



A STATEMENT OF WOMEN IN PROSTITUTION - 28 January 1995

Prostitution is a way of life like any other. It is a survival strategy that is parallel to any other occupation. It is not created for the benefit of men, as is the common perception, rather it is primarily for the women who live off it. Women in prostitution make money out of sex and we are the breadwinners of our families.

We disagree with the formulation that prostitution is a profession. We make a distinction between profession (*vyavasay*) and occupation/business (*dhandha*). For instance, if we are presently occupied by making money out of sex, then that is our occupation for a short span of time. The nature of the business itself is time-bound. Therefore, by using the term profession, we are necessarily being pushed into a category for a lifetime. We are women who are practicing this time-bound business of prostitution for a short and specific period in our lives. Please remember that when we are not making money out of sex, we are engaged in other income-generating activities.

We believe that all occupations stereotypical to women adhere to so-called 'feminine values'. They capitalize upon qualities like tolerance, sympathy, tenderness, endurance, understanding, patience, forbearance and much more, be they housewives, typists, nurses, teachers, office assistants, receptionists, or women in prostitution. We believe that the socialization of the girl-child to accept such occupations as the only option is also a major reason for the perpetuation of sexual discrimination in the female work force. We believe that women in prostitution are no different.

We believe that we are more empowered than most women within male-dominated patriarchal structures are. For instance, within the family structure (which we know is the most oppressive), we are the breadwinners and the heads of our households. The relationships we share with the men in our families are more honest and equal because the purdah of double standards is not necessary.



Economic independence from men is a reality that we enjoy with pride and dignity. Brothel-owners, goons, the police and the self-appointed crusaders of morality in society harass us, try to curb our independence and are forever trying to douse our spirit. Control structures have a vested interest in criminalizing prostitution. What we demand is the de-criminalization of prostitution such that we can live safely and continue to choose to make money from sex without stigmatization. We demand the eradication of all laws concerning prostitution, which are oppressive and contribute to further criminalizing the trade.

We believe that making money from sex is only selling a part of our body, which is in no way different from selling our brains or physical labour. We protest against a society that deems our work contribution as less prestigious than other traditional forms of work. We believe that we challenge and undermine structures of power by using a part of our womanhood -our sexuality- as a source of our power and income.

We also protest against all laws and value systems that treat soliciting for sex as indecent while sanctioning other forms of sexual contracts from advertisements and exchanging gifts by marriage partners to dowry and bride price.

As people who experience violence as a part of our daily life, we are being more and more penalized by increasing violence in a society that is trying to order and control our lifestyles. As women in prostitution, we protest against a society that forces on us the violence of a judgmental attitude.

We believe that a woman's sexuality is an integral part of her as a woman, as varied as her mothering, domestic and such other skills. We do not believe that sex has a sacred space and women who have sex for reasons other than its reproductive importance are violating this space. Or that if they chose to make money from the transaction they are immoral or debauched.

We believe that child prostitution is child sexual abuse, molestation and child labor and that it exists in a society that is fraught with crimes of abduction, kidnap, rape, assault and violence against women. We believe that as comparable to poor, weak and



marginalized communities, we are unable to have a reasonable control of our lives and destinies. We share the same experiences of women who live in the Third World.

We believe that there is a distinction between trafficking, which is a criminal offence, and adult prostitution. While we agree that ‘choice’ is a cruel mirage for all women within capitalist patriarchy, we feel the need to acknowledge that adult prostitution as an option, exists. We also believe that women who are in prostitution, choose to continue to remain in business for many reasons.

We believe that when involuntary initiation into prostitution occurs, a process of socialization within the institution of prostitution exists whereby the involuntary nature of the business changes increasingly to one of active acceptance, not necessarily with resignation. This is not a coercive process. We believe that, despite living within a capitalist patriarchal society and having experienced the freedom of living outside the patriarchal system, it is almost impossible for us to contemplate entering such a system with its inherent double standard, lopsided value system and inequalities.

We protest against a society that deems us immoral and illegal mainly because we do not accept its mores, rules and governance. We protest against the various forces of mainstream society that deny us the right to liberty, security, and fair administration of justice, respect for our lives, discrimination, freedom of expression and association.

We also protest against a society that aggressively promotes objectification and commercialization of women and their sexuality. We protest against the sale of our sexuality in the international market by unscrupulous individuals and governments who reap huge profits off our bodies. We are in a business wherein the control has shifted from traditional members of our community to criminal syndicates. We were not for sale. In today's world, unfortunately we are sacrificed and commodified by vested interests, sometimes from within our own communities.

Globalization and economic liberalization is further breaking up our communities and forcing us to accept the sale of our bodies and the sale of our young in the urban industrial centers for prostitution. Movement in search of work is not new for us, the problem however is the criminalisation of the trade which is forcing us to turn to debt



bondage, forced labour and slavery-like practices. Consequently, we find ourselves in the trap of criminal syndicates in our search for work.

We believe that it is imperative that we must unite with each other to erase the stigmatization of women in prostitution and restore our dignity as workers and citizens of civil society. We must build alliances with other segments of society and together, we must struggle against the forces that have a vested interest in eroding the rights of all women.

This Statement was read at the

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by women in sex work from Sangli who collectivized in 1997 as

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