

Opinion

Opinion: Inclusive Development

From a brothel to the UN — is the aid sector ready for survivor leadership?

Opinion: The aid sector celebrates survivor stories but rarely funds survivor leadership. A leader raised in Mumbai's red-light area argues that real localization means trusting communities to lead.

By *Shweta Katti* // 13 March 2026



The view from the podium in the U.N. General Assembly Hall. Photo by: [Kim Haughton / UN Photo / CC BY-NC-ND](#)

In development spaces, survivors are often welcomed as storytellers, but rarely trusted as decision-makers. Yet the girls I grew up with are not stories waiting to be told. They are leaders waiting to be trusted.

I was born and raised in a brothel in Mumbai. Today I am poised to speak at the United Nations about girls like the ones I grew up with.

This week I am in New York attending the Commission on the Status of Women, where I will speak on a [panel](#) titled “Hidden and Normalized Inequality and Violence: The Realities of Women from Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent.” The panel focuses on

communities like mine, where gender discrimination is compounded by caste and occupation.

For years, people around the world have invited me to share my story — how a girl raised in one of India’s most stigmatized communities found her way to global stages. At 18, I became the first girl from a red-light area to study abroad after receiving a scholarship to Bard College in New York. At 19, I received the [United Nations Youth Courage Award](#) and was named one of one of the 25 women under 25 to watch by Newsweek magazine.

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People often tell me my story is inspiring.

But the longer I spend in global development spaces, the more I notice a pattern. The system loves survivor stories. What it struggles with is survivor leadership.

I was born and raised in one of India’s oldest red-light areas, where the narrow lanes of brothels formed the backdrop of childhood. Girls learned early what the world expected of them — for many of us, the future had already been written.

At 16, I left the red-light area for the first time when I came to Kranti, a home and leadership school for girls from India’s red-light areas. Soon after, I found myself speaking to universities, conferences, and development organizations about my life. Again and again, I was asked to tell my story, to describe the trauma, the stigma, and the barriers girls face growing up in places like the one I came from. But never did anyone ask what solutions might look like if girls from those communities were the ones designing them.

Then, in my early 20s, something happened that forced me to reconsider everything. I nearly died of tuberculosis. After years of traveling, speaking, and chasing opportunities, I found myself confronting a simple question: What was all of this for?

“The system loves survivor stories. What it struggles with is survivor leadership.”

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In that moment, the answer became clear. I did not want a life defined by telling my story. I wanted every girl from my community to have the chance to create her own. So I returned to the very place I had once tried so hard to escape.

From the outside, people often assume that leaving a brothel is the ultimate goal. But over time I realized something else: I did not want to escape my community. I wanted to invest my life in it. The women and girls I grew up with are not people I feel compelled to “save.” They are the people I would choose to build a life with, anywhere in the world.

Today I lead Kranti, the same school that changed my life. It is now run entirely by women who grew up in red-light areas themselves. To our knowledge, we are the only school in the world for daughters of sex workers, led entirely by daughters of sex workers.

My mother, a former sex worker, now works at Kranti as well. She lives with HIV, something that once meant that decisions about her care were made by others, often far removed from the realities of her life. Today her health care rests in my hands, not in the hands of an NGO where someone else decides what support is possible.

That shift matters more than most development frameworks can capture. The women at Kranti are not “beneficiaries.” They are my mother, my sisters, my aunties — the community that raised me, who would give their lives for me. When we make decisions about education, health care, or opportunity, we are not managing a program, we are caring for our own.



When we began this work, many people assumed girls coming from brothels would struggle simply to complete school. What has happened instead has surprised almost everyone except us.

Two Kranti graduates earned master’s degrees in psychology in the United States and now work there as therapists. Another completed a master’s degree in gender and peacebuilding at the United Nations University for Peace. One is completing a master’s degree in transnational governance in Florence, Italy, and she uses her stipend to pay rent for an apartment for her mother, who is living outside a brothel for the first time in her life.

One Kranti girl became the first girl from an Indian red-light area ever to perform on Broadway and has now been admitted to New York University’s master’s program in Theatre for Social and Civic Engagement. Another recently completed her master’s in photography in Paris, France, and received a grant to create an exhibition about the lives of sex workers after their working hours. My younger sister studies fine arts in Rome, Italy.

None of these outcomes are miracles. And none of them came from rescue. They came from investment, education, and the belief that girls from even the most stigmatized communities can lead. Yet despite these outcomes, survivor-led initiatives like ours remain rare in the development world. The sector often speaks about “local leadership,” “community participation,” and “lived experience.” But in practice, power and resources still tend to flow toward large institutions far removed from the communities they aim to support.

Survivors are invited to illustrate the problem. Rarely are they trusted to lead the solution. If localization is meant to shift power, not just language, development institutions must confront a difficult question: Are

they truly prepared for leadership from the communities they have historically treated only as beneficiaries?

The question is no longer whether survivors have stories to tell. It is whether the system is ready to share power, because the world does not need more survivor stories. It needs survivor leadership — and the courage to fund it.

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The views in this opinion piece do not necessarily reflect Devex's editorial views.

About the author



Shweta Katti

Shweta Katti was born and raised in a Mumbai brothel. At 18, she became the first girl from an Indian red-light area to study abroad, and at 19, she received the U.N. Youth Courage Award. Today she is the director of Kranti School, a leadership academy for, and run entirely by, daughters of sex workers. She advocates globally for sex workers' rights and survivor-led leadership.