

# TACKLING STIGMA THROUGH STORIES

Video Volunteers' work to Combat Human Trafficking (2014-2017)



## HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN INDIA

Just in 2016, over 20,000 women and children<sup>1</sup> fell victim to trafficking in India. But men are not exempt either: an estimated 10 million bonded labourers<sup>2</sup>--most of them men--fuel a lot of key industries. 90% of the trafficking happens within the country's borders. The bulk of the victims are forced into bonded labour and other slavery-like situation. Millions of girls and women from the country are also trafficked for sexual exploitation. Trafficking for sexual exploitation has international dimensions involving women and children from Bangladesh and Nepal. Another dimension to the problem involves trafficking from poorer Eastern states with better female-to-male sex ratios to wealthier Northern states with very poor sex ratios, which is a result of, among other things, female foeticide. National Crime Records Bureau reveals that trafficking in minor girls has increased 65% in the last decade.

The most vulnerable populations, such as Dalits and indigenous people, are also the most likely to be trafficked. Conviction rates are appallingly low. While there are two separate laws on bonded labour and trafficking for sexual exploitation, legal loopholes are exploited. For example, trafficking for domestic labour in middle class urban households is on the rise and this does not fall under the ambit of the existing laws criminalising trafficking.

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<sup>1</sup>Source: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/almost-20000-women-children-trafficked-in-india-in-2016-govt-report/articleshow/57569145.cms> Accessed 27 July 2017

<sup>2</sup>Source: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-40724861> Accessed 27 July 2017

# VIDEO VOLUNTEERS' COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS ON TRAFFICKING: SCREENINGS, MOBILE REPORTING, AND TRAININGS

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## Partnership with MTV Exit: 76 screenings in 30 days to 100,000 people: 2014



MTV India engaged Video Volunteers to screen their human trafficking film “Bazar” and lead discussions in 12 high trafficking districts where the film had been shot. More than 100,000 people attended 76 screenings led by 12 different Community Correspondents all of whom became experts on speaking about this issue. Audience members reported that human trafficking indeed was happening all around their villages, but that before these screenings they had never recognized it as such.

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## Partnership with Radar: SMS Reporting on Trafficking: 2015

The British media organization Radar has developed an innovative tool that enables people in low bandwidth areas to report on issues using sms. Supported by the Guardian newspaper, Radar trained VV Correspondents from Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand to report on trafficking and mentored them through their first reports.

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## Mobile Journalism Trainings with the US Embassy: 2017



VV's Principal Trainer Manish Kumar led a session on storytelling using mobile based journalism at the 6th Conclave on Trafficking in Patna jointly conducted by Shakti Vahini and the United States Consulate. He trained 40 practitioners from the government law enforcement agency, non-governmental organisations and activists working on the issue.

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## RECRUITING COMMUNITY CORRESPONDENTS WITH A PERSONAL CONNECTION TO THE TRAFFICKING ISSUE

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In 2015, VV decided that future recruitments of Correspondents in Jharkhand and West Bengal, which are two of VV's most important states, would focus on districts with high rates of trafficking. West Bengal in particular is a hotbed of sex trafficking for girls from West Bengal and also Nepal and Bangladesh, which border it. We decided we would seek out Correspondents with a personal connection to the issue, who have friends and classmates who were trafficked, and who are eager to report intensively on it. We wanted our reports to convey the emotion of their personal connection. We spoke to over 25 organizations<sup>3</sup> who work on issues of trafficking, and who helped us recruit Correspondents from



13<sup>4</sup> of the districts most infamous for trafficking. In some cases, because these CC's were associated with the anti-trafficking organizations, they already understood legal and rehabilitation procedures, and the stigma that survivors face. In other cases, we have had to train them in this. In all cases, the CC's in our trafficking-focused group have a high degree of empathy.



SHAMPA MONDOL

**SHAMPA MONDOL** is based out of Sunderbans in South 24 Paraganas, West Bengal. She is a community mobiliser who educates teenage girls and their parents about trafficking. She was sixteen when her school friend was trafficked. The parents relentlessly pursued the case and finally the survivor was brought home two years after she went missing. Shampa says, "society never accepted her. Her past was used to stigmatise her, so much so that she attempted suicide. This incident affected me deeply. There are so many girls in my area who are trafficked. I thought, I could be the

next one and I wanted to take a stand on this. Today, thanks to my relentless meetings to raise awareness, in my village at least, the incidence of trafficking has gone down." Shampa is part of the local anti-trafficking NGO Kaikhali Samadhan

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<sup>3</sup> The NGOs that aided our recruitment included New Light, Malda Sahayogita Samiti, Dhumkuria Trust, Progressive Peoples' Union, Missing Art Project in collaboration with Samadhan Samajik Sansthan, Poorest Areas Civil Society partner Nari-O-Shishu Kalyan Kendra, Child in Need Institute (CINI), Nehru Yuva Kendra, Uthnau, and Cooch Behar Anashrishti.

<sup>4</sup> The high trafficking districts in West Bengal and Jharkhand where we have Correspondents are Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri, Malda, Kolkata, South 24 Parganas, North 24 Parganas, Birbhum, Cooch Behar, Murshidabad, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur and Darjeeling.

Samity, which primarily works in raising awareness in schools and within villages. But the battle is far from over. Grassroots activists like Shampa point out that stigmatisation of the victims is a major reason that rescued girls feel forced to go back to sex work because they have no option of employment or marriage in their native villages. Research reports corroborate this: families themselves stigmatise these daughters for, they believe, compromising the honor of the entire family.



**SORIYA BANU**

Among the correspondents currently working on trafficking is **SORIYA BANU** of Malda, West Bengal, who has grown up seeing a large number of teenage girls going missing every year around her. She feels very strongly about the issue. One of the handful of Muslim majority districts in the country, Malda has high rates of trafficking of minor girls because of poverty and unemployment, and the fact that it is a border state.



# PRODUCING REPORTS ON UNCOVERED ASPECTS OF TRAFFICKING

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As of June 2017, our Community Correspondents have published nine reports on trafficking. 15 more stories have gone into production since March 2017 alone.

This uptick is the result of our trafficking-focused recruitment drive, and a new training manual and tip sheet we have written on trafficking. Some of the stories we've covered are described below.

## Story in Focus #1:

### Kidnapped from Behind Her Home and Forced to Work in Brothel



VV COMMUNITY CORRESPONDENT



**Soriya Banu**  
MALDA | WEST BENGAL

Despite coming from an impoverished family, Soria pursued a post-secondary education and made Social Work her profession. She is now the only earning member of her family of four and is employed at a local NGO where she conducts First Aid Training and health care literacy and access.

Chumki was only fourteen when she was kidnapped from behind her house one night when she went to relieve herself. Her parents lodged a complaint with the local police station but not knowing their rights, they were not even provided with a copy of the First Information Report (FIR, a.k.a., police report.) Community Correspondent Soriya interviewed Chumki's parents and made a film where she appealed to her audience to call the local police station and urge the authorities to act urgently to rescue this girl. A few months later Chumki returned on her own. Chumki recounted a hair-raising tale of exploitation to Soriya. She was trafficked to the local red-light district and then to Kolkata where she was forced to work in a brothel along with several girls her age who had all been trafficked. Her traffickers decided to take her to Delhi. They kept her in a flat and made her do the household tasks for them. In Delhi she made the acquaintance of a young boy from her state who spoke her language. They fell in love and decided to get married and run away. With help of her husband, Chumki returned home. But her traffickers are still at large. Attempts by Soriya to find out about the investigation have been rudely rebuffed by the police and authorities. In fact, initially the police arrested Chumki's husband on grounds of violation of the child marriage law--Chumki is still below 18. Ironically, the one person, her husband, who helped Chumki find her way back home when the law enforcement agencies twiddled their thumbs, was the only one who faced arrest. Chumki is with her husband and together they are trying to build a new life together, leaving behind the dark past.

## Story in Focus #2:

### Middle Class Urban Indians are Complicit in Trafficking



VV COMMUNITY CORRESPONDENT



Jyoti Malto  
JHARKHAND

Jyoti Malto is a Community Correspondent from Sahibganj district of Jharkhand. Joti belongs to the indigenous community which has been historically marginalised and she works to bring the issues of her community to the fore. She has worked on getting people their entitlements under government schemes by battling official apathy.

The state of Jharkhand has a large indigenous population. With poverty and lack of employment as a push factor, more and more women seeking work find themselves in the trap of traffickers. Community Correspondent Jyoti Malto recorded the story of three women, all from the indigenous communities, from the same family who were trafficked all the way to Delhi as domestic workers after being offered jobs as computer operators in the nearby city of Patna, the capital of Bihar. Piya (name changed) secretly managed to call home from her abusive employers' house and inform her family about her plight. Piya and her sister were rescued soon after. Their sister-in-law still remains untraceable. Jyoti contacted the Human Rights Law Network to alert them of the story and request their assistance; they operationalised a rescue. The highlight in the case is a scenario all too common in human trafficking cases--their trafficker was Piya's fiancé. Known for over a month to the family, he promised jobs in his own computer firm but instead transported the girls 1500 kilometers away to Delhi and sold them to an agency that contracts out domestic workers to urban families. Urban families that employ women from marginalised communities might not be directly aware that they are employing women who are held against their will and have been trafficked and coerced into these jobs. But if Piya's experience of emotional and physical abuse teaches us anything, it is that urban India often doesn't care as long as it can get cheap labour. Many middle class urban Indians are undeniably culpable in perpetuating the vicious cycle that forces the vulnerable unemployed into the trafficking trap.

### Story in Focus #3:

## Human Trafficking Racket Brought to a Halt



VV COMMUNITY CORRESPONDENT



**Navita Devi**  
KATHIR | BIHAR

Navita is a Correspondent from Katihar district in Bihar on the eastern border of India. She has worked with the National Confederation of Dalit Organisations spreading awareness on issues like access to livelihood under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. Navita wants to focus her advocacy efforts on giving her community better access to education, healthcare and infrastructure.

Navita Devi started following the trail of a woman running a trafficking ring in early 2016. She documented two cases of trafficking that Ameerka Devi a.k.a Meena Devi had been involved in. Ameerka Devi and her gang of goons operated over an area that covered three blocks in Katihar District; hundreds, mostly women and children, had been trafficked to states like Uttar Pradesh. Katihar district in the East-Indian state of Bihar is a hotbed for human trafficking because of its proximity to Nepal and West Bengal. Navita Devi, has been reporting on the lack of basic facilities like schools and healthcare, and the effect of corruption on these communities since 2013. It was her ability to highlight such aspects of life in Bihar and bring justice to disenfranchised communities that made people confide in her about Ameerka Devi's trafficking racket.

Navita persisted despite being threatened by Ameerka Devi, and with little help from the apathetic government machinery. In one case, police refused to file a missing person's report for the woman and her children who had disappeared overnight because of Amreeka. Success finally came in May 2017 when Ameerka Devi was caught red-handed as she planned to traffic a 14-year-old-girl to Uttar Pradesh. This happened because the CC and some locals had been tracking her movements. The story exemplifies that networks built by CCs over time act as strong allies during difficult pursuits like Navita's. We've also selected this story because bringing trafficking agents to justice is a difficult process as corrupt officials are often involved in the racket.



#### Story in Focus #4:

## Community Correspondent Helps Trafficked Girl Return to her Family



She didn't know any more details about the area where she is being captive.

VV COMMUNITY CORRESPONDENT



**Shikha Pahadin**  
MANDRO | JHARKHAND

As a member of a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group, her early life was a daily struggle and it seemed like misfortune was always just around the corner. However, her foray into social work provided her with a life-line with which she could once again provide for herself and her family.

Community Correspondent Shikha Pahadin won a Womens Day award on March 8th 2017 from Prabhat Khabar for her reporting on the following story.

Balaka (name changed) from Sahebganj district of Jharkhand went missing from her village when she was only 16. She was taken to Gurgaon and made to do household work along with 3 more young people. Correspondent Shikha Paharin made a video about the issue and showed it to the local police officers but no action was taken. Shikha managed to file a missing person complaint but the inaction, negligence and allegations from the authorities kept intensifying. Shikha then submitted a written application to the Superintendent of Police, Sahebganj. After 19 days of filing this application with the Superintendent of Police, Balaka was returned to her home town by the same people who took her. She was paid no money for the work she was made to do for 3 months and confirmed the presence of many other girls who were trafficked and kept in the same place. Balaka's story changed for good. But that may not be the case for the other women trapped in that particular ring.



## Story in Focus #5:

### Twelve Rescued from Bonded Labour in Goa



"He made us work in the gutters..."

VV COMMUNITY CORRESPONDENT



**Shanti Baraik**  
GUMLA | JHARKHAND

Shanti Baraik is from the remote Gumla district. Shanti emphatically says "My empowerment came through the camera." Before joining VV she never realised that the problems she and her community faced could actually be solved by taking simple actions. She works closely with the local panchayat and other government officials to bring positive change to her community in rural Jharkhand

Twelve men, women and children left their homes in Tati village in Jharkhand's Gumla district in search of better employment opportunities. They ended up in Goa, over 2000 kilometres away. The men started working for a Goan contractor. They were given living quarters at the back of the contractor's house. They were promised proper jobs but ended up cleaning gutters for the city of Margao Municipality. At first the men were a little hesitant and didn't want to clean them, especially not without protective gear. It was then that the abuse started. Any refusal to do a task or requests to go back to Jharkhand were met with beatings. No illness, small or big, was reason enough to get a day off from work. The contractor would come each morning and set them to work. Eventually, the contractor confiscated the phones and voter ID's of all the men working for him. None had thought that their search for jobs would turn into this.

Meanwhile, back in Jharkhand, the sister, named Chuamar, of one of the laborers was getting worried because she hadn't heard from them in over 20 days. They should have been back home by June. It was at that time that someone in Goa managed to get to a mobile phone and snuck a call back home. They wanted someone to come rescue them. In a panic Chuamar approached Community Correspondent Shanti Baraik and asked her to accompany her to Goa. "I had never travelled outside of Jharkhand. This was my first time. We travelled at the last minute and spent the three-day journey on different parts of the train's floor. I didn't mind; I was going to help my brothers and sisters. This was also incidentally the first video I shot as an IndiaUnheard Community Correspondent," recalls Shanti. Once in Goa, the women managed to find their way to the contractor's house. They asked him to bring out their family. Once again, infuriated by Chuamar and Shanti's questions, the contractor verbally and physically assaulted those he had held captive as bonded labourers. "We went to a nearby police station and tried to lodge a complaint. They wouldn't file a complaint. Instead the contractor came over and started accusing the men of owing him Rs.3 Lakh. I then decided to call the VV office for help. Soon, Mr Joseph Vaz and Clifton—both Goan activists—came over," says Shanti. She continues, "They helped us file a written complaint to the District Collector's office. The Collector, Mr N.D Agarwal, was co-operative and immediately issued an order to the contractor to free the labourers." The contractor by now had his defences up. He even attempted to take the labourers to the train station and told them to run to Jharkhand. On 12.7.2013, the police facilitated a temporary settlement with the contractor after much argument. He presented certain figures as the final amount he would pay them. There was no



documentation or accounts to show how these figures were arrived at. Of the Rs.22,000 owed to them, the labourers were paid only Rs.8,360 each. He further deducted Rs.1000 each from them on account of 'losses' he had incurred. But at that point in time, their lives were more important and they were in no position to bargain more. The men took what they could.

They have since settled back into a routine of agricultural and small labour back in their villages.

## THE BIGGER PICTURE EMERGING FROM OUR REPORTS

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Most of the VV reports are from the eastern states of Jharkhand, Bihar and West Bengal, from where people are largely being trafficked for forced labour to richer states in the northern and western part of the country. In some cases, minor girls are being trafficked for sexual exploitation—not just in brothels but also within families where they are bought as ‘wives’.



The trafficking videos reveal a tale of systemic apathy, inaction and incompetence on the part of the authorities. Family members often feel helpless as the police refuse to take action. Even when the girl is rescued, traffickers largely go unpunished. In some states like West Bengal, the prosecution rate of traffickers is as low as 1%.

There is also the massive burden of stigma and shame on the female survivors which there is no existing mechanism to address. Government programs for rehabilitation and compensation remain but a distant dream as the girls struggle to rebuild their lives after their horrific ordeal. The extent of systemic inaction and unresponsiveness was a revelation for us at VV. Trafficking stories evoke a lot of sympathy and are covered regularly in the mainstream media. And yet, away from the glare of the camera in cities and suburbs, thousands of women, children and men remain lost forever as families struggle to get the local police to even register First Information Reports.

Sometimes families’ reluctance to deal with the societal stigma adds to the woes of the survivors. Many families do not want trafficked women back because of the shame associated with sex work (whether or not the survivor actually engaged in it). This is a noxious amalgamation of patriarchal dictats of victim-blaming.

## STRATEGY GOING FORWARD

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Among the 19 cases of trafficking, the CCs were able to achieve impact in five cases. This suggests that community journalism can have an impact in the fight against trafficking.

We are currently developing partnerships with organisations that work on the prevention of trafficking and victim rescue/rehabilitation such as the Bachpan Bachao Andolan, Shakti Vahini, Impulse NGO Network and New Light to ensure we are always working within the wider movement and in support of existing campaigns and initiatives. These partnerships will also help us train more grassroots anti-trafficking activists to produce stories, and our Correspondents will liaise with them for the rescue of victims.

In addition to producing more informational and journalistic videos with trafficking survivors, we plan to scale up our community screening work on this issue. We are planning a series of interactive screenings, a TED-style road show where the trafficking-focused CC's will visit numerous high-trafficking villages and conduct a dynamic, high energy screening and discussion. These local screening events will force people to confront trafficking head on, with stories from survivors, films documenting police apathy and activities designed to make the audience question their preconceived notions about victim-perpetrator and the ecosystem that allows trafficking to survive. These community screenings will raise awareness about victims' rights, help people recognize and 'name' instances of trafficking, and dismantle the belief system that stigmatises the victims. We also plan to use the screening spaces to disseminate informative handouts to the people so they know what steps to take when someone goes missing or is suspected as trafficked.

We believe that these continuous ground level actions will slowly lead to a more responsive local administration in these particular villages, and jog the officials out of their apathy.

In recent months, VV has developed a new model of 'mobile journalism' in which we conduct 2 day trainings on video-activism with social movements and NGOs, at the end of which people are able to shoot and edit an evidentiary video on the phone. We also teach people, from these largely 'offline' communities, how to create social media profiles and build up local distribution networks through social media. Through this effort, we can imagine literally hundreds of community members in high trafficking areas being able to produce and submit reports on it.

Through these various efforts, we amplify and celebrate micro stories of change. The victims need not be faceless nameless statistical figures, forever lost to the world. Their stories will help them come back to their families and the survivors will be celebrated through these films. At the same time, they will hold traffickers responsible. Due to political and financial clout at present traffickers often go scot



free even when they are known to be engaged in human trafficking. The burden of shame and responsibility should rightfully be on their shoulders and with our films we shall empower communities to support the survivors and their families to ask for justice and punishment of the traffickers.

