

## The Women's Movement and Our Troubled Relationship with Prostitution:

A Dialogue on Saheli Day

Newsletter sep - dec 2004

On 9th August 2004, Saheli completed twenty-three years of existence. To mark the occasion, a meeting was held on prostitution and sex work - a subject we have been feeling the need to engage with. We were happy to have with us Meena Seshu and Shabana Kazi from Sangram and Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad (VAMP), a collective of women in prostitution in Sangli, Maharashtra to initiate the discussion, address the dilemmas and take forward the debate. Over 60 people attended the meeting and participated in what turned out to be a multifaceted and lively discussion.

Working on campaigns related to coercive population policies, contraception and control over the body, we in Saheli have, over the past two decades, focused attention on one aspect of women's bodies invaded by the state and have campaigned for women "victims" of state oppression through forced population control and imposition of hazardous contraception. The conflation of sexuality and reproduction, the reduction of women into their reproductive organs alone has been reflected in health policy, the medical establishment and international funding of population control. The fragmentation of women in reproductive health policies has demanded an engagement with the construction of the female body and "control" over it. Where contraception and fertility control mark the convergence of female sexuality and reproduction, prostitution marks the convergence of female sexuality and economics/work - a convergence that has demanded a complex response that is still evolving.

### VARIOUS POSITIONS ON SEX WORK

Laxmi Murthy from Saheli initiated the discussion by presenting some points from the existing dominant discourse on prostitution. A widely shared perspective of women's groups has been that prostitution is the epitome of patriarchy, objectifying women bodies, commodification and commercialisation of sex. On one end of the spectrum is the view that prostitutes are victims of "female sexual slavery". Kathleen Barry, for instance has elaborated on the manner in which prostitution is inherently violent, whether women are kidnapped, purchased, fraudulently contracted through organized crime syndicates or procured through love and befriending tactics.

This perspective, echoed by those working to end trafficking in women and children assumes that all prostitutes are forced into the institution, and that making money from sex is synonymous with sexual exploitation. Complete abolition of prostitution is thus the logical solution to end such exploitation of women. This approach criminalizes the manifestations of sex work such as soliciting, pimping, brothel keeping and trafficking, and often criminalizes the prostitute herself.

At the other end of the spectrum, the global prostitutes' rights movement in the 60s and 70s articulated the rights of prostitute women. Spearheaded by women like Margo St James, founder of COYOTE (Cast Off Your Old Tired Ethics) since the early 1970s, or Helen Buckingham who founded PLAN (Prostitution Laws Are Nonsense) in 1975, are those who argue that many adult women actually choose sex work as a viable option. Proponents of this approach view this voluntary decision to make money from sex as akin to selling other forms of labour. The Second "World Whores Congress" which took place in October 1986 in the "distinguished halls" of the European Parliament building in Brussels, marked the "coming out" of the prostitute rights movement. However, shades of grey often get lost in this polarisation, and the attempt at this meeting was to explore the nuances in between.

### The Existing Positions Were Summed Up As:

**Abolitionist** - This approach believes that prostitution is a social evil and needs to be abolished by stringent laws and policies. It often criminalizes and punishes women in prostitution and the sex industry. This is an approach followed by the State (for instance, in the recent incident in Baina, Goa in June-July where the state government, in a bid to "purify" Goa, acted on the orders of the High Court and demolished 250 huts belonging to women in prostitution).

**Reformist** - Reformists believe that women in prostitution are either victims of male sexual demands or are women with loose morals and depraved sexuality. In either case, the approach of state agencies and 'social service' NGOs is to "rescue" women in prostitution and rehabilitate them either by sending them home or by providing alternate income generating schemes etc.

**Regulatory** - This approach basically "accepts" prostitution per se and believes in controlling and regulating the sex industry by using state machinery. Licensing, tax and compulsory health check ups. are some aspects of the regulatory approach.

**Rights based approach** - This takes into account that women come into prostitution for a wide range of economic, social and political reasons. This approach believes that women in prostitution have the same and equal rights as everyone else. Policies made for them should take their realities into account and be based on the suggestions made by them. It also believes that effective policy implementation is possible only through equal and active participation of the community. This approach has emerged from collectives of women in prostitution - such as the Durbar Mahila Samanvay Committee (DMSC) in Kolkata and VAMP in Sangli.

But whatever the position, what cannot be disputed is that there are a number of vexing questions which need complex engagement within the women's movement. Most of the groups working on the issue agree that decriminalising laws around prostitution is a critical step that is urgently needed to enable women in prostitution to access their rights and to end police violations. Yet the wide range of experiences that women in prostitution encounter demonstrate the complexity of the issue, taking the debate beyond the binaries of legalization/abolition, good/bad, moral/immoral, etc. A grey zone exists between these extremes - a zone of differences and discomfort, conflict and concern. Unravelling the complex world of sexual autonomy, free choice, sexual exploitation and agency-versus-victim debates cannot be done in a half a day, but we need to make a beginning in shifting the focus from blaming the woman and her sexual life to a continuum ranging from the "beneficial exploitation of the institution of prostitution" to the "inherent victimisation of the woman in prostitution". Most important, there is need to listen to those most affected - the women in prostitution themselves.

Shabana Kazi, General Secretary of VAMP, the collective of women in prostitution, Sangli began her talk by saying, "I am a sex worker. Earlier we used to work in Sangram on AIDS awareness and prostitutes' rights. Then we decided to have our own organization - VAMP."

Highlighting the importance of starting an organization, Shabana said that problems with the police - sexual favours and not using condoms; and with goondas who would not only have free sex but also take away their gold and money - became relatively easier to handle because the organisation provided them with unity. Not all problems have been dealt with though, as there is still exploitation by the police. According to Shabana, the policemen often say, 'you are not citizens, and not even women... you are "mere" prostitutes. "But prostitutes too belong to the same society as the men who come to them," she asserted.

Admitting that there are a number of young girls still entering the business, Shabana added that they have been stressing that girls younger than 18 years should not get into sex work. She further added that they did not want laws to regulate them. Stressing that regulation and laws would work for only those who have regular nine to five jobs, she said, "legislation will only end up exploiting us." Licensing and regulation will only give more power to the police, she stated.

Meena Seshu from Sangram, Sangli spoke of her personal journey and engagement with the issue. "When we started working with women, mainly on HIV/AIDS awareness, we came with the usual traditional images. For instance, I had the impression that prostitution is illegal, though the law does not prohibit prostitution per se. Our agenda, like that of all those working on HIV at that time, was mostly to save men from AIDS and through them the women in their homes," she said.

However, working with persons in prostitution and sex work in the HIV/AIDS prevention program, helped in addressing their own double standards and biases while dealing with issues of sexuality and prostitution. What this did was to shake to the core their perception of prostitution as "exploitation, victimization, oppression, loose, immoral, illegal".

During this journey, it was not only the ideas and beliefs which were questioned and reformulated but even the very language to describe the women had to be transformed. Words like “whore”, “harlot” and “veshya” which have been used as abuses for the “fallen woman” were more often than not derogatory within the moral space of sacredness, so an attempt was made to help reclaim some of the terminology, and assert identities with positive meaning.

The need to reclaim womanhood had also become necessary since this sanctified moral space refused to acknowledge the fact that the very identity (of being a woman) was wiped out by the “whore”, “harlot”, “veshya” image. This stigma created a new category that built on an image of “prostitutes” devoid of gender. They ceased to be women because they were not “good”. So those working in Sangli started using terms like “women in prostitution” instead of the commonly used term “prostitute” while the women themselves started using the term “women in business (dhandha)” while referring to themselves. Now after much discussion the term “People in Prostitution and Sex Work” to include all persons who “make money out of sex” has also been included in the vocabulary.

However, what has made the existing situation worse is that the HIV/AIDS epidemic has singled out people-in-prostitution and sex work as “carriers and vectors of spread of HIV”. Apart from the stigma already attached to their work, society has further marginalized them as core transmitters of the HIV infection. There is a failure to understand and recognise that they are but links in the broad networks of heterosexual transmission of HIV, Meena told the gathering.

In this complex situation, she raised some pertinent questions like where is the voice of the women? And are we going to have some kind of a policy which actually talks about them? She also stressed that what they would like to see is an encouragement of empowering strategies that adopt the perspective of the rights of the people in prostitution and sex work and which place such persons at the center of any analysis, irrespective of the site of work.

In the free-floating discussion that followed, these were broadly the issues discussed:

### TRAFFICKING, SEX WORK AND CHOICE

Trafficking, which is trade in human beings, has most often been made equivalent to prostitution. The move to stop trafficking is thus equated with stopping prostitution. Related to this is also the trafficking of minors and child abuse - when we talk of minor trafficking or minors in prostitution do we call it child sexual abuse? Another complex issue is the question of violence and consent. The women’s movement has always taken up issues of rape, sexual harassment and molestation, where the woman is seen as a typical “victim”. However, in prostitution, the concept of consent is a grey area. Moreover, do women in prostitution sell themselves unconditionally? How does one define rape here? Feminists have typically not wholeheartedly supported campaigns against rape of women in prostitution.

Lalitha of Joint Women’s Programme, Delhi said that all the women she had met and talked to on GB Road had said that if they had had an option, they would not have entered sex work. She further added that in Delhi there had not been a single case where a mother had put her own daughter into sex work, though in Mumbai this is known to happen. The brothel-based women in Mumbai are engaged in forced prostitution and in terms of state control, they face more problems, she said, adding that there have been no attempts to provide proper alternatives for them. Further she said that there were pressures from the family and lots of criminal elements get into red-light areas so she was surprised by Shabana’s statement that they don’t want laws because “what will they do without the police?”

Clarifying her position, Shabana said that they did not want licensing and they did not want to be exploited by the police. It was not as if they did not want the police, but they did not want the policemen to “look after” them. She further said that they did not want licenses because if they had to travel from one place to another they would have to go to the police thus opening another avenue of exploitation.

On the problem of speaking on someone else’s behalf, Asha Ramesh from Christian Aid, Delhi, felt

the need to have more sex workers present in discussions like the present one. She was also of the view that it would be incorrect to compare ourselves with sex workers who had chosen their profession because of their circumstances. "I am associated with a group of women in prostitution, the Vijaya Mahila Sangha in Bangalore. There we have a complex situation - some women work from 9 to 5 and go back home to a household situation. Some say they don't mind being active in the Sangha since they want protection, their rights, and to be treated as workers. Other women express fears of becoming "exposed" since they belong to a household. The question is how many such women have that choice. Even we who belong to women's movement, can we honestly say we have no problems, if our children also choose this as an occupation?"

Commenting on what Asha had said, Sashwati wondered whether the situation would reach a point where prostitution would be considered "good" work even by the women in the profession.

Bishakha from Point of View, Mumbai added that she was uncomfortable with isolating one group of women since the "choices" they made are comparable to others. "All of us make choices which are conditioned by circumstances, and by caste, class, society, and sexuality" she said, and "taking the point further, when we talk of poor women like rag pickers or construction workers we never ask them why they chose the work that they do. However, every time there is talk about women in prostitution it is like these women are coming from Mars and not from the same class, caste, race, religion and locations as other women. Why don't we treat them like human beings and treat them like one of us?" she asked.

Elizabeth Vatsyayan from AIDS Awareness Group, Delhi, spoke of another issue concerning women working on GB Road in Delhi - the increase in the number of HIV positive cases. According to her the atmosphere on GB Road was such that there was no trust and organizations which seem to show sympathy were actually implicated. She also stressed that HIV tests were being conducted without the knowledge of the women.

### **SEX, SEXUALITY AND SEX-WORK : MANY CHALLENGES TO FEMINISM**

Even as feminists we may/may not be able to distance ourselves from the deep social bias against the linking of sex with a commercial transaction. What we need to address here is whether the discomfort has to do with making money out of sex per se, or does it have to do with the reality that women in the business de facto have multiple sex partners? Related to this is the moot question of whether sex can be equated with selling any other service like say stone breaking or office work. What are the differences between these and what are the similarities?

Adding to the discussion, Manjima from Jagori, a group which works on migration and advocacy in issues of trafficking and prostitution, said they see prostitution as "work" and also see it as an institution of patriarchy as much as marriage is. Between marriage and prostitution, the lines are blurred, she said.

She added that in the course of their work, many of their assumptions were shattered - they had thought that women who married and women who did sex work were separate and lived separate lives. But they realized that they were wrong. In Gujarat they saw women who did sex work as part of mainstream society. There are no separate red light areas in Gujarat and meeting a group of sex workers was like sitting with a group of housewives. All this exploded the notion of these women forming a distinct group.

Women have sex for many reasons - some pragmatic, some not, Manjima continued. For instance, in the construction industry in Rajasthan there is intense competition for daily wage labour among women and it is often the promise of sex that gives one party an edge over the other. In the Nat community in the state, when a girl reaches puberty she is given a choice to either marry or do dhanda. According to the women from this community, the choice is obvious - as compared to marriage doing dhanda is "freedom". Prostitution is seen as liberation from the constrictions of marriage, the patriarchal set up of earning for male members of the family. She further added that a visit to Kamatipura shattered another belief - that women in prostitution have more understanding of sexuality than married women because there was as much confusion about sexuality among women in prostitution.

Abha Bhaiya, also from Jagori wanted to know how this debate could be conceptualized. What do we understand about the issue of sexual slavery? What is our position on it? Where do we stand in the entire issue of objectification -of the “vamp” and the “wife”? she asked. “As feminists, I feel this question that “will you make your daughter a prostitute” is useless. Will you ask a woman who breaks stones whether she will make her daughter also break stones? If we are practical, then this question of what will you make your daughter will be more understandable. Now we have made it quite a moralistic question, that is immobilising us, paralysing us,” she said.

Agreeing with Abha, Meena said that she was apprehensive of such polarised positions. She added that she did not believe that marriage and prostitution were two sides of the same coin. Instead she felt that they were not comparable as they occupied different spaces. The understanding and experience of male sexual power is very different in these two contexts. In marriage, the concept of the male ruling over the womb is very strong as compared with these notions among women in prostitution, she opined.

Taking the discussion in another direction Deepti from Saheli wanted Shabana to tell them a bit more about sex work. Did she see her work purely as business and did she decide with whom to have sex? Was there any community/religion that she would not entertain? Are there women who have relationships with other women? And did it ever happen that a bond developed with a client and did women also come to her?

Responding to these questions, Shabana said that there were some women in the community who loved other women. On the question of establishing a bond with a client, she said, “If at times we like someone, we treat him as a “husband” - that’s how we love.” She further added that there was no trust about “does he love me or not”. If he had money, the women took it. They also don’t discriminate on the basis of caste or religion etc. Men also don’t see which community the sex workers belong to - sex is for two minutes, so no one notices anything, she said.

Laxmi suggested that the group should try not to get polarised into positions of “married” vs “sex workers” or “us” vs “them”. She felt that there was a huge gap which was now slowly closing up. She added that these questions were fundamental to feminism and there was a need to look at sexuality as a broader experience. Many lines are blurred, and any deviance among “good” women too can lead to censure, sometimes extremely severe. According to Laxmi the meeting had come together not to look at rigid categories, but to look at how women’s lives have been circumscribed by laws and notions in society.

Raising a question about our very concepts of love and sex, Malika from Maati, Munsiyari, in Uttaranchal commented that we have very set ideas about “romantic love”. To men sex is like hunger, it’s a physical hunger like food. Working in Rajasthan when we spoke on this topic we spoke about relationships and women said what is important to them is laad (affection). Love can never be seen if laad is not there. If you are a low caste woman, he treats you like an untouchable, will not remove his clothes, he just has physical relations and walks out. In case of women in prostitution, they have given a man a place in their life and call him “malak” (owner). When we love we have also given a man a kind of place; so it is a challenge how we deal with sexuality in our lives. But I have seen this polarisation within same sex relationships also, where one woman sometimes takes a dominant and a violent role against the other woman. But romantic love in one way cheats on you and I have complained that we don’t question the concept at all!

## **WORK, SEX WORK AND MIGRATION**

Viewing prostitution as “work” can provide a basis for organising to solve many of the problems of commercial sex. Distinguishing sex work from other forms of labour reinforces the marginal, and therefore vulnerable status of the sex worker. What are the implications of sex workers demanding labour rights and occupational health and safety regulations like all other workers, for instance?

Manjima brought up the issue of the rights of migrants which too could be focused upon vis-à-vis sex workers. A Jagori study in 2000 seeking to track trafficking in Rajasthan and Gujarat among populations migrating for livelihood and found it impossible to find the data they were looking for as women were migrating out of their own choice though they were being exploited at various levels. Further, she added that sex workers are usually migrants, so at times there is this wholly

xenophobic response against Nepali and Bangladeshi women and women from the south. She also stressed that migrants' rights and the rights of citizens was an important part of the debate.

In response, Meena expressed her concern about the fact that prostitution was being seen as equivalent to trafficking and migration too had been made equivalent to trafficking and the term, "prostitution" was being used for migrating. So this made migration too an important issue.

According to Shreerexha from Jagori, migration was displacement. She stressed the need to look at the increase in the number of women engaged in domestic work and also falling into sex work. "We need to see this in the context of globalisation," she said.

Adding to the discussion, Indu Prakash from Ashray Adhikar Abhiyan, Delhi, said that in their work with the homeless, they found that women were more vulnerable and many of them were also doing sex work. "We have to remove the stigma associated with prostitution and work strategically," he said, adding that some organisations had picked up women, decided that they did sex work and had appropriated the job of "setting them straight." According to him, such things had to be resisted. Agreeing with Indu Prakash, Meena added that resistance was all-important - if the women in Baina had been organized they could have fought the move to evict them. Abha expressed the view that there was a need to have an e-group or mailing list and strengthen the network against the Kamathipura eviction issue.

Kalyani from Jagori raised some questions about the eviction of sex workers from Goa - Where will they go? What will they eat? What will they do? Commenting on this Meena said that the demolition of about 150 brothels in Baina, Goa and the people being returned to their state of origin, was passed as a law in 2003. Because it was mostly sex workers in Baina, nobody questioned anything. The morality justifying the move was very strong, she pointed out, since these women had been in Baina for 40 to 50 years and all of them were evicted in one go with tremendous violence.

Talking about the evictions in Goa, Rakesh (Advocate) said that we need to consider the Right to Shelter. "Where will you send people who have been living there for years? And why? The whole issue of "outsiders" and "insiders" of a state also come into play," he said. Added Leena (Lawyer's Collective), "We are all losing in Court, so its just not enough to say we "will support" - there needs to be more strategic support and action."

Bringing up an important point about the commercial dimension to the issue, journalist Rashme Sehgal said that what needs to be kept in mind is that the brothels on Baina beach in Goa and Kamathipura are on prime estate. Very influential businessmen want to acquire that land, since it is hugely profitable. The judiciary has a vested interest in ensuring that the land goes to the most profitable party, said Rashme.

Meena expressed the need to understand such complex problems, where even NGOs with different ideologies are dividing up the community into small areas. In Mumbai, a police commissioner has ordered the eviction of brothels - and nobody is reacting, she said. Civil society organizations have not taken up this issue in Kamathipura. In Maharashtra, the government says, "We cannot legalize prostitution". In Kolkata, the DMSC could do something. In Goa, civil society organizations refused to collaborate as they thought their cases would be jeopardized. Further, she stressed the importance of the issue of land in both Goa and Kamathipura and said that the question of land should also be kept in mind while discussing strategies. According to her such an isolationist policy is scary and there is a need to build broad coalitions - that is the direction in which the solution lies.

Taking the discussion further, Jaya from Prism, Delhi, said that it was important to get clarity in our strategy. She also expressed the need to articulate links between State power and say Section 377, prostitution, abortion of female foetuses and issues relating to sexuality. There was also the need to go beyond some of the boundaries of what are seen as "women's issues" and look at gender. For instance, she said was the whole issue of male sex workers - where does the discomfort lie when the articulation of "women's bodies for male pleasure" argument does not hold?

Expressing the urgency to deal with these issues, Abha added that these issues could not wait while they conceptualized on what needed to be done, both the processes had to be followed

simultaneously.

At a practical level, Meena suggested that like the network that emerged in Mumbai, following the dialogue on women in prostitution in Delhi, a network could be formed of those who attended the meeting and who want to keep in touch. And what better name could there be: “A Loose Network of Loose Women,” she quipped!

**Taken from Saheli’s Website: <https://sites.google.com/site/saheliorgsite/-miniscule-minority-supreme-court-recriminalises-homosexuality/gender-sexuality/the-women-s-movement-and-our-troubled-relationship-with-prostitution>**