

SANGRAM BILL OF RIGHTS

Preamble

At Sangram, the sex-worker community taught us that effective interventions are possible only if we respect their knowledge, experience and participation. Back in 1993, they brought home to us the simple truth that top-down programmes that are not guided by community knowledge, experience and participation, simply do not work. As we struggled, we learned the pragmatic lesson that only rights-centred approaches can be effective. Women's rights are particularly difficult to talk about because they challenge traditional patriarchal structures. SANGRAM's solution to this is to create a collective consciousness in order to strengthen people's ability to assert their rights and negotiate safety. It was this approach that showed us the way when we decided to work with rural women, adolescents, young people, men who have sex with men and trans people. Indeed, this was the genesis of the *SANGRAM Bill of Rights*.

1. People have the right to be approached with humility and respect.

Sex workers were not treated respectfully in the health services and thus avoided going to the civil hospital. In collaboration with the civil hospital, we set up a temporary clinic outside the brothels. But rather than flock to these 'accessible' services, the women had fled, to avoid being coerced into getting treatment.

We learnt our lesson. People cannot be told that they must get a test or they must be treated. Services and other resources can be offered, in a way that allows agency. It has to be a consultative process.

2. People have the right to say yes or no to things that concern them.

In response to the move in 1997 to shut down SANGRAM after VAMP was registered, sex workers likened HIV to a big river. In working with sex workers, we had built only one dam. "Building a dam at only one site will not stop a massive flood. If we really want to stem the tide, we have to build dams at different bends of the river," they said. We then began to work with non sex workers in rural areas. At that time, pregnant women living with HIV were told that they must abort, despite the medical knowledge that many of those babies would be born HIV-negative. The struggle was to create a safe space to discuss rights as well as the legal and ethical issues affecting people living with HIV/AIDS.

3. People have the right to reject harmful social norms.

Reaching out to cloistered young women with the language of rights and urging them to take control of their lives is a difficult task in a conservative rural setting. Our strong feminist perspective is difficult to digest for most young men, and most women find it difficult to talk about sex. Like in other parts of the world, young men clamour for information on sexual pleasure and women are conditioned to show more interest in reproductive health issues. We deal openly with controversial issues around sexual diversity in our work with MSM, trans people with our slogan: 'Pleasure me safely'.

4. People have the right to stand up to and change the balance of power.

Challenging social norms, standing up to the powerful elite in the district - police, village panchayat leaders, politicians and upper-caste village leaders has involved developing a dynamic social discourse. At the state and national level some success has been achieved in the engagement with government and non-government actors. Working with networks of sex workers, women's groups, HIV/AIDS activists and queer activists within the country and outside has resulted in concrete gains.

Mobilizing the voices of sex workers as citizens and community leaders to influence government of India to abandon its ill-conceived plan to amend the Immoral Traffic [Prevention] Act was without doubt one of our major successes.

Likewise, the recent success in influencing the RFP [the request for proposals] to the Global fund, Round 10 from India has been an affirmation of the impact of the sex worker-led Consortium set up by the National Network of Sex workers. Sex worker collectives must have the right to choose their own 'home grown' representation; we need the global fund to work for us.

5. People have the right not to be “rescued” by outsiders who neither understand nor respect them

Although sex workers are a central part of the solution to HIV, they have to deal with centuries of entrenched stigma and social disdain. Religiously motivated vigilantes from India, and subsequently from conservative Christian groups in the United States, who wanted to “rescue” sex workers from lives of immorality, have targeted SANGRAM and VAMP for advocating for the rights of people in sex work. The raids have been violent and were conducted with missionary zeal and thug-like brutality. Raids only drive marginalized communities further underground, and long-term community work gets disrupted. It was only the collective strength of VAMP that did not allow the HIV outreach programme, condom distribution and access to treatment services to be disrupted.

6. People have the right to exist how they want to exist.

Sex workers, men who have sex with men; kothis¹ and jogappas², though marginalized by the hypocrisies of the “system”, like all survivors, have the courage and strength to create a world that has much to offer. A world touched not only by their pain but also their dreams for a society and a people who will affirm their “right” to self worth, dignity and livelihood that no one agency can either confer or deny.

¹ a self-identifying label for men who might feminize their behaviour

² male devadasis - a form of temple prostitution linked to the Hindu religion