

# **PLIGHT OF THE FLYING SEX WORKERS**

**-KAUSTAV ROY, 4<sup>th</sup> Semester**

**I**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Sex Workers are a group of people who are looked down at by most of us because of the “dirty” work which they indulge in. These people, who are engaged in the oldest profession known to us are looked down upon and are ostracized by our society. We look at them in disgust without knowing why they are in this profession. My mind pondered over this question for a long time; I wanted to know to why they were in such a deplorable situation and the results I got left me shocked. It takes a lot of courage to lead a life, where you are deprived of your human rights, where you are tortured, and you have to bear it all because your family depends on you to provide for them and for this reason you have to comply with the unreasonable demands of everyone. The financial incapability of the sex workers make them vulnerable to such harassment. They are not in this profession of their free will but because their deplorable economic condition has left them no other option.

One of the aspects of the sex trade in Calcutta is that of informal or ‘flying’ sex-workers. Some are based in nearby villages or suburbs of the city and come to the red light area only in the evening or the day. Most of them are single women; some are married with children. With factories and alternative means of employment reducing in the city, middle class housewives and students act as ‘flying’ sex-workers in order to earn their sustenance. ‘Flying’ sex-workers are more vulnerable than brothel based women in Calcutta. Not being a part of the protective brothel system, they have less negotiating

powers. As per as the data available till 2006 there were about 3000 Flying Sex Workers operating in Kolkata alone.<sup>1</sup>

During my summer internship, I worked with the NGO Alakendu Bodh Niketan Residential (ABNR), Kolkata who are engaged in a target intervention project with the flying sex workers and their main motive is to spread HIV/AIDS awareness amongst these sex workers who are most vulnerable to this deadly disease. While working, what I found most interesting was that most of them have become quite prone and accustomed to the torture and harassment that is meted out to them by society and do not care to turn up in the medical clinics for regular checkups. According to one of the flying sex workers they are treated as “entities that are born only to have sex”. Therefore, promoting AIDS awareness amongst such a group of people is quite difficult, and to create awareness is also necessary as this disease has all the capabilities of turning into an epidemic and as such it is quite essential to protect these people from the grasp of this disease.

The plight of the flying sex workers shows how poverty can push an individual to such extremes. Most of them are in this profession just for the sake of their children, so that their child can have two proper meals a day. Many people call this profession immoral, after working with the flying sex workers; it is quite hard to believe what people say.

It has become quite essential to grant them necessary rights and legal remedies so that they can lead a life devoid of any harassment and torture, what we need to understand is that they are also human beings and that they have every right to lead a normal life, irrespective of the profession in which they are involved.

This study is based on the flying sex workers of Kolkata. The study is entirely based on the field work conducted in the areas of Phoolbagan and Howrah. The methodology used during the field work was simple survey and observation, and during the field visits I resorted to some case studies and interviews.

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<sup>1</sup> Gangoli, Geetanjali. Prostitution as Livelihood ‘Work’ or ‘Crime’? Organisation 3<sup>rd</sup> para.8 June 2008. <[http://www.anthrobase.org/Txt/G/Gangoli\\_G\\_01.htm](http://www.anthrobase.org/Txt/G/Gangoli_G_01.htm)>

## II

### CAUSES

There are many causes that can be inferred as to why sex work as a profession is taken up by many people. Most of the time the situation becomes such that people have no alternative but to take up this profession. This is a profession that they do not necessarily like but due to their existing economic problems and lack of alternatives, they have no option left but to join this profession.

Some have handicapped husbands who are unable to work, and in order to run the family, they have to enter this profession. Some are divorcees who have fled from their torturous husbands and in order to earn, in order to secure a better future for their children they are forced into this profession. Owing to their financial incapability some are forced to work in households and while working they have to bear torture, exploitation and sexual abuse from their masters; and in order to keep their job, they oblige to the sexual demands of their respective masters. They sacrifice a lot in order to sustain their families. Poverty is the root cause of all these situations. While interviewing the Peer Educators<sup>2</sup> everyone stressed that they are not in this profession of their own free will, but in order to have two square meals a day and in order to feed their children. Poverty has pushed them to such a deplorable situation. They have come to Kolkata in search of work from small places in Bengal such as Bagnan, Bali, Uluberia, Bandel, Mecheda, Kolaghat, etc. but end up in this profession. Some of their families do not know that they are in this profession. The families are informed that she is either a vegetable seller or a laborer working at a construction site. They do not have any idea that she is working as a sex worker in order to earn a living, as disclosure of this might only lead to boycott and opposition. Some do not earn much and take up this profession as an alternative source of income so as to earn a decent sum of money with which can sustain their family.

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<sup>2</sup> Peer Educators act as a link between the Ngo's and the sex workers and their main job is to make the sex workers aware of HIV/AIDS and encourage them to turn up at medical clinics for checkups. They are still in this profession but are fully aware of the consequences of this disease.

Such is the miserable plight of these people, who, in order to sustain their respective families sacrifice their prestige, dignity, pride, honor and work blindly for the betterment and upliftment of their family.

On the question of whether this profession should be legalized or not, everyone replied in the affirmative. When asked why they possessed such an opinion they said that if this profession is legalized they won't be tortured the way they are being now and they can be relieved of the inhumane treatment that is being meted out to them. In order to have safe sex and prevent the transmission of HIV/AIDS, use of condoms is quite necessary, but the freedom to use a condom does not rest upon the sex workers. It rests upon their clients who sometimes are ready to pay them double the amount so as to have sex without a condom. The sex workers have no option but to oblige, some do not even get paid, and many clients inflict enormous amount of torture on the sex workers, who just have to comply with the weird demands of their clients. As a consequence they feel this profession should be given legal recognition so as to relieve them of such an inhumane life.

### **III**

#### **CASE STUDY**

##### **CASE-1**

A girl in her early twenties fell in love with a boy whom she trusted very much. She came with him to the city but failed to learn the wicked intentions of her boyfriend, who, after coming to the city sold her to a brothel and escaped. The poor girl was trapped and had no alternative left with her and therefore, in order to earn a living in an unknown city, joined this profession. When her relatives came to know about her situation, they declined to take her back to the village and as such, the miserable plight of that girl continued and she is now earning her living as a flying sex worker at the Howrah railway station.

##### **CASE-2**

A married woman in her mid thirties was a victim of intense torture inflicted upon her by her husband who used to beat her with stones. He was a drunkard and frequently tortured her. The root cause of all such torture was that her husband was in love with another woman. Her husband finally deserted her and she is now having a terrible life in the city as she has to look after her three children all by herself. She is a rag picker, but is into this profession as she has no alternative left with her and has to earn more so as to feed her children.

### **CASE-3**

One of the Peer Educators of the Howrah field stated that they are regularly harassed by the police officials, who use to catch them while they were soliciting with their clients and use to reprimand them for indulging in such “dirty work”. On the other hand it was the same police officials who used to forcibly make these women have sex with them; and if they refused, the police used to threaten them with lock up, which shows that the police officials were making a clear misuse of the authority that has been vested in them.

### **CASE-4**

One of them (Peer Educator) recalled that she once gave an interview to a television news channel where she boldly confessed her profession. The result of this honest confession was that her elder sister’s daughter was removed from her school.

All these cases depict the enormous challenges that these women have to face in order to earn a living and look after their children.

## **IV**

### **ROLE OF WEST BENGAL GOVERNMENT AND NGO’S TO COMBAT AIDS**

Realising that flying prostitution is on the rise in the city, the government, involving the NGOs, has rolled out a comprehensive package for healthcare and counselling of the sex workers. A number of community-based organisations and NGOs in Calcutta are carrying out “targeted intervention” among flying commercial sex workers. The initiative is funded by National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO) and implemented by the West Bengal State AIDS Prevention and Control Society. The NGOs also work through outreach workers, counsellors and medical officers. Counselling forms an integral part of the intervention package. The sessions help them in promoting behavioural change in terms of practising safe sex and overcoming traumas. Targeted interventions are crucial, as flying prostitution is on the rise among the youth.<sup>3</sup>

There is an alarming increase in the HIV/AIDS cases in India’s West Bengal State with 0.5% of its population belonging to the age group of 15 years and 49 years carrying the virus, according to sources from the West Bengal State AIDS Prevention and Control Society (WBSACS). This figure is considered to be extremely high. The 2001 census figure put the total population of West Bengal at 80 million. West Bengal had 2,397 reported cases of full blown AIDS as of July 2005, according to official estimates of the National AIDS Control Organization (NACO), of which WBSACS is a unit. A total of 6,941 people are HIV positive in West Bengal. India has an HIV/AIDS population of 5.1 million, second only to South Africa with 5.3 million infected people, according to international health organizations. ‘Flying sex workers are more infected than the more organized brothel-based ones as they don’t always take the precautions and often operate under compulsions,’ said Suresh Kumar, the Project Director of WBSACS.<sup>4</sup>

## V

### LAW & PROSTITUTION

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<sup>3</sup>Healthcare for flying sex workers. The Telegraph(Calcutta).11 April 2007.<[http://www.telegraphindia.com/1070411/asp/calcutta/story\\_7630476.asp](http://www.telegraphindia.com/1070411/asp/calcutta/story_7630476.asp)>

<sup>4</sup> Aids Cases On The Rise In West Bengal.7 June 2008. <<http://www.bio-medicine.org/medicine-news/AIDS-Cases-On-The-Rise-In-West-Bengal-5946-1/>>

Some argue that legalizing or decriminalizing sex work is beneficial to the fight against AIDS, because it allows governments to monitor and regulate the sex trade. In doing so, they can ensure that sex workers are empowered to negotiate condom use, improve their access to public services, and give them protection from violence and abuse. There are many cases where legal restrictions stand in the way of HIV prevention amongst sex workers – for instance, in some countries members of organizations working with sex workers have been threatened with arrest for ‘promoting prostitution’. By removing such restrictions, HIV prevention campaigns could arguably be carried out much more effectively. On the other hand, some claim that legalization increases the number of individuals who enter sex work, and the demand for sex work. Another problem is that even in countries where sex work is legal, such as the Netherlands and Australia, there are still many sex workers who do not register with authorities, and operate ‘on the street’, where they cannot be reached by HIV prevention campaigns.<sup>5</sup>

Prostitution is regarded as the oldest profession in the world. However, the general perception of the trade has changed over the years. The changing socio-economic conditions, stigma, victimization and of late, prostitutes being vectors in spreading HIV, have labeled them as a distinct sexually promiscuous, ‘immoral’ community. Prostitutes are not seen as women being raped, threatened, coerced and sold into the sex trade. They are not seen as human beings with hopes, aspirations, likes, dislikes or desires to live a healthy normal life. Their rights are grossly violated. Moreover, the law criminalizes their every action, further punishing them for the deplorable state they are in and takes away even the little that they may have.

"Prostitution" under Immoral Traffic Prevention Act, 1986 (ITPA) has been defined as the sexual exploitation or abuse of persons for a commercial purpose, and the term "prostitute" is construed accordingly (there is commercial value to it; the politically correct term would be Commercial Sex Workers or CSW). Ironically, the sexual exploiter

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<sup>5</sup> HIV Prevention and Sex Workers. Should sex work be legalised ?7 June 2008.<<http://www.avert.org/sex-workers.htm>>

or abuser has been given no name or definition; it is the victim who has been stamped as "the prostitute". The abuser is not the criminal, the victim is.<sup>6</sup>

This is their profession, their job, their only means of livelihood, many lives are dependent on this income, and we fail to understand the extent of pain and suffering they have to bear in order to earn. Their miserable plight demands attention and not neglect, they are also human beings, and as fellow human beings it is our responsibility to provide remedies to others in distress. Frankly speaking, it is not possible to stop prostitution, but it is quite possible to provide them with the requisite remedial measures so as to enable them lead a humane life.

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<sup>6</sup> Dubey, Nidhi. The Criminally Legal Trade. July 2000.7 June 2008.<<http://www.lawyerscollective.org/content/criminally-legal-trade>>