

BREAKING THE MARGINS

THE TALES OF THE UNSUNG HEROES

Amina Khatun Laskar, a 38 year old woman, fights the atrocious crime of trafficking of women and children in the South 24 Parganas. This district has emerged as one of the worst hubs of trafficking. Even with meagre resources, she has undertaken the mission to rescue and rehabilitate women, helping them fight the trauma and stigma associated with abduction and rehabilitation, thus providing them a second chance at life.



Amina Laskar : Combating Trafficking

For Amina Khatun Laskar, who runs a small organisation named Birangana Seva Samity (BSS) in Canning in West Bengal, instances of women and girls going missing are almost a daily phenomenon. sitting in small office in Canning, the 38-year-old Amina was scourging through heaps of documents and police complaints of several survivors when Aliyah Sheikh entered. She has not heard about her daughter for the past several days. Aliya gives her daughter's Aadhaar card to Amina. Her date of birth says May 2001.

'Why did you marry her so young?' Amina asks. Aliya replies instead that her son-in-law had informed her that her daughter has run away with a local auto-rickshaw driver. Amina jots down the details but the mother has no name for the rickshaw driver. 'She is a minor and the police will have to take the case,' Amina says.

Early steps:

A graduate in political Science from Champahati in the district, Amina began as a volunteer in several Non Government Organisations (NGOs). She was so moved by the plight of girls and women that in 2012 she started her own organisation.

'You cannot imagine the plight of women, particularly those belonging to Muslim communities. They do not get proper education and they are married early. In many cases, husbands marry again, leaving these women to fend for themselves,' Amina said.

Amina grew up in a conservative Muslim family where discrimination was never questioned. Girls hardly completed their studies and had no say in their marriage. It was during her stint with the NGOs that she realised that many women were not aware of their legal rights.

'In many instances ,domestic violence is one of the factors due to which a woman wants to escape her household and lands in the trap of traffickers,' Amina said.

Rescue missions:

Over the past six years, Amina, along with her small team of volunteers, have been reaching out to victims and survivors in the remote areas of South 24 Parganas Canning, Jibontala and Ghutirai Sharif areas. She has had them rescued and has also made efforts so that they are rehabilitated and are not trafficked again.

Trafficking of women and girls is a major issue in these areas and the state administration as well as several voluntary organisations are trying to grapple with this circle of organised crime.

As the per latest NCRB data, West Bengal has the highest recorded case of trafficking in the country and South 24 Parganas is the most vulnerable district. The data for 2016 shows that of the 8,132 cases of human trafficking recorded in the country, 3,579 cases (around 44%) were from West Bengal.

'The extent of the malaise of trafficking can only be gauged by the fact that my organisation with minimum resources at its disposal has been able to rescue 60 girls from the bondage of trafficking in six years,' Amina said.

Once a girl or a woman goes missing and is trafficked, it is a herculean task to trace and rescue them. 'It is like searching for a needle in a haystack.

In many cases the police do not cooperate; sometimes the traffickers try to influence the police,' she said. However, Amina is not one to give up easily. She has made it her life's motto that no woman or girl who wants to come out of it is forced into slavery.

BSS volunteers and Amina keep the local police informed about every missing person and once they are sure that those women and girls have been trafficked, they pressure is the police for steps to be taken to rescue them. At times, it requires Amina and her volunteers take long journeys to other states.

A better world :

'In her attempt to rescue these girls I have travelled far and wide, sometimes with the police and sometimes without,' she said. She has come across cases where relatives and sometimes even husbands are involved in selling these girls.

Amina narrates the story of Ruksana (name changed) who was trafficked by a woman she met on a local train.

Ruksana had a two-year-old daughter who could not be rescued when she was. Amina, along with volunteers of her organisation, took the police into confidence and made repeated visits to Delhi to rescue the baby girl.

'In present times when there is so much talk of women's empowerment and feminism is a dominant discourse, not very far from Kolkata women are being treated as a commodity and traded like cattle from one brothel to another.

I cannot live with this and will work tirelessly to fight it,' Amina said. For Amina and her volunteers, rescues of girls from Delhi, Bombay, Pune and other areas of the country is only half of the job done.

'The real challenge begins when the woman returns. The social stigma she has to deal with and how she can sustain herself and continue her legal fight for justice,' Amina said.

BSS begins with psycho-social counselling, healing the trauma of abuse and telling the girls that they are not responsible for what has happened to them. Of late, Amina has been trying to rehabilitate the girls by ensuring that victim compensation is given to them.

'Since victim compensation is a long drawn process, I am trying to impart to them certain skills like tailoring,' she said.

Amina's organisation has still not got much of institutional support either from the government or from other organisations, but she is carrying on her work with sheer determination. ' There are many who will fund a social gathering, a religious occasion but shy away from investing in the rehabilitation of our daughters which is a far greater service to humanity,' Amina said.

'Breaking the Margin: Tales of the Unsung Heroes', an initiative of West Bengal Minorities' Development and Finance Corporation(WBMDFC) , presents examples of inspirations, hopes, and accomplishments. We are pleased to present the the stories of individuals drawn from the minority communities, who fought all kinds of odds and broke the barriers of stereotype. They triumphed over deeply entrenched poverty to set the examples for emulations. The first aim of the series is to capture the journey of different individuals, what were the enabler and triggering points that moved these heroes to embark upon the path travelled by a few people. The second principle guiding our this effort is to tell the stories of these unsung heroes to motivate others, especially those who come from similar backgrounds. One of the common threads running across every profile is the story of grit and determination.

Sustain the stories: Nominate your own unsung hero

There are many such stories of unsung heroes that remain unheard, this is the first attempt of this kind, we urge people to share such stories for another edition of this series. Your little effort can enlighten a large audience of an extraordinary achievers, and encourage a thousand of aspirants to emulate the stories who have cross the hurdles.

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