Columns
Ministry



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August 8, 2022

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The lives of minor girls in India appear of little concern to law enforcement agencies. It's just routine work and not to be taken seriously. In the meantime, many young girls can be trafficked, fall into the hands of the underworld and be lost to their parents.

In January a man kidnapped a minor girl. The mother got this message on her cellphone: "I am taking away your daughter and going far away, don't even try to search for us." Upset, the mother and her sister hurried to the police station, but the female constable drove them away, threatening that she would not register their complaint.

The uneducated parents were not sure what to do. With some outside help, they traced the couple to Gurgaon, and gave the information to the investigating officer (IO), asking him to go there with them. He refused — saying that it would be an impossible task — but at the father's expense three policemen traveled to Gurgaon. With the help of the local police, they found a woman who had helped the couple rent a room.

On hearing that the parents were coming, the kidnapper left town. The police suggested that the woman be taken to Patna to help trace them, but the uncooperative IO refused.

Since the girl was in 11th grade in a respected school in Patna, after she missed several days, the principal called the mother in. On hearing the story, the principal contacted me — as the directress of Aashray Abhiyan — and the mother and her sister came to share their story. I listened carefully, we kept in close contact, but as time passed it became harder to find clues.

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We knew several mobile numbers for the kidnapper, but they always seemed to be switched off. It was becoming clear that the kidnapper was changing his location every other day, and the locations were areas to which young girls are trafficked.

Toward the end of February, the parents and some Aashray Abhiyan members visited the Digha police station. When I inquired about the case, the callous attitude of the station house officer (SHO) was unbelievable. We asked what the IO had done, but were told that he was on leave. Their attitude was so casual that it seemed not to matter to them, even though they are supposed to protect the weak and the vulnerable. On the contrary, they told us that "there’s no need to be worried — it's a 'love affair' and once they are settled, they will return." It was shocking to learn that though a month had passed, the IO had not made any attempt to locate the kidnapper. Was he in connivance with the kidnapper?

We even contacted the home secretary of the government of Bihar. After that, the station house frantically called the girl's father, inviting him to visit the police station and tell them what happened. This was a ray of light in the dark cloud looming over the parents! Nothing happened. After a few weeks we again approached the home secretary. He had heard the story, admitting that since the girl is a minor, the possibility of trafficking could not be ruled out.

Still nothing. The parents and a group of women visited the boy's village to see if the neighbors knew anything. A respected village elder promised to try to reunite the girl and her parents, but after three days we learned that the parents of the kidnapper failed to cooperate. We were determined not to give up after this failed attempt.

The girl's mother could not accept that her daughter was still missing, so we went to Raja Pakkad, a village where some distant relatives of her abductor lived, to see if they had seen her. They promised to watch, but there was no breakthrough. Soon we decided that there was going to be no recovery; the IO had not done a single bit of investigation, in spite of the information provided by the parents.

Even though the girl was a minor the police did not invoke the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, or POCSO, making it appear that they are shielding the accused.

A protest was made in district court, requiring that a habeas corpus case be filed in the Patna High Court. But it took a long time for the case to be taken to the high court. It was so hard for the parents to find every door closed!

We realized that some important people might be wielding political pressure to shield the culprit. As a last resort, on May 13 we approached the director general of

police (DGP) of Patna, who was shocked that a minor girl had been missing for four months. However, whatever he learned from the SHO made him soften.

At this, I intervened, reminding him that the girl is a minor and is still missing. He then directed that the belongings of the boy's family be impounded and the male head be arrested and brought to the police station so that the boy would surrender. Despite his orders, the IO and the SHO of Digha police station did not make any effort to recover the girl.

Beginning on May 14 the father received a number of calls, inviting him to come to a certain place to recover the girl for a ransom of 50,000 rupees ($630.55). Then they changed the place and asked for a higher amount, which made us suspicious. Thinking that there might be a plan to do away with the father, we feared for his life and his family. We notified the DGP and the other authorities.

Finally learning that the girl was in Ludhiana, the parents still did not know what to do. Go to Ludhiana based on the information received? The mother gathered her courage and sent a message saying: "It is quite sure now that my daughter is not alive, if she is then let her talk to me at once." When the girl heard her mother's voice, she began weeping. Hearing her parents and her siblings, she said she wanted to come home.

When the daughter spoke to her father, she lied about where she was (the kidnapper told her the father could not keep her alive), but her father could tell she was not telling the truth. She finally admitted being in Kathmandu. The boy delayed, saying that in a week's time he would hand her over. The parents decided to risk driving to the border area of Nepal and India, where the girl was taken into the custody of her mother and grandmother.

Returning to Patna, the next morning they took the girl to court, telling the IO about her recovery. He did not seem happy with this news. When he prepared the girl to give her statement his behavior was not acceptable. His interrogation technique was torturing, demeaning and humiliating, and she was reluctant to share any information with him.

The three months we searched for the girl was like a nightmare; I fully understand how vulnerable adolescent girls are, and how easily they can be lured away. Good parenting is so important, as is a friendly mother-daughter relationship. In a country like India, where women are subjugated, it is urgent to teach young girls to keep

their dignity intact and not fall prey to false promises.