

# Positive Psychology: An Approach to Rehabilitation of Trafficked Victims

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**Abstract** - The subject of human trafficking has received renewed attention within the last two decades. This study was undertaken among the inmates of a destitute home run by a reputed NGO- 'Assam centre for Rural Development', Guwahati, Assam, India. The study was conducted with the following objectives-

- (A) The role of positive psychology in helping the trafficked girls to overcome from the mental trauma and disorders like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), mood disorders and depression.
- (B) How their experiences affect their reintegration in the society and re-construction of their social identity
- (C) How they rehabilitate with self-confidence, esteem and improve their economic condition.

Cases of three trafficked girls were being studied extensively and were followed till they were rehabilitated. In-depth, semi structured interviews were conducted with the victims, two key persons of the NGO and other individuals. Thematic approach has been employed in data analysis. The findings report that positive psychology, indeed, plays a stupendous role in helping the victims to recover.

**Index terms**- Positive Psychology, Human Trafficking, Rehabilitation, Reintegration

## I. INTRODUCTION

Human trafficking has become a matter of great concern both at the national as well as the global level. According to the Institute of Integrated Development Studies (IIDS) and United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM, 2004), two million children are trafficked globally every year and almost half of them, under the age of seven, are forced to work in the sex industry. India, in addition to being a source for trafficking, is also a transit and destination country. Trafficking patterns in India demonstrates that about 90% of trafficking in persons that is TIP is domestic (i.e. interstate and intrastate) and 10% is international.

### *Girl trafficking in the North-east - an overview*

North East region of India consists of seven states Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur and Tripura- a home to 200 of the 430 odd tribal groups in the country. The seven month long study carried out by the Nedan Foundation, sponsored by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) observed that, trafficking in North East regions occurs at two levels- internal trafficking of children and women from conflict affected rural areas and on an international level- trafficking of women to South East Asian countries like Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Bangkok via Myanmar for various purposes like drug trafficking, labour, bar girl and prostitution. Also, NE region is the main source of domestic servants. The mushrooming domestic servant recruiting agents come to lure these unaware girls who then travel to different destinations with these traffickers. Some of the main reasons of being trafficked victims are due to ethnic group conflict, poverty, few employment opportunities, flood situation, and a look for glamorous world.

The recognition that trafficking is a serious problem has led to a number of initiatives to respond to the issues. In accordance to the legal framework in India, Article 23 of the constitution, "Guarantees right against exploitation; prohibits traffic in human beings and forced labour and makes their practice punishable under law." Although, no special schemes or surveys have been conducted in the NE region to address the issues of human trafficking, the various NGOs are involved in the anti-trafficking activities which consist of three main components- The social components of rehabilitation are intended to mainstream the disadvantaged children and marginalized or stigmatized women. The psychological components are meant to enhance the self-esteem of trafficked survivors or potential victims. Lastly, the economic components are focused on the economic empowerment of the survivors of trafficking (IIDS & UNIFEM, 2004). Among the various NGOs of the NE region let us discuss about the schemes and initiatives of a reputed NGO of Assam- 'Assam Centre for Rural Development.'

Assam Centre for Rural Development (ACRD) is a registered Non Government organization which came into existence in 1995. It includes various programmes of which UJJAWALA PROJECT deals with the Prevention and Rehabilitation for the girls who are victims of trafficking. (Under Ministry of Women & Child Development, Govt of India.) ACRD has been trying to generate awareness by organizing meetings on the issue of trafficking in the remote villages and also works with various psychologists in addressing the issues of the victims. The trafficked girls are brought to the Rehabilitation Home named Nava Jeevan (new life), set up by ACRD at village Sikarhati in Barihat, Palasbari circle of Kamrup District, Assam, where the women are kept for at least six months to one year until they are rehabilitated.

Positive psychology is the science of positive subjective experience, which studies concepts such as well-being, contentment, hope, optimism, flow and happiness and focuses on what makes life fulfilling (Sheldon & King, 2001). ACRD, in its project Ujjawala applies the tools of positive psychology and uses strategies like instilling of hope, buffering of strengths such as courage, insight, optimism, authenticity, perseverance, realism, pleasure capacity, future mindedness, personal responsibility and purpose. The ways in which ACRD helps these survivors to cope with their trauma are discussed extensively in the later sections.

This paper is organised in four parts. The introductory part introduces the study problem and presents the objectives of the study. The second part describes the data source and methodology of the study. While results and discussion are presented in the third part, conclusion is presented in the final part.

## II. DATA SOURCE & METHODOLOGY

*Participants-* Three participants (trafficked girls) were interviewed and two key persons: Executive Director- Dr. Sunita Changkakati and Vice President Dr. Krishna Sharma of ACRD acted as the door openers and provided access to the trafficked returnees as well as to their documents, who were also interviewed later.

*Research Design & Procedure-* We have used the descriptive qualitative methodology to describe the cases. Unstructured, open-ended, in-depth interviews were the main source of primary data while the document search has provided the secondary data. Firstly the key persons of the NGO were contacted and the girls were interviewed. Daily visits were made to the NGO for about 2 months (28<sup>th</sup> May-15<sup>th</sup> July, 2012) to note how the inmates respond to the therapeutic sessions. Finally after compiling all the information, thematic analysis of the data was carried out along with interpretation and reduction. The data analysis involves understanding the raw data and then breaking them into units of practical meaning that led to emergence of themes. Interview transcriptions, field notes and the documents collected were thoroughly studied and a summary was then drawn from the major themes.

*Ethical Consideration-* Since it is a sensitive topic the girls were informed about the interview beforehand and were asked to come forward voluntarily without any selection process. It was also clarified that the information provided by them will only be used for study purpose and will be completely confidential in order to avoid any negative impact on their life.

*Limitation-* This study does not represent the situation of the entire country which consists of more diverse and complex groups of people. Also the participants could not be pressurized to answer questions on sensitive issues.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As stated previously, three survivors were being interviewed. To protect the identity, each informant is referred to as a case. Details of each case are as follows-

CASE 1, (20 years) was promised a job in Mumbai, by her cousin, in the tailoring industry but was instead sold to a brothel in Mumbai, at the age of 16. She stayed in Mumbai for about a year and then was moved to another brothel in Kolkata where she stayed for 3 years. Finally after four years the police rescued her in a police raid, and brought her back to Assam but she refused to go back to her family. So she was handed over to ACRD where she is currently staying. Today she is an active member of the NGO, helping the other survivors to cope up. She is planning to start her own retail shop and also get married to the man of her choice whom she is currently seeing.

CASE 2, (27 years) was trafficked at the age of 18 years. She was lured by a man who promised to marry her and eloped with her. But instead he sold her to a brothel in Mumbai. She stayed there for 3 years and then voluntarily moved to Agra to earn more money, where she stayed for the next 4 years. She somehow managed to escape from one of the agents, by jumping on to a moving train when they were taking her to a far off place. She contacted the police and came back to Assam and landed up in ACRD. Today she is an active member and also a peer educator in the NGO. (Peer educator is to support the other returnees).

CASE 3, (20 years), was trafficked at the age of 16 to Delhi. She was lured by a trafficker, who promised her step father to get her a job in the carpet industry. But as the story goes, she was sold to a brothel, where she stayed there for two years. Finally, she managed to escape with the help of some kind Assamese boys who enrolled her in the NGO. She is a new member in ACRD and is still going through the process of recovery. She is also a victim of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and is having daily sessions with the psychologist.

As stated earlier, from the raw data, we have derived the three broad themes: a) understanding the trafficked experiences of the victims b) the rescuing experience c) experience of rehabilitation and the role of positive psychology in it.

### *a) Understanding the trafficked experience of the victims-*

The victims face various types of torture, humiliation, and lose their self identity and respect. Hence it is of great importance to understand the experiences of these survivors. In the interview, they were asked to narrate about their emotion, fears, expectations and anything that they wish to reveal.

(Case 1) says,

*Every day I was beaten and was forced to sleep with 10 clients per night. I used to starve as I was given very little food to eat. 'Malkini' (the owner) poured hot and cold water over my body to get rid of the scars. I was forced to drink 'laupani' (alcohol). I had to put on a lot of makeup and wear pretty clothes and then go around with the clients. If I refused, I was threatened that I would be hanged.*

Case 2 also shared her experience of getting pregnant and having an abortion:

*I became pregnant once in the brothel but I could not go for abortion, as it was too late. Even during pregnancy, I had to satisfy clients. I delivered the baby in the brothel but since they did not feed the baby well, it died.*

She even recalls that:

*Our owner used to give us contraceptive pills so that we do not conceive. Because of the frequent usage of the pills, I used to feel dizzy and weak. But no one cared. We were treated as machines which are made to give pleasure.*

Case 3, silently weeps and recalls:

*Once a little girl of 7 years was forced to satisfy a client but she refused it. The pimp physically tortured her and raped her several times. I was angry and sad and disappointed and felt helpless. I spent nights crying, thinking of the trauma that she had to go through.*

The victims were tortured in many ways. They had to serve many clients in a night. The constant use of contraceptive pills made them extremely weak and fragile. Many of the girls suffered from Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) and also from other diseases like tuberculosis, jaundice etc. Indeed the statements of the informants demonstrate the presence of psycho-socio and mental tortures committed to trafficked women and girls. While Case 3, narrated the tale of the little girl, she was deeply disturbed and got aggressive and had to be calmed. She even mentioned that nights after she encountered the incident, she could not sleep and had disturbing dreams, which are clear signs of PTSD. Moreover the Vice President of the NGO stated that, these girls were trapped in a never ending debt cycle because the relatives who sold them, frequently visits the agents and claim for more money. As a result, the girls are abused even more to clear off the debts. He succinctly stated: "*Once sold it is forever*".

To sum up, we can say that the narratives of the victims clearly states that the trafficked girls go through a lot of physical and mental stress. They are forced to work against their will, locked in rooms, forced to use drugs, and hence they faced all kinds of humiliation, depression, mood disorders which ultimately leads to their loss of identity.

### *b) Rescuing Experience*

In this study the informants stated that, they were rescued through various means. They rescued themselves, or with the help of police or with the support of local boys. Here all three of them have different rescuing experiences but the common thing that all three of them accepted was, "we believed and were optimistic about returning back."

However, it was sad enough that, even after being informed about the rescue of the girls, many parents did not respond. Case 3 recalls:

*I was overjoyed with the idea of going back home. But my father and mother refused to recognise me and told that I am no more alive for them. They had no emotions..... I believe, staying in ACRD was my best decision (sighs).*

However, interview with the key persons revealed that there were many cases where the parents accepted their daughters and even helped the police to track the agents. But in most of the cases, the girls refuse to reintegrate in the society due to fear of their family honour being ruined. Also, it was found that, those who were supported by their parents recovered much faster and developed self respect and identity. Hence, both the key persons stated that establishing familial contacts, and counselling the family members, is also a responsibility, taken care by ACRD.

Thus, we can sum up by saying that, these trafficked girls are perceived as objects and treated with no respect at all which demoralises them, leading to low self esteem and loss of personal identity. They get conditioned to the fact that they are not respectable citizens and hence get comfortable with the idea of people calling them out with names and abusing them. Indeed this has given rise to the questioning of their own self identity as to who they are, can they lead a normal life, should they be treated as equals and so on.

### *c) Experience of rehabilitation in ACRD and the role of Positive Psychology*

All three victims stated that, although they wanted to escape but were reluctant to think of any such plans due to the threatening of the brothel owners and the agents. During the rescuing process they have developed a certain understanding of their self. Moreover they were also scared of the social stigma, shame and the fear of rejection that they and their family might have to face and hence they found themselves in the dilemma. Case 1 comments:

*I did not want to go back to my family after staying 7 years in a brothel. I did not want my siblings to face problems because of me. I have a younger sister, and my return would have been a huge problem in her marriage.*

They happily agreed that life for them in ACRD has been a wonderful experience. It has given a new meaning to their life and has helped them gain confidence and most importantly, self esteem.

As described above, UJJAWALA PROJECT works for the prevention and rehabilitation of the girls who are victims of trafficking. And positive Psychology is the science of positive subjective experience. Frederickson (1998) have also stated that

positive emotions also build physical, intellectual and social resources which increase survival. Promoting positive feelings enable the individual to develop psychologically and emotionally, and physically. (Seligman & Pawelski, 2003). So thus we see, building positive emotions with sexual abuse survivors is a goal that should be pursued in therapy, as desensitization work with the survivors is not enough to build back their strengths. Individuals who have experienced sexual abuse may also have a poor self-image, lower self-esteem, relationship difficulties and other characteristics that can affect their sense of self and their interaction with others. Helping clients who have experienced sexual abuse to construct positive emotions could support them in communicating differently with themselves and with others. (Hansen *et.al*, 1998).

Ujjawala Project, in its various schemes, has made wide use of positive psychology and its tools to address the issue of human trafficking. Some of the ways are:

The survivors are encouraged to narrate their life stories and also retelling them from a new perspective. They are kept busy and are taught to sing, perform drama, recitation, dances, to play indoor and outdoor games etc. The girls are imparted training on different income generating activities like hand loom, tailoring, doll making, flower making and beautician course etc. so that they can earn income through these trades and lead a better and dignified life. Prayer, meditation, physical exercises, indoor and outdoor games, etc are also day to day activities of the girls to keep them engaged and forget their past. Some of the other facilities provided to the inmates in Nava jeevan are non formal schooling for both the illiterate and literate girls so that they can read and write in Assamese and English. A library has been set up for the girls to study books on various subjects. The inmates are provided legal support service in case of requirement at Nava jeevan. Some of the girls have been engaged in different jobs after they have completed their stay in Nava Jeevan. It has been found after follow up study that a few girls have got married and lead a normal life with their spouses. Many girls have started small enterprises by opening tailoring, beautician work, hand loom etc. after going back to their villages.

**Table 1- Girls rescued and trained by ACRD**

1.	Total no. Of girls rescued and trained in Nava jeevan	201
2.	Presently no. Of girls residing at Nava jeevan	25
3.	No. Of girls so far trained in different trades	
A.	Beautician	22
B.	Weaving	20
C.	Tailoring	75
D.	Soft toy making	8
4.	No. Of girls who started small enterprises after returning to their villages	
A.	Beauty parlour	9
B.	Tailoring shop	10
C.	Weaving unit	3
D.	Sales girls/ guards	6
E.	Got married	25
F.	Re admitted to school and continued education	23



Fig.1. Handloom training



Fig. 2. Tailoring

#### *Measuring Subjective well-being and strengths of character*

A person’s cognitive and affective evaluations of his or her life are subjective well being.” (Diener et al. 2002) According to Lubin & Van Whitlock (2004 ), considering the components of well-being—the presence of positive emotion, the absence of negative emotion, and a cognitive judgement of satisfaction and fulfilment- is important to all individuals and even to the most troubled ones. A happy and engaged life consists of using one’s strengths and talents to achieve flow. Also one must measure one’s own positive character traits like, interests, talents, and strengths. The ACRD psychologist, encourages the girls to write about their positive experiences, their strengths, things that they love, what makes them proud of themselves etc, for 20 minutes, on three consecutive days, for several weeks. This helps the girls to identify their own strength and power. Also the girls were asked to write about five things for which they were thankful. The girls reported feeling better about the lives in general, more optimistic about the coming week and being more connected to others.

Such exercises make the girls happier and less depressed. They were higher in life satisfaction and positive effect. The survivors are taught to use their own strengths and look forward to their lives with hope and optimism. They are also given the task of writing stories about themselves, portraying themselves to be the best.

Moreover, these positive interventions build pleasure, engagement and meaning. Feelings of positive emotions like gratitude, love, kindness, buffer individuals from stress. Thus we see positive strategies are active and specific ingredients for a normal, healthy life. It helps an individual to use one's strengths and face challenges.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This study identifies that the girls go through tremendous pressure, humiliation and trauma, both physically and mentally. Even after getting rescued, due to fear of stigma and rejection by the society, they refuse to reintegrate back to their earlier lives. But I/NGOs play a great role in rehabilitating the girls. We have especially discussed upon the schemes and projects of ACRD. Here we have examined the stupendous role played by positive psychology in helping the victims come back to lives. Also it is important to raise awareness on the issues of trafficking and the various rights that a victim has in the society. We must view the victims positively and help them build up confidence and self respect.

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