



BUILDING CAPACITIES OF PEOPLE IN SEX WORK

VAMP INSTITUTE – MARATHI



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DAULATABAD
SANGRAM SANSTHA, SANGLI

The VAMP Institute organized a three-day workshop for the upcoming second line of activist leaders in sex workers' organizations from 12th to 14th November 2018. The workshop was held in the lush green Hiranya Resort in Daulatabad, half an hour from Aurangabad, Maharashtra. Participants were from the Adhar Bahuddeshiya Sanstha, Amalner; Mahila Jagrut Sevabhavi Sanstha, Parbhani; Kranti Mahila Sangh, Solapur; Saheli Sangh, Pune; Prerna Samajik Sanstha, Vaijapur; Indian Red Cross Society, Nagpur and Godavari Foundation, Jalgaon. There were 26 females and 03 transgender participants, ranging in the age from 25 years to 35 years. The workshop consisted of three days of learning, unlearning and relearning of concepts, ideas, perspectives and fostered a new way of looking at and understanding sex work as work.

The sessions were conducted in a mix of Marathi and Hindi by Meena Seshu and Aarthi Pai of Sangram. Participants were mostly female sex workers with three trans-persons in sex work, accompanied by supporters from their respective organizations.

The workshop aimed to help participants understand and widen their perspectives towards sex work, and also to encourage dialogue and conversations amongst them. The discussions stemmed from shared experiences and their stories helped them to open up and take part in healthy debates.

The workshop used various methodologies to introduce new ideas and concepts and revisit old ones. Primarily, it was activity based, followed by discussions and presentations made by the participants. Storytelling as a medium was also used to break societal stereotypes and constructs.

Day 1:

The first day began with a lot of excitement as we were getting the room ready, putting up the banner, setting up the digital recorder and the voice recorder. **Meena Seshu**, welcomed participants and introduced VAMP, *"Whatever knowledge I have acquired about sex work today, is through the women of VAMP (Veshya Anyay Muqabla Parishad). This is the first institute where VAMP women are not present as we have another meeting immediately post this and they are caught up with preparations for that. But usually members of VAMP are the ones who conduct these sessions."*

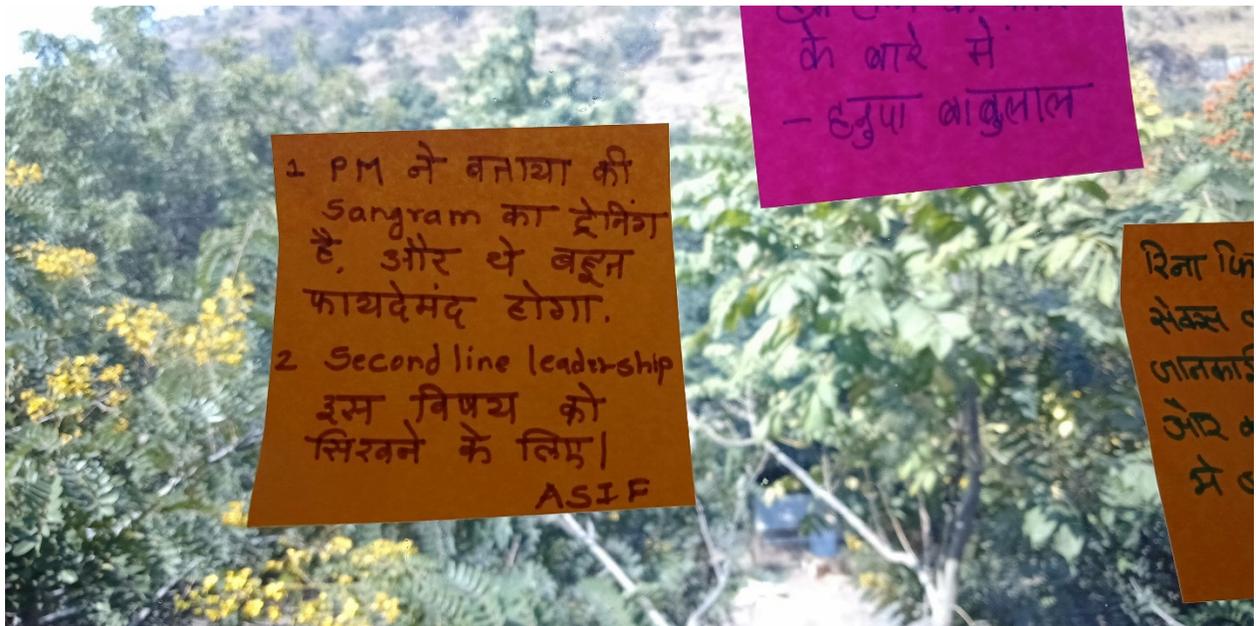
The next session was setting of ground rules led by **Aarthi Pai**. The participants contributed and agreed to the following;

1. To keep our phones on silent.
2. To step out of the room and receive urgent calls.
3. To listen to others with complete attention.
4. To be punctual.
5. To maintain hygiene and cleanliness around.
6. Those with children were responsible for their care.
7. To be respectful of the speaker by not discussing amongst themselves during the session. However, they could stop the speaker to seek clarifications or further discuss a topic.

Meena Seshu started the discussion by asking the participants what they think leadership is, and why it is important.

Arti Zodpe responded by saying, “Leadership is meant to make us stronger and more resilient.”

Saeeda added, “This training in leadership will help us advocate and fight for our rights.”



Session 1: Respectful Listening

The first session started with an introductory game, where everyone was asked to pair up. Five minutes each was given to the pair to speak to each other and get to know more about their respective partners. Post the 10 minutes, each pair had to introduce their respective partners.

This exercise was meant for people to realize that it is important to listen to others and acknowledge that we often don't pay attention to what others are saying and thus lose out on the important aspects of an individual's life.

Meena requested everyone to try and pay attention as their active participation meant that they would benefit more from the workshop. She also kept the stage open for the participants to speak out if they didn't understand concepts or were losing interest.

Ruksana remarked, “If people don't listen to others, then how are they going to understand?”

Aarthi Pai explained the use of photographs and asked for participants' consent. The photographs of only those who agreed were taken throughout the workshop. No pictures of children were taken.

We use the photographs:

1. In our reports
2. For our Facebook, Twitter and other Social Media
3. For our Website
4. For sending reports to donors

Session 2: Act like a Lady Flower

The second session facilitated by Aarthi began by her asking all the participants to mention two reasons why they wanted to be a part of the training. Each participant was given a postit on which they wrote down their reasons and stuck it on the nearby window panes.

Those who had difficulties writing were helped by the Sangram team and other participants.

Wanting to gain knowledge and hearing about the experiences of participants from other districts were the main objectives identified.

“I want to gain knowledge and learn more about leadership.” (Asif)

“I want to learn more about sex work.”(Hanupa)

“I want to learn about others and the kind of work being done in other districts with regard to sex work and understand the issues they face.” (Meena Dhapse)

“I have come to learn about CBOs and also about women’s empowerment.” (Seema Sharma)

Going ahead with the session, each table was given a chart and markers.

Meena then asked each group to draw a diagram – either a flower or a circle, and then put down the characteristics of ‘good’ women within the flower petals/circle and the characteristics of ‘bad’ women outside the flower petals/circle. Every chart was to have one flower/circle.

The supporters were asked not to help in doing the exercise but rather let the women do it themselves.

The participants discussed it amongst themselves and each group put down its points accordingly on the chart. They were then later asked to present to the rest of the participants present.

1. Aadhar Bahudeshiya (Amalner) – Surya Phul Group (Presented by Rina and Saeeda)

Characteristics of ‘good’ women (among sex workers):

- A woman who gets into sex work under pressing circumstances (*majboori mein dhanda karna*).
- A woman who has to look after her family.
- A woman whose husband has passed away and hence she has taken up sex work to feed her children.

Characteristics of ‘bad’ women:

- Getting into sex work for greed.
- Pushing underage girls into sex work for money.
- Using violence and forcing women into sex work.
- Opting for sex work despite sound personal financial situation.
- Getting into sex for her own desires.

from the group had done the presentation.

2. Titli Group (Indian Red Cross Society) - (Presented by Seema, Pooja, Poonam and Kamla)

Characteristics of 'good' women:

- Those who do not use swear or cuss words
- Those who help other women in need
- Those who look after their children and other children of the community as well
- Those who know what is right and what is wrong
- Those who can fight for their rights

Characteristics of a 'bad' woman:

- Someone who drinks alcohol, consumes tobacco and has other addictions
- One who forces underage girls to get into sex work
- Someone who hits children (other's children)
- Someone who gossips
- Someone who makes others' husband her own
- One who uses swear words
- One who gets into sex work to fulfill her wants or desires
- One who doesn't listen to others

3. Genda Phul (MSM T. Group) – (Presented by Asif, Ajagar and Adil)

Characteristics of 'good' transgender persons:

- Those who use condoms and spread awareness about condoms
- Those who support their own community
- Those who contribute to society
- Those who do not fight with people within their communities
- Those who also support their families

Characteristics of a 'bad' transgender person:

- One who does not use condoms
- One who uses people only for money

- One who spreads rumors against organizations and spoils their name
 - One who discriminates against 'pant-shirt' wearing trans people and 'saree' clad trans people.
 - One who does not stand up against wrong doings and violence
4. Zhendu Group - (Presented by Renuka, Rani, Hanupa, Meena and Pushpa)

Characteristics of a 'good' woman as defined in mainstream society:

- A married woman living with family
- Stays with her husband even though he hits her and is abusive
- Guides other women against going into sex work
- Who is not into sex work
- Who respects people and speaks with respect
- Who follows the norms and rules of society
- Who does not smoke or drink or who does not have any other addictions
- A widow who looks after her children and hasn't remarried

Characteristics of a 'bad' woman:

- Is addicted to smoking and drinking and hits children
- Does not look after children, can even sell them away
- Influences others in the wrong way
- Does sex work but lies about it
- She sleeps with other men, leaving her husband and kids
- Goes with other men for her desires leaving her husband behind

5. Kamal Group – (Presented by Arti, Ruksana, Vanita and Lakshmi)

Characteristics of a 'good' woman from the perspective of mainstream society:

- She follows the rules and norms of society, i.e. is *Sanskari*
- She is dependent on her family – does not cross her limits and always listens to her husband
- She loves her children, but doesn't try to discipline them
- Eats after her family has eaten
- Goes out only when accompanied by her family members
- Supports child-marriage as she believes that her daughter will get 'spoilt' if not married at a young age
- She never speaks up against violence – accepts it and is subservient to her family

Characteristics of a 'bad' woman:

- She uses swear and cuss words
- She does not respect others
- She does not look after her children

- Wears short dresses and clothes – is too fashionable
- Does not listen to others
- She hits others
- Is envious of others

Discussion

Meena Seshu asked a question to the Suryaphul group who had spoken about sex workers, *“Why is sex work as a profession wrong?”* She asked everyone to share their opinions.

In response, **Arti Zodpe** said, *“Sex work is not bad work. It’s like any other daily wage labour. I do not feel it is wrong.”*

Some participants were of the opinion that when sex work is done under pressing circumstances or in dire situations, it is not wrong. Meena then asked, *“Even if Sex Work is not done under dire circumstances, is it wrong?”*

Lakshmi recounted her story of getting into sex work. She was married off when she was in 4th Grade to her aunt’s son. She was expected to follow all the rules and norms. She ate after everyone ate and was mentally, physically and emotionally harassed by her husband’s family. When she could not take it anymore, she ran away and for six months had stayed in a rickshaw. She then met a Muslim family, with whom she worked as a maid. Later she came into sex work.

Meena then posed the question: *“If you stay inside the flower petals (follow all the norms and rules set down by society), do you think you will not face violence?”*

The room went quiet for a bit and then everyone unanimously answered “NO” – *staying within the flower petals does not guarantee a happy, safe and a secure life free from violence.*

Arti Zodpe added, *“Domestic violence faced by women is far greater in a marriage than what sex workers face.”*

Meena Seshu asked, *“Is getting married an answer to the Devdasi system; how far is it helpful? – Think about it. Get women educated, make them independent and then let them make a choice about whether they want to get married or not. Also, is marriage a guarantee of a safe, secure and a non-violent life?”*

Aarthi Pai posed the question: *“I am an adult, I have chosen to not get married. I might want to keep relationships with different men. Don’t unmarried women have the right to enjoy sex? Am I then a bad woman?”*

Session 3 - Post Lunch (Story of Maya)

The session post lunch started with an energizer conducted by Aiman. Everyone gathered in a group and they had to start counting backwards and accordingly move their hands and legs those many times. For example, when everyone was on number 8 – they had to move each of their hands and legs 8 times and so on till they reached 1.

Post the energizer, Meena started the session and divided the participants into four groups.

After copies of Maya's Story were distributed to each group, Meena started with a storytelling session. The story was in a pictorial format and the pictures were explained page by page. This session brought out the social stigma and social constructs that play in our sub-conscious mind and which also colour our perspectives.

"There are five characters in the story: Maya, Ram, Ganguram, Shyam and Krishna. Maya's marriage has been fixed with Ram. He is a young and a handsome man. Ram stays on the other side of the river which houses many crocodiles. The next pictograph shows that Maya has been informed of her fiancé's illness and she gets really worried. Maya wants to cross the river to meet him and goes to Ganguram (the boatman) for help. He asks for money to help her cross the river. But Maya does not have money to give him and he instead asks for sex in return for helping her to cross the river. Maya is taken aback by this and feels helpless. She then approaches her brother Shyam to help her with some money. She tells her brother about the incident and seeks his help. But Shyam turns her down and says, you can choose to do whatever you want but I can't help you.

Maya then sleeps with Ganguram and he helps her to reach Ram's home. She takes care of Ram throughout his illness and helps him to recover. Post his recovery, when he asks her how she reached there, Maya tells him her story. Ram gets furious and throws her out of the house.

Maya is very upset and hurt and while walking on the road, she meets Krishna – a passerby. He sees her crying and stops to ask her about why she is upset. Maya tells him the story. He then goes and beats up Ram."

The participants were then asked to write down the names of the five characters in the story on a notepad and rate each character from 1 to 5, 1 being a very good person and 5 being a very bad person. This task was to be done individually.

Once done with their individual ratings, each group had to discuss amongst themselves and come to a consensus and rate each character.

In one of the groups (Group No. 1) one of the members (Lakshmi) wasn't convinced and felt that each character was right in his/her own place and she did not want to rate anyone. Hemlata Tai, another participant then explained to Lakshmi why numbering was important – she gave the example of how we are rated during our exams in school.

Their group ranked the characters in the following order:

1. Krishna
2. Maya
3. Ganguram
4. Ram
5. Shyam

Reason: They felt that as Krishna had helped her without even knowing her, he really was a good human at heart. Maya was truthful and slept with Ganguram because she had no other choice. Ganguram asked for a favour in return for money and Ram was ranked 4th as he threw her out even after knowing that what she did was only to meet and help him. They ranked Shyam (the brother) 5th, as he did not help her out and they felt that whatever she went through was because of him.

Group 2 gave the following rankings:

1. Maya
2. Krishna
3. Ganguram
4. Shyam
5. Ram

Reason: Maya was the best as she did everything she could to meet her fiancé and take care of him. She thought only about him and not society. She was also truthful to him about everything. Krishna was ranked 2nd because he helped her out even though he did not know her. Ganguram was ranked 3rd as the group felt that he used Maya and took advantage of the situation. Shyam was ranked 4th as he did not help his own sister when she needed him the most. And Ram was ranked the last as he did not understand Maya's honesty and left her even when she did everything for him.

Group 3 ranked the characters as follows:

1. Maya
2. Krishna
3. Shyam
4. Ganguram
5. Ram

Reason – Their reasons for ranking the characters were similar. They felt that Ganguram should be ranked 4th for taking advantage of the situation and sleeping with Maya.

Across most of the groups, Maya was ranked number 1 and Ram was ranked the last.

One analysis that emerged was that we give men more power when we approach them for protection as sisters and mothers.

Arti Zodpe said, *"If everyone thinks that she is my sister or my mother, then whom shall we do our sex work with?"*

Meena posed a question: *"Ganguram works as a boatman, that's his job. He takes money from everyone to help them cross over. Maya did not have money, so he asked her to have sex. How is this wrong?"*

Why did everyone feel that Maya was wrong in sleeping with Ganguram? When you use the language such as, 'Ram ko uska ek galti maaf akr dena chahiye tha' (Ram should have forgiven her wrongdoing) you are already assuming that she is wrong. Why so?"

Rina said that Maya gave her 'Izzat ki kurbani' (sacrificed her honour).

Meena then questioned whether sleeping with a man mean that you forego your 'izzat'? "Is your izzat so easy to give away?"

Aarhi added, "Is an individual's izzat attached to their body?"

Meena then mentioned that for everyone, their izzat is attached to different aspects. For you, it maybe that the period stain visible on your clothes, means my izzat is gone. For her, her izzat is lost if she sleeps with someone else."

Meena Seshu questioned "Who decides where is the izzat? Who decides maryada? (decorum)"

Aarhi Pai added, "When you say that he (Krishna) did this for humanity, remember that for the sake of humanity, organizations like Freedom Firm, Justice and Care, IGM, etc.; also raid brothels thinking that they are doing good for humanity, they are saving people (victims of trafficking). But have they ever asked these same people (women) as to what they want? Do they really want to be saved?"

Terms like: "Jism Bechana", [selling the body] "Izzat ki Kurbani dena", [sacrificing honour] demean sex work and also sex workers. Does a doctor sell his hand? No, he uses his hands to provide service to others. We never say that the doctor has sold his hands. Then, why when it comes to sex, does it become "jism bechana". Likewise, when a man is into sex work, he never uses the term, jism bechana/ jism vikri.

Ajagar (Anjali) explained, "Men don't use these terms because they do sex out of shauk (choice)."

Aarhi Pai said, "There are many women too who do sex out of choice (Shauk) but still use the term "jism bechana". Why? I am questioning the terminologies used; not whether they do it out of choice or under certain circumstances."

Renuka said, "Such terms are used because, they think of the work as demeaning."

Aarhi Pai: "When you keep similar sexual relations with you husband, then why don't you say you are selling your body? What power has the mangalsutra [chain that denotes a married woman) given, that you no longer see sex as jism bechana...Think about the terms that you use to define your work."

Meena Seshu asked, "Does she have control on her body post marriage? She doesn't. She doesn't even have the control on her womb – whether she wants a child or not. Jism pe control (control over the body) – does marriage give you that? It does not."

Aarhi Pai asked, "You all praised Maya because she told the truth to Ram about having sex with Ganguram. But then why didn't she speak about her periods to Ram? If truth is so important, then why hide about her monthly biological mechanism? We idolize women who speak the truth. But shouldn't the discretion of speaking about my life lie with me?"

Lakshmi responded, "Because Ram asked her specifically about how she crossed the river."

Meena Seshu said, *“Whenever we have periods, do we announce it to everyone? No, we don’t. Then why did Maya have to speak about something which was related to her body and which was hers? Is it necessary to say everything to everyone? And those who don’t, then are they bad people? You all ranked Maya No. 1 because she spoke the truth.”*

Aarthi Pai added, *“If Maya wanted to stay with Ram, she could have easily said something else. I am not trying to say that your interpretations are wrong. I am just trying to make you all look at a different perspective and try to think differently. We do not have control over our own sexuality – we have given the control of our sexuality to our partners. This thought process is what I want you to question. We have relegated our izzat to our sexual organs. You actually sell your mind, soul and body when you get married. Because you are giving your entire being to another person and his family. Sex work is only having sex using your body. It does not anywhere mean “selling of body”. If a woman is raped, we say Izzat Lut Gayi; but how does her izzat go away with it? Why does the woman have to feel ashamed? But when a man kills another man, we never say that he lost his izzat.”*

Points that emerged in the discussion:

- Once a body is sold, can you sell it again?
- Then accordingly in sex work, you are selling a new body every day.
- Sex workers don’t sell their bodies, they use it to provide service to other people; just as a lawyer or a doctor give their service to other people.
- Men in sex work never use the term “selling of body”. Then why is this stigma attached only to women?
- Maya only had sex and she only used her body to avail of the boat. She did not sell her body and nor did she sacrifice her honour.

Meena Seshu said, *“We use the language of izzat, giving power to men to rule over women and put all the responsibility on the women. This has given power to men to violate us, and still we put it on women. We never question this. Violence is violence. It has got nothing to do with izzat.”*

Aarthi Pai added, *“Sexuality should be equal for all. A man is unable to control his desires and we blame the woman’s skirt. We never put any responsibility on men. When men step out wearing shorts, do women jump on them? No, we don’t. Then why when a man cannot control his desires, are we women asked to take responsibility for it. Just think and question the sort of language we use and the power we give to others to control us.”*

The session ended on some hard hitting ideas and facts to think and ponder over.

Day 2: **RECAP**



Aarthi Pai recapped the previous sessions and every participant was asked to write down what they had learnt (takeaways) from each session.

Following are a few takeaways as written by the participants:

Session 1:

Lakshmi: “We learnt how important it is to listen carefully and with full attention to others, otherwise we can miss out important points.”

Saeeda Shaikh: “We got to know each other and their likes and dislikes too.”

Poonam: “We got to know others and the kind of work they are doing.”

Session 2:

Arti: “I learnt that women’s izzat (honour) is not in their bodies.”

Seema Sharma: “I came to understand what is right and wrong.”

Asif: “I was able to understand that sex work is not wrong, whether it is done under pressing circumstances or done to fulfill ones’ desire. We have control over our own bodies.”

Session 3:

Asif: “We need to always ask people what the issue is, and what sort of help they want, before jumping in to help them.”

Lakshmi: “I learnt a lot. A woman has a right on her own body, it has got nothing to do with *izzat*.”

Pushpa Tai: “ I liked the way Maya was portrayed.”

Vanitha: “I was not able to understand Maya’s story. I felt that every character was right from his/her stand point. Maya could have kept quiet, she did not have to share everything. She faced its consequences.”

After individual post-its of the takeaways were displayed, Aarthi Pai addressed the fact that many participants, did not have a clear understanding of the exercise. The exercise was repeated, but this time in organizational groups:

1. As an organization, what did you learn in yesterday’s sessions?
2. As an organization, what were the challenges you faced?

Meena Seshu then spoke about how association too affects our understandings. She then gave an example of Maya who came to her and told her that she hadn’t been to school and could not understand what she was saying. Then Meena asked her to recollect what she had done and heard in the last few sessions and through that conversation, her learnings stemmed forth. Meena explained, *“Those who have gone to school, have learnt about association and hence, are able to grasp quickly. But we also need to take the others along with us. We need to just give them some time. It’s not that those who haven’t been to school do not have brains. They do, otherwise they wouldn’t have been able to navigate life. Just because a few of us did go to school, we learnt the tricks and the ways to navigate life. But they too know their own ways. We just need to be patient with them. Understanding and putting our learnings to use is a huge and important part of empowerment.”*

The groups discussed amongst themselves and then presented their learnings of the earlier sessions.

Indian Red Cross Society, Nagpur (Group 1) – (Presented by Kamla, Seema, Poonam and Pooja)

- We learnt how to be attentive to others and listen carefully.
- We also learnt the various places the participants had come from and the number of years they had been in the profession.
- We learnt about the good and bad characteristics of a woman.
- Even though society ostracizes women, we need to work around it
- Even when we try to do some good, society views us in a negative light
- Even other ‘good’ women think negatively about sex workers
- Society decides the criteria and parameters of good and bad for women
- Men are free, women are not
- Sex workers are kept away from society
- Maya does not worry about her izzat and gives herself to the boatman for the sake of her fiancé.
- Maya spoke the truth even under trying circumstances.
- The boatman took advantage of Maya’s situation
- When Maya was facing tough situations, no one supported her; even her family left her
- An outsider helped her – this is humanity

Aarthi Pai questioned, *“Were we trying to differentiate and teach you the characteristics of good women and bad women?”*

Asif said “No”.

Aarthi then said, “Sure. There is a difference between your understanding and their understanding. You can address this difference and talk about it when you are presenting.”

Kranti Mahila Sangh, Solapur (Group 2) - (Presented by Asif, Renuka and Lakshmi)

- We need to listen attentively as it will help us in understanding others and their needs better. (Session 1)
- I have rights on my own body – whether I want to get married, with whom I want to have sex, whether I want to have children, the kind of clothes I choose to wear are all my own decisions. No one else can force it on us. (Session 2)
- Nobody has the right to judge other women and label them as bad or good.
- Men and women both should get equal rights. (Session 2)
- The objective of the flower session was for us to push ourselves out of the boundaries and stereotypes created by society. We need to break stereotypes. (Session 2)
- Women should step out of the template of being bad or good. (Session 3)
- “Sharir ko Bechana”, “Meri Izzat Chali Gayi” are wrong terms and negative terms that we use, instead; we should say that we have provided them with service using our body or had sex.
- No one’s izzat (honour) is in their reproductive organs
- Organizations such as Rescue Foundation and others, come and raid our brothels without even asking us as to what we want. This situation has been related to the character of Krishna who went ahead and beat up Maya’s fiancé without even asking her what she really wanted.

Meena Seshu suggested to use the word “people” rather than the binary of male and female, in order to be inclusive of transgender people in the discourse of equal rights.

Aarthi Pai started a discussion on the ideas that they were trying to put forth through the earlier sessions. *“Women who stay inside the societal structure, are seen as good and the women who are out of it, are seen in a negative light. We need to break this stereotype. Women who have sexual relations within the marital construct are seen as good women and women who keep sexual relations outside of marriage are seen as bad. Should we agree with this construct? No. Our objective behind yesterday’s sessions was to help you understand this construct and try and break it.”*

*“Also, please think about the term **izzat** (honour) when you go home. Is covering your face – izzat? Is being subservient to violence izzat? The one who hits me, his izzat is not at stake but mine is. So, think about all the things we have tagged the term izzat with. Discuss this term izzat amongst your groups and communities when you go back home.”*

Likewise, examining the notion of truth, the one who speaks truth is a good woman and the one who doesn’t, is a bad woman. Whose truth is it anyway? Where is it written that you have to narrate the entire story of your life to your partner and then also face his violence. We have given so much power to our partners, husbands and boyfriends in our lives, that we give them all – our body, soul, everything. It’s your life, will you dedicate it to them? Also, do MSMs have to justify their every act to their partners? Do they have to give their dominant

partners their financial records – on where they spent money and why they spent money. They don't. But then why is it expected from women. Why do we label them good or bad? Where is this thing about lying and saying the truth coming from? It's my personal thing and it should be my personal decision to whether divulge information or not.

Anjali said, "There some partners who demand explanations and justifications."

Meena Seshu explained, "When you dedicate your life to your partners, only then can they demand explanations and justifications from you. When you are not doing so, then where do they get the right to demand? Do you understand the concept of confidentiality? Often sex workers are labelled as liars. But why should they talk about their lives and divulge information about themselves to you? This is their personal life. And the construct that only when they speak about themselves, they are right, otherwise they are wrong – where does it come from? It's imperative to question such constructs.

So many times we get to hear that, "she takes others' Malaks". But no one points at the malak and says that he went to her. We always put it on the woman. Think about it. We are trying to say this – that it's their personal life. She can sleep with anyone she wants. It's her life".

Adhar Bahuddeshiya Sanstha (Group 3) - (Presented by Saeda and Rina)

1. A woman working to fulfill her family's needs is not wrong.
2. Doing sex work does not mean that your izzat is lost. It is work.
3. Because we are sex workers, we face violence and are not given respect in society. But we want respect and want to be accepted.
4. When men have sex, they are not considered wrong; then why are women seen in a negative light when we do the same thing.
5. If you want to change the world, then change your thought processes within yourselves first.

Meena Seshu pointed out that the group's learnings were not clear as they did not mindfully listen to the trainers. It was stressed that participants must clarify doubts and think through issues, failing which, empowerment could not take place.

Godavari Foundation (Group 4) – (Presented by Adil and Ajagar/Anjali)

1. Listen carefully and with attention. Also, those who come late should not disturb others.
2. Sex work is work whether done out of choice or under certain pressing circumstances. Also, we need to take control over our own body. The patriarchal system has subjugated women.
3. Your izzat is not lost if you have sex.
4. It's my body, I can give it to anyone I want. Whether I have missionary sex or anal sex, nobody else has the right to judge me on it.

Mahila Jagrut Sevabhavi Sanstha, Parbhani (Group 5) – (Presented by Arti Zodpe and Meena Dhapse)

1. We understood the purpose of attending this workshop – listen carefully and with attention, there is a vast ocean of knowledge you can grasp. Help others also to understand.

2. Before coming to this workshop, we were under the impression that women who stay inside the home are safe and secure as compared with those who step out to work. But this perception was wrong. We also realized that both the home-bound woman and the woman working outside, are not aware of their rights and it is supremely important for a woman to become aware these laws and rights to help her better fight her battle.
3. We learnt from Maya's story that whatever maybe the work, do not label it and demean it – view it as work.
4. Krishna could be anyone – he could be the gunda (anti-social element); the police or even the rescue operation people; who under the guise of help and protection, actually cause harm.

MGVS (Group) – (Presented by Babita and Ruksana)

1. Got to know others and also about other organizations that work for sex workers.
2. The flower session taught us that we are the ones in charge of our bodies.
3. From the next session we learnt that sex work is work and we shouldn't demean it.
4. We learnt that sex work is like any other work and also understood that the definition of izzat is not limited nor can it be relegated to our bodies.

Meena then concluded the session by saying that, *“Everyone's understanding is different and it starts from their life's framework.”*

Session 2: Day 2 – Balloon Activity

Meena Seshu asked, *“When you hear the words ‘Veshya’ or ‘Dhanda’, what is it that you usually hear?”*

Participants listed the following words: Randi, Rand, Chinal, Veshya, Jism Bechnewali, Halkat Rand, Chudanewali, Durasan, Kulta, Panwali, Kalanki, Satra se Chudanewali, Dagad Diwani, Yaar Diwani, Professional, HIV wali Rand, T.B. wali Rand, Sex Karnewali, Khadi Khadi Chudanewali, Sadi Rand, Item, Kothewali, Muh mein lenewali, French Karnewali Chinal, Naspiti, Thoke Company, Chillar kaam karnewali, Laaj Sharam Bechnewali..... and many more such negative and demeaning words.

Meena Seshu asked, *“Whenever we hear such swear words, what happens? You feel bad? But now when we were saying these we were laughing and joking about it amongst ourselves. Why didn't we feel bad?”*

Pushpa Tai responded, *“When we ourselves say it, it doesn't hurt us. But when others say it, it hurts. We get angry and hurt and then resort to drinking and doing other sorts of nasha (intoxicants) to help us lessen the pain.”*

Rina added, *“Whatever we are doing is not wrong, we are just having sex. But, whenever we step outside, people cuss us and say things like, ‘dekho who rand ja rahi hai’. But why? Ain't we human beings too? It has become so difficult for us to even walk the streets and till when shall we suffer all this?”*

Lakshmi said, *“You shouldn't keep silent about it. Go and question the person about who gave them the right to say such things to you?”*

Meena Seshu added, *“Till we don’t feel from within that what I am doing is just work; whether I do it for my family or for my bread and butter or even out of choice, it’s my decision. I am not selling my body. We are just having sex and taking money for it. You sell body in a marriage; where you are given heart, body and soul to your in-laws. Till you don’t challenge the concepts and ideas put forth by society that sex work is bad, you won’t be able to fight against this system. It has to come from within you that sex work is work.*

“This workshop is about empowerment and how will you get empowered if you don’t question the norms laid down by society. You will only be able to accept yourself and your work when you start thinking that it is society that is wrong in labelling us; we are not. This sort of language used by society is wrong. Hence, the term ‘sex worker’ is used all over the world. We want freedom from these cuss words and that freedom will only come from within.”

Meena Seshu then demonstrated the first step that we can take to fight against such language.

She took a balloon, blew it, wrote *Randi*, the word that was most hurtful and bad and burst it – symbolically blowing away the word and the negativity along with it. She then instructed everyone to do the same and write the word that is the most hurtful for them and burst it away.

Some wrote the word ‘randi’, some ‘chinal’ and some even ‘chudnewali’ and ‘na-mard’. And some even said that these words did not affect them and hence, they did not burst anything.

Maya said, *“Main haram ka paisa nahi khati aur na main kisika gali khati hoon” (I do not touch tainted money, nor do I tolerate abuse).*

Renuka added, *“My grandmother has been in sex work since a long time. I used to be scared earlier and found all this alien. But since the time I have started working in this field, my perspectives have changed. My grandmother gave me and my mother the support and the encouragement to be strong. I got educated because of my grandmother; my father never supported us. In her entire lifetime, she never once complained of anything – but once or twice just spoke of police raids. Her strength gives me strength and I don’t think I would have got this anywhere else.”*

Lakshmi said, *“There is no guarantee that a dog who hasn’t bitten you today, won’t bite you again. So, when people badmouth you, never take it lying down. We should retaliate.”*

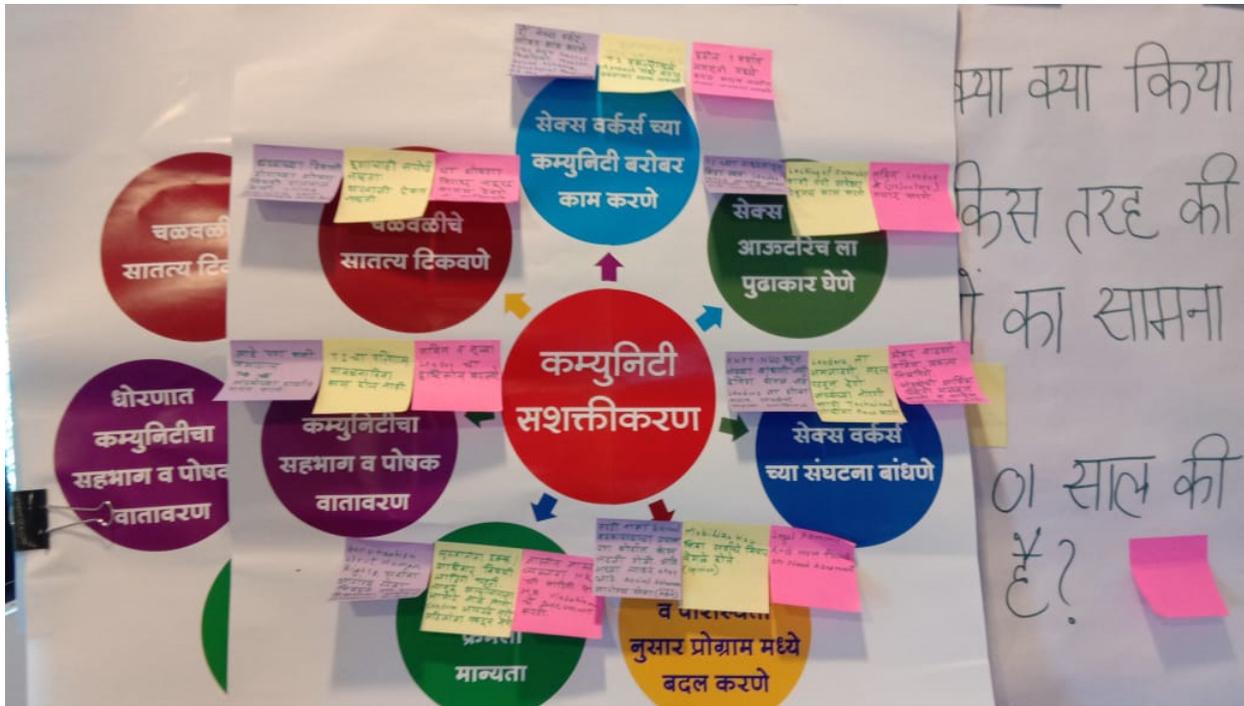
Meena Seshu said, *“Everyone takes decisions at their individual level which are best suited to them.”*

Seema said, *“I curse those who swear at me. That’s my way of taking out my pain and anger.”*

Meena Seshu said, *“Society has made the term ‘veshya’ impure. We will make it pure. That’s our aim and we will keep striving towards it. We stand against the anger that the society has towards us.”*

The session thus ended with everyone wanting to break free from the bondage of such language.

Post Lunch: Session 1: Community Empowerment



Aiman conducted an energizer which was in the form of a game. She asked everyone to form a group and one amongst them was sent out of the room. The others in the room then selected a leader amongst them whose actions everyone else had to follow but, in such a manner that whoever is leading the group is not evident as the leader to the others. The first time, Bharati Patil went out and Ruksana was chosen as the leader in the group. Everyone else was following her actions. Bharati then was called inside the room once the leader was chosen and was then asked to identify who is the leader. It was difficult initially for her, but after two attempts, she caught that Ruksana was the chosen leader.

Post the energizer, Meena Seshu asked everyone present to sit in their respective organizational groups and then brought out the Community Empowerment chart made by VAMP (which has been recognized by World Health Organization) and asked participants to go through the segments in the chart. She explained that the Chart had come from the community itself and the best way was to work **with** them and not **for** them.

Each organizational group was given a chart of the community empowerment diagram and were asked to answer the following three questions. They were also given three different coloured post-its and had to do a self-analysis of where they were placed in the segments and write their answers accordingly. Each segment was to have three coloured post-its covering the following questions:

1. What the activities being run in your organization?
2. What are the challenges you face while doing it?
3. What is your plan for the upcoming year?

Meena Seshu explained the approach to the chart in the following manner:

First Segment: Working with communities: Please note that we work WITH sex workers and NOT FOR THEM. Check where you are.

Second Segment: Fostering sex worker-led outreach: Is your outreach worker from the community, is she a sex worker or a non-sex worker? Examine how many outreach workers are sex workers.

Third Segment: Developing sex worker collectives: evolving networks/organizations and strengthening them. Have you been able to form such collectives? If yes, what were the challenges? If not, why not?

Fourth Segment: Adapting to local needs and contexts: Did you change your organizational methods according to the changing needs and demands of the community? If yes, what were the challenges that you faced?

Fifth Segment: Promoting the human rights framework: How far does your organization abide by the human rights framework and how has it been articulated in your organization? It could be anything, for example: That we treat everyone equally, everyone should have equal access to medicines.

Sixth Segment: Shaping policies and creating an enabling environment: Is such a conducive environment prevalent in your organization? Does everyone have a safe space to speak up? If not, then why not? What are the challenges and how will you work towards addressing them in the future?

Seventh Segment: Sustaining the movement: Once you have built your CBO or your collective, how will you sustain it? You can also write about not wanting to sustain it.

Meena Seshu said, *“If you follow all these segments, all your health programs, awareness programs are bound to become successful. We never work with preplanning but only think of interventions when there is a crisis.*

*Working **for** sex workers, working **with** them and they **themselves** carrying out the work: these are various stand points and you have to see where do you stand as an organization.”*

There ensued intense discussion amongst the members. Meena Seshu encouraged the participants to do this exercise and look at it from an organizational perspective.

Post Lunch Session 2: Film (ZindaLaash)

This session focused on the portrayal of sex workers in Bollywood, or the Hindi film industry and how it has shaped the image of a sex worker for the people of our country. This short documentary has been made by Point Of View and has been put together using several movie clippings. The objective of the movie was to help break stereotypes surrounding sex workers. They highlighted the following stereotypical portrayals of sex workers in Bollywood films:

Norm #1: Cigarette Smoking – a sex worker is always shown as a cigarette smoker.

Norm #2: Swears – A sex worker always uses cuss words and swears

Norm #3: Flamboyant clothing is different – sex workers are shown wearing gaudy clothes and stands out from other women.

Norm #4: Eats Paan (betel leaf): her lips are always shown as paan stained.

Norm #6: Brothels are always located in sleazy and dirty areas.

Norm #7: The women are always surrounded by sleazy characters.

Norm #8: Women join sex work only through deceit.

Norm #9: Women are shown as bad, villainous characters

Norm #10: They are shown as impure (apavitra)

Norm #11: They are portrayed as zinda laash (a living corpse)

Norm #12: They do not have a place in society.

Norm #13: They are different from other women.

Norm #14: They cannot be anyone's wife – they are not allowed to get married.

Norm #15: They cannot be a mother – their motherhood is not acceptable to society.

Norm #16: A woman can never escape her identity of being a sex worker.

Meena Seshu then asked, *“What did you understand by watching the movie?”*

- *“They have portrayed sex workers in a negative light, showing them as different from others by portraying them wearing loud and gaudy make-up and clothes.”*
- *“A sex worker too can have babies. We too want to be mothers and have the right to be so.”*
- *“The chal challan (gestures), the tone of the voice, everything is depicted differently and in a certain way.”*

Meena Seshu remarked, *“We are so influenced by Bollywood, that we accept whatever is shown at face value and look at people through those lens.”*

Aarthi Pai recounted her experience of interacting with the police in Hyderabad as an example of how the Bollywood portrayal of sex workers had seeped into everyone's consciousness and how the society views them through the lens coloured by Bollywood. *“In this particular area in Hyderabad, the sex workers were happily living with their families and there was an area/room in the front portion of the house, where they had sex. When the police officers were shown this, they said that you brought us in a wrong place. This cannot be a brothel. Nobody looks like a sex worker here. We have seen it in movies – they stand provocatively.”*

Meena Seshu added, *“Extra masala is added to spice up the movies, and this affects the community. If you had gone to Gokulnagar [an area in Sangli] 30 years back, sex workers never used as much makeup then as they use now. It’s a construction of society and we too are unable to come out of it.”*

Adil added, *“To spice up the movies and sell them, they portray sex workers with loud makeup.”*

Arti Zodpe then spoke about the movie *Talash* – where Kareena Kapoor (who portrayed the role of a sex worker), dies and no one cares to go and look for her. She said, *“This is not a true depiction.”*

Seema however differed, *“But this does happen. Recently in Nagpur, a sex worker passed away and no one even bothered to search for her.”*

Arti Zodpe added, *“Everyone reacted to the movie *Padmavat* and its depiction of the queen. But why do we never stand up and protest against these Bollywood movies that depict us in such a bad light?”*

Meena Seshu commented, *“We need to have dialogues and conversations within our communities regarding this and question the prevalent societal norms that make these portrayals acceptable. We need to question how can we change thought processes.”*

The three-day workshop concluded with a wrap up of how sharing life experiences and narratives from sex workers’ own lives can transform the way in which issues are approached. The exercise in organization-building was an opportunity to analyze the functioning of organizations and move towards more democratic structures, processes and sex worker-led mobilization.

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

	Name	Age	Organisation	Place
1	Sunita Kasar	24	Kranti Mahila Sangh	Solapur
2	Jagdevi Talekari	26	Kranti Mahila Sangh	Solapur
3	Shaikh	28	Kranti Mahila Sangh	Solapur
4	Renuka Jadav	42	Kranti Mahila Sangh	Solapur
5	Arti Zodpe	30	Mahila Jagruti Sevabhavi Sanstha	Parbhani
6	Meena Dhapse	32	Mahila Jagruti Sevabhavi Sanstha	Parbhani
7	Rani Shaikh	25	Aadhar Bahuddeshiya Sanstha	Amalner
8	Pushpa Birkhade	30	Aadhar Bahuddeshiya Sanstha	Amalner
9	Padma Dhap	32	Aadhar Bahuddeshiya Sanstha	Amalner
10	Varsha M Badgujar	30	Aadhar Bahuddeshiya Sanstha	Amalner
11	Saheeda Shaikh	28	Aadhar Bahuddeshiya Sanstha	Amalner
12	Renuka Shaikh	30	Aadhar Bahuddeshiya Sanstha	Amalner
13	Ramaiya Y Tamang	33	Aadhar Bahuddeshiya Sanstha	Amalner
14	Suni Gulsher	32	Aadhar Bahuddeshiya Sanstha	Amalner
15	Rina Khan	28	Aadhar Bahuddeshiya Sanstha	Amalner
16	Jyoti Jakira	29	Aadhar Bahuddeshiya Sanstha	Amalner
17	Bharati Patil	45	Aadhar Bahuddeshiya Sanstha	Amalner
18	Vanita Mane	26	Saheli Sangh	Pune
19	Maya Hirkal	27	Saheli Sangh	Pune
20	Ruksana Altaf Beg	32	Prerna Samajik Sanstha	Vaijapur
21	Payal Shaikh	25	Prerna Samajik Sanstha	Vaijapur
22	Poonam Bhide	30	Indian Red Cross	Nagpur
23	Kamla Baghel	45	Indian Red Cross	Nagpur
24	Seema Sharma	30	Indian Red Cross	Nagpur

25	Pooja Kalkhor	27	Indian Red Cross	Nagpur
26	Hemlata Lohave	49	Indian Red Cross	Nagpur
27	Rajesh Suryavanshi	27	Godavari Foundation	Jalgaon
28	Adil Patel	35	Godavari Foundation	Jalgaon
29	Ajagar Patel	39	Godavari Foundation	Jalgaon
30	Kunal Mahind	36	Sarathi Trust	Nagpur
31	Chetan Chodkar	24	Sarathi Trust	Nagpur
32	Aarthi Pai	45	Sangram Sanstha	Sangli
33	Meena Seshu	54	Sangram Sanstha	Sangli
34	Aiman Khan	24	Sangram Sanstha	Sangli
35	Neha Chattopadhyay	26	Sangram Sanstha	Sangli