

‘Streetwalkers Show the Way’:¹ Reframing the Debate on Trafficking from Sex Workers’ Perspective

Nandinee Bandyopadhyay with Swapna Gayen, Rama Debnath, Kajol Bose, Sikha Das, Geeta Das, M. Das, Manju Biswas, Pushpa Sarkar, Putul Singh, Rashoba Bibi, Rekha Mitra and Sudipta Biswas*

Trafficking of women and children across and within nations is said to have escalated dramatically in the last decade. At the same time, we are told how much political commitment to, and funding for, anti-trafficking interventions, preventive and punitive legislation has grown. For both propositions to be true there must be something wrong, either in the definition of trafficking, or in the ways it is being tackled. Despite the media headlines on desperate Third World men dying in their hundreds in closed containers that haul them across international borders, there remains a steadfast conviction that those who are trafficked are predominantly women and children. After all, the most persistent of all trafficking myths asserts that the destination of all trafficking is prostitution, all prostitutes are women and as no woman can deliberately choose to be a prostitute, all of them are trafficked. The principal causes of trafficking are commonly believed to be the so-called push factors of poverty and gender inequality. Moreover, it is supposed that organised gangs of traffickers carefully orchestrate all trafficking that takes place, both internationally and within national borders. Then it is assumed that those who are trafficked remain in a situation of everlasting powerlessness, unless rescued by external agents, preferably anti-trafficking non-governmental organisations (NGOs) ... and the list goes on.

The problem with such positions and conceptions is not just that they are misleading. More importantly,

they fail to examine the experiences of those who are trafficked into a range of labour markets every year and deny them any possibility of autonomy or agency, forever banishing them to a silent world of eternal and relentless victimhood. To understand the realities of trafficking from the point of view of those who are trafficked, this article will recount the stories of some women who now work in the sex trade. It will also briefly examine the ways in which Durbar,² an organised forum of sex workers based in West Bengal, India has intervened into the debate on trafficking and has offered alternative ways of thinking about and acting on the issue.

First the stories ...

Shohagi’s story

Shohagi³ was born to a poor family in Murshidabad. Her parents could barely make ends meet, working as they did as agricultural labourers. But she did not mind, as she was much loved by her mother and grandmother. As a child she had loved going to school and had taken much pleasure in learning to embroider from her grandmother. However, when she was 14 her father married her off to a much older and much married man, whose only qualification was that he did not demand any dowry. Although Shohagi was heartbroken to leave her home and schoolfriends, and disappointed in her father’s choice, she resolved to be a good wife. To her horror, soon after her wedding she found her

*This article was first published in the *IDS Bulletin* Volume 35 Number 4 (2004) ‘Repositioning Feminisms in Development’ edited by Andrea Cornwall, Elizabeth Harrison and Ann Whitehead. © Institute of Development Studies 2004

new husband was extremely violent. He regularly thrashed her black and blue and seemed to derive enormous pleasure in threatening to kill her if she dared to protest. Unable to stand it any longer, six months into the marriage, Shohagi returned to her parents. Her father and elder brothers were livid at her effrontery of rejecting a husband they had chosen and threatened to kill her when she refused to return to him, as her waywardness would bring ignominy to her family. Her mother and grandmother tried to intervene on her behalf, but were ignored.

So, Shohagi ran away from home. Taking shelter in a bus station she came across an older woman who listened to her tale of woe with sympathy. She offered to take Shohagi to Calcutta and find her a job as a domestic help. After a long and confusing journey, it was evening when Shohagi's new-found benefactor brought her to a crowded neighbourhood in Calcutta, with well-lit narrow roads, old, dilapidated mansions and numerous men milling around. Shohagi's companion took her to a room and whispered something to a formidable-looking woman, who after a brief discussion handed some money to the older woman and shoved Shohagi into a small room. Tired after her ordeal, Shohagi fell asleep.

Next morning Shohagi woke up to find two or three young women crowding around her curiously. Responding to her nervous queries, these women said she was in a brothel and patiently explained to Shohagi what she was expected to do. Shohagi was shattered. She pleaded with the *malkin*⁴ that she be spared and allowed to go. However, the *malkin* argued that she had invested money in Shohagi, and could not let her leave till Shohagi repaid the amount. However, she conceded that Shohagi could do household chores in the brothel until she became accustomed to the idea of working as a sex worker.

During the first month or so that Shohagi spent in the brothel working as a housemaid, the prospect of sex work lost its initial horror. Young though she was, she had already been initiated into sex by her husband, and often had to have sex with him against her will. In the brothel she found that the sex workers had more of a say with their clients, and could even refuse them. Also, they got paid for it. The clients paid the *malkin*, which supposedly went towards paying off her investment in the sex workers

and their upkeep. But if the clients were happy with the sex worker they would pay her some extra which she could keep. As she swept the brothel, she considered her options. Given her situation, working in the brothel seemed less hazardous than going home to inevitable violence. Soon after, Shohagi, nearly 15 now, started working as a *chhukri*.⁵ She worked hard and saved harder, determined to get out of bondage and become independent.

One year later, Shohagi ran away from the brothel. She took shelter with another sex worker whom she met at a protest rally organised by Durbar. Her *malkin* found out and came to her new home demanding that she pay her debt. The sex workers of the area rallied together and persuaded the *malkin* to leave Shohagi alone, saying she had already made enough money from Shohagi and threatening dire consequences if she ever harassed Shohagi again. Shohagi rented a room in the red light area and started operating as an independent sex worker. Every once in a while she thought of her mother and her grandmother, and even sent them money and gifts, but never considered going back for good. She still has the room and still works as a sex worker – it has been ten years now since she last ran away.

Jharna's story

Living in a village in Bangladesh, Jharna⁶ was happy enough with her uncle and aunt who had looked after her since her parents died, as long as she could roam around with her friends, climbing trees and swimming in the river. However, when her guardians said that they had fixed her marriage, she rebelled. The man they had chosen was much older and Jharna loved a boy from the village who had left to seek his fortune in India. An older woman from the neighbourhood suggested that she ran away from home and assured Jharna that she would help her find her lover. Jharna, determined to find her love, left home with this woman, crossed the river Padma and walked across the border to reach India. After staying with the woman for a few days, Jharna started pressing her to take her to her boyfriend. The woman took her along on another journey; this time to a red light area in Calcutta. She took her to Meera, a local *malkin*, who paid off the woman and contracted Jharna as a *chhukri*. So began Jharna's working life as a sex worker.

A few months later, Meera took Jharna to Bombay and put her in another brothel there. As it happened

the brothel was raided by the police that very night. As Jharna sat sleepless, worrying about her future, policemen broke open the door of the brothel and kicked her out. With many other sex workers she was pushed into a police van and taken to a remand home. At the remand home she and the others were persistently abused. The social workers warned her that she would be allowed to leave the home only if she promised to give up sex work and accepted a rehabilitation package offered by the government. Jharna was quite ready to accept the proposition and get out; but the authorities had another stipulation – that unless her guardians came to take her into custody, Jharna would not be allowed to go under her own volition. Jharna was in a fix. She had not let on that she was a Bangladeshi because that would have landed her in another protracted bureaucratic wrangle. So where would she produce her guardians from? This is when Meera, her first *malkin*, came to her rescue. Meera paid a hefty bribe to the home authorities and took Jharna back to Calcutta, this time to work for another *malkin*, Parul.

For a year Jharna worked hard to pay off her debt to Meera; all she earned went to Meera and Parul. To escape the debt trap and once again to find love, one day Jharna ran away from the brothel with a client she fancied. She lived with him for a while but not being able to tolerate his father's persistent sexual advances, she left him and came back to the sex industry to work as an *adhiya*.⁷ With the money she saved and the help of a friend she finally managed to rent a room independently in a cheaper red light area. She says although she never found the elusive love that she had sought, she derives great satisfaction from the fact that she is now her own *malkin*.

Madhabi's story

As a teenager, Madhabi⁸ had fallen in love with a distant relative, Mukul. However her parents did not approve of Madhabi's love affair. When her parents insisted she end her relationship, Madhabi ran away from home with him. They rented a room in the suburbs of Calcutta and started living together. Mukul had no income nor did he have any skills to find any job in the city. They managed to survive the first couple of months by selling Madhabi's jewellery.

One morning Mukul left home in search of a job and did not return. Two days later Mukul's friends turned

up saying they had come to take Madhabi to a hospital where Mukul had been admitted following a serious accident. Travelling for more than an hour by bus and tram Madhabi found herself in a strange street. 'How could it be a hospital?', she mumbled. She had never seen so many women standing in the street, dressed so brightly or talking so loudly. As she hesitated, Mukul's friends dragged her to the staircase of the nearby building. Suddenly they heard a harsh voice from behind asking them to stop. Unknown to Mukul's friends, Durbar activists had been following them since their arrival into the red light area, finding their movements to be suspicious.

Madhabi was brought to the Durbar office for counselling and support. The other volunteers found Mukul lurking in the brothel Madhabi was being taken to and took him and his friends to the local police station. After a brief dialogue, the officer in charge asked Durbar members to hand over Mukul and Madhabi to the police so that he could register a case of trafficking against Mukul, saying that without taking custody of Madhabi no case could be booked. The activists returned to the Durbar office. A debate soon ensued.

What was being debated was Madhabi's fate. Should she be handed over to the police so that Mukul could be punished? Or should she be allowed to follow a course of action of her own choice? Durbar members knew that putting Madhabi in police custody meant indirectly forcing her into the sex trade. When a trafficked woman is rescued from the sex trade and put in police custody, the police put her up in the government remand home, which is notorious for corruption and unofficial linkages with brothel owners. Durbar's experience is that *malkins* have a system worked out to get the woman back by paying a bribe to the remand home authorities. They then extract an inflated repayment from the trafficked woman by making her work without wages. Moreover, Durbar members felt that the process from police custody to judicial custody to remand home is not only a lengthy one, but also extremely hazardous. The police, as well as the caretakers of the remand home, were likely to treat her with no dignity and might well have taken advantage of her sexually. At the end of such a process her already restricted options would be reduced to none.

Challenging the associations between poverty and trafficking

While Durbar members debate over what is to be done with Madhabi, let us now look at what these stories tell. These stories and numerous others, recorded during the course of recent research,⁹ indicate that contrary to popular belief, poverty *per se* does not inevitably lead to trafficking. Poverty and lack of viable livelihood opportunities can and do prompt people to migrate. Of the 60 sex workers interviewed, most did come from very poor households, where they had little or no access to education or training in marketable skills. However, in the majority of cases they left home by their own choice, in search of better livelihoods, to escape parental or marital violence or drudgery, or to seek love. After deciding to leave home, many of the respondents sought information about possible employment from neighbours or relatives who seemed to them to be more clued-up about the ways of the world. It was these people who brought them to their future recruiters – be they brothel managers or owners of small factories or labour contractors in the building industry – and made a profit out of it. At every level, it was a string of individuals who carried out different functions such as helping undocumented migrants to cross international borders illegally, or introducing them to potential employment sectors, rather than the process being masterminded and controlled by an organised mafia of traffickers.

Some respondents chose to become sex workers when they left home, finding out about the industry from neighbours who had worked as sex workers and had used the services of the same kind of agents to find their way to the cities. Others were tricked into being employed by a *malkin*, while they thought they were to get some other job. Only one respondent said she was actually forcibly abducted as a child from her school in Uttar Pradesh by a group of four men who tried to bring her to Calcutta. Ironically, one of the policemen who then rescued her from her traffickers was the one who actually brought her to Calcutta and sold her to a brothel.

Not all the respondents were recruited into sex work directly after leaving home or being trafficked. Some of the respondents were recruited as domestic help and a few in small, informal manufacturing units, where they got very low or no wages, were abused verbally and physically,

sometimes sexually harassed and often summarily dismissed when they dared to protest. Some of them were of course, directly brought to red light areas and sold off to brothel managers, as some others were subsequently.

A significant number of respondents left home for love and the dream of romantic adventure and marital bliss. It was the boyfriends they absconded with who introduced them to the sex industry – sometimes after a brief and half-hearted attempt at conjugality. Many of the respondents never saw the man they left home with again once they were paid off by the brothel manager, while a few of the men stayed on for a while, living off the women's income.

Most women who came into to the sex industry stayed on, even when they could have notionally returned to their earlier lives. Looking at why, it was found that contrary to popular belief, coercion by brothel managers or other gatekeepers of the sex industry was not a serious deterrent. Rather it was the stigma attached to being a sex worker and apprehension of social rejection that closed that option for them. Having become a sex worker, they feared that their parents, family or neighbours would not accept them back, or even if their parents did, their neighbours would boycott them. Brought up as dutiful daughters, they were more concerned about protecting their parents' or families' interests rather than their own wishes. The other important reason was that sex work provided them a viable income with which to sustain themselves, their children and their families. Many did not want to return home fearing violence from the husbands.

The study further helped to dispel another popular misconception regarding trafficking. Dominant discourses describe a trafficked person as eternally doomed, forever trapped in the condition of victimhood, without rights and without ever regaining control over her life. The respondents' experience showed that being trafficked is a temporally, time-bound and reversible phase in any person's life. At the time of the study, none of the respondents who were trafficked into the sex industry had remained with the original brothel manager to whom they were sold.

What enabled these sex workers to get out of the trafficked situation? Support from fellow sex workers, especially those who were more experienced and

street smart, was the most important and frequently cited factor that spurred the respondents to seek a practical way out of the trafficked situation. These colleagues provided advice, courage, loans and contacts with more friendly *malkins*. In some cases, members of Durbar acted as counsellors and guides. For some respondents, regular clients or *babus* came to the rescue, offering moral and financial support to set up independent establishments. In some cases, the *malkin* herself helped the respondents to change their situation, such as by encouraging them to save money. In one case, the *malkin* got the respondent to get rid of the boyfriend she had run away with, who had sold her to the *malkin*. In another, the *malkin* loaned money to rent a room in the red light area from which to operate independently. Of course, not all *malkins* were as sympathetic or fair-minded. Many respondents recounted escaping when everyone else was asleep. In these cases too, other sex workers provided information about and contacts in other red light areas. In none of these cases did the *malkins* or other gatekeepers seem zealous about finding and reclaiming the runaway sex workers.

While outsiders, whether colleagues, friends, *babus* or *malkins*, provided support and practical help, it was the respondents who had to take the initiative and find the conviction to make the move. In no case did they meekly submit themselves to their situation or passively wait to be rescued. Their own sense of agency and determination to act, as well as their resourcefulness, was critical in regaining control over their lives.

When asked what needed to change for sex workers to work with autonomy and security, sex workers named local hooligans,¹⁰ the police, political party workers at the local level, and *malkins* as those who persistently exploited and oppressed them. They said that if sex workers were to work with dignity and security there should be mechanisms to stop these people harassing and exploiting them. Some mentioned the role of sex workers' organisations like Durbar, while some others looked upon the state to intervene on sex workers' behalf. Almost all respondents were of the opinion that it was social stigma that makes sex workers' lives vulnerable and their security precarious. They felt that the way to de-stigmatise the profession was to give it the same social and legal recognition as any other work, and to recognise their rights as workers. Although most were not aware of exactly what individual rights they

would gain as workers, they were clear in their demands for an ideological recognition of sex work as a legitimate and valid occupation.¹¹

Durbar's position on trafficking and its interventions against it

Durbar sees trafficking as an *outcome* of a process where people are recruited and moved within or across national borders without informed consent, coerced into a job against their will and as a result lose control over their lives. As sex workers' rights activists they are against trafficking for a number of reasons. The first lot of reasons has to do with Durbar's aim of safeguarding the interests and rights of workers engaged in the sex industry. Durbar sees sex work as a contractual service, negotiated between consenting adults. In such a service contract, no coercion or deception ought to be involved. Trafficking into sex work by definition involves women and children being employed against their will, either through direct force or through deception, violating their fundamental rights to self-determination and autonomy over their bodies. As Durbar has been persistent in protecting and promoting the rights of sex workers in other contexts such as police harassment, forcible eviction of sex workers by landlords or builders, the mafia, unethical use of sex workers in medical research without their informed consent, intervening to stop people from being trafficked into the sex industry was an obvious arena of intervention.

Durbar holds that for sex work to be established as a legitimate profession, those practising it have to comply by certain non-negotiable norms. Two fundamental principles have been identified on which these norms have to be based: first, anyone becoming a sex worker has to be of age, that is 18 years or older, and second, she has to exercise informed consent. As trafficking violates both these norms, Durbar is determined to eliminate this as a way of recruitment into sex work. Moreover, Durbar aims to dissociate sex work from all criminal links so as to clean up its image as a profession and also to eliminate middlemen or agents profiteering from sex work through exploitation of sex workers. As trafficking involves both, it needs to be eliminated.

The second set of arguments that Durbar posits to show the necessity of sex workers' direct involvement in combating trafficking into sex work relates to efficiency and effectiveness. Durbar argues that no

degree of stringency in patrolling international borders has ever managed to stop the illegal crossing of borders. Such severe measures put the lives of those being trafficked more at risk, as they force traffickers to use more hazardous routes. They also hold that no amount of policing by the state or intervention by social workers has managed to control intra-country trafficking. Durbar feels that one effective way of deterring trafficking, at least for the purpose of sex work, would be to ensure that within the sex trade itself, no trafficked person gets recruited as a sex worker. They are in a good position to help develop and enforce these norms, working with sex workers to develop confidential, efficient and independent communication channels for finding out whether any of the new entrants in the sex work sites has been trafficked into it, to which outsiders – be they the police or social workers – would not have access.

The third reason is a more strategic one. Every time sex workers have claimed their rights, those who see prostitution as a moral malaise have used the issue of trafficking to clamour for abolition, silencing sex workers' voices and demands. Contemporary discourses on trafficking are mired with the same anti-sex – and sex worker – stances. Durbar feels that unless it carves out a space for itself in the public arena to offer alternative perspectives on trafficking, the current focus on trafficking will be overtaken by the abolitionist agenda of the moral right.

What is to be done?

Ending trafficking in sex work calls for measures to ensure all brothel owners and managers abide by norms barring them from recruiting trafficked sex workers. Durbar rejects the raid and rescue operations favoured by the police, social workers and anti-trafficking NGOs. These rescuers never consult sex workers to find out what *they* want, violate their rights by evicting them from their homes and workplaces, often insult and physically abuse them during the raid and then imprison them in remand homes for destitutes and delinquents, in a process not dissimilar at all from trafficking. Rehabilitation can be equally coercive and can create the conditions for further exploitation, with brothel-keepers or petty impostors posing as guardians and later extorting money from the sex worker or making her work like a slave.

To make a real dent into the practice of trafficking, Durbar realised they would have to formalise their

efforts. In 1999, they established local Self-Regulatory Boards in three red light areas in Calcutta, with the aim of ending exploitation of sex workers within the industry by establishing certain business norms. By 2002, such boards were established in another 19 red light areas across West Bengal. These boards comprise ten members, six sex workers and four non-sex workers who can be members of local clubs, locally practising lawyers and doctors, and local councillors or *Panchayat*¹² members. In the boards established in Calcutta red light areas, they also included representatives from the state Social Welfare Department, the Labour Commission, State Women's Commission and Human Rights Commission, and in some cases well-known social workers and women activists.

Boards serve to mitigate violence against sex workers by brothel keepers, room owners, pimps, local hooligans or the police; to establish channels of information within the red light area through which the board members can monitor whether any children or adults are trafficked into sex work or whether anyone is being made to work against her will; to identify those who have been trafficked, and encourage them to seek the help of the board to come out of the situation; to provide trauma counselling and health services; in the case of children, to organise repatriation, with representatives of the boards accompanying them to their homes, or if they did not want to go back, to government residential homes, and maintain contact with them to ensure that they are not stigmatised or re-trafficked.

The principal challenge the boards face is their lack of legal standing. While the law is ambivalent about legality of taking money for sexual services, it does not recognise sex work as a valid occupation. Social discourses frame sex workers as aberrant women, associated with criminality, who cannot be trusted with the welfare of other women and children. In an attempt to overcome this bias, Durbar members involved representatives from the mainstream society in the boards, to render their activities transparent and public. Strategically Durbar involved state representatives in the boards, to gain tacit approval of the state. However, there continues to exist a degree of discomfort between Durbar and the state, particularly the police. Such tensions become even more obvious and acute when Durbar refuses to submit the rescued individuals into police custody, as is required by the law.

Restoring control to trafficked women

People have always left home in search of new lives, better livelihoods, or adventure. Traditionally rigid gender norms and lack of opportunities have prevented women from exploring opportunities. With radical and rapid changes in the politico-economic and social realms across the world, realignment of social and cultural relations and sweeping changes in the labour market, more and more women are now breaking away from homes, looking for more viable livelihood options or a preferred way of life. For Durbar, this is seen as a positive and even potentially transformative development, opening up a window of opportunity for challenging existing gender and class inequalities. As feminists and rights activists, they are totally against any measure that restricts women's mobility in the name of stopping trafficking.

Durbar has taken a stand that their chief interest is in restoring a degree of control to the trafficked individual and not in convicting the trafficking agent, the latter being the responsibility and concern of the state. They have decided never to put a trafficked individual in police custody for the sake of filing a case against the traffickers. Moreover, their experience has shown that trafficking takes place with the help of numerous agents, often unconnected with each other and many of them are known to the trafficked individuals, be they their relatives or lovers. Thus, arresting or convicting some of them sporadically is unlikely to have any impact. In many cases, Durbar has managed to establish working relationships with local police, and the higher-ups in the police administration, whereby Durbar continues to recover and repatriate trafficked sex workers with implicit knowledge of the police. However, the issue gets more complicated when the trafficked individual comes from another country. This poses a potential threat to Durbar's intervention in this arena, as its extra-constitutional role can be used against them if the state so wishes.

The other challenge is a more practical one. While sex worker members are eager to take action against exploitation, non-sex worker members are more hesitant. Durbar members suggested that boards should be brought up to speed with Durbar's thinking on trafficking, so that they do not lapse into the usual raid and rescue mode of intervention, or just pursue welfare activities. They also suggested visits between board members from different areas,

to develop a wider understanding of the issues involved, and in turn, a more institutional character. The boards' effectiveness also depends on the confidence and support of local sex workers. In order to gain their trust, and involve non-sex worker members more actively, the Self Regulatory Boards have embarked on a series of developmental activities in the red light areas. These include helping sex workers to acquire ration cards and access government schemes for the poor, repairing roads, arranging regular clearing of garbage, proper water supply and sanitation and so on. These activities bring succour to sex workers, get non-sex workers members involved and give the boards visibility and a certain legitimacy. Through these activities, Durbar reiterates sex workers' claims to amenities and benefits to which they are entitled as citizens.

NGOs' positions and practices also pose a challenge to sex workers' intervention into trafficking. On the one hand, the conflict is ideological. Sex workers and trafficked persons taking the initiative to deal with their own problems as actors rather than passive beneficiaries challenge the conventional role of NGOs and the enlightened middle classes of working on behalf of the poor. On the other hand, there is also an immediate conflict of interest. If more and more sex workers' organisations gain the capacity and the confidence to implement anti-trafficking intervention activities themselves, NGOs would become gradually redundant. In fact, sex workers and trafficked persons' demands for the right to self-determination and autonomy represent an ideological challenge not just to NGOs' anti-trafficking practices, but to all discourses that reduce the marginalised, and particularly women, to submissive victims of their circumstance, devoid of human agency, unable to steer their own destiny unless rescued by benevolent others.

Changing the frame

Overcoming this challenge calls for a discursive shift in the way sex work and sex workers are framed. Durbar was the one to introduce the word *jounokarmee* as Bengali nomenclature for sex workers, as a way of claiming an identity as workers. While the debates rage on about whether sex work can be considered a valid occupation and be decriminalised, the word *jounokarmee* has made its way into everyday language. Local newspapers, both English and Bengali, hardly ever use other, more derogatory terms for sex workers unless the reporter

deliberately wants to deprecate the sex workers' rights movement.

For this shift in discourse to have an impact on anti-trafficking practices on the ground, and for sex workers to be accepted as equal players in anti-trafficking forums, where they could effectively challenge the anti-sex worker and anti-human rights slants in the dominant discourses and interventions

Notes

- * Swapna Gayen, Rama Debnath, Kajol Bose, Sikha Das, Geeta Das, M. Das, Manju Biswas, Pushpa Sarkar, Putul Singh, Rashoba Bibi, Rekha Mitra and Sudipta Biswas are sex worker activists who conducted the action research and helped in analysing the data. Swapna and Rama are the elected Secretary and President of DMSC – Durbar's agitational front. Kajol is the current President of the sex workers' own cooperative society, Usha. Durbar fieldworkers Akshay Mukherjee, Arati Dutta, Bishwajit Modok, Mahashweta Bhattacharya, Shoma Dutta, Shubra Mitra also helped in conducting the interviews.
- 1 The title is a translation from a popular slogan of the sex workers' movement in West Bengal: '*Rastar meyerai path dekhachhey*'.
 - 2 *Durbar* in Bengali means indomitable.
 - 3 Her real name has not been used at her request.
 - 4 Brothel manager or madam.
 - 5 *Chhukris* are virtually bonded to their brothel managers, who usually make a down-payment in advance, either to agents who traffic sex workers or to the sex workers' relatives or associates who bring her, for contracting the services of the sex worker. A *chhukri* is obliged to work under the *malkin* until she earns enough to pay off the advanced amount. However, in reality a *chhukri* ends up paying off her debt several times over before she is allowed to move on. The conditions of work are extremely harsh as the *malkin* tries to

and establish their own perspectives and protect their interests, much more has to happen. However, the stories related here tell us that sex workers themselves, together with organisations like Durbar, can perhaps show ways in which any marginalised group of poor women can claim citizenship rights through voicing and actualising their demand for self-determination and participation in the public sphere.

- extract as much income from the *chhukri* as possible, allowing her neither leisure nor much choice over clients and sexual practices.
- 6 Her real name has been used at her request.
 - 7 *Adhiya* is a particular contractual arrangement in sex work. *Adhiyas* are those sex workers who work for a *malkin* and share 50 per cent of their income with her. Some *adhiyas* graduate to this status from originally being *chhukris* while the majority start their career in sex work as *adhiyas*.
 - 8 Her real name has not been used at her request.
 - 9 An action research for a programme on Gender Citizenship and Good Governance conducted by Durbar in collaboration with Royal Tropical Institute (KIT), the Netherlands in 2000–2.
 - 10 They mentioned *parar chheley* or neighbourhood boys and *mastans* or petty criminals who live on extortion and small crime. In most cases they are synonymous. In red light areas and indeed in most poor neighbourhoods, these young men are a common phenomenon often enjoying the patronage of one or the other political party. In red light areas these men are sex workers' sons, their boyfriends or husbands. Some also come from families that own the brothels.
 - 11 They wanted sex work to enjoy the same status as any other work (*aar panchta kajer mato kaj*) and claimed workers' rights or *srameeker adhikar*, so that the *shamaj* (society) respects them.
 - 12 Elected local government body.