

Beyond the Violence of Stigma and Victimhood

Open Letter to the delegates of 'Last Girl First': Second World Congress against the Sexual Exploitation of Women and Girls (January 29-31, 2017, New Delhi, India) organised by the Coalition for the Abolition of Prostitution International (CAP Intl)

The stellar contribution of the global women's movement has been to identify the source of women's **victimhood**: male domination in the social, political, economic and cultural spheres. Naming **patriarchy** as the system that subjugated women and denied them access to rights and a life of dignity free from discrimination and violence, enabled a concerted movement towards eliminating women's inequality. A major element of women's victimhood was an inability to make choices – about livelihood, place of residence, marriage or maternity.

Choice is mediated not only by gender, but also in a major way by class, caste, ethnicity, region, religion and a host of other factors. Feminists also view **consent** as a deliberate act, based on various dynamic factors. Importantly, women's **agency** began to be lauded and supported by all those who believed that women have the capacity, and the right to make decisions for themselves, and that conditions must be created in order for these choices to work in women's favour. Such respect for women can be engendered only when all women --regardless of their occupation, caste, class, ethnicity, religion or location-- are accorded full rights as **citizens** and are not excluded from privileges granted by the state, society, community or family.

We find however, that organisations like *the Coalition for the Abolition of Prostitution International (CAP Intl)* persist in **erroneously viewing** all women in sex work as victims of trafficking and violence denying them the very right to call themselves workers. However, as evidence from research studies and documented experiences of organised collectives of sex workers shows, sex workers can live a life of dignity, earn reasonable incomes and participate fully as citizens if stigma, discrimination and violence by the society and state are eliminated. CAP Intl, by conflating violence, trafficking and prostitution, muddies the waters and calls for a crackdown on prostitution itself. Through its misleading [video](#), showcasing its campaign 'End Demand' to expose prospective clients through graphic images of violence against women, it equates sex work with trafficking and violence. Instead of focussing on the real perpetrators of kidnap, fraud and assault, they seek to "end prostitution" by 'frightening' clients with gory images of dead women.

This conflation of sex work and trafficking not only impinges on the rights of adult sex workers, but also does a disservice to women who have actually been trafficked or want to leave sex work. Additionally, it diverts attention and resources away from genuine anti-trafficking initiatives.

It must be noted that the law in India does not criminalize prostitution or sex work per se. In addition, the

highest court of the land, the Supreme Court of India has by judicial order (*Budhadev Karmaskar vs. State of West Bengal (2011) 11 SCC 538*) called for recognising the dignity of sex workers so that they can pursue a livelihood free from harassment and violence, on par with all citizens of India.

We urge delegates at this World Congress to understand the Indian reality and press for CAP Intl to allocate its considerable clout and resources to support the real victims of trafficking, and desist from calling for the abolition of prostitution, which is not illegal in the land where the CAP Intl World Congress is being held.

SIGNATORIES:

Individuals

1. Laxmi Murthy
2. Prabha Nagaraja
3. Vrinda Grover
4. Vani Subramanian
5. Shohini Ghosh
6. Geeta Seshu
7. Sarojini N. B.
8. Anjali Gopalan
9. Pramada Menon
10. Deepa Venkatchalam
11. Amita Pitre
12. Meena Saraswathi Seshu
13. Japleen Pasricha
14. Madhu Bhushan
15. Ritambhara Mehta
16. Rituparna Borah
17. Suneeta Dhar
18. Prabhleen Tuteja
19. Dr. Mira Savara
20. Veena Poonacha
21. Farah Naqvi
22. Sarojini
23. Vinita Sahasranaman
24. Manak Matiyani
25. S. Jana
26. Kalyani Menon Sen
27. Feroz Ahmad
28. Neelanjana Mukhia
29. Shampa Sengupta
30. Javid Syed
31. Johanna Lokhande
32. Pushpa Achanta
33. Bishaka Datta
34. Kamayani Bali Mahabal
35. Aarthi Pai

36. Asma N.
37. Suroor Mander, Advocate
38. Shruti Arora
39. Sunanda Jalote
40. Swarnima Bhattacharya
41. Subha Hari
42. Ipsita Gauri

Organisations

1. SANGRAM, Sangli
2. Saheli women's resource centre
3. Feminism in India
4. Nazariya: A Queer Feminist Resource Group
5. CREA
6. TARSHI
7. YP Foundation
8. LABIA - A Queer Feminist LBT Collective, Mumbai
9. Forum Against Oppression of Women, Bombay
10. HWVO Kashmir
11. Point of View
12. Asia Pacific Network Of Sex Workers
13. Red Schulte, Support Ho(s)e Chicago
14. Women's Health Line