

'Sex, Work and Sex-Work': The Clandestine Tale of a Tabooed Industry in Bangladesh

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Abstract : There are around 150,000 female sex workers in Bangladesh, and the country hosts one of the largest brothels in the world. There are 20 brothel-villages in the country, of which 14 are recognized to be 'official', and at least 11 are currently operational. Although the national Constitution adopts a preventive policy against prostitution, law does not, as such, prohibit commercial sex work by an adult woman working in a brothel having made an affidavit in this regard. But, at the same time, the law renders at least some forms of floating and hotel based sex work illegal, while sex between males has been termed as sodomy and made culpable offence even on its own. All forms of sex works by MSM and Hijra are thus branded as criminal acts. Observations and findings drawn in this article are based on both primary and secondary sources collecting data from a series of field-based empirical studies conducted by the author through questionnaire survey, FGDs, key informant consultations and other PRA/PLA tools. General and specific conclusions have been based on analysis guided by international standards of human and labour rights approaches. It has been noted that neither the community attitudes nor the cultural mind-sets, or the State's institutional set up is supportive of the causes of sex workers engaged in the most exploitative forms of labour. Lack of respect for fundamental rights continues to diminish any chances of sex workers' reintegration to the mainstream of the society, perpetuates poverty, and increases their vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. To aggravate the scenario, the endemic practice of a complex debt-bondage masked by the so-called 'entry-cost' and 'legal license' to the industry is considered to be a somewhat accepted 'open secret' and that the police and administration keep their eyes off from such practices treating these as 'their internal affairs'. Often these practices are used by the Sardarni/Khala (landlady) and other 'managing' actors as the tool for further exploitation of the sex workers as well as a 'control strategy'. The paper concludes with the observation that the tabooed truths of commercial sex and sex workers are inherently embedded in the very factors that compel them into this endemically ostracised profession itself. While denial of both recognition and enjoyment of the fundamental human rights of sex workers is widespread, it is the same cycle of social vulnerability and economic exclusion that often confines these people within a continuous process of servitude and modern day slavery.

Keywords : commercial sex work and human rights, Labor protection in sex industry, Prostitution Law in Bangladesh, Sex work as modern day slavery

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