
PROSTITUTES: THE STIGMATIZED DAUGHTERS

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Abstract: The constitution of India provides each person with equal rights and liberty. Every individual living in the country is free to practice a trade of his or her choice unless it is harming the nation. However when the topic of sex work or prostitution comes into discussion the rights or freedom have not been given. There are preconceived notions in the minds of the people that sex workers are 'dirt' in the society, they pollute the cultural essence of the society. Nobody gives a heed that they are also human and they deserve all the rights as much as any other citizen of the country. This paper mainly focuses on the ill-treatment faced by the prostitutes in India. Before making any conclusion it is essential to understand a few concepts related to prostitution and have an idea of how badly the women in this field are treated through the cases mentioned in the paper.

Keywords: abuse, ill-treatment, prostitutes, sex workers, stigmatization.

Introduction: "Prostitution' means the sexual exploitation or abuse of persons for commercial purposes or for consideration in money or in any other kind, and the expression 'prostitute' shall be construed accordingly" [1]

Prostitution is considered to be among the oldest profession since the onset of a structured society. Prostitution is practiced in more or less all countries and in almost all forms of the society. However, dislike for this profession is not only pertained by the males of the society, it is also evident from the disregard that women of one society hold for 'women' living in the same society, often called by names such as 'whores', 'sex workers' and 'prostitutes'.

While the matter of human right violation is still of burning nature in India, this section of the society is one of its worst sufferers. Discrimination faced by the prostitutes in India is an issue of seriousness as much as discrimination towards any other marginalized groups along the lines of caste, creed, religion or sex. Sex work is not considered to be work but looked down upon as a dirty and immoral lifestyle tainting the life of the 'innocent' people. The result of such a belief is the neglect of the basic human rights to the sex worker and their families. Women involved in this 'profession' lack the basic right to proper health care, are abused by government officials and the police, are looked down upon by their neighbors, are treated with utter disrespect and their children are also harassed at schools and other public places.

Sex work should be considered as a rightful business. Adopting such a perspective provides a base to solve the problems associated with sex work. No one can deny that sex work often involved financial exploitation, poor health facilities, physical and sexual exploitation, however these conditions are not intrinsic only to the profession of sex work but is commonly found in almost all types of professions. Another point to note here is that these kinds of exploitations are greatly a result of the stigmatization and marginalization of prostitutes from the Indian society. Looking at prostitution from a business perspective en-

ables women engaged in the trade to demand their business rights, human rights and health regulation.

Stigmatization of sex workers: "The presence of deep-seated social stigmatization of sex workers affect their well being negatively." Researchers have shown that the social stigma faced by sex workers is extremely injurious to their well being, with each prostitute having her own subjective experience of stigma.[2] The stigma of prostitution results in extensive discrimination against sex workers, who have been rejected by their families, have been considered open to sexual exploitation, have been harassed by police and government officials, their daughters have been considered unmarriageable and their children have been taunted at school.

While there are women who have been trafficked into the profession, there are a majority of them who have the consent to do the job. It is their personal decision that being involved in sex work is a profitable option for them and their families. It is the traditionalist who cannot divorce the idea of sex from its holy and religious implications. The Indian laws and policies regarding prostitution are crafted from a moralistic point of view and people involved in the profession are defined and looked upon as 'immoral'. [3] One of the very common perspectives that people have about prostitution assumes that No women could possibly "choose" such a profession and thus making money from sex becomes synonymous with sexual exploitation. The general belief that people of this perspective have is that prostitutes should be set "free" from the trade.

Stigmatization is the main factor that hinders the women involved in sex work to access their rights. Due to stigmatization, prostitutes have been denied their basic rights like safety, health facilities, safety and most importantly the right to carry out a business to earn a living.

Safety: One of the most common problems faced by the prostitutes is high risk of violence. The prostitutes not only faced physical violence but also other types of violence. There have been ample cases where

the police, instead of protecting the prostitutes have rather exploited them. They have been extorted for money in police station and if the prostitute fails to provide money she has been asked for sexual favors in return.

Education: Lack of education is one of the major factors that contribute to the stigmatization of prostitutes. Studies have shown that prostitutes have lower levels of education compared to their surrounding population. The NGO SANGRAM conducted a baseline survey of the Sangali, Maharashtra, which showed that less than 2% of prostitutes have been to school of any kind and less than 50% of those 2% have completed high school. The stigmatization faced on the basis is not only limited to the prostitutes but it is carried on to their children as well. The children are often victims of ill treatment at their schools by teachers and other staff, also many a times they are called aside to ask the "rate" of their mothers. Education does not only include the normal schooling, educating the sex workers about aspects important to them is also important. Education on HIV/AIDS, its prevention, condoms, various safety measures and others is also important. Education is one of the major factors that can help in the upliftment of this section of the society.

Health: "Our health and our children suffer the most due to this stigma and marginalization." [4] The 'whore stigma' often prevents prostitute to access proper medical aid. Sex worker have reported of ill-treatment from the doctor and other staff. Even women who are fully aware of their health rights do not access them because police, officials and criminals force women to have sex with them without condom, they are threatened with blackmail, extortion, arrest and/or violence. Thus women are at higher risk of poor health and less chance of accessing good healthcare.

HIV/AIDS is another aspect of healthcare where women face discrimination. The prostitutes are considered to be 'vectors' and 'carriers' of the HIV and AIDS. Use This has been a very common view: considering the prostitutes are out casts who are infecting the normal population. As a result of this, this 'high risk group' has even more difficulty in accessing good health.

Method of Research: The aim of the research was to focus on the atrocities faced by the sex workers in India. Thus a case study method was used to understand the same. Two cases in which sex workers from different parts of the nation that faced discrimination were taken up. These cases clearly showed the main motive of the paper- the wrongful treatment of prostitutes.

Case 1: In January 2002, Veshya AIDS Muqabla Parishad (VAMP, a part of Sampada Grameen Mahila Sanstha or SANGRAM, a collective of women in pros-

titution working against AIDS) purchased a house in Nippani, a small town in Karnataka. The house was intended to be used as an office and meeting place as well as to provide hospice services for prostitutes with AIDS and for supplementing education for children of these women.

Taking on the practice by SANGRAM of conducting regular weekly meetings to coordinate the work of peer education (peer educators include women in prostitution who as insiders could help educated other prostitutes), VAMP held its first meeting in a peaceful manner in Nippani at the end of January. ., the local leader of Shiv Sena, a political party, Babasaheba Khambe told the VAMP general secretary, Shabana Kazi, a sex worker herself, to stop the meetings as the residents of Nippani objected to it. In March 2002, Kazi confessed that Kambhe told her that if the meeting continued "we will make you to get out and will not keep you alive." [5]

In the succeeding days, from 5 February to 11 February, local boys stoned the VAMP house in which Kazi was staying and threatened or beat the women and clients who tried to approach the house. Horrified by the treatment, on February 6 and 7, Kazi attempted to file police report against the violence around her house, but the police constable refused to file the report and told her to approach Khambe. [5]

On February 11, as scheduled, a regular meeting took place for the collective of women but the local Nippani VAMP members were prohibited from attending the meeting by Khambe, as informed by Kazi.

In response to the prohibition, Shabana Kazi and Meena Seshu, A member of SANGRAM who came to attend the meeting, went to meet Vijay Shetge, the corporate of Nippani. Shetge told them that they either would have to cancel the meeting or that they should be help in open sun behind the building i.e. not facing the side of the street. He further added that the VAMP member should only enter the building from the back side and cover their heads while entering so that they do not offend the respectability of the 'upper caste women'. [6]

By 17 February, the attacks intensified to such a level that more than seventy local youth came up to VAMP house and threatened the life of Kazi and her daughter, they nearly broke down the door until the landlord interfered. The members of VAMP, including Shabana Kazi were forced to leave their houses and shift to another district. According to Meena Seshu "the problem is they never thought that women in prostitution would collectivize - that's the one thing that really surprised everyone. People are threatened by women in prostitution coming together; women will tell their stories, and things come out." [7]

Tired of all the harassment faced, Seshu, Kazi and many other VAMP member attempted to register a complaint to the Nippani Circle Inspector of Police

Satish Khot on February 18. according to the deposition of the three VAMP members at the meeting with Inspector Khot and Neil pate , a reporter from The Times Of India , the inspector refused to accept the complain and called them “bloody veshyas (prostitutes) and not normal citizens” [5][6][8][9] When Neil pate asked Khot to define the term “normal citizen” , the inspector insulted him and said that he would “ strip all the sex workers in the public square and beat them black and blue” [8] The abuses of the inspector did not stop here, he threatened the VAMP members of bodily harm, and he said “*You prostitutes, today you have come with this women (referring to Seshu) and are creating this drama...Tomorrow I will personally come and pull out your pubic hair. I will enter your vagina and tear it apart, and do not forget that my penis has the strength of my police job and power*” [6]

According to the depositions of the members present in front of the inspector, Khot abruptly ended the meeting by locking the circle office, continuing to use abusive language and then driving away.

According to Meena seshu , all the attacks done by the youths on VAMP house were guided by Shiv Sena leader , Khambe, who gave them religious instructions and whom he fired up to “ clean up the town” by removing the sex workers from it.

SANGRAM, VAMP and their allies could gather support from many quarters for an official inquiry. The chief minister ordered for an inquiry into the case. The national Human rights Commission asked for an explanation of the official’s behavior and also ordered to provide protection to members of organization.

The inquiry took a long time, the inquiry against Mr. Khot continued at a snail’s pace, while 30 odd sex workers lingered without houses.

Case 2 Sanghamitra Iyengar , is the director of Samraksha , a prominent NGO working for women in prostitution in Banglore. According to Iyengar , the police abuse towards peer educators intensified from December 2001 to April 2002 [10]. There were about twenty separate incidents reported by Samraksha of police violence against twenty-seven peer educators and other women involved in prostitution. Majority of the incidents included beating of women in detention and extortion of money.

One of the most painful incidents was on March 25 and 26, when two peer educators were arrested and

beaten up. Chili powder was rubbed in their eyes and mouth and in the vagina of one among the two. Another incident reported was that of extortion of money by threatening women with drug abuses even when she wasn’t involved in one. On April 1, Samraksha summarized these abuses in a letter to the director of NACO (National AIDS Control Organization). She raised concern about the obstruction they have faced in their work from past four months. The peer educators were beaten up badly. They have also been harassed and humiliated in public. Their bags have been snatched and all the condoms were thrown down on the street. The educational material had been torn up and their identity cards had been destroyed. The record diaries of the meetings help had been confiscated .In addition the police had also blamed the peer educators of promoting sex work and spreading AIDS. The peer member were questioned on their work and threatened to be arrested if they continue with their work.[10] . Peer educators were dragged by their hair, insulted and verbally abused in the public and were beaten by both hands and batons. They were also physically abused in the police station where they were handcuffed and beaten on palms and feet and other times they were kicked in the face by policemen wearing boots or just beaten severely on the breasts and back.

In the meeting with H.T. Sangliana, commissioner of police, Samraksha also presented a case of peer educator who had been attacked by assailants who threw acid at her, disfiguring her face in a way that affected her speech. The local police had refused to register the issue. The commissioner said that he would look into the matter. [10] However the response Samraksha received was minimal.

Conclusion: The cases above made it clearly evident, the amount of torment faced by the prostitutes living in India. The very basic step to clear the misconceptions regarding sex work is to start considering it to be work. Sex worker advocates argue that the sex industry should be decriminalized and regulated by occupational law like any other profession. Improving working conditions, reforming laws and are important strategies to improve sex workers rights.

Acknowledgment: It gives me great pleasure to thank Dr. Neeta Khurana who helped me through my research. I would also extend my thanks to IMRF to give an opportunity to research on such a topic.

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