



Sex Workers' Conversations with Feminist Allies

Culture and Religion

Sex Worker Speak

- Exclusion of sex workers from organized religion which has created the “whore stigma” also leads to exclusions outside the religious sphere.
- Sex work is generally considered 'sinful', and sex workers are denied their status as citizens.
- Campaigns to challenge religious and cultural practices which reinforce women's secondary status must also join hands with sex workers' movements for change.

Summary of the issue

In all societies there are certain cultural practices that can block women from fully realising their human rights. Sometimes such customs and traditions can prevent the enjoyment of rights for entire communities. Many forms of gender-based violence (GBV), that is, an individual being targeted only because of their gender, are justified in the name of culture, tradition or religion. Religion and culture are sometimes manipulated to deny women rights and equality. In many religions the leaders traditionally male and thus the interpretation of scripture lacks a female perspective and at times this can mean women are treated unfavourably in those teachings and interpretations of religious texts. 'Norms' of behaviour for women, which are restrictive and discriminatory, can all too easily become ingrained in culture and unless challenged, can result in ongoing discrimination against women in some societies.



At times, narrow identity politics is promoted by a state, based on excluding or stigmatizing that which is considered different. This is often disguised as 'patriotism' and 'nationalism' when in fact it is simply prejudice and discrimination against people based on their religion, ethnicity, or cultural identity. Ultra-nationalism often goes hand in hand with 'idealizing' the role of women for example as a “pure loyal wife” or “woman as mother”. Sex in this context must be within marriage, and only for reproduction. Viewed from this perspective, sex work is therefore seen as a sin and immoral. Sex workers are therefore excluded from many organized religions.

This in turn has a major impact on many aspects of sex workers lives, outside of religion: sex workers are treated as lesser citizens. The children of sex workers are often denied admission to schools due to the nature of their mothers' work. The lack of identity documents makes them easy targets e.g. for eviction from their homes, viewed as 'corrupting outsiders' polluting the neighbourhood and society.

Many family laws treat men and women unequally, giving more rights to the husband and sons. Some policies restrict the reproductive choices of women. For example, terms and conditions for employment stating that women are not allowed to take maternity leave. Conversely, some policies aim to pressure women to have children, or sons, in particular. Some women are denied employment or elected office if they have more than a specified number of children. The absence of laws prohibiting violence, genital mutilation or other harmful practices also serves to deny women their human rights.

Cultural and religious norms are, however, not necessarily fixed and are subject to change based on the changes in how people live, their experiences and beliefs. If under duress or pressure, religious communities tend to become more insular and more conservative, and this can also impact negatively on women, in terms of additional sanctions e.g. dress codes, mobility, employment prospects and autonomy. However, in any religion there are also pressure groups and people who challenge discrimination against women and campaign for alternative interpretations which favour equality and justice. Women have struggled against being treated unequally, and changed many cultural practices and traditions which were restricting their human rights.



Women's organisations, human rights groups and sex workers' organisations have struggled against religious and cultural interpretations which block women from being financially independent and exercising their fundamental rights. We need to explore ways in which women can work for change in the cultural and religious practices and towards greater enjoyment of economic, social and other human rights.

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