

## Summary of International sex workers Day celebration

International Sex workers Day- 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2009  
Nazrul Manch, Kolkata, West Bengal



### Inauguration

*International Sex workers Day* was celebrated by Durbar Mahila Samanwaya committee from 27<sup>th</sup> February till 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 2009 at Kolkata, India. The program was inaugurated by Mr Bikas Ranjan Battacharya, Honorable Mayor of Kolkata. The inauguration ceremony was graced by other dignitaries like Mr Hannan Mollah, Member of Parliament, Mr Ajaydev Majumdar Head of Kolkata blood donor forum, Pradhan Maharaj of Alampur Ramakrishna math and mission, and others.

The conference was attended by 61 International Participants from countries e.e. Australia, Nepal, Bangladesh, Hong Kong, Cambodia, England, and America. More than 250 sex workers from different states of India also attended the program in addition to them 1500 sex workers coming from different districts of West Bengal did attend the program.

Mayor of Kolkata, Mr Bikas Ranjan Battacharya, in his note expressed that “If sex workers want respect from society they should have respect for themselves. Through HIV prevention program, DMSC have not just educated sex workers but have also prevented minors and forced girls’ entry to sex trade also.

**Mr Hanan Mollah, Honorable Minister of Parliament**, mentioned in his address that “In early days women who made a living through selling sex services was duly recognized by the state. It is unfortunate that in the present era they receive stigma and are ostracized”. However sex worker through their constant fight would duly get that recognition. He also commented that he will stand against ITPA amendment and other law in future which criminalize sex work.

### ***The Main objective of the International conference was***

- I. To develop network and alliance with National and Asian sex workers organizations and other civil society organization.
- II. To initiate a process of partnership with different Universities and Educational institutions in Kolkata with an objective to develop ties with them and involve them in Sonagachi Research and Training Institute.
- III. To strengthen network with other marginalized communities and their movement.
- IV. To help repositioning of Durbar as a responsible non government organization who take stake in social and development issues and not just limited to sex workers issues and challenges.
- V. To involve different social activist, political analyst, and intellectuals in the ongoing movement of sex workers.

### ***Panel Discussion, Debates and Workshop***

The International sex workers Day celebration saw several different important Panel discussions and debating sessions which involved both sex workers and other social and political analyst including Public health experts.

- a. **Panel Discussion:-**Sex workers are Entertainment workers.
- b. **Workshop:-** Self Regulatory Board - A Practice Of Participatory Democracy In Combating Trafficking
- c. **Panel Discussion:-** Issues of sexuality in women’s movement
- d. **Global Scenario of Social Movement and Developmental Approaches of Sex Worker.**

- e. **Debating Session:** “Talibanism is rooted in the core of religious belief system”.
- f. **Discussion Session:-**“Rights To Sex Work Is A Challenge To Patriarchy”.
- g. **Panel Discussion:-**Who is to decide what should be the culture of the country and how?
- h. **Panel Discussion:-**Role of state in dealing with sexual minorities.

## **2. Holding procession in support of sex workers rights by *Padatik*-An organization of children of sex workers**

The procession by “Padatik” was a great success. There were more than 1000 participants including children of sex workers, sex workers, International dignitaries and social activist. The procession was held to express solidarity towards to their mother profession. It attracted a lot of commoner’s attention in the street. For International delegates it was something unimaginable who can’t conceive such a show and that too by the children of sex workers.

## **3. Two Capacity building workshop was organized on**

- a. “CBO development and its challenges”
- b. “Community led advocacy”.

The Speakers for both the workshop was a unique combination of Technical experts like Dr Smarajit Jana, Dr Sushena Reza Paul and Mr Shreeram. Community members from DMSC were Ms Bharati Dey, Ms Putul, Ms Rekha, Ms Bishka and Ms Asha Banerjee.

The enthusiastic participants included both National organizations like WISE, Saheli, Sangram, Nari Mukti, CARE Saksham, SIAAP, Asha Mahila Sanastha, Alliance and some SACS TIs and many more. International participants were Durjoy Nari Sangho, Bangladesh women health collision, Badhoun, Sarena from Scarlet Alliance Australia etc.

## **4. Panel Discussion with Media personnel-Role of media in raising the voices of marginalised communities**

An Interesting session was organized to discuss on “Role of media in raising marginalized communities voices”. The panel had a varied set of media personels from both print and audio and visual media units.

The panelist agreed on a common point that they have a major role to play in raising the voices of marginalized communities, however they felt the efforts need to made on the field by the community themselves initially. Once they start the struggle, their voices will automatically picked up by the media like how Durbar have worked extensively on the field on social, political and economical rights of sex workers along with health issues.

The discussion also moved to the question of having own “channel” for spreading their voices however some of the panelist felt that apart from just looking at one medium is not enough, one needs look into various means for spreading message and information and reaching out to a larger audience.

Media personnel’s did agree that all important community news don’t get published or telecasted. Some areas are regulated by government and some by private channel owners and thus it limits the areas that need to be published. However sex worker through their struggle and determination have been able to change their status to a certain extent. They have changed their own status from being called “prostitute” in a derogatory way to “sex workers” and in future “entertainment workers”

**5. A Pre Conference seminar** was also organized on 21<sup>st</sup> February 09 on two important topics, “Protecting rights of sex workers” and “Should sex workers get workers rights?”. This conference was held in DMSC office. Trade Union representative were the primary participants of the said seminar. For the topic “Should sex workers get workers rights” session main attended were legal experts. Some of the other important dignitaries were Ms Sabhri Bhattacharya, Rajya Mahila Commission, Mr Tapas Bhattacharya, Blood Donar Association president Dumdum branch, Ms Mamata Ghosh, State women commission member, Ms Arunava Ghosh High Court Lawyer.

#### **6. National Network of sex workers meeting (NNSW)**

The National network of sex workers (NNSW) meeting showed greater participation from more than 20 sex workers organization and several concrete steps were taken for taking ahead the sex workers movement. Ashodaya Mysore, sex workers collective offered to function as the secretariat for the operations of NNSW for a year.

## 7. Cultural Programs

Cultural events have always been an important part of sex workers life. The International sex workers day Celebration, thus had a major component of Cultural programs which included variety of program e.g. song, dance, drama etc.

DMSC organized a Fashion Show at Tapan Theater. The show saw sex worker, Transgender and children of sex workers enthusiastic participation. Komal Gandhar, the cultural wing performed several splendid shows and received appreciation from all.

On 3<sup>rd</sup> March “Destiny” named Rock Band was invited which made the show even more Interesting. “Chao Nach” from Puralia, West Bengal and Manipuri dance got great appreciation from the participants.

Anandam, and organization of MSM and Transgender also organized a entertaining Fashion show, on 3<sup>rd</sup> March evening.

## Key Note Speakers

**Ms Ishika basu, educationalist** expressed that sex work profession is a part of 64 act of Kamasutra. Sex comes very naturally to all human being, but society thinks that female is only for reproduction system and in a patriarchal society women have no right to express her sexuality and there is no say and no choice no scope for pleasure. Thus some people feel that giving sexual pleasure for monetary exchange can't be considered as skilled worker.

**Ms Serrena sex worker from Australia** expressed that there was a lot of atrocities on sex workers before they got recognition through Occupational health and safety act in Australia. Now they are safe and no vulnerable situation. Thus recognition by law is very important.

**Ms Rama Debnath ex president of DMSC**, during the session of “Issues of sexuality of women movement”, said that through HIV prevention program we realized that we have the capacity to say no. similarly she felt that if the marginalized community also learns to say no and express their opinion, they will realize that they have started voicing their opinion and that's what we

want to do during the International sex workers day celebration i.e. “Raise the voices of marginal’s”. She also mentioned that women are controlled through men. Men enjoy the freedom and those women who talk about their right they considered “bad” girls. The structure of the society is like that even if they dislike their husbands they have to stay with them all their life. However sex worker is in a better state and they can talk about sexuality and have a freedom of choice.

**Partha Dey (Education Minister):** He mentioned that he has always supported that sex education should be included in school curriculum. His government has also discussed the same with the central government and as a result, the life skill education has already been included in the school education curriculum. He also mentioned that Durbar has been able to change the perception that society usually have about sex workers. They have not just been able to successfully run their health and education Intervention but also been able to establish their rights as citizen of the country.

**Dr. Manibrata Bhattacharya (Head of the department-Anthropology):** As torial values and sper the history, sex work is the oldest profession in the world. In ancient India sex workers used to be considered as a profession and duly supported and recognized by the state authorities. But the situation changed during British era. The victorial values and systems were imposed on us by the colonizer, what we have swallowed even after they left the country.

But what I believe is that - sex workers are equal to any other workers. Durbar has been able to change the social position to some extent. Thanks Durbar for organizing this kind of workshops which may help more to change people’s outlook toward sex workers.

**Dr. Helen Lambert (Medical Anthropologist – University of Bristol):** According to her, Durbar has got the success because it is working as a large collectivization which is run by community members themselves. She thanked Durbar for their ongoing struggle to establish the rights of marginalized communities.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> March International Sex workers Day**

3<sup>rd</sup> March culminated the week long celebration of sex workers day. The Celebration platform saw the presence of esteemed dignitaries like Md Saleem, Member of Parliament, BJP MP Thathagatha Roy, Mr Gautom Ghosh Film Director, Ms Roshmi Goswami from Ford foundation , and Ms Asa Andersson senior program co-ordinator from UNAIDS and representative from Trade union.

### **Conclusion and Follow up Actions**

DMSC would like to thank all the Individuals and organizations who have contributed in making International sex workers day celebration a success. This was a major celebration also an ITPA amendment pushed by WCD was not passed by the parliament, because of the relentless work done by all the sex workers organization.

We have also been able to open dialogues with two of the most prestigious Universities in Kolkata i.e. Calcutta University and Rabindra Bharti. They have extended us support with our future activities and showed keen interest in sex workers movement. Efforts are made to start courses together with these academic Institutions.

The ISWD also received comprehensive press coverage and thus we were able to connect to the mainstream society through both print and electronic medium.

On the basis of discussion that DMSC had with Media personnel's, several Advocacy teams were formed along with the community members and technical staff, to meet with different Election candidate and other party representatives before the election, to advocate for sex workers rights.