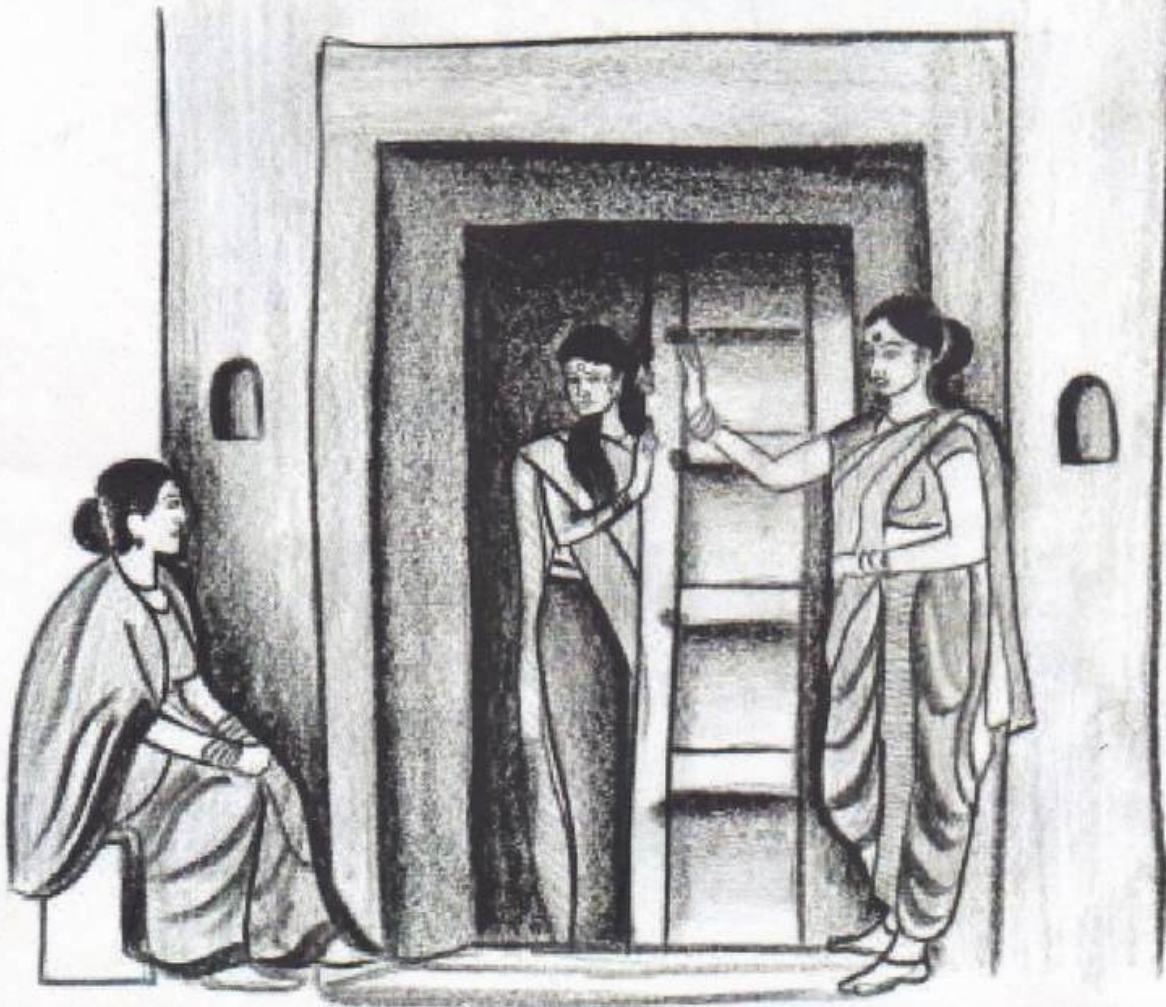


Fractures Conversations Alliances

The Feminist and the Sex Worker



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Perspective Papers

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Introduction to Reprint

Fractures, Conversations, Alliances

The Feminist and the Sex Worker

Context

Working with women in prostitution and sex-work since 1992 in the HIV/AIDS prevention programme opened up questions about women's labour, sexuality, migration and mobilisation. Importantly, it helped address our own double standards and biases while dealing with issues related to sexuality and prostitution. As our involvement with the women we worked with deepened, our beliefs, ideas and notions about prostitution and women in prostitution underwent a sea-change. Our perception of prostitution as 'exploitation, victimisation, oppression, loose, immoral, illegal', was shaken to the core.

Words matter

It was not merely our ideas and beliefs that had to be questioned and reformulated but the very use of language to describe the women had to be transformed. 'Whore', 'harlot', 'veshya'-have been used as abuses for the 'fallen woman', the subject of much public discourse.

We began to engage deeply with the politics of language. Collectively, we reclaimed some of these terms and asserted identities with positive meaning. In 1996, the collective of sex workers in Sangli was registered as Veshya AIDS Muquabla Parishad, Veshya the Sanskrit word for prostitute was reclaimed from its extremely stigmatised use (Prostitutes Combat AIDS, (VAMP). Members later rechristened the collective as Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad, a more inclusive name to reflect their journey towards Anyay Mukti or freedom from injustice. The cheeky acronym, VAMP, remained.

We revised our vocabulary to weed out words that reinforced the stigmatisation and marginalisation of women in prostitution. Besides, we realised that the terminology used for generations by mainstream society to refer to 'the fallen woman' was more often than not derogatory, within the moral space of sacredness. The need to reclaim womanhood also became necessary since this moral space refused to acknowledge the fact that the very identity (of being a woman) was obliterated by the

'whore, harlot, veshya' image. Hence, the importance of the use of terminology like 'women in prostitution' instead of the commonly used term 'prostitute'. Women who practise prostitution used the term 'women in business' while referring to themselves.

We struggled with language for years. 'Sex Worker' the English term was easy on the tongue and was alien enough to be non-stigmatising and so was easily adopted by all the workers. We refused to use the term 'commercial sex worker' (CSW) replete in most donor documents and project reports. The collectives rejected the word 'commercial', deeming it an unnecessary addition to the term sex work/sex worker. "Why not commercial doctors or commercial lawyers?" they wondered. Sex workers had coined the term 'Sex Work' to claim the space of labour and to combat stigma, and the construct of 'commercial' only added the stigma back to sex work. Instead, we increasingly used 'sex worker' and sometimes 'women in sex work' in documents produced by SANGRAM and VAMP. In November 1997, the National Network of Sex Workers (NNSW) was born out of the first National Conference of Sex Workers in India, attended by over 4000 sex workers from all over the country. They decided to unite and broaden their base to facilitate organising sex workers by building a strong nation-wide network of sex workers. VAMP was a founding member of this network and took on the mantle of organising sex workers and also began to facilitate the activities of NNSW in the western region of India.

Local language terminology continued to dodge us. The Hindi term *yunkarmi* which was easily adopted in the North and Eastern parts of India did not sit easily on the Marathi tongue and was quickly abandoned. *Veshya* was the preferred term in written documents and 'sex worker' was used by the workers to introduce themselves.

Post 2000, SANGRAM's work expanded to include male and transgender persons in prostitution and thus after much discussion among us we adopted the term People in Prostitution and Sex-work (PPS) to include all persons – female, male and transpersons – who 'make money out of sex'. But this was unwieldy and soon abandoned.

In 2013, Sex Workers & Allies South Asia (SWASA) a regional initiative was launched in New Delhi by representatives seeking to empower sex work leaders, regional networks and build alliances with civil society to address practices harmful to sex workers across the South Asian region. SWASA initially began work in four countries:

Bangladesh, Nepal, India and Sri Lanka. The main objective was to advocate for change in discriminatory laws and policies and improve HIV and health services and access to justice for sex workers. Such a regional network would be mindful of voices from South Asia, expressing themselves in their own languages and foregrounding local experiences.

This initiative introduced us to further challenges regarding languages used in the region to describe the workers. Bangladesh (*yaunakarmi*) and Nepal (*yaunakarmee*) were using versions of *younkarmi* the Hindi term used in north and east India. Sri Lanka used local terms developed by sex workers rights activists: Tamil workers used *pāliyalto lilāḷi* and Sinhala workers used *laingika sevakaya*. Discussions with the workers on arriving at some common terminology is a work in progress.

When the workers started articulating sex work as work and were describing themselves as part of the informal workforce, there was a need to develop terminology that described what they did at work. Stand Up Movement from Sri Lanka came up with *Laingika Sramika* and India came up with *Laingik Kamgaar*, but this still did not describe the work. After much debate, the workers who have been unsuccessfully trying to register trade unions for years came up with 'service providers'. And thus was born the term 'sexual service providers'. Sex work then is sexual service provision, a part of the service industry, a part of the self-employed informal workforce.

Why this paper now?

Conversations between sex workers and their allies, feminists, queer rights and civil rights activists, trade unionists, anti-caste activists, academics and media persons have always been fraught. Lack of engagement, invisibilisation and hostility have dogged interactions between constituencies that are general seen to be working towards a vision of a progressive society free from injustice and discrimination. Yet, there have been deep fractures. This paper, first published in 2013, is as relevant today in terms of framing the discomforts and disagreements between mainstream feminist discourse and the sex worker rights movement. It also identifies common ground that can be built upon in order to move discussions about sex work on to new and meaningful terrain.

THE FEMINIST AND THE SEX WORKER

What is it about sex work that arouses so much passion amongst feminists? From outrage over the exploitation of women's bodies to pity for the hapless victims of male lust, it has been difficult to view sex workers as going about the daily business of earning a livelihood by providing sexual services for money. While victimhood and exploitation have been relatively easy to empathize with and mobilize around, money for sex has engendered not just noisy public debate, but quiet squeamishness even among feminists who should argue that rendering sexual services for money must be regarded as a legitimate livelihood option. Even feminists who advocate liberation from restrictive sexual mores have generally not addressed commercial sexual transactions. Where does this unease lie?

The notion is that sex work, or for that matter even surrogate motherhood or breast feeding for hire, by definition debase women and transform them into objects of control. This thinking is premised on the belief that a cash transaction strips supposedly intimate acts like sex, pregnancy, child birth or breast feeding of their inherent worth. That no 'good' woman can actually opt for sex work as a viable livelihood option and the women who 'readily' do so do not comprehend the inherent patriarchal sexual exploitation of their body and self is also convincingly argued. At the core of feminist discomfort regarding sex work is the notion that sex with multiple partners, especially casual sex, is inherently exploitative, violent or disgusting. The assumption, of course, is that men want such sex whereas women are exploited and are defiled by it.

But for sex workers, the push to unravel various concepts of sex-related issues – morality, sacredness, pleasure, preference, desire, love, romance, health, rights – have gradually become an important piece of the puzzle of life. Unfortunately, feminists and development activists often consider such discussions to be frivolous and 'upper class'. Instead, more 'important' issues of poverty, caste, environment and violence against women take centre stage. However, as feminist theorist Gayle Rubin pointed out in an essay in 1984¹:

To some, sexuality may seem to be an unimportant topic, a frivolous diversion from the more critical problems of poverty, war, disease, racism, famine or nuclear annihilation. But it is precisely at times such as these, when we live with the possibility of

¹ Rubin, G, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality", in Carole Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger*, Routledge & Kegan, Paul, 1984.

unthinkable destruction, that people are likely to become dangerously crazy about sexuality ... Disputes over sexual behavior often become the vehicles for displacing social anxieties, and discharging their attendant emotional intensity. Consequently, sexuality should be treated with special respect in times of great social stress.

Rubin's point becomes clear when we consider that in a world that continues to be threatened by the problems outlined earlier, so much energy and effort is expended on clamping down on and controlling sexuality. Examples abound in fundamentalist campaigns against women—public flogging of adulterers and homosexuals and honour killings and lynching of young people in same-*gotra* marriages. In today's world, sexuality is clearly not an issue at the margins, but is at its very centre. It is an issue, which when viewed through the prism of sex work, poses a challenge to stereotyped ways of thought and activism.

How did we enter into thinking about and working on these issues? Meena², the founder of SANGRAM, a feminist and activist for sex workers' rights began her journey in the movement against violence against women in the mid-1980s. She started working with deserted women and cases of dowry deaths in south Maharashtra. Sex workers were always 'the other' in every village. The understanding was that married men abused their wives largely because of their interest in 'loose' women. She worked with marginalized populations in a rural context through grassroots rights-based organizing, particularly with people in sex work. Her engagement with HIV/AIDS, sexual and reproductive health, violence against women, poverty alleviation and gender and sexual minority rights sharpened her need to work at the intersection of sexuality and marginalization.

What caught her imagination was the notion that casual sex could be a physical act stripped of emotion, can be initiated by women, can be used in a commercial context and even be pleasurable. Besides, many adult women seemed to appear in the communities out of 'nowhere' apparently comfortable with this notion of sex within a commercial context with multiple men. This challenged her initial idea that no woman could come into sex work on her own and that all women were forced and trafficked into sex work. It was apparent, however, that many women were not there by force, deception, debt bondage and were freely walking in and out of the communities.

² Meena began working with SANGRAM in 1992 with peer based interventions which evolved into VAMP (VeshyaAnyay Mukti Parishad) in 1997 a collective of women in sex work from western Maharashtra and north Karnataka and MUSKAN is a collective of men who have sex with men and of men and trans persons in sex work.

This picture refused to match common prevalent of the 'prostitute' of one's imagination. But all women were not 'happy hookers' either. There was an underlying discontent in this picture that was troubling. Many young girls were in business and that was unacceptable, that minors were being trafficked into sex work was a reality. There was an urgent need to unravel and understand these complex contradictions. Numerous conversations revealed that casual multiple sex with the male client was not the core of the problem, but the spaces where sex work was practised were hugely abusive – police violence, petty criminal gang harassment, abusive moneylenders who charged compound interest from the girls and brothel owners, brothel owners who ruthlessly used the system for monetary gain. Debt bondage was a reality, as were petty political leaders who stigmatised and discriminated against women on the one hand and used them as vote banks on the other. Quacks abounded, as did doctors refused to physically examine the women. The list was endless. This was stark life at the margins. Rights based sex worker organising and collectivisation as a model to deal with abuse and violence in the community was thus born and grievance addressable mechanisms instituted.

As a feminist engaged in campaigns related closely to population, contraception and control over the body since the mid-1980s, Laxmi was part of discussions about the body (influenced in great part by the iconic 'Our Bodies Ourselves' by the Boston Women's Health Book Collective and its Indian versions). Self-help, knowing one's body and its rhythms and linking the personal to political issues of population control, the body tended to be viewed as a subject over which patriarchal forces fought. However, the simultaneous creation and promotion of the 'mother earth' icon, all-nurturing, sexual and imbued with the power to reproduce was not a comfortable alternative.

Her work involved campaigning against forced population control and imposition of hazardous contraception and pre-natal sex selection. This, and the conflation of sexuality and reproduction, the reduction of women into uteruses and ovaries and the fragmentation of women in reproductive health policies demanded an engagement with the construction of the female body and 'control' over it. Where contraception and fertility control mark the convergence of female sexuality and reproduction, sex work marks the convergence of female sexuality and work. This is a convergence that has demanded a complex response that is still evolving. Morality; double standards; a discomfort with the erotic, accompanied by an unwillingness to listen to sex workers themselves has hindered alliances between what would have been "natural" allies. Feminist theory and practice – a powerful liberatory

force challenging inequities in every sphere – seemed to have faltered, and even failed, when it came to the issue of commercial sex.

This chapter attempts to examine the troubled relationship between mainstream feminism, the human rights discourse and sex workers' movement for their rights in negotiating the knotty terrain of sexual politics. Over the years, collectivization, community mobilization and fighting for the right to a 'voice' has helped centre the debate on sex work by the people in sex work themselves. We address ourselves to issues within the movement and do not talk here of the stigma, discrimination or violence against sex workers that exists in the broader social, legal and political sphere.

The good, the bad and the 'other'

Though the distinctions between women who are in sex work and those who are not are sharply and explicitly drawn in social arrangements, the lines between the two categories are fuzzy. Some blurring of the categories of respectable bourgeois womanhood and the woman in sex work, otherwise maintained in sharp disjunction from each other can be seen in the following:

- The contractual terms of bourgeois marriage
- Many women who admit to 'occasional prostitution', or sex for favours
- Some forms of heterosexual 'dating' involving a 'quid pro quo'
- The description of women accused of departing from the norm as 'whores'.

The recognition of continuities and commonalities among women is central to a feminist understanding of sex work while analyzing the specificities of the phenomenon of sex work.

The dominant feminist discourse today fails to recognize and acknowledge the dynamics of sex work that encompasses a wide spectrum of elements ranging from violence and exploitation to autonomy and agency for negotiating the best possible options. The difficult space of the politics of the female body, female sexual conditioning and sexual control needs to be broadened and its complexities teased out. Feminists must question the very essence of a patriarchal value that shapes and constructs both the 'good' women who do not question the dominant norm of propriety and those in sex work who dare to flaunt their 'bad' selves, break norms and willingly accept the mantle of the 'other' woman. The 'good' ideal wife/partner who lovingly services a single man preferably in a monogamous set up or the 'bad happy hooker' who sexily services many men in a commercial context are both on the same side of a coin. Besides pitting women against each other this image accords no agency to both the 'good' and the 'bad' woman. It freezes women into a set format and frame depriving them of

the freedom of framelessness.

Sex work activists and those in sex work have helped immensely in unravelling the mysteries of this framelessness by questioning both the frame and the construction of the bad and good body politic. They have also questioned the understandings of agency, choice and consent. Good or bad, the construction of women as mere recipients of 'oppressive' sexual desires from their male partners has created an image devoid of any agency in the spectrum of man-woman sexual relationships. So while good women 'bear' the burden of male sexuality, bad women 'cater' to this demand, and even make a livelihood off it.

Women in sex work question the simplistic linearity of women being bundled into the good-bad continuum challenging such a construction as male centred. The analysis of a burdensome, oppressive sexual desire which is male centred constructs and fuels the image of passive victimhood, again frozen into a timeless frame. They break out of the shackles of the good and bad paradigm denouncing it as essentially emotional and claim a space of the 'other' which is neither good nor bad. They define *dhandā* (sex business) as a transaction of multiple sexual partnerships within a commercial context. Rendering sexual services for money within this transaction is therefore not only possible but can exist devoid of emotion, whether of love or of guilt.

Women in sex work as part of a popular whore culture from western Maharashtra and north Karnataka, weave stories that have been passed on through poetry and 'sayings' that talk of 'control of' rather than 'oppression by' the phallus. This is very interesting in that it not only challenges the 'grin and bear/cater to' construction of female sexual conditioning but also introduces a concept that actually trivializes both the phallus and 'male sexual control'. On the other hand when discussing power dynamics sex workers – both female and male – share stories of 'trivialization of the phallus', reducing of male sexual power to 100 rupees or whatever the going rate is, as commonplace. That male sexual power can be viewed as something to laugh at and even ridicule is fascinating in a world where it is one of the tools of oppression most commonly used to subjugate. Sex workers – female, male and transgender – share a wealth of knowledge and experience of masculine behaviours that defies any one stereotype. That men will pay a lot of money 'merely' for sexual pleasure is always a discussion point. The interesting issue of female pleasure is acknowledged but always with a caveat - the money is good, I need to take care of my family and other such practical reasons. But many men who are in sex work also talk about pleasure while servicing a client. These conversations reveal a reality where the popular image of the golden hearted *tawaif* (courtesan) or the vicious vamp is closely entwined with the irreverence around the

concept of male sexual power. This is in complete contrast to the popular notions surrounding prostitution as the most abhorrent form of exploitation of women.

Body of rights

It was only around the mid-19th century that prostitution in India was constructed as a social problem. Prior to this, courtesans, dancing girls and others who provided sexual services outside the confines of marriage were not as reviled as the 'common prostitute' who was created out of regulatory laws under the British.³ The fact that prostitution was perceived to be practiced exclusively by women created a category of women who were undesirable and therefore in need of reform. The perception of such women further evolved as 'bad' women and they came to be seen as immoral and debauched. The profession itself is thought to have an 'evil' influence on society's 'good' moral standing, particularly on the character of 'good' women. The 'loose woman' has been the subject of much public discourse and debate, academic writing, policy making and campaigns. Several perspectives have been articulated, even within the women's movement. A quick glance at some of the most dominant threads – largely emanating from western feminists who set the tone of the debate in the early years – will help contextualize the current points of friction.

On one end of the spectrum is the view that 'prostitutes' are victims of what has been termed 'female sexual slavery'. In her famous eponymous book, American sociologist Kathleen Barry⁴, elaborates on the manner in which prostitution is inherently violent, whether women are kidnapped, purchased, fraudulently contracted through organized crime syndicates or procured through love and befriending tactics. This perspective, echoed by those working to end trafficking in women and children, assumes that all prostitutes are forced into the institution. Further it assumes that making money from sex is synonymous with sexual exploitation.

Trafficking of women and children also takes place for domestic work, organ transplant, bonded labour, begging or as camel jockeys. But, activists, NGOs and the media highlight trafficking for prostitution as the sole issue in fighting trafficking. Trafficking is a criminal offense but the obsession with sex work dilutes the attention that this issue deserves. The violence and injustice faced by those trafficked for a variety of reasons does not get addressed and the focus remains on sex and morality. Complete abolition of prostitution is thus touted as the logical solution to end such exploitation of women. This approach, which criminalizes the practice of sex work including soliciting, pimping, brothel keeping often

³ Tambe, Ashwini, Codes of Misconduct, Regulating Prostitution in Late Colonial Bombay, Zubaan, 2009

⁴ Barry, K, "Female Sexual Slavery", New York University Press, 1979.

criminalizes the woman herself. This is also something that is reflected in official policies of most governments, including in India.

Without doubt, people forced, coerced, duped and trafficked into sex work bear the brunt of a system that uses sex work as a tool of oppression, but they cannot and must not represent all people in sex work. Trafficking for purposes other than sex work should be addressed in the effort to stop trafficking in persons. Activists from the anti-trafficking movement have concentrated on trafficking for sex work almost exclusively, concurrently calling for the abolition of sex work. The tenuousness of this argument would become apparent were there to be calls for the abolition of domestic labour, marriage, factory work or casual labour only because people are trafficked. Yet, this call for abolition of sex work – mainly because of the conflation between trafficking and sex work – continues to inform the campaigners who insist that all women in sex work are victims of trafficking. Ironically, the law provides that adult women can be 'rescued' and detained against their will in 'rescue homes', is a gross violation of human rights that has yet to attract the attention of human rights defenders in India.

Such a conflation has contributed immensely to the alienation and marginalization of all women in sex work where force, deception, debt bondage and slavery-like practices are made the ruling principle. The discourse on 'trafficking' and 'sex work' runs concurrently at the local, national and global levels. Trafficking is conceptualized by authorities and experts as part of the discourse around citizenship and law and sex work as an articulation generated by the marginalized involved in sex work. The almost exclusive focus on trafficking for sex work leaves little space for sex workers to talk about issues that affect their work—working conditions, state and societal violence against them and safety and health issues. Also, the exclusive narrative of 'commercial sexual exploitation' in the paradigm of anti-trafficking obliterates the real life stories of sex workers and the manner in which they negotiate control of their bodies on a daily basis.

Differing notions of who owns the female body or who has the 'right' over it has been a rallying point since the early days of feminism. How this 'right' is to be interpreted, however, has been deeply contentious. Farida Akhter⁵, a women's health activist and researcher in Bangladesh critiques the notion of 'the individual right of woman over her own body' as an 'unconscious mirroring of the capitalist-patriarchal ideology...premised on the logic of bourgeois individualism and inner urge of private property'. According to Akhter, the idea that a woman owns her body turns it into a 'reproductive factory', objectifies it and denies that reproductive capacity is a 'natural power we carry within

⁵ Akhter, F, "The Eugenic and racist premise of reproductive rights and population control" in *Reproductive and Genetic Engineering: Journal of International Feminist Analysis* Volume 5 Number 1, 1992

ourselves'.

At the other end of the spectrum, is a group spearheaded by women in sex work like Margo St James, founder of COYOTE (Cast Off Your Old Tired Ethics) since the early 1970s in North America who argue that adult women can choose sex work as a viable option. Proponents of this approach view this voluntary decision to make money from sex as akin to selling other forms of labour. They contend that 'sex work is work'. Viewing prostitution as 'work' provides a basis for organizing to solve many of the problems of commercial sex. According to them, distinguishing sex work from other forms of labour reinforces the marginal, and therefore vulnerable, status of a sex worker. Sex workers, they state, should be entitled to labour rights and occupational health and safety regulations like all other workers. Tired of non-sex workers propounding on their lives, women in sex work claim that sex work is a personal choice and demand complete de-criminalization of voluntary sex work and all related activities. Legalization of prostitution, demanded by some sex workers' groups, involves taking the subject outside the realm of criminal law, but advocates regulation of sex work through zoning and licensing laws.

Critics of this approach, like political scientist Carole Pateman⁶ claim that feminists who invoke 'women's right to own their bodies' are reinforcing a language that can just as well validate their 'right' to sell their bodies through civil contracts for prostitution, surrogacy, marriage, labour or slavery. For Pateman, saying we 'own our bodies' can only mean that we are 'free' to sell our bodies (our body parts or sexual or reproductive services) in the marketplace.

According to Pateman, prostitution is the classic case of men as a 'fraternity' gaining a 'right of access to women's bodies' through the fictive device of contract (voluntary consent). Underneath this contract is another, more insidious fiction that equates women's reproductive and sexual capacities with labour power; as a 'service' that can be alienated from the 'self' without compromising the self's 'moral freedom'. According to Pateman, 'When a prostitute contracts out use of her body' she is doing something different from a worker getting a job; 'she is ... selling *herself* in a very real sense', alienating herself from her sexuality, which is integral to her 'womanhood'.

A different approach to concepts like autonomy and self-ownership has been taken by feminists of colour in the United States, who are engaged in re-appropriating these concepts. Patricia Williams⁷, for instance, is committed to reclaiming women's ownership of their

⁶ Pateman, C., "The Sexual Contract," Polity Press, 1988.

⁷ Williams, Patricia J., "On Being the Object of Property." In The Beacon Book of Essays by Contemporary American Women. Edited by Wendy Martin. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996

flesh and blood by reinventing the language of self-ownership, or what she calls 'the formulation of an autonomous social self'.

Those who tend, care for, or carry are by definition those with authentic claims to be named owners of things or people whose growth they nurture. When the 'objects of property' speak they remind us that the language of self-creation, self-propriety and freedom is always a story told and retold, and rejecting that language wholesale is to leave those without property nothing at all to own. As Williams observes, to repudiate formalized claims to personal worth and rights is to trivialize the experience of those who historically have been treated as worthless. She argues that rather than jettisoning the rights discourse it should be broadened and diversified. The crucial function of the rights discourse — that of giving visibility to those previously invisible — needs to be emphasized.

In recent years, the discourse around prostitution has changed and is now couched in the language of human rights. Feminists, theorists and activists of prostitutes' rights are involved in unravelling the complex and complicated world of sexual autonomy, free choice, sexual exploitation and agency-versus-victim debates. This discourse has helped in that it has shifted the focus from blaming the woman and her sexual life to a continuum ranging from the 'inherent victimization of the woman in prostitution' to the 'beneficial exploitation of the institution of prostitution', acknowledging the shades in between.

Yet, the human rights framework has been challenged as a limiting strategy for a more radical social transformation that ensures the dignity and self-respect of women. Critics do not deny the relevance of 'rights' as a survival strategy to negotiate for wider survival spaces within the given system to be more responsible and accountable to all its citizens, but urge that the rights approach be viewed only as a strategy and not shape the vision for possible futures.

In the wake of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, a range of perspectives is being played out in public health programs and their approach to sex workers, identified as a 'high risk' group. It must be noted that most interventions with sex workers are designed to 'protect' their male clients rather than the sex workers. A large factor in the ill-treatment of sex workers is the narrow understanding that people have of this work. Traditional perspectives assume that all people involved in sex work are victims who have been coerced, bribed, blackmailed or forced into the trade. Sex work is thus viewed as a dehumanizing business with no space for the assertion of human rights. The only approach to giving sex workers their rights is to 'free' them from the trade and abolish prostitution altogether.

VAMP (VeshyaAnyay Mukti Parishad) a collective of women in sex work from western Maharashtra and north Karnataka, refused to accept this burden of analysis on their work and self-worth. They have helped build a rare solidarity among people in sex work and collectivized women who had common experiences of being exposed to multiple discriminations and who had their rights ignored and violated. Women in sex work came to identify themselves as part of a marginalized community who were vulnerable not only to HIV/AIDS but also to social stigma and public violence. VAMP challenges the concept of 'exploitation by any male'. It defines sex work as adult, monogamous or polygamous sexual partnerships within a commercial context. The contextualization of sex work between consenting adults and where the exchange of money is a contract between two or more individuals is therefore critical. The contract itself signifies the 'mutual' nature of the exchange more so because the terms of the contract are controlled by the person/woman offering the service.

As Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan⁸ observes, the prostitution question(s), 'challenges us, as well, to ask whether prostitute interests are being truly represented in these debates. The urgency and force of the disagreements arise not only from the issues relating to prostitution, but also from the fact that the prostitution question has gathered around itself many of the issues that remain unresolved in feminism: the relationship between feminists and female "victims of oppression"; the construction of the female subject in terms of "agency" (choice, autonomy, desire, "voice"); the public/ private dimension of work / sexuality; the conceptualization of First World/Third World difference - and- sameness in women's status; the narrativization-as-progress of women's (here, especially, prostitutes',) history.'

It is apparent that the 'prostitution question' will be debated and arguments for and against, whether voluntary/forced, 'agency' / victim, trafficked / socialized, legal/ criminal, sexual slavery/ sexual autonomy, exploited / liberated, will continue to occupy theorists, activists and governments. However, the experiences of the women in sex work themselves are not given due recognition in these debates. As Durga Pujari, an activist from VAMP puts it, 'Over the years, we have become "commercial sex workers" from "common prostitutes", debates are held about us and we are discussed in documents, covenants and declarations. The problem is that when we try to inform the arguments, our stories are disbelieved, and we are treated as if we cannot comprehend our own lives. Thus, we are either romanticised or victimised – or worse, our reality gets buried and distorted.'

⁸ Sunder Rajan, R, "The Scandal of the State: Women, Law and Citizenship in Postcolonial India," Duke University Press, 2003.

Sex work as Violence

Is sex work not violence against women? This question has been posed countless times by feminists of various strands in the Indian women's movement. It is not necessarily asked from a moralistic viewpoint, but comes from a genuine need to engage in a contentious space that has pitted women in sex work against mainstream feminist thought and theory. This question necessitates examining feminists' notions of sex itself. In the words of radical feminist ex-prostitute Amber Hollibaugh, 'Women in this culture live with sexual fear like an extra skin. Each of us wears it differently depending on our race, class, sexual preference and community, but from birth we have all been taught our lessons well. Sexuality is dangerous. It is frightening, unexplored, and threatening... Many of us become feminists because of our feelings about sex.'⁹

Apart from arguments about the violence inherent in sex work, a key issue that feminists raise is that sex work reduces the female body to an object of sexual pleasure for men, bringing it into the marketplace to be exploited. While this view remains strong within feminist and other circles, an increasing number of people are urging a broadening and even outright change of definitions of the fundamental concepts around sex work. For instance, VAMP works to specifically challenge the notion of sex work being inherently exploitative. Instead, sex work is defined as adult, monogamous or polygamous sexual partnerships within a commercial context, including men, women and transgender people. For many, this has proven to be a very contentious position.

Some women in sex work prefer the use of the term 'commercial sex' instead of 'prostitution' or 'sex work' because these terms focus on the seller of sexual services and perhaps contribute to the invisibility of buyers. Yet, they point out that sex workers' priorities vary from one community to another. For example, improving health and safety standards in the workplace may be a realistic goal for those involved in a formal sex industry, but is not helpful for marginalized young people selling 'survival' sex spontaneously or housewives who occasionally exchange sexual services for money.

The contextualization of sex work is critical, and needs to be understood as an act between consenting adults involving the exchange of money in return for services. This, of course, does not refer to situations of trafficking, wherein coercion and deception are the dominant features. Within the Indian context sex work is defined as a business or *dhanda* where sex work is a contract with the terms spelt out. Also, there is no equivalent for 'selling sex' in any Indian language,

⁹ Hollibaugh, A, "Desire for the Future: Radical Hope in Passion and Passion" in Jackson, S. and Scott, S. eds. *Feminism and Sexuality: A Reader*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.

possibly because sex or sexual services are not sold, but exchanged for money (or other material benefits). Further, the fact that sex work includes men and transgender people is only recently seeping into societal consciousness, and feminism has to rethink many dearly held positions about male domination over the female body via transactions of commercial sex.

Life at the margins

Paradoxically, the urge to dismiss the significance of sexuality co-exists with measures by both state and society to control and confine sexual activity according to rigid norms. We can thus discern two distinct worlds: one that would like to control sexuality, couching it in moral terms and societal norms, even in rhetoric of 'the good of the species'; and another of resisters, those who break norms and live by rules unacceptable to the moralists. What is forgotten, however, is that life is dynamic, and herein lie the critical grey areas around which most sex workers tend to move and live their lives. In the process they sometimes adhere to the first of these worlds, sometimes to the second, and at other times straddling both. The patterns that emerge from stories told by sex workers would come as a surprise to those accustomed to the pathetic picture of the whore. These include women's sense of economic power as the head of the household, monetary gains, economic stability and security, mobility, control over their bodies (manifested, for example, in their ability to insist on condom use) and a feeling of liberation from constrictive social norms. Alongside, however, there is also anger, emerging from a feeling of powerlessness against the intolerance and judgements of mainstream society.

Family honour or *izzat* is constantly presented as another issue that most women in sex work have to contend with in South Asia. This, perhaps even more than anti-trafficking or feminists or state constructions of sex work, pushes women underground. Stigma, discrimination and rejection by the family are legendary. Most women in sex work are estranged from their natal families or have furtive relationships with them. While money is accepted by the family, openly acknowledging that a daughter is in sex work attracts ostracism from caste and other community groups. This in some cases has led to violence resulting in the death of the woman in sex work. In townships far away from their natal homes, women start new family structures that include lovers, children and sometimes extended families of older and ailing parents and young siblings. Current lovers become fathers of children whom they have neither fathered, nor do they claim them as their 'own' children. Curiously, relationships with their *malaks** often mirror patriarchal relationships within the family. It would seem that 'love' and

* malak literally means 'owner' in Marathi, but contrary to popular perception, it is the sex worker woman who 'keeps' the malak as a lover, and not the other way around. The women are called malkins which also means female owner.

romance could succeed in making even the strongest women vulnerable to the often unreasonable demands of their *malaks*/lovers...a phenomenon that begs further study and analysis. The fact that as clients, *malaks* are multiple and change often is also a reality. But during the 'episode of love' they are given the platform of power.

Women who have had the chance to leave the profession have often chosen to remain, accepting sex work as a way of life better than what is offered by the double standards that exist in mainstream society. When convenient, they have also chosen to leave and re-enter the profession when their circumstances changed.

These are indubitably signs of women's control over their lives. Yet, notwithstanding such evidence, under the guise of protection (of both the individual and of 'society at large'), sexuality that does not conform to the norm is widely considered a 'vice' and pushed underground. Indeed, self-appointed moral brigades campaign, at times viciously, against a wide spectrum of what they view as sexual deviance – be it single motherhood, pre- or extramarital relationships, same-sex partners, multiple sex partnerships or any non-mainstream form of erotic sexual preference. In India, as elsewhere, many of these choices come under the moral, and at times legal, hammer as 'illicit sexual conduct', the punishments for which are as extreme as flogging, forced migration or even death. In particular, sex work and homosexuality have long been considered areas beyond redemption, with stringent laws and their swift enforcement. The linkage between trafficking (a criminal offence) and sex work (which is not an offence per se in India and in some other countries of South Asia) and that of homosexuality with paedophilia, have been repeatedly put forward as reason enough for the moral policing of these presumed 'offences'.

Much of the debate around sex work has been constructed around one of two polarized positions: either as a human rights violation, a modern form of slavery, or as the exercise of the right to work. But in real life these positions – slavery and victimhood on the one hand, and choice and the right to work on the other – are woven together inextricably. Such ambiguities, however, are in no way reflected in the larger discussion of morality and rights. Before any clarity on this issue can be reached, the complex terrain of the politics of the female body, female sexual conditioning and sexual control need to be understood. Of course, sex work, like marriage and family – which also significantly impact a woman's sexuality – is not a monolithic institution. The degree of autonomy possible, the extent of abuse and violence and the possibility of accessing rights vary widely according to the situation.

As Martha Nussbaum puts it, '...at least some of our feminist theory may be insufficiently grounded in the reality of working-class

lives and too focused on sexuality as an issue in its own right, as if it could be extricated from the fabric of poor people's attempts to survive....When we consider our views about sexual and reproductive services, then, we must be on our guard against two types of irrationality: aristocratic class prejudice and fear of the body and its passions.¹⁰

'The moral value of 'chaste womanhood', so beloved of the moral brigades and the middle class, is centred on a monogamous heterosexual relationship within marriage. Further, the sole purpose of this relationship has traditionally been seen as reproduction – an issue considered sacred insofar as the continuance of the species is concerned. In this view, female passion is also vehemently denied, as it is seen as an 'impure desire'. The flaunting of a woman's sexual parts or the use of such parts for money is also frowned upon, as is any overt use of a woman's sexuality, with such acts deemed cheap or immoral. However, all of this is still permissible if the motive is 'love' or marriage, and hence ostensibly in the service of reproduction or pleasuring a husband. Much resistance to sex work emanates from this deep-seated conditioning, which is averse to accepting women's sexuality for any purpose other than reproductive. The unease is compounded by the commercial transaction that characterises sex work. If, in the liberated era, seduction is permissible in certain settings, it must not be tainted by the exchange of cash, is an underlying but rarely admitted view.

Sex is sex

Central to re-examining this view is an understanding of sex workers' perceptions of sex itself. In fact, sex workers' daily encounters with sex throw light on an aspect that has been little analysed. As noted earlier, while feminists have long portrayed sex work as a commodification of the female body, it is important to understand who decides whether such a definition fits a particular transaction. For instance, are monetary exchanges between families, or individuals 'in love' commercial? In fact, commodification needs to be redefined in a world dictated by commerce, where a vast majority of exchanges are defined by some material gain, be it monetary or otherwise.

The assumption that sex is loftier in some situations – between individuals who are in 'love' or married, for instance – is problematic. There is absolutely no guarantee that the sexual experience will be pure and elating in a so-called 'love' relationship. The opposite also holds good. Which is, that it is entirely possible to have a sexual encounter with someone one does not love and experience it as elation and pure. One may exchange money or other material goods in either circumstances. One may be in love and need the monetary benefit. Does that make the

¹⁰ Nussbaum, Martha C, "Whether from reason or prejudice: Taking money for bodily services", *Journal of Legal Studies*, vol. XXVII (January 1998), The University of Chicago

love unreal and impure? The institution of marriage, of which a feminist and socialist critique exists, is also a framework where exchange of money and goods occurs under various guises and where sexual negotiation also occurs. So why is that not discussed in the framework of 'commodification'? Are we by definition protecting purely commercial exchanges by couching them in 'acceptable' terms? Sociologist Wendy Chapkis¹¹ contention that sex can be seen not as a representation of the 'authentic self' alone, but in performative terms, as an act, might go some way in understanding commercial sex.

Sex is but sex – it is we humans who attribute certain emotions to it, depending on our socialization and our individual experiences. Moving away from this paradigm, commodification and commercialization need to be understood from the point of view of 'control'. Thus, sex should be defined as commodification only if the body (be it male, female or transgender) is used as an instrument for financial gain without consent.

The caste question and sex work

Sociologist Andre Beteille¹² articulates the gendered form of social control and perpetuation of caste hierarchies thus: 'There is, firstly, the sexual use and abuse of women, which is an aspect of the inequality of power seen in its most extreme form in the treatment of women on the lowest rank by men of the highest; this is the aspect of the problem that has received the most attention. There is, in addition, the unremitting concern with the purity of women at the top, associated with ideas regarding bodily substance...' The co-existence of prohibition of inter-caste marriages along with sexual unions across castes (usually upper caste men with lower caste women) is what Anupama Rao¹³ calls 'an important paradox in understanding the profound anxieties about sexuality and caste purity that issues of caste and gender raise...'

Caste, with its rigid strictures related to the body – touch, segregation, ritual purity and pollution – and gender, with its own set of strictures about touch, pollution and segregation, intersect powerfully in the arena of Dalit sex workers. Transgressions and challenges to these strictures, occurring on a daily basis, might provide insights into the functioning as well as fluidity of these systems of control on the ground.

While statistics are difficult to come by, it is well-known that a large number – maybe even a majority – of sex workers are from the Dalit and other backward communities. Yet, the intersection of gender and

¹¹ Chapkis, W, "Live Sex Acts: Women Performing Erotic Labour", Routledge 1997

¹² Beteille, A, "Race, Caste and gender," in Society and Politics in India: Essays in a Comparative Perspective. Delhi, OUP, 1992.

¹³ Rao, A, Introduction to "Gender and Caste", Kali for Women, 2003

caste has rarely been explored either by feminists or those within the Dalit movement. The Dalit women's movement in India has largely framed itself around what political scientist Gopal Guru¹⁴ terms 'the politics of difference'. The attempt to carve out a space independent of the mainstream women's movement dominated by upper caste middle-class urbanized women on the one hand and dealing with the patriarchal Dalit movement on the other, has been an inevitable outcome of the assertion of the politics of identity that dominated the 1990s. Much work (both academic and artistic) has gone into examining violence, particularly sexual violence on Dalit women, the eroticization and 'availability' of the Dalit woman's body to upper caste males and the rampant molestation and rape that the Dalit woman is subjected to, both within and outside her community.¹⁵

In this framework, sex work, especially forms linked to religious/ritual practices like the devadasi or jogappa system¹⁶, have been analysed as part of systemic violence against Dalit women. Attempts to abolish the devadasi system were also led by former devadasis, who regarded the system as one of utmost degradation. The link between temple prostitution and the backward caste movements, particularly in south India, can be seen in the work of MuvularRamamirtham (1883-1962), a former devadasi in the Madras Presidency.¹⁷

Caste continues to be a defining factor in the paradigm within which sex work is practised in India today. Anecdotally, the fact that some Dalit castes are overrepresented among women sex workers is

¹⁴ Guru, G, "Dalit Women talk differently", *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 14-21, 1995.

¹⁵ Dalit poet NamdeoDhasal's evocative and forceful first collection of poems, *Golpitha*, about the red light district in Bombay that he was brought up in, paints a savage and harsh picture of prostitution.

¹⁶ Devadasis (literally, servant of god) and Jogappas (transgender devotees), are part of a system of ritual dedication to the Goddess Yellamma. This long-standing tradition in present-day North Karnataka and South Maharashtra equipped girls and women with considerable skills in poetry, music and dance, as well as provided for their livelihood, security, community identity and support. The British in their classification drive, tended to blur and collapse categories of women whose sexuality transgressed rigid restrictions of marriage and caste, thus consolidating a monolithic – but limited and often erroneous – view of Indian culture, for ease of administration in the colonies. As Philippa Levine notes, "These classificatory schemes clearly stripped indigenous women of the ability to name their occupation on their own terms, even while their daily lives challenged colonial definition. But this was an important aim of classification, its insistence on objective knowledge rendering the object of scrutiny passive. Prostitution always complicated that formula, as critics veered uneasily between wanting to see women as victims of abuse or as amoral profiteers." (see Levine (2000) for an excellent analysis of the alienating process of colonial taxonomy).

¹⁷ Kannabiran K and Vasanth Kannabiran (translated), "MuvularRamamirtham's Web of Deceit: Devadasi Reform in Colonial India, *Kali for Women*, 2003.

apparent. While poverty is one of the reasons attributed to this phenomenon, it does not explain why some Dalit women do sex work and others do not. The overall understanding of male control and violence against Dalit women in sex work shapes policies such as the Government of Karnataka campaign (initiated during colonial times) against the devadasi system. It is also the same argument that has gained currency among the young men within the Dalit communities who are now insisting that their women folk stop sex work and remain within the confines of the home. This might not however mirror the situation in reality, where Dalit women sex workers may have more control over their sexuality and their earnings than the men in their families. Interaction with Dalit devadasi sex workers reveals that they are considered as 'males' in the household and given equal status in property and lineage. Indeed, if the devadasi system was not linked to earning money through sexual services it would be studied as a kind of matrilineal system. The problem is that any voice that is raised by the practising devadasis who are in sex work is at worst silenced or disregarded or at best is deemed as 'false consciousness'.

An example of this disrespect to sex workers' voices is the disruptive outburst after the VAMP play 'My Mother, The Gharwali, Her Malak, His Wife', in Mumbai in 2009. Professor Ramesh Kamble, a prominent Dalit intellectual, raised an objection that a non-Dalit, non-sex worker theatre director and producer had exploited the women in sex work by allowing them to falsely depict their lives. Reality according to him was that sex work is upper caste exploitation of lower caste women. He rebuffed the women, and declared that since they were under the spectre of false consciousness the director and producer should answer his queries. He, however, refused to engage with people who live lives as sex workers as well as identify as women from the Dalit community.

The play was premised on the belief that on seeing sex workers tell their own stories, audiences would finally accept them as human beings entitled to the same set of citizenship rights as others. The play, which aims to give voice to the invisible realities of women, men and transpersons in sex work, was performed as part of the Women Playwright's International Conference. In his influential book, *Pedagogy Of The Oppressed*, the noted Brazilian educator Paulo Friere defined the 'culture of silence' as a situation in which oppressed members of society are not heard by the dominant members. Dominant members prescribe the words to be spoken and the images to be seen through control of schools, media and other institutions. In this process, marginalized and oppressed people are both silenced and they internalize negative images of themselves. The result is incapacity to act; to remain only a subject. One way to challenge this incapacitating culture of silence is by turning society on its head. By telling stories bottom-up; talking of reality at the

grassroots; making visible life at the margins, where the powerful don't look or listen. Significantly, in its trilogy 'Voices of the Poor'¹⁸ reports to understand poverty from the perspective of the poor, the World Bank spoke to some 60,000 people living on less than a dollar a day to identify the biggest hurdle to their advancement. It wasn't food, shelter or health care—it was access to a voice. This is particularly true of voiceless sections like women and Dalits. In the case of Dalit sex workers, their multiple vulnerabilities are rarely voiced.

Vijay Kamble a son of a sex worker from VAMP who was at the show later said, '*Amhi Dalitanchat Dalit ahe. Amcha awaaz kuchal ichahaincha kai adhikar?*' (we are the Dalits among Dalits. What rights do these people have to kill our voice?) In VAMP, one of the most valuable lessons learned has been to listen to the women in sex work themselves – rather than to those who speak for them, or about them – and respect the wisdom earned from a life of resistance.

Falseness of false consciousness

An inability to see things, especially social relations and relations of exploitation, as they really are, is a state of false consciousness, a state which may be the inevitable result of a way of living. It characterizes the generic and chronic kind of servitude that cannot even perceive its own situation and may co-exist with a kind of illusory contentment. The prescribed cure is 'consciousness-raising'. This is what SANGRAM set out to do. But the world of the well-meaning activists was turned upside down. An immediate realization was that knowledge from the outside was vastly different from the world view inside. Caste, class, religion and gender analysis of prostitution and sexual exploitation proved to be very limited in understanding this community of women.

The involvement with this community – now over 18 years old – forced SANGRAM to address the deep-rooted double standards and biases while dealing with issues related to sexuality and prostitution. It was impossible to 'preach' to a group of women who scorned the dominant value systems. The crying victims of the social workers' imagination were not to be seen or heard.

As the understanding of prostitution as 'exploitation, victimization, oppression, loose, immoral, illegal', was broken into, it was not merely ideas and beliefs that had to be questioned but the language too had to be transformed. Meena adds, 'We had to revise our vocabulary to weed out words that reinforced the stigmatization and

¹⁸ World Bank, *Voices of the Poor*, 1999 (three books which bring together the experiences of over 60,000 poor women and men. The first book, *Can Anyone Hear Us?*, gathers the voices of over 40,000 poor women and men in 50 countries from the World Bank's participatory poverty assessments; the second book, *Crying Out for Change*, draws material from a new 23 country comparative study. The final book, *From Many Lands*, offers regional patterns and country case studies.)

marginalization of women in sex work. The need to reclaim womanhood also became necessary since this sanctified moral space refused to acknowledge the fact that the very identity (of being a woman) was obliterated by the 'whore, harlot, veshya' image. If women were not "good" then they had no right to be considered women.' It thus became a matter of claiming citizenship itself.

This realization dawned in the late 1990s, when one police officer after another declared that they did not consider "common prostitutes" as women. As "bloody veshyas, they were not 'normal citizens' hence their complaints could not be registered. But inspectors showering abuses were generally careful; they did not use abusive language referring to caste, as they could have been booked under the law prohibiting denigration of lower castes. Instead, they used sexually explicit language towards a 'prostitute'. Incidents like this brought home the fact that it was not a question of a woman's caste or religion but the mere fact that she was a 'bad' woman in prostitution. She neither had caste or religious protection as she was stripped of both.

In such a scenario, it was unclear what consciousness could be raised. What was the lesson to be transmitted: should society be educated about using sex for money or about its inhuman behaviour towards a fellow human being because she exchanges sex for money? Where was the inhumanity or exploitation here? Was it in the transaction between the client and the woman? Or was it in our treatment of this woman?

The ability to do sex work

'There are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. To perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives', says Audre Lorde.¹⁹

'*Dhanda* demands a person who is sharp, intelligent, has the gift of the gab and the ability to retain customers and regular clients,' says Shabana Kazi of VAMP. She continues, '*Dhanda* is not lucrative for people who are merely good looking; they have to be good "performers" both erotic and otherwise. While it is true that economic pressure (*majboori*) is expressed as the driving force of entry into sex work, to understand sex work purely in the economic sense does not present the correct picture. Issues of economic needs supersede religion, morality, family etc. and provide a convenient frame to position sex work, but this

¹⁹ Lorde, A, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" in *Zami/Sister Outsider/Undersong*. New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1982.

frame is limited. While it shapes the lives of people in sex work it does not determine the way the business is practiced. Many women who enter this business are not able to turn it into a viable economic option. It is not necessarily poverty or *majboori* that is the driving force, it is the ability to make money in a certain way.²⁰ 'Non-sex workers do not have that ability...thus an analysis about the *ability* to do sex work is usually absent.

'The understanding/myth that it is the easiest thing to do (spread your legs) is not true; it is an ability, a skill, to continue the workday in and out. Different skills – the sexy whore, the sympathetic whore, the USP of the housewife, i.e., the 'good' woman, etc. – all of these are used as strategies to Make money. The ability to negotiate/bargain these spaces is what determines the ability to earn and is translated into economic gain (and not only in terms of hard cash – for food, beer, mobiles, cinema tickets etc. Regular clients are the backbone of the business. How to cultivate a regular client is a skill that is developed by “successful” women in this business. Sex workers challenge the victim image by simply stating the fact that to make money out of sex, a “continuous watering pot” will just not work. Some women will use it effectively to gain the sympathy of the client and hope it will translate into more money, but it is part of the performance.

This is not to say that all the persons in sex work enjoy sex work as work. Some like it on some days and hate it on other days. Some just do not like doing this work and are on the lookout for better working options. As in any other workforce the aptitude to do the work at hand is crucial in order to be successful. Critical evidence – for instance, that a majority of adult women in sex work consent to engage in this work – continues to be largely ignored or disbelieved, since there is little understanding of the difference between 'consent' and 'choice'. Likewise, the issue of 'choice' and 'consent' is usually stripped of its class and caste context. It must also be noted that consent operates at various stages, not always contiguous. For example, a woman may consent to enter and remain in the commercial sex business. Another might have entered due to various compulsions, but consents to remain in business. It is these realities that can be uncovered only when a judgemental attitude is suspended.

²⁰ Sahni, R, "You know, then why do you ask? Report on the First Pan- India Survey of 3000 women in sex work across 14 states of India, found that 1979 of them had experience of alternative work prior to or alongside sex work. Of these, were in different occupations before sex work but were not engaging with them presently; 1054 were continuing them alongside. These occupations were diverse, though some common ones could be identified across the country (as house maids, cooks, daily wage labourers, construction labour, farming/ agricultural labour, liquor selling/ making, petty shops (tea, paan, eggs, cloth, grocery), selling a host of miscellaneous goods (door to door, bangles, candles, socks/ hankys in trains, old clothes, traditional medicines, wood, toys, fruits/vegetables/ flowers) to mention a few. While the average age of entry in these activities was around 17 years 468 girls had begun working when they were 14 years of less. The average monthly income for these activities came to be Rs. 1300 (provisional). In comparison the average incomes for sex work were Rs. 4300 (provisional).

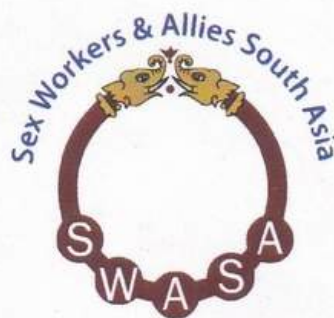
End note

The concepts of patriarchy and the construction of power relations which inform feminist theory and praxis have been valuable tools with which to articulate certain forms of discrimination. Yet, the overwhelming currency of the victim discourse and underlying dominant morality that privileges heterosexual monogamy have hampered an understanding of the myriad realities of sex workers through a feminist lens. The other challenge that the sex work paradigm poses is the assertion that sex can be offered as a service for monetary gain. It also contests the disbelief that women would never willingly offer their sexual services for money, a scepticism that is morphed into societal consciousness.

The condemnatory attitude towards women in sex work has contributed immensely to alienation and marginalization. For sex workers to access and enjoy their rights, misgivings and stereotypes about sex work need to be broken. Sex workers do not necessarily need or want to be rescued. Further, they are not a threat to the greater 'chaste' society, nor are they mobile cases and/or transmitters of HIV. In fact, they are capable of advocating for themselves, and of demanding their own rights.

In the last two decades people in sex work have fought back and forced society to create a space for their movement. They have proved that they are capable of advocating for themselves, and demanding their own rights. At the same time, newly emerging articulation that can broadly be termed 'whore feminism', like 'queer feminism,' has the potential of opening fresh thought on matters pertaining to the sexual terrain and power equations therein.

No one can deny that sex work often involves poor health, financial exploitation and physical and sexual abuse. However, these abuses are not intrinsic to sex work but are the result of the stigmatization and marginalization of sex workers. While sex workers certainly face discrimination and hardship, people in sex work do not need pity. Rather, they need the rest of society to recognize and fight against its own misconceptions, judgements and unfounded fears.



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