

STORIES OF HOPE-I

Rescuing Lost Childhoods: A Journey from Exploitation to Empowerment

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Being a psychologist and psychotherapist, I had the opportunity to work with underprivileged children rescued from a toy factory under a case of child labor. It was an honor to be part of the organization Bachpan Bachao Andolan from April 2019 to June 2019, which focuses on child welfare and rescuing children from exploitative situations.

Child labor remains a significant issue in India, despite legal frameworks and persistent efforts to eliminate it. Recent estimates suggest that millions of children between the ages of 5 and 17 are engaged in labor, often under hazardous conditions.

I provide counseling and therapeutic interventions to help these children recover from trauma and rebuild their lives. This opportunity has deepened my understanding of the psychological impact of adverse childhood experiences and strengthened my skills in empathy, active listening, and creative therapeutic techniques like art therapy. I have heard numerous stories about what led them to run away from home. At such a vulnerable age, where they struggle to understand whom to trust, they leave home with the hope of a better life. Unfortunately, their journey led them to a toy factory in this particular case under discussion, where they were forced to work and live in the dark, cramped conditions, unable to go outside. Although the factory owner was aware that employing child labor was illegal, he continued to exploit these children. The children, however, did not understand how this environment was impacting their lives, both physically and psychologically. Some had vision issues due to poor lighting, while others had fallen into substance abuse as a means to cope.

One of the most poignant moments came when I observed the children carving their names into surfaces with iron wires—a painful act that spoke volumes about their desire for self-expression in a life that had denied them autonomy. Many were unable to understand the pain they endured daily, both physically and emotionally, as they clung to the illusion that they were on a path to a better life, unable to see that they were being manipulated and exploited.

In juvenile court, they were asked questions that intended to help them secure a better future and grant them the compensation they deserved. Yet, the children would often alter their statements when questioned, likely due to the deep manipulation they had experienced. This brainwashing made it challenging to work with them as they had lost a sense of insight and reality. The underlying reasons for their incongruent behavior often stemmed from a lack of tolerance for accepting any fault, which fueled their aggression and vulnerability. Growing up in a low socio-economic environment made them particularly susceptible to manipulation, as they were desperate to escape poverty and believed in the promises of a better life from exploitative figures.

I believe that, as a society, we must confront our role in perpetuating child labor. For instance, it is common to see children working at roadside eateries or as domestic help because people find them affordable. But it is essential to recognise that the money we offer in these cases comes at the cost of a child's innocence and freedom. We need to take a stand and refuse to engage in practices that exploit children.

We should engage in vocational training for these children, equipping them with skills they can use to build sustainable livelihoods. They need to understand that slow progress is better than getting caught in the rat race that leads to exploitation. Additionally, raising awareness about their rights can empower them to stand up against injustices. By standing together against child labor and supporting rehabilitation and education efforts, we can offer these children a genuine opportunity to experience a safe and fulfilling childhood while helping them shape a dignified and purposeful future.

