

## **We Are Under Attack**

**The time:** 11 p.m., August 29, 2002

**The place:** Tollygunj, a red-light area in Kolkata, India

**The incident:** Local mastans (anti-socials), who masquerade as the neighbourhood big brothers, severely beat up Rekha Lodh, a sex worker. They said she needed to be punished for having had a public altercation with her current husband. In the middle of the night Rekha and her two young children are thrown out of her room and locked out. The reason — she needed to be taught a further lesson, the beating alone was not enough.

Swapna Gayen, also a local sex worker, and the President of Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, a sex workers' collective, vehemently protests. With her support Rekha dares to lodge a complaint with the police. DMSC too lodges a first incident report. The police take no action against the perpetrators.

The bigwigs of the neighbourhood, who live off the earnings of sex workers through extortion and running various other rackets in the locality retaliates by launching a hate campaign against Swapna. How dared she bring in outsiders, the police, to settle the neighbourhood dispute? She is persistently intimidated, abused and harassed. When Swapna refuses to be cowed and continues to protest, her husband, who works as a vendor in a shop run by one of the leading mastans, is summarily sacked from his job to teach Swapna a lesson.

The STD clinic run by DMSC as part of their HIV prevention programme in area is closed down.

So what is new? Sex workers are after all routinely subjected to violence and human rights abuse all around India and rarely does the administration intervene in their favour. But this incident has a wider significance. For the last ten years, sex workers of Kolkata have been organising themselves to protect their rights and end their exploitation, and had also been in the forefront of an extremely effective HIV prevention programme across West Bengal under the leadership of DMSC. This was no isolated incident against individual sex workers. This was a premeditated act to undermine this movement, and strike at the heart of its leadership. As marginalised and exploited people come together and attempt to take control of their lives, those whose interests are vested in their subordination have to hit back.

On 06 October, two days after the DMSC clinic was reopened in response to local demand, Swapna Gayen's house was encircled by the same mastans who felt that she and DMSC were a serious threat to their control over the locality. Anticipating violence Swapna summoned police help. While four policemen from the local police station were escorting her out of the area at her insistence, Swapna was dragged away by the mastans and publicly beaten up. While she was held back by her hair by some, the others took their turn to kick and punch her. She is now in hospital. Some of her comrades in DMSC who rushed to the area on hearing about the incident were also beaten up. While Swapna was being beaten the policemen simply looked on. Rekha has

been told by the mastans that she will be taken care of once Swapna has been sorted out and put to rest. And the police have refused to accept a first incident report this time. And of course the criminals are running free. No, one person has been arrested and produced in court – though not one of the criminals, but Swapna’s husband, Dilip, who had tried to protect her.

Friends, the constitution of our state guarantees equal right and security to all its citizens, irrespective of the class, gender or occupation. The state takes special responsibility towards guaranteeing and promoting the rights of those who have been historically exploited and marginalised. Our public administration is charged to uphold the constitution and law of the land without fear or favour. So why are the police so reluctant to intervene? Why do the Tollygunj mastans, who are known criminals with police records so sure of their immunity from law that they persist in persecuting Swapna? Is it because she is a woman, an under-class, and a sex worker? Or has it more to do with the fact that she the President of DMSC – the largest ever sex workers’ organisation, which is challenging the very basis of persisting inequalities and violence on the basis of class, gender and sexuality?

We appeal to you to act as individuals or on behalf of your organisation now and write to the Chief Minister of West Bengal, the state Home Ministry, the Human Rights Commission and the National as well as State Commission for Women and demanding justice. If we do not protest and act now, once again we will be party to the increasing assault on the democratic basis of our country.

Addresses of the above mentioned offices are given below.

Yours in solidarity,

Ms. Angura Begum  
Secretary, DMSC

*Durbar represents an affiliation of autonomous sex workers’ organisations with a membership of about sixty thousand sex workers, based in West Bengal, working for the rights of sex workers. The promotion of sexual health and HIV prevention was the original context within which the Durbar affiliates had emerged. However, Durbar addresses the environmental factors that determine the quality of sex workers’ lives, locate these issues in the broader political and cultural context within which they live, and make political interventions to bring about radical changes in the social structures and institutional arrangements that underpin unequal distribution of power and reinforce social exclusion of sex workers.*

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2. **Mr. Buddhadev Bhattacharya**  
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3. **Ms. Purnima Advani**  
**Ms. Sudha Malaiya**  
National Commission for Women  
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4. **The Chairperson**  
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5. **The Chairperson**  
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