
Learning to Dream Again

KOLKATA, INDIA – A group of girls kicks the dirt with their toes and whisper excitedly as they wait together for a school bus. Going to school is not just a chance to prepare for the future, but evidence of freedom from a horrific past. These students are sex trafficking survivors.

The girls live in an aftercare home with other survivors of sex trafficking. This year, the aftercare home launched an innovative program to educate the young women in a school outside the home. A special classroom has been set up at the school to help them cover material at an accelerated rate.



Attending classes in a school outside the aftercare home helps sex trafficking survivors gain new opportunities.

Most of the clients in aftercare homes have had little to no schooling. Beginning first or second grade as a 16-year-old in a traditional classroom setting would be a disheartening prospect for any late-learner. The new program started by the aftercare home, one of IJM’s partners, will allow the girls to attend school outside the home like their peers and receive a graduation certificate formalizing their education.

The teachers at the school have all been trained to work with late learners and are sensitive to the needs of the trafficking survivors. Instead of focusing exclusively on anxiety-inducing tests, interactive learning is emphasized in the classroom. In addition to a regular curriculum with subjects like math and science, the girls study dance, music and yoga.

“We’ve very honored to partner with this excellent home, where girls and young women rescued through IJM operations have such wonderful opportunities to heal and grow,” says Biju Mathew, IJM Kolkata Field Office Director. “The IJM social workers who visit with these girls regularly have seen the dramatic impact the ability to participate in this academic opportunity has had on them.”

The girls return home at the same time every day, pulling out their papers to show the staff. Shefali* beams as she points to her teacher’s note across the top of her math exam – “Very good!”

Attending school was once impossible for Shefali and the other young women who gather around her to start homework. Shefali was sold to a brothel when she was 15 years old. Four years ago she

*A pseudonym. Real name and casework documentation on file with IJM.

was rescued in an IJM-assisted operation, and she moved into the aftercare home which is still her home today. Shefali has a son, born as a result of the abuse, but she is raising him in an environment that is supportive of her as both a young mother and a dedicated student.

Through trauma-focused counseling and opportunities to gain a good education, Shefali and her friends at the aftercare home are learning to dream.

Right now, several clients are studying hard so they can pass a prerequisite exam with hopes of attending a college-level program to gain more specialized skills. IJM social workers continue to visit Shefali and the other survivors who were rescued in IJM-assisted operations, celebrating good grades and encouraging the young women to make their dreams a reality.

“I really like school,” says Shefali. It is a very good school, and the teachers are nice. They teach us well, and I like that.”

She adds the math exam to a stack of completed assignments, kept safe in a box in her cupboard. Shefali keeps them to show visitors or her family – and also for herself, to help remember how far she has come.

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