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# The Politics of 'Giving Back' and its Effects on the Autonomy of Women after Sex Trafficking

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# The Politics of 'Giving Back' and Its Effects on the Autonomy of Women after Sex Trafficking

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8<sup>th</sup> of May, 2009

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In the field of humanitarian service, advocates have the intentions of speaking on behalf of those they represent. Many activists and organizations seek to 'give back' to those in need of food, shelter and social services. But, does 'giving back' really help? This essay explores the politics and hierarchies of humanitarian aid to discover if independence and agency for aid recipients can be achieved. On the path to independence, what are the obstacles that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and activists create for the underprivileged? Are there effective frameworks and methods for advocate organizations to approach the underprivileged?

Authors such as Columbia University professor Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak questions whether any agency can be achieved while Bengali activists such as Samarajit Jana, Nandinnee Bandyopadhyay, Mrinal Kanti Dutta and Amitrajit Saha argue that agency is attainable by providing tools for the underprivileged to empower themselves. Using my own observations from working at All Bengal Women's Union in Kolkata, India, I review and analyze the attempts of this organization to empower women and girls to determine whether the underprivileged *can* speak.

My work in the All Bengal Women's Union in Kolkata in Spring 2008 allowed me to spend personal time with young women who were sexually exploited. The women I met left such an indelible impression on me that I brought their voices and causes back with me. Every day I saw the pain of these girls, struggling to overcome their violent past. And every day, I saw their endless ability to continue to dance, to smile, and to love. Our sisterhood pushed me to promote awareness of sex trafficking and to identify the best methods of rehabilitation that value their voice.

After reviewing previous literature and theory discussing if the underprivileged have a voice, I began my participant observation and field research at All Bengal Women Union during the months of January to April in 2008. Using my ethnographic data, I examine the programs and initiatives put forth by All Bengal Women's Union as well as reviewing material published by the NGO. The approach of analyzing the organization's efforts is significant; the concern is not the intentions and mission of the organization, but the process and outcomes it has on the women. Instead of looking at the organization as a whole, my approach is to view it's effectiveness from the perspective of the female clients.

This essay concludes there are good and bad approaches towards the path of victim empowerment, but ability of voice and agency can only be determined by the underprivileged. While a structure like All Bengal Women's Union posses the ability to oppress its constituents, critically analyzing approaches and methods in dialogues with its privileged and underprivileged members can lead to more effective strategies. In order for women and girls after trafficking to have a voice in society, critical and opposition structures like All Bengal Women's Union must exist to serve a space to achieve agency, a space where they can demand their choice.

It is best to be critical of one's intentions of 'helping' the subaltern, and to listen more often - perhaps the subaltern are speaking but we are not listening.

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### The Question of Agency

She beams as I hand over the correct number of rupees for my purchase. In Kolkata, India, the organization called All Bengal Women's Union provides health and social services to young women and girls who have been victims of violence many from commercial sex exploitation. In a stone auditorium behind the green courtyard, a craft fair begins on a bright Saturday afternoon in March, just a year ago. This women's union provides vocational training to its members to learn skills to achieve independence. Enthusiasm radiates from the girls who stand in pride behind their handmade pieces: maroon salwar kameez, yellow baby dresses, rose embroidered tablecloths and napkins, candles shaped like animals, and journals from recycled paper.

As she places the lopsided purple elephant candle in a plastic bag, the young woman of about 15 years old smiles and hands over her craft to me. Her optimistic brown eyes share with me her pride in herself, how her hard work paid off, and now she has ten rupees all to herself.

In the field of humanitarian service, advocates have the intentions of speaking on behalf of those they represent. Many activists and organizations seek to 'give back' to those in need of food, shelter and social services. But, does 'giving back' really help? This essay explores the politics and hierarchies of humanitarian aid to discover if independence and agency for aid recipients can be achieved. On the path to independence, what are the obstacles that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and activists create for the underprivileged? Are there effective frameworks and methods for advocate organizations to approach the underprivileged? In "Can the

Subaltern Speak” (1988), Columbia University professor Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak questions whether any agency can be achieved while Bengali activists such as Samarajit Jana, Nandinnee Bandyopadhyay, Mrinal Kanti Dutta and Amitrajit Saha argue that agency is attainable by providing tools for the underprivileged to empower themselves. Using my own observations from working at All Bengal Women’s Union in Kolkata, India, I review and analyze the attempts of this organization to empower women and girls to determine whether the underprivileged *can* speak. In my review I discover that there are good and bad approaches to victim empowerment, but strength of voice and agency can only be determined by the underprivileged.

Aid workers try to understand the plight of the people they ‘represent’ and seek to empower; however, they encounter the quiet yet dominant presence of privilege. What often occurs is that in trying to ‘give’ a chance to the underprivileged, they accidentally suppress them further. Analyzing language, when an advocate ‘gives’ to an underprivileged recipient, the advocate remains a privileged authority who is ‘so kind as to grant them these gifts.’ The advocate remains in power. The question is: can an advocate approach the lives of the underprivileged without recreating the hierarchy? In “Can the Subaltern Speak,” Spivak asks a similar question: can subaltern scholars truly reiterate the experiences of the postcolonial subaltern? In her essay, Spivak acknowledges the harsh postcolonial experiences of the economically underprivileged—experiences she describes as “epistemic violence” (p. 280) as well as the arduous path to protest these unwarranted situations.

## Representation and Assumption

In her critical deconstruction of representation and relations of power, Spivak reveals significant and oppressive mistakes made by advocates from the West. She begins with advocates' false dependence on verbal experiences by the subaltern, assuming they are universal. Spivak fears that the experience of one subaltern will become the single story to represent all subaltern people. This representation is disingenuous; it leads activists to assume that all subaltern need identical aid. Instead, there are many differences between people, cultures, locations, and the reasons for their marginalized states. Stepping in to 'help' them with one solution will not solve anything. An example Spivak gives is how Western feminists often universalize women's experience, assuming that a woman suppressed in one area equals the suppression she will receive in every area around the world. She acknowledges a great gap in experiences between women in different areas based on religious, social, historical, and political practices and ideals. The gap worsens between developed and developing nations, but can also differ within the same nation between different classes, ethnicities, and religions. While a woman can be taken advantage of in any part of the world, this does not mean that all experiences and reactions are the same.

Michael Shapiro (1988) agrees with Spivak, stating that:

...Representation is the absence of presence, but because the real is never wholly presented to us—how it is real for us is always mediated through some representational practice—we lose something when we think of representation as mimetic. What we lose, in general, is insight into the institutions and actions and episodes through which the real has been fashioned (p. xii).

He agrees that an immediate representation loses the impact of the historical context that created the marginalized situation. The act of representation errs in assuming the consciousness of the object—the underprivileged in this case. When a real situation is based on assumption, the voice of the object is silenced as the voice of the subject, the advocate, becomes stronger.

When the privileged construct the consciousness of the underprivileged, it is assumed that they have the same needs and demands of the privileged. However, by trying to fit the underprivileged into the privileged world, the hierarchy is recreated; this keeps them in an inferior position, forcing them back into a system that marginalized them in the first place. An example given by Arthur and Joan Kleinman (1997) is a picture that appeared in *The New York Times* in April 1993 of a child prostitute in Dhaka, Bangladesh:

The prepubescent girl is shown bare-chested, wearing a Lolita smile, a tousled adult hairstyle, many bangles on her arm, earrings and a necklace...Outside the context of a major newspaper, this picture would qualify as child pornography. The purpose of this picture and the accompanying story is to expose the degradation of child prostitution...But the picture simultaneously appeals, probably not entirely without intention, to a prurient sensibility. It is clearly not enough to picture a child's body for sale; the picture needs to recreate the atmosphere of sexual desire. Thus the media, by the success of its artistry, gets caught up in the very processes it seeks to criticize (p. 11).

The picture's intention was to give a voice to the voiceless, to capture the child's life as trafficked and spread awareness to end commercial sexual exploitation. But this image exploits her further; her face and condition are commodified to gain profit

from magazine sales. The consciousness and identity of the young girl is constructed by the photographer in the name of activism. According to Spivak, when the privileged constructs the consciousness of the underprivileged, the epistemic violence hides under the advancement of learning and activism, and “the subaltern woman will be as mute as ever” (p. 295).

A similar concept is Michel Foucault's (1995) theory of docile bodies. Foucault writes in *Discipline and Punish* that “a body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved. And that this docile body can only be achieved through strict regiment of disciplinary acts” (p. 136). People are considered to be unruly. In order to remain in society, they are manipulated and remolded to become productive bodies. In the case of the subaltern, the underprivileged are constructed as marginalized, deviant, and ‘needy.’ Under the guise of activism, advocates ‘give’ resources to the underprivileged that, yet again, construct them into becoming ‘valuable’ in society's eyes. The subaltern will now be valued and objectified by the very society that demonized them initially.

In questioning whether the subaltern can speak, Spivak reveals an undertone of privilege when one ‘speaks for’ the poor rather than them speaking for themselves. It is ethnocentric and essentialist for scholars to ‘speak on behalf of’ those who cannot. Spivak (1988) notes that if subalterns must prove their identity as a subaltern, they will, in fact, be re-instated into their inferior position in their society (p. 293). The construction of the subaltern as an object depends on the privileged: you are only subaltern if the privilege exists. Having to prove that one is inferior in order to gain aid reinforces one's low status on the social pyramid. The privilege lies in the ability

to judge who is subaltern and the ability to 'bestow' resources upon those proven worthy.

Arthur and Joan Kleinman give an example of the underprivileged proving their inferiority. In "Cultural Appropriations of Suffering in Our Times," the Kleinmans reveal the World Bank's economist table to measure the cost of suffering by cause and region (p. 12). The World Bank created the chart to give higher priority to those who suffer the most. It demands each person needing aid to prove their suffering in order to fit on this particular scale. Though the intention of the chart was to allocate resources to the worst of areas, it forms a social space where people fight to prove their inferior situation in order to receive aid. The privileged bank has the power as the recipients struggle to demonstrate their dire need for resources or aid.

What Spivak believes is key is starting a dialogue with a subaltern person rather than speaking for him or her. Spivak (1988) uses the example of Western feminists: through verbal exchange, an activist or scholar "'unlearns' female privilege. This systematic unlearning involves learning to critique postcolonial discourse with the best tools it can provide and not simply substituting the lost figure of the colonialized" (p. 295). While Western-taught feminists are oppressed in their own society, the experiences faced in other places differ tremendously. When an activist universalizes the consciousness and the needs of the underprivileged, the underprivileged will be poorly represented. This inaccurate representation must be recognized and criticized in their relationship with the subaltern. What becomes crucial is for the privileged to listen to the needs and demands of the underprivileged rather than what the privileged activist believes is needed.

After reviewing the history of *sati* in India, Spivak concludes that the subaltern cannot speak. She compares the post-colonial scholars to those who wish to save Indian women from the patriarchy of Indian society. The term 'good' is a key element: for it is the view of the privileged elite, whether it be an imperialist or an activist, to bestow upon the subaltern. Spivak reveals that imperialists try to impose a 'good' society to save their colonies from 'bad' cultural practices (pg. 298) while advocates try to 'save' the underprivileged who have been subjected to 'bad' lives with their 'good' and 'effective' institutions and methods. Forcing the 'good' methods to 'save' marginalized groups further reinstates the underprivileged into an inferior position and blames them for their subordinate state. The tone of authorization from the elite does not speak for the subaltern, but furthers the silencing of them. With their initially suppressed position that is reinstated with aid and resources—the marginalized can neither speak for themselves, and can never be accurately represented.

According to Spivak, the underprivileged are marginalized so long as the avenues to independence and autonomy are blocked. Without agency, these groups have no choice in consenting or resisting hegemonic powers and hierarchal system. This lack of freedom constructs them to be inferior, marginalized and controlled by those in power. However, to challenge Spivak, are there ways in which the relationship of the underprivileged with the privileged and their institutions can be empowering, rather than recreating the varying degrees of power?

### The Possibility of Agency after Sexual Exploitation

Women who are victims of sex trafficking fall under the category of the underprivileged. Simply put, sex trafficking is the forced migration of women and girls<sup>1</sup> to cities where sex is exchanged for money. Sex industry profits seldom reach the hands of the women and girls providing the services; instead they go to the brothel owners, pimps or traffickers themselves. Socio-economic factors, gender inequality, migration to cities through globalization and industrialization, and corrupt legislation are pulling, pushing and keeping women in systems of commercial sexual exploitation.

The exploitation occurs out of the social idea that women can be controlled and objectified by men. As Kathryn Farr (2005) states, “the forces that lead to the organization of the sex trade, and the demand for it, are rooted in patriarchal constructs about women and men” (p.164). Class and status of economic power within the increasing global economy contributes to the demand for sex tourism. Saskia Sassen (2002) writes that “as Third World economies on the periphery of the global system struggle against debt and poverty, they increasingly build survival circuits on the backs of women....Through their work and remittances, these women contribute to the revenue of deeply indebted countries” (p. 255-6). In this case, women who are trafficked are vulnerable and silent in several ways: female, poor, and being from a postcolonial peripheral country. In “A Tale of Two Cities: Shifting the Paradigm of Anti-Trafficking Programmes,” (2002) Smarajit Jana, Nandinnee Bandyapadhyay, Mrinal Kanti Dutta and Amitrajit Saha write:

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<sup>1</sup> In some situations, young men and boys are also trafficked for sexual exploitation.

The most critical element of trafficking is not necessarily the process through which a person is trafficked...rather, it is the outcome of that process that is instrumental in leaving the trafficked person with little or no option to leave the place or position in which they find themselves" (p. 70).

Bengali women activists<sup>2</sup> Jana, Bandyopadhyay, Dutta and Saha examine trafficking from the perspective of grassroots sex worker organizations. Addressing patriarchal legislation controls, they confront the Bangladeshi government when a law was created that prevented single women from traveling across its borders as a pre-emptive strike against sex trafficking. This act violated the rights of all female citizens by stereotyping and universalizing women's experiences.

Also addressed by Jana et al. (2002) is the lack of standard<sup>3</sup> methods by NGOs and state agencies who implement rescue and rehabilitation programs. There are many instances where a woman is sold into the sex industry, either by her family, pressures of poverty, or illusions of better jobs. The police will 'rescue' them and force them into a remand home to undergo 'rehabilitation,' where there have been cases of further abuse. Jana et al. notes that most women have two options: enter rehabilitation or be sent to jail (p. 73); as if it is *their* crime for being exploited, and are only given the choice to repent or be punished. To leave some programs, parents must take custody of the woman or girl. In some cases the family cannot be found or they refuse to claim her for she has shamed her family. Jana et al. (2002) questions "whether forced 'rehabilitation' ought to be seen as trafficking too" (p. 73).

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<sup>2</sup> The authors are advisors for Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee.

<sup>3</sup> Even if an approach is 'standard or universal' – it can be yielding to different circumstances.

Despite the ineffectiveness of the aforementioned attempts to stop trafficking, Jana, Bandyopadhyay, Dutta and Saha feel that better methods can be found:

If the basic objective of our anti-trafficking efforts is to enhance the well-being of the individual and help improve her livelihood options, then the role of that individual and that of other third parties involved in the individual's rescue and rehabilitation should come under scrutiny (p. 75).

Jana et al. feel that the first step is to recognize agency within the women victims; “those who have been trafficked should not be perceived as passive victims of their circumstances, manipulated by others, but as human agents, who can—and often do—fight to gain control over their lives” (p. 69). Arguing against Spivak, Jana et al. state that agency can be claimed by the subaltern in an organization that recognizes a positive role of human agency.

To prove that positive methods of human agency exist, they turn to the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC)<sup>4</sup>, one of the largest organized groups for sex work based in Kolkata. The organization provides vocational training to women and girls who seek alternative employment after trafficking. Through the concept of self-regulatory boards, the DMSC has information channels to reveal traffickers, provide health services, and continue communication women who left the program. Many services provided by the DMSC are collaborations with other organizations and NGOs. The DMSC also recruits daughters of sex workers to teach education programs for sex workers. Sixty percent of the members of the self-regulatory boards are sex workers, a method used to help prevent exploitation and violation of human rights within the

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.durbar.org/index.html>

sex economy. Through such initiatives, the DMSC listens to the voices of its clients and provides resources for women who desire control over their lives.

Jana et al. (2002) argue that “the direct participation of those who are trafficked in preventing and ameliorating the effects of trafficking is both ethical and effective” (p. 71). The victims are fighting for their own autonomy, as well as their high risk peers in the design and maintenance of forward efforts. Jana et al. state:

Sex workers' and trafficked persons' demands for the right to self-determination and autonomy represent an ideological challenge not just to the prevalent development practices by NGOs, but to all discourses that reduce marginalized people, particularly women, to being submissive victims of their circumstance, devoid of human agency, and unable to steer their own destiny unless 'rescued' through the benevolence of others (p. 78).

With different approaches and frameworks, such as self-regulatory boards, the role of the NGO can tune to become more effective for the women who are seeking the path to agency. As Jana, Bandyapadhyay, Dutta and Saha conclude (2002), these methods “ensur[e] the community's right to self-determination” (p. 78).

### Methodology

My work<sup>5</sup> in Kolkata, India gave me perspective as to the positive and negative effects that NGOs can have on the development of agency for marginalized groups. For four months I worked four hours a day for five days a week at All Bengal Women's Union (ABWU)<sup>6</sup>. Since 1932, ABWU has offered various services such as shelter,

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<sup>5</sup> I receive this position through the study abroad program International Partnership for Service Learning and Leadership (<http://ipsl.org/>) during

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.abwu.org/>

counseling, education and skills training to thousands of women and children to integrate them back into the world after violent experiences. Their main commitment is to restore the rights and dignity of women who have been trampled upon. The young women and girls admitted to the shelter are “lost, abandoned, below poverty line, under moral danger, abused, [and] neglected” (All Bengal 2006 p. 34). One pamphlet states that ABWU is creating “new rehabilitation programs and work centers to help the needy to become self-reliant” (All Bengal 1998). To meet this goal, they have a series of different programs and facilities to cover the basic needs of the women and girls who have been marginalized from society.

The first two hours of my day was spent in one dormitory called the Mid-way Home where I would help 20 girls 7-18 years-old prepare for school. The following two hours of my day were spent in two classrooms: the Non-formal School with 25 students, 4-14 years old; and the Primary School with 50 students, four and five years old. The Mid-way Home and Non-formal School exist to ease the transition from living and working on the streets to working in the education system. Most of the young women and girls I worked with were new to the program. During my time there, I took notes on my observations and experiences within the organization as well as my interactions and conversations with the students, staff and upper management.<sup>7</sup>

### Case Study

When I began my work at the shelter, Ankita<sup>8</sup> and I became fast friend. Her crooked teeth mirror the curves of her mouth that form a mischievous smile. She

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<sup>7</sup> In my research I ignored reviewing ABWU finances. For NGOs, money fluctuates, so the structure and approach should remain regardless of monetary status.

<sup>8</sup> To protect the anonymity of these women, the names have been changed.

grew up in a small village outside of Dhaka, Bangladesh. Her mother left her family for the wealth of Dubai. Soon her father and younger brother followed, leaving Ankita to her uncle. Scrambling for money, her uncle sold her to a trafficker. The man illegally brought her to India. Sold again she was to another man who began to sell her body for sex every day. Abuse occurred to her body and mind as she was exploited daily for two years. The police interfered and caught the man who brought her to India and found the brothel she was in.

Ankita arrived at ABWU, her heart empty but her belly full of the growth of an unwanted child. ABWU paid for her abortion. She is now 17. Though it was a legal medical procedure, something went wrong for there are frequent jolts of pain in her abdomen. She might not be able to have children; but that is inconsequential because it is difficult to find a husband with the stigma attached to her. The man who trafficked her is on trial and she must testify at the hearings. The trial proceedings keep her from returning to her home in Bangladesh. Despite the allegations made toward her uncle, Ankita wants to go back to him and his wife because they are the only family she knows. While she is at ABWU, she learns to stitch as a part of her vocational training and is constantly giggling.

Another young girl named Raii has a beautiful slender hands and loud voice. Raii is very aggressive with many outbursts of anger. While she craves attention and love, she is hidden by the estimated 45 scars all over her body. ABWU shaves the girls' heads when they arrive to get rid of lice. On Raii's beautiful head, there were at thirteen little scars where hair can't grow anymore. The police brought her here after finding her on the street. Therapy revealed that she was abused by her parents.

Her parents and sisters, who might also be abused, cannot be found. I never found out the results of the doctor's examination to see if she was sexually assaulted.<sup>9</sup>

### Findings and Analysis

All Bengal Women's Union has three dormitories for females ranging in ages: children, young adults and older women. Each shelter provides meals, sleeping arrangements and bathing facilities for the females residing within their property. A physician is available for sudden illnesses and scheduled check-ups to ensure that they are healthy.<sup>10</sup> These services are provided for free. One student of mine became HIV positive after being raped daily in a brothel, and the anti-retroviral medication needed to survive with HIV/AIDS is extremely expensive. Through ABWU's sponsorship program, the young woman is set up to receive monthly financial support that pays for her medication. On the side of health, ABWU provides essentials needed to live and develop with a strong body.

Each dormitory has a 'house mom' that oversees the activities of the girls. The house mothers also receive course training in child development and psychology to ensure a healthy, stable environment for the girls (All Bengal 2006 17). This is helpful not only to the development of the new girls but to the career of the house mom; for she receives a letter of certification. Though the idea of having a house mother present seems helpful, one house mother expressed how she dislikes her job and was trying to find another. After complaining of no jobs being available, she often

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<sup>9</sup> I became extremely close with the girls, so much so that my nickname became: *paagli didi*, which translates as 'crazy older sister.'

<sup>10</sup> The women and girls arrive at the shelter with varying health conditions, typically from living on the street.

lounge around the dormitory when girls would act out towards each other. Though never abusive, she lacked care and patience with the girls. Her passive authority did not provide a secure, calm environment. Having a positive, dedicated role model would have a more profound impact on their path to self-agency<sup>11</sup>.

The Mid-way Home is the first dormitory for new clients. The reason is that the organization fears girls off the street bring bad habits of violence, addictions, and depression that they do not want the other girls to follow in their bad behavior. They are placed into the Mid-way Home until they are considered stable enough to move into the bigger home with the rest of the girls. Though the organization's intent is to protect the girls' development, this approach places blame on the young women for developing habits during lives within structural violence. While there is logic in separating unstable girls from stable ones, it is done under the assumption that the girls are solely at fault for their marginalized situation. Most habits are expressions of anger or fear, or survival tactics learned from the streets. The separation of the dormitories and placement into the Mid-Way Home states: 'you're not good enough—yet.' The patronizing attitude alludes that their 'bad' behavior is consequently and entirely the girls' fault. Many of my students competed with each other to receive a spot in the 'good' home and some girls were teased for being in the Mid-Way Home for a long time<sup>12</sup>. The competition between dorms is not beneficial; these girls should be working together and not divided among each other.

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<sup>11</sup> I only had solid interaction with one house mother. This observation is an isolated situation and is not to judge other house mothers or their role in the dormitory.

<sup>12</sup> Young girls like Raii, who has a difficult time in therapy and violent tendencies, stay in the Mid-way Home longer than most. She was often teased for it, causing her to become more violent out of embarrassment for not moving to the next dorm.

The girls are also given counseling from hired psychologists through the means of art therapy, drama therapy, group therapy and special one-on-one guidance<sup>13</sup>. As the girls have various histories that require unique attention, the psychologists provide different avenues of therapy to discover what works best for each girl. ABWU believes that the traumatized lives of their clients need this additional help to accept and overcome their past experiences. This acceptance of one's past should create a stable body and mind. I agree with ABWU that it is necessary to confront past demons in order to move forward with independence. With various approaches available, each client can recognize her self-worth and begin to establish a happy life for herself.

One of the strong methods I found to achieve victim agency was the drama therapy program. With one psychologist, fifteen of the girls from Mid-Way home gathered together to write a play based on their experiences during commercial sexual exploitation<sup>14</sup>. The play revolved around a girl in a rural village living with her family. She is first visited by a friend who has her own job in the city, and has nice clothes. The protagonist desires her friend's life and independence, and begs her mother for permission to move to the city. When the girl arrives in the city, the job market is not what it seemed. The play shows the ways in which the girl is vulnerable to trafficking; from having to sleep on the streets to running from traffickers and beaconing prostitutes. When the girl becomes afraid, she finds shelter at All Bengal Women's Union and is reunited with family.

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<sup>13</sup> The organization takes on different initiatives each year in an trial-and-error approach, to see what programs work best.

<sup>14</sup> Sometimes girls who were not victims of trafficking sat in on the sessions to support their friends' work. There was a sense of community created with this program that did not exclude any girl.

Before I left India, the girls insisted on performing their work for me<sup>15</sup>. They organized a dress-rehearsal in their auditorium space. When ABWU's upper management and board members heard of the impromptu performance, they wished to attend. Towards the end of March, the girls' put on their self-made performance for myself and twenty Bengali women who run the organization. First, the support from ABWU's upper management gave the girls great pride in their efforts. I then discovered that ABWU planned to produce the play as a community performance and invite families from the surrounding community to be the audience<sup>16</sup>.

The initiatives surrounding the performance achieve many goals of agency for the young women. First, as a therapy program, it allows the girls to reveal and alleviate some of the pain, fear and anger they experienced in their pasts. Sharing experiences with women of similar histories helps lessen feelings of alienation and self-blame. Second, the community learns from the performance by seeing the surrounding vulnerabilities of young girls and how commercial sexual exploitation manifests itself. The consciousness acquired can be brought back to the community to end the stigma of sex trafficking as well as becoming more aware to suspicious activity. This consciousness empowers the community to guard their families and neighbors. Third, if girls are discovered to be trafficked, the community now knows of a shelter to report to; a shelter that will care for them. Last and most importantly, the girls writing and performing will gain empowerment by having the space to be leaders and create an original work to educate their community. Empowerment extend to both the young women writers and the listening community.

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<sup>15</sup> The young women were always very eager to share their work and skills.

<sup>16</sup> I have not heard from ABWU to see if the performance occurred. The following observations are theories of its success.

Education is provided at ABWU and is seen as essential for the future independence the young women and girls. Different education is available; children and teens from different backgrounds can receive primary and secondary education based on their effort and intelligence. For older teens and women who are considered too old to receive basic education, ABWU provides skill training that would be of more helpful for them once they leave the shelter. In-house vocational training includes weaving, block printing, needlework, and cooking. It also supports a few women to receive computer, teaching, and paramedical training from outside-credited institutions.

The organization analyzes and places a new female into the instructional facility that would suit them best based on their age, background, measured intelligence and effort. The services offered are skills that will be useful for the careers of the women when leaving the shelter. The required placement is completed by ABWU and is comparable to the placements of the Mid-Way Home. This placement judges them as 'smart' or 'dumb.' Girls 'too old' or 'not smart enough' go to vocational trainings or the Non-Formal school. It is true that some young women arrive at 15 years-old and cannot write<sup>17</sup>—however, some girls never had the choice. An approach towards the girls' intelligence can be more sensitive to their career goals instead of, again, assuming their voices.

In embroidery section of vocational training, one instructor was a previous client of ABWU. Her presence can comfort the lives of the new students. The teacher has suffered similar experiences and went through the same process to

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<sup>17</sup> Like Western schools, there are standards to be placed in Indian schools. It is difficult to have a 15 year-old among 8 year-olds.

achieve independence at All Bengal Women's Union. She now has her own home and job. As an instructor to the girls, she has unique insight as to the problems they face.

The products the girls make during vocational training are sold. The organization gives the items to outside vendors and the girls receive a profit of what they created. As the girls reap the rewards from their hard work, they now have full agency as to how to spend their money<sup>18</sup>. Another strong strategy of agency was the week long craft fair mentioned at the start of this paper. With the fair open to the community and with the skills learned in training, the young women and girls presented their crafts. The young vendors had the opportunity to sell their products and handle their own financial transactions. At the end of the week, they were allowed to keep their money. With their training put into action, there was a sense of empowerment as the girls' new talents were being rewarded.

While many of the All Bengal Women's Union services are for young women and girls living on the premises, the organization also retains programs to serve the surrounding community. One example is the Primary School, which provides free education for children of the slums. A special addition to this program is the mid-day meal provided for all students. Many come from the surrounding slums without reliable sources of food. Struggling parents prefer their children to find odd jobs or beg instead of attending school, which puts them at a high risk of becoming trafficked, lost or killed<sup>19</sup>. Providing a meal allows for the parents to not have to choose whether to give their child food or an education—both needed and valued.

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<sup>18</sup> The salary received is never much more than Rp200, equivalent of around 6USD.

<sup>19</sup> In many families, the girl child is chosen to remain home while the boy is sent to school. This difference stems from societal ideas that a daughter is worth less than a son.

Another initiative is the Child Watch Programme created to survey the health in the surrounding slum areas. Since many current clients come from poor areas with little resources to obtain health services, ABWU strives to protect the families' health by sending out a van to medically cover over 50 families in the slums. The program recently introduced interaction with mothers who are adamant about improving the program. ABWU organizes health camps with mothers of the slums to discuss various health issues: AIDS, TB, diarrhea, prenatal care and family planning. This program, though small, is successful as it provides services for improving health and does not force change upon the families. ABWU heard the mothers of that area asking for health and safety information, then collaborated with them to improve their knowledge and conditions. Here is an instance where the underprivileged spoke and how an NGO could respond without dehumanizing or imposing them.

#### Conclusion: Where is their voice?

Of the effective strategies and approaches for the underprivileged, Foucault's concept of docile bodies is applicable. While many positive actions were taken towards building agency, the NGO must work within one framework: a capitalist patriarchy. At All Bengal Women's Union, the drama therapy was only performed because the theme and ending fit into the desires of the community. The protagonist's story, however, is not the common story; seldom do victims of sexual trafficking have happy endings. The craft fair trains the women to participate in society by giving them skills highly valued by the capitalist society—the same society that marginalized them in the first place, the same society that drives sex trafficking.

Also, most skills these women learn are 'feminine' skills, continuing to keep them in the patriarchal structure. The women are becoming independent, but only independent within the society that marginalized them. Lastly, judging the women on their intellect and behavior upon their immediate arrival into the institution divides the women into 'bad' and 'good,' placing blame upon them, then assuming their voice.

The programs for women who are trafficked at ABWU could be modeled on organizations like the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee. However, can All Bengal Women's Union escape their creation of docile bodies? Foucault argues that institutions, by nature, cannot guarantee the exercise of freedom and independence; structures are meant to control. However, Foucault (2007) also argues that approaches or institutions cannot be so rigidly divided between 'liberation' and 'oppressed.' He states, "there always remains the possibilities of resistance, disobedience and opposition" (Foucault 2007 p.11). If resistance does not succeed fully in overthrowing hegemonic power, we cannot assume that oppositional voices were not present. 'Failed resistance' is an oxymoron in that if an action is classified as resistance, it succeeded.

In the case of ABWU's young women and girls, though they are now entering into the oppressive structure, it is important to recognize that they are *entering* the structure; they are less marginalized and have found agency and expression in particular settings. With this agency, they now possess choices; the ability to make a decision is what defines agency. While structures possess the ability to oppress their constituents, critically analyzing approaches and methods, in dialogues with its

owners/privileged and clients/underprivileged members, can lead to more effective strategies. Also, the dialogue and exchange that occurs between the privileged and underprivileged is, in fact, itself a step towards empowerment for the underprivileged. For women and girls after trafficking to have a voice in the societal structure that oppresses them, critical and opposition structures like NGOs need to serve as a space to achieve agency, a space where they can demand their choice.

Can the subaltern speak? The answer lies within the subaltern. Who are we, as Western, or even Eastern, academics and activists, to claim that someone does not have self-agency? The identity conflict should be discovered and defined by those seeking self-agency. In creating spaces for agency, it is best to be critical of approaches to 'help' the subaltern to listen more often—perhaps the subaltern are speaking but we are not listening.

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