



Anita's Story

From "The Story of My Body," an event co-sponsored by *Glamour* magazine and the International Women's Health Coalition (IWHC)

March 8, 2007

My village is called Gokal Nagar. To others in India, it is a shanty town. To me, it is home. When I was little, men would knock on our door to see my mother. "Hello, Anita," they would say. Then they would come inside, and I would take their bicycles for a long ride. I was a happy girl, full of energy. I was 10 when I found out that my mother was a Devdasi, a sex worker, like many of her friends. Soon after that, she died.

My auntie became my new mother, and one day when I was 12, she and three or four other women took me on a journey to dedicate me to the Goddess Yallamma. I had no idea what this ceremony meant. First we went to a temple. Then they told me to have a bath, and they dressed me in leaves and we made Paradi – a plate of food for the Goddess. In the evening, as the sun went down, they hung five pearls around my neck, and from then on I was a Devdasi.

I never thought anything much of becoming Devdasi. It was a religious thing for me. In my family, my mother, my aunt and my sister were Devdasis. I was a regular girl, making noise, riding bicycles and having fun. But when I got my first period, my auntie told me to get ready for Dhanda, or "business".

In the beginning, I was scared. I didn't know anything. When I was 16, the older Devdasis told me: "Look, this man is going to hold your hand. You will go inside, and sit next to him." And so that is what I did. He tried to hold me, but I was uncomfortable...I wanted to go hang out with my girlfriends...so I shouted and he left. Three months later the same man came back. This time, he demanded sex, and I found out what it really means to "go inside" with someone. At first I had maybe one or two clients a day. Then I started having more like 10 or 15. I could earn a lot of money. A day without clients was a bad day. On those days, I blamed myself.

Back then, no one had condoms. We didn't know why we should use them. Then one day Meena Seshu Madam came to our community. She was from a group called SANGRAM and she gave us information on HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases. She trained us about our rights. The clients would not bring condoms, but now we women had them ourselves. I learned to negotiate. If he wanted me, he would wear a condom.

And then I met my love, my Malak. But I did not use a condom with my Malak. I wanted to have a baby with him. We loved each other.

The day I took my pregnancy test I was overjoyed. But they also took my blood for an HIV test, and when I got the results a few days later I took my report straight to Madam Meena and cried and cried. I was HIV-positive. Still, I stayed hopeful for my baby and took medicine to protect her.

In my ninth month, my blood pressure shot up, and the doctors sent me to the civil hospital, where I had a Cesarean section. I delivered a baby girl! I had to be in the hospital for a month and a half to recover from the pain of the surgery, but my baby was healthy and so sweet. Then when she was three months old she developed pneumonia and died. My sweet baby. I suffered so much and had a child with great difficulty, only to lose her. I was devastated.

I stopped doing Dhanda. All through that time many people from Meena's organization supported me, and soon I wanted to do the same work for others. I started convincing other sex workers to use condoms. At first, many would not listen. But I wouldn't give up, I continued to meet with them. And because I was one of them, because I know what it is to be a Devdasis, they began to listen. They believed me.

It is not my business to convince them to leave Dhanda. It's their livelihood, I know. But the condoms will save their lives. Helping women, I build up their confidence, their self-respect. They build up mine, too.

For now, I am healthy. I have medicine, and I take care and go to the hospital regularly. I tell people who are HIV positive: Take care of yourself. You can continue to work and contribute to society as I am doing. I hope to live healthy and wealthy forever.

IWHC gave its first grant to SANGRAM in 2006.