Voices of Sisters
Trafficking



Sr. Joseph Mary Vadlamudi conducts an awareness session on human trafficking and sexual exploitation for adolescent girls at a shelter home in Guntur, Andhra Pradesh. (Courtesy of Joseph Mary Vadlamudi)



by Sr. Joseph Mary Vadlamudi

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

August 20, 2024

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

When I first arrived in Andhra Pradesh, India, I was filled with a mix of anticipation and uncertainty. The unfamiliar sights, sounds and smells of this vibrant region were a stark contrast to what I was used to. But as I began my internship with the Congregation of Jesus Mary Joseph Social Service Society, I quickly realized that the greatest contrast was not external — it was in the lives of the children and women I was about to meet. These were lives marked by resilience, strength and a quiet courage that I would soon come to admire deeply.

In a state with a population of around 54 million people, many of whom face significant hardships, I witnessed firsthand the stark realities of life for children and women in difficult circumstances. According to the National Family Health Survey, or NFHS-5, about 13% of teenage girls and women ages 15-19 have begun having children.

Many of these children are deprived of their basic rights, and the challenges they face are complex and multifaceted. For children in dysfunctional families — the most vulnerable among them — the perceived solution often seems to be institutionalization, a system that, while providing immediate relief, is far from ideal.

Institutional education and care encompass multiple dimensions — providing safe shelter, nutritious food, decent clothing, quality care and support, education, emotional and psychological support, peer interaction, participation in sports and recreation, life-skills training, family and community engagement, empowerment, and advocacy. Religious congregations like the Congregation of Jesus Mary Joseph have a long history of establishing institutions to address social inequalities, such as access to education based on social status, oppression based on caste, and gender-based disadvantages.

The Congregation of Jesus Mary Joseph, driven by its charism of "an ever-adaptable apostolic availability," recognized the need for safe shelter for the homeless and provided them with homes where they were free from the dangers of the world and able to grow in wisdom and knowledge. With a vision to support the weak and empower the vulnerable, support and rehabilitation centers were established.

Through these institutions, the vulnerable, people living with depression, the ill-treated, tortured, abused, and trafficked young women and children found support, security and a sense of community and fellowship that enabled them to overcome

the memories of violence and harm, and regain their strength to recognize and assert their self-dignity.

My internship was at rehabilitation homes for girls and young women in difficult circumstances, run by the congregation's social service society. The congregation collaborates with the government of Andhra Pradesh. All the residents come through the state's Child Welfare Commission. Some are school-age students, while adults without basic education receive skill training.



Residents at a rehabilitation center in Andhra Pradesh, India, participate in skill development training, learning practical skills to help them become self-sufficient. (Courtesy of Joseph Mary Vadlamudi)

The home is equipped with advanced tailoring machines, and the residents are trained to use them. The daily operations resemble a small-scale industry. The income generated is used for their maintenance, with some deposited into their bank accounts.

The sister in charge of the house holds a postgraduate degree in psychology and meets with the residents occasionally to provide guidance. Among the residents are a few HIV-positive individuals, who are neither discriminated against nor isolated. They receive medicine and nutritious food daily.

Locals often share meals during festivals or special occasions. The students frequently have opportunities to interact with the outside world and enjoy considerable freedom. Relationships among the residents are generally positive; they are generous and supportive, coming together to joyfully celebrate feasts. I had the opportunity to interact with them, conduct interviews, and spend time listening to their stories.

Some of the protective factors at the rehabilitation home include:

- *Exclusivity for women*: The home is exclusively for women, which helps create a safer and more supportive environment.
- *Quality dormitories*: The dormitories are well-maintained, with only four beds in each room, providing a more comfortable and secure living space.
- *Security measures*: CCTV cameras are installed in common areas and corridors to ensure the safety of the residents.
- *Nutritious meals*: The residents receive nourishing food, which supports their overall health and well-being.
- *Opportunity to express concerns*: There is space for the residents to voice their concerns, making them feel heard and supported.

Some of the risk factors include:

- *Emotional and psychological preparedness*: Inmates may have suppressed emotions and a fragile psychological state, potentially leaving them unprepared for effective rehabilitation after their temporary shelter period ends.
- *Adequacy of skill training*: The skill training provided might not be sufficient for inmates to thrive independently unless they are placed in employment settings.
- *Sociocultural context*: The sociocultural environment does not always ensure safety and security for single women. Many women only leave home once they have secured stable employment after completing their education or through marriage.

During interviews, most residents expressed that they feel safer in the institution but also feel that they are not free and don't belong to a family, which makes them

unhappy. They wish they had families with loving parents and regret not having parents who provide individual attention and care. The party culture in general society also makes them feel embarrassed among their classmates when they can't contribute money like other students do. Adolescents sometimes become rebellious, encouraging and helping newly admitted peers to run away.

Advertisement

One girl, who was abandoned by her mother and left in the hands of traffickers, expressed that she still loves and misses her mother deeply. When asked if she was angry with her mother for the suffering she had to endure, she responded that she forgives her because, at the very least, her mother chose to bring her into the world. Given the suffering she experienced even as a child, I truly admire her courage to forgive and love.

Another girl, who is studying in ninth grade, mentioned that she misses her family and loved ones intensely when she sees her classmates' parents caring for them. Yet another girl shared that if she had had a loving family, she wouldn't be living in a care home.

The sisters in my congregation are working to provide these young women and girls with the best opportunities to grow, become independent, and integrate into society and family life. However, I believe that even our best efforts cannot compare to the warmth of a loving family, where a child receives love, individual attention, and encouragement to grow.

The three months of my internship gave me a profound experience of life as I met women of remarkable resilience and strength. I met strong and motivated individuals who not only limit themselves to survive in society but also aspire to thrive and reach new heights.