

Komal Gandhar – the cultural front of the sex workers' movement

We, the sex workers involved in the STD/HIV Intervention Project (SHIP) and the members of the sex workers' organisation Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC), have been reclaiming our rightful place in the public sphere as legitimate workers and citizens. We feel that we can not wage an effective battle against sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS, unless we confront and challenge the deep-rooted prejudice against prostitution that not only keeps us enmeshed in our material and symbolic deprivation, but justifies our disenfranchisement in the name of protecting 'society.'

To claim our right to protect ourselves from diseases, we feel it is crucial to carve out a positive identity for ourselves. One important way in which we have been attempting to do so is through forming a cultural front. We formed Komal Gandhar, our cultural wing, constituted exclusively of us sex workers and our children, to express ourselves through music, dance, plays, painting and writing. We feel that, as a group of sex workers coming from diverse cultural backgrounds, **Komal Gandhar** has created an opportunity for us to explore our cultural heritage and preserve and expand our cultural expressions. It has become a platform for exchanging our various cultural traditions across linguistic, religious and regional barriers and for forging a common identity as sex workers.

Keeping us silent has been a tool used by society for keeping us marginalised. We feel that for us to be empowered as a group, each individual sex worker has to gain the confidence and have the opportunity to reclaim her/his voice. **Komal Gandhar** therefore has become a critical political tool in our movement, enabling a wide section of the sex workers' community to express ourselves in public spaces through cultural activities in which many of us are already skilled.

Messages on health promotion and disease-prevention have proved to have enormous impact both in terms of comprehension and recall when conveyed through familiar cultural forms. **Komal Gandhar** has been an effective tool for propagating our STD/HIV messages among the wider community of sex workers as well as those outside the sex industry. Beyond that, through **Komal Gandhar** we have been able to reach out to a large number of our fellow sex workers, the general public, other actors in the civil society, and the policy makers and have conveyed the urgency of not only acting on STD/HIV prevention but also on the critical need for structural changes within the sex industry and the ways in which prostitution is socially perceived.

Cultural expression is a basic human need. Apart from the obvious objectives of HIV/STD prevention and empowerment that are being served through the activities of **Komal Gandhar**, this forum gives us sex workers and our children an opportunity to claim the right to enjoy ourselves through cultural expression. This space to express our creativity helps in neutralising some of the brutalising experiences of being sex workers or the children of sex workers. Thus, forming Komal Gandhar has been a significant step towards improving the quality of our lives, which after all, is what we are striving for.

Since its inception, **Komal Gandhar** has been involved in enhancing the our collective cultural skills and those of our children. Talented and empathetic members

of staff from SHIP have helped us to hone our skills in song, dance and theatre. We, the members of **Komal Gandhar**, have composed a play based on the reality of our experiences, and depicting the initiation of our movement. After the first public staging of this play in Calcutta, we staged it again at a drama competition organised by an NGO in Delhi in 1996 and won the first prize. When we were preparing for the First National Conference of Sex workers in November 1997, an established theatre group conducted workshops with us, which generated a play composed by us. We staged this play at our conference and later in public theatre festivals across West Bengal, India. Our trained music and dance team performs at all the programmes that SHIP and DMSC organise, and also participates in commemorative programmes organised for World AIDS Day, Women's Day and Labour Day. Female and male sex workers participate in all of our cultural activities. Our children are actively encouraged to develop their skills through painting competitions, music and dance acts and plays. Our cultural programmes have received rave reviews from the media, not just as 'sex workers' acts' but also as quality performances.

Komal Gandhar has been an important instrument in promoting STD/HIV prevention. Also, it has allowed us to prove both to ourselves and to others that, despite our social marginalisation, we can perform on par with mainstream cultural workers. Further, it has enabled us to establish our distinct cultural identity and to encourage our children to retain and develop our cultural traditions and improve their finer qualities. Lastly, it has significantly helped us in forging a positive, collective identity as sex workers. It not only is a powerful tool to enable us to realise our demands in the long term, it also enhances the quality of our lives in the process.