

FLOWERS OF THE DARK KINGDOM FEMALE SEX WORKERS IN MANIPUR

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INTRODUCTION

Prostitution is the business or practice of engaging in sexual relations in exchange for payment (Merriam Webster Dictionary, 2013). A person who works in this field is called a prostitute. Female sex workers is the more refined and polite term used to address such individuals who are otherwise termed as prostitutes.

Prostitution is as old as history. Prostitution is frequently referred to as “the world’s oldest profession” (Ronald Be Flower, 1988). When the earliest known human societies emerged in the fertile crescent of Mesopotamia, the sex trade evolved alongside temples, customs, markets and law. It started as a religious affair and hence even the king took part in it with High Priestess in conjunction with grain harvests, the fertility of the earth was secured through a ritual that celebrated the fertility of the womb. In ancient Greek society prostitution was engaged in both by women and boys (A Brief Cultural History of Sex, 2008). Again in the Muslim world, despite Islam’s strict forbidding of prostitution, sexual slavery persisted and as some would say persists today too. Slaves served as concubines in the harems of the East. Asian countries like Japan and India too have their own history of prostitution. Mention can be made of the Devadasis of India. The devadasis were girls symbolically married and pledged to a deity and their responsibility included the care and maintenance of the temple, later they turned to prostitution as temples lost their patron kings.

In Japan, Oiran were courtesans during the Edo period. Among the Oiran, the Tayuwas considered the highest rank of courtesan available only to the wealthiest and highest ranking men. Similarly, a tawaif was a courtesan who catered to the nobility of South Asia, particularly during the Mughal Empire. During the middle ages, popes and religious communities made various attempts to remove prostitution or reform prostitutes. During the British East India Company's rule in India in the late 18th and 19th centuries, it was initially fairly common for British soldiers to engage in inter-ethnic prostitution in India, where they frequently visited

Indian nautch dancers (Fisher, Michael H, 2007). Historian Phillipa Levine offers one trajectory for the racialization of prostitution, through the history of British colonialism in India. Discusses the nineteenth century rise in official concern about British soldiers having relationships with native women in the colonies, including soldiers cohabiting with local women and having children with them, Levine argues that soldiers were encouraged to become clients of sex workers instead, a move which may have given rise to the brothel system in many places including Bombay. “The prostitute fulfilled a role as the most degraded of women, a polluted and despised wretch removed from decency but nonetheless providing a “necessary” outlet. (Phillipa Levine, Prostitution, Race and Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire). In the 19th century, legalized prostitution became a public controversy as France and the then United Kingdom passed the Contagious Disease Acts, legislation mandating pelvic examinations for suspected prostitutes.

In the 20th century despite the Communist Governments tried to repress prostitution, the economic decline brought about by the collapse of the Soviet Union led to increased prostitution in many current and former Communist Countries (Wickman, Forest, November, 2011). Therefore, prostitution is a global phenomenon practiced through the ages and at all times of the human civilization.

PRESENT SCENARIO OF THE SEX TRADE

To talk about the world of the sex workers is still a taboo subject, the sex trade is a striving business in many countries of the world. It has become a multimillion industry where the object sold and bought is a women's body. The Governments of Countries like Thailand, United Kingdom, Netherland, Costa Rica, Greece, Germany, Colombia and Bangladesh have legalised sex work. In India there is limited legality, prostitution and prostitution in public is illegal. In India, districts bordering Maharashtra and Karnataka, known as the "devadasi belt" have trafficking structure operating at various levels. The largest and best known red light districts are Sonagachi in Kolkata, Kamathipura in Mumbai, G.B. Road in New Delhi, Kashmiri Market in Agra, Ward No.14 of Silchar in Assam etc., hosts thousand of sex workers (Prostitution in India, Wikipedia). Mumbai and Kolkata have the country's largest brothel based sex industry, with over 100,000 sex workers in Mumbai (Wikipedia). At present, there are around 20 million sex workers in India, out of which 35% are below the age of 18 years (Human Rights Watch Report). According to estimates, there are half a billion children in brothels in India.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

- To highlight the lives of Female sex workers in Manipur.
- The factors which led these women to commercial sex work.
- To sensitize the stakeholders – government, members of different social organizations, health service providers, law enforcing agencies and the general masses.
- Suggests ways to decriminalize and rehabilitate them.

METHODOLOGY

The study is of descriptive nature and the datas are based mainly on secondary datas collected from books, newspaper report, NGOs working in the field of Female Sex Workers in the state, Manipur State Aids Control Society (MACS) and from the internet.

ROLE OF WOMEN IN MANIPUR SOCIETY

The role of the Manipuri women in the socio economic and cultural life of Manipur is significant. Manipuri society is patriarchal, yet Manipuri women hold a high and liberal position than women in other patriarchal societies in the country. They have made a mark of their own in all works of life be it sports, education, administration, politics, arts, culture etc. The world famous Meirapaibeas (Women torch bearers) are spreading the people's movement against atrocities of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, even though the Meirapaibeas initially came into being in the late 1970s as a movement against alcoholism.

The Khwairamband Bazar, the all women market in Manipur is proof enough of the strong involvement of the women of Manipur in the economic life of the state. Yet, despite this strong and powerful image of the Manipuri women, a large number of Manipuri women have turned themselves into female sex workers (FSWs) and become a part of the burgeoning sex trade in the state.

WHO ARE THE FSWs IN MANIPUR?

Very little is known about the Female Sex Workers (FSWs) in Manipur. It is an area very less researched, discussed, nor focused except for some NGOs working in the field and the Manipur State Aids Control Society (MACS). Moreover the fear, hatred, stigma, discrimination and criminalization associated with this profession makes it a taboo subject.

There is also a big difficulty ascertaining the number of female sex workers in Manipur. Yet, as per report from the Manipur State Aids Control Society there are around 5,600 FSW in Manipur.

But if we go close to the lives of these women (FSWs) in Manipur, it reveals a totally different story. They are women who have had enough of dejection and depression in their lives. The general notion that they are promiscuous persons may not always be true. Putting the question of morality and social acceptability aside, a FSW is just another human being struggling to survive and feed their dependents, the general notion that they wear revealing dresses, dirty, painted faces or have different mannerisms is misleading and specially in the context of Manipur. As one staff of an NGO working in this field in the State says - "We do not know who the sex worker is. The person looks just like you and me. They dress normally and they have families too like us". (An NGO worker, Manipur).

REASONS FOR BECOMING A FSW

The reasons for becoming a FSW are many, yet, the chief reason seems to be poverty. These are women who have poor socio-economic background, lack of emotional support, from family and friends, women who are exposed to extreme conditions of poverty with no option for earning a livelihood. The case of Thoi (name changed) a 30 year old who told to Imphal Free Press, can be cited in this regard – "I don't know how my daughter, siblings and relatives are doing as it has been almost a decade that the communication was completely terminated with them." When asked about the reason to become a sex worker, she replied with tears in her eyes that shattered hopes due to endless suffering since her childhood till her marriage has forced her to become an FSW. After her husband died, just two years into their marriage, she worked as a daily wagger doing whatever work she get. But owing to mounting pressure for survival, she started engaging in sex work as a last resort (PhurailatpamKeny Devi, 2021). Then, there are women who are widowed or marginalised by the general population and widows and spouses of Injecting Drug Users (IDUs). Again, many landless women from rural areas come to this occupation as she has no land to cultivate and therefore goes totown and becomes a FSW which was an easy option. Divorcees, widows and those who have an unstable marital relationship also come to the sex trade. Again, another alarming reason is that, 45% of these women did not enter this occupation by choice but were influenced and the person who influenced them ranges from dose relatives or known persons to strangers. These women and girls are usually trafficked from other places to the operating area.

Many such victims of trafficking are from places which were affected by violent ethnic conflict. They were brought with promises to provide a job to places like Imphal City. Initially they were given job as a helper in hotels or local brew vendor and ultimately forced them to commercial sex work. Another major cause for a woman to enter sex work is her drug habit, as she finds sex work an easy way to 'quick money'. Usually after 1-3 years of active addiction, a number of women are influenced by the male users or paddlers to get into commercial sex work (Assessment of Situation and Response on CSWs in Manipur, 2005). Becoming a FSW is also sometimes a result of an irresponsible husband, a husband who fails to look after his wife and children and spends time drinking. The monetary demand of running a home, education for children are the main reasons of why young mothers choose to go for this much stigmatized profession. The strong pull of consumerism, the modern luxury gadgets like mobile phones, branded dresses, designer jewellery, cosmetic etc. can lead any young girl to become an easy prey to prostitution. Another reason also could be the declining moral standards of men and women. The sense of loyalty to one's husband and wife have become more and more bleak. The question of chastity in fact seems to have been totally thrown to the wind.

TYPES OF FSWs IN THE STATE

1. FSWs hotels of Imphal Town:

The manager acts a middleman between the FSW and the client. Many FSWs are vegetable and fish sellers from other districts of the state. Some of them are victims of trafficking and unmarried.

2. FSW working under a contact person:

The contact person is usually a women who runs a business where people gather a beauty parlour or a paan shop or a wine vendor etc.

3. Street Based FSWs:

They are found in the busy streets of Imphal City, Churachandpur, Bishnupur and Thoubal. They are older, between the age group of 40-55 years. These women used to work in hotels before but as they age, their demand decreased and they are available around crowded tea stalls, cinema halls, vegetable vendors, paan shops and parks etc.

4. Mobile Sex workers:

They move from one place to another every 3-4 months or when they are in less demand.

DILEMMAS OF FSWs

The dilemmas of FSWs in Manipur are many. Once a woman becomes a FSW, she faces a lot of social problems like - humiliation, discrimination and criminalization. They are humiliated and discriminated by the general community once they are identified. Again, the law enforcers especially the police personnels are known to have caused a lot of harassment to these women. They are threatened and forced to supply free sex. Meira Paibeas, police, students organisations, local youth clubs etc. raids the places of operation of the FSWs from time to time. They are beaten mercilessly and humiliated by tonsuring their heads in public. The

media too leaves no stone unturned in humiliating them, very often they are flashed in local papers if they are caught by social organisations and these are followed by locality people burning their houses and rain verbal abuse whenever they get an opportunity. Another big dilemma is their little access to health care. Physical barriers such as poor communication and non-availability of health services in surrounding or operating areas. Sometimes they are charged exorbitant fees for treatment and the unfriendly attitude of the service providers add to the misery. They also suffer from psychological problems like depression, anxiety, social isolation and low self esteem. They are ashamed of going for treatment, less they are found out. All these are bitter but painful truths about the lives of the FSWs.

HOPES AND ASPIRATIONS

These women have bright hopes and aspirations. They hope that someday when they are able to have a respectable business they will leave their profession. They have high hopes for their children that someday they will become respectable citizens having dignified professions. Some of them wishes to be rehabilitated and feels that if they are provided financial support and vocational training, they can leave the profession. A very positive news is that, very recently during the fearful COVID-19 pandemic, the Social Welfare Department of Manipur state had initiated to provide financial assistance to FSWs and a total amount of Rs 1.7 crore was sanctioned. The financial assistance was transferred to the NGOs working in this field and the NGOs will further hand over the amount to FSWs registered under them.

SUGGESTIONS

- Legalization or decriminalization will greatly reduce sex trafficking and coercion into the industry.
- Vocational skills and financial or material support should be provided to FSWs who want to leave the occupation.
- Rehabilitation and detoxification for FSWs who are drug users/addicts.
- Care and support should be provided to aged FSWs to have a source of income after leaving the occupation.
- Support should be given to FSWs who are forced and exploited to become commercial sex workers, as they cannot free themselves from the clutches of the brothel owners.
- Health and hygiene awareness should be imparted in order to curb the menace of STIs and HIV infection among the FSWs and their customers.
- Counseling services are a must in order to enhance their self esteem.
- People who come in direct contact, like middlemen, pimps, hotel managers, doctors, nurses NGO workers, media etc. should be sensitized to reduce stigma and discrimination to a certain extent.
- Improving accessibility, affordability and availability of health services.
- Development of a helpline and legal aid facility becomes of utmost importance.
- Policy makers attention should be drawn by local groups like NGOs, academics working on social issues and social activists etc.

CONCLUSION

This paper tries to add a new insight in the field of the socially ostracised world of the female sex workers (FSWs) in the state of Manipur. It is high time the people and the state take a softer and a more lenient look into the lives of the FSWs who have till date remained flowers in the dark kingdom of sex trade. We should not trample them and allow them to wither unheard and unseen. After all, they are like each one of us for nature never made them differently but society made them different.

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