

1) SPECIAL FEATURE

1.1) International day of Sex Workers (3 March) in Kolkata , India (By Cherry)

The 3rd of March is International Sex Workers' Day, a forum for these women to voice their concerns and demand social recognition and legal reform for their profession; participants from sex workers support groups across the world gather and celebrate the sex workers' festival every year. This year, we were honoured to be invited by Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, a Kolkata, India based group whose membership consists of somewhere upwards of 65,000 sex workers and members of their communities, to participate in their 5 days celebration programme. I was surprised by the enthusiastically participants coming from different districts of West Bengal. The response has been to lobby for improving the working conditions of these workers, rather than to eliminate the work and the worker.

Within the programme, which involved speakers from different walks of life, such as political, social and intellectual addressed some important viewpoints. First of all, was the emphasis of sex workers are entertainment workers. We believe that sex workers are equal to any other workers in entertainment industry and the existence of sexual pleasure within the services, i.e. sex workers provide entertainment to the customers, and thus sex workers are entertainment workers and should have the same workers' right as entertainment workers. Secondly, under the traditional caste system in India, women especially working class women, have limited economic opportunities and make the best choices that are available to them. In order to improve the unfair condition of women, we have to fight for the rights of women, such as opportunities to education, employment and marriage etc. Lastly was the influence of Talibanism on movement of sex workers. Talibanism, which promoted by Afghanistan, do not accept men and women have equal rights and do not accept sexual enjoyment, thus selling sex is not acceptable. Religion is always use as political purpose, therefore if Talibanism exists in India, sex workers will force to go underground and lack of medical protection.

Sex workers' children Rally

Within the programme, the rally impressed me the most and it was held by Amra Padatik, a group of sex workers' children, to express the solidarity towards to their mother profession. There were more than 1,000 participants including children of sex workers, sex workers and social activist. I can never imagine their bravery to march on the street fearlessly and fight for their rights without covering up their faces and disguise them. And what all the children have done to protect their mothers, some hand-hold wooden sign with different slogans; some stretched and jumped vividly, shouting out the slogan loudly; some were waving to our

cameras. The demand for decriminalisation was also coupled with a demand for human rights. These included the right to retain and raise their children, the independency of the children as an individual, to be recognised as a legitimate family unit, to be treated equally with all other women, and free of social stigma. Moreover the demand of a safe and healthy working conditions for them. Lastly, they demand for the abolishment of the child marriage. Due to the tradition cultural value in India, the importance of marriage to a women and the system of dowry, makes the child marriage more problematic. We heard it' is not uncommon for the girls to get marry in 12 years old! This problem stunned me, and it created more problem such as the manipulation of the middle man, pretend to arrange the marriage, in face intention to sell them to the brothels as sex workers, or abandon by the groom's family and has to join the profession under limited choices. Therefore, it is important for them to fight for the right to equality, including the repeal of any section or legislation that makes a woman's right contingent on her sexual conduct.

Sex workers' own bank and clinic

In addition, we have visited the office and clinic of Durbar in Sonagachi, which comprised of 65,000 members! We were amazed by their hard work to set up their own bank in the office! Without work proof, sex workers cannot do mortgage or even deposit in banks! For that reason, they set up a bank for themselves, and it has 12,000 members so far! Besides, we have chatted with the peer educators in their clinic on the current condition in India. In deed, the sex workers in India mostly employed under the owner of brothels. They have to pay the rent, and they have to share the earnings with the pimp, so they actually earn very little. On the other hand, they showed great interest in different types of venues in Hong Kong when we showed them the photos, especially the operation of one woman apartment. Apart from that, we have been to their shop, which selling sanitary products, condoms and some of their handmade products, such as bags and badges. They were so pretty and we have even bought some back to Hong Kong!

I admired their solidarity, unity and cohesion so much, which established their own community and social network. Imagine they have their own bank, shop and you can never underestimate the power of unity, which drives them to fight for their rights and lead to a fairer world.

I believe the only way in which the harms and abuses in sex work, the problems of trafficking and of HIV can be addressed is through the active participation and leadership by sex workers. To support the rights of women in the sex industry is to support the rights of all women. Once sex workers are treated with respect and equality, are given rights to housing, health care and safe working conditions, no other woman will be entitled to anything less.

2) WORK REPORT

2.1) Info-Activism Camp 2009 in Bangalore, India

On behalf of AFRO, Connie joined the Info-Activism Camp 2009 which was held in Bangalore, India from 19 to 25 February. More than 100 top information technologists and activists gathered there, including those who are engaged in the student and labor movements, environmental protection, equal rights and human rights for migrants, sex workers, LGBT, people living with HIV etc., coming from Latin America, Africa, Southeast Asia, Europe, and Arab communities. Connie was the only Chinese among them.

The camp was interesting and very interactive. Connie was able to learn a lot about internet security and invisibility, and video taking. Most importantly, she got a chance to learn to use information technology to support social movements, such as making use of words, sounds, photos and video, on internet/mobile phone platform/social network for information sharing and mobilization. A few representatives from sex workers support groups of various countries also joined this camp. We believe that this international network would contribute to our work on advocating for the decriminalization of sex work.

2.2) A disappointing report by the Independent Police Complaints Council

The IPCC has just released their work report for 2008. In 2008, the IPCC endorsed the investigation results in a total of 2,572 complaint cases against the Police. This comprised 4,523 allegations, among which, 1,159 were fully investigated. Of the fully investigated allegations, 57 were classified as 'Substantiated', 66 as 'Substantiated Other Than Reported', and 5 as 'Not Fully Substantiated'. The substantiation rate in respect of fully investigated allegations was 11%. The three major areas of complaints endorsed in 2008 in descending order, were 'Neglect of Duty' (1,675 or 37%), 'Misconduct/ Improper Manner/ Offensive Language' (1,520 or 33.6%) and 'Assault' (538 or 11.9%).

The above-mentioned figures indicate that only about 10% of complaint cases were considered "successful". The IPCC is appointed by the government. It has long been criticised for lacking transparency and accountability. It is with limited authority, unable to effectively monitor the Complaints Against Police Office (CAPO) under the Hong Kong Police, or to reinvestigate cases handled by the CAPO. Recently, the issue of police abuse has become more and more serious. AFRO hopes that the government can look squarely at this issue. The IPCC should be empowered to conduct independent investigations and follow-ups so as to effectively monitor the police.

2.3) Noah's Ark - Ma Wan Park Trip

It has been a while since we last went out with sex workers for an outing. We were sponsored by Hong Kong Council Social Service and went to Noah's Ark and Ma Wan Park in Ma Wan on 14 March. The temperature had dropped significantly the day before and we were so worried that it might affect the event. But fortunately, the weather turned out to be beautiful. It was warm and the sun was out. We, in a group of 34, headed towards Noah's Ark.

When we were on the way to Ma Wan, passing through the Tsing Ma Bridge, our sisters became very excited. We later found out that many of them had only heard about the bridge or seen that on TV but never in reality. They were so impressed that couldn't help yelling out: "Finally, I have seen it!" Most of our sisters are so busy with their work every day. Some of them have never even been to the Ladies' Street (Tong Choi Street)!"

The staff of Noah's Ark toured us and showed us their facilities. Our sisters were at first quite shy but later after some warm-up became passionate and creative in posing and photo taking. And the kids were curious about everything. They raised a lot of questions and tried to touch everything that they could. After that, we went to Ma Wan Park. Some of them were already tired and preferred to take a seat and chit-chat under a tree, while others were busy bringing their children to take a look at the rainbow, and the frogs...

We were all a bit tired when we were about to leave. But we could tell from the laughter that it had been a day full of fun and happiness. We hope that it won't be long before we have another outing.

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