

## **Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC) & The Usha Multipurpose Co-operative Society Ltd.**

In November 1997, the First National Conference of Sex Workers in India was held in Calcutta. The conference was convened by Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (Committee for Co-ordination of Women), a forum exclusively of sex workers and their children. In July 1995, a group of sex workers from Sonagachi, one of the oldest and largest red-light areas of Calcutta, had set up DMSC to create solidarity and collective strength among a larger community of sex workers, forge a positive identity for themselves as prostitutes and mark out a space for acting on their own behalf. More than 3000 sex workers and their children from different areas of Calcutta and other parts of West Bengal and India attended the conference, where they met each other, shared experiences and planned strategies for struggling against their conditions of material deprivation and social stigmatisation. This was the first time in the history of India that a group of sex workers rallied together and explicitly spoke of the rights and wrongs of their profession at a public forum and attempted to inscribe their self-defined and self-conscious identity on the public sphere.

The conference, and even more so, the institution of DMSC, symbolise a process of contestation over the meanings and definitions of prostitution, and mark the beginning of a struggle by a marginalised and stigmatised group who have come to organise themselves in an attempt to confront the material terms of their deprivation and question the discursive language of their social exclusion.

In dominant discourses in India the term 'prostitute' is rarely used to refer to an occupational group of people who earn their livelihood through providing sexual services. Rather, it is deployed as a descriptive term denoting a homogenised category, usually of women, who pose threats to public health, sexual morality, social stability and civic order. Within this discursive boundary, prostitutes systematically find themselves to be targets of moralising impulses of the elite, through missions of cleansing and sanitising, both materially and symbolically. If and when they figure in a political or developmental agenda, they are enmeshed in discursive practices and practical projects which aim to rescue, rehabilitate, reform, discipline, control or police them. They get to be saved and put in 'safe' homes by charity organisations for their moral improvement. Developmental NGOs tend to 'rehabilitate' them through alternative employment generation activities which invariably yield too meagre an income for them to sustain themselves and their dependants. The police regularly raid their quarters and extract payments from them in the name of controlling 'immoral' trafficking.

The founding members of DMSC had come together through their active involvement in a STD/HIV Intervention Programme (SHIP) which has been running in Sonagachi since 1992. SHIP provided the immediate context within which DMSC came to be formed. The operational activities of the programme are designed around centralised clinical services, which are supported by a team of outreach workers who are all sex workers, active or retired. These sex workers, the peer educators of SHIP, were instrumental in forming DMSC. Their recruitment as workers in a programme run by a government institution gave them new identities that did not carry the traditional stigma of their profession, at least within the context of the programme. It was perhaps the first time in India that sex workers were directly involved in a

developmental project which accepted them as sex workers and did not aim to reform or rehabilitate them. Instead, their particular abilities and skills were acknowledged and put to use for actualising the programme objectives. They were paid a daily stipend to compensate for the custom they would lose during the working hours of the programme which created the opportunity for them to think beyond their immediate survival. All this gave them the initial impetus and a supportive space to reflect on the conditions that control their lives and take steps to change them.

Very early in the life of SHIP, the peer educators, with the empathetic support of the programme management, recognised that even to realise the very basic programme objectives of controlling transmission of HIV and STDs it was crucial to view sex workers in their totality — as complete people with a range of emotional and material needs and not merely in terms of their sexual behaviour — because it was essential to address the issues that determine the quality of their lives and to locate those issues in the broader context within which they live.

In order to motivate the larger body of sex workers to change their sexual behaviour and also to enable and encourage them to participate in SHIP's activities and best take advantage of the services provided by it, the peer educators had to ensure that the entire body of sex workers in the locality developed a positive self-image, had self-esteem and confidence and had increased access to power so that they could articulate their needs and have an interest in investing in, and planning for, the future. They also realised that, given the asymmetrical power relations within the sex industry and given its social exclusion, the only way that sex workers could gain greater control over their own bodies, sexuality, income, health or lives was through mutual support, collective bargaining and united action.

It was this realisation that prompted the peer educators to form Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee as a forum of their own, distinct from the funded programme. DMSC at present, is involved in crisis mitigation on behalf of its sex-workermembers and has been taking steps to improve their immediate working conditions. The members of DMSC have organised protests against specific instances of trouble caused by local hooligans, extortion and harassment by the local police, forcible AIDS surveillance and an unauthorised vaccine trial; they have stopped the eviction of individual sex workers from their homes. They operate a helpline, mainly for seropositive sex workers and their families to help them cope with the social and psychological traumas associated with being HIV-positive.

Currently, DMSC is in the process of recruiting brothel-based, as well as floating sex workers, from all red light districts of Calcutta and other districts of West Bengal and has opened branches in all of these areas in order to offer their services to as many sex workers as possible and also to consolidate their numerical strength in order to fight their long-term political battle. An important development the movement is marked by male sex workers coming to join DMSC on their own accord. They now represent the interests of a particular section of sex workers whose needs, and in fact whose very existence, is commonly denied.

DMSC is quite explicit about its political objectives of fighting for a more secure legal status for sex workers and their children, and the protection of their own rights. Their long-term political goals are to fight for full legal recognition of prostitution as a profession and to demand decriminalisation of adult prostitution. They feel that the

ambiguous legal status of sex workers make them vulnerable to extortion of all kinds and pushes them to the margins of the society. They demand abolition of existing laws controlling the sex trade as these laws have historically acted against the interest of sex workers rather than penalising those who exploit them. Also, they feel that, as citizens of the country, they are already under the purview of the general civic and criminal laws and that the existence of laws specific to prostitution only further limits their rights as full citizens and increases their stigmatisation. Finally, DMSC aims to work towards forming a self-regulatory body constituted solely by sex workers, along the lines of other professional bodies such as the Indian Medical Council or the Bar Association, which will act as the principal arbitrator of the sex industry. This professional body of sex workers would be responsible for ensuring that the industry abides by some minimum guidelines to safeguard the interests of working sex workers and also to prevent the forcible entry of unwilling women and minors into the profession. As in other professions, this body would also stipulate some minimum qualifications for entry into the profession, one of the principle ones of which would be age. The members of DMSC contend that this will act as a much more efficient deterrent to underage prostitution than state-imposed laws and police action, particularly since the members will restrict entry of young children into the profession not only because they are against any form of child labour and child abuse on humanitarian grounds, but also in the interest of eliminating competition from younger sex workers.

These long term goals of DMSC embody sex workers' desire for a better deal in life — for a better life — and indicate their determination to take concrete steps to improve their situation. This involves taking on both levels of their marginalisation, the material and the symbolic, by confronting the structural conditions which exacerbate their deprivation — like poverty, unfavourable working conditions, harassment and coercion by the police and the local thugs — as well as by struggling against their stigmatisation and the discursive bias against prostitution.

One of the most significant steps that the members of DMSC have taken is to increase the economic security of its members by registering a consumer co-operative (Usha Co-operative and Multipurpose Stores limited) in their own name in August 1995. They had to fight a long battle with concerned authorities to force them to accept the group's member's professional status as sex workers, rather than hiding behind the more 'virtuous' label of housewife, as was suggested by the officials. Through this co-operative, they plan to start a creche facility for children of sex workers during business hours which will also give employment to out-of-work sex workers. They have already started a savings and credit scheme for co-operative members. They have also undertaken a social team of members — the Basanti Sena. They are very emphatic that the co-operative is not meant for economic 'rehabilitation' of sex workers who are in the trade, but is designed to provide a financial resource for them to fall back on in moments of crises, to minimise their economic desperation and create space for negotiation. Moreover, they hope that the Basanti Sena will not only travel around different parts of the country for social marketing of condoms, but will also help in acquainting more and more sex workers with the aims and objectives of the Committee.

The registration of the co-operative also marks an important strategic advantage for DMSC in their struggle to re-frame the definitions and meanings of their occupation. Members of the committee hope to use the fact that a state institution has formally recognised prostitution as the co-operative member's profession as leverage in their

campaign for complete legalisation of prostitution. This they see as a crucial gain as they realise that, in order to improve the material circumstances of their lives and their working conditions, they have to first gain recognition as legitimate workers. Members of DMSC share a common premise: that prostitution is not moral condition but an occupation. As sex workers, they are working women and men who, like many other workers, are engaged in a marginal, sexist, exploitative and low-status job. For most sex worker, working in the sex industry is not an irrational act of desperation, but a rational choice made from the very limited options available, particularly to poor, unskilled women, in a capitalist and patriarchal society. The rallying slogan of the National Conference — "sex work is legitimate work, we want workers'rights" — has now become the immediate strategic aim for securing our basic needs as human beings. This year, DMSC celebrated Labour Day by organising a midnight torch-light rally at the end of which the members vowed solemnly to continue their struggle until all their demands were met.

The process of struggle that the members of DMSC are engaged in has only just begun. It has thrown up a whole host of issues about gender, poverty, and sexuality that have to be debated, defined and re-defined within the process of the struggle itself. The experience of DMSC shows that, for a marginalised group to achieve the smallest of gains, it becomes imperative to challenge an all-encompassing material and symbolic order that not only shapes the dominant discourses outside but, and perhaps more importantly, historically conditions the way the participants negotiate their own locations.