Her Future Coalition

Her Future Coalition's (HFC) mission is to break the cycle of exploitation, poverty and gender violence by providing education and holistic support to survivors of trafficking, child marriage, rape and other forms of severe gender-based violence, as well as to girls at high risk. The girls we serve face extreme barriers to getting an education, including being trafficked, being forced into child marriage, extreme poverty, or the stigma of growing up in a red-light area. We focus on removing these barriers, rebuilding lives and ensuring that girls have all the tools they need to remain safe and independent, and to become leaders in their families and communities.

HFC offers shelter, education, and economic independence programs, which include vocational and life skills training. Our education programs are multi-year and include entire schools in slums and high-risk villages, after-school support at learning centers (Resource Centers) in red-light areas, mobile schools, remedial education to help rescued survivors catch up with their peers, computer classes, adult literacy, and education sponsorships from grade school to graduate school.

HFC seeks a $10,000 grant to provide one year of transformative education services to 150 high-risk girls growing up in the red-light areas of Kolkata, India. Girls born into red-light communities are often denied access to even the most basic education, leaving them vulnerable to intergenerational exploitation. This project will provide tools, support and resources for girls born into brothel communities to overcome the many barriers they face, and to break cycles of poverty and slavery.

For girls growing up in red-light areas of India, the experience of seeing their mothers routinely exploited and sometimes violently raped, or of being sexually assaulted themselves by their mothers' clients, is a profound barrier to education and wellbeing. Red-light families share one room in a brothel, so it is very dangerous for children to remain at home while their mothers are seeing clients. Many children have been abused because a client tired of the mother and simply reached for her young child instead. 90% of girls and 75% of boys in HFC's red-light area programs were sexually abused by the age of eight, usually by their mother's clients. 98% of women in the area are illiterate, which is unsurprising given the reality that 49% are trafficked before age 16. Red-light area girls usually do not complete primary school. Barriers include stigma from school officials, teachers and other children; parental exhaustion making it impossible for mothers to get children to school; lack of money for school fees and expenses; hunger and/or malnutrition making it difficult to learn; trauma; lack of sleep; and an atmosphere of constant menace.

HFC programs give vulnerable girls the long-term, intensive support they need to overcome these barriers. Specifically, our social workers and education specialists advocate with schools to get children enrolled, and work to raise awareness and increase sensitization towards 'second generation' kids in red-light districts. Sponsorships remove financial burden, paying school and exam fees, transportation, uniforms and books. Girls get regular healthy meals at the Resource Centers and can take naps to make up for lost sleep. Group and individual counseling are provided to help them heal from trauma and develop resilience. Mothers are also given counseling, as well as opportunities for job training and employment in alternative livelihoods. Many have been able to leave prostitution and become more able to support their children's education. Resource Centers offer girls a place to study, play, get support, or simply rest while their mothers are with clients. The services provided at Resource Centers make it possible for girls to stay in school and make it far less likely for them to be abused by their mothers' clients, or by the gangs of men roving the streets of the red-light area each night.

Her Future Coalition currently operates five Resource Centers serving 500+ women and children in three Kolkata red-light areas. The Centers are open from 8am to 8pm and staffed by women from the community (most of whom are survivors) as well as professional social workers and teachers. A grant of $10,000 from Circle of Sisterhood would support a year of education programs at the existing Resource Centers, serving 150 girls. Services will include sponsorships for school and exam fees, uniforms and books, afterschool care, tutoring, English and computer classes. This grant will also enable us to launch new education programs including a leadership curriculum, a three-month mind-body wellness program, and a six-month Computer and English intensive.

Sultana's family is one of the many families served in the HFC Resource Centers. Sultana was trafficked into a Kolkata red-light area when she was 15; she is now in her early thirties. Sultana became pregnant soon after she was trafficked and ultimately had five children. While she is no longer literally under lock and key, she was forced to submit to increasingly violent sexual acts to survive and care for her children. Sultana's oldest daughters, Ruhi and Rimi, are the children of a pimp/trafficker. Her father was grooming them to join their mother in sex work. The family began coming to our Resource Center when Ruhi and Rimi were 14 and 11. HFC staff got the girls back into school, and they began receiving daily tutoring, nutrition and counseling. Sultana received intensive counseling and job training. Today, Ruhi is in college studying Sociology, and Rimi is in high school and is interested in STEM fields. The younger children are all in school and thriving. Sultana has left life-endangering prostitution and is earning money with other women from the community in a catering and food truck business started out of the Resource Center.

This project aims to create social systems change by showing that there are alternatives to trafficking and a life of exploitation and poverty. Girls who are educated through 10th grade (high school graduation in India) are significantly less likely to be trafficked or to experience other forms of exploitation. In this program, they also learn about their human and legal rights, and the laws in place to protect those rights. They learn about local and national laws regarding slavery, historical and international aspects of the issue, women's rights, women leaders past and present, the power of economic independence, domestic violence, trafficking, forced and bonded labor, and the inherent worth of every human being. This knowledge enables them to advocate for themselves and others long into the future, contributing to systemic change.

We expect to see - as we have seen in past projects - that some program participants will become changemakers and advocates, who dedicate their lives to uplifting others and changing society from within. As others in the community see girls advancing and changing their lives, attitudes towards women and girls will also gradually improve. People in the red-light community and from the mainstream will begin to see the value and potential, as well as the simple humanity, of trafficked women, and of girls born into brothels.