

Sex Workers' Manifesto

DURBAR MAHILA SAMANWAYA COMMITTEE, KOLKATA

A new spectre seems to be haunting society. Or maybe those phantom creatures that have been pushed into the shades for ages are taking on human form – and that is why there is so much fear. The sex workers' movement for the last few years has made us confront many fundamental questions about social structures, life sexuality, moral rights and wrongs. We think an intrinsic component of our movement is to go on searching for the answers to these questions, and to raise newer ones.

What Is the Sex Workers' Movement All About?

We came together as a community through our active involvement as health workers, Peer Educators, in a HIV/STD Control Project which has been running in Sonagachhi since 1992. This Project provided the initial space for building mutual support, facilitating reflection and initiating collective action among us (sex workers). Very early on in the Sonagachhi Project, we, with the empathetic support of those who had started the Project, clearly recognised that to realise even the very basic objectives of controlling transmission of HIV and STDs, it was crucial that we be viewed in our totality – as complete persons with a range of emotional and material needs, living within concrete and specific social, political and ideological contexts which determine the quality of our lives and our health. We do not wish to be seen merely in terms of our sexual behaviour.

For example, while promoting the use of condoms we soon realised that in order to change the sexual behaviour of sex workers, it was not enough to enlighten them about the risks of unprotected sex or to improve their communication and negotiation skills. How will a sex worker who does not value herself at all think of taking steps to protect her health and her life? Even when fully aware of the necessity of using condoms to prevent the transmission of disease, an individual sex worker may feel compelled to jeopardise her health for fear of losing her clients to other sex workers in the area, unless it could be ensured that all sex workers were able to persuade their clients to use condoms for every sexual act. Some sex workers may not even be in a position to try and negotiate safer sex with a client as they may be too closely controlled by exploitative madams or pimps. If a sex worker is starving, either because she does not have enough customers or because most of her income goes towards maintaining a room or meeting the demands of madams,

local power-brokers or the police, can she be really in a position to refuse a client who cannot be persuaded to use condoms? And what about the client? Is a man likely to be amenable to learn anything from a woman, particularly an uneducated 'fallen' woman? For him, doesn't coming to a prostitute necessarily involve an inherent element of risky and irresponsible behaviour? In which case, don't notions of responsibility and safety completely contradict his attitude towards his relationship with a prostitute? Doesn't a condom represent, for him, an unnecessary impediment in his way to 'total' pleasure?

In most cases this male client may himself be a poor, displaced man. Is he in a position to value his own life or protect his health? Again, why does a sex worker who is ready to use a condom with her client, generally never have protected sex with her lover or husband? What fine balance – between commercial transactions and love, caution and trust, safety and intimacy – engenders such behaviour? How do ideologies of love, family and motherhood influence our every sexual gesture?

Thus, thinking about such an apparently uncomplicated question – whether a sex worker can insist on having safe sex – made us realise that the issue is not at all simple. Sexuality and the lives and movement of sex workers are intrinsically enmeshed in the social structure we live within and the dominant ideology which shapes our values.

Like many other professions, sex work is also an occupation, and it is probably one of the 'oldest professions' in the world because it meets an important social demand. But the term 'prostitute' is rarely used to refer to an occupational group who earns its livelihood through providing sexual services. Rather, it is deployed as a descriptive term denoting a homogenised category (usually of women) that poses threats to public health, sexual morality, social stability and civic order. Within this discursive boundary we systematically find ourselves to be targets of moralising impulses of dominant social groups, through missions of cleansing and sanitising, both materially and symbolically. If and when we figure in political or developmental agendas, we are enmeshed in discursive practices and practical projects which aim to rescue, rehabilitate, improve, discipline, control or police us. Charity organisations are prone to rescue us and put us in 'safe' homes, developmental organisations are likely to 'rehabilitate' us through meagre income-generation activities, and the police seem bent upon regularly raiding our quarters in the name of controlling 'immoral' trafficking. Even when we are inscribed less negatively or even sympathetically within dominant discourses, we are not exempt from stigmatisation or social exclusion. As powerless, abused victims with no resources, we are seen as objects of pity. Otherwise we appear as the self-sacrificing and nurturing supporting cast of characters in popular literature and cinema, ceaselessly ready to give up our hard-earned income, our clients, our 'sinful' ways and finally our lives, to ensure the well-being of the hero or the society he represents. In either case, we are refused enfranchisement as legitimate citizens or workers, and are banished to the margins of society and history.

The kind of oppression that can be meted out to a sex worker can never be perpetrated against a regular worker. The justification given is that sex work is not real work – it is morally sinful. As prostitution is kept hidden behind the façade of sexual morality and social order, unlike other professions, there is no legitimacy or scope for any discussion about the demands and needs of the workers of the sex industry.

People who are interested in our welfare, and many are genuinely concerned, often cannot think beyond rehabilitating us or abolishing prostitution altogether. However, we know that in reality it is perhaps impossible to 'rehabilitate' a sex worker because society never allows to erase our identity as prostitutes. Is rehabilitation feasible, or even desirable?

In a country where unemployment is in such gigantic proportions, where does the compulsion to displace millions of women and men who are already engaged in an occupation which supports them and their extended families come from? If other workers in similarly exploitative occupations can work within the structures of their profession to improve their working conditions, why can't sex workers remain in the sex industry and demand a better deal in their life and work?

What is the History of Sexual Morality?

Like other human propensities and desires, sexuality and sexual needs are fundamental and necessary to the human condition. Ethical and political ideas about sexuality and sexual practices are socially conditioned and historically and contextually specific. In society as we know it now, ideologies about sexuality are deeply entrenched within structures of patriarchy and largely misogynist mores. State and social structures only acknowledge a limited and narrow aspect of our sexuality. Pleasure, happiness, comfort and intimacy find expression through sexuality. On the one hand we weave narratives around these in our literature and art. But on the other, our societal norms and regulations allow for sexual expression only between men and women within the strict boundaries of marital relations within the institution of the family. Why have we circumscribed sexuality within such a narrow confine, ignoring its many other expressions, experiences and manifestations?

Ownership of private property and maintenance of patriarchy necessitates a control over women's reproductive rights. Since inheritance is maintained through legitimate heirs, and sexual intercourse between men and women is what carries the potential to procreate, capitalist patriarchy sanctions and privileges only such heterosexual couplings. Sex is seen primarily, and almost exclusively, as an instrument for reproduction, negating all aspects of pleasure and desire intrinsic to it. Homosexuality is not only denied legitimacy, it is considered to be undesirable, unnatural and deviant.

Thus, sex and sexuality are given no social sanction beyond their reproductive purpose.

Do we then not value motherhood? Just because our profession or our social situation as sex workers does not allow for legitimate parenthood, are we trying to claim that motherhood and bearing children is unworthy and unimportant for women? That is not the case. We feel that every woman has the right to bear children if she so wishes. But we also think that through trying to establish motherhood as the only and primary goal for a woman, patriarchal structures try to control women's reproductive functions and curb their social and sexual autonomy. Many of us sex workers are mothers – our children are very precious to us. By social standards these children are illegitimate – bastards. But at least they are ours, and not mere instruments for maintaining some man's property or continuing his genealogy. However, we too are not exempt from the ideologies of the society we live in. For many of us the impossible desire for family, home and togetherness is a permanent source of pain.

Do Men and Women Have Equal Claims to Sexuality?

Societal norms about sex and sexuality do not apply equally to men and women. If sexual needs are at all acknowledged beyond procreation, it is only for men. Even if there are minor variations from community to community, and if in the name of modernity certain mores have changed in some place, it is largely men who have enjoyed the right to be polygamous or seek multiple sexual partners. Women have always been expected to be faithful to a single man. Beyond scriptural prohibitions too, social practices severely restrict the expression of female sexuality. As soon as a girl reaches puberty, her behaviour is strictly controlled and monitored so as not to provoke the lust of men. In the name of 'decency' and 'tradition', a female teacher is prohibited from wearing the clothes of her choice to the university. While selecting a bride for the son, the men of the family scrutinise the physical attributes of a potential bride. Pornographic representations of women satisfy the voyeuristic pleasures of millions of men. From shaving cream to bathroom fittings, innumerable commodities are sold through attracting men via advertisements depicting women as sex objects.

In this political economy of sexuality, there is no space for the expression of women's own sexuality and desires. Women have to cover their bodies from the gaze of men and at the same time have to bare themselves for male gratification. Even when women are granted some amount of subjecthood by being represented as consumers in commercial media, that role is defined by their ability to buy, and normed by capitalist and patriarchal strictures.

Is Our Movement Anti-Men?

Our movement is definitely against patriarchy, but not against all individual men. As it so happens, apart from the madams and landladies, almost all people who profit from the sex trade are men. But what is more important is that their attitudes towards women and prostitution are biased, with strong patriarchal values. They generally think of women as weak, dependent, immoral or irrational – beings who need to be directed and disciplined. Conditioned by patriarchal gender ideologies, both men and women in general approve of the control of sex trade and oppression of sex workers as necessary for maintaining social order. The power of this moral discourse is so strong that we prostitutes too tend to think of ourselves as morally corrupt and shameless. The men who come to us as clients are also victims of the same ideology. Sometimes the sense of sin adds to their thrill, sometimes it leads to perversion, and almost always it creates a feeling of self-loathing among them. Never does it allow for confident, honest sexual exchange.

It is important to remember that there is no uniform category 'men'. Men, like women, are differentiated by their class, caste, race and other social relations. For many men, adherence to the dominant sexual norm is not only impracticable but also unreal. The young men who look for sexual initiation, the married men who seek the company of 'other' women, the migrant labourers separated from their wives who try to find warmth and companionship in the red light areas, cannot all be dismissed as wicked and perverted. To do so would amount to dismissing a whole history of the human search for desire, intimacy and need. Such dismissal creates an unfulfilled demand for sexual pleasure, the burden of

which, though shared by men and women alike, ultimately weighs more heavily on women. Sexuality, which can be a basis of an equal, healthy relationship between men and women, between people, becomes the source of further inequality and stringent control. This is what we oppose.

Next to any factory, truckers' checkpoint or market, there have always been red light areas. The same system of productive relations and logic of profit maximisation, which drives men from their homes in villages to towns and cities, make women into sex workers for these men.

What is deplorable is that this patriarchal ideology is so deeply entrenched, and the interest of men as a group is so solidly vested in it, that women's issues hardly ever find a place in mainstream political or social movements. The male workers who organise themselves against exploitation rarely address the issues of gender oppression, let alone the oppression of sex workers. Against the interest of women, these radical men too defend the ideology of the family and patriarchy.

Are We against the Institution of Family?

In the perception of society, we sex workers and in fact all women outside the relation of conjugality are seen as threats to the institution of family. It is said that enticed by us, men stray from the straight and narrow path, destroy the family. All institutions, from religious to educational, reiterate and perpetuate this fear about us. Women, and men too, are the victims of this all-pervasive misogyny.

We would like to stress strongly that the sex workers' movement is not against the institution of family. What we challenge is the inequity and oppression within the dominant notions of an 'ideal' family which support and justify unequal distribution of power and resources within the structures of the family. What our movement aims at is working towards a really humanitarian, just and equitable structure of the family that has perhaps yet to come into existence.

Like other social institutions, the family too is situated within the material and ideological structures of the state and society. The basis of a normative ideal family is inheritance through legitimate heirs, and therefore, sexual fidelity. Historically, the structure of the family has in reality gone through many changes. In our country, by and large, joint families are being replaced by nuclear ones. In fact, in all societies people actually live their lives in many different ways, through various social and cultural relations which deviate from this norm, but are still not recognised as such by dominant discourses.

If two persons love each other, want to be together, want to raise children together, relate to the social world, it can be a happy, egalitarian, democratic arrangement. But does it really happen like that within the families we see, between the couples we know? Don't we know of many, many families where there is no love, and where relations are based on inequality and oppression? Don't many legal wives virtually live the life of sex slaves in exchange for food and shelter? In most cases, women do not have the power or the resources to opt out of such marriages and families. Sometimes men and women both remain trapped in empty relations by social pressure. Is this situation desirable? Is it healthy?

The Whore and the Madonna: Divide and Rule

Within the oppressive family ideology, it is women's sexuality that is identified as the main threat to the conjugal relationship of a couple. Women are pitted against each other as the wife against the prostitute, the chaste against the immoral; both represented as fighting over the attention and lust of men. A chaste wife is granted no sexuality, only a de-sexed motherhood and domesticity. At the other end of the spectrum is the 'fallen' woman, a sex machine, unfettered by any domestic inclination or 'feminine' emotion. A woman's goodness is judged on the basis of her desire and ability to control and disguise her sexuality. The neighbourhood girl who dresses up cannot be good; models and actresses are morally corrupt. In all cases, female sexuality is controlled and shaped by patriarchy through reproduction, and to perpetuate the existing political economy of sexuality that safeguards the interests of men. A man has access to his docile homemaker wife, the mother of his children, and to the prostitute who sustains his wildest sexual fantasies. Women's sexual needs are considered to be insignificant; in most cases, these needs are denied autonomy, or their existence erased.

Probably no one other than a prostitute really realises the extent of loneliness, alienation, desire and yearning for intimacy that brings men to us. The sexual needs we satisfy for these men is not just about mechanical sexual activity, nor a momentary gratification of 'base' instincts. Beyond the sex act, we provide a much wider range of sexual pleasure with regard to intimacy, touch and companionship – a service that we render without any social recognition of its significance. At least men can come to us for their sexual needs despite the system of prostitution being seen as prurient or shameful. Women hardly have such recourse. The autonomy of women's sexuality is completely denied. Ironically, the only option they have is to be prostitutes in the sex industry.

Why Do Women Take Up Prostitution?

Women take up prostitution for the same reason as they take up any other livelihood option available to them. Our stories are not fundamentally different from the labourer from Bihar who pulls a rickshaw in Calcutta, or the worker from Calcutta who works part-time in a factory in Bombay. Some of us get sold into the industry. After being bonded to the madam who has bought us for some years, we gain a degree of independence within the sex industry. Most of us end up in the sex trade after going through many experiences, often unwillingly, without fully understanding all the implications of being a prostitute.

But when do women have access to choice within or outside the family? Do we become casual or domestic labourers willingly? Do we have a choice about who we want to marry and when? The choice is rarely real for most women, particularly poor women.

Why do we end up staying in prostitution? It is, after all, a very tough occupation. The physical labour involved in providing sexual services to multiple clients in a working day is no less intense or rigorous than ploughing a field or working in a factory. There are occupational hazards such as unwanted pregnancy, painful abortions, risk of sexually transmitted diseases. In almost all red light areas, housing and sanitation facilities are abysmal, the localities are crowded, most sex workers are quite poor, and there is constant

police harassment and violence from local thugs. Moreover, to add to the material condition of deprivation and distress, we have to take on stigmatisation and marginalisation, the social indignity of being 'sinful', being mothers of illegitimate children, being the target of those children's frustrations and anger.

Do We Advocate 'Free Sex'?

What we advocate and desire is independent, democratic, non-coercive, mutually pleasurable and safe sex. 'Free sex' seems to imply irresponsibility and lack of concern for others' well-being, which is not what we are working towards. Freedom of speech, expression or politics all come with obligations and need to acknowledge and accommodate the other's freedom too. Freedom of sexuality should also come with responsibility and respect for other's needs and desires. We do want the freedom to explore and shape healthy, mature attitudes and practices about sex and sexuality, that are also free from obscenity and vulgarity.

We do not yet know what this autonomous sexuality will be like in practice. We do not have a complete picture as yet. We are working people, not soothsayers or prophets. When, for the first time in history, workers agitated for class equity and freedom from capitalist exploitation, when blacks protested against white hegemony, when feminists rejected the subordination of women, they too did not know fully what the new system they were striving for would exactly be like. There is no exact picture of the 'ideal' future: it can only emerge and be shaped through the process of political movement.

All we can say is that in our imagination of autonomous sexuality, men and women will have equal access, will participate equally, will have the right to say 'yes' or 'no'; and there will be no space for guilt or oppression.

We do not live in an ideal social world today. We do not know when and if ever an ideal social order will come into place. In our less-than-ideal world, if we can accept the immorality of commercial transactions over food or health, why is exchanging sex for money so unethical and unacceptable? Maybe in an ideal world there will be no need for any such transactions; where the material, emotional, intellectual and sexual needs of all will be met equitably and with pleasure and happiness. We do not know. All we can do now is to explore current inequalities and injustices, question their basis and confront, challenge and change them.

Which Way Is Our Movement Going?

The process of struggle that we, the members of Mahila Samanwaya Committee, are currently engaged in has only just begun. We think our movement has two principal aspects. The first one is to debate, define and re-define the whole host of issues about gender, poverty, sexuality that are being thrown up within the process of the struggle itself. Our experience of Mahila Samanwaya Committee shows that for a marginalised group to achieve the smallest of gains, it becomes imperative to challenge an all-encompassing material and symbolic order that not only shapes dominant discourses but, and perhaps more importantly, historically conditions the way we negotiate our own locations as workers within the sex industry. This long-term and complex process will have to continue.

Second, the daily oppression that is practiced on us with the support of the dominant ideologies has to be urgently and consistently confronted and resisted. We have to struggle to improve the conditions of our work and the material quality of our lives, and that can happen through efforts towards our gaining control as sex workers over the sex industry itself. We have started the process. Today in many red light areas in cities, towns and villages, we sex workers have come to organise our own forums to create solidarity and collective strength among a larger community of prostitutes, forge a positive identity for ourselves as prostitutes and mark out a space for acting on our own behalf.

Male Prostitutes Are with Us Too

The Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee was originally formed by women sex workers of Sonagachhi and neighbouring red light areas, and initially for women prostitutes. However, within two years of our coming into existence, male sex workers have come and joined us at their own initiative. These male sex workers provide sexual services primarily to homosexual men. As our society is strongly homophobic (in fact, the penetrative sexual act even between consenting adult men can still be legally penalised), the material and ideological status of male sex workers is even more precarious. We therefore welcomed them in our midst as comrades-in-arms, and we strongly believe that their participation will make our movement truly representative and robust.

The Sex Workers Movement is going on: it has to go on. We believe the questions about sexuality that we are raising are relevant not only to the sex worker community but to all men and women who question subordination of all kinds — within society at large and also within themselves. This movement is for everyone who strives for an equal, just, equitable, oppression-free and, above all, happy social world. Sexuality, like class and gender, makes us who we are. To deny its importance is to accept an incomplete existence as human beings. Sexual inequality and control of sexuality engender and perpetuate many other inequalities and exploitative practices. We need to shake the roots of all such injustice through our movement. We have to win this battle, and the war too, for a gender-just, socially equitable, emotionally fulfilling, intellectually stimulating and exhilarating future for men, women and children.