

3 July 2014

Nonda Manasu: A Wounded Heart

I have found a new job today. I have found a job as a salesgirl in a cloth shop, where I have to show customers different kinds of sarees. I am very excited as I will go to work from tomorrow. All my friends at the hostel are asking me for sweets, but I don't have any money now and promised to get them as soon as I get my first salary.

I learnt tailoring for the last almost one year from Roopa aunty who is my teacher at the hostel. She taught me how to do sari embroidery, stitch blouses, petticoats, dress, school uniform, *lehenga* blouse, etc.

I used to hate cooking earlier and would never take up any cooking work. But for the last few months, Shruti akka who used to cook has had an operation and cannot cook and since there are many mouths to feed, including children, I feel I should also help and have started learning to cook and helping out in the kitchen. I am responsible for teaching prayers to the children and I love doing that. Every day, after prayers, I gather the children in a group for an hour. I give them a word as the 'word for the day' and we all talk about it. I usually love to give words like *appa*, *amma*, *anna*, *thangi*, *prapancha*, *bandhana*, etc (meaning father, mother, older brother, young sister, universe, and relationship in Kannada) and we all talk about our feelings and thoughts about it. I found a book with some exercises in the hostel and started doing this on my own. Now I have been given the responsibility to do it and I really enjoy doing this. There are some young children who go to school, studying in Kannada medium - I try to help them with their studies. Actually it is an excuse for me to also study because I also get to study along with them. About 25 children have been admitted to a local English medium school and I am taking 'tuitions' for them -teaching ABCD, and also learning to read and write English along with them.

However, life was not always like this. 4 years back when I was just over 16 years old, I was found guilty of having kidnapped a 12 year old girl and selling her into sex work. I was brought before the Juvenile Justice Board and stayed at the Government reception centre for women for almost two and half years while my case was going on. I did not even apply for bail because there was no one to take me home and no home to go back to, because my family disowned me for having brought dishonor to their name. My uncle and some neighbors in my village threatened to kill me if I stepped into the village.

Life in my home and family :

Appa - I was in 9th standard and my father did not allow me to appear for my 10th standard exam. My chikkappa (father's younger brother), Murthy used to sexually abuse me, make me do all kinds of work and hit me with a big stick if I didn't do

what he asked. Unable to bear this, my father took up another house nearby in the same village. Only my *akka* (older sister) used to go for work in a factory nearby. She was the only one earning some money and feeding all of us. But my uncle used to hate this and started harassing us for money from her salary as well. My uncle insisted that I should also earn and sent me to sell flowers at a local flower and vegetable market along with my '*atthai*' (father's older sister). I used to wake up at 3.00 a.m everyday, to sell flowers. If I didn't earn much in a day, my *chikkappa* used to beat me really badly. He used to tell everyone that he was looking after all of us in front of the whole village, but in reality, he used to come to my house at night and snatch the money I had made during the day and spend it on drinking.

My *ajji* (maternal grandmother) had put some money in the bank in my name and my uncle used to continuously torture my grandmother and all of us for that money.

My *amma* died when I was 7 years, by drinking poison. My uncle used to harass my mother a lot. My mother had even lodged a complaint against him at the local police station. She walked all the way with us 3 young children to the police station to do this but no action was taken. My uncle found out and beat her really badly for this. My *ajji* then came and took us all away to her place and we lived for a few days in a rented house in my *ajji*'s village. I feel my mother did not see any other way out as my father was also a drunkard and finally she took her own life. My uncle then started blaming my father saying he was the one responsible for killing my mother and my father started drinking even more. None of my father's relatives supported us and even his sisters were not bothered about us.

When I dropped out of school, I and my sister started going for a job in a garments factory, where I worked for 3-4 months. I used to earn Rs. 2,500 per month. I took leave from work twice when I was feeling moody and didn't feel like going to work. My sister beat me up for this and told me that she had tried really hard to get me this job. I used to love to play with children my age or younger than me. I used to love to play in the water in the local tank. I did not want to go to work - where the manager used to try to misbehave with me and scold me for small things.

How I got into the world of crime : My *ajji* fell sick one day. I had gone to the hospital to look after her. One morning, she gave me Rs 500/- to buy her some food, fruits, etc. I was feeling homesick as I had been in the hospital for 3-4 days and went home. I spent some of the money on snacks and some beads, earrings, etc. from the local market on my way home. In the evening I got scared as I had not got her any food and went back to the hospital, but seeing my uncle and aunt angrily arguing about my whereabouts, I got scared and hid in the hallway of the hospital all night and went back home next morning. My father beat me badly saying everyone had been searching me. I was really upset and left home and went to stay with a '*thatha*' - an old man related to my grandmother, in a nearby village.

During this time, I was friends with a boy called Auto Manja. He used to get me gobi Manchurian. He told me he liked me but I found out later that he was married and had children. I used to stay in different relatives houses for a day or two and didn't want to go back home. I tried going back once or twice but my father and uncle used to scold and beat me very badly so I was in confusion as to what to do.

At that time, a lady called Shobha came forward and told Auto Manja that he should bring me to her house and she promised to look after me. Manja was a good person and did not allow me to go and scolded her, but his friend took money from her and lied to me saying Manja was calling me to meet him at a place a few kilometers away. I sat in the auto and went with him.

He took me to Shobha aunty's house where I was kept in a room along with another pregnant lady and a middle aged lady. In the night, a middle aged man paid Rs. 5,000/- for me and Shobha aunty asked me to go and sleep with him. When I refused, she beat me badly and forcibly made me eat sleeping tablets. I didn't know what was happening. The pregnant lady told me the next day that I had been raped by many men through the night. After that I was taken to a farm house along with other girls and every time I was forced to go and sleep with different men, beaten, made to eat sleeping tablets and the same nightmares followed with different men.

I ran away once and came home, but was beaten up badly by my father, uncle, aunts etc. for bringing a bad name to the family so I didn't want to go home again. Then one day, I met Sunita¹ in the bus and made friends with her. After a few days, I was desperate as I could neither go home nor had anywhere to go and so I went back to Shobha. She asked me to bring Sunita to her and I took Sunita and left her in Shobha's house, without thinking anything. Shobha gave me some money for this. Later I came to know that Sunita had been taken to different places, including some tourist places, temple towns, etc. and treated very badly, burnt with cigarettes, etc. Then I realized that what I had done was a very big mistake but it was too late. I was taken by the police, who also slapped me and beat me badly. My family were called and they too beat me in the police station itself saying they didn't want to take me home.

My contact and experiences with the juvenile justice system : I then came to the reception centre. I used to struggle a lot, because girls used to say very sharp and hurtful things. One of the staff hit me with a stick, I was crying when Geeta² aunty told me she will complain to the JJB . They then stopped hitting me because I would blackmail them that I will tell the judge, but they started using very bad language with me. They would call me very bad names which made me feel really sad and ashamed.

¹ Name changed to protect the identity of the child survivor.

² Adv. Geeta Sajjanshetty, Centre for Child and the Law who legally represented the child before the JJB.

Then Vasanthi³ doddamma came into my life, she was very affectionate and was the mother I never had. Then I met Kalpana⁴ aunty- she steadied me. I was very homesick, felt orphaned and abandoned by my family, but when Kalpana aunty told me that she would help me reconnect with her family, I felt some hope.

Because of Kalpana aunty - my family came back to me - they at least agreed to talk to me on the phone. She and Geeta aunty went to my house and convinced my family to talk to me. Then my granny died and I was totally shocked. My family told me that I was responsible for her death. They did not tell me about her death or my sister's marriage. They got my sister married off early thinking she will also become a 'bad girl ' like me. I was very pained by all this and felt life was not worth living anymore.

Ramadevi⁵ aunty was a very kind person in my life. She always gave me a security person to accompany me to the JJB hearings, she always spoke to me with so much respect and affection that I used to look forward to go to the JJB just to spend some time with her. She kept assuring me that I had a long and bright future and that I should focus on learning good behavior as well as some skills that would help me build my life again.

One day I cut myself at the reception centre, using glass from a window pane. I used to be full of anger and hate those days. Anger with my family, anger with the society that so much '*daurjanya*' (exploitation) had happened with me, so much 'anyaya' (injustice) had happened with me, anger and shame that I had done so much damage to Sunita, anger that no one had corrected me when I made my first mistakes.

Then Kalpana aunty took me to NIMHANS, Preeti⁶ aunty gave me tablets to calm me down. I felt much calmer and better able to manage my anger when I had those tablets. I really looked forward to Kalpana's aunty's visits and bragged to all my friends that I had a 'good mother' who had adopted me. I knew it was a lie, but I wanted it to be true and it made me feel strong and good about myself. When her visits became lesser, I told my friends, she was busy and would come to see me directly at NIMHANS.

One day I was taken to a place called Jeevodaya⁷ by Kalpana and Geeta aunty. Then I was taken to the CWC⁸ and asked my consent for placement in this institution. I was very happy that they were asking me my opinion. I liked the place and the sisters were very kind to me. Sr. Ancy⁹ used to take care of me but used to

³ Ms. Vasanthi, Superintendent, Government Reception Centre for Women.

⁴ Ms. Kalpana Purushothaman, Senior Counselor from Centre for Child and the Law, NLSIU.

⁵ Ms. Ramadevi, Superintendent and Probationary officer.

⁶ Dr. Preeti Jacob, Child Psychiatrist, Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, NIMHANS.

⁷ Jeevodaya - a fit institution.

⁸ CWC - Child Welfare Committee.

⁹ Sister Ancy - nun in charge of Jeevodaya, an NGO fit institution for girls.

scold me sometimes. One day, my friend Nagina told me let's run away. Without thinking, I also accompanied her to the station. It seemed like an exciting adventure at that time.

I was very grateful that they did not report me to the police and treated it like a stupid mistake and brought me back to the reception centre. Again, Kalpana aunty met me and I told her that I was really frustrated and wanted to commit suicide.

Dodamma told me she would be leaving / getting transferred. I got really upset about this and felt that she too was leaving me. I fought with her without knowing how to express myself and told her that she was neither sending me home, nor finding a way out of the system for me. Then Ramadevi aunty and Vasanthi aunty found this hostel for me¹⁰. I was placed there and Kalpana and Geeta aunty used to call me and visit me at this place.

At the hostel where I was staying, they tried to find me a boy to marry. I told them I was open to marry but I needed time to think about it. I also told them that as far as I was concerned my family was dead to me and that I was an orphan, but that I would like to ask permission from Kalpana aunty and like her to be present at my wedding.

Ek choti si love story : During this time, I met a boy called Surya and fell in love. I used to tease him as he used to pass in front of my hostel. I used to think about him and day and night. I even went and tried to find out where he lived and if he would be able to look after me well. He lived in a small house and worked as a construction laborer. My tailoring teacher Nagaveni at the hostel then took me aside and talked to me. She told me it was natural to have such feelings but that I was still young. She then made me learn embroidery and I got so involved in that that I slowly started forgetting about Surya. After a few days, he went away to some other construction site and I forgot him and became happy again.

When I first came to the reception centre, all I could feel was anger and hatred towards men for what they had done to me. Today, I feel warm and good inside when I think I too can fall in love with a boy like any other teenage girl. It didn't work out, but that's ok. Like Kalpana aunty says, there's always time in life for love and I'm willing to wait for the right man.

What if ? : On quiet evenings, sometimes I think about how my life would have been if all these people had not helped me and supported me over the last 3- 4 years. If Vasanthi aunty had not corrected me when I behaved badly, if she had not shown me affection when I was suicidal, if Ramadevi aunty had not encouraged me and given me hope that she would find me a safe place to live someday, if Kalpana aunty had not become my mother when my family abandoned me, if Geeta aunty had not explained my actions to the JJB, if I had not got a chance to go to

¹⁰ A fit institution.

Jeevodaya or this hostel, if Dr. Preeti had not saved me when I tried to kill myself, I don't know if I would even be here today.

I feel very, very afraid thinking about what kind of life I would have had. I made a horrible mistake of taking a young girl who was my friend to a bad person like Shoba aunty. I really didn't know what I was doing then, I was so caught up in my own problems and miseries in life that I did not think that her life would be spoilt by my foolish act. I felt really sorry for what I had done and even asked Sunita for forgiveness when she came to the JJB. Someday, when I am grown up I want to look after my younger brother and educate him, take care of my both my sisters, support my mother's family financially. I often pray that Sunita should be healthy and happy wherever she is, I feel like telling her that I want to help you if you are ever in any trouble, but I don't know how I can do it.

Geeta aunty told me that the government is now planning to bring in a new law, and explained it to me. I strongly believe that this new law should never be passed. If every young girl who has committed an offence like the one I had committed also gets the kind of support I have got, gets good advice and guidance from good people, I believe 100% that they will surely become a good person. I am not a bad person; I did a bad thing, because I didn't understand that my action can cause bad things to happen to Sunita. Please give me a chance to live a better life than what my family and society have given me, please give me a chance to do something for other 'Sunitas' by becoming a good mother, a good teacher and a good woman. My own family and village had no place for me and did not want me back, so where would I have gone other than back to the brothel from where the police caught me? If you had sent me to jail, I would have become a criminal seeing only the bad things of bad people around me. I would have probably become another Shobha aunty. By sending me to the reception centre, JJB, Jeevodaya, and this hostel and by giving me a chance to meet so many good people and learn so many good things from them, I have today become a good person and not a criminal.

So please give young girls like me a chance to be a good citizen in this society.

When I look at so many leaders in our country, I feel and know that many of them have made many mistakes - big and small in their lives. Yet, have they not turned their lives around and become leaders and are they not doing great things for our country? Please give young people a chance and we will also show you what good we can do for this country. Please do not kill our spirit and hopes by sending us to jail. Help us, guide us, advise us, support us and show us the right path - don't condemn us to a life in jail.

This testimony was narrated by "G" in Kannada and was transcribed in English by Kalpana Purushothaman, Senior Counselor, CCL - NLSIU over a 4 hour period. G

was found guilty of kidnapping a 12 year old girl and selling her into commercial sex work.

G was invited to share her story and her thoughts about the new proposed legislation for children between 16 to 18 years committing serious offences. G felt very strongly about this issue and insisted that her story should be told so that other children like her could also benefit from rehabilitation and reformation oriented law rather than a punishment -oriented law.

She was emotionally prepared to tell her story and supported throughout her telling of it. G is a huge movie buff so the counselor invited her to tell her story as if she were the heroine of her story, explaining some significant events, heroes and villains in her life, as well as what dreams she had for the future. This story is exactly as she has narrated and has been read back to her and confirmed as accurately capturing what she has shared. The Kannada title of her story has also been coined by her. The English translation does not adequately capture the essence of her title.