

Nandini: Today we have a phenomenal woman with us as our guest, meet Ruchira Gupta. Ruchira is the founder of the anti-sex trafficking non-profit that has helped thousands of women exit systems of prostitution. Ruchira is a social justice activist, feminist campaigner, and journalist. She's also a professor at New York University and distinguished scholar at UC Berkeley. For over three decades Ruchira has been campaigning for a world where no girl is bought or sold, she has helped to shape anti-trafficking policies and laws across the globe. Ruchira got numerous prestigious awards for her work; her documentary *The Selling of Innocence*, won an Emmy. Listeners, Ruchira has accomplished a lot in her life and if I want to do justice with her bio then probably I will need a lot more time for that. So listeners, it is better you read about Ruchira on her website, apneaap.org. Ruchira, welcome to our show.

Ruchira: Thank you it is such a pleasure to be on this show hosted by you at Maitri. I have been a long admirer of the work that you do.

Nandini: Thank you. I don't know where to start. You have done so many great things. I think everyone should know about your work and you began your career as a journalist in India. The city she began her work in is my hometown so I feel like we have a special connection. I don't know where to start. So anyways, let's start with a simple question that in your journalism career you extensively covered sex trafficking. So what made you interested in covering this extremely dangerous topic and what is the story behind starting your *apneaap*?

Ruchira: I used to be a journalist and in fact I began my career in a newspaper in Kolkata called the *Telegram* and at that time I was walking through the hills to cover an assignment when I came across a village which didn't have any girls or women and I was a bit surprised so I asked the men who were sitting there drinking tea and playing cards where the girls were and to my horror they said that "don't you know they are in Bombay." And that was really puzzling to me because I couldn't understand why so many girls could be in Bombay which is 1400 kilometers away and these villagers were even two hours away from the highway. They were so remote. So as a good journalist I of course followed my nose and I found to my horror that a smooth supply chain existed from these remote villages to the brothels of Bombay. There were traffickers who could be local village procurers who were uncles, aunts, neighbors, who would go to very poor starving farmers and would offer them as little as fifty to one hundred dollars for their daughters and would say they would find the daughter work, find her a husband, or even say would sell her into prostitution. They would say that the family would get some money and that the daughter would have a roof and food. And the farmers didn't know better and they would let the daughters go. And these were girls between the ages of nine and thirteen. And then the procurer would take the girl to the border and the border guards would take a little bit of money; across the border she would be taken, locked in these small shabby lodges for a few days, beaten, starved, drugged, told that her life is over. And then when she was completely subjugated, she would be handed over to the transporters who would put on chains and vices and take her to Bombay, Kolkata, New Delhi, and there they would sell her to the brothel owners and they would negotiate through a pimp. The pimp would be of course a higher price for a virgin, he would ask the girls for a fairer skin, voluptuous, docile, these are the qualities that the customers wanted. And then the daughters were handed over to the brothel manager who would lock them up and sell them to men after men. Sometimes up to eight or

nine in one night for as little as thirty cents to be raped. Behind the brothel manager were the brother owners, financiers, organized criminal networks, and of course driving the whole thing was the customers or the clients. The women in prostitution called them passengers because they would ride the bodies and then just go away. They would just demand that they wanted young girls, fair skinned girls, oriental looking girls and the traffickers saw a profit in it and they would unleash this entire chain of operations. I found this and tracked it down to Bombay. Of course as a journalist I wanted to tell the story and expose this to the world so I ended up making a documentary on the subject called *The Selling of Innocence* and when I was filming the documentary; this was for HBO and Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, I was constantly heckled and attacked because I was exposing something which organized criminal were doing. In Bombay, when I was filming inside the brothels a man pulled out his knife at me when I was interviewing a woman. He said I won't let you film here. I thought this is as close to death as I'm ever going to get. But suddenly I was surrounded by twenty women who told him that if you kill her you will have to kill us first because we have decided to break a silence and tell our story. And the reason we are doing this is because we want a different future for our daughters so we want the world to know what is going on and we want the world to know that this is not a choice, we want the world to know this is an absence of choice. Our daughter don't wake up one morning and decide we want to be prostitutes. So we want the world to understand that and if you want to kill her, you'll have to kill us first. The man slunk away thinking it would be too much trouble to kill twenty three women. I ended up finishing the documentary and I won an Emmy for outstanding investigative documentary filmmaking in 1996. And because the documentary showed the horrors of prostitution inside the brothels as well as how prostitution was connected to human trafficking. The process was prostitution the outcome was human trafficking. It showed the entire method of how the whole thing worked.

Nandini: It is a very courageous thing to make a documentary on this subject. The story that you are telling me, that you were attacked by someone and you thought it was your last day and at the same time, you saw that so many women are protecting you because they know that you are trying to protect them.

Yes

It is a beautiful story, beautiful angle, that women are standing up for each other absolutely, and that's when I realized the importance of the women's circle. That you will never be powerless if you have a circle of women friends. That was something that was absolutely physically real to me in that moment and also that I was rescued by them even before. A lot of people told me over the coming years that you were rescued by so many women, but I was rescued by them first. Anyway I won an Emmy, and I thought, you know I have to keep my promise to the women because they agreed to help us, that's why they are breaking their silence. I went back to Bombay with my award and I said here is the award, I have told your story and the world now knows about what is going on, and I have shown it at the UN and the women said, actually, you've got to do something more now. I was a bit surprised, I said what can I do, I'm a journalist, I know how to tell a story. They said no, we want to do more, they said you've got to help us change our lives. I said I'm not a lawyer, social worker or doctor. They said that you have two things: you know English and you have access to money and power. I said yes I do. They said let's use that and please help us educate our daughters. I said sure, so I

rented a room in a municipal school and had a teacher put a straw mat on the floor and we began to prepare the children for school. Once the teachers had the children and said they were ready for mainstream school we tried to admit them there. We were told that the principal was objecting because they were the children of prostitutes. Then we decided that we would form a circle again. The women went and made a women's circle and went to the principal. They said that our children are children too and the principal relented and they were admitted into the school. Not only were they admitted, they are coming first in class, some of them have graduated, some have come to America for school. One is an animation artist, another is a domino's pizza parlor manager, another is a teacher, I can go on and on.

Yeah, sometimes people need resources and support, otherwise, we cannot do anything in our lives if we feel alone. We can provide like what you are doing, and this really proves to you that you are providing that support to those who are so helpless. I hope that all principals in all schools can embrace those students and they can give hope and opportunities to those students. It's a really moving story

It's important to consider and talk about all the factors: principals, students, education, institutions. It makes such a difference because you now; what ought to happen, but educating the children, the women said we need more change, we need more change in our lives. So we then decided to form enju, which means self action in Hindi. And we formed a circle just like the women formed a circle to save me from the man with the knife and just like how the mothers formed a circle to get education for their children, so that became our organizing method, we named it enju because we wanted the women to understand the name of the organization and because we wanted the name to mean something about who we were and what we were doing. So it really was important to us. That was what we wanted to call it. We registered it and we had to make a business plan and we didn't know how to make a business plan. So I asked the women, what are your dreams and they had four dreams at that time. The first dream was a school for the children, the second was, just like Virginia Wolfe, a room of their own, third, the said, a job in an office because prostitution is neither sustainable or dignified. As your body gets consumed over the years you begin to earn less and less and finally you're thrown out because your commercial life and value is only three or four years because customers want fresh meat as they say. And then, you know that was the third dream. They wanted steady salaries, retirement, treated with dignity, and no violence because of prostitution includes violence. It's inherent to prostitution, you can legislate the boxing, beating, and the stabbing and the murders which are common to prostitution, but you cannot legislate body invasion and penetration because that is what the customer is buying. You can imagine the mental health consequences that come with repeated body penetration. So you know from skin invasion, the vagina, to repeated human contact can be devaluing. You are always standing on the street, this gives you a back ache. People coming into close contact with you makes you susceptible to all kinds of sexually transmitted diseases, there are so many things. So they wanted a job in an office and the fourth thing was, they said they wanted those who had done this to them to be punished and I absolutely agree. Those that have brokered should be punished. That became our business plan, we began to form these circles and created community circles; educate the children and enroll them in formal schools

And these are such basic human rights, it's not that they're asking for something extraordinary, these are very basic human rights

Exactly, that's what I always tell people when I speak at the UN, or organizations, or universities. I say that basic needs are human rights. You know there is no point fighting for, theoretically we should want fundamental freedom, but we can't get it if we don't have foundational freedom. Food, shelter, and child protection, right? And so, you know, this is something that people sometimes of privilege cannot even understand. That is why is I called my goal in ending prostitution is the last girl. The idea of the last girl is to me, that she is the most vulnerable of all human beings i know. Not only because she is poor, but because she is female and because she is a teenager. So these intersecting inequalities already takeaway many of her choices. And on top of that, in India, she could be low caste, in america she could be black or native american, she could be refugee, a political asylum seeker, she could be a victim of foster care abuse, she could be a from a broken system, war, natural disaster, all of this. So many things intersect to take away people's choices. Prostitution is jreally the absence of choice. It's not a choice. People have to understand that.

Yes and if we explore the root causes of sex trafficking it is like you said, intersections of so many things, gender inequality, colonialism, systemic racism, castism, caste discrimination, homophobia, ableism, so mahy things. I am glad that you address those issues in your writing, in your documentary, you try to educate the public. I think that to prevent abuse and exploitation of women and girls we need to address the root causes of these issues in our daily conversations. Nothing is going to change. And so this podcast is one of our efforts to raise awareness about this issue, about the issue of gender violence, domestic violence, and power imbalance faced by women and other genders so that we can motivate our listeners to think about this issue deeply so we can together do something because no one alone can bring any change. We can end violence against women if we all take part and I have heard the, for example, I have heard about your one million meals campaign, a campaign you started. It is successful because of so many compassionate people participating. You alone cannot make it a huge success. So tell us about the one million meals campaign. How did it start and anything any of our listeners, if they want to help in this campaign how can they help. Anything you want to share about this one million meals campaign.

Thank you, Nandini. So as I told you that became our business plan, to educate children and women. That became the plan to break the cycle of intergenerational prostitution. We also decided to help the women exit prostitution by providing them with food coupons and housing voutures and by getting them the basic documents. They were undocumented, so we halped them get caste and birth cirtificates to prove that they were poor so they could access things that were meant for poor people. Once that happened, women slowly began to exit the systems. We were having some success; we helped more than twenty thousand women and girls exit systems of prostitution through education, small businesses, to accessing govenement welfare. At the same time, we were working to change laws and policies so we could go after the fourth dream of the women: punish those who bought and sold them. Sex trafficking is driven on one hand by the absence of choice, which is among the poorest of the poor, the last girl. And on the other hand, it is also driven by the fact that the sex buyers have choice with impunity. Today there is the Epstein trial going on in New York. So many of the survivors are standing outside of the courthouse because they do not want him to get away scotch free. They are trying to cover up what happened; this happens again and again with perpetrators. They have more power and they get away with it. We were making some dents and changes, we helped to change the UN

policy on trafficking and the US laws on trafficking. I went and testified to the US senate; I went and spoke to the UN gender assembly; I have done the same in France, South Africa, all over the world. I also tried to make sure that we were changing the system by helping the individual last girl. We were making some progress then covid hit. I was in India at that time and some of the children we were sponsoring in boarding schools were suddenly sent back to the red light areas overnight. Their mothers lost all of their livelihoods. Eleven in a room with no windows, the police were particularly brutal, they wouldn't let them leave, the parks were closed, there was no food. The children started to suffer; they did not have access to online education. The mothers have to make decisions like recharging a phone or buying rice. So I spoke to a friend who owns a restaurant and cooked up 500 meals secretly in this underground kitchen. I spoke to another civil servant friend and took her car which had a curfew pass and took the food into the back of the car and drove to the red light area. When I reached there, I saw there were 2,000 people in line; I gave food to the people I could. On my way back, I received messages asking about getting more food the next day and other locations. This made me realize that I needed to create some kind of system to keep some food supply going because women were saying they would commit suicide, they had sold everything, there were traffickers approaching them to inquire about their children. They were really desperate. So then I created a food drive called One Indian Meals thinking I would, for the next 100 days, provide dry rations: rice, vegetables, cooking oil, spices, to girls in small kits which would have enough rations for 100 meals. I would provide this for 10,000 women and children in the red light areas of a number of cities. I would do so for 100 days, which would add up to approximately 1 million meals. I spoke to students who said they would go to the red light areas to receive the dry rations when they came. I spoke to our community mobilizers, we made a list of the people who needed the food and then I spoke to factory owners, to food companies, and grocery store owners. I said I will give you this money if you give me the food. This is when the curfew in India caused a lot of movement issues. No trucks, trains, or buses, nothing. I hustled and hustled with different people to get permission to deliver the food. There is an India government body called National Disaster relief force which normally helps to clear the roads from accidents, the mountain roads from landslides, they have cars and they have personnel. So I said will you help me deliver and store the food in your warehouses where it can then be divided into these rations kits. I created a human chain. It started from the factory owners and it reached the last girl inside the brothel. I created virtual whatsapp groups of factory owners, people in red light areas, restaurant owners, to mobilize people. I would monitor every day, who needed food and I would make sure the food reached them. I began to do it and slowly the one million meals had to continue because there was nothing in place for women and children in the red light areas even now. The covid second wave hit India in an even more devastating wave and the third wave is now there in many places. I am hearing anecdotally that people are now dying as winter approaches. I have to continue with the food because these women and children will starve if I don't continue. Today's giving Tuesdays so we have a campaign going on on our website and we have another website called 1millionmeals.org. We ask people to donate so we can keep the food going. We have now managed to distribute about 15 million meals to more than half a million women and girls in the last 18 months. All through, exactly as you said, there are compassionate people who helped me form the human chain. This human chain helped me reach the last girl. I did it because I couldn't walk around and do much. I did it through the phone

and it's continuing so it's wonderful that we were able to do that. It really restored my faith in humanity. Because when everything else failed I stopped looking up and I tried to talk to the government but they weren't the most helpful. We were able to continue and that has been really wonderful for us.

That is really wonderful. Like you said, so many compassionate people are helping you to fulfill your dream and to help so many vulnerable souls; they need so basic things like food and shelter, that's it. And I hope people will keep donating to your plan. We have many women, men, children, anyone who needs food; I hope that the program can do more work to help those we really need your help. To our listeners, I hope they will do something to help this organization and your initiative. And thank you so much for your activism and initiative in ending violence against women. You are an inspiration for many activists who are working every day towards this goal. Although we are seeing a gradual improvement in women's participation versus men, there is still a void in upward mobility. All of us need to do something, all of us need to identify these inequalities and do our best to bring the change. So what are your ideas? Can you please suggest something that all of us can do in our daily life to bring back change. To prevent inequalities and to bring that change. How can we end oppressive gender norms in our daily lives? That is how we prevent and end violence against women and girls.

I would say that all of us can say no when somebody is abusing us as women. Because very often we are so used to saying yes just for peace of mind or peace in the house that we say let it happen, let it go. And when we let it go, we create a culture which then not only oppresses us, but oppresses all others in our lives. We have, for the sake of the larger good, we should not let things go, we should speak up when somebody is doing something which is discriminatory or abusive to women, either to us or to our friends. The second is to support those who are speaking up=. Very often we say, oh she is so aggressive or rude, or she is fighting all the time. But we have to understand the root cause of her aggression, of her shrill voice, why she is fighting all of the time, and then support her so that she doesn't feel silenced. The third thing is that very often women who are facing violence and discrimination, they are told they are not facing violence and discrimination. They are told that they are imagining it and so gaslighting is very common. We should not become part of the gaslighting. We should acknowledge the truth of what we are seeing and remove our blinders because if we continue to do that we are normalizing the culture that is abusing us. This is true for men too; because if women get oppressed, the men who are the sons of the women are also getting oppressed. A boy who is watching his mother being beaten is also a victim. The same is true of her brother who is watching his sister being beaten. So they are also caught in the cycle of abuse and continued abuse so we have to make sure that the men feel powerful enough to speak up and not be treated as sissies by their peer group or told that this is male culture. You are in silicon valley, and I know the levels of sexism are very very high in the tech world and some women have started speaking up and we should appreciate these women because they will break and shatter this culture of silence which will bring about great change. The other thing is that we need to look at how we bring up girls and boys. Do there have to be gender segregated roles? We are living in a time of gender fluidity. Everybody is manifesting their different sexualities. So if people are talking about gender fluidity in terms of sexualities, then why don't we also think about gender fluidity in terms of work roles. Why is it only in sexuality issues? Why does one class of human beings always order and be better paid for their work while one may not be paid

for their work. One is seeking approval while the other gives approval. Why do men have to be the breadwinners and women the caregivers? Why can't we turn it around. Maybe everyone will then learn the values of love and compassion.

Nandini: And then the values of some of our cultures like victim blaming, so whenever something is going wrong, women are blamed, victims are blamed. We need to be mindful of that and change that culture and as you said, men, they have a role in bringing that change. That's why we are here today and everyday so that we can start talking about these issues and we can engage and include entire communities to think about this issue and do something. Thank you so much Ruchira for coming to our show and sharing your courage and optimism and knowledge with us. Thank you

Thank you for hosting me and I am really touched because I have always respected our organization, Merit, so I am very happy. Good luck to all that you do. It is a circle of sisterhood, so we all do it together and can be inspired by the world

Yes, listeners, all of us must remember that with small and big efforts together we can prevent violence against women. Please do your part, identify misogynistic behavior around you, reflect upon your own actions and thoughts and see if they are misogynistic and then change those behaviors. You can help in many ways to end violence against women and girls. Donate to a local agency that empowers women. Please believe survivors, boys support survivors, stand up against child marriage, child marriage, sex trafficking, advocate for girls education, and promote acceptance of all gender identities. Thank you for listening to the Maitri podcast between friends. Please like and share this podcast with a new listener and please find all past episodes on sound cloud and other podcast apps, send us your feedback to outreach@maitri.org. I am your host Nandini Ray signing off today. I will come back soon with another discussion. Have a wonderful day. Thank you.

Namaste.

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