



Sex Workers' Conversations with Feminist Allies

Sexuality

Sex Worker Speak

- Sex workers challenge the norm of female sexuality that dictates that sex should remain within the bounds of monogamous heterosexual marriage.
- The gender, class and racial bias of colonial laws aimed at controlling “diseased” and deviant prostitutes in the 19th Century continues in present day laws in some countries.
- Despite commercialization of most aspects of life, the exchange of sexual services for money is viewed with a moralistic lens.
- The interface of economy and sexuality – in sex work, pornography and trafficking – must be examined from the perspectives of sex workers' movements.

Summary of the issue

Society has many ways of controlling women. An important area of control is in sexual and reproductive rights. There are also strong attempts to control the rights of persons from the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex (LGBTQI) and other marginalized sexualities. Heterosexual people are also affected by these controls. The state, family, community, caste and clan play a role in controlling sexuality. The market economy also controls sexuality. Sex workers provide certain sexual services for money. However, moral judgments impact on sex work, as it is singled out as 'bad' and 'immoral' and in most countries, sex work is criminalized in some form.

The suppression of female sexuality and the stereotyping of women's roles as mothers whose focus should be reproduction leads to the attachment of labels such as 'immoral' and 'impure' to sexual acts other than monogamous heterosexual sex for the purposes of procreation. This comes sharply to the fore in the arena of sex work and homosexuality, both of which are not procreative i.e. sex for pleasure and not for reproduction. It is believed by some that women must not use their bodies to make money through selling sex. There is often discomfort with the concept of detaching 'love and emotion' from sex as a physical activity.

The silence around sexuality in most societies has been broken with the spread of the HIV epidemic. Sexual minorities, sex workers and people living with HIV have been pushed to the margins by a society that has condemned their very existence. Sexuality and sexual relationships have now come under tremendous public scrutiny.



The epidemic has forced societies to acknowledge and confront the myriad and complex world inhabited by people who are in monogamous relationships within and outside marriage, as well as people who are in multiple sex partnerships within both commercial and non-commercial contexts.

The interface between economics and sexuality is seen very clearly in the areas of sex work and trafficking. At times of economic crisis, there is often a greater attempt to control sexuality and limit access to health services. The impact is often felt more by women who are poor and other marginalized groups. Under the guise of 'protection' of both the individual and the family, sexuality that does not conform to the norm is considered a 'vice' and pushed underground. 'Moral' agendas are often followed which campaign against 'deviance': be it single motherhood, pre and extra-marital relationships, multiple sex partnerships, commercial sex. Punishment and sanctions for such 'illicit sexual conduct' include forced migration, or even death.

Discrimination and harassment of women, transgender, gay, lesbian and bisexual people in the workplace show how sexuality affects the economic system. While the new social media provide space for sexual and gender experimentation, they also predominantly tend to promote gender stereotypes. At times, issues relating to sexuality are used to deflect debate on important economic policies. A policy restricting sexual rights may be brought to take away attention from a cut being made in the money for social services or an important trade agreement. Some other examples of economics affecting access to health services and sexuality are the limitations of efforts to cope with HIV and AIDS; discrimination in some of the programmes and the lack of sensitive response taking into consideration the gender identity of the individual.

Efforts need to be made to include sexuality in discussions of economic and development policies. Strategies to influence economic policies to advance sexual rights need to be developed. We need to see in what way the lack of connection between sexuality and economic policy affects women's rights and equality. We need to explore whether looking at economic and development policies from the viewpoint of sexual rights can influence policies to focus not only on harm but also take into account pleasure. Unravelling the concepts of sexual morality, sexual sacredness, sexual pleasures, sexual preferences, sexual diversity, sexual health and sexual rights is essential.



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