

Sex Workers' Struggles in Bangladesh: Learning for the Women's Movement

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1 Introduction

The 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. This article explores the lessons learnt by Bangladeshi women's organisations through their involvement in a campaign to support the rights of sex workers, and their struggles to defend themselves against illegal eviction threats from brothels. It suggests that these struggles gave a new – and more public – meaning to discussions on sexuality and sexual rights that had been taking place within the women's movement. The article focuses on the experiences of Naripokkho, a country-wide women's organisation, and the lessons that this organisation learnt through engagement in the struggle for sex workers' rights in Bangladesh.

2 Putting sexual freedom on the agenda

Naripokkho's 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. These stories drew out how the experience of being a woman is inevitably marked with the painful reality of women's bodies being at the centre of much of the ill-treatment, denial and deprivation they suffer at the hands of their family members, strangers, institutions and policies alike. Sociocultural norms dictate what women should or should not do with their bodies. The stories depicted the many social rules restricting women's *cholaphera* (physical movement), i.e. when, where and how far they can venture out of their homes and what constitutes a legitimate reason to do so; what parts of their bodies they have to cover and how; how they have to carry themselves when in the gaze of 'undesirable others' ranging from brothers-in-law to the general public; when they can

have sexual relations and with whom; whether they can insist on sexual pleasure for themselves or not; when and how often they can complain of ill-health; whether they can seek healthcare, and where, when and from whom; and so on – these are 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 their sense of self-worth, personal freedom and happiness was one of interrogating every sociocultural practice that imposed such restrictions and rules, and resisting them in every way possible. What implications did they have for women's rights and freedoms? How could the rights agenda then leave out issues of sexual freedom, as it tended to do?

Putting issues of sexual freedom onto the rights agenda was a difficult task, not least because we were surrounded by conservative social mores, but more so because the usually progressive political discourses around us reflected a similar conservatism in respect to sexuality and imposed a sense of propriety totally out of sync with their otherwise radical political stance. Our attempts to redefine 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 protir narir preeti*' (women's

love for women) was received with surprising 'compassion'. We tested the waters in public 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 30,000 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 also began to have second thoughts. The slogan was too controversial.

3 Making alliances, becoming *attiyo*

Sex workers, and their mobilisations against evictions, helped us work out these knotty politics around sexuality. The town of Narayanganj, 11 miles (17.7 km) outside of the capital Dhaka, is a commercial township that had developed around an inland river port, and houses the largest cluster of brothels in Bangladesh. In 1991, at the height of eviction threats by self-appointed guardians of Narayanganj, the women in the Tanbazaar brothels 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 deserve 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.

Naripokkho's association with sex workers began when the Kandupatti brothel in Dhaka, was evicted in 1997. This led to the formation of Ulka, the first sex workers organisation in Bangladesh. In 1999 the government turned their attention to forcefully evicting the Narayanganj brothels. At the break of dawn, without warning or notice, truckloads of police descended on the nearly 2,000 women who worked in the brothels and lived there with their children. Many were forcibly taken to government-run 'vagrant homes' where they were confined, but most managed to escape.

Upon receiving news of the Tanbazaar eviction, Ulka members rushed to the Naripokkho office, which

was immediately transformed into 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. Some 84 women's and human rights' organisations and development non-governmental organisations (NGOs) representing a wide spectrum of views on social change came together to form *Shonghoti* (solidarity), an alliance in support of the rights of sex workers. For the next five weeks or so, 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 to the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and in between sitting around having tea, listening to the many untold stories of personal struggles and sharing jokes. We had become *attiyo* (related). Our political alliances had grown into our 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 premises. 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 premises!

4 Going public

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 into a precarious situation. This could not go unchallenged. That was our joint position.

Many of the organisations had no idea of the heated 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 for the time being, 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.

The extensive media coverage brought to public attention the sex workers' realities and their demands. Putting up front what is generally considered morally reprehensible stirred 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. By renaming prostitution as sex work, women engaged in the trade could be addressed as workers who were socially acceptable rights holders.

5 Reframing sex work

Sex work in Bangladesh has been understood in ways which display some ambivalence. On the one hand, it is seen primarily as a function of poverty thus evoking the standard welfare response that women need to be saved and rehabilitated into respectable marriages and occupations. On the other hand, sex work is also perceived as protecting good women from sexual harassment or incursions because this army of 'bad' women provide a release for 'natural' male sexual urges. Sex workers are seen to provide a 'safety-valve' function in society. Sex work also 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, implicitly recognising sex work within brothels as legal.

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. The campaign in their support in 1990s Bangladesh not only mobilised a whole new constituency of women for our movement, it also challenged our own concepts, views and attitudes. Our campaign questioned these 'rehabilitation' prescriptions and instead raised an agenda of 'social acceptance' involving recognising sex work as a legitimate occupation and accepting sex workers in our midst – in our movements, in our workplaces and in our homes.

One of the groups that came forward during this campaign was a group of *hijras* (inter-sex persons), whose main livelihood is usually sex work. This committed us to a new relationship and added 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.

6 Reflections

Over the many cups of tea that we drank together in the Naripokkho office, we compared our lives with our guest sex workers, 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 ...'

What we learnt from such discussions and from our relationships with these women is that our lives are not necessarily better than the lives of sex workers, and neither are they so different. Although we might negotiate our lives in different ways, we all live within the same frame of social rules regulating our sexualities and our movements. Whether sex workers, wives, activists, or all of these, women's bodies are the site of struggles around sexuality,

reproduction, health and violence. Sex workers and *hijras* now play an active part in Naripokkho. Members of the sex worker's organisation, Ulka, have been elected to key positions in the Naripokkho network of women's organisations. And the *hijra* organisation 'Bondhon' was formally accepted into the network of women's organisations in 2003. Together we continue the struggle for sexual freedom when and where possible.