

## **SANGRAM STATEMENTS**

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### **1. Communication following prostitution raid by Meena Seshu, Director of SANGRAM, June 19, 2005**

***We believe that child prostitution is akin to child sexual abuse, molestation and child labor and that it exists in a society that is fraught with crimes of abduction, kidnap, rape, assault and violence against women. [VAMP statement 1996]***

For the last two weeks now, the 'foreign hand' has been trying its utmost to wreck havoc in the prostitutes' collective in Sangli district. Two foreigners, members of what we later came to know owe allegiance to an international NGO, Restore International, have raided Gokul Nagar and sought to 'rescue' the women and children there. In clear violation of the law of this land, they confined boarding school children who had come to visit their homes during the summer vacation, wrongly accusing them of being in prostitution!

This may sound completely far-fetched and unbelievable but the two Mr. Greg Malstead and his colleague who are allegedly US nationals, got an Indian Mr. Somling Kamble to file an FIR with local police as they are unable to do so themselves. Today 10 children are at the Children's Home even as the civil hospital has yet to certify 4 of them as minors. Younger sisters, who are majors, were set free whereas their older sisters were confined in the Home as minors! The drama started on .18/5/2005 when Malstead came to the brothels of Sangli to conduct a survey. He began distributing chocolates and when women from VAMP, the collective of women in prostitution, questioned the foreigner he treated them with disgust and disrespect as child abusers. He also got visibly angry with Bhimawa [Director, VAMP] who asked for his credentials.

He then contacted the District Superintendent of Police Mr. Bharambe and told him he had surveyed the area and that the survey shows that there are minor girls in the brothels. The police conducted a raid in Gokulnagar Sangli in plainclothes with strength of around 200 police personnel, mainly men, accompanied by Malstead. During the course of the raid, the police picked up two school going girls who had come home for school holidays. Pleading with the police only resulted in more accusations. Further, when one of SANGRAM's workers Mr. Sunil Terdale told the police that his sister is not in prostitution but lives with their grandmother in His sister was finally released as a `major' according to the medical examination.

Anyway the raid yielded 13 brothel owners and 35 `minor' girls. The girls were sent to the remand home in Sangli. The first medical report stated that there were only 4 minors out of the 35. The embarrassed police went for a re-exam and the resultant medical report stated that an additional 13 i.e. 17 of them, were minors ranging from 16-19 years of age!! The eighteen majors were released to their parents and the 17 sent to the Child Welfare Committee at the

instance of the lawyer from Prerna an NGO in Mumbai. The CWC then appointed a Probation Officer to investigate and submit a report regarding the parents of the 17 girls.

SANGRAM pleaded on behalf of the two school going girls who submitted their school credentials to the CWC. By the time they were released they had been in remand for 15 days. The International NGO did not come to their rescue much less make any effort to counsel them about this gross violation of their rights. Parents of the remaining 15 then appealed to the CWC that they should be given custody of their children and were also willing to give an undertaking that they will ensure that their children will not reach the brothels. They also had school leaving certificates for 12 of the girls stating that they were 18 and above. The CWC the released 9 girls to their parents on the basis of the PO report. The PO report of the remaining 6 girls is yet to be submitted to the CWC. Two of these girls are pregnant and constantly ill.

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The CWC the released 9 girls to their parents on the basis of the PO report. The PO report of the remaining 6 girls is yet to be submitted to the CWC. Two of these girls are pregnant and constantly ill. Meanwhile, Restore International came back to Sangli with a three-pronged attack:

1. To challenge the decision of the CWC to release the girls to their parents in the session's court.
2. To get Uttamnagar, Miraj [twin town to Sangli] raided that has yielded 4 girls [yet to be medically examined]. Local newspapers reported that Malstead himself participated in the raid, kicking the doors of the brothels viciously, to get the girls out. A reporter had to intervene and ask him to stop.
3. To counsel the six girls in the remand home to accept rehabilitation and an alternative lifestyle.

SANGRAM has also been asked to counsel the girls and are being accused by Restore International that we are asking them to remain in prostitution!

But the drama didn't end there. The foreigner, Malstead, returned to Sangli on 14/6/2005. The news spread like wild fire and the community of women in prostitution rushed to the remand home where he was sitting with his team. As soon as we got a call to the effect we first called the Police Inspector to rush to the remand home. We were worried that mass anger would result in some kind of harm to the foreigner and his team. When I arrived at the remand home I found

two foreigners [men] with two Indian women and around four Indian men in the courtyard. The community started surging forward and we were trying to keep them at bay. In the meanwhile one of the white men brushed past me, deliberately walking between my colleague Mr. Prashant Bhosale and me, while we were having a conversation. I was furious at his discourteous and rude behavior. Being white and male does not give anyone the right to behave in this manner. I quickly turned around and asked him not to threaten me by this rudeness wherein he replied that it was not his intention to do so. I said well, do not even try it. I am still amazed at this rudeness. Unconcerned, he put out his hand and literally barked at me without caring to identify himself first: "What is your name?" I did not like this abrupt manner that smacked of a very patronizing attitude. I said to him, "I do not shake the hands of a person like you", preferring to do a namaste instead. I left the premises.

I felt he was deliberately trying to intimidate me and instead of introducing himself, thought he could demand my name instead! I am yet to figure out if this is just male behavior towards a woman activist or worsened by the additional dimension of colour (white male behavior to any woman) or class (the rich white man from the global north vs poor woman from the global south)!

Even as this incident occurred, women from the VAMP collective were ranged outside the remand home and police were unable to push them back from the gates. They held chappals in their hands and shouted slogans against the team of Indians and foreigners but it was only on my personal intervention (after the local police officer. Mr. Chogule requested me to do so) that the women stepped back and allowed the team to leave.

But Malstead preferred to ignore his own behavior, focusing instead on my refusal to shake hands with him. He petulantly got his organization, Restore International to complain to our international supporters that I was rude because I did not shake hands with him or take kindly to his rude behavior!

### **Our position on young girls in the trade and on raids**

I feel it is necessary to put out what we believe and why we are opposed to raids as a method to stop young girls from entering the trade. Prostitution is a system that exists in a society fraught with inequalities. Gender inequalities, economic inequalities, caste, class and race contribute to a social fabric that is abusive of women's rights and the right of the girl child, and to a culture that does not value the girl child. The girl child is thus sacrificed at the altar of male dominated patriarchal systems that believes they exist to be molded to accept a sexuality that is actually detrimental to their health. Abject poverty, drought, famine, and economic inequalities complete the picture. While these structural issues are not the purview of this plea, they need to be kept in mind while we search for a solution that is best for the 'child in need of care and protection'.

What is the best solution for a 'girl child in need of care and protection'? A simplistic solution - such as raid and rescue- only offers patchwork relief, and takes away the rights of the girl child by inflicting untold violence on her in the process. The 'raid, rescue and rehabilitation' model blames the community, pushing it to a corner of no return. Such strategies that have violated the rights of the women in prostitution have not yielded good results for generations.

We need solutions that are long term and those that can be implemented effectively. We need strategies that will strengthen women to resist being pushed into those corners and build the will to reject the unacceptable and illegal violation and sexual abuse of the girl child. The collectivization of women in prostitution, which is a rights based approach, is one such strategy. It creates a space for women in prostitution to collectively look for solutions to their

problems. It helps them to access information and education about rights and to take informed decisions.

Sampada Grameen Mahila Sanstha, [SANGRAM] is a feminist organization that is working with women in prostitution for the past 12 years. The HIV/AIDS programme, which is a peer-based intervention with women in prostitution, has been accepted as a best practice by NACO, UNAIDS and UNESCO. The intervention led to the formation of a collective of women in prostitution called Veshya AIDS Muquabla Parishad [VAMP] registered in 1996. This collective of women has mohalla committees in each red light area, which is made up of key stakeholders in the area. They help the women to take decisions about any injustice in the area and also advise women on issues related to health, education of youth, the law related to prostitution. The collectives have been able to stem the transmission of HIV and have proved to be the best educators of their male clients.

The collective renamed itself Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad [VAMP] when it realized that collective strength could be used against goondas and other anti-social elements who were exploiting them. Lately, the VAMP mohalla committee also tackled brothel owners who are abusive and who extort money from the girls. This has been a slow process and has taken a long time to implement.

- The strategy to stop young girls/minors from entering prostitution is to strengthen and educate women in prostitution to stop child sexual abuse.
- Use of force, only pushes them underground and does not allow social workers to outreach them and educate them about the law.
- To build collectives that will teach them dignity and strengthen them to stop the menace of child trafficking and child sexual abuse.
- Communities should be taken into confidence to ensure that minors do not replace the ones rescued by the police.
- To help collectives appoint mohalla committees to watch over such women who break the law and pressurize them to remain within the law.
- To work with the police to keep anti-social elements outside the communities.
- To teach women their rights and help them fight for the same.

The issue of minor girls at present is one fraught with problems.

- The girls should be asked what they would like to be done with them
- If the girls want to return to their parents and the court is convinced that the persons present are indeed their parents and not the agents they should be given to their parents.
- Family as an institution is the best institution for minors.
- No state institution can take the place of the family and its extended support systems from birth to death.

*In 1991 before VAMP was formed and before SANGAM worked in this area, every brothel had minor girls in prostitution. Today, 'police and this organization found 35 of whom 31 are in dispute. Why is it that organizations that work for the rights of women in prostitution and sex work are considered pro trafficking, which is a criminal offence or pro minors in prostitution when it is clearly child sexual abuse.*

## **2. Communication following release of girls by Meena Seshu, Director of SANGRAM, July 19, 2005**

Dear all,

The raid and rescue saga ended with all the girls being released yesterday. They were raided and rescued but were not rehabilitated. Six of them after almost two months in custody though 31 of the 35 were adults/not minors.

As you know on 20/May/2005 a raid was conducted in Gokulnagar a red light district in Sangli, western Maharashtra, India. The police on the information given by Mr. Greg Malstead a U.S. national conducted this raid. Mr. Malstead used distribution of chocolates and condoms as his survey method. Mr. Malstead claimed he belonged to an NGO Restore International. We later found that this is not a registered organization but a Christian ministry started recently in South India by Mr. Malstead.

13 brothel owners and 35 girls were picked up in the raid and unfortunately two of the 35 were school going girls who had come home for their school holidays. The medical exam found 31 girls above the age of 18. But the embarrassed police asked for a re-exam and they submitted a report that 18 girls were above 20 and the rest between 16 to 19 years of age. The 18 girls were released to their parents.

The remaining 17 were transferred to the Child Welfare Committee on the instance of a lawyer from Prerna an NGO in Mumbai. They were remanded till further orders. Two of the school going girls, were then released to their parents. Unfortunately, one of the school going girls is so embarrassed by the incident she has refused to go back to school and threatens suicide if she is sent back. Nine girls produced school leaving and birth certificates as proof of them being above 18 but this was not accepted. This is actually against the law of the land. Anyway they were released to their parents.

Restore International went against this order of the Child Welfare Committee and the case is pending in the sessions court in Sangli. Four of the six remaining girls produced proof of age as above 18 to the sessions court representing themselves, as wrongfully remanded, despite being above 18 and they were also released to their parents.

The two girls who were actually minors were released on humanitarian grounds as they were found to be pregnant and were ill and pleading for their mothers.

Thus the saga ends.

## **3. Communication following HT article by Meena Seshu, Director of SANGRAM**

Dear all,

We strongly refute the charge that we are pro trafficking. This is a defamation of us as individuals and as an organization that works for the human rights of people in sex work. This accusation is so untrue. We protest this colonial manner of dealing with any resistance, dumping us as traffickers and criminals. After the girls were sent to the CWC, out of the seventeen, thirteen proved that they were majors by submitting authentic certificates of birth

proving they were adults. Out of the four left, two were school going girls and only two were minors. The CWC has the authority to release the girls and did so, To accuse us of influencing the CWC is also untrue!! Brothel owners are not members of SANGRAM that is totally untrue.

The MOU with Avert and I have documentation to prove the same, was on Mutual grounds and because we refused to sign the anti prostitution clause of USAID, not because we are traffickers! In fact there are external evaluations done by Avert society that strongly recommend that the SANGRAM project with women in prostitution should be made into a demonstration and training center, as a best practice. !!

#### **4. SANGRAM statement after the HT article, October 7, 2005**

##### INDIAN NGO SAYS NO TO US FUNDS, REJECTS IMPOSITION OF CONDITIONS

With regard to the article 'US accuses NGO of 'trafficking' by Rema Nagarajan in the Hindustan Times, Washington, September 29, 2005, we strongly refute the charge that SANGRAM supports trafficking for sexual exploitation. SANGRAM has been working on HIV/AIDS prevention and for the rights of people in prostitution for more than a decade. We oppose trafficking for any purpose and believe it is a criminal offence. We believe that the use of minors in prostitution is child sexual abuse. The thousands of women and children who have benefitted from our services and all of our actions and advocacy, which have always been subjected to public scrutiny, attest to our commitment to the end of the exploitation of trafficking. The accusations leveled against SANGRAM in the article are completely and shockingly unfounded. The completely untrue character of these accusations can only lead to the supposition that they have been fabricated because SANGRAM works in favour of the human rights and empowerment of all women, including women in prostitution, which is an idea that is threatening to conservative forces in the United States and elsewhere.

The HIV/AIDS prevention programme of Sampada Grameen Mahila Sanstha (SANGRAM) with women in prostitution is a peer-based initiative that seeks to motivate and empower women on issues concerning their lives and that of their community. This intervention led to the formation of a collective of women in prostitution called the Veshya AIDS Muqabla Parishad (VAMP) registered in 1996. In fact, external evaluations conducted by the AVERT society strongly recommend that the SANGRAM project with women in prostitution should be made into a demonstration and training center, as a best practice. This HIV/AIDS prevention programme with women in prostitution was also accepted as a best practice by NACO, UNAIDS, and UNESCO. The renowned international organization Human Rights Watch recognised the work of SANGRAM and VAMP as an outstanding example of a human rights-based response to HIV/AIDS as it conferred its annual Human Rights Defender award on the SANGRAM general secretary in 2003.

The MOU between SANGRAM and Avert society [USAID] was terminated on mutual grounds because of SANGRAM's refusal to comply with the conditions imposed by the United States' Leadership Against Global HIV/AIDS Act of 2003. The US Embassy in Delhi has also confirmed in writing on October 6, 2005 to SANGRAM that, "funding was not removed from SANGRAM for trafficking in persons".

However we would like to state that we oppose the conditions and moral strings that the US conservatives attach to foreign funding, especially around HIV/AIDS in developing countries. India's HIV/AIDS policy guidelines as put out by National AIDS Control Organization [NACO] is explicit in supporting high risk groups including sex workers to combat HIV/AIDS.

Earlier this year, even the Government of Brazil, refused a grant of 40 million US dollars from the United States. Pedro Chequer, director of Brazil's AIDS program and chair of the national commission (which includes cabinet ministers, scientists and AIDS advocates) that decided to refuse the grants, viewed the Bush administration policy as "interference that harms the Brazilian policy regarding diversity, ethical principles and human rights." (The Wall Street Journal, May 2, 2005). Since then, two respected international organizations that provide services to people at risk of HIV/AIDS, DKT International and the Open Society Institute, have each brought a lawsuit against the United States government on similar grounds. These legal actions allege that requiring HIV/AIDS service organisations to denounce prostitution as a condition of receiving US support is both against the spirit of working respectfully with at-risk persons and a violation of the right of civil society organizations to free expression.

We protest the manner of the United States dealing with aid to developing countries with strings attached. We have seen this time and time again with programs such as India's family planning/population control, structural adjustments programs, the TRIPS agreement, and environmental issues, amongst others. SANGRAM and VAMP would not be true to our mission of local empowerment, including of all women and girls, if we succumbed to the dictates of people who do not apparently understand that victories against HIV/AIDS have been won when those most at risk are respected and empowered.

### **5. Raids, rescues, and unseen realities – SANGRAM statement**

On 24 October 2005, hundreds of women in prostitution in Sangli, a town in the western state of Maharashtra, marched to the collector's office to protest against Restore International, an international NGO, for harassing and terrorizing them.

Restore International rescues and rehabilitates children forced into prostitution and seeks prosecution of the perpetrators. Its website says that the organization is motivated by "Christ's mandate to care for the widow and orphan, heal the sick and bring justice for the oppressed. Living out these commands shapes our lives and actions." The organization typically works with the local police to initiate raids, rescue girls, and arrest brothel keepers in red-light districts.

In their memorandum, the protesting women demanded that the government of India investigate the presence of Restore International in the country. They also demanded that action be taken against two key officials of Restore - Greg Malstead and Bob Goff – for creating a law and order situation in Sangli. They said these two officials had initiated a smear campaign against a vulnerable and marginalized community of women in prostitution, which has collectively been fighting a heroic battle against the HIV/AIDS epidemic for almost 15 years.

The face-off between Restore International and this small community in Sangli started on 20 May 2005, when Restore raided a red-light area – with 60 policemen, 17 female police constables, and eight police officers. The raids, which were conducted with missionary zeal and thug-like brutality, spared no one: 2 school girls visiting their families were picked up as part of the 35 women and girls and 13 brothel-keepers who were arrested.

According to the law, only minors in prostitution may be rescued, not adult women. An initial medical report showed that only 4 out of the 35 were minors. Based on this, when SANGRAM (which has collectivized women in prostitution in this community) intervened to secure the release of *adult* women in prostitution – and the 2 school children, it was accused of 'thwarting the raids'. The two girls were actually school girls on an ordinary visit to their relatives; but the 'raiders' saw them only as trafficked minors. They were released after being in remand for 15 days.

In the following months, a vicious online campaign was launched against SANGRAM accusing the organization of trafficking minor girls. One such article said that USAID had stopped funding SANGRAM for thwarting rescue efforts – even though the US Embassy in Delhi confirmed in writing on 6 October 2005 that “United States funding for activities carried out by SANGRAM, was terminated by mutual consent of the Avert Society and SANGRAM.” Fueled by a frenzied moral climate of raids and rescues, the media dropped the plain truth for a more sensational story. Never mind that it wasn't true.

On 22 October, Greg Malstead and Bob Goff entered the red-light area without police support. They parked their car two streets away and sent in a decoy customer. The community intercepted this decoy, who was behaving suspiciously, and started questioning him. He told them he was waiting for his friend who had gone in to be serviced by a woman in prostitution, and would call him.

The call resulted in a white four-wheeler charging into the community, from which Greg Malstead and the driver jumped out and started rushing down the narrow streets. Two photographers started taking photographs of the community without permission. Women from the community were pushed aside by a rude and abusive Malstead. A huge mob gathered, resulting in a free-for-all – fisticuffs and red chilli powder. When Bob Goff came out of the vehicle and tried to pull his colleagues into the car; the enraged mass broke the windows and damaged the car.

Community leaders called the police. Malstead and Goff could have been seriously injured but for members of the collective of women in prostitution, who pleaded with the mob to leave them alone. Malstead has refused to press charges and has since left Sangli. Following this incident, hundreds of women in prostitution marched to the Sangli collector's office, accusing the two Restore International officials of violating their right to privacy, using physical violence and abusive language, and entering their houses without their permission.

SANGRAM, which has worked with women in prostitution for more than a decade, sees child prostitution as a criminal offence – and as a form of child sexual abuse. The issue though is how to stop it. Brothels have been raided since time immemorial, but more and more children are being brought into prostitution. So how have these raids helped? Every brothel in Sangli had a minor when SANGRAM started work in 1990; today, very few brothels have minors. How has this happened? Through time, trust, and community involvement. Not through police raids, indiscriminate arrests, and physical violence. Raids only drive marginalized communities further underground; long-term community work is what is needed. Missionary organizations like Restore International need to rethink their strategies instead of raiding vulnerable communities of women in prostitution in faraway lands.