunj, Kolkata: I am from Murshidabad. I come from a very poor family and I was not able to go to school. I used to help out in the house to make ends meet. When I was 16 years old I was offered a job by my aunt in Kolkata. We were finding it difficult at home so my family happily accepted the job so I could leave and earn some money for the family.

When I came to Kolkata my aunt took me to stay in the Bowbazaar area. I was quite excited to start my new life with my aunt, whom I trusted. I was keen to earn money to send back to my family so that they could live a better life as well.

After a day my aunt disappeared. The landlady said that my aunt had sold me to her and that I had to accept prostitution as my profession. I was shocked and didn’t understand what she meant. I couldn’t believe that my aunt had left me and I insisted that she would be back for me. The landlady simply laughed at me. I couldn’t go back to my family, I didn’t even know how. The landlady would not let me leave; I had to accept my fate.

I thought about my family. We are five sisters. I was sent here to earn money and I felt that I could not disappoint my parents. I began earning as a prostitute as I felt it was the only way I could provide for my family. I am now 35 years old, from 16 I had to accept prostitution as my only option.

After two years of being in Bowbazar I came to Munshigunj. Since 2004 I have been a member of Apne Aap Women Worldwide. When I came to this area I had seen all the women who were working with and talking to people from Apne Aap. I was very interested and after talking to a few of the didi’s I also because a member of Apne Aap. I attend all the meetings where we are constantly told about our rights. Now we are more conscious and know that if all of us work for our rights we will achieve a lot.

After learning about my rights I was very happy and decided to get my ration card. When I went to get my card they realised I was from the Red Light Area and refused to help me. They did not even let me explain myself. We were also unable to get voter ID but thanks to the didi’s at Apne Aap, who came with us, we eventually were issued the ID.

If we can convince all women like me to fight for our rights we will be able to receive all that we deserve. That is where we can start to put an end to something like prostitution.
Dharampura, Delhi: I have been attending Apne Aap’s centre in Dharampura. I really enjoy Apne Aap’s programs in my village, especially when I get the chance to meet all the different didis who come to teach us exciting new things. For example, Irene didi taught us how to paint and she also let us draw pictures of whatever we wanted. Although we paint and draw often Irene didi showed us so many new techniques that we had never heard of. We enjoyed painting with our hands for the first time.

The didis who came taught us games that we all really enjoyed and were interested in getting to know more about us. They also taught us a game using our hands and a piece of string that we tied together. Catherine didi and Kari didi came to do some filming with us at my aunt’s house and taught us acting. They also painted with us and asked us what our desires and dreams were. They wanted to know what we imagined our futures to be and what we aspired to be. In turn, we asked the didis what their names were and where they came from. We also asked them to dance for us! I really enjoyed meeting all the didis and talking to them. It is great to learn about other places and other cultures. I hope that we continue to have visitors and new didis who can teach us fun things.

Announcements:

Ruchira Gupta, Founder & President of Apne Aap Women Worldwide, received the prestigious “Karmaveer Puraskaar” award on 26th November 2011. Ruchira was recognized and appreciated for her extraordinary work in combating sex trafficking. The ‘Karmaveer Puraskaar (KVP)’ are the National Awards for Social Justice and Citizen Action instituted by the people sector with various partner organisations, citizens at large and media supporters. The awards are part of the RIGHT every WRONG movement.

The awards are given every year on the 26th day of November, to recognize real life unsung heroes who believe that 'It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness' and have walked that extra mile to "Be the change they want to see in this world". The Karmaveer awardees are dubbed by the people as Noble Laureates. Various past awardees have been featured in documentaries and articles on the Discovery Channel, National Geographic, BBC, TIME and have gone on to win global fellowships, awards and become ambassadors of international and UN organizations.
**My Dreams** *(Continued from page 1)*

It was very different. We did not paint on normal paper like we had been doing before. Irene didi started by tying strings around our hands to show that we all had the same bond. It signified that we are all part of the same group. I have kept my string very carefully to this day because it reminds me of Irene didi and the wonderful things she taught us.

Irene didi taught us to use our brains while painting, not just our hands. We painted using our hands instead of crayons. She helped us make new things from our mind. She taught us to innovate. Irene didi even taught me how to use a brush for painting. I had never used a brush before and I was very excited about it.

Generally we are used to make drawings of girls and boys, our homes, our village, our family and school but Irene didi told us that we could paint anything we wanted to. Even when we just made lines with paint that didn’t seem to mean anything she encouraged us and told us that anything we paint and anything we draw is art. Art is a form of expression and we should use whatever we feel, whether it is anger, love or happiness in art and paint it.

Once Irene didi covered the walls of the room with paper and then she painted our hands and asked us to use the paints to colour the walls in any way we wanted. That was my favourite day of the art session. I had so much fun with my friends colouring the walls of the room. I made a rainbow.

I had a very good time in the art classes and I miss them a lot. I hope more people like Irene didi come and teach us to draw and paint. I learnt new things about drawing and hope to use what I have learnt in the future in what I do and what I learn in school. I will always think of using my brain to think of new ideas. I learnt exciting, new techniques for drawing, painting and colouring. It was fun drawing with our hands and fingers. These sessions made me realize that there always an inner meaning to what we do. All that we do reflects the kind of a person we are. Art is an expression of who we are.

**Taking the First Steps Towards Change** *(continued from page 4)*

Subsequently we learned that each Self Empowerment Group should have a bank account. The members have to sign on the bank document at the time of opening the account and on the deposit and withdrawal of money. So I had to learn how to sign my name, because I was illiterate when we first opened the bank account. With the help of Chaitali didi (an employee of Apne Aap), many of our members became literate and learnt to write their signature properly.

Gradually, our group and two A2W2 members namely Surabani didi and Minu didi went to UBI Bank in Khidderpore to open a bank account under the name ‘Dhobi Group’. We continued saving money into that account for quite some time. At the time we thought that if we regularly deposited money into the account it would be helpful to us because we could use it to buy any asset or for any emergency purposes. At the same time if we deposited money regularly we could earn interest on it. At that time our initiatives was an example to our neighbours who were also very interested in opening up a bank account in their name. We were then able to suggest and guide them on the proper way to do so.

Sadly, some of the members left the group as they went back to their native villages and the meetings and savings became irregular. Although I have a personal bank account now where I deposit and withdraw money as and when required I am currently motivating other members to continue the account.

**My Eyes Filled with Joy to See My Daughter’s Future** *(continued from page 1)*

The Ramakrishna Mission authority arranged lunch for all of us that day. After lunch Mataji came to us and requested us to join the cultural programme which was to be presented by the students of that ashram.

The programme was set to start in the evening but we had to return to our home in Kidderpore as many of us left our other children with our neighbours. So we left the mission at about 4.30pm.

I returned home with great hopes in my heart. I am so glad that I’ve managed to provide a better life for my child.
**Interview**

*Meena in an interview about her experience with Apne Aap*

Q: Do you remember how Ruchira helped you file an FIR at the Katihar police station? Do you remember how scared you were to go the police station? How did you overcome that fear?

**Meena:** Yes, Ruchira di was with me during the whole process and even though it was not the first time I’d gone to a police station, I was scared. But Ruchira di and Tinku di supported me and gave me the courage to face the situation. And when I thought that I had to do it for my daughter, to set her free from the hell of the RLA, I felt stronger.

Q: How did your resistance lead to courage and give you power?

**Meena:** I had made up my mind that I had to rescue Naina, my daughter, and that feeling gave me all the courage I needed. During the whole process the police officers behaved very badly with us but we kept our patience and finally Naina was rescued.

Q: What do you identify as your strength?

**Meena:** I left the Red Light Area, have a house of my own and am living an independent life. My daughters are receiving an education and want them to have a good life. This life of freedom and integrity is what strengthens me.

Q: How do you feel seeing your daughters literate today?

**Meena:** I am happy that my daughters are studying and will try my level best to give them a good life.

Q: How do you feel about the fact that with Apne Aap’s help you can now deal with the police yourself?

**Meena:** I feel happy and I am grateful to Ruchira di and Apne Aap for being with me at that time and helping me overcome my fear of dealing with the police.

Q: You own a plot of land and a house, get a monthly salary from Apne Aap and your husband is with you at home. Do you think that your association with Apne Aap has helped in these matters?

**Meena:** Yes, because I get my salary from Apne Aap and so am grateful that they help me live a decent and respectful life. And as far as my plot and house is concerned, even for that I am grateful to Apne Aap as without their help I wouldn’t have been able to meet Michaella who interviewed me and gave me money to buy the plot and to build the house.

Q: You had overcome your fear to the point that you could list the names of girls who were not in school last year; you could face the traffickers and defend Ruchira from them when they threatened her. When did you overcome your own fear? What was the strength you found in your dialogue/conversations with Ruchira at that time?

**Meena:** I suffered a lot whilst living in the Red Light Area and always wished that no woman should have to live in the same way. No woman should be trafficked and prostituted and the fight against it gives me the ability to overcome my fear and face the traffickers. Moreover Ruchira di was fighting for me so I would have never allowed anyone to harm her.

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**Red Light Despatch**

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