

## **SEX WORK: FEMINIST FAULT-LINES**

**1st – 2nd May 2024,**

**Dhaka, Bangladesh**

**Sex Workers and Allies South Asia (SAWSA) & Naripokkho, Bangladesh**

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**Participants:** A total of 41 participants from diverse groups, especially feminist activists, trade unionists, sex workers, rights activists, attended the two-day residential cross-movement adda held in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

**Aim:** To explore feminist debates regarding sex work, within a safe and open-minded space.

**Objectives:**

1. To build an understanding of sex work and sex workers' rights from the framework of:
  - a. Moral Policing: Ability to consent to sex work, representation and sex work, intimate partnerships within sex work.
  - b. Politics of sexuality: Queer theory, gender and sexual identities.
  - c. Sex work and decent work: The labour framework
2. Trafficking and sex work: Understanding the difference.
3. To explore possibilities of a common position on sex work and identify areas of consensus and disagreement, as well areas of solidarity and potential common agendas.
4. Draw out highlights and key points to present to allies to build solidarity.



## **Day one**

### **Session 1: Setting the Context**

#### **a. Why this meeting and what do we hope to achieve: Meena Seshu**

The purpose of the meeting is to discuss sex work, feminist perspectives, and advocacy in Bangladesh, particularly focusing on sex workers' rights, health, and the challenges they face. The meeting aims to foster a collective understanding among feminists and activists regarding sex work and related issues.

Meena started by explaining her evolving understanding of sex work, which was initially shaped by societal stereotypes, but later changed through her work in HIV prevention with sex workers starting in 1992.

She noted that sex workers were able to convince clients to use condoms, showing remarkable strength and agency, while many married women struggled with HIV due to unprotected sex with infected husbands.

### **Challenges in Feminist Understanding:**

-Meena raised concerns that feminists have failed to recognize the strength and agency of sex workers. She emphasized the need for a clearer feminist analysis of sex work.

-She advocated for a collaborative approach, incorporating different perspectives (feminists, queer community, sex workers), to develop a comprehensive understanding of sex work.

### **Call for Collective Action:**

- The meeting is an opportunity for feminists and activists to share experiences and construct a well-informed perspective on sex work, with the goal of advancing advocacy efforts in Bangladesh.

### **Key Questions Raised:**

- How can feminists construct a stronger analysis of sex work?
- What can be learned from the lived experiences of sex workers and how should this inform future advocacy?

### **Shireen Huq's Reflections:**

- Shireen shared two stories from her experience with sex workers during anti-eviction movements in the 1990s. These stories highlighted the common humanity shared between feminists and sex workers, despite societal prejudices.

- She emphasized the importance of working hand in hand with sex workers and overcoming barriers of discrimination and stigma within feminist spaces.

### **Other Contributions:**

- Shamim Ara emphasized the mental strength of sex workers who continue to work despite facing violence from various sectors of society, including police and journalists.

- Daw Nai Prue Naly shared personal experiences of rescuing young girls from being forced into sex work and highlighted the segregation and discrimination faced by sex workers, even from fellow activists.

- Rabeya Baby expressed curiosity about the structure of the sex worker movement and the challenges faced in empowering sex workers.

The session highlighted the need for feminists, sex workers, and the queer community to engage in honest discussions about sex work, overcome internal and external prejudices, and develop a more nuanced understanding that informs advocacy and policy change.

Lunch followed, with a planned continuation of discussions and presentations afterwards.

## **b. Bangladeshi Women's Movement and Sex Work - Firdous Azim**

Firdous Azim reflects on the intersection of the Bangladeshi women's movement and sex work, exploring feminist fault lines, legal struggles, and societal narratives around sex work.

### **Key Discussion Points:**

#### **Historical Context of the '90s Feminist Movement:**

- The women's movement in Bangladesh gained momentum in the 1990s, particularly focusing on cases that highlighted societal prejudices against women in sex work.
- Firdous recounted a specific case from 1985, where a young girl's death in a brothel spotlighted the societal narrative of "innocent girl vs. criminal madam," reinforcing women vs. women narratives.
- The case raised questions about how society distinguishes between "innocent" women and those in sex work, creating harmful divisions.

#### **Challenges Within Feminist Circles:**

- Feminists grappled with the tension of supporting sex workers while advocating for women's rights. There was resistance within the movement, as some believed supporting sex work conflicted with feminist ideals.
- Firdous emphasized that conversations around women's sexuality, pleasure, and freedom of movement are often avoided, even within feminist spaces.

#### **Shift in Terminology and Public Recognition:**

- A significant achievement of the 1990s movement was the shift in language from "prostitution" to "sex work," aligning with the broader labor movement and recognizing sex work as a form of labor.
- However, challenges remain, particularly in connecting the sex workers' rights movement with the larger women's labor movement.

#### **Legal and Societal Achievements:**

- The feminist movement won important legal victories, including the right for brothels to be recognized as both places of abode and workplaces.
- Despite these achievements, the broader question of whether prostitution should be seen as legitimate work remains unresolved.

#### **Barriers and the Way Forward:**

- Firdous highlighted ongoing societal prejudices against sex workers, where sympathy often translates to pity rather than respect.

- She stressed the need for deeper connections between sex worker movements, feminist circles, labor movements, and queer rights advocacy.

### **Debate on Legitimacy of Sex Work:**

- Firdous called for a public debate on whether sex work should be recognized as legitimate work, questioning how society and the legal system view the spaces in which sex work occurs.

### **Final Reflections:**

- There is a need to challenge existing narratives and legal structures to provide dignity and respect to sex workers.

- Firdous urged for continued advocacy, calling on feminists and activists to structure the movement in a way that leaves a legacy for future generations.

The discussion concluded with an emphasis on the need to reshape societal perceptions of sex work, connect it with broader labor and rights movements, and address the long-standing gaps in recognizing sex work as legitimate labor. Firdous highlighted that while there have been victories, many challenges remain in fully integrating sex work within feminist advocacy.

### **c. Sex Workers Movement: Insights and Experiences by Ismot Ara Alo, Rina Begum, & Kajol Akter**

In this segment of the meeting, three prominent sex workers—Rina Begum, Ismot Ara Alo, and Kajol Akter—shared personal experiences that illustrated the systemic abuse and exploitation they face within the sex worker community in Bangladesh.

#### **Rina Begum:**

- Rina recounted her life as a sex worker, starting from the age of eight when she was sold into the trade by a relative. Despite her hardship, she continues to advocate for her fellow sex workers.

- She described a recent incident where a fellow sex worker died after being beaten by a morgue worker who exploited her. Rina highlighted the lack of police cooperation and the stigma they face, with law enforcement treating them as "agents" instead of victims.

- Rina also detailed the harassment sex workers face from landlords, who exploit them financially by demanding extra rent or accusing them of theft. She and her peers are frequently dismissed or harassed by the police when seeking justice.

#### **Ismot Ara Alo:**

- Ismot raised the issue of societal discrimination against sex workers, noting that even in spaces meant for advocacy, the distinction between sex workers and the general public is starkly drawn.

- She emphasized the difficult conditions under which sex workers live, particularly in Rangpur, where they have no permanent homes and are forced to live in parks and stations. Their children, too, suffer from lack of access to basic necessities like healthcare.

- Ismot pointed out the irony that sex workers' profession is dismissed despite their livelihood depending on it. She also mentioned the financial strain sex workers face, such as being unable to afford condoms due to their poverty.

### **Kajol Akter:**

- Kajol shared her story of being sold into sex work at the age of eight and starting the work at ten. She spoke about the cycle of running away and being forced back into the brothel system.

- She eventually became involved in advocacy after escaping from sex work and joining an NGO. Kajol recounted the challenges of working in informal settings like parks and stations, where sex workers are vulnerable to violence from police, criminals, and the public.

- Kajol urged for greater advocacy, pushing for basic rights like voter IDs and birth certificates for their children, alongside a call for more marches, meetings, and movements.

### **Key Themes:**

- The police's failure to protect and the societal stigma faced by sex workers.

- The exploitation of sex workers by landlords, law enforcement, and clients.

- The need for structural support such as legal recognition, shelter, and access to education and healthcare for sex workers and their children.

## **Session 2: The moral lens and how it influences feminist theory and practice**

### **a. Consent: Agency, choice and 'false consciousness': Laxmi Murthy**

Laxmi Murthy's session centred around the complex relationship between consent, agency, and the concept of 'false consciousness,' particularly in the context of sex work.

### **Session Overview by Laxmi Murthy:**

- Laxmi began with an overview of the historical and legal evolution of the age of consent, especially in South Asia. She explained how age of consent laws were introduced during British rule, citing the case of Phulmoni Dasi, a 10-year-old girl who died after being raped by her husband. This case led to the age of consent being raised to 12 in British India in 1891.

- She further discussed how age of consent laws across South Asia often intertwine with marriage laws, emphasizing the complexity of age restrictions related to marriage, voting, and rape.

### **Key Discussion Points:**

- Historical Context: Laxmi delved into how age of consent debates began as a reaction to colonial laws, which were seen as interference in local customs. This led to massive protests against the British, though it did increase the legal age of consent.

- Legal Definitions of Consent: She touched upon how different countries define legal consent and the disparity in age limits across laws concerning marriage, rape, and statutory rape. Laxmi also mentioned the complications of modern-day rape laws and how consent has been misinterpreted or undermined by the judiciary, referencing key cases in India like the Mathura case (1979) and the Mahmood Farooqui case (2017).

- Feminist Engagement with Consent: Laxmi explained how feminists approached the issue of consent largely through the lens of sexual violence. She discussed how societal and judicial attitudes towards women's bodies and sexual autonomy have been slow to change.

- Consent and Sex Work: She raised important questions about whether sex workers can freely give consent, particularly in situations of economic hardship or coercion. Laxmi shared findings from a multi-country study on violence against sex workers, where many reported economic violence and sexual extortion by law enforcement, raising questions about agency and consent under coercive conditions.

- False Consciousness and Choice: Laxmi introduced the concept of "false consciousness," suggesting that societal power dynamics may cloud the ability to recognize or exercise free consent. This is particularly true in cases where sex workers are coerced into making decisions based on unequal power dynamics. She questioned whether sex workers can genuinely have agency when their choices are constrained by stigma and exploitation.

#### 4. Key Discussion Questions:

- Laxmi concluded by posing critical questions: How do we understand consent and choice in sex work, an unorganized labor sector fraught with moral judgment and stigma? Can sex workers truly exercise agency in an environment where they may be coerced or stigmatized? What happens when individuals "choose" to stay in sex work despite being trafficked into it?

Laxmi's presentation emphasized the need to critically examine how legal and societal frameworks influence the concept of consent, especially in the marginalized context of sex work. The conversation also underlined the importance of understanding consent as a dynamic, ongoing negotiation rather than a one-time decision.

### **b. Intimate partnerships within sex work: negotiating desire, violence, and control:**

#### **Andrea Cornwall**

The session, led by Andrea Cornwall, centered on the complexities of intimate relationships, desire, control, and violence within the lives of sex workers. Andrea shared her personal and

professional journey as a feminist anthropologist, describing how her experiences working with sex workers in India and Bangladesh reshaped her perspectives. She recounted stories from her interactions with sex workers, emphasizing their agency, empowerment, and the social dynamics within their relationships, challenging common stereotypes.

Key discussions included:

1. Empowerment in Sex Work: Andrea Cornwall highlighted the empowerment seen in some sex workers' relationships, particularly in Sangli, India. Women exhibited control over their partners and their lives, contradicting the Western perception of sex work as inherently exploitative. Cornwall emphasized the importance of viewing sex workers' lives through their own narratives rather than external assumptions.

2. Rescue Operations and Their Impact: The harmful effects of Western-funded rescue operations were discussed. These operations often endangered women, exposing them to media without addressing the real issues they faced. Cornwall pointed out that such interventions, focused on minors, were better handled by the community itself rather than external raids.

3. Unionization and Collective Action: Aarthi Pai and other participants discussed the importance of collectivization among sex workers to address issues such as the entry of minors into the trade. Meena Seshu provided a case study of VAMP, where sex workers themselves managed to regulate and prevent minor entry into the industry, highlighting the effectiveness of grassroots efforts.

4. False Consciousness: The concept of false consciousness, often used to dismiss the voices of sex workers, was critically examined. Participants stressed that sex workers are fully aware of their circumstances and exploitation, challenging the notion that they need external awareness to understand their oppression.

5. Sexual Exploitation and Brothels: The discussion addressed the assumption that brothels are inherently exploitative. Comparisons were made to other industries where exploitation occurs but

is not deemed inherent to the space itself. Participants advocated for a more nuanced understanding of exploitation within brothels and the importance of providing safe working environments for sex workers.

6. **Trafficking and the Role of Sex Workers:** The challenge of human trafficking within the sex trade was discussed, with Meena Seshu highlighting the role of sex workers in identifying and combating trafficking. While sex workers play a crucial role in protecting minors and preventing exploitation, they often face accusations of collusion with traffickers, adding to their burdens.

In conclusion, the session highlighted the need for a deeper understanding of sex workers' lives, focusing on their agency, empowerment, and the importance of collective action. The discussions emphasized the need to challenge dominant narratives about sex work and consider sex workers as active agents in shaping their own lives and addressing the challenges they face.

## **Day two**

### **Session 3: Politics of sexuality and intersections with sex work**

1. **Queer theory: Nazia Zebin**
2. **Gender and sexual identities: Zannat Husna and Aarthi Pai**

#### **Opening Remarks:**

- Aarthi Pai: Emphasized the interconnectedness of discussions on sex work, consent, agency, and intimacy. Reiterated the goal of exploring how the sex workers' movement can learn from the queer movement and vice versa.

#### **Speakers: Nazia Zebin and Zannat Husna**

- Key Discussion Topics:
  - Heteronormativity and the gender binary are deeply ingrained in societal norms, media, and laws.
  - Sex workers and queer individuals face exclusion and lack recognition in mainstream discourse.
  - The concept of queerness was introduced as a spectrum of identities beyond the binary, challenging societal expectations of gender and sexuality.
  - Queer identities, especially women and non-binary individuals face marginalization within movements and broader society.

#### **Challenges:**

- The visibility of queer women in movements is limited compared to men due to safety and security concerns.
- The intersection of feminism, sex work, and queer movements needs deeper practical implementation beyond theoretical overlaps.

### **Discussions:**

- Andrea Cornwall: Linked the politics of queerness to a broader struggle for rejecting societal labels and norms, highlighting shared goals between the queer and sex worker movements.
- Nazma Akhter: Sought to find ways to connect queer movements with marginalized women workers in the garment sector.
- Firdous Azim: Proposed redefining queerness within a local cultural context, as was done with feminism, to build stronger alliances and reduce backlash.
- Meena Seshu: Raised the issue of conflict between sex work and intimate sexual identities, urging a nuanced understanding of sexuality and gender.

### **Key Discussion Points:**

- Intersectionality: Commonalities between feminist, queer, and sex worker movements lie in body autonomy and resistance to societal norms. However, class and gender hierarchies persist, affecting visibility and safety, especially for queer women.
- Visibility & Solidarity: Queer women and non-binary individuals often face greater challenges than men in coming forward. There's a need for increased collectivization, alliances, and international solidarity with movements in neighboring countries like Nepal.
- Challenges in Bangladesh: The queer movement operates largely underground due to safety concerns, and backlash from conservative societal structures remains a key issue.

### **Key Takeaways:**

- Building alliances across movements is critical to confronting shared challenges of heteronormativity and gender norms.
- There is a need for more inclusive, accessible language and strategies to engage all levels of society, especially marginalized groups like garment workers and rural populations.
- Future discussions should focus on deepening the integration of queer, feminist, and sex worker rights movements while considering local cultural and societal contexts.

### **Next Steps:**

- Explore how movements can better include and support marginalized queer identities.
- Strengthen alliances between movements at national and international levels.
- Consider redefining key terms and strategies in local contexts to foster broader acceptance and reduce backlash.

### **Session 4: Is the labor framework useful to understand sex work?**

1. **Women and Sex Work: Meena Seshu**
  - a. **"Is Sex Work Really Work? - Meena Seshu**

### **Key Discussion Points:**

1. Reframing of Sex Work:
  - Sex Workers' Perspective: Sex workers identify sex work as legitimate labor, rejecting the labels of criminal or victim.
  - Feminist Dilemma: There is a debate within feminist circles, where sex work is often viewed as inherently violent, contrasting with sex workers' own stance that violence exists within the profession but does not define the work itself.
  
2. Bangladeshi Migrant Workers:
  - Post-Rana Plaza Migration: After the 2013 Rana Plaza disaster, Bangladeshi women began migrating to Sangli, India, many of whom entered sex work. They faced dangerous border crossings and arrived under false pretenses of garment work.
  - Service Provision: Despite the legal uncertainties, Meena's organization chose to provide services to all migrant women, focusing on preventing forced sex work while supporting voluntary workers.
  
3. Challenges with Trafficking:
  - Women's Agency: Many women stated they voluntarily entered sex work to support their families, even requesting protection for their traffickers, who facilitated the transfer of their earnings home.
  - Traffickers' Strategies: Traffickers supplied fake birth certificates from rural areas to help women appear of legal working age, exploiting loopholes in the system.
  
4. Trends in Migration and Trafficking:
  - Cross-Border Movement: Women, often in distress, paid traffickers to facilitate their migration for work, blurring the lines between trafficking and voluntary migration.
  - Nepali Example: One Nepali woman used her trafficker to relocate to a better work environment, exemplifying the complex relationship between labor migration and exploitation.
  
5. Categorization of Women's Work:
  - Formal vs Informal Work: Women's labor falls into categories of recognized formal work (e.g., teachers, bankers) and unregulated, informal work (e.g., sex work, domestic work). Much of women's labor remains invisible or unrecognized, especially within the home.
  - Wage Disparities: Women are paid less across various sectors, including sex work, where male and transgender workers often earn more.

## 6. Impact of Neoliberal Policies:

- Privatization: As governments retreat from providing essential services, women are forced into labor migration, leading to the "feminization of migration."
- Exploitation by Corporations: Women's labor rights are further undermined by multinational corporations, which prioritize profits over workers' protections.

## 7. Research Findings on Sex Work:

- Early Labor: A study of 3,000 sex workers across 14 states revealed that many entered the labor force at a young age, engaging in multiple forms of work before transitioning to sex work.
- Sex Work as Service: Sex work is seen as part of the service industry, akin to care work, with sex workers as providers of sexual services. The context of the work—whether viewed as intimate or transactional—depends on individual circumstances.

Meena Seshu emphasized that sex work should be recognized as legitimate labor within the broader framework of women's work. The intersection of trafficking, migration, and economic policy must be considered to fully understand women's labor conditions. The discussion concluded with the handover to the next speaker, Maheen.

### **b. Unpacking sex work as work, business, livelihood, profession: Maheen Sultan**

#### **Key Discussion Points:**

##### 1. Support for Sex Workers:

- Naripokkho has consistently supported sex workers since the Tanbazar eviction, focusing on securing their fundamental rights (citizenship, work, and shelter) without initially taking a stance on whether sex work is "good" or "bad."
- Over time, Naripokkho deliberately reframed prostitution as sex work, leading to a shift from censure and pity to solidarity within the women's movement.

##### 2. Challenges of Recognition:

- There are ongoing debates within Naripokkho about whether sex work should be formally recognized as a profession. Formal recognition would mean inclusion under labor laws, offering protections such as minimum wages and legal safeguards.
- However, concerns exist about corruption, exclusion of certain groups, and the impact on brothels, which serve as both homes and workplaces for sex workers.

##### 3. Consent and Autonomy:

- Consent is a complex issue in sex work. While some women may choose sex work, the question remains whether they had other viable options. Consent in sex work is also compared to consent in marriage, where women may have more control in sex work than in marriage.

#### 4. Feminist Debates and Decent Work:

- Feminists are divided on whether sex work constitutes selling oneself or providing a service. The question of whether it can be considered "decent work" and what conditions would be necessary for that remains open for discussion.
- There are also questions about empowerment in sex work and whether it allows women greater autonomy over their bodies compared to other industries.

#### 5. Future Discussions:

- Maheen Sultan raised several questions for further debate, including the risks involved in sex work, how it compares to other entertainment industries, and what conditions are necessary to make sex work more empowering and secure.

The session concluded with Maheen Sultan encouraging further discussion on these complex issues.

### **c. Decent Work (ILO Framework) and the question of trade unions: Aarthi Pai**

#### **Key Discussion Points:**

##### 1. Decent Work Framework:

- Aarthi Pai introduced the ILO's "Decent Work" framework, emphasizing four key pillars: employment, rights at work, social protection, and social dialogue.
- The framework consists of eight guiding questions to ensure work is decent, covering aspects like fair income, workplace security, personal development, equality, and freedom to organize.
- The question raised was how to include sex workers within this "Decent Work" framework without engaging in the decent vs. indecent debate.

##### 2. Challenges of Recognition:

- Maheen Sultan highlighted the need to define "social protection" for self-employed workers, focusing on government-provided facilities.
- Hena Akhter shared challenges sex workers face in Bangladesh, including lack of resources, office space, and government support. She stressed the importance of international pressure, similar to that applied during the garment labor movement, to push for sex worker rights.
- Srabonti Srabon raised concerns about health and accommodation issues for hijra and transgender sex workers and called for advocacy to address their unique challenges.

##### 3. Legal and Social Considerations:

- Kolpona Akhter discussed the importance of government recognition of sex work. Drawing parallels with the garment workers' movement, she emphasized the need for sex workers to be included under the "Decent Work" agenda.

- Nazma Akhter called for a new ILO convention for sex workers, similar to ILO Convention 189 for domestic workers, to safeguard their rights and address occupational health and safety.

#### 4. Empowerment and Social Perceptions:

- Taslima Akhter raised critical questions about societal views on sex work, including issues of consent, autonomy, and the broader societal impacts of sex work. She questioned whether sex work should be seen as a long-term solution for future generations, especially when many sex workers do not want their children to follow the same path.

- Jahanara Khatun suggested that sex workers should be at the forefront of the feminist movement to lend their unique perspectives and strengthen the movement.

#### 5. Sex Work and Cultural Impact:

- Daw Nai Prue Naly expressed concerns about the exploitation of women in the hilly regions of Bangladesh, where marriage is often used as a pretext for temporary relationships, leading to women being coerced into sex work.

#### 6. Advocacy and Future Steps:

- Participants discussed the need for further dialogue on how to integrate sex work into broader labor movements, considering both national and international strategies.

- Calls for increased advocacy, especially for the recognition of sex work by the government and inclusion in labor laws, were highlighted as crucial next steps.

The session wrapped up with reflections on the necessity of ongoing discussions around the rights of sex workers, their inclusion in the \*Decent Work\* framework, and the need to balance advocacy for both immediate rights and long-term societal change.

### **Session 5: Trafficking and sex work: beyond a critique of conflation**

#### **a. Impact of anti-trafficking campaign on sex-workers' rights: Meena Poudel**

Meena Poudel, with 35 years of experience in anti-trafficking campaigns and sex workers' rights activism, shared insights from her work. She began by describing her initial involvement in anti-trafficking, sparked by an encounter with a trafficked woman while she was imprisoned in 1990 for political activism. After her release, Meena started working with sex workers in Kathmandu in 1998, especially those affected by HIV/AIDS, to claim their health and labor rights.

Over the years, she observed how trafficked women and those returning from sex work faced severe social stigma. Her Ph.D. research explored the power structures behind this stigma, highlighting how these women were denied basic rights such as returning home, finding work, or caring for their children.

Meena then discussed her transition to focusing on migration issues over the last 15 years, explaining how sex work is often misunderstood within feminist movements. Despite efforts to align sex work with labor rights frameworks like those of the International Labour Organization (ILO), feminist groups often struggle to fully accept the issue. While trafficking remains a human rights violation and a crime, sex work, Meena emphasized, is legitimate work involving consensual provision of services.

One of the major challenges, according to Meena, is the role of donors in shaping the anti-trafficking and sex workers' rights agenda. In South Asia, donors often have more influence than governments in deciding the priorities of NGOs and influencing government policies. Meena criticized the conservative, donor-driven perspectives, which have hindered the sex workers' rights movement from gaining sufficient support.

Meena concluded by calling for unity among sex workers' rights groups, feminist movements, media, NGOs, queer groups, Dalit groups, and other marginalized communities to address the structural discrimination faced by victims of trafficking and sex workers. She stressed the importance of confronting harmful donor policies, societal perceptions, and market exploitation, while advocating for women's mobility and the right to choose their work.

### **Key Discussion Points:**

1. Evolution of Meena's activism from anti-trafficking to sex workers' rights.
2. Social stigma and discrimination faced by trafficked women and sex workers.
3. The challenges of aligning sex work with labor rights within the feminist movement.
4. The influence of donors in shaping anti-trafficking and sex workers' rights policies in South Asia.
5. The need for collaboration across movements to fight discrimination and advocate for rights.

### **Recommendations:**

- Greater collaboration between feminist movements, sex workers' unions, and other marginalized groups.
- Critical analysis of donor-driven policies that negatively affect the sex workers' rights movement.
- A unified approach to challenge societal, cultural, and institutional discrimination.

Meena's presentation highlighted the complexities of the anti-trafficking and sex workers' rights movements, urging stakeholders to unite in challenging harmful donor influence and advocating for the rights of women to choose their work and protect their dignity.

**b. Going beyond the conflation of trafficking and sex work: Mahbooba Mahmood Leena**

Mahbooba Mahmood Leena, a ground-level activist, shared her experiences working with trafficked women and sex workers. She began by discussing the historical objectification of women, highlighting how women's sexuality has long been exploited by men. While trafficking is a crime, she emphasized that it often occurs due to false promises made to women seeking employment abroad, particularly in the garment industry. Many women are deceived and coerced into sex work.

Leena also pointed out that not all sex workers are trafficked; some, like a widow she mentioned, enter sex work by choice due to dire personal circumstances. This widow sought sex work as a means to provide for her daughters after facing harassment and insufficient income from other jobs. In her experience, sex work often provides women with better earnings than other labor-intensive jobs available to them.

Leena shared other personal stories, such as that of a widow working as a sex worker in secret while pretending to have an NGO job to support her family. She used these stories to illustrate that for many women, sex work is a survival strategy, and it's important to recognize the role of personal choice.

One of the key issues raised was the social stigma around sex work. Leena argued that sex work should be recognized as a legitimate profession, as this would help reduce the power of traffickers and agents who exploit vulnerable women. She highlighted that many other professions also face stigma, but sex work is especially targeted because of societal views about women's bodies.

Leena emphasized that recognizing sex work as a profession would also open doors for policy improvements, such as tax registration for sex workers, which could grant them more rights and protection. She pointed to the example of Durbar in Kolkata, where sex workers have been granted trade licenses, as a step toward recognition. This recognition, she argued, would not only provide legal protections but also humanize sex work, clearing up issues related to consent and exploitation.

Leena concluded by stressing the need for collective action to push for the recognition of sex work within frameworks like the International Labour Organization (ILO), while also urging society to shift away from moral judgments rooted in outdated gender norms.

**Key Discussion Points:**

1. Historical exploitation of women's bodies and sexuality.
2. Trafficking as a crime, often enabled by false promises to women seeking work.
3. The difference between consensual sex work and trafficking.
4. The potential benefits of recognizing sex work as a profession, including better protections for sex workers and reducing the influence of traffickers.
5. Personal stories of women who entered sex work by choice due to financial and personal hardships.
6. Advocacy for tax registration and legal recognition of sex workers to improve their status and rights as citizens.

**Recommendations:**

- Push for the recognition of sex work as a legitimate profession to reduce exploitation and improve the lives of sex workers.
- Shift the social and legal frameworks to humanize sex work, focusing on labor rights, consent, and the well-being of the workers.
- Engage with the government to explore mechanisms like taxation and trade licenses to offer formal recognition and protection to sex workers.

Leena called for the recognition of sex work as a profession as a means to reduce exploitation, improve working conditions, and empower sex workers. She stressed the importance of addressing the stigma around sex work and aligning advocacy efforts with labor rights frameworks.

**c. Sharing experience - Salma Ali, Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association (BNWLA)**

Salma Ali, a long-time advocate with the Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association (BNWLA), shared her experiences of working with trafficked women and rescuing victims from various situations. She began by recounting her research in 1989, where she found many underage Bangladeshi girls in Indian prisons under the guise of "safe custody." BNWLA successfully rescued and rehabilitated many of these girls, reintegrating them into society. She emphasized BNWLA's continued efforts to rescue and support trafficked women, even

collaborating with international organizations like the International Labour Organization (ILO) for cases in the Middle East.

Ali pointed out the gaps in the legal system, noting that while a 2013 law on trafficking was passed, only 3% of cases see judgments due to victims' inability to identify perpetrators and the complexity of criminal networks. She also highlighted the lack of agreements between Bangladesh and countries like India and those in the Middle East, which limits legal support for trafficked victims abroad.

BNWLA continues to work with public prosecutors, judges, and police to expedite trials and provide victim-centric support. Ali stressed the need for improvements in existing laws, particularly around sex work, which remains a legal gray area. She explained that while sex work is not illegal in Bangladesh, sex workers face practical challenges, such as being unable to rent homes or access services.

Ali concluded by advocating for more collaboration with the government, law enforcement, and NGOs to create a safer environment for trafficked women and sex workers. She called for more focused advocacy on law enforcement, victim protection, sustainable reintegration, and policy improvements on trafficking prevention and protection.

### **Key Discussion Points:**

1. BNWLA's long history of rescuing trafficked women, particularly minors, and their efforts at reintegration.
2. Legal challenges in prosecuting traffickers due to weak law enforcement and organized criminal networks.
3. Gaps in legal frameworks around sex work, which is neither fully legal nor fully illegal, leading to the exploitation of sex workers.
4. The lack of agreements between Bangladesh and other countries to hold traffickers accountable and provide support to victims abroad.
5. Advocacy for better implementation of existing laws, sustainable reintegration programs, and stronger protection mechanisms for victims of trafficking.

Recommendations:

- Strengthen the legal frameworks on human trafficking and sex work, ensuring more consistent application of the law.
- Advocate for agreements between Bangladesh and countries where trafficking occurs to better protect and support victims.
- Improve collaboration between government bodies, NGOs, and international organizations for victim protection and reintegration.
- Raise awareness on the rights of sex workers and ensure their legal and social protection.

Salma Ali emphasized the need for legal reforms, better implementation of laws, and greater advocacy to protect the rights of trafficked women and sex workers. She highlighted the importance of a multi-stakeholder approach to address these complex issues, calling for stronger collaboration with government and international bodies to create sustainable solutions.

### **Discussion Highlights - Laxmi Murthy**

Laxmi Murthy provided a recap of the key discussions from the two-day event, identifying core issues and themes for further exploration. She began by addressing the ongoing debates within the feminist movement, particularly regarding the recognition of sex workers' strengths and the need for an honest, respectful conversation with, rather than about or for, sex workers. She highlighted the importance of recognizing sex work as legitimate labor and ensuring social and legal recognition for sex workers.

#### **Key Points:**

##### 1. Feminist Movement and Sex Workers:

- The challenge of integrating sex workers' rights into the feminist movement.
- The need for more serious engagement from the global south on the issue.
- Moving away from victim narratives and recognizing sex workers' agency and rights.

##### 2. Violence and Workplace Security:

- Violence against sex workers stems from the unstructured and insecure nature of their workplace.
- There is a need to provide sex workers with rights as citizens, beyond labor rights.

##### 3. Older Sex Workers:

- A lack of discussions around the issues faced by older sex workers, highlighting the need for more attention and support.

#### 4. Migration and Legal Frameworks:

- Current laws on migration do not adequately protect women, particularly those vulnerable to trafficking.

#### 5. Impact of Donor Funding:

- Caution was raised about how donor interventions and funding can have negative, unintended consequences.

#### 6. Gender and Sexuality Beyond Binaries:

- The conversation emphasized the importance of reaching individuals beyond traditional gender binaries, who often face criminalization and societal rejection.
- The conflation of gender and sexuality was identified as a problem that needs to be addressed.

#### 7. Decriminalization and Legal Frameworks:

- Decriminalizing sex work could help in reforming legal frameworks, ensuring that consent is more clearly recognized.

#### 8. International Labour Organization (ILO) Framework and Taxation:

- Discussions touched on the need to explore the ILO framework and the potential for taxing sex work to formalize the profession and reduce stigma.

#### 9. Building a Feminist Understanding Around Sex Work:

- The feminist movement has evolved over the past 40 years, incorporating input from various other movements, but more alliances need to be built around sex work.

#### 10. Need for Research and Media Engagement:

- Continued research and engagement with the media are crucial for advancing the conversation around sex work and breaking stereotypes.

#### 11. Collectivization and Unionization:

- The need for collectivization, unionization, and mobilization within sex work was discussed as a powerful tool to fight exploitation.
- However, this is difficult to achieve due to the dominance of victim narratives which overshadow stories of empowerment and agency.

Murthy concluded by emphasizing that collective movements can help push the discussion forward. The next session would delve deeper into how movements and collective action can drive change in both the sex workers' rights space and the broader feminist discourse.

### **Brainstorming on ways forward - Shireen Huq**

#### **Key Points:**

- Identifying Challenges: Participants highlighted poverty as a root cause leading labor girls into deceptive practices ending in sex work, emphasizing the need for protective measures.
- Action Planning: Proposed future meetings at Naripokkho to develop a comprehensive work plan to address these issues effectively.
- Innovative Ideas: Suggestions included digital literacy workshops for sex workers and collaborations with media to raise awareness, despite challenges in advocacy within a shrinking free-thinking space in Bangladesh.
- Community Collaboration: Emphasis on uniting movements—queer, labor, sex workers', and women's rights—alongside journalists to strengthen advocacy efforts.
- Next Steps: Urgent calls to revive Naripokkho's feminist agenda (Shonghoti) and continue discussions to foster collaboration and develop strategic actions.

The meeting highlighted the importance of ongoing dialogue and collaborative efforts to tackle complex social issues affecting marginalized communities in Bangladesh.