

# THE VAMP/SANGRAM SEX WORKER'S MOVEMENT IN INDIA'S SOUTHWEST

BY THE SANGRAM/VAMP TEAM

FROM CHANGING THEIR WORLD 2ND EDITION  
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## The VAMP/SANGRAM Sex Worker's Movement in India's Southwest

By the SANGRAM/VAMP team

The Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) is an international feminist, membership organization committed to achieving gender equality, sustainable development and women's human rights. AWID's mission is to strengthen the voice, impact and influence of women's rights advocates, organizations and movements internationally to effectively advance the rights of women.

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### The Dominant Discourse on Sex Work—A brief history

Prostitution has always been constructed as a social problem and at the same time as the “world's oldest profession”. This dichotomous perception of prostitution has ruled the social response to women in prostitution. The fact that this ‘problematic and undesirable profession’ was practiced almost exclusively by women created a category of women who were ‘prostitutes’—undesirable persons, “fallen women”, who needed to be reformed. The perception of such women as ‘bad’ women further evolved and they came to be viewed as immoral and debauched. The profession itself is thought to have an evil influence on the moral fabric of society, and particularly on the character of ‘good’ women. This concept of the fallen woman has governed public opinion, policy and law.

In nineteenth century Britain, the legal discourse identified women in prostitution as the source of venereal disease. The Contagious Diseases Acts (1864, 1866, 1869), the Indian Contagious Diseases Act 1868 and the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 1885 reflected this diseased state of ‘prostitutes’ which was viewed as a reflection of their morally corrupt state. Hence it was the objective of law to control the deviant ‘prostitute’ in a thorough, systematic way. Medical discourse further assigned the spread of venereal diseases to women in prostitution and constituted it as “unnatural”. Sex work contradicted the bourgeois notion and norm of a controlled female sexuality, confined within the bounds of monogamous heterosexual marriage. While in Britain prostitution was tied to a general anxiety about the unruliness of the working classes and their sexuality, in the colonial empire, race added another dimension that deepened the perceived threat of the prostitute. In contrast, male sexuality was seen as ‘natural’ and in need of sexual release. Ideally, men should control themselves, but working class and racialized ‘other’ men were perceived as innately more promiscuous<sup>1</sup>. Social reform discourses, such as those led by Josephine Butler, sought the abolition of the Contagious Diseases Acts on the grounds that the state was supporting prostitution. The history of social reform movements resonates today in the move to prevent women from entering prostitution and in the attempt to rescue and rehabilitate them.

### The Power of Language

Just as the stigma surrounding prostitution grew around these core ideas and beliefs, language further consolidated the stigma. Terms which describe women in prostitution are usually derogatory: ‘Fallen women’, ‘whore’, “veshya” (in Indian languages) and even the word ‘prostitute’ are pejorative terms for women in sex work, yet are considered acceptable in common usage. Female sex workers in

India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal call themselves “dhandewali”—or ‘women in business’. Every time we use the term ‘prostitution’ or ‘sex work’, the image that comes to mind is that of a woman. But if men did not pay for sexual services, prostitution, as we know it, would not exist. The unmarked status of the client who pays for sexual services is apparent, and reflects an inherent acceptance of male sexual behavior. For men to have multiple sex partnerships and even pay for sex, is socially acceptable though frowned upon. This ‘male thirst’ is

1. Levine, Philippa (2003), *Prostitution, Race and Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire*. Routledge. New York

normalized to make the male client invisible. Prostitution as an institution has thus come to embody women with 'loose' desires. Female desires and women in multiple sex partnerships do not remain merely sexual, they attain immorality. This immoral space within which prostitution is placed is the challenge that needs to be addressed. Without accepting and confronting the idea that women can have sex with more than one person, the perception of prostitution will remain skewed.

### Feminist Approaches to Sex Work

For feminism, prostitution has symbolized oppression, victimization and the exploitation of womanhood. This is because it has looked at prostitution through the framework of a rigid understanding of patriarchy, viewing it as objectifying women's bodies, and as the commercialization of sex. Hence, for feminists, prostitutes are victims of unequal power relations between the sexes. No 'real' woman would willingly agree to do sex work, and if she does so, it is because of her 'false consciousness'. We hear feminists talk of prostitution as 'female sexual slavery' and 'sexual victimhood'. These perceptions echo the early reformist discourse, which views women as needing to be protected - preferably by law - from lustful men. But the fact remains that in most contexts - including India - prostitution is neither legal nor illegal. It simply has no status.<sup>2</sup>

The victim imagery has engendered several positions on prostitution, including among feminists. Those who see women in sex work as 'slaves', advocate the complete eradication of prostitution—this is known as the "abolitionist" position. The State and other establishments, such as NGOs, often use this approach. Another feminist position is reformist, where women in prostitution are seen as in need of rescue and reform because they have lost their way, been tricked or trafficked into sex work, or lack 'character'. Rescue and rehabilitation strategies are used here, to "save" these women from sex work and then rehabilitate them in alternate work. A third approach is the regulatory

approach, which relies on law. This does not take the stand of banning prostitution but rather accepts that prostitution is here to stay, and therefore needs regulation. Laws like India's Immoral Traffic Prevention Act 1956 (ITPA) are a reflection of this approach. Finally, there is the rights-based approach—which is silent on the merits or morality of sex work, but contends that women in sex work should have the same rights and entitlements as any other citizen, and that the State must act as the duty bearer of these rights.

A complex issue that has troubled feminists in the context of sex work is the question of consent. The women's movement has raised the issue of consent in sexual relations mainly within the domestic / marital sphere. In prostitution, adult women consent to exchange sexual services for money, but the ability to consent is contested. Because feminism posits prostitution as violence, this viewpoint forecloses any discussion over whether women can actively choose sex work as a livelihood option. Accordingly, it is assumed that all female sex workers have been coerced into sex work. Violence against women (VAW) has focused on domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment, acid throwing, and similar crimes. So when violence is conflated with sex work, it becomes difficult to see the trees for the woods. For example, in India many sex workers report that they experience violence and exploitation mainly at the hands of police and petty local thugs, rather than in sexual relations with clients<sup>4</sup>. The debates around trafficking further bolster the idea of sex work as violence - exchanging sexual services for money [sex work] is conflated with selling of a body to another [trafficking]. Violence that does occur within the field of sex work is used to justify punitive action against the sex work industry such as closure of brothels and 'clean ups'.

The basic tenet of anti-trafficking rhetoric is that bodies are unwillingly 'sold' and transported across borders. This dovetails perfectly with the feminist argument that prostitution involves no choice and is the major market for trafficking. Trafficking is not viewed as an issue of poverty that causes many women to willingly enter into agreements with traffickers because they are desperately seeking a

better life: secure livelihoods, and / or escape from domestic violence, poverty, conflict, or ecological or natural disasters and displacement. Many women report entering sex work because of the compulsions of difficult circumstances, mainly poverty, and this leads them to think of sex work as a means of survival (Point of View, n.d.). But, without finding out the multiplicity of "push" and "pull" factors in sex workers' histories, most feminists have held that women are trafficked into sex work because of their vulnerability as women. The movement to stop trafficking, by feminist and other groups favoring abolition, is thus framed as the necessity to stop prostitution.<sup>3</sup> By not perceiving the possibility of consent, and focusing on sex work as violence, feminist understanding of sex work has been incomplete, to say the least.

### Historical profile of the SANGRAM/VAMP Sex Workers Movement in India:

#### Catalyst: the AIDS discourse

Ironically, it is the HIV/AIDS discourse, the location of sex workers within it, and the impact of the epidemic itself that played a catalytic role in the formation of the SANGRAM/VAMP sex workers movement. As it has evolved, the AIDS discourse in India professed that women in prostitution are at greater risk to HIV infection than other categories of women. But despite this seemingly rational view, the neglect of sex workers by HIV prevention programs—especially in the early stages of the epidemic in India—demonstrated that women in sex work were actually considered dispensable. Though it was deemed important to work

with women in prostitution, the real intent was to 'save' their clients, who were termed the 'bridge population'—and by implication, to save their monogamous wives, the "good women" who might be subsequently infected by their wandering men. Thus, married women and the general population were constructed as 'innocent' and in need of protection from HIV, whereas the sex worker, who stands culpable of immoral sexual behavior, deserves to get infected. This unarticulated but widespread view among policymakers, health professionals, and the public at large has shaped the design and implementation of the approach to HIV/AIDS prevention, where interventions target a 'population' rather than the virus.

Women in the sex industry have therefore been at the front line of the HIV/AIDS pandemic since its advent. In the sex trade, vulnerability to HIV is mediated by poverty and power, by knowledge and risk perception, by access to health services, and by the violence of stigma, discrimination and abuse. Female sex workers are marginalized both as women and as members of a highly stigmatized group, greatly increasing their risk. Clearly, HIV vulnerability cannot be reduced to a narrow set of behavioral and demographic factors. Public morality on prostitution, patriarchal norms related to female sexuality, and the accompanying blaming and labeling of women in prostitution are critical elements of their HIV risk.

#### Formation and leadership

It was in this context of the AIDS pandemic that in 1992, Sampada Grameen Mahila Sanstha (SANGRAM) a women's rights NGO, decided to speak to women sex workers about HIV and condom-use. The women lived and worked in Gokulnagar,

2. India's Immoral Traffic Prevention Act (ITPA, 1956) does not define prostitution as a crime per se. But many aspects of prostitution are defined as crimes: soliciting, brothel-keeping and pimping.

3. [UN Protocol To Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in persons. Especially Women and Children](#) The definition of trafficking in the Protocol is the first international definition of trafficking.

' Trafficking in persons' shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs;"

\* National Commission for Women, "Societal violence against women and children in Prostitution," NCW, New Delhi, 1997

an area of Sangli town in southern Maharashtra, and the discussions were initiated by Meena Shu, founder of SANGRAM and a feminist and sex worker rights activist. Her journey began in the VAW movement, where she worked with deserted women and cases of dowry deaths. The sex workers were always 'the other' in every village. The understanding was that married men abused their wives largely because of their interest in these 'loose' women.

During these initial interventions in Gokulnagar, a man repeatedly raped<sup>4</sup> and finally murdered a sex worker. Nobody protested. The police and civil society completely ignored the crime - the murder was not even recorded in the police station. The newspapers reported the incident in the 'police diary' section as a small news item. This shocking incident, and the helplessness of the women to resist such violence, brought home the fact that violence against women in prostitution was a serious threat, and one that was being ignored by feminists, activists, the State and society in Sangli.

SANGRAM decided to organize and build a community-based organization of sex workers to give them a voice and build collective responses in such situations. Initially, it was difficult to build a concept of community in the highly competitive atmosphere of sex work. None of the *gharwalis* ("Madams") would come to any of the meetings SANGRAM organized. Wary of health interventions because most initiatives had stigmatized them as vectors of HIV, or urged them to take steps to protect *others* from HIV infection, SANGRAM took the approach of telling women about protecting *themselves*. Very gradually, the women gained interest in how they could benefit from collectivizing. Self-determination and self-organization through a participatory methodology became the main principles behind the collectivization strategy.

In 1992, sixteen women sex workers from Gokulnagar, with the tacit support of some of the madams who ran the brothels, took up positions as peer educators in SANGRAM, and this catalyzed the emergence of the sex workers movement in Maharashtra. Their work was underpinned by two assumptions: that insiders are

more effective than outsiders in reaching out to a community, and that women in sex work can enforce condom use for their own protection. The peer education program was

1. **Women-centered**—i.e., based on the needs, perceptions and experiences of the women sex workers as opposed to what the intervening agency thinks the women need;
2. **Process-oriented**, with less emphasis on how many condoms were distributed and more on how women sex workers could effectively negotiate safe and responsible sex with clients; and
3. **Empowerment-focused** - Most important of all, the program's main goal was the empowerment of women sex workers.

The peer education program was able to strengthen the sex worker community from within and help the women forge a common identity, and to set their own agenda and priorities—the awareness it brought or actions it facilitated were never imposed.

This peer educator approach resulted in the establishment of VAMP—the Veshya AIDS Muqabla Parishad in 1996 which changed its name in 1998 to Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad. This smooth transition from 'AIDS Muqabla' (struggle against AIDS) to 'Anyay Mukti' (freedom from injustice) is an important marker for a collective journey that began as a struggle against AIDS but has now broadened to a movement that seeks liberation from oppression and injustice. SANGRAM's emphasis on forging a collective identity helped to build a rare solidarity among women sex workers. No longer were they sex workers competing for clients, patronage and resources., but women who shared experiences of multiple discrimination and exclusion, their rights ignored and violated. The women came to identify as part of a marginalized community who were vulnerable not only to HIV/AIDS but to social stigma and public violence, by the very fact being women in sex work. Thus began the process of politicization.

## Empowering from Within: Establishing the VAMP Collective

The idea of VAMP as an independent collective emerged in 1995, by which time 150 women sex workers had become peer educators. The concept of forming an independent collective was first brought up at a meeting held in the seaside village of Ganpatipule. At this meeting, the women agreed that what they wanted was a registered, volunteer-based NGO that would work in partnership with SANGRAM. They did not want the other available option of forming a co-operative society, because of the high levels of corruption associated with the powerful sugar co-operatives in the region. They discussed the possibility of having their own organization with SANGRAM staff, and administered a questionnaire amongst themselves to draw out the aims and wishes of women sex workers. What emerged was a view of the collective as an expansion of the projects undertaken by the peer educator program.

SANGRAM's role was largely guidance and advice, while the collective was to function independently with its own administrative and executive board. VAMP members felt comfortable managing the community on their own, but needed help with back-office work such as writing proposals, managing accounts, and dealing with the Charity Commission<sup>5</sup>. It was decided that the two organizations should collaborate, bringing together their strengths and meeting the other's needs. Because they felt it unlikely that every sex worker in Maharashtra and neighboring Karnataka would join the collective, VAMP was perceived as a mechanism for facilitating women sex workers across the State to build organized communities of their own. VAMP's leadership in taking forward the sex workers movement in Maharashtra and Northern Karnataka has thus been critical.

Three key words characterize SANGRAM's peer education program: empowering, women centered, and process-oriented. Given the organization's emphasis on process, and on strengthening the community from within, building a collective

was an obvious next step. As part of the division of responsibilities, VAMP now runs the peer education program in the eight districts in Maharashtra, with the help of SANGRAM. VAMP has a membership of over **five thousand women in sex work**. The membership is not formal and is need-based. Any woman in sex work from the 'sites' where VAMP works is entitled to the services offered, can attend the weekly *mohalla* (neighborhood) committee meetings, make a complaint, or help in arbitration of community disputes.

By functioning as a loose collective, VAMP is able to attract women to join the sex workers movement in Maharashtra. VAMP holds weekly meetings where decisions are made on how to go about mediating community disputes, lobbying with the police, helping colleagues access government health systems and facilitating leadership potential among members. VAMP's membership structure has three basic layers. It is governed by a board of peer educators who are leaders in the sex work community, effective in their condom distribution work and in providing care and support to colleagues. Each board member carries an identity card, put into to use mainly when dealing with the police. Peer educators are called *tais* (meaning sisters). Other categories of VAMP members are community workers and field workers. Community workers assess condom requirements and monitor condom supply. They also help women with accessing medical services and offer informal counseling. Field workers are the contact / point people, who attend VAMP's weekly meetings and report back to their community worker colleagues who pass on the information to their constituents. Raju Naik, the son of a sex worker, was selected by VAMP members as its Co-ordinator, or full-time executive. He is the first male co-ordinator of VAMP, and his salary is shared by VAMP and SANGRAM.

## Framing the VAMP agenda

Although SANGRAM facilitated the process of identity formation and leadership building, it now plays a more back-stopping role, while the women

4. Sex workers can be raped just like any other woman, if we understand rape to be forced sex against the woman's will and without her consent.

5. The regulatory body for NGOs in India

in the movement come up with solutions to their problems. While HIV/AIDS forms a large part of the focus in VAMP, considerable attention is also given to the social, psychological and economic issues in women sex workers' lives, and the effect of these on their health and well-being. VAMP plays a crucial role in promoting the interests of its constituents and setting the movement's political agenda, which emerges from the ground up.

For instance, police harassment is an ongoing problem for women sex workers. Not only are they routinely abused and beaten, they are randomly picked up on charges of soliciting, which is deemed criminal under the ITPA. Brothel-keeping and soliciting are criminalized under Indian law, and more often than not, sex workers are implicated in the 'crime' to a greater extent than actual brothel keepers and pimps<sup>6</sup>. These experiences helped shape VAMP's agenda.

Since this community is so familiar with HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), the emphasis of the peer educator's portfolio is on the entire continuum of HIV - before, during and after infection. The women can easily identify specific STDs affecting sex workers. They are trained in identifying the right medication for each STD, through a system of colour coding. Preventive work on HIV/AIDS is mainly through peer education, condom distribution and assisting sex worker colleagues access treatment services. VAMP women play a supportive role when community members become HIV infected. Often peer educators become the *de facto* families and care givers for ill colleagues. Not only do they ferry these women back and forth from hospitals, but also organize food, and look after their children or even lovers who are sick. When a colleague succumbs to AIDS-related complications, they manage funeral arrangements.

VAMP has worked toward forging and consolidating a common identity among women sex workers, empowering them to assert their rights and protect themselves from HIV infection. Indeed, the collective works towards creating a safer and less hostile working and living environment.

## Strategies

The empowerment of women sex workers is often taken to mean the development of sex workers as peer educators in order to achieve 100 per cent condom use in brothels<sup>7</sup>. Most NGOs use such a peer educator approach and their empowerment strategies tend to be more about equipping women with ways to access health services and to become the conduits for condom distribution. SANGRAM and VAMP's strategies were evolved to consider first and foremost the women sex workers' overall psycho-socio-economic situation in order to facilitate the realization of rights. At the heart of this process is the collective, and the building of sex workers' collective power.

Collectivizing is one of the most effective strategies to resist and reduce violence against sex workers. VAMP's collectives have helped sex workers deal with exploitative brothel owners and other forms of violence—so much so that the police are now recognizing that women in sex work are the only ones who can reduce violence in sex work. Goons, bad clients, political leaders - all of them are forced to negotiate with the collective. Collectives have also helped reduce the number of minor girls in prostitution.

A firm belief of VAMP and SANGRAM has been the participatory approach, which focuses on developing the sex workers' own capacity, making

them the primary focus in everything. Unlike more hierarchical peer interventions, VAMP's peer-based strategy is designed so that sex workers are not the 'foot soldiers' while activists with social work degrees are the coordinators. Rather, this program is managed, run and implemented by sex workers from top to bottom. Women sex workers' participation in the planning and implementation of interventions assures the appropriateness and effectiveness of the design, and, more importantly, recognises that the women are in a position to provide valuable information to their activist and NGO allies and supporters.

VAMP believes that empowered sex workers are the best agents of change for themselves and their community. In the early days, a peer was chosen in every seventh house in Gokulnagar, the red light district of Sangli town. Now, a peer works with 40 women in prostitution and sex work. Peer educators reach other sex workers in ways that range from informal street corner chats to formal puppet shows or Information, Education, Communication (IEC) sessions. The information that is provided is never judgemental. This is one of the benefits of adopting an approach where the 'educators' and the 'educated' live in similar circumstances and can understand each other's experiences.

### The "No Condoms No Sex" Campaign

Women in prostitution have devised various innovative methods of making their clients use condoms. Some of them pick up gruesome pictorial images of STDs from the SANGRAM office to show their clients. Others are able to predict – and challenge – the reason clients may offer to not wear condoms.

"We never say yes to sex without a condom," says Shabana, a peer educator from the tobacco growing area of Nippani in Karnataka. "There are times when clients have asked for their money back. But we have learnt that *pyar, muhabbat se sab sunte hain* (everyone understands loving words)". Shabana describes a typical effort at condom negotiation with a married client in her earthy tones. "I tell them: *Mazaa to do minit ka rehta hai* (fun is for two minutes only), but if you use a condom the rest of your life can be enjoyed. If your two minutes of pleasure are reduced by 5%, what is the big deal?"

Over the years, peers have taken the initiative to reach new, unorganized communities of sex workers. For example, they carried out a survey of married women who are in sex work in order to discover how to reach this largely hidden group. The survey showed that married women operate from lodges (small hotels) in a particular area. This data formed the basis for an outreach programme targeting married women in sex work.

haul cross-country truckers who ply the national highways, and local truckers who ferry produce along the state highways. Truckers usually wait a day as their trucks are loaded and unloaded, and this is a window of opportunity to buy sex. Truck drivers are often the favourite clients of women sex workers, who report that they are the least violent. In 2000, VAMP started a program to convince truck drivers, and other transport workers, to treat STDs and prevent HIV. Truckers who ply the highways between the states of Maharashtra and Karnataka are extremely mobile and have multiple sex partners. As they were the regular clients of VAMP members and formed a large pool of the clientele, it was decided that the VAMP collective's experience with the peer educator intervention could be used as a model approach for an intervention

## New Directions

■ **Working with truckers:** In the late nineties, HIV prevention programs widened beyond the sex worker to include their clients. Truck drivers were the new target population—both long-

6. Gangoli, G, (1999), *The regulation of women's sexuality through law: civil and criminal laws in re/productions*, Issue No. 2, April 1999, Harvard School of Public Health, Boston. D'Cunha, J, (1992), *Prostitution Laws – ideological dimensions and enforcement practices*, in Economic and Political Weekly, April 25, 1992, Sameeksha Trust, Mumbai.

7. Shivdas, M, (2000), *Control and Counteractions: Women Sex Workers, State and NGOs*. Work in progress paper presented on 6th May 2000, Institute of Development Studies, Sussex. Shivdas, M, (forthcoming), *Not always in tandem: women sex workers' lives and prescriptions for their health*, paper presented at the WHO panel on women and occupational health, 2nd International Congress on Women and Work, June 2002, Stockholm. WHO, Geneva.

with truckers.

VAMP's emphasis on safe and responsible sex formed the core of the intervention. Applying women's knowledge of their clients' habits and behaviour patterns, this project succeeded in raising awareness about the need for protection during sexual encounters. The truckers saw the VAMP women as their friends and lovers and not as elite, professional interventionists. Befriending truckers is fairly easy, since their routes are fairly regular. In a transitional lifestyle marked by long, lonely stretches on the road, friendship becomes all the more important. The truckers' program is built around the same core idea of empowering individuals to prevent STDs, including HIV. In other words, *the target is not the trucker, it is the STD*. VAMP's strategy was to build the self-worth and dignity of truckers. VAMP's workers reach out to truckers at the *dhabas (roadside restaurants)* where they stop for meals, at vegetable and animal markets where they unload produce, and industrial complexes in the Sangli-Miraj area. They talk to them about life on the road, the journey, relationships back home. At some point in the conversation, a small space opens up into which HIV can be slipped in. "The truckers come from as far as Haryana<sup>8</sup>," says Amina a peer educator with VAMP. "They remember the discussions they had with these women."

Talking to truckers about sex between men is an important aspect of this program, since many truck drivers have sex with the male cleaners who accompany them. Recently, the truckers' program has expanded to reach auto rickshaw<sup>9</sup> drivers. Here, the most effective outreach workers are young men from the sex worker community. Previously, with few job prospects, many of them had turned to petty crime and become *goondas* or thugs. Becoming outreach workers has given them a sense of self-esteem and hope. Some of them are educated and keep records for VAMP workers. Although new, the auto rickshaw program has already tasted success. "One rickshaw driver told us that he now talks to every passenger he drops off at brothels about using condoms," says Shevanta.

#### ■ **Working with the children of sex workers:**

Another diversification since VAMP's inception is working with sex workers' children. Children of sex workers often face the whiplash of stigma and discrimination from an early age—such as being taunted and ostracized at school. Such stigma often leads to low motivation and low self-esteem, which translates into poor academic performance. Even when a sex worker's son or daughter successfully finishes school, there are few prospects for further education or employment opportunities. 'What next?' is a question that sex workers' children must confront at every step in their teenage lives. VAMP members felt that their children needed a safe space to explore and strengthen their ability to deal with the mainstream attitude towards them. This program was designed with the aim of helping the children cope with the stigma of their mothers' occupation. Staff members of the program are adult children of women in sex work. It was through their experiences of being discriminated at school, especially by teachers, that the idea of making education more accessible to children of sex workers emerged. They suggested a 'Supplementary Education' intervention, using tuition classes as an entry point to teach children core life-skills. This project has three goals: First, when teachers discriminate, the child begins to fall behind in her/his studies, or refuses to go to school. Project staff intervene by giving emotional support and encouragement to the child. Secondly, by sharing their own experiences, they are able to present a positive role model to the child, of achieving respect within the community and considerable success in getting jobs and earning money. Thirdly, with the help of qualified teachers, the child can make up academic losses by taking extra classes. The children examine their identity and explore ways to reclaim spaces for respect given the type of work and lives that are led by their mothers. They learn to respect society, community, family, and, most important, themselves.

#### When mothers are in sex work...

The children of female sex workers inhabit two separate worlds. "Your mother is bad. The company she keeps is bad. Her behavior is bad": this is the child's first world; while the other is: "My Mother." When children step out of their home, one world begins; when they return home it is the other. The conflict between these two worlds is the children's daily trauma. The biggest problem the children faced was their inability to openly assert their identity. The inability to openly say, "This is my mother"; the inability to take their mothers to the doctor when they fell ill because the doctor would ask innumerable questions; the inability to take their mothers to their school day functions. The agony of an unacknowledged father was also an ever-present issue. Likewise, the deep sense of alienation: "What is to be done about a society that refuses to listen to what I have to say?" A radical change in their thought processes must begin with questioning the society that was rife with hypocrisy and double standards. As such, we began a parallel education, right from the school level: an education that equipped the child to question and deal with society. These children could now tell a society which was trying to rob them of their self-esteem: "We will not let you do this."

#### Brothel Born and Bred:

Children of Sex Workers Speak. <http://sangram.org/Download/Brothel.pdf>

■ **Mitra Hostel for Children of Sex Workers:** In continuation of this work with the children of sex workers, SANGRAM and VAMP started a residential center (a hostel) for children of sex workers in 2008. Usually due to alcoholism, some women in sex work find it difficult to give their children the necessary care. This hostel, called Mitra (or "Friend"), is based in Nipani town. Currently, there are 35 girls and boys aged 4 to 14 at Mitra, along with a caretaker, warden, and teacher/facilitator. All the children are admitted to local government schools, but the Mitra teacher provides supplementary education. Once a week a doctor from the government hospital visits Mitra to handle the children's health care needs.

■ **Working with men who have sex with men:** In 2000, a small group of men approached SANGRAM to start a program for Males who have Sex with Males (MSM). The program that grew out of this was called "Muskan" (or "Smile"). In its first phase, Muskan reached out to more than 600 men, treating at least 40 STD cases and identifying three HIV-positive persons in one year. During this time, Muskan functioned almost as a separate project, partly due to the support group members' own struggles with gender and sexual identities. After an unforeseen hiatus of two years, the Muskan project re-started in 2004 with new perspectives and intervention

strategies. In order to integrate MSM more firmly into the ethos and work of SANGRAM and VAMP, the men now also participate in the truckers' project as outreach workers.

#### ■ Allies of the Sex Workers Movement

VAMP and SANGRAM collaborate with many other like-minded organizations and networks in India working on HIV/AIDS, sexuality, prostitution and women's rights. Networking is a way to take the main trunk of VAMP's agenda forward through diverse branches. VAMP and SANGRAM are active in Action Plus, a network of 15 organizations working to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS in India, in the National Network of Sex Workers, of which VAMP is a member, in Rainbow Planet, a diverse coalition of progressive groups working for the rights of sexuality minorities, sex workers and PLHA (People Living with HIV/AIDS) in India, and in the Network of Sex Work Projects—A global network of projects around the world who advocate for the human rights of people in sex work irrespective of their legal status. The goals and strategies of some of these alliances and networks are briefly described in the box below:

8. A state in the Northern part of India, about 2000 kms north of the region where VAMP is active.

9. Drivers of the three-wheeler "tuk tuks" ubiquitous in towns and cities across India.

- Member organizations of the **Action Plus** network aim to prevent the spread of HIV through a range of interventions, such as advocacy, peer education, counseling, training, community mobilization, care and support, providing information on sex and sexuality, and creating educational materials. In April 2004, Action Plus convened a People's "Panchayat" (People's Court) which listened to testimonies from sex workers, sexual minorities and people living with HIV/AIDS. In 2009 SANGRAM was instrumental in both conceiving and executing the People's Panchayat on resisting homophobia in 5 cities, with support from all the members of Action Plus.
- **The National Network of Sex Workers** was seeded in November 1997 at the 1st National Conference of Sex Workers in India (convened by the Kolkata-based Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, or DMSC). The 4000 sex workers who attended the conference from India, Bangladesh and Nepal shared experiences and planned strategies to struggle against their conditions of material deprivation and social stigmatization. This was the first time in the history of South Asia that a group of sex workers rallied together and explicitly attempted to inscribe their self-defined and self-conscious identity on the public sphere. At this conference, DMSC, VAMP, and others decided to unite their efforts and broaden the scope of their respective struggles and facilitate the formation of autonomous sex workers' organizations in other parts of India. Based on this decision, and amidst overwhelming enthusiasm shown by other unorganized groups of sex workers who had come to the Conference, the National Network of Sex Workers of India was formed.
- **Rainbow Planet is a diverse coalition** of progressive groups working for the rights of sexual minorities, sex workers and PLHA (People Living with HIV/AIDS) in India. The coalition made news at the World Social Forum 2003 in Mumbai, forcing 'old style' activists and trade unionists to recognize their legitimate struggle for human rights.

In 2003, members of VAMP and SANGRAM participated in The South Asia Court of Women on the Violence of Trafficking and HIV AIDS organized by the **Asian Women's Human Rights Council** in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and in which the autonomous Bangalore-based feminist organization **Vimochana** played an important role. And since 2000, SANGRAM and Mumbai-based creative development media and communications NGO **Point of View** have consistently worked together to voice the needs, concerns and perspectives of women in prostitution. This collaboration, which began with the production of a newsletter, now encompasses other elements—a theatre production, a series of feminist dialogues and trainings, and other publications.

### VAMP as a feminist movement

The politics of the female body, female sexual conditioning and sexual control are contentious issues that the sex workers movement has teased out,

providing clarity in this often-confusing terrain. The moral value placed on 'chaste womanhood' is centered on monogamous heterosexual relationships within marriage for the sole purpose of reproduction. Female sexual conditioning is construed around Indian notions of 'pure and sacred womanhood'. In this framework, female passion is vehemently denied expression and acquires the status of 'impure desire'. This sexual conditioning frowns upon the explicit use of sexual parts of the female body or the sexual self, deeming it cheap and immoral, acceptable only if the motive is love and monogamously male-centric. But any deviation from this pushes the limits of acceptable female sexual behavior.

Work with sex workers has evolved under these socially-constructed premises. The conceptual foundations that inform the sex workers movement are deeply feminist because they challenged this discourse, in both analysis and action. To begin with, the very language used to describe women in sex work had to be transformed. Thus one of the movement's earliest feminist strategies was to

reclaim some of the negative terminology, and assert identities with positive meaning. Vocabulary has been revised to weed out words which reinforce the stigma and marginalization of women in prostitution. Hence, we started using terminology like 'women in prostitution' instead of the commonly used term 'prostitute'. We now use people in sex work to include male and trans persons in sex work.

In the era when SANGRAM and VAMP began, many sections of the Indian women's movement felt that issues of sexuality are frivolous and 'upper class,' while more life-threatening issues of poverty, drought, degradation of the environment, caste oppression and violence against women assume higher importance in the 'cause'. Sex, sexuality and sex work have therefore been relegated to the lowest rungs in the ladder of research and intervention. The journey of the sex workers movement has been consumed with discussions on sex, love, multiple sex partners, and discomfort with sex as physical activity devoid of love. The movement has attempted to unravel concepts of sexual morality, pleasure, preferences, diversity, health and rights in ways that are not only feminist in character, but have actually catalyzed discussions on sexuality in the Indian feminist movement. It has been particularly challenging to do this at a time when, under the guise of 'protection' of the individual and the family, moral policing and vicious campaigning against sexuality in any form that is not procreative has become disturbingly widespread. The sex workers movement has challenged the very notions of 'vice' and 'deviance' advanced by the moralists, who condemn the lived experiences of sex workers - single motherhood, pre and extra-marital relationships, multiple sex partners and different forms of erotic expression and sexual preference.

But the feminist nature of the sex workers movement is not manifest only in its interrogation of sexuality. The movement raises many other issues that are essentially feminist - the patterns that emerge in sex workers lives include economic power as the female head of the household, economic security and a feeling of liberation from the constricting social norms faced by women living within the realm of mainstream heteronormativity and marriage. That women who have had a chance

to leave the profession have chosen to remain, accepting prostitution as 'a way of life', indicates an option that is better than the double standards that exist in mainstream society.

### The Constraints of the Movement

A significant way in which the sex workers movement has been constrained is by the lack of acceptance that women can be in charge of what they do when they enter and decide to work in the sex trade. Some sections of feminists have been active proponents of the view that sex workers possess a "false consciousness" which apparently inhibits them from accurately assessing their oppressive situation. This notion of the false consciousness originates in the Marxist analysis of the working classes. As a product of second-wave feminism though, its implications have led to an inability to incorporate sex work into the feminist agenda. In debates over pornography in the Eighties, for instance, feminist lawyer Catherine McKinnon argued that the social subjugation of women is directly linked to the subjugation of their sexuality<sup>10</sup>. Taken to its extreme, this view held that the sex industry was the fundamental source leading to all forms of discrimination against women. The claim that women who enter this industry must be unknowing victims or attached to a false sense of sex work as 'liberating' is hard for sex workers and sex work activists to counter. It has the effect of pathologizing those who claim to enjoy their work, or who remain in sex work by choice.

In an attempt to overcome this impasse, a channel of communication between sex workers and feminists needed to be opened up. SANGRAM and Point of View, a feminist organization working with media, organized a set of dialogues and published the outcomes in the form of a book entitled "*Ain't I a Woman*"<sup>11</sup>. These dialogues involved activists representing both sex workers and feminists, who attempted to understand each other's politics—without necessarily arriving at a consensus. It was a space for thinking aloud,

10. MacKinnon, Catherine. 1982. *Feminism, marxism, method, and the state: An agenda for theory*. *Signs* 7(Spring) No. 3



expressing discomforts and disagreements without the fear of censure. Five dialogues were held in Mumbai, Delhi, Pune, Bangalore and Kolkata from June to December 2004, organized in collaboration with a women's rights organization in each city<sup>11</sup>. A multitude of overlapping issues were discussed, including:

- how the 'choices' of women in prostitution can be located in the larger context of women's choices, while acknowledging their specificity;
- whether sex work is work, and whether exchanging sex for money can be equated with providing other services;
- to what extent a feminist understanding of prostitution and sex work is embedded in conservative morality;

- whether a 'woman's right to her body' translates into a 'right' to using her body in the marketplace—for prostitution or for anything else;
- whether violence faced by women in prostitution is a form of violence against women; and most importantly,
- how women's rights organizations can acknowledge and support the struggles of women in prostitution.

This dialogue series succeeded in opening up a line of questioning within feminist organizations, challenging hitherto sacrosanct feminist tenets. Ground was also laid for future collaboration, which has been evident in the way many feminist organizations have been responding to sex workers' issues that were earlier marginalized by the mainstream feminist movement in India, such as the attack and closure of Mumbai city's "dance bars".

### The Women's Movement, VAW and the Dance Bar Girls

The slow but sure alliance between the women's movement and the sex worker's movement coalesced in 2004 around the controversy of banning bars with women dancers in Mumbai. These two movements found resonance on the key point that bar girls have rights to human dignity and livelihood – rights which were being denied on grounds of indecency, vulgarity and obscenity. Dance bars had been an integral part of Mumbai's nightlife for many years. While some anti-trafficking organizations argued that dance bars were brothels and sites for trafficking of minors, one noted feminist legal organization took up the dancers' plight, recognizing that dance bars differed from brothels: sex work does not occur on the premises and not all dancers do sex work.

Women who enter the world of dance bars come from a variety of backgrounds and situations. They are daughters of sex workers; women from India's traditional dancing communities; women from poor textile worker families, and those who have worked under exploitative conditions as maidservants, piece-rate workers, or door-to-door salesgirls. A proliferation of dance bars had occurred in Mumbai in the nineties, ironically under the rule of the right-wing and morally conservative Shiv Sena-BJP parties. However in 2001 with a change of government, dance bars in Mumbai came under increased surveillance by the ruling Congress Party<sup>12</sup>. By March 2004, more than one hundred bars had been raided by law enforcement agencies. Bar owners and the

11. "Ain't I a Woman" Point of View and SANGRAM Viz., Saheli in Delhi; Masum in Pune; Vimochana in Bangalore; and Sanhita in Kolkata.  
 12. The Shiv Sena is a far-right political organization, which propagates a militant ideology of Maharashtra for Maharashtrians and supports the pan-Indian Hindu Nationalist agenda, forwarded by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The BJP is a major political party in India driven by a nationalist, conservative and Hindu agenda. The Indian National Congress Party is a major political party currently the leading India's coalition government. It claims a secular identity, giving special emphasis on the welfare of the economically and socially disadvantaged sections of society

women unionized, organized political rallies and approached the courts. But the Congress Party maintained that the bars were a smokescreen for trafficking in minors.

Despite working on issues of violence against women, the women's movement had not taken much notice of the dance bar industry as a potential site for VAW, and especially for state-sponsored violence. It was only when the bar girls came out in force at a huge rally in August 2004, that women's groups recognized the extent of this violence: When the bars are raided, it is the girls who are arrested, but the owners are let off. During the raids the police molest them, tear their clothes, and abuse them in filthy language. At times, the girls are retained in the police station for the whole night and subjected to further indignities. But in the litigation, their concerns were not reflected. It is essential that they be heard and they become part of the negotiations with the State regarding the code of conduct to be followed during the raids<sup>13</sup>.

However, it was not a clear-cut path for women's groups in taking up the bar girls' plight within a VAW campaign. Crucial to feminist analysis had been the critique of the use of women's bodies and their sexuality for profit making and male consumption. With a history of protesting against the commodification of women's bodies in events like beauty pageants, it was difficult to view the act of women dancing in front of men for money as anything but a manifestation of patriarchal power. Majlis, a women's legal rights organization in Mumbai decided to take up the litigation despite a lot of opposition from NGOs and women's groups who viewed dancing as they did sex work—as degrading for women—and the bars as potential dens for trafficking of minors.

Despite the ban, the fact that some feminists were able to reexamine notions of morality has had wider implications, by paving the way for the women's movement to include violence against women in the entertainment industry as well as sex workers on the larger VAW agenda. Although there are now some grassroots connections between sex workers groups, autonomous women's groups, and feminists in India, these alliances are still new and fragile. In 2007, the National Conference of Autonomous Women's Groups held in Kolkata made history by allowing the participation of sex workers' organizations, and including sex workers' rights for the first time; but many participants expressed discomfort with a performance by bar dancers at the conference.

13. Agnes, Flavia. "Hypocritical Morality" in Manushi: Issue 149.

### How the sex workers movement has influenced the larger discourse on women's rights

Violence has clearly been an area where the sex workers rights movement has directly influenced the wider discourse of VAW and women's rights. There is a lot of violence in the sex worker community. Men beat up women, *women occasionally, mainly in retaliation, beat up men* and there is a high degree of alcohol abuse. The police and criminal gangs are major sources of violence. The power of the police lies in having the authority and institutional backing to extort bribes, and pick up women because they have targets to meet. In dealing with this violence, sex workers have been reluctant to turn to the State, but have resisted violence in their own ways. When a policeman threatened to rape a sex worker in the middle of the road and tear open her vagina, SANGRAM started articulating the links between violence and language. Every legal attempt was made to book the police officer for his threatening tirade, but to no avail. The violence of language then became an important issue for the sex workers to take up. The governance and legal system is not willing to accept that sex workers have valid grievances. For the women's movement, the State has been the main reference point for making claims of women's rights. The world of sex workers has taught women's rights activists that in the context of violence, the state may not

always be the appropriate agency, and must be negotiated in numerous ways.

The struggle for justice for sex workers has come with the realization that alliances with other movements must be forged in order to secure sex workers' rights. Reaching out to the women's movement has helped in articulating and documenting human rights violations so that justice can be sought for violence against sex workers. But building these alliances has not been easy. Feminists have emphasized the elimination of sex work as a goal over and above the rights of sex workers. The challenge has therefore been to talk about these rights with communities of activists.

The sex workers' movement has made visible the underlying and unquestioned moralities in women's movements—and along with lesbian women, disabled women and trans women, have challenged women's movements to broaden their ambit to represent all women—not just 'good' victims. By showing the commonalities in some of the violence that sex workers and other women experience, sex workers challenge women's movements by asking the questions: Why is the violence we face not considered or addressed within the framework of violence against women; Are we not women?

### ■ The Successes of the Sex Workers movement

The sex workers movement has been successful on many counts. Societal attitudes towards women in prostitution force them to employ two sets of behaviour—one for talking to the outside world which makes them say things like “we are helpless, what can we do”, and one amongst themselves. The victim image is cultivated to deal with the hostility of the mainstream. If one challenges them and wins their trust, the victim image is dropped, and their sense of agency often emerges. The movement has therefore opened up spaces for multiple realities and competing narratives to be heard, each with its own integrity. Thus by mobilizing women sex workers, by creating a positive identity, and by building their leadership and capacity, many women in the movement now take pride in themselves.

As a result, a new awareness has emerged that their lives, like any other, include pain *and* pleasure, exploitation *and* empowerment, victimhood *and* agency, coercion *and* choice. This has been particularly important in contesting binary feminist constructions of 'choice' and 'force'. Sex workers have exposed how these are not mutually exclusive positions, but simply situations that a woman encounters and has to negotiate—like any other woman. The movement has revealed how women in sex work constitute a community with many positive values.

In the context of HIV/AIDS, mainstream society often rejects even family members who test positive. But women in prostitution and sex work rally around each other, and willingly share both the financial and emotional burden, without considering family, caste, or creed. The movement has exposed how women in sex work, in fact often have greater control over some aspects of their lives than women who are not in prostitution and sex work. This is particularly so in areas of sexuality, relationships and reproduction. The women may be vulnerable to organized criminals and brutal cops, but they are also able to confront male-dominated power dynamics. In the workplace, for instance, the women control the conditions of the transaction. Working without payment or due consideration, whatever the amount, is unheard of. Women in sex work pose a tremendous challenge to the family structure and its values and, in this sense, they provide an interesting alternative role model. Sex work has traditionally been seen by feminism as the most extreme manifestation of patriarchy. Not only do women in sex work reject the moral double standards forced on them by mainstream society, but sex workers rights groups argue that sex work also challenges patriarchy. As Meenakshi Kamble of VAMP argues

*“We do not allow men to sit on our heads! We are the earning heads of households. Everything to do with the money we earn is decided by us. We have more power within our families compared to other women. We are the ones who run our families: take all the decisions about the money, about the family members etc. In fact, we have more equal relationships with the men in our lives.”*

Other successes of the sex workers' movement include gradually altering the understanding among other social movements that sex workers

are a constituency whose human rights need to be fulfilled, and so changing the previous view of them as victims. In the public and policy domains too, sex workers are slowly being recognized as women, as human beings and as citizens—although this is just the initial part of an uphill struggle for these recognitions.

### ■ Future Challenges / Directions:

The biggest challenge for VAMP and SANGRAM is posed by the fact that the campaign to establish sexuality rights is relatively new, compared to the more recognized activism of workers, women, farmers, indigenous people or dalits. Its 'legitimacy' is still not accepted even as sexual dissidents try to claim a place among the communities of resistance. More often than not, the abuse suffered by subaltern sexual cultures has been made invisible even by the activist community, using a convoluted logic that arrogates to itself the ability to calibrate pain. The classical position of progressive activists—even if not explicitly articulated—is that class comes first in order of discrimination and marginalization, followed by caste, gender, ecology and so on. If there is any space left on this arc of suffering, then sexuality is included as a humble cabin boy. There is no hope of the last being the first in this inheritance of the meek. It is clear that there is a need to reach out to other movements of groups marginalized by this sort of thinking, in order to challenge this hierarchy of suffering and build broader alliances. The need for coalition building at the local, national, regional and international level is a necessity. The challenge and the struggle is to find a voice in these movements and to create spaces for inter movement dialogue.

### ■ Conclusion

People in sex work cannot be put into a box. The fact that a majority of adult women in sex work can consent to sex work is disbelieved and ignored. Very often, because society and the state deems women in sex work to be morally corrupt, they are assumed to be guilty in any altercation, and thus “deserving” of any violence committed against them. Violence is not intrinsic to sex work; it is the result of discrimination and the vulnerability of the women involved.

The sex workers rights movement has partially succeeded in breaking the morality of the dominant discourse on sex work. But politically motivated vigilantes will continue to pose challenges of 'voluntary versus involuntary', 'choice versus force' and 'exploitation versus business or work'. No one can deny that sex work often involves poor health, financial exploitation and physical and sexual abuse; however, this is not inherent to sex work alone, but rather the result of the stigmatization and marginalization of sex workers in Indian society which deems sex work as immoral and formulates laws that deem it illegal. The uncomplicated understanding that trafficking is synonymous to sex work is also a political one and has managed to guide the strategies of policy makers who are now convinced that all women in sex work are victims of trafficking. The truth is that not all of the women in sex work are trafficked and not all trafficked women are in sex work.

For sex workers in India to access and enjoy their rights, massive and deeply embedded social stereotypes about sex work need to be broken down. Sex work is work. Sex workers do not necessarily need or want to be rescued; they are not a threat to the health of larger society, nor are they walking cases of HIV. While they certainly face discrimination and hardships, people in sex work are capable of advocating for themselves and demanding their own rights.

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