

# How jewelry is saving women from human trafficking

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Updated 9:58 AM ET, Fri March 25, 2016



Who's Sari Now? The women of Apne Aap have survived human trafficking and now make jewelry from upcycled saris for Rosena Sammi Jewelry.

## Story highlights

- Rosena Sammi Jewelry has partnered with nonprofit organization Apne Aap to help fund education for human trafficking survivors
- The women of Apne Aap make the "Who's Sari Now?" jewelry collection
- The jewelry is popular with celebrities and is featured in many fashion magazines
- "Apne Aap" means self-empowerment in Hindi

(CNN) Sometimes something as simple as a bracelet can save a life.

For thousands of women who have been rescued from human trafficking in India by the organization Apne Aap, it's not the piece of jewelry itself, but rather the future it can create.

Bangles, necklaces, earrings and even bags made by [Apne Aap](#) women from upcycled saris are being sold at American department stores and boutiques and online as part of [Rosena Sammi Jewelry's "Who Sari Now?" Collection](#).

About 25% of the purchase price goes back to the women artisans, giving them a livable wage. The money also helps fund their children's education. No small feat for women who may have been sold into prostitution at a very young age, abused for years and then discarded when they were no longer a profitable commodity.

## Journalist turned activist



Rosena Sammi and Ruchira Gupta are working together to help survivors of sex trafficking.

"Apne Aap" means "self-empowerment" in Hindi. For founder and former journalist Ruchira Gupta, helping women help themselves is what Apne Aap is all about.

About 20 years ago, Gupta was walking through the hills of Nepal when she heard a story of missing girls from the villages. When she followed the story, she uncovered a supply line of young girls taken from the villages of Nepal to the brothels of Bombay.

"What I saw in the brothel was 13-year-old girls being raped by 10 customers a night and a whole group of people living off that girl. I saw pimps who made money from her. I saw brothel managers, brothel owners, landlords. ... She was basically kept in that bondage like a slave. Her body was just basically consumed, consumed, consumed for five years and when she was no longer commercially viable, she was just thrown out," Gupta says.

She ended up making a documentary called "The Selling of Innocents," which won an Emmy for outstanding investigative journalism in 1996. She says making that documentary changed her life.

"As a journalist, I covered war and famine and hunger and cost conflict and ethnic conflict but I'd never seen this kind of deliberate exploitation of human beings by other human beings."

## **Humble beginnings to a big impact**

The 22 women profiled in the documentary asked Gupta for help in protecting themselves and their daughters from prostitution. Gupta organized the women into a collective and Apne Aap was born. The women worked together to provide a safe place to live, jobs, education for their children and, ultimately, to try to bring human traffickers to justice.

All of those original 22 women have since died from suicide, hunger or AIDS-related complications.



Ruby was once a student at Apne Aap and now she works with other women to make the bracelets sold by Rosena Sammi Jewelry. The money she earns supports her family.

Gupta says more than 21,000 women and children have been helped by Apne Aap over the past 20 years. She says there are currently more than 1,000 children of former sex slaves in school; dozens are in college. With education, the children break the cycle of slavery by getting skilled jobs or buying land and getting their mothers out of the red-light districts.

How does that make Gupta feel?

"Satisfied," she says. "Very, very, very satisfied and exhausted... it takes sweat, blood, and toil. It sounds easy when I say we've gone from 22 women to more than 20,000 people helped, but every step of the way we faced all kinds of challenges."

Gupta says for every 100 children they put in school, 100 more are waiting.

## More than just making jewelry



The women of Apne Aap have survived human trafficking and now make jewelry from upcycled saris for the Who's Sari Now? line to sell in America.

Gupta says teaming up with Rosena Sammi Jewelry has created more than just jobs for survivors of human trafficking. As the women make the jewelry, they heal.

"They sit in a group and make the bangles together so they have a lot of fun and they can connect with the product. It makes them feel like real professionals and it's a real occupation," Gupta says.

She hopes it will clear the way for similar business opportunities for the women of Apne Aap.

"Through our partnership we've created double impact. One is educating girls and the other is creating a livelihood. Even triple impact, I would say, because it will create awareness among the people who buy and wear the bangles," says Gupta.

The jewelry is also made from upcycled saris -- garments damaged in production and not being used. It's a sustainable way to help women and the environment.

## Inspired to make a difference



Jewelry designer brings India's style to Hollywood 01:21

CNN first profiled Rosena Sammi and her jewelry in 2009 as a small business going global in a unique way.

Born and raised in New Zealand, Sammi is of Sri Lankan descent and now lives in New York. The lawyer-turned-jewelry designer turned to artisans in India to create jewelry inspired by South Asia.

The jewelry is popular with celebrities and has been featured on red carpets and fashion magazines for years. But after she became a mother, Sammi was inspired to do more.

"When I met Ruchira her message resonated with me, because she was really telling the story of very young girls just a few years older than my own who have been taken from their villages and put into brothels, denied an education, and living a life of prostitution," says Sammi.

At the time, Sammi was also looking to really do something to combat what she calls a "fast fashion" environment.

"I know other Indian designers who've moved their operations to China, where they can be made in a factory a little bit more economically, but I have definitely been a big proponent of keeping everything handmade in India," she says.

## Dedicated workforce



Mumtaj Bibi joined Apne Aap 13 years ago and learned how to sew. She has used the money she has earned to pay for her children's education.

Sammi employs about 30 women from Apne Aap. She recently put in an order for 22,000 pieces.

"These women are so excited to be working, really dedicated to doing a good job and learning. It does not take very long to get them up to speed on the sort of designs that I wanted to do and we very quickly created this fantastic production unit," says Sammi.

It's not all about making beautiful things and being in the fashion business. It's also about making a difference.

"These are women who have just survived things we can't even imagine. To see that change in their lives and the opportunities that they are now being given through this project is so meaningful to me," says Sammi.

To learn more about [Apne Aap](#) and how you can make an impact, follow the Who's Sari Now movement on social media at [#whossarinow](#).