The girls and women of these photographs have been in the care of Sanlaap, a nongovernmental organization based in Kolkata, India. The photography sessions were conducted at the Sneha Girls Shelter in Narendrapur, near Kolkata, a shelter operated with the government of India under the Juvenile Justice Act. The girls and women are residents of Sanlaap’s four shelters or are participants in the organization’s youth groups and outreach activities. 126 portraits were made by the photographer, and 126 personal histories were shared with the counselor during sessions with each girl. The girls and the women gave their images and stories gladly, often with a forceful request to “tell the world.”

These are not stories of trafficking and prostitution. These are stories of vulnerability. They record how a young girl’s fragile web of protection is torn by domestic violence, the loss of a parent or an early marriage — and how that vulnerability is exploited by husbands, aunts and uncles, neighbors and finally, brothel owners. The stories take us beyond poverty as “the cause of trafficking.” For many of the girls and women had happy, if poor, early childhoods. Instead, we repeatedly see family dysfunction, village gossip, polygamy and misplaced trust resulting in a girl’s descent into an extremely vulnerable situation — from which the trafficker easily harvests her.

Their stories don’t dwell upon their lives in the brothel. Most didn’t want to talk about it. They wanted to tell how they came to it and what it meant to them. These are stories of resiliency and of collapse. Some of the girls and women in the care of Sanlaap have incredible power, struggling, pushing against a society that has exploited them; some are challenged, or rejected by their families because they are too young, or perhaps mentally or physically unstable. Some are free to leave the shelter. For most, “freedom” is reach 18 or when their court cases end, almost all are free to leave the shelter. For most, “freedom” is uncertain and frightening. Their stories seldom talk about the future.

Transformations

The photography sessions were conducted in silence, except for the voice of the photographer. Many are crying in their portraits. Through the months of the project, the girls and women were guided by the counselor and the photographer to seek an expression of themselves — something, anything, they wanted to be. And for a moment, before the camera, each one silently transformed.

These portraits evolved from the need to protect the identities of the girls and women. The photographer decided upon masks, drawing inspiration from tribal masked ritual. Each woman would choose her own mask. Through group and individual counseling sessions, the counselor helped each identify a human, divine or natural being that she would like to transform into, a being that would express her feelings, that would strengthen her — a long and delicate task, given the pain, anger, sadness and, at times, emotional instability of the girls and women.

A studio was set up in a training hall in Narendrapur, a shelter housing about 90 girls and women. The photographer sought a stronger visual expression of their transformations, and simple masks developed into full costumes. Then a sort of magic happened. Shawls, jewelry, leaves, antique sari and cooking pots were brought to the shelter. The girls and women played with costumes and makeup. Behind the silent studio, the dressing rooms rang with laughter as they dressed each other, made up each other’s faces and waited for their turn to be photographed.

All joined in, even the silent ones who normally hid during the day behind the coconut trees. For a brief time, the aggressive ones quieted down and the depressed started talking with others. Many shook with emotion as they went in front of the camera. For a half hour or longer, each one stood quietly under the lights, under the gentle guidance of the photographer, adjusting, focussing. For perhaps the first time in her life, she was the center of warm attention: costumed, beautiful, fussed over, focused upon, hallowed for what she wanted to be. What originated as a simple photography project had become a healing experience.

Those who made Another Me Transformations from Pain to Power possible:

Achinto Bhadra studied photography at Chitra Bani, Kolkata, and at the London College of Printing as a recipient of the Charles Wallace Scholarship. As an independent documentary photographer, he has spent years photographing the urban poor and marginalized children and women for national and international development agencies. Some of the photographs in this project have appeared in the 13th Noorderlicht Photofestival, the Netherlands, and will be featured in C International Photo Magazine, Ivory Press, London, in 2007.

Harleen Walia is a counselor, trainer, and specialist in child protection. She was program coordinator of Sanlaap’s psychological programs and has conducted trainings throughout India for the last 11 years in gender, trafficking, child sexual abuse and similar issues. She is presently a consultant for the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime in New Delhi, providing training for law enforcement officers and prosecutors in antitrafficking interventions.

Sanlaap is a nongovernmental organization based in Kolkata, India, that seeks to address the social imbalances that manifest in gender injustice and violence against women and girls. Sanlaap works against the trafficking of women and children for commercial sexual exploitation, sexual abuse and prostitution. The organization operates four shelter homes, a child protection program for the children of the red-light areas of Kolkata, support groups for women in prostitution, and a trafficking prevention program with 27 community-based organizations in nine districts of West Bengal. In particular we wish to acknowledge the efforts of Indrani Sinha, the Director of Sanlaap in Kolkata. Sanlaap is the Indian partner in the Another Me project. http://www.sanlaapindia.org

Terre des hommes Foundation (Lausanne, Switzerland) has supported this project through its offices in Karmandu, Nepal. Throughout the world, Terre des hommes supports community-based activities in maternal and child health, children’s rights, child protection and antitrafficking. In particular we wish to acknowledge the efforts of Reinhard Fichtl, presently the Country Director for Tdh in Sri Lanka. He was the Tdh representative in Nepal who initiated and supported the Another Me project. So, too, we are grateful to Muna Basent and John Frederick who have been closely involved with the Another Me project from the outset. Learn more at http://www.termeshommes.org/

John M. Cook is president and chief executive officer of PRG-Schultz International and founder of the South Asia Children’s Fund. He was chairman of the board of trustees of Saint Louis University and currently serves as a member of the board of trustees and on the executive advisory board of the University’s John Cook School of Business. Cook is a graduate of Saint Louis University, from which he holds a bachelor’s degree in accounting.