

**Cross Movement Adda, SWASA Village
@ Renew: Sex Workers' Rights by CREA
31st May 2024
Arboretum Park, Park Village Resort**

***Brief overview:** On the third day of the Renew, SWASA hosted Cross Movement Adda, an informal discussion centered around the sex workers' movement among activists, researchers, and professionals from diverse backgrounds. Six speakers from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka were invited. Around seventy sex workers and allies from Sri Lanka, India, Nepal, and Bangladesh attended the Cross Movement Adda.*

The report is written in the first person as the speaker's direct speech is translated into English.

***Moderators:** Shanti Tiwari, SWASA Coordinator in Nepal, and Zannat Husna, SWASA Coordinator in Bangladesh*

***Interpreters:** Tehani, Zannat, and Meena Poudel*



**1. Ashila Dandeniya
Stand Up Movement, Sri Lanka**

Ashila shared her experience of working with sex workers in Sri Lanka as part of the Stand Up Movement, which promotes the rights and entitlements of workers in Economic Processing Zones.

In a progressive society, laws are in place that do not often criminalize sex work. However, when working with women activists, they do not recognize it as work but as prostitution. They strongly

oppose sex work and refuse to accept it. They intend to rehabilitate the workers, viewing them as victims needing rescue. However, the workers assert their right to choose their work and livelihood and do not wish to be seen as victims. They perceive the work as sex work.

Despite our concerns, our fundamental right is to choose our work and livelihood.

After facing many challenges, we have positioned ourselves as workers in informal sectors. This information should be formalized. We should be united with other workers and have cross-movement dialogues with allies from similar sectors. We should work together for the exact cause.

2. Jahanara Khatun Naripokkho, Bangladesh

Jahanara Khatun shared her experience as a women's rights activist working with the sex workers movement for the past two decades and her role in reviving Shonghoti, the biggest coalition of sex workers and allies in Bangladesh, in recent years.

In 1997, when I began working for women's rights, the sex workers' movement also started in Bangladesh. The members of Naripokkho realized that both movements intersect at the woman's body, with women's vaginas becoming sites of political struggle.

In 1999, two of the largest brothels in Bangladesh, Kandupotti and Nimtoli, were evicted. Momotaz, a renowned sex workers' leader, contacted Naripokkho to inform them of the eviction. Recognizing this as a gross human rights violation, Naripokkho members agreed that the brothels were homes to the sex workers, and they should not be evicted.

The Bangladeshi constitution has contradictory stances on sex work: it upholds the right of citizens to choose their profession but also mandates the reduction of sex work. Understanding the need for broader support, Naripokkho contacted other organizations and individuals, including CSOs, human rights activists, journalists, and artists. This collaboration led to the creation of Shonghoti, the largest platform for sex workers and their allies in Bangladesh.

Shonghoti operated on the principle that leadership should remain with the sex workers, with the allies assisting only where needed. For example, Naripokkho members would help organize press conferences, but sex workers would be the ones speaking.

From 1999 to 2003, Shonghoti was very active but then became inactive. In 2022, when SWASA contacted Naripokkho, we saw an opportunity to revive Shonghoti. Shonghoti played a huge role in the sex workers' rights movement in Bangladesh. The journalists especially made sure that the

term sex workers was used instead of prostitutes. We are very hopeful that we can bring forward more meaningful changes together.

3. Sumika Perera **WRC, Sri Lanka**

Sumika Perera spoke on the difficulties of organizing sex workers in Sri Lanka based on her experience in Kurunegala.

In the socio-cultural and political context of lower-income generating sectors, we met sex workers who are involved in part-time such as handicrafts in rural areas. Engaging with them, we realized they are women and children, many of whom are migrants engaged in various sectors.

Organizing sex workers presents several challenges: lack of recognition in social sectors, stigmatization with derogatory labels, and internal community pressures regarding their choice of work.

The acceptance of their work is poor; although it contributes to the economy, their families do not celebrate their work, only the money they earn. This lack of acceptance makes it challenging to organize sex workers, who often move frequently and are difficult to locate due to their migrant status and lack of education about their rights.

Successfully managing these challenges involves having internal dialogues and treating the issue seriously. There is still a lot to learn from other South Asian allies on strengthening and enhancing our collaborations. We are gradually transitioning to referring to their work as sex work from prostitution, asserting that it is their chosen work and not seeking alternatives.

Cross-movement dialogues and exchanging ideas across regions have begun to change perceptions. We are still learning and have much to do to strengthen our alliances.

4. Nivedita Jayaram **Women's Fund Asia (WFA), Bangalore, India**

Nivedita spoke about her work at WFA, its funding for the sex workers' rights movement, opportunities for grants, and the sex work donor collaborations that WFA is part of.

I work with the Women's Fund Asia to support the sex workers' movement across more than 201 countries. We provide core grants to organizations to cover their expenses, focusing on activism

from grassroots to higher levels. Our approach strengthens feminist-led organizations or structures and directs funds to regions. Our main objective is to support the sex work movement and its allies, including those focused on anti-trafficking, rights-based work, and health rights.

As a feminist organization, we enhance our strength by differentiating and including feminist partners per their wishes. We advocate for rights and do not support the rehabilitation of sex work organizations. Our approach is rights-based, and 40% of our total grants have been allocated to the entertainment sectors and sex work agencies for women and girls. We work towards advancing labor rights, encouraging organizations to take the lead in their responsibilities.

The Sex Work Donor Collaborative (SWDC) aims to increase funding and improve quality through transparency efforts. We reach out to potential donors individually and through collaborations like SWDC to advocate and advance our priorities. This year, our focus includes funding, collaborating with other donors, and maintaining quality, transparency, and goal achievement.

We empower sex workers on how to write proposals and advocate for their rights effectively.

5. Jyotshna Maskey **Urgent Action Fund - Asia Pacific, Nepal**

Jyotshna highlighted the role of the Urgent Action Fund and its impact on supporting community members.

The Urgent Action Fund provides rapid response grants aimed at seeking urgent help. Two main types of grants are security and well-being grants, typically disbursed within 2-3 months, and resource and resilience grants, which take about 5-6 months.

We engage in feminist participatory human rights work and adjust grant payments according to changes in political situations.

We also provide a voice of safety and support for sex work activists, including COVID crisis grants. During our work, we identified the need for grants to support sex workers and have successfully mobilized across various nations. During the COVID-19 pandemic, two community-based organizations (CBOs) collaborated with sex work activists, submitted proposals, and disbursed grants totaling USD 5,000.

6. Meena Poudel **Researcher, Nepal**

Meena Poudel shared her experience of working as an expert on the issue of trafficking and migration for over thirty years.

We must work together to face the same challenges in the socio-political-cultural aspects where women are often marginalized. We need to cut through these barriers and align with common principles. Our politics is the only thing dividing us, and it stems from patriarchal values. The common problem lies in socio-cultural practices and legal frameworks that restrict our ability to work.

We must find a common agenda and strategies, combining efforts to address shared challenges and find solutions. Politics is dividing us, and we must learn to collaborate effectively, criticize divisive policies, and confront them.

With over 30 years of experience in the development sector and a lifelong commitment to gender justice, migration, and social inclusion, I have faced threats and criticism. What I have learned is that there is tension between trafficking and sex work. The anti-trafficking narrative often conflicts with the rights of sex workers. It is essential to understand that not all anti-trafficking efforts are beneficial; those who choose sex work should be supported in doing so, including migrants engaging in sex work or domestic work.

Our challenges include political divisions, borders, and donor influences. These factors often act as barriers, and we must ensure our decisions have political agency. It is crucial to be less accountable to grand agendas and more accountable to decisive policy.

Questions from the audience

Sanjay: I am a professional lawyer, and this discussion intrigues me. I would like to ask the panelists if there is any legal precedent in your countries where the verdict was in favor of sex workers' rights.

Jahanara Khatun: In 1999, Shonghoti had 86 members. Five organizations submitted a writ petition at the High Court against the eviction of the Taanbazar and Nimtoli brothels. Barrister Sigma Huda took up the case on behalf of the Shonghoti. In February 2000, the High Court gave a verdict in favor of sex workers.

Conclusion

The Cross Movement Adda successfully brought together diverse voices from across South Asia, fostering a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by sex workers and the ongoing efforts

to advocate for their rights. The event highlighted the importance of solidarity, cross-movement dialogues, and collaborative efforts to advance the rights and recognition of sex workers.

What next...?

- Follow-Up Meetings: Organize regular follow-up meetings to continue the dialogue and share updates on ongoing initiatives.
- Collaborative Projects: Develop collaborative projects across South Asian countries to address common challenges and leverage shared resources.
- Policy Advocacy: Strengthen efforts in policy advocacy by forming a unified front to influence legal and social changes in favor of sex workers' rights.
- Capacity Building: Conduct training sessions to enhance the skills of sex workers and their allies in advocacy, proposal writing, and resource mobilization.
- Resource Center: Establish a resource center to provide ongoing support, information, and networking opportunities for sex workers and their allies.

The momentum generated by the Cross Movement Adda will continue through these next steps, ensuring sustained progress and collaboration in advocating for sex workers' rights across South Asia. We look forward to the collective efforts and shared commitment to advancing this important cause.

