

# From the arc lights of Vadapalani to dance bars of Dubai and back

The story of a young girl's journey over the lure of money spills the beans on a human trafficking racket

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**CHENNAI:** A young girl's ordeal has revealed a network of human traffickers leading from Vadapalani in Chennai across borders to Dubai and back.

Workers of the Indian Community Welfare Organisation (ICWO), an organisation working on issues of human trafficking and prostitution, identified Meenakshi, a 22-year-old, during a routine field visit to Vadapalani recently. According to the workers, the girl could not speak or walk and appeared to be suffering from mental trauma. They met with the young woman's mother Vijaya, following which the woman's shocking story began to unfold. On Thursday, they organised a press meet in a bid to bring out the human trafficking network that wrecked havoc in her life.

The organisation has tried to trace those who they suspect are part of a large network involved in trafficking girls and responsible for Meenakshi's current state. As part of this process, the workers and Meenakshi's mother addressed the media.

## From film studios to hell

Meenakshi was once a bubbly girl who worked in the film studios of Chennai. After finishing her eighth year in school, she followed in her father's footsteps and became a junior artist in films. Beautiful and fair, Meenakshi received a lot of attention on the sets. Meenakshi had befriended two middle-aged female dancers who had told

her she could go to Dubai and earn a lot of money as a dancer. They had also told her she could meet filmmakers there whom she could impress with her dancing. Persuaded by them, Meenakshi, her eyes filled with dreams, set off for Dubai.

Less than two months later, she returned in a wheel chair, a mere shadow of the woman she was and unable to tell

anyone what had happened to her.

Vijaya related the events that lead up to her daughter's departure to Dubai and her unexpected return to Chennai. She alleged that an agent named Shafee had approached her daughter and offered her an advance of Rs.50,000 for a job as a dancer in Dubai. Meenakshi's friends had persuaded her to accept. Vijaya said one of the

women had then taken the advance and she and her daughter never received a single paisa. Vijaya alleged that the sponsor in Dubai was a man named Taul. It was he who had organised everything for her daughter in Dubai. "Two other girls also left with Meenakshi that day," she said.

Meenakshi left for Dubai on April 29. According to Vijaya, she "seemed fine"

during the first month. In May, Vijaya received a call from her daughter saying that she did not want to stay there anymore as "strange things" were happening. For a month afterwards, she did not hear from her daughter, but later received a call from Taul asking for Rs.25,000, as "the girl was of no use to them." Vijaya told him that they did not have so much money.

A few days after the conversation with Taul, she was sent word that her daughter would be arriving in Chennai on June 27. At the airport, Vijaya saw her daughter being wheeled in — a blank look on her face, and only her hand bag across her arm.

A.J. Hariharan, Founder Secretary, ICWO, said they first informed the police of the case. "We informed the CID, but were told that we had to first inform the Commissioner's office as this case involved event that had occurred in Dubai. We did but haven't heard from them since"

ICWO has attempted to find out more about the suspected network, based on Vijaya's claims. On Thursday, following the press briefing, a woman posing as a potential client telephoned Taul. He told the woman to take "the client" to his agent in Chennai. When probed about the nature of the job, he said it involved dancing and the girl could earn about Rs.20,000-30,000, but could earn as much as Rs.50,000 "if she cooperated." Mr. Hariharan, added that "this is looked more than a normal instance of trafficking, as there was a cross border network and a lot of money involved. We will look into where exactly this trail leads."

