

EXCLUSIVE

IN FORBIDDANCE...

Centre for New Economics Studies



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PHOTOS BY
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MISTRY

Secrets of the Trade

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AGARWAL

“She promised me a job and Rs. 80,000 to my mother, but she then sold me and did not give even a penny to anyone. I was then locked in a room, threatened, beaten and forced to attend to the clients to pay off double the amount they had purchased me for. What could have I possibly done?” says Geeta, expressing her story that has now become a common tale of personalized experience for most women working in the area of Budhwar Peth in Pune (Maharashtra).

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The spatial geography of Budhwar Peth houses over 2100 sex-workers, where, more than 1000 workers come here for business and return home. Most women, who one spoke to, ended up in this profession as a result of coercion, financial distress, and/or trafficking. Those who chose the vocation voluntarily, did so, as they were trapped in the vicious cycle of poverty, unemployment, helplessness, (drug) addiction. Many women started work at a young age with the hope of rescuing themselves from the entrapments of forced labor one day. They however find themselves enmeshed by the situations they are thrown into and each story tells a more troubling tale.

Reeta points out, “No matter how much I hate it, this is what kept me alive through the years”. Two primary sources motivations for



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women to continue in the business, despite their tribulations, are managing their own survival and that of their kids.

Geeta’s children live with her brother and sister-in-law in their native village who told her, “We raise and cater to our kids by farming, make sure you keep sending money for your own kids living here”. She sometimes wonders and reflects if she could do something else for subsistence, however, she feels nothing helps or can help in giving alternative employment to women like her. She just hopes that her kids have a better life than she did... In the area of Budhwar Peth, despite poor working conditions, the precarity of work, health issues, psychological trauma and meagre earnings, most women fight every day for minimal survival.

The profession regularly evokes scorn and scoffs both, from the legal and the social lens. Sex work in India is governed by the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956, and although sex work itself is not an illegal activity according to the Act, supporting activities such as maintenance of brothels, or soliciting customers are punishable offences. This entails that the sex workers can work privately but not in tandem with



the organized structures. This clause, however, makes it difficult for the service providers to thrive in the business as it hampers access to clients and jeopardizes their own security.

Leela, in a candid statement, adds: “There was a raid, I got arrested. It took only 50,000 rupees to get me out, maybe because I was juvenile. I was too young to understand what was happening around me.” The illegality of structures or institutions attached with the profession makes the profession being embroiled in criminality and corruption. The nexus between the brothel owners, police and muscle and power allows the industry to survive.



From the social lens, the profession has stigmatized and ostracized many women from their social spaces. Geeta recalls with horror “They all came to know about my work, so I did not go back to my village. They would have shot me dead”. The women end up living hidden-lives in forbiddance as they carry out the work behind the veils or in the dark hours, staying ‘invisible’. Poonam, who lives away from the red-light area and visits it for work: “I do not talk to anyone. No one in my locality knows what I do. I cannot tell them, they might kick me out.”

There is a vast difference between the real life of sex workers and the projected imagery of the profession. Blurred images, dark backgrounds, for many, the impressions of a sex worker are almost chimerical, derived largely from her visual imagery in the media; chastised as much by self as by the society, her portrayal is a sheer mockery of reality. This imagery moulds attitudes, and attitudes, in turn, manifest in the imagery, reinforcing each other. The culminating point, however, is of marginalization, and strong socially prejudiced and conditioned responses to her needs. Attitudes that demean her work and character go on further to marginalize her at every level of existence.





In the wake of a pandemic, the vulnerability of this community was exposed like never before. Geeta says, "I have seen lot of bad times in life. When my legs became useless, when my body was sold, when men used me, but never has it been so bad. There was nothing to eat, no work and no way to look after the kids." With the lockdown, women had no clients, no savings and no alternative resources or opportunities they could depend on. As the conditions got relaxed, they got back to work agreeing to attend to the clients even below the market rates. Many women received substantial assistance by the local NGOs which helped



Recently on 7th October, 2020, after years of incessant struggle of the community and NGOs, the National Human Rights Commission classified sex workers as 'women at work'. Under the announcement, 'sex workers' will now be recognised as 'informal workers' that can be registered to avail state benefits and support. Migrant sex workers will also have access to the schemes and



benefits designed for migrant workers. However, the road for securing dignity, svabhiman (self-respect) and basic social safety for the workers is still a long, arduous one.

Having created lives of their own within the confined areas of cities, in harmony with the people within the trade and with the limited aspirations for life, these women are examples of resilience, strength and forbearance. The story of each (sex) worker surviving and feeding her children provides enough reasons for the administration, law and society, to rethink about the existing (social) structures to help (re)build a more inclusive environment for those entrapped and living in forbiddance.





PAIGAM (People's Association In Grassroots Action and Movement) is an aggregator of activists, researchers, practitioners and organisations that aims to bring together social efforts at the local, national and global levels through media advocacy and action research.

They wish to bring a seamless bridge between academia, activism, policy and public through our media, advocacy, research, grassroots fellowship and mobilization channels.

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