

APRIL - JUNE 2021

COVID-19 PROGRAMME UPDATE

Operation PeaceMaker of
My Choices Foundation



MY CHOICES
FOUNDATION

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ABOUT US

My Choices Foundation was founded by Elca Grobler in 2012, moved by her deep desire to give women, children and families in India choices to live lives free from violence, abuse and exploitation. My Choices Foundation aims to see the transformation of India into a safe, peaceful, and flourishing place for women and girls, by empowering women and girls with the awareness, education, and support they need to become their change agents. We address two of the most pervasive and intractable human rights abuses, domestic violence and anti-sex trafficking, through our two initiatives - Operation PeaceMaker and Operation Red Alert.

Operation PeaceMaker is the domestic violence prevention initiative of My Choices Foundation that aims to stop domestic violence and create meaningful changes in the lives of women and girls.

Operation PeaceMaker's prevention programmes has tailor-made curriculums for each demographic of the society that ensures that the community members are sensitised and educated about gender, masculinity, violence, gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment, and laws related to them. We work with men as a critical solution to develop safe spaces for women and to help them understand the harmful impact of patriarchy and toxic masculinity.

Operation PeaceMaker provides free counselling, legal and safe home services to women and children who have survived abuse. We run 5 counselling centres in Telangana and provide our services through 11 Implementing Partners across Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and West Bengal. Through these initiatives, we advance women's rights and enable them to be agents of change and further advance gender equality.



SECOND WAVE OF COVID-19

India is currently experiencing the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The second wave has had severe consequences in the form of spiralling cases, increased deaths and reduced supplies to essentials. It has created a grave crisis for women being trapped with their abusers. Rising cases and loss of life due to the pandemic has also caused a mental health crisis in the country. Our focus during this difficult time is to continue to provide support to survivors of domestic violence and to reach out to affected families to help them through this difficult time by offering counselling services to address their anxiety and grief through telephone and online means.

SUPPORT PROVIDED BY OPERATION PEACEMAKER



ONLINE COUNSELLING



COVID-19 RELIEF DISTRIBUTION



CAPACITY BUILDING PROGRAMMES



LOTUS FUND



COUNSELLING FOR POLICE PERSONNEL



SAFE HOME



PEACEMAKER SUPPORT



HELPLINE SERVICES



PREVENTION PROGRAMMES



RELATIONSHIP QUIZ



AWARENESS PROGRAMMES



E-LEARNING MODULES

OPERATION PEACEMAKER - COVID-19 UPDATE

Most women are experiencing their worst nightmare - being locked in with their abusers, following the strict lockdown measures to curb the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. With all doors shut, they had no place to receive help.

The period of COVID-19 has challenged each of us to think differently to reach out to those in need of help and support. We opened up our counselling centres and started offering both telephonic and in-personal counselling. Our experienced domestic violence counsellors acted proactively. They analysed the client base to identify every woman who required assistance and reached out to existing and new clients via telephone using our custom-built PeaceTracker software. We began online counselling sessions for women and families. Simultaneously, our army of PeaceMakers - local women trained to be first responders to domestic violence - reached out to women in their communities and ensured that the impact of lockdown was minimal.

We ramped up our counselling services by launching an additional national helpline number 1800 212 9131 for women and girls to seek help or counselling and report domestic violence. In addition to Telangana, we expanded our work into four additional states - Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and West Bengal.

As the pandemic restricted field activities, we moved our operations online. We conducted webinars to create awareness about gender-based violence, mental health, toxic masculinity and much more. Specific WhatsApp groups were created to continuously engage with our beneficiaries and provide access to information about gender-based violence and necessary services.



ONLINE COUNSELLING

To continue to assist survivors of domestic violence and abuse, we leveraged online platforms. We are using Whatsapp and calls to maintain contact with survivors while also providing counselling when necessary. Despite the struggles of the pandemic and the repeated lockdowns, survivors are reaching out to Operation PeaceMaker of My Choices Foundation for help from various sources such as our local helpline, our toll-free national helpline, e-mail, healthy relationship quiz, our partner Zariya, the Margdarshak program, our partner Invisible Scars, Women's Police Station, the PeaceMakers and through referrals from other women.

Our team assisted the women by:

- helping them file complaints in the police station
- helping them get access to medical services
- assisting them to acquire a pass to move out of their homes in a time of crisis
- helping them reach shelter homes
- helping them get access to groceries and essential items
- providing telephone counselling and legal advice

We are also conducting continuous follow-ups to ensure survivors are safe. Our data collection software PeaceTracker enabled us to analyse our data to reach out to women who need our help and maintain continuous follow-ups.

COVID-19 has impacted not only one's physical but also mental and emotional health. People are dealing with loss at an unprecedented scale. To help deal with loss and grief in their lives, we also started COVID-19 counselling for people who are feeling anxious, depressed or going through grief. Through this voluntary initiative, we are trying to support families affected by the pandemic and help them through this difficult time.

FEEDBACK FROM SURVIVORS

"My Choices Foundation gave me a variety of legal options about my situation which proved beneficial. They also provided the best support and guidance when I was at my lowest and helped me boost my confidence. Today, I am much stronger and better equipped to protect myself"

- HOMEMAKER | 36

"Services provided by My Choices Foundation were beneficial. It was because of My Choices Foundation and you (counsellor) that I have become stronger and self-confident."

-HUMAN RESOURCES EXECUTIVE | 33





CAPACITY BUILDING FOR COUNSELLORS

We firmly believe in upskilling our counsellors regularly while also providing them with safe spaces to relax and recuperate from the stressful and traumatic events they hear about daily. Capacity building and training are key elements to equip our counsellors with knowledge and skills in diverse areas that support them in their work. It improves the quality of counselling practices and emphasizes the importance of self-care while helping clients, looking to free themselves from domestic violence.

TRAUMA-FOCUSED COGNITIVE BEHAVIOURAL THERAPY

My Choices Foundation organised a series of 'Capacity building training programmes for domestic violence counsellors' across five centres located in Shah Ali Banda, Golconda, Lakdikapul, Secunderabad in Hyderabad and Hunter Road in Warangal last month. Led by Dr Sukriti Kushwaha, Chief Psychologist and Director of Programs at Emancipation India Foundation, 10 counsellors and 4 support staff have attended the programme.

The sessions focused on 'Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioural Therapy'

- The role of the therapist
- Psychoeducation: Communication techniques
- Relaxation exercises
- Emotion management
- Cognitive processing

Therapists' active and supportive agenda helps the survivors to open up and release their stress and emotions. The second method to lower the psychological stress of clients is psychoeducation and communication techniques. Acknowledging and affirming with the clients help them to trust the counsellor and helps them release their tension. The next exercises used in Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioural Therapy are breathing relaxation exercises to help counsellors understand and express their feelings.

The emotion management exercises include recognising feelings and grounding exercise helps the clients to recognize trauma-related cognitive distortions and replace the negative thoughts with more helpful and positive thoughts. Cognitive processing revolves around a cognitive triangle, when an event happens there are three basic reactions given out; what we think, what we feel and what we do.

FEEDBACK FROM OUR COUNSELLOR

"The best of the training is the mix of theory and practice. I have thoroughly enjoyed all the exercises and when I applied, it showed great results. It helped to understand and solve survivor's problems as well as ours."

SUICIDE ASSESSMENT AND INTERVENTION

My Choices Foundation organised a training programme for our counsellors on Suicide Assessment and Intervention with Dr Sukriti Kushwaha, PhD, LMFT. The COVID-19 pandemic has emerged as a new global health threat. By increasing the risk of isolation, fear, stigma, abuse and economic fallout, COVID-19 has led to an increase in the risk of psychiatric disorders, chronic trauma and stress, which eventually increase suicidality and suicidal behaviour. Through this training programme, we aimed at empowering our counsellors and team members with the skills and knowledge to assist people who exhibit suicidal tendencies.

This 3 part series conducted by Dr Kushwaha helped our team of counsellors-

- identify direct and indirect signs of suicidality
- learn techniques for determining the level of risk
- interventions for reducing high-risk and suicidal behaviour
- how to intervene in crises
- how to reduce anxiety
- increase self-confidence in engaging with suicidal individuals.

FEEDBACK FROM OUR COUNSELLOR

“These sessions helped me understand how we as counsellors should be focused on the survivor's feelings but not on the 2nd or 3rd person's problem for whom she approached.”

ANGER MANAGEMENT

My Choices Foundation organised a training programme for our team members on Anger Management with Dr Sukriti Kushwaha, PhD, LMFT. Anger is the single most destructive element and has the power to destroy relationships. Prolonged anger poisons our bodies and can lead to depression and violence. The survivors who approach us for assistance are intensely angry with one or more people in their lives. This training helped our counsellors in understanding anger as well as steps to teach survivors anger management. Through these sessions, our counsellors now have an understanding of the angry brain, anger and co-occurring disorders like trauma, addiction, depression and more, causes of anger, the relationship between anger and abuse, identifying triggers for anger, techniques for derailing anger and teaching survivors to communicate their anger effectively.

FEEDBACK FROM OUR TEAM MEMBER

“The sessions on anger management have been highly emotional and since we are doing it very experientially, it is extremely hard-hitting and a huge reality check for me. Touching those vulnerable areas and relationships in our lives is most necessary to be able to work intrinsically and process the iceberg of our Anger! Extremely grateful for these sessions which Dr Sukriti is not hurrying us through but taking it very slowly and so the experience is going to be with me and us forever.”



THE EMOTIONAL WELLBEING OF POLICE PERSONNEL

Rachakonda Commissionerate (Hyderabad, Telangana), under the leadership of the Rachakonda Commissioner of Police Mr. Mahesh Bhagwath, Indian Police Service initiated a quarantine follow-up for the staff of the Commissionerate who were tested positive for COVID-19 (mild and moderate cases). My Choices Foundation was brought on board to conduct counselling sessions, along with the routine medical team group consultations. The purpose of the counselling sessions was to help the staff navigate through anxiety or serious health situations during this difficult time.

These calls focused on encouraging the staff and their family members to watch out for any COVID-19 related symptoms, referring them to an isolation facility opened exclusively for the Rachakonda Police Personnel and their families. We also encouraged them to consult the Department Doctor regularly, seek any referrals from Covid Control Room, reach out to their Senior Officers if they are in any need and maintain a healthy lifestyle.

Our team spoke and listened in a very empathic manner. Loneliness, fear of family members contracting the virus, fear of being hospitalized, hopelessness, uncertainty about their future, fear of losing their loved ones and the handling of the grief after losing their loved ones are some of the many things discussed and addressed during the calls. Some personnel were very deeply disappointed when they were tested positive again after their quarantine. Our team gently encouraged them to handle the disappointment till they tested negative. With time, the Personnel started looking forward to our calls as they enjoyed conversing with our team. It gave them an outlet to share their joys and sorrows.

Our team conducted follow-up calls to **330** Police Personnel daily until all of them tested negative. We conducted **3013** sessions from 26 May to 20 July 2021 with the police personnel to help them through these uncertain times.

It is difficult to maintain a healthy lifestyle and also be worry-free when someone is going through the COVID-19 crisis. The uncertainty and worries related to the spreading of infection to other family members, especially elderly parents, pregnant staff or family members of the infected staff and disruption of routines, our lifestyles can impact our mental health. The uncertainty about the future, the ceaseless news coverage and the constant social media-driven flood of messages can increase our sense of anxiety. Stress is a normal response in these situations. Stress disturbs our sleeping and eating patterns and leads to irritability or emotional outbursts and low motivation.

The Commissioner arranged for regular group consultations with the Medical team over the zoom along with Doctors and Senior Officials to encourage the COVID-19 affected personnel through this difficult time. Alongside the group consultations, individual follow-up calls were also conducted.

FEEDBACK

“My mother died yesterday night and my wife has been suffering from Covid for the past 4 days. I am in deep sorrow. Feeling very tensed about what will happen next? Thank you for these calls at least I can share my feelings in my difficult time”

- ARPC FROM THE RACHAKONDA COMMISSIONERATE TEAM

“My special thanks to the MCF team who succeeded to imbibe confidence at my depressive state once occurred.”

- CONSTABLE FROM THE RACHAKONDA COMMISSIONERATE TEAM

“My COVID-19 report is negative. Thank you for supporting me during my time in isolation. Thank you for your moral support and motivation Madam.”

- RACHAKONDA COMMISSIONERATE TEAM

“Mam, I wanted to share with you first about my negative report. Thank you for your support.”

- RACHAKONDA COMMISSIONERATE TEAM

Evening: 4:45 Today's call was all about how his day looked like. He shared that both he and his son are trying to follow the chart given by the Department. He can follow most of the activities mentioned, also spending time reading books, watching TV, He is also doing breathing exercises. Taught him a few relaxation techniques too.

- MCF TEAM MEMBER NOTES



PEACEMAKER SUPPORT

Our PeaceMakers are playing an indispensable role in providing support to the community during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of our PeaceMakers have years of training with us which encourages them to go above and beyond their roles. During the pandemic, PeaceMakers were proactive in leveraging their position in the community to assist people in need. Through their assistance, we were able to identify women and families who required help and assisted the PeaceMakers with essential resources. They contacted all our beneficiaries to identify women who required assistance, pregnant women who were unable to access necessities or families infected with COVID-19 struggling for essential supplies. Our PeaceMaker coordinated with local authorities and the My Choices Foundation team to ensure help was provided. We assisted in the form of distribution of ration, providing monetary assistance through our Lotus Fund and a haven through our Safe Home.

In 2020, by the end of the first wave, our PeaceMakers started entering the field with full precautions to conduct door-to-door awareness about domestic violence and our helpline service. Some of our PeaceMakers who are also ASHA Workers (primary health care workers) and Anganwadi (community creche) Teachers played a crucial role in reaching out to women in the community. While everyone's movement was limited during the pandemic, this team was still active in the community as they are government-appointed volunteers who provide invaluable aid to the communities. ASHA workers and Anganwadi workers (government-led initiative) helped many domestic violence victims to get the necessary help, be it assistance with Police, Legal, medicines and food essentials. Distressed women who still reach out to the Police are directed to our counselling centres for assistance.

Our PeaceMakers play a vital role in our ability to reach the vulnerable communities in Hyderabad and Warangal. To help them continue their great work, we conduct drives to provide them with safety kits which include - N95 Masks, surgical masks, gloves, face shields and sanitisers. We distributed 40 safety kits among our 40 PeaceMakers who are actively involved in creating meaningful changes in the lives of women, children and families. Armed with the safety kit, the PeaceMakers are again entering the field safely and interacting with the community members to create awareness about domestic violence and the assistance available through counselling and helpline.





PREVENTION PROGRAMMES

Our heavy focus on data capturing helped us reach out to our beneficiaries even during the lockdown. We created WhatsApp groups where our team regularly posted information related to domestic violence, child sexual abuse, our helpline services and much more.

Our team operates WhatsApp groups with Shakti Girls and Asli Boys. These groups have become a place where young girls and boys can share their grievances and get appropriate assistance for their problems. These children are regularly engaged in online activities and worksheets to keep them involved in understanding gender equality.

Our team also operates WhatsApp groups with women members. In these groups, our team shares regularly about domestic violence, how to spot signs of violence, child sexual abuse, how to seek assistance, our helpline and their legal rights in instances of domestic violence. These groups have been extremely important for many women as they came forward about being abused during the lockdown and were able to avail appropriate assistance through our counsellors, safe home and partnership with the police. We operate 49 groups with 1,313 beneficiaries

FEEDBACK FROM OUR BENEFICIARIES

"I appreciate the work you and your team are doing nowadays. The posts you are sharing are really helpful. Posts related to COVID-19 safety are very helpful. Thank you for sharing didi, will share with others."

- FIRDOUS

"I am sharing all your posts with my family and friends. They are very helpful. Your work during the pandemic has been great."

- ARJUMAN





AWARENESS PROGRAMMES

With COVID-19 confining people to their homes, our team utilized innovative means such as online platforms to connect with people and spread awareness about domestic violence and mental health. Due to the rising pandemic within the pandemic [domestic violence within COVID-19], our team partnered with various organisations to create awareness about domestic violence and our work to help survivors. We conducted webinars on -

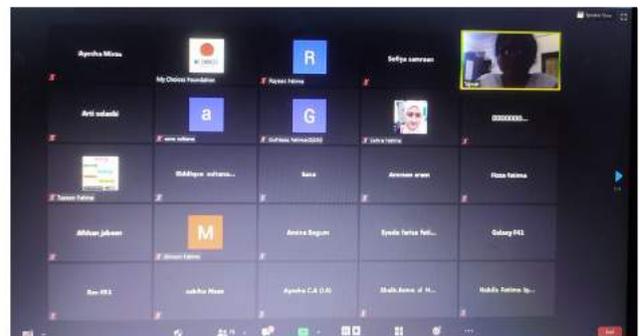
- Domestic violence awareness
- Social media safety norms
- Healthy relationship
- Understanding anxiety during COVID-19
- Emotional well being during the pandemic

These sessions were attended by more than 500 people and were well received by all of them.

Understanding Anxiety during times of Covid 19



WEBINAR ON SOCIAL MEDIA SAFETY NORMS



WEBINAR ON HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

FEEDBACK FROM PARTICIPANTS

"Forgiving myself for all the things I could not do was very healing. I never thought of it."

"We do have a time of meditation every day but now I follow the techniques in the right way and do it meaningfully."



COVID-19 RELIEF DISTRIBUTION

The pandemic made it difficult for some families to access necessities like food. To assist families in distress our team in Hyderabad partnered with Childline and other donors to provide families with dry rations. Our PeaceMakers helped us identify families who were in dire need of ration kits and helped us deliver these kits to the families. Through this initiative, we have supported 104 families.

To assist families in need in Warangal we partnered with Aapadbandava, an NGO and Childline to distribute ration to 50 families.



LOTUS FUND

The Lotus Fund is a start-up fund for women who have chosen to start a new life free from an abusive relationship. We provide financial support for essential items, advances on rental, and skill and vocational development. Equipping women to stand on their own feet is essential to ensure that they can support themselves and their children going forward.

One of our domestic violence survivors, Lata* was in a very dire situation. She found herself in the middle of a severe economic crisis. Her strength began to fall apart when she saw her children also struggling because of the decision to take a stand and fight the domestic violence she was being subjected to for years. We identified the severity of her struggle and offered her economic support, with the help of our partner NGO, Invisible Scars. We also supported Lata by providing her with a month's groceries. She felt extremely comforted and strengthened by this support and is now able to continue her fight for justice.

**name changed to protect identity*

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many women to be locked in with the perpetrators. With our Safe Home, we are providing a haven for survivors to protect themselves from violent situations. Since April 2021, we have assisted 12 women at our Safe Home. These women were referred to our home through our counsellors and local Police Stations. Our team helped these women by - providing medical care, vocational training, filing of FIR, and assistance in looking for employment opportunities.

While at the Safe Home, the women engaged in various activities like art and crafts, soap making and gardening. Some of the soaps made by the survivors were distributed among the survivors who were leaving the safe home, low-income families living around the safe home and Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation (GHMC).

Our Safe Home team also engaged in COVID-19 relief activities. We ran a campaign to distribute masks to the employees of GHMC who work tirelessly to ensure we have a safe city. Our team also provided cooked meals to three families who were suffering from COVID-19. We ensured they had home-cooked, hot and healthy meals until they recovered from the disease.

ARYA'S JOURNEY TOWARDS SELF-CONFIDENCE

Arya* did not talk or engage in any of the activities organised at the Safe Home when she first arrived. She was extremely weak and had panic attacks.

Arya lost her mother and her father abandoned the survivor and performed a remarriage. Abandoned at a young age, Arya was brought up by well-wishers and other care-takers. During one of her stays with a caretaker, she fell in love with a boy who reciprocated her feelings and promised marriage. When Arya would ask him about the marriage he would defer the question and eventually refused to marry him. Her fear of abandonment crept up when he refused to marry, feeling disheartened Arya filed a police report. The Police officers referred her to our Safe Home as the Officer thought she is very susceptible to trafficking and directed Arya to the Safe Home where she felt safe.

At the Safe Home, Arya underwent psychological and medical tests to determine her health. Based on the test results, Arya was given medication and was also undergoing counselling with the help of our counsellor. Due to all the trauma, she suffered the survivor was always quiet and afraid to express anything. Our counsellor helped Arya by encouraging her to express her feelings through art and music which made her feel safe to express. It took some time before Arya would open up, but eventually, through the help of our counsellor and the extended team, she was finally able to make a breakthrough and started talking about her fears and trauma. Our counsellor addressed these issues and helped her overcome the same using various techniques.

During one of her counselling sessions, Arya mentioned that she felt safe for the first time. She had been moving from one home to another to have necessities met but now at the safe home, she did not have to worry about her safety.

She started expressing herself using art. She mentioned that earlier she used to like a fish out of water with no love, support, family or genuine people to love and be loved. Now she feels that she would like to get back into the stream of life and know some basic rights of a girl and the strength to deal with challenges in the mainstream of society.



With the help of our counsellor, Arya was able to locate an extended family member who was willing to take care of her. She lived with them for some time and eventually was able to marry a man of her choice with the help of her extended family.

Today, Arya is safe, strong, confident and empowered with coping mechanisms taught by our counsellors which continue to help her.

**name changed to protect identity*



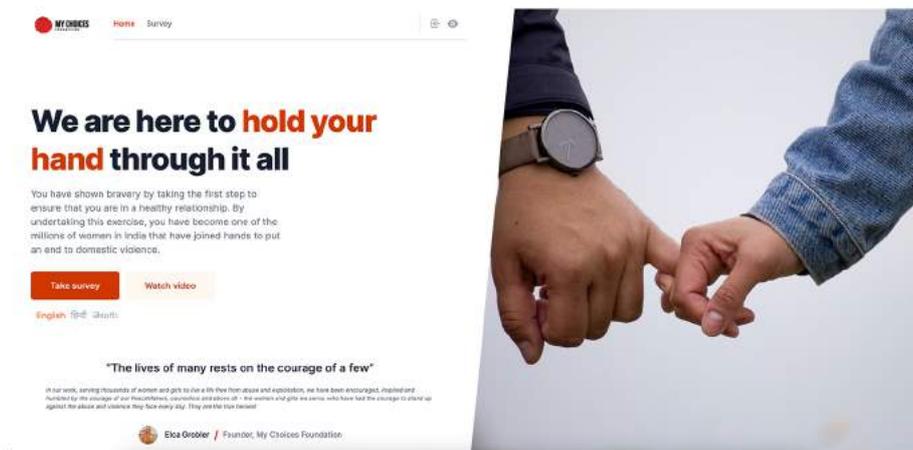
HELPLINE SERVICES

In June 2020, we launched a toll-free helpline number **1800 212 9131** in response to the sharp increase in the number of women reaching out to us for help from domestic violence and other forms of abuse, due to the COVID-19 lockdown. The new helpline number allowed us to expand our helpline services to reach more geographical locations and help more women in need. From April 2021 to June 2021, through our toll-free helpline number, we have assisted 36 women. 39 women reached out for assistance through our WhatsApp/Text-based helpline **9333 40 4141**.

HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP QUIZ

We have developed a relationship quiz in partnership with our technology partner Merlynn Intelligence Technologies. Titled 'Are You in a Healthy Relationship', our quiz focuses on the health of a relationship in four core areas: physical, emotional, economic and sexual. The quiz consists of yes or no questions and is completely confidential. This quiz is available on our website. Anyone can take the quiz to have a deeper understanding of their relationship, in case of any doubts regarding the relationship quiz, contact using the helpline number - 1800 212 9131. The relationship quiz is available in English, Hindi and Telugu.

43 women have approached us from April to June 2021 after taking the quiz. These women were unaware of the red flags in their relationships, taking the quiz gave them a deeper understanding of what are healthy and unhealthy signs in a relationship



E-LEARNING MODULES

The current COVID-19 pandemic has affected how programmes have been conducted in the field. Reaching out to communities became an issue and it is unknown when the situation would stabilize. Hence, in times of distress, adapting to changing scenarios is essential. The phone has become a sole source for communication, learning and entertainment for many people. This platform can be utilized to educate people about the grave danger of trafficking and domestic violence. Hence, we are developing online modules to spread awareness through remote programs, social media and other education platforms.

We are leveraging online platforms like YouTube and ChalkLit to create awareness about sex trafficking and domestic violence. My Choices Foundation (MCF), conceptualized the building of digital training modules which will include videos that will cover the issue of sex trafficking and domestic violence, Indian and International laws implemented for preventing these issues, and initiatives taken by My Choices Foundation to protect women and children from abuse and violence. The proposed digital module will be globally scalable, replicable, and sustainable.

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Spot signs of abuse
Talk to seek help
Oppose abusive attitudes
Push for a life free from
abuse & violence

Domestic Violence

Call us for free counselling, legal assistance and safe shelter

1800 212 9131

If you are unable to call, text/whatsapp

9333 40 4141

Hyderabad: Golconda, Lakdi Ka Pul, Shah Ali Banda, Secunderabad

India: Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Telangana, West Bengal

CREATING SAFE SPACES FOR WOMEN & CHILDREN



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