

Power of One

Using dance as psychotherapy, **Sohini Chakraborty** is helping former child prostitutes regain their sense of self



BY NILANJANA BHOWMICK

IN 1996, SOHINI CHAKRABORTY was walking in Kolkata when she came across a wrenching poster: a photo of a child prostitute staring listlessly at the camera, with the caption "I am no more bride-to-be, no more mother-to-be, no more future-to-be." The poster, which was outside the office of a local nongovernmental organization (NGO), was part of an antitrafficking campaign in India, where about 1.2 million children are believed to be involved in prostitution.

Chakraborty, who six years earlier had used her passion for dance to help cope with the loss of her mother to cancer, returned to the NGO the next day and pitched her idea of using dance as a psychotherapy tool for victims of trafficking and violence. The then 22-year-old started visiting Kolkata's women's shelters and red-light districts, talking to girls about what movements made them happy, excited or angry—moves, in other words, that could aid the abused in expressing them-

selves. "They explore what's inside you and help in bringing it out," says Chakraborty.

After honing her techniques, in 2004, Chakraborty started Kolkata Sanved (*sanved* is the Sanskrit word for empathy), a group of therapists who conduct dance classes in women's shelters. So far, the nonprofit has directly assisted some 5,000 women, including 2,500 former child prostitutes, through dance therapy. One of Sanved's toughest cases: a 16-year-old trafficking survivor who was so traumatized that when staff members tried to connect with her, she refused to talk or even move. At many points, Chakraborty worried they were going to fail the girl. But after three years of extensive therapy, the teenager has become a gregarious chatterbox and has a job in Sanved's audiovisual department.

Sanved has also trained 11 women who live in shelters to become dance-therapy instructors. "My fight is not just to teach people to dance," she says, "but to make them blossom into strong individuals and live in society with dignity and self-respect." ■

BIG STEPS



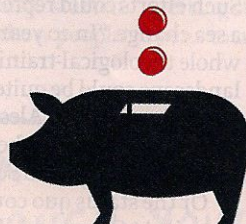
About **1.2 million** children are believed to be involved in prostitution in India



Sanved's dance-therapy program has been adopted by **40** organizations to help victims of sexual violence



So far, Sanved has directly assisted **5,000** abused women, including **2,500** former child prostitutes



The Kolkata nonprofit started in 2004 with a monthly budget of **\$400**; it now employs **18** full-time staff members



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