



festival of Learning



VAMP Institute National 2019

May 1-2 2019

SANGRAM SANSTHA, SANGLI, INDIA

Festival of Learning

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Once I fell in love

with a man who betrayed me

I went into sex work

men came to me for sex

I saw sex work as work

and now I am in love with sex work

Jayshree, Kolli Maharashtra

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I cannot explain in words, how happy I felt! Imagine the police were requesting us to “please wait, I want to take photos”. I think they understood that sex work is work and were extending support to our rally. Not only that, they were walking along side with us as if they are our “body guards” Police also posed for photos with us!

Pushpa, Anantapuram



We were all dressed in red, and had red umbrella, it was our uniform it was so systematic we sang and carried banners and placards in 8 languages. Slogans in all languages echoed in the air. We claimed public space and visibility!

Rani, Karim Nagar

Introduction

The occasion of the NNSW Annual General Body Meeting and the elections was also the occasion to have intense knowledge sharing sessions on issues such as gender and sexuality, women's movement, labour movement and media apart from skill building on writing and theatre specifically targeted at the younger generation members. Each of the sessions sparked a lively debate within the language groups excerpts of which are reproduced here in the voices of the sex workers along with a summary of the presentations made. The report seeks to capture some of these moments of learning not only for purposes of documentation but as a live resource for further discussion and debate within newer members of NNSW.

March on May Day: Inquilab Zindabad!

The sessions were inaugurated with an invigorating May Day Rally in which the sex workers took to the streets. And this time not to practice their "*dhandā*" in secrecy and silence in the dead of the night but to publicly in the full light of the day assert their rights as workers stating that this "*dhandā*" is their work and labour for which the State should give recognition and rights.

They literally painted the streets red too. With the red umbrellas, the red attire, the full-throated slogans and the feisty songs! It was a most appropriate way for NNSW observe the day and make it their own.

Personal is the Political – The Indian Women’s Movement

Laxmi Murthy



Laxmi Murthy, a senior activist presented a historical and ideological overview of the women’s movement in India over the last four decades. What also made a striking impact were the posters from the Poster Women exhibition curated by Kali for Women that she showed as part of her presentation. The responses of the participants to the speaker and within their own groups clearly indicated that they started making their own links with their everyday struggles as women and as sex workers to the longer struggle of women and began seeing their own movement as part of the larger movements for rights and justice.



Historical Overview

Laxmi began by describing the women’s movement, also called the women’s liberation movement or the feminist movement as one that wanted to change unequal power based on gender, discrimination and women’s secondary status. It also wanted to challenge institutions like family, marriage, and religious laws (institutionalized religion), that kept women down, and also institutions like law enforcement and judiciary which reinforced women’s secondary status.

“So personal being political was understood as this: if I am not being given equal rights in my family, if my husband is beating me up, if the police is not treating me properly, it is not my personal problem nor is it my fault. It is because of a larger systemic problem called patriarchy- this is what women’s movement wanted to change.”

The feminist struggles she explained included political, economic, human rights, control over women’s sexuality and health. One of the first global women’s struggles was the suffragette movement which was the women’s right to

vote and the right to political representation which they had been denied for centuries.

In India, women got the right to vote with independence, but the struggle for political representation in elected bodies and in political parties is still going on. Other struggles that the women’s movement have been engaged in include the right to work and own property; violence of various kinds- rape, dowry related violence, domestic violence, sexual



harassment; the right to control sexuality and reproduction ; the struggle to have sexual

relations with who one wants, when and whether one wants, and the right to control one's body in terms of reproduction- when to have children, whether to have children, how many children to have. All these struggles have been the core issues of the early women's movement.

While she focussed largely on the struggles from around the 1980s onwards that she also illustrated through the poster exhibition she clarified that this did not mean that feminist struggles or talk about women's rights did not exist before. She gave the example of Savitri Bai Phule in Maharashtra and the national level campaigns for girl's education. She spoke also about the independence movement that had the participation of large numbers of women. This made it clear that while the focus of the presentation was on the third wave of feminism in the late 1970s, women's mobilization is centuries old and not just a 30 -35year old phenomena.

The Ideological Streams Within the Movement

Indicating that there is no one single women's movement as such and no one single ideology that defined it, Laxmi spoke of three primary streams within the movement between the 1970's and 1980's that have laid its ideological foundations - Socialist Feminism, Liberal Feminism, and Radical Feminism. These were defined as follows:

Socialist feminism: This kind of feminism sees that the struggle against women's

Conversations

We never knew there are so many aspects to our freedom including social, cultural, political etc.

Vijaylakshmi, Srikakulam

We always took it for granted that we could stand on our feet economically and never questioned all this.

Chandrakumari, Guntur

The fight of Savitri Bai Phule made me proud as a woman. Hers was the first fight of women against inequality and the right to education.

Lalitha, Jharkhand

oppression is inextricably linked to other forms of injustice. The understanding was

that unless all forms of injustice are struggled against, women's liberation will remain inadequate or will not be complete.

Liberal Feminism: More widely prevalent, liberal feminism believes that the system is unequal against women and what needs to be done is to improve women's access into all the systems. This would mean that if the government or judiciary is dominated by men, women should get into these structures. A number of state and national commissions and different policies have therefore been put into place to increase women's representation in all these bodies.

Radical Feminism: This stream broadly defined the autonomous women's movement in the India context – one that she said many in the room belonged to and shared a common history of.

Going deeper into the history of the third stream she stated that prior to the seventies a large part of the women's movement was led by women who had earlier belonged to Left political parties and similar political formations that had structures very different from those they now belonged to. Having a more fundamental critique of power that informed mainstream politics, whether socialist or liberal and believing in horizontal decision-making structures most of them came together as collectives with no identified leaders, no hierarchies and no formal positions of power. Their focus remained violence against women in the context of broader issues of injustice and marginalisation.

“While many of these groups may not exist now, the activists from there are still very much rooted in the women's rights movement. For example, Meena herself has come from the women's rights movement

Conversations

There are so many streams of feminism- too complicated to understand! But we think that we need to work more like radical feminist activists. **Hemlatha, Nagpur**

This session taught us the importance of taking clear stands on issues. The challenge is how we can take a political stand about our own issues even while protecting and maintaining confidentiality. Especially about TG sex workers and rights of HIV positive sex workers.

Sudhir, Muskan, Sangli

The women's' movements have played such an important role in acquiring the rights of women. We too have done a lot of these programmes back in Kerala. But they seem to have learnt nothing. I can't speak there with the same freedom that we are speaking here.

My body is my right. But the police harassment in Kerala is critically high. If the policemen see us on buses or anywhere in public they pick us up and take us to the police station and charge us with petty cases. So we don't have any freedom to move or work independently. We will take what we have learnt here back to Kerala and also try to increase the membership of KNSW. It will make us stronger.

Shyamala John, Kerala

and therefore the sex worker movement she is part of has also grounded itself in an idea which was born in the women's movement.

So many of us maybe doing different things, but the women's movement has had a deep impact on the way in which we look at injustice and discrimination."

PosterWomen: A Pictorial Journey of Women's Rights and Realities

A last part of Laxmi's presentation revolved around sharing excerpts from a visual journey of the autonomous women's movement as portrayed through PosterWomen - an archive of women's history through posters. Posters in the women's movement were a very visual, dynamic form of expressing oneself. These posters curated and collected by a feminist publishing house called Zubaan, Delhi are a visual testimony to the history of the women's movements that focussed at different kinds of discrimination and injustice at different points of time.

Anti- dowry posters



Figure 1. Brides are not for burning (from Zubaan Poster Women Collection)

A photograph from one of the anti dowry protests in Delhi. Dowry was one of

the biggest issues in the late 70s. These protests used to happen in localities every time there was a bride burning when activists would identify the family where the bride was killed, and organise a public protest in front of their homes.

A poster from Rajasthan, which looked beyond dowry death to understand why dowry deaths happen. This was when the

Conversations

In our society women are not treated equally to men and sex workers are further ill-treated because of moralistic views. In general women are struggling to exercise their rights and it is even more hard for sex workers demanding and exercising their rights. We have to work hard and associate with the wider women's movement.

Kokila, Madurai

We need to also make public issues like domestic violence, rape and sexual harassment at workplace so that society can pay attention and government will do something for us!

Renuka Kale, Miraj

However hard we have fought patriarchy, control over women and girls still exists. Why is the women's movement not there in the rural areas? Chandrashri, Karnataka

It is wrong to think that there is no women's movement in the rural areas. There is fight against patriarchy even in the villages. Except that it may not be in this fancy way. Rubarus should be there everywhere...we must have more inter movement dialogue.

Meena Seshu, SANGRAM

movement started looking at domestic violence. Even when women are not burned to death, what does marriage mean for women? This simple image, about literally being locked in a cage/prison, sees marriage/family as a prison.

Anti -Rape posters



Figure 2. Rape in custody (from Zubaan Poster Women Collection)

This is not an exciting but very important picture of an open letter to the Chief Justice, in what came to be known as the

Mathura case. A 16 year- old adivasi girl, called Mathura was raped by two policemen in 1972. This open letter was written by law professors- Lotika Sarkar, Upendra Baxi, Vasudha Dhagamvar to the Supreme Court because when the case reached the highest court in 1979, the presiding judges acquitted the policemen on the ground that the minor adivasi girl was “habituated” to sex. This caused a huge furore amongst the women’s groups and this letter was the trigger of the anti-rape movement in India.

One of the most powerful images in the women’s movement. The protest by ‘Mothers of Manipur’ against the gang rape of a young woman called Manorama by paramilitary forces called Assam Rifles. They dragged her out of her house in the middle of the night, tortured her, raped her, and left her body on the road. The women came and stripped outside the Kangla Fort, which is the headquarters of

Conversations

What is AFSPA and why is it happening only in Kashmir and Manipur?

Lalitha, Jharkhand

The picture of Manipur tribes’ protest especially the one titled “Indian army rape us” made me restless. I felt so sad. It is a very powerful picture.

Kokila, Tamil Nadu

The story of Manorama in Manipur made us cry. But also gave us courage to fight. The story of the protest of women in front of Assam Rifles also gives us courage to live in dignity.

Vijayamma, Tamil Nadu

Women work so hard, our lives are also like this (referring to the posters which showed Durga/Kali with a lot of household work related objects in their hands) The whole day we have to serve our clients, at night we have to serve our husband, our work never ends does it?!

Lalitha, JSS, Jharkhand

Many women even in sex work till today don’t accept sex work as work due to stigma and discrimination towards sex work and sex workers. Why in spite of worldwide acceptance of human rights are we still struggling for years together to get acceptance of choice of profession/work?

Maharashtra team

the Assam Rifles, and held up this banner saying, 'Indian Army Rape Us. It was a very powerful moment which made the whole of India sit up and take note of the very regressive and unjust Armed Forces Special Powers Act.

Women and work posters

A lot of posters started to use goddesses and show her hands full of household work. The need to do this was actually because there was a huge devaluation of women's work and there was a need to recognize women's productive labour.



Figure 3. Meri Biwi kaam nahin karti (from Zubaan Poster Women Collection)

A poster designed by Kamla Bhasin about women's labour which

says 'Meri biwi kaam nahi karti' despite that all her hands are filled with what all she does- from giving birth to children to getting water etc. team

Birth control and population control posters

A poster that looks at birth control and population control. There was a very strong campaign in parts of India against hazardous birth control which was only tested on women. There was a critique about whether or not India is overpopulated and the kind of contraceptive measures being used on women, to deal with what they call a

Conversations

We faced a lot of challenges while organising the March 8 women's day programme in Delhi. Many women's groups were reluctant to even take the name "sex workers". We told them you want our money and our contribution but you don't want to take our name! But despite their hostility we are happy that NNSW played a prominent role in the events and activities

Ayesha Rai, NNSW

"Pehle desh ki naari hoon. Phir dhande waali hoon!" (First, I am a woman from this country. Only after this I am a sex worker!) Four of us went to Delhi for the March 8th meeting. They were refusing to give me space to speak. I got up and said this line and the entire front row walked out. I shouted and asked them if I was not a woman. It was only then that they came back and sat down!

Sangeeta Manoji, Sangli, VAMP

The reason why we are having this session is to learn from other struggles. The women's movement first started its fight against rape in 1979 with the Mathura rape case and finally we got the first fairly decent rape law only in 2013 after Nirbhaya. So we have a long way to go in the sex worker's rights movement and need not give up!

Meena Saraswathi Seshu, SANGRAM

population problem. Poster which shows the earth's resources being rapidly depleted by over consumption. The attempt was to bring the focus on consumerism and take it away from the idea that population should be controlled through controlling women's bodies.

Declining Sex Ratios

A poster on the declining sex ratio and sex selection- pre natal sex selection which started around the 1980s. Women's groups were involved in formulating laws, in campaigning, raising awareness, and also protesting against doctors who were doing these tests.

Sexuality

One of the early posters on sexuality which very simply says 'Heterosexuality is as normal as Homosexuality.'

Anti-communalism and personal laws

Strong and interesting posters on communalism, on religious and personal laws- about how religious laws keep women down.

Laxmi ended her presentation with posing questions revolving around the kind of feminism represented by the posters which

indicated that sisterhood is universal with women being mobilised as one class. But in today's context she asked how would we understand intersectionality in the context of the emergence of multiple feminisms i.e. Dalit feminism or Muslim women organising or a critique of Savarna feminism. These she felt are movements that are taking forward the concerns of earlier women's movements in more holistic and nuanced ways.

"Now all this is part of history. What we see today is a proliferation of social justice movements which give a lot of thought to intersectionality, and looking at various kinds of injustice, and marginalized communities struggling for their rights in a more holistic way."

The Final Word

The discussions and responses from the sex workers also brought to the fore the sensitive issue of the non- acceptance of sex workers within the women's movement even today. In response to experiences shared by some of the participants Laxmi accepted that there was discomfort among many in women's groups to accept sex work as work. The challenges are therefore many and the dialogue has to continue.



Deconstructing Gender and Sexuality: *The Trans Rights Movement*

Chayanika Shah

The session on gender and sexuality took the previous session and discussions of the women's movement further into clearly uncharted terrain. Dismantling the dominant construct of gender and sexuality Chayanika Shah, another senior activist from the women's movement laid bare the fundamental lies that underlie patriarchy which has also perpetuated itself, like any other imperial power, by dividing and ruling. Except that in this instance the divide and rule policy is internalised through maintaining the great divide between the good and the bad women; between what is normal and abnormal sex and gender. The animated discussions within and between the language groups made it clear that Chayanika had lit the critical bulb of enlightenment in everybody's head!



Chayanika began with taking off where Laxmi left out in the previous session i.e. the fact of how the women's movement has left out certain sections of people and their diverse realities including sex workers, lesbian women, transgender women, dalit women and so on. Her focus she said would be to see whether and how as the movement went along and started learning from those who were excluded, our understanding of gender and sexuality actually shifted.

Patriarchy and the Great Divide

Chayanika warned us against thinking that all exclusions are the same.

“What we learnt by talking to Dalit women and the Dalit women's movement is that we cannot speak about gender without speaking about caste and that they have to

be spoken together. The experience of patriarchy by a Brahmin woman is different from that experienced by a Dalit woman. This means that there are multiple kinds of patriarchies and multiple kinds of realities so gender itself became more complex for us.”

But, as she said, it wasn't as if that the women's movement was not recognising Dalit, Muslim or Adivasi women as women. This was however not the same with lesbian, transwomen and sex workers. While the former women are recognized by the women's movement it wrongly presumed that patriarchy affects all women similarly. In the case of the latter lesbian, transwomen and sex workers were not even acknowledged as women which is why they have had to keep reiterating that they too are women for them to gain acceptance by the women's movement.

One of the reasons for this could be found she pointed out on Aarthi's T shirt which says, 'Good women go to heaven, Bad women go everywhere.'

“This distinction of good and bad women is critical to how we understand patriarchy and the women’s movement. This is one of the biggest divides that patriarchy does amongst women; there are some good women and the rest are bad women. This distinction also meant that when the women’s movement began, they were speaking of rights of good women because the good women were also facing so much violence. All the demands and all the campaigns were about these “good” women.”

Activity: Defining the Good and the Bad Woman

To illustrate the above point, she gave an exercise to the language groups to talk together and come back with one defining characteristic of a *bad* woman and one of a *good* woman.

Team Malayalam:

A good woman has the capacity to face everything - all the sadness and sorrows, happiness.

Only the sex worker is seen as a bad woman.

Team Kannada:

When we are born, all women are same. It is society that differentiates between good woman and bad woman. Someone who is married and lives in a proper house is seen as a good woman, and a woman who is in sex work is seen as a bad woman. We don’t perceive ourselves as bad women. Even if we are good, only because we are sex workers, we are seen as bad.

Team Telugu:

Conversations

In my opinion, these lines aren’t rigid. If a married woman doesn’t take up her husband’s surname, people start raising questions. If a woman thinks it’s her choice to get an abortion, then also she’s considered a bad woman. So even the women who are married because of certain kinds of behaviour or choices might not be considered good within these institutions. Further apart from demarcations of a good and bad woman, there is also the demarcation between a natural and an ‘unnatural’ woman.

Aarthi Pai, SANGRAM

Like people tell transgender persons many things about how they are dressed, there are so many stereotypes regarding how sex workers look. If you put red lipstick, it is considered that you look like a sex worker- and people start discussing these things amongst themselves. We are always judged.

Lalitha, JSS, Jharkhand

A woman who is able to take on the problems created by the husband and is very submissive to him is a good woman. The moment she rebels and gets out of the house, she is a bad woman.

Team Marathi:

The woman who is married and is submissive to her husband is a good woman and the woman who steps out of the house for work, whatever work she does is considered a bad woman because it is presumed that she has relationships and affairs.



The woman who is married and facing all sorts of discrimination and violence is a good woman, and the woman who accepts getting raped and continues as a sex worker, is a bad woman.

Team Telugu:

The woman who obeys and gets married to the person of her parents' choice is a good woman and when she walks out and marries someone of her own choice, is a bad woman.

Team Tamil Nadu:

The woman who adjusts with husband and family problems is a good woman. The one who doesn't is bad.

Team Hindi:

If a woman is bearing violence silently, she's a good woman, the day she raises her voice and demands her rights, society starts calling her a bad woman.

Team Marathi:

A woman who stays in the control of the

society is considered a good woman. A woman who goes beyond her boundaries, and thinks it's okay to go outside with any boy or any girl is considered as a bad woman.

A woman who behaves equal to men, and the one who keeps her hair short and wears clothes like men is a bad woman. The one who comes home before 7 pm, and speaks to everyone softly is considered a good woman while the one who comes home later is a bad woman.

Sex and Sexuality: The Three Stories

Summarising what one could draw from this exercise, Chayanika stated that through understanding society's understanding of a good woman and bad woman, we can also begin to understand what it thinks of gender and sexuality.

From the discussions she said it was clear that there is a consensus on the dominant understanding of a “good” woman who lives within the norms of the society.

Those norms can be very rigid at times, and sometimes a little open but nevertheless these are norms that are set.

A lot of these norms and rules she pointed out, are linked to a woman’s sexual behaviour. If she refuses sex to her husband, that makes her a bad woman. Whereas if she agrees to have sex with anybody other than who she is married to, that will also make her a bad woman. Women’s sexuality is controlled in a manner such that anybody who dares challenge this norm has the potential to become a bad woman. For it is assumed that if she breaks this norm then she will

many boyfriends, and have sex with many people!”

It is so true, the community and caste system have had total control over marriage especially of women. Penis can penetrate into any vagina and any number of vaginas. There is a strong control over the vagina not on penis. Bothumani, Taminadu

So regardless of which part of the country we come from or age group we belong to we all have a common understanding of how we should behave like a good woman and what society considers a bad woman.

And much as we attempt to remove it, this understanding is deeply internalised. This she stressed, is how patriarchy takes



break every other norm too.

“The fear is that if today she says I will not have sex with you, tomorrow she might refuse to do housework and then go on to independently exercise her mind on what she wants with no limits. The meaning of this usually being that she will go and have

control over us and every individual to the extent that we carry it within each of us.

Chayanika then laid out **three very clear understandings of sex and sexuality.**

a. The story of “real” sex and reproduction

The first story or myth is that real sex is only when the penis goes into the vagina. This is the primary meaning of sex as defined by society. And this is linked very clearly to an understanding that sex is for producing children. It is when sex is only for reproduction that the question of which penis goes into which vagina is very critical, because this is what establishes paternity. People have to have clarity about who is the father, and who the mother. And if the child's father and mother have to be known, then there have to be strict rules about which penis is allowed into which vagina. And since the body that has the vagina has the child, the vagina has to be controlled. The penis does not need to be controlled.

This understanding of sex underlies and explains the institution of marriage. Inter caste marriages, or inter religion marriages are frowned upon because it is not allowed that any penis can go into any vagina. The caste, religion and caste of the penis has to match with that of the vagina. And all of that has to be done, so that the purity of communities is maintained. It is in this

context we must understand the control over women who have to stay inside the house and not be allowed to go out freely lest they get into relationships that are not allowed. This would in turn cast doubts on the purity of the child.

b. The story of sex beyond marital sex and heterosexuality

The second understanding is the imagination of sex itself which is limited to being peno - vaginal by nature i.e. real sex is only when the penis goes into the vagina. Despite the fact that there are diverse ways to get sexual pleasure she pointed out how we are all schooled into thinking, that this is the only way and by doing so limits the experience of desire itself.

Chayanika then went on to explain that it is actually from people who live outside the framework of this one kind of marital sex that we learn about the many other ways in which people can be sexual.

“Most obviously are people who are homosexuals, where the bodies are such that there maybe two penises, there maybe



two vaginas, there may be a penis and a vagina, but you do not have sex in the peno-vaginal manner. It is those people who have actually explored sexual desire much more than any of us who feel comfortable with peno-vaginal sex. This kind of being schooled into only one kind of sex is what causes us not only to find faults in those who do variations but also limit ourselves in what we are doing."

She questioned this tendency of society to make a judgement on something without even having the experience of the same because it has been deemed as wrong. As for instance vegetarians who may never have tasted meat to even dismiss it saying that it is not good. Or heterosexuals who have rejected homosexuality even without experiencing it.

"The point I am making is not that everybody has to have every experience. The point that I am making is that before casting judgement on people who have different experiences, instead of trying to question them or trying to say that

something is not 'normal' maybe what we really need to do is examine society. Examine the structure of society which so efficiently, so insistently, and so compulsorily is making us into one kind of people."

Linking this to the question of marriage, caste and religious control and the control on women's mobility, choice and ownership of property she drew out the centrality of sexuality to the questions we have of patriarchy. Sexuality therefore has more aspects to it than what it is reduced to i.e. pleasure and desire.

The sexuality rights movement is saying that if sexuality is not included as a core idea in feminism then we would be reduced to merely putting a band aid onto the lives of women within marriage, because dismantling of marriage means dismantling many structures of the society.

"So there is a very close linkage of the politics of sexuality with social change of the kind that Laxmi had put under radical feminism. For that kind of transformative



rebuilding of society needs sexuality as one of the core features of feminism.”

The discussions on sex was very interesting. Our society's concept is that sex is only for reproduction. This I understood is the reason for marriages within the same caste and religion.

Lalitha, Kerala

In our society sex is treated as bad and ugly, as is sex work also.

Team Maharashtra

c. The story of sex as transactional

One of the most important lessons that she feels feminism learnt, was from the sex workers movement and their analysis and critique of marriage. Cutting through the

in it, is not to know whether it is a long term, monogamous marriage. It is far more important to learn how to treat the other person with respect, how to talk about consent, and how to talk about pleasure. And we learn about all this much more from the experience of sex workers than the experiences of married women.

“As sex workers movement that are organized for their rights, I think you are at the lead of the sexuality question. You have to take it forward along with all the others who have been excluded from the mainstream.”

Gender and the Many Lies of Patriarchy

Patriarchy, she said, does not live with one lie but with many lies. The one lie that we have lived with for very long, is that there



charade of love, commitment and purity, she feels sex workers have clearly stated that all sex, even within marriage, is transactional.

“I may have sex for money, you are having sex for status.” The questions therefore that we need to ask are different. The question for any relationship which has sex

are two genders and that every child is born with either a penis or a vagina. The second lie is that the body that came with the penis is a man and the body that came with a vagina is a woman.

“This lie that there are only two genders- the gender that we call a man has a penis, and the gender that we call a woman has a vagina - is so well established and so present amongst us, that whether I know anything about you or not, if I look at a person, I assign a gender. I don’t go to look at the penis or the vagina, but all of us appear and present ourselves in public in ways that you can read me, as a man or a woman. This is something that we constantly do even without recognizing that we are doing it.”

She stressed that gender is not necessarily something that is given at birth. It is also something that we decide. And the moment we ask people their gender regardless of what they look like or wear then we succeed in removing gender codes. And this is a very critical shift, because what we are saying is that every person decides what is their gender and not only those who are different. *“I as a cis woman too needs to think about whether I really am a woman.”*

In **not** assuming gender, the whole construct of gender actually gets dismantled because bodies, dresses, expressions get liberated from a fixed understanding of gender. It allows for multiple genders by going beyond the two and opening up our minds to many more. All of us, she pointed out, look twice at people who we think do not fit. In some places it could just be a woman with short hair, in some it could be more complicated but in doing so we are trying to make the lives of those who are already struggling to be a part of this society, more difficult.

So whether it is the lesbian or the gay rights movement or people who lived those lives

Conversations

Is it possible that like sexual preferences change, gender can also change?

Maharashtra

We need a better understanding of patriarchy; it is very confusing!

Maharashtra

I was shocked to understand how the system of patriarchy affects women. We must not judge other’s gender and make decision based on their genital part, everyone has a right to choose their preferred comfortable gender.

Meena, Tamilnadu

- the question they asked was of compulsory heterosexuality. They did not only talk about their lives; they asked this question of why heterosexuality is compulsory. The sex worker rights movement, spoke of their issues and their concerns, but also raised questions on the institution of marriage itself where legalized sex can happen. The movements always ask questions of the larger structures.

“What we have known over the years from living these lives, is that society’s usual



response to all these sets of people who have been told that “you are bad, you are ill, you are abnormal, you are a problem” is itself the biggest violence that should not happen. Actually, we are asking questions of your structure.”

Chayanika also pointed out to the danger of presuming that this society and structure is outside us. It is within each one of us which is why we need to ask ourselves these questions all the time. We need to realise that we carry many learning’s from the society within us and we keep doing it to each other. And how we unlearn ourselves is the meaning of personal is political today. How do I recognize and be vigilant about how I have been troubled by structures of

society, and how it operates through me to trouble somebody else? And while this is finally a question that has been raised back to feminism, it is true for all movements.

“We have seen lesbian and gay groups becoming very judgemental about how people dress when they come to their spaces; we have seen trans groups being very judgemental about ‘really who is trans’, of being judgemental when two transmen have relationships with each other. When I came last time for Rubaru, I was surprised that in sex worker groups people were surprised that there are lesbians. One of the lessons that we need to take from personal is political is that the question is to each one of us and we should keep it alive. Feminisms make mistakes but if they do not correct themselves then that is a problem. Making mistakes is alright, but to get complacent about who transpersons are, who lesbians are, this is how sex work should be -is not something that is good for any movement.”

Chayanika ended by stating that the women’s movement should learn from the



fact that the fact of being woman itself has been problematised and redefined in multiple ways. And by doing so it has infact made feminism more liberative.

“When you distil gender and separate it from the body even while maintaining that the body is important for my gender identity, it actually makes feminisms much more exciting opening up the possibility for a lot more to happen within feminisms.”

The Last Word

It was abundantly clear from the very intense discussions both within and between the groups the issue of sexuality and gender had struck a very deep chord. Perhaps because ironically, despite the fact that their livelihood and work revolves around sex and despite the fact that they have demystified sex in a very basic sense, mainstream morality and perception continues to impact on the way they view both their own sexuality and gender and that of others.

The reason I asked Chayanika to come is for us to become aware of the fact that sex work too is dominantly such a hetero sexual space. Transaction is only between women and men. Whereas the reality is that lesbianism is prevalent among sex workers. The Queer movement helps unpack sexuality for us. And unless we unpack sexuality fundamental changes cannot happen in society.

Meena Seshu, SANGRAM

It is not easy to change the system that protects gender differences. Standing against it should be part of our lives and political advocacy is important

Kokila, Madurai



Skill Building: How to write Reports

Laxmi Murthy

This session was planned in the context of enabling the sex workers to improve their capacity to document their own work better. Something that as Meena Seshu mentioned in her introduction to the session they could do without necessarily knowing either reading or writing as many of them may not.

A journalist by profession Laxmi Murthy gave a simple yet comprehensive idea of effective reporting and gave them a very effective exercise on how to write a good press report.

Instead of writing a report I thought this session could be all about "How to tell your story" effectively and accurately.

This session given us the idea of effective writing. this session will surely influence us in our future reports of each CBO.

Sharada, Kerala

With the learnings of this session, we got a clear idea of reporting. We need only the facts during our reporting. We learned to shorten the incident to the least number of words to communicate clearly.

Mary, Maharashtra

Basics of writing a good press release

1. Focus on the five W's and one H i.e. What, When, Where, Who Why and How
2. Structure of the report should be like an inverted pyramid.
 - The base as the lead with the important points right on top
 - The body of the report which could contain more details, quotes and statistics.
 - Finally, the tail that is dispensable

Based on these fundamentals the groups were given the task of drafting out different parts of a press release on the May day rally of the morning.

The release reflected most appropriately the lessons learnt during the session! And the success lay in the fact that even those who did not know how to read and write expressed more confidence in being able to communicate better even verbally either between each other or the press.

Adapting new communication technologies like voice whatsapp it was clear has also increased their levels of confidence.

Whenever we go for any meeting, they ask us for press release. It is very important for us to know how to write.

Ayesha, VAMP, Maharashtra

I don't have writing skills but I can use whats app voice calls for documentation purpose and I will use five 'W' and H' method

Jaya, Madurai



Labouring for Our Rights: The Workers Movement

MJ Pandey and Meena Seshu

Meena Seshu, an activist working on sex worker rights for over 25 years opened the session with a little bit of the history of the Sex Worker's Rights Movement globally. The discussion helped place sex work in the context of work and the labor

The Sex workers rights movement

It can be said that the sex workers rights movement first started in 1915 in Canada. They did not call themselves "sex workers" but fallen women or prostitutes. The purpose of coming together was for safety.

They also called themselves the "Friendless Girls". Subsequently in the US the women got together and started COYOTE (Cast off your Tired Old Ethics) the name itself of which marked the shift in the thinking. A change reflected in yet another initiative called PUSSI (Prostitutes United for Social and Sexual Independence) in Australia. This marked the moving away from the "fallen" image to reclaiming a space of strength.

Senegal legalised sex work in the 70's. Brazil legalised some forms of it. Despite all these changes the stigma never really went away. At a conference in Brussels in 1979 Carol Leigh termed "sex work" as an industry which was when this term even began to seep into our consciousness.

In India the first International Sex Workers' Conference was held in Calcutta. Here they moved away from construct of worker's rights to that of decriminalisation since it

Conversations

I wonder why did some of them choose to call themselves prostitutes and not sex workers?

Ayesha, VAMP, Maharashtra

The history of the sex worker movements across the world was very interesting especially how the word prostitute changed as sex workers. The fight behind this is giving us the right to live with dignity.

Omana, Kerala

The movements for the decriminalisation of sex work is the slogan for sex workers now. We want to work and live as a normal worker. The history of sex worker movement in India and all around the globe is helping us understand things better and is giving us more courage!

Lalitha, Kerala

Our "sex work as work" efforts started very late! We need to do so many things! Are we using the red color as a symbol of unity and solidarity with labour and communists or as a symbol of "red light area"? If government can amend Section 377 why can't they do somethings about decriminalising sex work?

Maharashtra Team



was felt that this framework was not helping them. “Stop criminalisation” was the stand.

This was a demand raised by those HIV groups who felt that the government was using them for prevention work but not giving them safety and security from the police. That is also because sex workers accept different terminologies for themselves. In Brazil they continue to call themselves “prostitutes.”

Sex worker unions are still not recognised by the state. We can’t register an independent trade union as sex workers in any part of the world.



May Day and the Labour Movement

MJ Pandey

M.J. Pandey, a well-known and long-time trade unionist and journalist gave a history of the trade union movement and its current status in the context of globalisation of capital and the insidious impact of Hindutva nationalism.

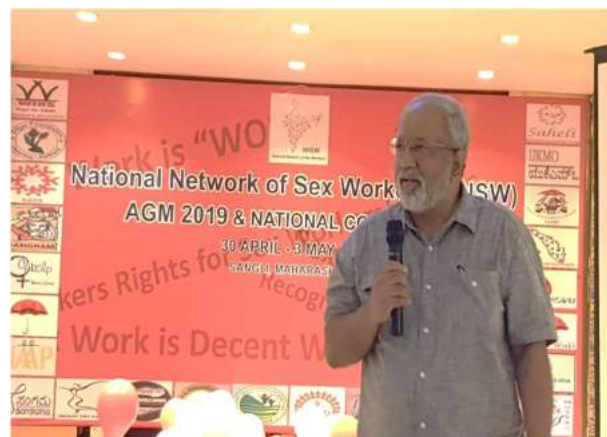
Arguing that sex work too like domestic work is integral to reproductive labour he sought to question and answer why sex work is deliberately being kept out of the service industry and recognised as work and instead continues to be devalued and dismissed in economic terms.

M.J. Pandey began with talking about the history of May Day which was celebrated in Sangli the previous day by the sex workers who would perhaps want to know how it all began.

The origins of what we celebrate as May Day can be traced back to Chicago in USA. USA was going through industrialization, and dealing with the problem of overwork. This was around 1866, and the workers in these factories would work for around 14-16 hours a day. Some of the workers were demanding 8 hours of work, 8 hours of leisure and 8 hours of sleep. This demand of an 8 hour work day became popular in the USA which at that time was economically booming, employment was easily available and more and more people were joining the workforce. However, people were also overworked. So, when this demand came up, it was received very well all over the country.

On May 1 1889 13,000 factories in the USA shut down and went on a general strike.

The response was overwhelming because the situation on ground was bad for the workers, and they wanted to do something about it. Chicago where the strike started was one of the most industrialized cities



around that time.

“We must always remember that unless water reaches a certain temperature it doesn't turn into steam.”

The strike, he said was successful but the owners/ capitalists then responded to the potential threat of workers becoming too radicalized. To break their unity and spirit, a few days later they planted a bomb at a



worker rally as a result of which a few workers died. Four of the leaders of the workers union were hanged brutally in public as the capitalists sat and watched like they were at the movies. One of the workers committed suicide.

In 1889, several socialists and communists met in Paris, and decided that they would remember the martyrs of May Day by commemorating the day internationally as Worker's Day. The first International Workers Day was celebrated in 1890.

However, there are two ways in which this day is observed. Some celebrate this as a festival of workers while others observe it more solemnly as Martyrs Day.

Responding to a question about how the demand for an 8-hour working day came up and was negotiated for, Pandey said that the demand came up from the people themselves. It also got the support from a large section of the society including the

middle class since a section of capitalists also understood that workers would perform better if they worked for lesser number of hours. If you make someone work for 16 hours a day, their productivity can't be assured or sustained. And neither can you force someone to work for 16 hours a day continuously.

Laws and rights, he stressed don't happen in a vacuum – they only reflect the relationships in society. The forces from above try to control and the forces from below assert their rights to resist. It is this tussle between the two forces that is always reflects and results in laws.

"If you look at the history of labour laws in the west and even in India you see a pattern. Initially you have laws which are made to prevent people from coming together. And when then they do things which are unpredictable then the state moves from preventing to regulating. And since coming together should also be in

interests of the owners, they then seek to make those laws which will regulate how you come together. As for instance in India, shortly after this, was the famous incident when Bhagat Singh threw a bomb at the parliament in 1928. He was protesting the Law against the prevention of strikes. And today you have an act which says how you can have a strike- which is the Industrial Disputes Act. “

The Diverse Approaches to Union building in Independent India

Going on to speak of what happened in India vis a vis labour rights he said that May Day was first celebrated here in 1923. And the honour goes to Singaravelu Chettiar who used the red frock of his daughter to raise a red flag! Indian politicians also have understood the importance of the working class. Even Mahatma Gandhi started a union called Mazdoor Mahajan Sangh in 1918 which organized the textile workers of Ahmedabad. Babasaheb Ambedkar started the Labour party. They understood the importance and the strength of the working class which was slowly being formed in India. The first federation of unions in India



Conversations

Gandhi and Ambedkar contributed so much for labour rights even though each took their own path. While Ambedkar concentrated on discrimination against caste and class among labourers Gandhiji attempted to include owners and labourers in the association

Tamil Nadu

The class and caste struggle of Ambedkar and Gandhiji's philosophy, their greatness and differences are explained clearly by MJ Pandey. In CPM meetings we get to listen to only cursory views.

Rani, Andhra Pradesh

was The All India Trade Unions Congress whose president was Lala Lajpat Rai.

While mainstream politicians got involved with workers and their activities, he pointed out two different streams of approaching the issue. The first was Gandhi's approach which saw workers and owners working together in harmony; operating like a family with the owners trusting the workers and not oppressing them. In fact, the first president of Gandhi's union was Sarabhai, the head of the largest textile industries in Ahmedabad. And he did not just make him president, he made him life time president indicating how

power relationships can get reinforced at the initial level itself.

The other stream was that of Babasaheb who also struggled with ideas of caste as well as class. However, disillusioned about how the Communists failed to address the issue of caste among the mill workers and in the Konkan region, Babasaheb moved away from the Independent Labour Party to form the Schedule Caste Federation.

Babasaheb- As Counsellor to the Viceroy, Babasaheb brought in many progressive measures including the concept of maternity benefits and provident fund. Very few people talk about Babasaheb's contributions since the controversy was that he worked closely with the British Council of Ministers giving rise to the question whether he used imperialism or did he get used? Despite all this it is clear that due to his efforts the workers got a lot of benefits.

Worker's Rights: A Constitutional Perspective

Conversations

It was so interesting to know about the different laws regarding the welfare of workers and how global incidents influenced the constitution makers while drafting the laws regarding labour rights.

Lekha, Kerala

There is equality of men and women in front of law. But some business owners are giving less money to women for same work despite the fact that the productivity of men and women are same. This inequality of wages has to change.

Omana, Kerala



Pandey then went on to talk about workers' rights in India by placing it within the framework of Article 14 and Article 19 of the Indian Constitution and The Trade Union Act of 1926.

Article 14 ensures equality before law. Article 19 is the most basic right- the right to freedom. Among the six basic freedoms is the freedom to form unions and associations. Unfortunately, Article 19 has eight exceptions as for instance that it may not be applicable in certain cases including national integrity, relations with foreign powers, defamation and morality and indecency. The question we need to ask if

these are reasonable restrictions and who decides or defines morality and decency.

Broadly in India we have three kinds of laws:

- 1) Laws which govern working conditions and regulate the work conditions of the workers like the Industrial Disputes Act and Mining Act
- 2) Laws which are Beneficial laws- bonus, provident fund, gratuity etc
- 3) Laws which are for a special category of people- child labour, contract-based workers, bonded labour, migrants.

Responding to a question about how and why one Article of the Constitution can take away the rights given by another one, he reminded the participants of the previous day's discussion on how patriarchy operates. Similarly, he said we need to understand how the state operates and in whose favour it does so. The state pretends to be there for everyone but in reality, it is there only for the economic and socially powerful.

He gave the example of the three laws for "good" women starting with the Equal Remuneration Act under which you get paid equally for the same work; the Maternity Benefit Act and the Prevention of Sexual Harassment at the Workplace Act 2013. If women do work within a particular area and particular paradigm, the state seeks to protect your rights. But on the other hand, there are specific laws against "bad" women one of which is the Immoral Trafficking and Prevention Act.

The many laws which are there for the benefit of workers may give the impression that India is a great place to be a worker.

Conversations

That session gave us very useful information including some history. All this was very new for us! We are proud that the first May Day rally was started in Chennai by Singaravel and held up a flag which was the red dress of his daughter!

**Geetha, Pushpavalli – Madurai.
Meena, Bothumani, Sakilabanu – Theni**

This session helped us to think of how a sex worker can live with dignity. What the rights of workers are and how it connects with us as sex workers were discussed during the session.

Rukkiya, Kerala

But he reminded the participants that the situation on the ground is that 99% of laws are not implemented. There are long delays in labour commissioner offices and courts. And if for instance one had to file a case for changing one's position from a contractual

going to further erode the rights of workers. The current *Make in India* initiative is trying to legitimise a hire and fire policy. This would give you the freedom to take workers whenever you want them and throw them out when you don't. He



to a permanent employee, it could take up to 15-20 years to fight it out in court. And that would be just the time it would take to move from the lowest to the highest court. And even the matter gets admitted into High Court, as in Bombay. the waiting list is 18 years. Finally, even if you do get a favourable order the implementation could take another 15 years.

If the state appointed more judges, half the job would be done. But the state doesn't appoint more judges since it is in the interests of the powerful and the state that the delays continue.

Labour Laws: The Current Context

Speaking about the deteriorating situation of labour he said that the current policy is

clarified that this was part of a trend started by the previous government since that has been the dominant thrust of the Indian Economy over the past decades.

He identified three **reasons** for the ongoing **disintegration of the labour movement**.

- a) First there is a particular kind of trade union leadership which is completely pro management. It does not want to challenge anything that the management does.
- b) The second is that a lot of the old working class got destroyed when deindustrialization took place in Bombay, Kanpur, Kolkata etc.



c) The third is the growth in the service sector including the IT sector which is totally unorganized.

The only way to go ahead and not be paralysed in such a confusing context he suggested was to go beyond our smaller realities and try to understand the larger context within which these realities are located.

He explained **two critical aspects of this larger reality:**

First is understanding how foreign capital operates in India. “

Make in India” is nothing but a front for foreign capital to come in, and operate freely. As a result, over the past five years the very rich have gotten richer and the poor have gotten much poorer. The ones who have benefitted are those who are linked to the foreign capital directly. Like in Bombay, all infrastructure projects are funded by Japan whose investments run into thousands of crores. The simple reason being that in Japan you don’t get interest on that money if you put it in the bank. Therefore, when they invest in India, they

get interest and also profit from the decrease in currency value. The Indian Rupee keeps decreasing as opposed to yen which is to the benefit of the investors. We need to basically understand therefore how India is being re-colonized with foreign capital.

Second is to understand the increasing impact of Hindutva Nationalism. Today we have reached a point where if you take the name of the flag or the nation and wrap the issue up with Hindutva, you are prevented from asking any questions about it.

As for instance you cannot question anything about the Rafale deal or the Pulwama incident because it is packaged in the language of nationalism and if you do, you are labelled a traitor. We are clearly moving towards a society devoid of reason. The killings of Dabholkar, Pansare, Kalburgi,

This is all connected. Now it all makes sense, from yesterday’s gender and sexuality session. Now its all adding up.
Ayesha, VAMP, Maharashtra

Gauri were all people who were making people think and ask questions. They were not great revolutionaries. And yet they were eliminated.

Sex Work as Devalued Reproductive Labour

He ended with some thoughts on the nature of work and what constitutes it.

Conventionally work is seen as something traditionally done in farms, factories or in the service sector (in a hospital, transport etc). This is part of production or productive work which is valued and accepted. There is another kind of work that society doesn't take account of. And this is social reproduction which is the process by which different classes reproduce and sustain members of that class and is a form of work that is both invisible and not valued. As for instance domestic work which is unpaid or child rearing or cooking.

Sex work is also another aspect of social

Men will never be able to go to work if we don't take care of the house.

Women's work is never valued, no matter what we do.

Lalitha, JSS, Jharkhand

reproduction where you don't get paid your due. There has been a demand for long that women who do household work, should be paid. Having sex within a family is also work.

Explaining further he said that the money women earned from sex work was coming from the client that in turn coming from his wages which are accounted for in the cost of living index. Sex work too then needs to

Conversations

It seems like all 'kranti' (revolutions) happens in west!

If we are saying sex work is work and asking for it as such we need to decide and get clarity about what constitutes workplace as it is very different from any other workplace/industry etc. How can we for instance decide about something like 'minimum wages? We don't have enough knowledge about labour laws and how they negotiate.

Maharashtra

Almost 27 years ago Noorie, a woman from Ichalkaranji said exactly this. She said 'only because I service this man every night can he go back to work in the factory and be productive.'

Recognition of sexual labour is critical both within marriage and within sex work.

Meena Seshu, SANGRAM

be added to the basket of commodities that you need to buy like bread, fruits, vegetables. But when you do so then wages too will need to go up causing profits to go down. So, the problem is not just patriarchy. It also has to be framed as an economic argument because if society recognizes this as work then the owners will have to pay for it and it will have to come from the profits.

The question he asked was that we can pay a barber for the service he does of cutting



our hair why can sex work too not be included in the service industry?

The argument seems to rest on the fact that the former has an economic function while the latter does not. Linking this to domestic sex for which you are not paid and by doing so are keeping the wages down, here too by resisting the demand that sex work be declared as work you are keeping the wages down and the profits up.

The Final Word

If the May Day rally enthused the spirits of the sex workers, the presentation and discussion on worker rights sparked of intense discussions on why women's work including sex work is devalued. They obviously saw value in being part of a broader workers movement that brought them into the mainstream definition and economy of work but did debate about how labour laws could possibly help them too given that what they do has no direct economic value and they lack the experience and knowledge about these laws.



Looking at the Larger Picture: Understanding and Using Media

Geeta Seshu



Geeta Seshu, a senior journalist took the participants step by step through a power point presentation including video clips in which she explained the structure and the limitations of the mainstream media also gave them an effective exercise through which they able to understand how they should deal with the media at different levels and use it to their advantage.



She started by asking the participants why they would not be able to see on mainstream media all that they have learnt over the last two days. Showing them actual media representations on the way the issues of sex workers was covered she also asked them to reflect on why there was so little about sex workers in the media and even if there was, then why the coverage would only show them in a very sexy or sensationalised way.

Appreciating and congratulating all in the sex worker rights movement for having succeeded in pushing the media to use “sex workers” instead of the word prostitute she said that this could only happen because of their collective struggle over the past 27 years and more. Despite this however there continues to be hostility, a total lack of understanding, and a total denial of the reality of the lives of people who are in sex work. She shared the example of Maneka Gandhis recent speech in Parliament on the trafficking bill showed

widely on media in which she used totally derogatory words to refer to transgender persons.

But this kind of portrayal she stressed was not only in relation to the problems that sex workers face but is the general way in which the media deals with issues related to women, labour, workers and even health.

Giving an example she said that India is the third country with maximum number of HIV infected patients. There are more than 122 million households without toilets in their





homes. At least 6500 children have died of encephalitis, which is a brain disease.

Despite the seriousness of the health crisis what is focussed in the media are stories on how to change our lifestyle, eat and exercise better without any concern about the real cause of the crisis. The answer to why the media does not focus on more serious structural issues is located in the structure of the media itself.

Giving some startling statistics about the size of Indian media she said that we have the largest number of newspapers across the world, the highest number of television channels (800), the largest film industries producing more number of films than Hollywood, more than 250 million people on Facebook and the highest number of youtube video watchers. Apart from all this we also have other kinds of media produced by ordinary people including music, theatre, oral storytelling and posters. But despite all this she reiterated that we do not see news in the way in which we should.



Explaining the reasons why, she started with showing part of a photograph on the screen and asked everybody what they thought was happening.

There was a collective gasp on seeing the picture which was that of a young boy getting scared of a man with a bat which seemed menacing. Most guessed that the boy was scared since he was getting hit by a policeman. But they all left a collective sigh of relief when she subsequently showed the full picture which in reality was that of the boy witnessing two older people playing table tennis.

This, Geeta explained was how the media worked. It showed only part of the real picture without revealing the larger frame which would help us understand reality in a more comprehensive way.

Explaining why most news focusses on politics, sports, crime or cinema she said it was since it made the most money for media.



“The reason why we only see sports, crime and cinema, is because they make the most money for the media. So, there are three basic reasons why serious issues like those you face don’t get covered by the media. First is that there is a huge amount of prejudice against sex workers apart from a lack of understanding even by ministers like Maneka Gandhi. Secondly these issues do not make money for the media. And then finally you have governments which say that journalists should not write anything that is of importance to people. So that is the reality we are faced with today.”

Geeta then showed a photograph that she asked if the participants recognised. It was that of the NNSW’s press conference in Delhi on March 6th. She tried she said to look for the news items that came after this press conference but found only two website and two newspaper reports.

She went on to give some tips on how to deal with a media that is hostile to the sex workers and does not want to even see their faces. Playing Kanhaiya Kumar’s famous speech on video after he came out from jail and he chanted the Azaadi slogans which was widely covered by the media, she spoke about the press conference held the next day in which he was able to

The Photograph and the Incident

Hindustan Times had come to Sangli district saying they want to show positive lives and so talk to people living with HIV. They assured them that nobody’s faces would be shown nor their confidentiality broken.

They then came, got access and did a huge one -page story where although they did not show the faces of the adults, the faces of all the children were shown. Those from the villages in Sangli working in Pune and Bombay saw the story. One of the children’s faces was recognised by the uncle and then there was hell to pay.

He was furious, and the entire *gram panchayat* passed a resolution saying that our *sanstha* has outed the village, and their status. What they did was not wrong. It was the media that was to blame. Despite us insisting that they cannot show the village they went ahead and made it public in an indirect way.

Prashant Bhosale

capture the moment and turn it around to his advantage.

“It is a long press conference, the only reason why I wanted to show it all to you was that he gave a speech, he started with a lot of humour, and there were journalists who asked a lot of hostile questions, but he managed to turn this to his advantage and reply to them. Though I gave Kanhaiya as an example, I want you all to understand that what he uses are very simple tricks - he uses humour, he uses natural language something that you already have as I have been observing since yesterday. There is little doubt that what you will say and how you will say it will reveal that it is the absolute genuine truth. Yes, he is a natural performer but don't feel ever that you don't have the ability or that skill to be able to talk to anyone who is hostile towards you.”

She went on to warn the women that they have to be careful about the journalists trying to trap them into saying something on record, which they don't want to say. That would result in them giving away information about their personal lives

which they should not share. She gave an example showing a photograph that the Sangli group was familiar with and asked Prashant to narrate the story behind the picture.

Geeta added a postscript to this story saying that despite letters being written to the newspaper there was no response. And the photographer since then went on to receive many awards for his work. She cautioned the women saying that they have to be careful and in total control of what they say to the media.

In the discussion that followed others also gave examples from their own personal experiences:

1. Disclosing identity of a raped child: Lalitha from JSS, Jharkhand shared her experience where when a child was raped, the media people assured them that they would not give any details about the child including name. But when the story came out it gave details of the parents and where they lived.



2. Manipulating Realities: “Prostitutes of Gods”: Renuka from VAMP narrated another incident of a foreign reporter who came to Sangli after visiting other places in South India to make a film on devadasis and sex workers. She went into the brothels, gained the confidence of the women there, took information about their living

Media persons always talk against us. When there is violence against us, and police beats us up, we call them so many times, but they never came. When there are raids, they always come suddenly, and always write bad things about us.

Nagpur team

conditions including the clothes they wear etc. She met a senior sex worker and took footage from her house as well in which she is speaking explaining how this is the space

in which she does sex work. The women totally trusted and spoke very openly to her. Unfortunately, the reporter totally betrayed this trust, manipulated everything they said and projected the sex worker as a brothel keeper portraying the entire community in a negative light. The final film was even put on YouTube and there was no mention of confidentiality or trust.

But VAMP did not take this quietly. They not only wrote to her condemning how she had betrayed their trust and manipulated their realities but went ahead and made another film which showed the truth and they put out on YouTube.

3. Misrepresenting Realities: Jaya from Vadamalar, Tamil Nadu shared another incident of a press meet they had conducted in Chennai in which some people from Kerala also participated. One



of the women spoke of how she came into sex work at the age of 13 because of her father. But in the media this story was attributed to Jaya. After reading this in the papers her family boycotted her and stopped inviting her to family functions. She has still not been able to make up with her relatives.

Responding to these stories Geeta stated how we should learn how to be smart while dealing with the media:



On consent: The law on media coverage of sexual violence is very clear. Journalists should not share any information about the identity of anybody who is a victim of sexual violence and these laws are stricter with minors. But irresponsible journalists use pictures that could give away the location of the place because of the clothes the people are wearing etc. And in smaller communities this is easily identifiable. “The

important question is that of taking consent. Whenever journalists come to speak to us, we have to be able to give consent to what they want to write about” she stressed.

On creating our own media: We need to be smart and clever about how to deal with the media. She said the VAMP response to the documentary film maker was a good example of how negative reporting can be countered. “We have a good example of

how when there is one YouTube video which is against what we want to show, we can counter it by making one of our own. So, there is a counter media and an alternative way of controlling what we want to put out in the media which is important to learn and that is not very difficult. Every single group/person here has an advantage because we have WhatsApp, many of us are on Facebook, we take and put out photographs. We have the opportunity for



the first time to create our own media and put out our own messages and we need to learn how to do that well and properly.”

An exercise on media strategy

Geeta then went on to do an exercise with the participants to orient them as to what the media is, how it is structured and how best they could use it. She gave each group five minutes to have a discussion on a good media strategy and come back with at least five basic points that they would follow while putting out their own stories.

The media strategies the participants presented clearly reflected the positive impact that the session had on the participants. Some of these strategic norms included:

Norms

1. Nothing should be published without our consent.
2. When a journalist comes to us, he/she must clearly state what they want from us.
3. They must confirm with us or a third party before they finally publish what they have spoken to us.

4. We should prepare our own press release
5. We must only invite those people from the press who are our friends
6. We must make clear to the press that there can be no photographs
7. We need to prepare ourselves well and answer to the point. We must remain cool and calm under all circumstances
8. What we say should be the truth
9. When we are unsure about the question or answer say “no comments”
10. In a press conference give contacts of only those sex workers who have come out into the open.
11. Insist that they use our quotes
12. Don’t share any personal information
13. We should know that we have the right to complain in case of any damaging representation

Major Lessons learnt

- Be prepared
- Get consent
- Create your own media

The Last Word:

Media is a very powerful tool and we should learn to use it well for our needs.

Geetha, Madurai

With the help of this session we understood that the agenda of the media is very different from reality. The illustration of a game being played and a boy watching is such a good example for that!

Shyamala, Kerala

I understood very well in this session how powerful words and language can be! I also learnt for the first time that media includes all forms of expression – be it reading, writing, poetry, facebook and different forms of social media!

P. Devi, Guntur

We must remember all that we have learnt in the movement. It is because we have had negative experiences that we have now learnt to be so careful. This is the reason why on the first day of this meeting we asked those who do not want to be photographed to please stand up so that we could photograph them and remember not to put them into anything we would be bringing out as part of this meeting. We have also learnt that once it goes into the hands of the outsiders, confidentiality is impossible to ensure which is why we have to be so careful. When Lalitha from Jharkhand went to Delhi to help coordinate the Delhi office, since she asked, we ensured that despite her being the coordinator her photographs appeared nowhere. So, let us not go back with any negativity. Let's use all these stories such that our strategies then reflect the learning from these stories.

Meena Seshu, SANGRAM



Skill Building: Learning to Play!

Anuradha Rao

The theatre workshop conducted by Anuradha Rao who heads Big Fat Theatre Company and Subbu was a study in creative chaos! Everybody was pushed to let their hair down, connect across languages and cultures and make creative sense of all that had been heard and spoken over the last three days. The expressions were largely non verbal – through photo friezes and little skits.



The first part was total confusion and chaos:

People coming together on the basis of arbitrary categories that the facilitators have fun randomly throwing at the group

- Favourite flower (rose and not lotus was thankfully voted as the favourite with cauliflower ending up at the bottom with one standing by her lonesome self!)
- Favourite colour



Animal sounds rent the room that becomes a fish market selling colours, festivals, birth month, flowers and film heroes!

The second part was connecting through the chaos:

Each language group coming together to teach the other one selected word from their language with which they would like to connect.

- ✚ Bhavaikyathe (unity in diversity in Kannada)
- ✚ Manasalayo (“Understood?” in Malayalam)
- ✚ Namaskar (greetings in Marathi)
- ✚ Namasthe (greetings in Hindi)
- ✚ Vanakkam (greetings in Tamil)

The final part was making creative sense of what they had learnt through the last days through enacting it:

The two facilitators teach the group the basics of creative expression and collective





- ✚ How they have learnt to deal with the media
- ✚ How to write a press release through a choreographed visual of the four W's and one H
- ✚ Justice
- ✚ Compassion



Using our words against Us!

A discussion on the proposed sex work glossary

During the process of these learning sessions there was an interesting discussion on a sex work glossary, an idea that had been put initially put forward by Suryasarthi Bhattacharya from the Firstpost to Meena Seshu. When he then proposed this idea to Meena Seshu she felt it was an idea worth exploring but felt that it needed the consent and insights of the sex worker community. When she raised this issue with the groups in Maharashtra she was surprised by their strong reactions and therefore decided to ask Suryasarthi to come and talk to the women directly at the AGBM to see if they would consent to their language being documented and disseminated by the mainstream media. Speaking about it Suryasarthi said that the origins of the idea emerged when they were doing a story on sex workers in Haryana and they felt the need to look at the kind of words being used in the media for sex workers. His curiosity led him then to explore the idea of trying to understand and document the coded language of the sex workers themselves when they speak of the outside world. He believed initially that documenting these words could perhaps help to empower the community.

He started by speaking to women in Kamatipura which did not lead anywhere since it was not easy to win their confidence and the fact that they are not organised made it more difficult. He was hopeful of getting a more positive response from the

We are people who are deeply suspicious of outsiders. The question that comes to us immediately is why should we give you access to our inside worlds? How will it benefit us? Given all this why did I accept for this to be done? I always wanted to do this because of the hugely successful “Bad Girl’s Dictionary” brought out by Empower for their own community. I was wondering if he could do this for us and not so much to communicate about us to the world. I told him that he would first need to take our permission before he gets access to our world.”

Meena Saraswathi Seshu, SANGRAM

sex worker community here. A spirited discussion ensued excerpts of which are below:

Suryasarthi: *“I want to assure you that what I collect will not be printed and it will only be online. We are not trying to create a platform to empower you. We are only trying to make a spoken word, written. It is not to bring this into the mainstream. For those of us in the media it is just to bridge a gap between two worlds to show that*

your world is just like ours. It is important for us from the writers/media world to do this since there is so much of change that is happening which is important for us to understand.”

Kiran Deshmukh, Maharashtra: *If you are going to study these words and make a dictionary how is it going to help us? When we ask for help from you to stand with us when we are victims of discrimination and violence how much will you stand with us?*

Nisha Gulur, Karnataka: *As a transgender sex worker we use so many code words and language. If you publish it online it will affect our business. Even women sex workers don't know this language. It will not help us. It will affect us. If our language is put on the net then police can get hold of it and that will surely rebound on us.*

Devi, Andhra Pradesh: *Maybe you should rethink your idea. The words you are going to study are not going to help us. Stand with us instead in our fight against violence and discrimination.*

Sudheer, Maharashtra: *We created this code language because the mainstream has used its own language against us. Now you will take our language and we will not have anything left with us since you will take it away from us. This would be alright if all you became sex workers!*

Mukta, Karnataka: *We do sex work for the sake of our families so that our children don't get into this. In many cases our own children don't know that we are doing this work since we use a code. If all this comes out since they use the net so much it will impact us personally.*

Geetha, Tamil Nadu: *This way even our clients will get to know our codes. This will make us more vulnerable to our clients.*

Ayesha, Maharashtra: *You say you want to fill the gap in perception between mainstream and sex workers. As it is mainstream whether it is the media or writers see us as “dirty” and show us in a bad light. Now you will be giving them more words (our words) to use against us.*

It was clear from the responses he got that despite his assurances that he would do it in a way that would safeguard them, including putting it online and not on the mainstream media, Suryarsarathi would need to go back to the drawing board and rethink his idea if it had to be relevant to the lives of the sex workers.

This was a conversation therefore in which the women had the last word.



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