

How One Mother Trapped in Sexual Slavery Refuses to Let Her Daughter Suffer This Pain

Pushana gently brushes soft kisses across her daughter's brown cheek. Her toddler turns and gazes up at her. She reaches out her tiny hand, which her mother covers with another kiss.

I first met Pushana four years ago in the Banchara community of India. She was still a teenager at that time, and she was one of the first girls who taught me about the horrific reality of *nari mata*—the tradition that forces girls to sell their bodies to pay for their brothers' dowries.

This year, I got to speak with her again and meet her beautiful little girl. Pushana wants to boldly speak out about this abuse so her own daughter won't have to suffer. And today, you can help give a voice to women like Pushana and fight for their freedom from sexual slavery.

Pushana's family doesn't approve of her speaking out against this work. They believe it's simply a normal part of their culture. So, Pushana asked that I not tell you her real name or show you her picture.

I've chosen to use the name "Pushana" for this brave young mom because it means "protector" and "provider," and that's exactly what she is for her two children.

Pushana doesn't want her daughter, whom I'll call Angel, to follow in her footsteps someday. She dreams of her 2-year-old growing up, graduating from school, and having a beautiful wedding and a compassionate husband—everything Pushana did not.

She dreams of her little girl living in a nice house, not the

tiny, one-room dwelling they now call home. The colorful paint on the walls is faded and peeling. A few dishes sit in the kitchen, located only a few feet from the bed. And in this small space, Pushana tries to give her children everything.

Pushana holds Angel on her lap as the afternoon sun casts a sliver of light in the dark room. They sit on the bed, a subtle reminder of the work that dominates Pushana's entire life.

She is paying off the debt of three brothers' marriage dowries. What she owes totals around \$9,500—an astronomical amount for someone living in poverty. And the interest compounds daily. Her brothers do nothing to help her with the debt, though they are aware their sister works in the sex industry to pay for their security. It will take Pushana most of her life to pay the debt.

She looks down at Angel and kisses the child's head. Her daughter's life could easily mirror her own if Angel doesn't escape the traditions that her community has followed for generations.

"I don't want her to suffer like I do," Pushana says.

The single mother is doing her best. Her 8-year-old son goes to a good school thanks to child sponsorship, and she hopes her daughter will follow in his footsteps.

But there's one problem. When her brother is old enough to marry, it's Angel who will be expected to go thousands of dollars into debt for him—and to repay it with her body.

For now, though, Angel is tired of sitting on her mother's lap. She slides off and wobbles into the sunlight.

When I ask Pushana how she will make sure her daughter doesn't have to suffer, she doesn't hesitate.

"I will pay the money," she says, tears slowly sliding down

her cheeks.

Her answer floors me. This mom, already burdened with her three brothers' debts, is willing to add even more of a burden so her daughter can have a different future.

"You're a good mom," I tell her as we both quietly contemplate the weight of her words.

Those words mean she will add *years* to an already life sentence as a slave to the sex industry. She will add countless more nights of being used by men who don't care about her. And her chances of contracting sexually transmitted diseases will increase even more.

But to Pushana, it's all worth it because it means her daughter will be free.

When she says, "I will pay the money," Pushana is saying so much more. What she is really saying is, "It ends here with me."

The debt. The pain. The line of customers. The abuse. The limited future ... none of this will pass on to her daughter.

In celebration of International Women's Day, we can join Pushana in this fight. We can help a girl have a happy, dignified life instead of paying off mountains of debt by selling herself.

You, too, can say, "It ends here with me."

Through World Help's freedom programs, we introduce girls like Pushana's daughter to freedom by helping provide her with essentials like a safe place to live, education or vocational training, medical care, trauma counseling and more. These homes are havens for girls who are looking for a way out.

When I asked Pushana if she had any other way to pay off her debts, she shook her head. She has no education, so she has no

job prospects. But at the Freedom Homes, girls can go to school and learn valuable skills so they can find a good job and avoid this vicious cycle of sexual slavery.

The question is: Will we be brave like Pushana? Will we make sure one more little girl doesn't have to follow in her mother's footsteps? {eoa}

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