



Sex Workers' Conversations with Feminist Allies

Women, Work and Sex Work

“We define sex work as provision of sexual services for compensation,” say sex workers from the SWASA network (Sex Workers and Allies South Asia). We are Laingik Shramik”. They challenge the notion that sex work is “selling sex” or “selling bodies” (deh vikri) and instead assert that they provide services to clients either directly as independent workers or through third parties.

Intimate Labour: Sex Work

Women work in a range of settings, from the formal sector like manufacturing, to the informal sector and also as self-employed workers. A lot of women's labour is not recognized as work, such as looking after the home, the cattle, or raising children and nurturing the sick and aged. Patriarchal practices ensure that a woman who tends the land and looks after the crops might have no say in how much money has been generated/earned by her, much less how it is spent. Even when women's labour is counted as work, it is often not valued and earns a lesser rate than men doing the same job. There is need to change the notion of what is considered as 'work' and therefore valued in society. Only then will women be able to earn their livelihood more fairly and safely.

Women's ability to generate incomes for their families is adversely affected by neo-liberal policies that is: free trade, open markets, deregulation and privatization of nationalized industries, and less state control of the economy. This school of thought advocates that governments should not exercise control over the price of food and basic necessities. It also advocates for restrictions in public spending on health services, education and housing, instead pushing for these services to be paid for directly by citizens. Such policies push more and more women in poorer countries to take up informal work, which is not well-paid, women have few legal protections or rights in the workplace and trade unions are absent. Sex workers are part of this broad spectrum of the self-employed informal workforce. They are part of the service industry such as masseurs, maids, cleaners, personal chefs, tuition teachers, child care and elder care workers among others.

Sex work is work

Sex work must be considered as work along with other forms of economic activity, be afforded the same protections as other forms of work and be part of the mainstream debate on rights of workers and rights of women. The interpretation of many of the standards agreed by the United Nations and International Labour Organisation (such as the ILO Recommendation 200 on HIV/AIDS and work) must be expanded to give sex workers access to their rights and promote respect for these rights in the sex industry.



In countries where sex work is illegal, the income earned by sex workers is not accounted for in the national economy. The lack of recognition to sex work has led to sex workers' financial transactions not being counted and a resultant second-class citizen status and invisibilization in the economy. **Migrant women** whose cheap labour is welcome in any receiving country, are frowned upon when they decide to work in sex work. They are quickly deemed trafficked and face the brunt of the moral police.

Sex work is not trafficking

Trafficking, with the elements of force and deception is criminal and a complex problem. However, trafficking must also be viewed as an issue of poverty that causes many women to willingly enter into agreements with traffickers and human smugglers because they desperately seek better livelihoods, escape from violence, poverty, conflict, or displacement – in short, a better life. Globalization has come to mean money flowing across countries but has gone hand in hand with stricter checks and surveillance of people moving across borders in search of livelihoods. Moving across borders within a country and across nations has played a crucial role in sex work, and the curbs on free movement of people, especially women, contributes to trafficking and concentration of money and power in the hands of a few vested interests.

Poverty of Access

While sex workers might be able to earn enough to lift themselves out of poverty, they still face a “poverty of access” to healthcare, banking, or legal help. For instance, due to the stigma of 'immorality', and lack of economic empowerment, sex workers cannot buy houses in many neighbourhoods considered to be 'decent'. Access to credit, for example for loans for housing or cars is also denied to sex workers. Often sex workers must buy or get loans in the name of third parties and are then at their mercy. It is very difficult to cross the social threshold of poverty due to the stigma attached to sex work. Many aspects of sex-work continue to be criminalized, often pushing the work underground. The **hidden nature of their work** is the biggest challenge. 'Invisible' sex workers also include women, men and transgender persons working from home and arranging clients via mobile phones, independently or through an agent. A large number of women in sex work are housewives and their families are unaware of the nature of their work.

Out of the Shadows

Their **shadow existence** due to laws that criminalize many aspects of sex work including soliciting, brothels and living off the earnings of sex work, makes it difficult for sex workers to access government services. Despite laws to address violence, access to justice for sex workers is minimal due to lack of support and the misogyny of the patriarchal mindset of judges, police and local leaders.

The stigma, laws and criminal penalties need to be removed, and sex work considered a legitimate livelihood option. Minimum standards must be laid down regarding working conditions in the sex industry, to promote a fair and safe work environment as per ILO standards of Decent Work.

