

Realising Sexual Rights
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Sex Workers Struggles in Bangladesh: Learnings for the Women's Movement

Our engagement in sex workers' struggles to defend themselves against illegal eviction threats from the brothels gave new meaning to the discussions on sexuality and sexual rights that had taken place inside Naripokkho.

Naripokkho's own engagement in discussions on sexuality was rooted in the experiential sharing of women's life stories that characterised the early stages of the organisation's agenda building. The experience of being woman was inevitably marked with the painful association of women's bodies being at the centre of much of the ill treatment, denial and deprivation they suffered in the hands of their family members, strangers, and institutions and policies alike. Social-cultural norms dictated what women should or should not do with their bodies. Restrictions on women's *cholaphera*, their physical movement, i.e. when, where and how far they could venture out of their homes and what would constitute legitimate reason to do so; on how and what parts of their bodies they had to cover; on how they had to carry themselves when in the gaze of "undesirable others" ranging from brothers-in-law to the general public; on who and when they could have sexual relations with and whether they could insist on sexual pleasure for themselves or not; on when and how often they could complain of ill-health; on whether they could seek health care or not, and from who, where and when; and, so on and on - all centred around women's bodies in one way or another.

The agenda that grew out of the countless testimonies of what these restrictions meant in terms not only of women's physical well being but also of women's sense of self-worth, personal freedom and happiness was one of interrogating every social-cultural practice that imposed such restrictions and resisting these in every way possible. What implications did these have for women's rights and freedoms? How could the rights agenda then leave out issues of sexual freedom as it had tended to do?

Putting it back into the rights agenda was a difficult task, not least because we were surrounded by conservative social mores, but more so because the progressive political discourses around us reflected a similar conservatism and imposed a sense of propriety totally out of sync with their otherwise radical political stance. Our attempts to re-define the rights agenda by incorporating sexual freedom met with hostility. We were ostracised for taking things too far. It was bad enough that our discussion on equality did not stop at wages and franchise but went on to talk about the right to love and pleasure. To then raise the question of sexual freedom was definitely stepping beyond the boundaries of a "legitimate" rights discourse.

We continued our discussions, albeit within the walls of our meeting rooms. The first discussion we had on women loving women, '*narir proti narir preeti*' was received with surprising 'compassion'. We tested the waters in 1994 when we proposed our slogan '*Shorir amaar shidhanto amaar*' (my body, my decision) for adoption by the International Women's Day Committee as the theme for celebrations that year. The adoption of the slogan meant it was echoed in over a dozen places in the country where the Committee members had organised events, press releases had gone out to every major newspaper, and over thirty

thousand leaflets had been distributed. The backlash was instantaneous - what did we mean by *shorir amaar, shidhanto amaar*? Were we by any chance talking of sexual freedom? Were we seeking license for promiscuity? Some of our sisters in the International Women's Day Committee began to have second thoughts as well. The slogan was too controversial.

In 1999, the largest cluster of brothels in Bangladesh located in Narayanganj, 11 miles outside of the capital Dhaka in a commercial township that had developed around an inland river port, was forcefully evicted by the government. Truckloads of police descended on the nearly two thousand women who worked in the brothels and lived there with their children at the break of dawn without warning or notice. Many were forcibly taken to government run "vagrant homes" where they were confined, while most managed to escape.

Our earlier association with sex-workers in the Kandupatti brothel in Dhaka, which had been evicted a couple of years before, had led to the formation of Ulka the first sex workers organisation in Bangladesh. Upon receiving the news of the Tanbazaar eviction Ulka members rushed to the Naripokkho office. Before we knew it the Naripokkho office was transformed in to an impromptu shelter with over 40 women sleeping there, and a few more in our homes. We were at the centre of a full scale agitation. There was an unprecedented response to our call for action. Over 80 NGOs and associations joined us in forming an alliance in support of the rights of sex workers. For the next nearly five weeks it turned in to a 24 hour operation. We were together, strategising, mobilising, facing journalists, holding street protests, demonstrating in front of different government offices including that of the Inspector General of Police, meeting UN officials and handing over a formal communication for the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and in between sitting around having tea, listening to the many untold stories of personal struggles, sharing jokes...we had become *attiyo* (related). Our political alliances had grown in to relationships.

Not only did our own acquaintance with the reality of sex work deepen, the links between the many different realities of women in and out of sex work became evident. We also received notice from our landlady to vacate the premise. Some of our new found sisters reassured us that as soon as they could get back to business they could raise enough money for us to buy our own premise!

The response by the media to this agitation was unprecedented. The story stayed on the front page of major newspapers for almost a month. Finally, we had an opportunity to go public with our agenda on sexual freedom! Sexuality, reproduction, health, violence all centred on women's bodies. And that is what we had in common with women in sex work. However, we had to be strategic on how we were going to present to the media and the public the issue of our solidarity with the women in sex work. Are you supporting prostitution? The question was shot at us by journalists and by fellow travellers in the women's movement. What the broad alliance composed of an otherwise disparate range of organisations had in common was outrage, not theoretical positions on sex work and prostitution. The government had acted in an arbitrary and inhumane manner throwing hundreds of women and children in to a precarious situation. This could not go unchallenged. That was their position. Many of the organisations had no idea of the puerile debates on sexual exploitation and sex work that had come to preoccupy sections of the women's movement. Is sex-work work? This was a potentially divisive question. We chose to side step it because having these organisations with us gave us much needed political leverage and protection. We could not afford to lose it. Instead, we talked about the rights of the women in sex work. We put forward what had drawn us in the first instance to identify with sex workers. In 1991, at the height of eviction threats by self appointed guardians of

Narayanganj town, the women in the Tanbazaar brothels had issued a press statement making a public appeal for support. The statement read, "We are women, we work for our living, and we are citizens of this country". Our rights as women, as workers and as citizens deserved the same respect and protection as any other citizen. This created the basis for a new solidarity between sections of the "mainstream" women's movement and sex workers struggles. The subsequent acceptance of sex workers' groups in national networks of women's organisations is a milestone in the history of the women's movement in Bangladesh.

The extensive media coverage brought to public attention the sex workers realities and their demands. By putting up front what is generally considered morally reprehensible surfaced the fear of what an uncontrolled un-demarcated arena of sex work may do to the social fabric. Society was better off having these women confined in brothels. Now they were everywhere.

The shift in terminology used by the print media was particularly noticeable as "*jouna kormi*" (sex worker) came to replace "*potita*" (prostitute, but literally meaning 'the fallen one'). This change in terminology actually meant that we had changed the terms of the debate so that women in prostitution could no longer be seen as objects of pity or of moral opprobrium, but that by renaming prostitution as sex work, women engaged in the trade could be addressed as workers who were socially acceptable rights holders.

Sex work in Bangladesh has been understood primarily as a function of poverty thus evoking the standard welfare response, i.e. the women needed to be saved and rehabilitated in to respectable marriages and occupations. Our campaign put to question these 'rehabilitation' prescriptions and instead raised the issue of "social acceptance" i.e., recognising sex work as a legitimate occupation and accepting sex workers in our midst - in our movements, in our workplaces and in our homes.

On the other hand, the view-point that good women are safe from sexual harassment or incursions because of this army of 'bad' women who provide a release for 'natural' male sexual urges was also prevalent. Sex workers provided a 'safety-valve' function in society.

Sex work occupies an ambivalent position in our legal framework, where soliciting and pimping are considered criminal offences, but sex work within brothels by adult women is not considered illegal. This ambivalence provided a lacuna from where a successful legal case against the eviction could be launched, and a landmark ruling pronounced the eviction in 1999 as illegal and implicitly recognised sex work within brothels to be legal. The history of the sex trade coupled with the history of sex workers' movements in our country make for a rich chapter in the history of the women's movement.

The success of our movement for sex workers' rights is surprising when seen in the context of the predominantly moral view of sex work and of the issue of sexuality as such. Women even in 'progressive' political and social discourse are placed within certain conventional frameworks within which women are expected to conduct their struggles. The struggle for sex workers' rights has the potential of overturning these established norms and conventions and redefining the boundaries of women's activism and the meaning of rights work. 84 women's and human rights' organisations and development NGO's representing a wide spectrum of views on social change had come together to form *Shonghoti* (solidarity), an alliance in support of the rights of sex workers.

One of the groups that came forward during this campaign was of *hijras* (inter-sex persons), committing us to a new relationship and adding a whole other dimension to our sexual rights campaign. It challenged our own adoption of the standard sex/gender concepts as fixed categories, and forced us to redefine our notion of what makes a woman. The application for membership by inter-sex groups into the national network of women's organisations started for us a process of revisiting the biology *vs* social construction framework that had thus far informed our thinking on gender and social change.

The campaign to support the rights of sex workers in which Naripokkho was involved throughout the decade of the 1990's, not only mobilised a whole new constituency of women for our movement, it also challenged our own concepts, views, and attitudes.

Over the many cups of tea that we drank together in the Naripokkho office we compared our lives with theirs, as they did with ours.

"We wish we could send our children to good schools, like you do."

"Do you enjoy the sex you have with your customers?"

"Do you enjoy the sex you have with your husbands? How often do you have sex?"

"Once a week, maybe once a month, once in several months.....".

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