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Sr. Bincy Parambakathu, superior of the Daughters of St. Camillus, manages Jeevadaan center in Mangaluru, India. (GSR photo/Thomas Scaria)



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Maria was 9 and a fourth grader in a convent school when she tested positive for HIV.

She had lost her mother when she was just 3; her father, also an HIV patient, died last month in February.

Maria (name changed) recalled her father and the hostel warden bringing her 17 years ago to Jeevadaan (Life giver), an HIV/AIDS rehabilitation center managed by the Daughters of St. Camillus in the outskirts of Mangaluru, a southwestern Indian port city. "I was shocked and crying for leaving my friends," she told Global Sisters Report.

Now married with a 2 ½-year-old son, Maria thanks the nuns for providing her care and support when everything seemed bleak.

"We are now positive about our life and our son keeps us occupied," said Maria, who, with the intervention and support of Jeevadaan, married an HIV-positive young man.

The Catholic woman is among more than 400 HIV-infected women and children whom Jeevadaan has helped and who have settled into lives with jobs or marriage.

That's because of the hope and confidence Jeevadaan teaches its beneficiaries, Maria said.



Jeevadaan rehabilitation center for HIV/AIDS is managed by the Daughters of St. Camillus in Gurpur, near the southwestern Indian port town of Mangaluru. (GSR photo/Thomas Scaria)

"With proper care and support, we could bring them up as normal children, giving them education at a public school and helping them settle with good education and jobs," said Camillus Sr. Shiji Madathithazhe, who is in charge of education and has served the center for seven years.

"Our children have become smarter and healthier as they began interacting with the other children in the school," she said. "We become really mothers when we dress them up, comb their hair, arrange their study bags, prepare their tiffin box (lunch box) and send them to the school."

Some students and parents initially opposed the presence of Jeevadaan students in the school because of "severe social disapproval and stigma," Madathithazhe said. At first, the nuns taught the children at the center.

Only after the Bethany nuns led several awareness sessions for parents and teachers did they accept the Jeevadaan students in 2010, with students performing well, Madathithazhe said.

Many children are malnourished when they arrive at the center, and it takes several months for them to become healthy, Madathithazhe said. She introduced GSR to Devika, who came to the center as a 10-year-old weighing just 12 kilos (about 26 pounds); in four years, she's reached 30 kilos (66 pounds), she said.

Maria, too, was malnourished and weak when she came to Jeevadaan, "but sisters turned me into a healthy child, mentally and physically fit."

"After I completed my 10th grade at Jeevadaan with good marks, the sisters sent me for a nursing course," Maria said. "This instilled more confidence in me as I had to leave Jeevadaan when I turned 18."



Nine Camillian Sisters work at Jeevadaan HIV/AIDS rehabilitation center in Mangaluru, India. They include, from left: Sr. Bernadette Peddada, Priyanka Kiran John (social worker), Sr. Bincy Parambakathu (superior) and Sr. Shiji Madathithazhe. (GSR photo/Thomas Scaria)

Camillus Sr. Bernadette Peddada, who has a master's degree in social work, told GSR that the young women face many challenges after they leave Jeevadaan. "We continue to assist them until they are able to stand on their own," she said. "Very often, their relatives refuse to take them back as the social stigma of HIV is still strong."

The center often helps arrange marriages between the young women and HIV-positive young men from Snehasadan, a similar home for boys managed by the Camilus priests in an adjacent compound.

Maria now encourages another Jeevadaan resident, Diana (name changed), to shed her hesitation to marry: Diana told GSR she disliked marriage because she was angry with her father for infecting her mother with HIV.

"Today both of them are not there, and the sisters in Jeevadaan are my parents, and people like Maria are my sisters," she said.

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Madathithazhe said children are often infected during birth or through breast feeding, though now, "hardly any children are born with HIV, as there is better awareness among mothers on how to prevent the infection among the newborn."

Madathithazhe said the center receives antiretroviral medication and subsidized food from the government. "With regular medicines, nutritious food, care and support and a positive attitude, people can live long with HIV," she added, noting that some women in the center have lived with HIV for more than 50 years.

Priyanka Kiran John, a social worker serving the center for three years, said they've received 68 children with HIV through a government referral system, including from homes such as the Jeevadaan center.

Parambakathu, the team leader, said the center has a system to support continued studies for those who fare well academically, and they arrange scholarships from the government and other sources. Several children are studying for degrees or technical courses in the city.

Soumya, who is completing a degree in social work, told GSR that she was able to continue her education because of the nuns' support.

"My ambition is to do master's in social work and work among children who became HIV positive for no fault of theirs." the 21-year-old woman said.



A Camillian priest painted this depiction of boys at Snehasadan, a center that cares for HIV-affected boys in Mangaluru. (GSR photo/Thomas Scaria)

Still, Peddada said, the real challenge is reintegrating the young women into society. Social stigma still haunts them, and the nuns have to keep in touch to help them move on in life.

About 4:30 pm, the children returned from school; the center soon filled with laughter and talk as they shared their day's experiences over tea and snacks. Some rushed to play with Diya, an 18-month-old who is the youngest in the center.

At the nuns' request, the children sang a song in the local Kannada language: "At the time of difficulties, Jesus walks with us; in times of crises, he stands by us; in darkness, he guides us, and in sorrow, he consoles us."

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Rohan Monteiro, a young Catholic man who visits the center every month with his family and friends, began organizing birthdays for the children seven years ago. He and others have become partners in the nun's ministry, he said.

"Earlier, we were afraid to visit such centers, since HIV/AIDS was considered a dreaded disease. But the Camillus sisters have convinced us that it is a normal disease that requires tender loving care," said Monteiro, who now encourages many young people to visit and interact with the children.

Parambakathu said community participation and support encourages the congregation's mission.

Jeevadaan is among 17 homes the Cammillian nuns manage for marginalized groups, including children with physical and mental disabilities, the elderly and orphans. The congregation came to India 50 years ago with the motto, "A life for God and hands for others." Of the congregation's 175 professed nuns in India, most are trained nurses who serve in hospitals and disaster management facilities, Pamabakathu said.

Camillian Fr. Siby Kaitharan, director of Snehasadan, a similar center for boys in Mangaluru, told GSR that the nuns' dedication and commitment "is an inspiration for us, too."

This story appears in the **HIV/AIDS Ministry** feature series. View the full series.