



Sex Workers Network (SWN), Bangladesh

And

Sex Workers and Allies in South Asia (SWASA), Bangladesh Chapter

**SUBMISSION ON THE STATUS OF SEX WORKERS IN BANGLADESH
TO THE UNITED NATIONS COMMITTEE ON THE ELIMINATION OF
DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN
65th SESSION, October 24 – November 18, 2016**

UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (the Committee) will examine Bangladesh's eighth periodic report at its 65th session in November 2016. The Sex Worker's Network (SWN), Bangladesh and Sex Workers and Allies in South Asia (SWASA) with this submission focus on the violence faced by women, and specifically on violence against sex workers in Bangladesh.

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Report on the status of the sex workers in Bangladesh

1: Introduction:

Situation of women in any patriarchal society is vulnerable. If a woman does not lead her life according to the 'social norms', her character is questioned. The 'delicate character' of woman gets 'loose and dark', and she is seen as involved in 'unsocial' activities. Imagine how the society looks at a woman, who has sex with other men, who are not their lawfully married husbands. Women in sex work are often looked at as 'criminals' even when Bangladesh Penal Code does not criminalize sex work but there is a wide range of laws that create an atmosphere, which criminalizes sex work and thus the sex worker.

Sex-workers in Bangladesh are perceived as criminals when **sex work in private is legal**, then again, soliciting and running a brothel is illegal. Because of this contradiction in law the sex workers in Bangladesh are subjected to harassment, violence and are criminalized. For their profession sex workers are not seen as 'normal citizens' who have equal right to life and livelihood. This has led to systemic violation of rights such as the right to life, dignity, equality, equal protection and due processes under the law that are fundamental rights for us all. Stigma attached to sex work exposes them to violence in personal and public spaces too.

1.1: Addressing sex workers issue in previous CEDAW sessions:

The issue of sex worker's, has come up in state party reports in earlier CEDAW sessions and following are few paragraphs from previous CEDAW reports:

Observation by CEDAW (CEDAW/C/BGD/5): 2.7:

There are a few projects for displaced sex workers. Sex workers especially the young ones have been rehabilitated in these centres.

Special projects have been undertaken for the education of the children of the sex workers.

Response to Recommendation 462 in CEDAW/C/BGD/5:

Studies and researches have come up with the suggestion that poverty is the root cause behind prostitution in most of the cases. Consequences of prostitution are healthy neither for women involved nor for the society as well. Women who are involved in this work are the worst victims, as this becomes a sort of social stigma for them because of different social, cultural and religious values of the respective countries.

On behalf of the Government of Bangladesh, the Ministry of Social Welfare has taken up a project "Capacity Building, Poverty Alleviation and Sustainable Livelihood of the Socially Disadvantaged Women and their Children" for sex-worker women. Through this project, the government has tried to rehabilitate the sex-workers in a particular shelter home. Some of them have already gone back to their parents while some others entered the marital life with the help of the Government.

2: General situation of women sex workers:

Unfortunately, the situation of brothel based and street based sex workers are a stark reminder of the fact that there has been no 'real change' for the better since the sex workers' rights movement started almost two decades ago. Having contradictory laws and regulations the profession is criminalized and sex workers are subjected to violence. It clearly shows that despite many years in existence and few achievements, the sex workers movements have hit a wall.

Among a few achievements, sex workers no longer call themselves 'prostitutes', a few brothels now have secured land to bury their dead, these days the sex workers wear shoes in the market places, which they were not allowed to do in the past. The sex workers in Bangladesh have done commendable work in the field of HIV/AIDS prevention. Sex workers have the lowest rate of prevalence among all key populations. Sex workers have proved that they are a responsible group contrary to stereotyped perceptions. Most importantly, sex workers have organized themselves, built network with other development and movement based organizations (within Bangladesh and internationally) and have demanded rights to which they are entitled as citizens of this country. Despite all this, they still suffer in inhumane, horrible ways. Their lives are still wrought with brutality, violence and insecurity. The gaps in the laws are still there thus in the eyes of law in Bangladesh a sex worker is involved in "immoral act", they create "public nuisance" and often they are booked under anti-trafficking acts. The brothel-based sex workers' primary fear is that of eviction while the street based sex workers fear is being beaten up by local goons, police, being arrested and face false cases. Women in the sex trade often sells condoms and if any women are caught with condoms in bags would be first verbally abused and then she has to pay bribe to avoid further harassment. They often are denied access to health care. They are still not considered people who deserve to live with dignity.

In Bangladesh, Sex Worker's Network (SWN) has 29 self-organized sex worker's group as members. Among these there are 10 brothel-based groups and 19 floating/street based sex workers groups. SWN currently works with an estimated 2975 female and transgender sex workers and a recent study shows that there are almost two hundred thousand sex workers working in Bangladesh. There are a total of 29 NGOs/CBOs who are working with the sex worker network and self-organized groups in Bangladesh.

2.1: Presenting the ground reality to National Human Rights Commission:

A public hearing organised by Sex Workers Network in the lead and joined by National Human Rights Commission, Sex Workers Allies South Asia (SWASA), and Shonghoti (an alliance of diverse organizations and individuals working on sex worker rights), was organised to bring together key players in one platform. Three hundred (300) sex workers from different districts of Bangladesh, 60 NGOs/CBOs,

human rights and women activist attended the hearing. The Chairman of National Human Rights Commission chaired the Public Hearing.

Seven sex workers gave testimonies and narrated issues of eviction from brothels, arbitrary arrest and daily harassment by police, physical abuse by the clients and local goons, non-payment for work, extortion, denial of health care and justice.

The Chair of NHRC made the following recommendations after hearing the sex workers giving testimonies in person:

- Laws related to “prostitution” must be abolished
- Laws needed to provide legal protection to sex workers
- Law enforcement agencies must be trained to follow rule of law
- Sex workers should file official complaints of human rights violations to the NHRC. NHRC will take legal action.

3: Day to day Violence faced by women in sex trade: Eviction, a regular threat

The first brothel known as English road red light area in Old Dhaka was evicted around end 1990's. After that the brothels came under severe threat and after the close down of Tanbazar and Neemtoli brothels in Narayanganj by the authorities in July 1999, the sex workers went to the court. In 2000, The Bangladesh High Court ruled that 'prostitution' as a livelihood is not illegal. This judgment means that the 'prostitutes' in Bangladesh now have the legal rights to practice their trade. And evicting someone from ones workplace is illegal. Which also say that every profession must have a workplace and a brothel was legal too. The court made the above observation while passing the judgment in favor of the rights of the sex workers.

The case conducted by BSEHR vs. Government of Bangladesh (2001) says: *"The Court upheld the fundamental right to the protection of privacy of the sex workers. The Court held that the eviction of sex workers had deprived them of their livelihood, which amounts to deprivation of their right to life. The Court took the view that, even if sex work is not illegal in Bangladesh it is not encouraged. It held that rehabilitation schemes must be compatible with human dignity and worth."*

Even after such a landmark judgment the threat of eviction of brothels did not stop and as late as in 2014 around 1000 sex workers were evicted from a 200-year-old brothel in Tangail. Overnight sex workers became destitute, homeless and were on the streets with their families. The women of Kandapara brothel fought it out in the Court once again, won the case and now they have re-entered the area and have re-established Kandapara brothel in Tangail. But the remaining brothels in Bangladesh are still living under threat of eviction.

4: Access to Justice

4.1: Sex workers as ‘repeat offenders’:

In Bangladesh often the law enforcing agencies report to arbitrary detention of sex workers and extort money under threat of arrest and physical violence. There are thousands of reports where sex workers are arrested under ‘public nuisance’ or ‘obscene’ conduct provisions of the penal code. They are produced in court and released on the payment of fines. For last few years the sex workers are charged with drug peddling and for human trafficking also. The later charges are often unbailable and police takes bigger amount of bribe from the sex workers and not book them under these cases.

Sex workers booked under *Section 54 of Code of Criminal Procedure 1898* where police can arrest without any warrant under ‘suspicious’ conditions. The *municipal laws of Dhaka, Chittagong, Sylhet, Rajshahi, Khulna and Barisal* prohibit soliciting in public places, they all follow *Dhaka Metropolitan Police Ordinance 1976*. The *Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act, 1933* makes soliciting in public punishable offence. The *Local Government Act 1988*, empowers the local government to make regulations to prevent “prostitution”.

Sex workers choose not to contest their arrest under these provisions since they find it easier to pay bribe or fines and be released. The reasons can vary from being in sex work secretly, having dependent children and other family members at home, to be sent in jail for weeks, inability to cope with repeatedly getting arrested and appearing in the court, inability to find lawyers who are willing to fight her case, etc. In this process the sex workers get marked as repeat offenders. The vicious cycle of discrimination is perpetuated, setting into motion further marginalisation, stigma, violence and poverty.

The stigmatised woman in sex trade finds it extremely hard to access their human and fundamental rights. This structural violence further aggravates discrimination in the lives of women in sex work. It creates a fertile ground for social exclusion and denial of rights as was witnessed in many cases. As a result of their inaccessibility in law and social practice, sex workers face difficulties accessing health care, housing, and supplementary employment opportunities. They face verbal, physical, and sexual abuse; arbitrary arrests and harassment. Stigma decreases their ability to seek protection from the courts or the police when they suffer from violence and discrimination.

4.2: Sex work and the issue of trafficking in person:

Trafficking is a serious issue and the *Women and Child Repression Act 2000* addressed the issue with all seriousness. The government of Bangladesh introduced a draft *Human Trafficking (Deterrence and Protection) Bill 2011*, that has consolidated laws related to trafficking.

There is an urgent need to distinguish between “trafficking”, “sex work” and “irregular migration for work”. The Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women observed, there was a tendency to conflate sex work with trafficking in persons.

Increasing evidence and global norms confirm a clear distinction between trafficking and sex work and describe the characteristics of trafficking. “Trafficking” is an act that refers to “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat of use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, or fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power ...or the giving or receiving of payment or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person for exploitation.

There may be many sex workers who have been deceived or lured into sex work and might be said to be “trafficked” but there are a large number of sex workers, who have entered this trade on their own without any coercion or deceit. Many have moved in search of a better life and livelihood. Though poverty, lack of skill, poor job options and inequality are reasons for people to enter sex work and indicate inadequate “free choice”, it cannot be said that all people in such conditions have been trafficked. The sex workers should not be targeted and should benefit from human rights support, including social and economic choices.

When trafficking is mixed up or confused with women’s voluntary migration (for the purpose of employment, residence, or escape from persecution by State or non-State actors) protectionist measures steeped in patriarchal control over women’s mobility result in curbing female migration within and outside the borders of the country, the law denies equal rights to women. Women’s access and opportunity to travel on her own will often get blurred and curbs women’s right to freedom of mobility.

The main reason for this confusion is the lack of a common definition of ‘trafficking’. Most of the countries in south Asia region, specially, the SAARC countries, use the SAARC Convention definition which has limited scope and only focuses on trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation. This makes the workers in sex trade as ‘criminals’. New laws have been passed and all of them criminalize sex work.

In Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women’s 65th session to be held from 24 October-18 November 2016,

Item 4 of the provisional agenda Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 18 of the CEDAW

List of issues in relation to the eighth periodic report of Bangladesh General

1. *In its eighth periodic report, the State party acknowledges that a limitation of its report was the lack of updated national data and that updated figures were not available (para. 9).*
2. *It is also indicated that the State party agreed on the collection and compilation of a minimum set of gender indicators, in line with the guidelines of the Statistical Commission of 2013 (para. 172). Please provide updated information on the current status of this initiative and information on the establishment of a national-level database using gender statistical basic indicators.*

It also observes that “trafficking and exploitation of prostitution, The State party indicates that there is a gap in its legislation on prostitution, that women involved in prostitution are often subjected to harassment and violence by the police and that their rights are often denied in practice (para. 126). Please provide updated information on measures taken to adopt specific legal measures to close the gap in the legislation on prostitution and protect women in prostitution, as well as information on the prevalence of the phenomenon in the State party and measures taken to prevent the sexual exploitation of women and girls. Please also describe existing mechanisms to reduce the demand for prostitution and to support women who wish to leave prostitution.”

The Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) of Government of Bangladesh in their report provides this following data:

Table 6: Cases on Trafficking on Women and Children	
No. of Cases: 683	No. of Victims Trafficked: 818
No. of Victims Recovered: 477	
Rehabilitation with Parents: 467 Shelter home: 10	

Source: MOHA, from January 2010 to August, 2014

This table is taken from the Bangladesh Country report for the 65th session which shows that there have been about eight hundred cases of trafficking in four years in Bangladesh. The government has enacted laws to curb trafficking but laws that are there that criminalise sex workers are still untouched. On the other hand, the 5year National Development policy for women does not have any mention of sex workers of Bangladesh. It seems that according to the policy for women the sex workers are invisible. On the other hand the laws that are regularly used against the sex workers are kept intact. In the State party reporting in CEDAW, the government talks about taking steps that are merely lip services.

4.3: Why Sex work needs to be decriminalized:

Decriminalisation of sex work is a pre-requisite to ensure the physical and emotional inviolability of sex workers, their right to life, right to freedom of labour, health and reproductive and sexual rights. The uncertain legal status attached to their work and identity further make them “invisible” as citizens with associate rights and entitlements.

UN Resolutions, International agencies and Commissions have stressed on a rights based response to sex work and the need to protect rights not just by decriminalising sex work, but also by eliminating the unjust application of non - criminal laws and regulations against sex workers.

- i. The UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia Pacific resolution calls on members to address legal barriers¹ to HIV responses including reviews² of national laws, policies with a view to eliminating discrimination against

vulnerable populations.

ii. The Independent Commission on AIDS in Asia,³ UN Special Rapporteur on Right to Health,⁴ Global Commission on HIV and the Law⁵ and UNDP Asia Pacific⁶ have recommended the decriminalization of sex work involving consenting adults.

iii. The Global Commission on HIV and the Law and UNDP Asia Pacific have also specifically recommended repeal of laws that prohibit consenting adults to buy or sell sex as well as laws that prohibit commercial sex (immoral earnings, living off the earnings' of prostitution, brothel-keeping.).

iv. National Human Rights Institutions have been called on to hold governments accountable for the protection of sex workers from discrimination, harassment, abuse and violence perpetrated by police or other government officers.⁷

UN organizations, International agencies and Commissions call for recognition of trafficking in persons for sexual exploitation and Sex Work as two different concepts to be understood and legislated accordingly.^{8,9,10} The use of anti-trafficking laws against adults in consensual sex work needs to be reviewed. Sex Work organizations have also called for a review of laws that criminalize third parties who support sex workers to work within a safe environment.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) and UNDP have emphasized on the need to provide sex workers with legally enforceable rights to occupational health and safety and right to participate in the process of developing workplace health and safety standards.^{11,12}

Sex workers have been recognised as an invaluable resource in the law and policy reform process with a view to develop non-judgmental and rights based laws, policies and programmes.¹³

Elaborating the scope of Article 6 of CEDAW; General Recommendation ¹⁴ calls on States to recognize that their (sex worker's) unlawful status makes sex workers vulnerable to violence and hence need equal protection under laws against rape and other forms of violence.¹⁵ States were asked to report on the measures to protect women in sex work and the effectiveness of these measures.¹⁶ The CEDAW Committee has recommended the need for measures to prevent "discrimination against sex workers and ensure that legislation on their right to safe working conditions is guaranteed".¹⁷

5: Recommendations:

The Government of Bangladesh, has not highlighted the status of sex workers, or has taken any specific measures to respect, protect, fulfill and promote their human rights that are in contradiction with CEDAW Articles 1- 6. Sex Workers Network, Bangladesh and SWASA recommend the Government of Bangladesh to:

- Take steps keeping in mind the emerging rights discourse at the global and national level and argues the Government to make efforts to respect, protect, fulfill and promote the human rights of the sex workers and ensuring their rights as citizens under the Constitution.
- The State needs to be accountable to ensure that such rights are appropriately protected and that sex workers to have access to social, economic and legal entitlements, as often they lack access to resources.
- Having an environment that criminalises activities of sex workers or seeks to forcibly evict or rescue and rehabilitate them clearly violates their rights to self - determination and free choice.
- Bangladesh does not have gender-neutral laws, which makes women to have easy access to justice. The poor infrastructure and discriminatory laws limit women sex worker's access to justice.
- Laws, policies and programmes devised in partnerships with sex workers are often most effective. Despite these formulations and clear recommendations by international human rights instruments, Bangladesh Government has failed to recognise the marginalisation, vulnerabilities and human rights of sex workers.
- Developing and implementing programmes that guarantee access to overall health care, to create a support system for women who faced sexual and gender-based violence. This programme should also include measures to eliminate stigma and discrimination.
- It is the duty of State to ensure the rights of women in sex work (as well as their children). The Annexure with case studies attached, are testimonies, which clearly shows that State actors as well as non-State actors continue to violate the rights of sex workers with impunity and there is lack of due diligence to address violence against sex workers.
- These acts of violence, humiliation and discrimination can be prevented once these cases are properly investigated, the perpetrators are prosecuted and the victims/ survivors are duly compensated.

- Our State has failed in its duty to protect and enhance the human rights of people within its jurisdiction. It is imperative that the State be reminded of the core Articles of CEDAW, namely 1-4 that define discrimination and emphasise State Obligation in the removal of all forms of historical and current discriminations through active measures, including putting in place processes of substantive equality for sex workers and their children.

References:

- ¹ UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia Pacific (ESCAP) Resolution 66-10, Regional call for action to achieve universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support in Asia and the Pacific, 2010 (29 September 2011), available from http://www.unescapdd.org/files/documents/HIV_IGM1_INF4.pdf
- ² UN ESCAP Resolution 67-9, Asia pacific regional review of progress in achieving declaration of commitment on HIV and political declaration on HIV/AIDS, 2011
- ³ Commission on AIDS in Asia (2008), *Redefining AIDS in Asia, Crafting an effective response*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- ⁴ Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, Anand Grover, A/HRC/14/20, 27 April 2010.
- ⁵ Global Commission on HIV and law (2012), *op. cit.*, p 43.
- ⁶ UNDP (2012), *Sex Work and the Law in Asia and the Pacific, HIV and human rights in the context of sex work.* p 34–39.
- ⁷ *ibid.* p 39.
- ⁸ Global Commission on HIV and the law (2012), *op. cit.*, p 43.
- ⁹ UNDP (2012), *op cit.*, p 24.
- ¹⁰ Human Rights Council (2010), *op. cit.*, p 15.
- ¹¹ Global network of sex work projects (2013), Third parties briefing paper. http://www.nswp.org/sites/nswp.org/files/thirdparties3_0_0.pdf. Viewed on December 2013.
- ^{12,13} ILO Recommendation concerning HIV and AIDS and the World of Work, 2010 (No 200), Geneva: ILO 21UNDP (2012), *op cit.*, p 35.
- ^{14, 15} WHO, UNFPA, UNAIDS, Global Network of sex Work Projects, The World Bank. *Implementing comprehensive HIV/STI programmes with sex workers: practical approaches from collaborative interventions.* Geneva, World Health Organisation, 2013. P XX 23UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), CEDAW General Recommendations Nos. 19, Article 6. Adopted at the Eleventh Session, 1992, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/453882a422.html> [accessed 14 December 2013].
- ¹⁶ *ibid.* Specific recommendations 24 (h).
- ¹⁷ UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, Concluding Observations on the combined seventh and eight periodic reports: Hungary, 26 March 2013, CEDAW/C/HUN/CO/7-8.
- ¹⁸ Status of Women in Sex Work in India, a submission to CEDAW in April, 2014.

6: Testimonies to describe violence faced by brothel and street based sex workers:

SWN and SWASA wanted to collect case studies for the report and had a structured format for the work. But we could not stick to our format and had to let the brutally harassed, traumatized sex workers speak, we let them speak out their anger, their sorrows, their emotions which might give them a bit of 'relief'. The following are a few testimonies given by the sex workers.

Testimonies:

Sex workers working in brothels are living in constant threat of eviction. The sex workers fight out cases and the court in its judgment said that the act of eviction was illegal and no one should be evicted from one's workplace. The brothels are seen as places where "immoral" activities take place and to "clean" the area, religious and community leaders often mobilize local people to carry out eviction drives and the local authorities also support them and the sex workers face harassment.

1. Hashi, General Secretary, Nari Mukti Shongothon, Kandapara brothel, Tangail

From a year before the eviction, there were discussions on putting up a boundary wall around the brothel. We needed one and everyone encouraged us. Little did we know that would be a problem for us.

We heard rumors about eviction for a while, but never anything concrete. The citizen's committee made a leaflet about us, and distributed it in all the mosques. We started approaching different NGOs but we really did not get much time. Before we knew it, on 12th July 2014, we were evicted. We suffered much abuse from local thugs in the days following up to the eviction.

The brothel area had about fifteen to sixteen hundred people including sex workers, their children, other people of the local economy such as shop owners, landowners, sex workers and so on. We were all threatened to be set on fire if we did not leave in a hours time. We had nowhere to go, allowed no shelter anywhere, and were made to leave wherever we went. We were homeless, suffering, with 3-4 women and 2-4 children dead.

We are humans, voting citizens, but no we do not have rights of a citizen. However, we, sex workers are resilient and despite the treatment towards us, we persevere.

Few days before Qurbani Eid same year, we forced ourselves into the brothel area in a large group, and stayed there for 3 days. Our Mayor and local community leaders made sure we were evicted again. We however, stuck to the movement. We went to many but never got much support from anyone.

I was born in this 200 year old brothel and I will die here. We, will get back our land and will rebuild the houses and will carry on with our lives.

Another testimony on brothel eviction threat:

2. Fatema, President, Alokito Nari, Phooltola brothel, Khulna

I come from a brothel situated in the South of Bangladesh and near an inland sea port. I have been part of the sex worker's rights movement from the beginning in 1990's. Like all brothels, we also face regular threats, but we always speak to local leaders.

In our brothel, there is also the problem of selling and usage of drugs and alcohol. We cannot stop it as local goons are involved in this illegal business but we cannot say no to them. If they and people from authorities know that I am here talking, then I will be in great trouble and for it there will be repercussions.

Our problems are mainly threat of eviction and not being able to bury our dead. A landowner who lives off my income can be buried, but why not me? I demand a graveyard for our brothel.

Nodi, a floating sex worker from Dhaka gave an account of the way she was abused by her clients. While testifying in private, she was terrified, not being able to shake off the fear she felt for the perpetrators. At no point during her testimonial did she state but implied that not only did they torture her and beat her up, a number of them, if not all, raped her too.

3. Nodi

I was tortured by local thugs. The night before the incident, a bunch of them came to take me, but I did not go with them. So they beat me up and threatened me, saying, "If you ever stand here again, we will kill you." Next day they came again and beat me up.

(At this point she stopped and whispered that she was scared to speak further. After a pause, she started to speak again.)

Late at night, I was taken to an alley. There were fifteen or sixteen of them, among them I knew six of them only. They beat me up brutally.

I was hacked in the back of my shoulder, I fell down and they thought I was dead, so they kicked me into a drain. When I regained my consciousness, around 2.30am, I went to National Hospital but the hospital authority kicked me out. I then went to Islamia Hospital, a government hospital but the guards did not allow me in. Then I dragged myself and went to DMCH (Dhaka Medical College Hospital). Once I reached DMCH, I lost consciousness. When I regained consciousness they sent me to Orthopaedic Hospital in Agargaon which is on the other side of the city, because the thugs had cut my finger too.

After getting out of the hospital I went to the police station where I was attacked to file a case with a few other sex worker sisters, but I was made to wait from 2pm till 10pm. I was told the case has been filed, but I was not given any paper that I was asked to sign. I belong to a street based self-helped group named Durjoy and they had asked for the case papers. I went back to the police station and I was told that the paper is lost. The law enforcing authorities suggested that I should go for reconciliation with the perpetrators.

I found out that I was told a lie. Apparently filing a case is of no use. I went every day, and it has been 2-3 weeks but the police do not take my case.

I went to other places too but the local goons are too powerful and I do not have the power or support to fight them.

“Pori” a floating sex worker from Dhaka gave accounts of how members of the police force have abused her when she was very young and how her experiences are similar to many others who enter sex work at an early age.

4. “Pori”

When I was young and was lost. The ‘bad girls’ found me and they used to look after me as their child. One day a policeman near the Court area asked me to go see him after his shift was over. I was not worried because I was not a sex worker. I was very young. So I went and he along with 3-4 policemen took me in the area behind the Court, near the “vault” and one of them sexually abused me. When he saw that he was not going to be satisfied, that I had started to bleed, they dumped me by the small hotel in that area. A sex worker heard what happened. She advised me not to say anything as I will not get justice, and it might put my life in danger too. Instead I should just join the profession, as that would ensure some income and independence. Some other people said that too, so I became a sex worker.

I am now in my 30’s and I still get harassed by the police regularly. The duty police in the Court area knows us and they would often call me, want free sex, but I did not go. During the Ramadan before last (2014), one day I was at home, he called me to come in front of the Court. I went with another friend of mine. We did not know they were arresting sex workers there. After coming in front of the Court I was arrested. I was in jail for 7-8 days, had to pay a fine of about Tk. 4000-5000 along with court fees.

About 4-5 months ago, I was in an accident where a private car hit me. The police paid no attention to me, but took the car and driver away to the police station. Four of us went to the station to file a case, but one of us was arrested, and the others were asked to leave or risk getting thrown in jail. We left, but even then the next day we got beat up by the police and local thugs, and were asked to leave the area.

We never get justice. We went to so many people with Nodi, but we got no justice. The Officer-in-Charge (OC) says that no case filed by sex workers will be accepted. Police abuse on us is rampant.

Najma, a mother of four children was in tears and emotional throughout giving us her testimonial. A floating sex worker working in the Sadarghat area (inland river port area in Dhaka), her concerns were the violence and insecurity that sex workers face, her children, and her future, as she is getting older.

5. Najma

I live in Aatibajar with my four children, they are my only family. I work in the Sadarghat area which is few hours away from where I stay. My children know's that I work in a hospital and I have night duties only.

As older sex workers, we have no security, and the police are brutal to us. They often arbitrarily charge us with a false case, of which is very hard and expensive to get out from. Then there are local thugs who extort money from us, they are abusive and they often do not let us work. The police extort money from us too.

Over the last one year I have had two cases filed by the police against me. I was booked under drug peddling case and was taken to jail. I did not have any way to contact my children at home. One lawyer in the court area who saw me working offered help and contact my family.

That is when my daughter found out that I was a sex worker because I got caught and was taken to jail. That was very difficult for her to accept and she had to look after her younger siblings without any adult supervision and they often go hungry as I am the only earning family member.

People in the jail helped me get out, but I still have the case in my name and have to go to the court every month. That is an expensive process too as it entails paying an attendance fee.

What value do we have? What are our rights? I plead that treatment towards sex workers improve and I demand that court attendance fee is waived!

Shanu, who works in various areas of Dhaka city, spoke about the problems of sex workers in general, and elaborated on police abuse and arbitrary arrest by talking about her own experience and suffering. She also touched on the insensitive ways some media personnel treat sex workers.

6. Shanu

We are humans, but due to unavoidable circumstances, we are here as sex workers. Our clients have all the rights, but we have none. In this patriarchal society, we women with no position provide service, cure an ailment, give treatment to these men in return for just Tk. 20, Tk. 50, while a doctor to just even check temperature gets Tk. 500-1000.

When we go to work in a house we are sexually abused. Most of the sisters here became sex workers after being abused by the man of the house while the woman was at work. I myself used to work at a garments factory. One night a man got into my bed while I was asleep. He took me to another place at gunpoint where 4-5 men had sex with me. They kept me captive in that place for 3 months, used me to earn money. I left when they did not want me anymore. I went back to working in the factory, but there was sexual abuse there too, so I voluntarily came in to sex work. I stood on the streets and would earn Tk. 100, sometimes Tk. 500, and sometimes Tk. 200. I was doing all right.

Thugs and police always extort money from us. At least we work for money, but what about them? Why do they abuse us so? Are we not humans? When the time for elections come they call us voters, not sex workers. They forget about us after the elections. Even our Prime Minister is a woman but no one asks about us!

During Ramadan on 2014, I was not working but standing on the street when I was picked up and taken to the police station. The so-called client was let go at midnight but I was slapped with a false case. Around 2.30am I was handcuffed, blindfolded with my own scarf, and brutally beaten up. When I lost consciousness, the 2nd Officer left the room thinking I was dead. The Sub-Inspector said he would let me go if I gave him Tk. 10,000. He finally agreed on Tk. 5000, which I arranged. After giving him the money, I learned that he had already filed the case against me. I had to organize Tk. 80,000 for bail and spent 16 days in jail.

I am still suffering from that case against me. I beg you to look into waiving the court fee.

Please look out for us. If we were not around then your mothers, sisters would have been sexually abused. We hear about children being violated. Leave them alone, because you can come to us. We provide the service.

Another group who harass us are members of the media. They are insensitive; they chase us, and photograph us. We might be bad, but our entire family is not. Their image is tarnished when we are photographed. I request you to be sensitive towards our families, our children, and us. Thank you.