



## Radical Change Comes to Kolkata

### Freeset Offers Hope Amidst India's Sex Industry

*This is the first in a series of monthly articles as part of the **WorldCrafts** Set1Free campaign. This campaign highlights **WorldCrafts** artisan groups working to end sexual exploitation and human trafficking among the world's poor.*



Human trafficking and poverty feed India's sex trade, where women and children forced into prostitution become society's castoffs. They face a life in which they are robbed of the most basic choices.

**WorldCrafts** partners with Freeset (India) as they offer women hope for a new life.

The Bangladesh Liberation War in the 1970s left Menaka stranded in a refugee camp with her parents. For a free-spirited 13-year-old girl, it was an unhappy place. Particularly disgusted by the filthy toilets, she so appreciated her friendship with an older woman who had access to a better toilet.

One day, after a big argument with her sister—and without the knowledge of her parents—Menaka decided to take up her friend's long-standing offer of a job as a housemaid in Kolkata (Calcutta), India. No longer could she resist the allure of freedom outside the refugee camp. Ironically, her choice did not end in freedom but quite the opposite.

For a girl who'd never been to a big city, Kolkata was a strange, bewildering place. Instead of helping Menaka find the expected job as a housemaid, her "friend" sold her to a brothel for 1,000 rupees (US\$20).

The first customer paid a premium for her virginity. He locked the door and gave her a soda. Menaka began to feel groggy, and realizing she'd been drugged, tried to escape, but she couldn't reach the lock. At the age of just 13, frightened and alone, she was raped by a stranger.

Fast-forward 30 years. Menaka still lives in the same area but is now employed by the Freeset artisan group where she sews high-quality jute bags, available through **WorldCrafts**. She was one of Freeset's original 20 employees when it opened for business in 2001.

Freeset is a business that employs women on the basis of their need for

freedom, not the skills they have. A woman must be in the sex trade or be the daughter of a woman in the trade to qualify for a job there. As Freeset's property is located within a red-light area, women in prostitution hear about job openings by word of mouth, many times through the testimony of current employees. The women are trained, paid a fair wage, taught how to read and write, and signed up for health insurance and a pension fund. A milestone for each employee is the day she is able to sign her own name for her paycheck!

A few years ago, still haunted by the shame of the past, but finding courage in her newfound freedom, Menaka journeyed home to see her mother. They hadn't seen each other for 30 years. The tears flowed as mother and daughter were reunited.

Menaka has big dreams for Freeset. She wants to see as many women as possible freed from the bondage of prostitution, so she actively tells her story to those in the red-light district. She wants to see women who were once shunned being offered the life-changing choice of leaving the sex trade. Menaka is now a joyful ambassador for freedom.

*Your purchase of these items from **WorldCrafts** allows for the expansion of Freeset's work among the sexually exploited in India. As **WorldCrafts** orders additional bags and totes, Freeset can employ more women on the path to freedom.*

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