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Sex Workers Of Kamathipura: Nowhere To Go, Nowhere To Live

Multiple factors including the law have made it impossible to collectivise the women in the locality



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Nowhere to Go, Nowhere to Live Photographs: Dinesh Parab

Mona Saraswathi Seshu | Anchi Pai

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Kamathipura is suddenly in the limelight because of Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Gangubai Kathiawadi*, an attempt to depict sex workers living here in the 1960s. However, the red-light district today is no longer home to sex workers. The women and children were forcibly driven out over two decades due to a combination of factors ranging from abolitionists under the guise of anti-trafficking measures to local non sex work residents who want to 'cleans' the area of the stigma associated to its generations of sex work.

In 2018, the Maharashtra government announced that the 39 acres comprising Kamathipura must be revamped. The buildings are more than 100 years old and crumbling, putting residents at risk. The HIV epidemic also discredited sex workers who got labelled as vectors of the spread of the disease. Despite many efforts by the state, NGOs and the sex workers to fight HIV, the latter could not shake off the perception that they did not use condoms and were therefore responsible for spreading HIV. Also, anti-trafficking

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Organising sex workers in Mumbai was very difficult, recalled Seema Shroff, an activist formerly associated with the Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) project of the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC). Primarily because the women, who hailed from Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, West Bengal, and Tamil Nadu, besides Nepal and Bangladesh, lived in silos and spoke in their mother tongue. These tightly-knit language groups rarely had the occasion to meet, as they lived and worked exclusively of each other. Most of them learnt to converse in *Mumbaiya* Hindi. Even brothel owners were organised state-wise.

This made it difficult to collectivise the women as 'one voice' against the onslaught of the traffickers and agents on one side and on the other hand the many civil society organisations that worked with abolitionists to raid and rescue the women in sex work. Women were also leaving the area in huge numbers. The ASHA project did a head count in 1998 and found 25,000 sex workers in the area. By 2004, this number had reduced to 18,000. The workers moved to outlying areas of Mumbai such as Kalyan, Borivali, Bhiwandi

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recorded in 2018 to around 500 workers when the BMC decided to revamp the entire 39 acres.

Sex Workers Face Violence Including Rape From Partners, Neighbours, Landlords And Goons But Are Unable To File Complaints Fearing Police Harrasment And Blame

Devata Meitri who works for Asha Darpan in Grant Road said that most of Kamathipura 14th street is now occupied by bag makers. Previously sex workers, these women are now trained to make bags for the bag manufacturers in the area. Asked if they had stopped sex work, Meitri said many workers make bags in the day and walk the streets at night. They mostly service their regular clients.

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An unending litany of forceful evictions

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Displacement has had a huge impact on the lives of many of the women in sex work. The most important one was the loss of the regular clients, said Archana who worked in the area for over 10 years before moving to Sangli. Another problem is the citizenship cards they had made in the area—ration cards, voter IDs, credit society membership—a loss that is not easily replaced when they moved from Mumbai to the mofussil. Radha, previously a brothel owner in Kamathipura, now lives and works in Miraj. She said that the reduced *dhandha* in Kamathipura forced her to stop her business there, and when she moved to a new place, she had to enter sex work herself. Being displaced from the place of residence and work is not uncommon for sex workers. These hasty and often illegal evictions take place with impunity due to the attached stigma to sex work. Then there's Anu, who had to leave Kamathipura after 17 years of doing sex work here because the brothel owner was forced to sell her house to a local petty criminal. She moved to Surat and then onward to South Maharashtra. The brothel now houses factory workers from the newly mushroomed factories in and around Kamathipura.

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No announcement was made, nor was there any hint that such a dire restriction of mobility was intended. On August 13, a police order of the previous day by the Lakadganj Police Station, was pasted in the locality, invoking Section 144 Cr Pc prohibiting the assembly of four or more persons, from August 11 to September 9, 2021. No valid reason was given for invoking these powers based on alleged complaints from citizens about “illegal sex trade”. Neither was there any evidence that “ordinary citizens” are facing any insecurity/risks while traversing this area or that public peace was being threatened. The police order put sex workers with their children and families in an illegal prison. Munni from the Ganga Jamuna area had to flee the area because she needed to work to provide for her family. She came to Pune to find work in the Budhwar Peth area but came up against COVID-19 restrictions. Fortunately, she got support from activists of the National Network of Sex Workers (NNSW).

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An open letter dated January 1, 2022, to the Maharashtra CM Uddhav Thackeray from feminist activists said, “...Given the developments over the last few months we are deeply worried for ourselves and for our families. It seems that the police are out on a well-coordinated drive to swoop down on and attack all red-light areas and hound us out of our homes. What they will end up doing is further stigmatising and criminalising the women and perhaps drive them further underground where they will become more vulnerable to the violence of rowdies and criminal gangs. There are lakhs of sex workers (female, male and trans) in Maharashtra, many of whom are not able to come out openly as sex workers such that they can claim the benefits that are due to them. Are the police planning to imprison or incarcerate all these women either in jails or rehabilitation homes or give them

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‘rehabilitation’, dehumanising and criminal. The letter further noted that the Supreme Court in its various judgements on sex workers has interpreted the law in ways that acknowledge the humanity and the rights of women sex workers. However, the police force is failing to follow the directives or the directions laid down by the highest court of the land, the letter concluded.

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No support from law

Sex workers eke out their livelihoods under the shadow of criminalisation under laws such as the Immoral Traffic Prevention Act that is used to harass, arrest and detain them. The criminalised status of sex work prevents their shielding from exploitative agents and violent clients. They face violence including rape from partners, neighbours, landlords and goons, but are unable to file complaints against the perpetrators fearing further police harassment and blame. The most widespread state sponsored violations of sex workers’ human rights is the forced raid-rescue-and-incarceration modus operandi in rehabilitation homes. Even consenting adult sex workers are picked up in often violent operations conducted by police and NGOs.

ALSO READ: [Developing Kamathipura: Life Measured in Square Feet](#)

The alienation and rejection that sex workers face impact their physical, emotional and mental health. The stigma surrounding sex work ensures that sex workers are denied access to health care, including HIV/AIDS prevention, care and support services through government aided programmes. Migrant sex workers, many of whom lack identity documents, are particularly marginalised. Organising sex workers through unions will enable them to fight unfair practices such as exploitation by private money