

Sex Workers Stage National Protest for Rights

In what could be described as an unparalleled step to reclaim rights, over 4,000 female, male and transgender sex workers from across the country converged in New Delhi on 8th March 2006 to oppose the *Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Amendment Bill, 2005* and demand their rights. Demonstrating their resentment against the Bill that threatens to crush their livelihood, sex workers congregated at Ram Lila Grounds and marched to *Jantar Mantar*, stopping people and traffic in the heart of the city. Marching alongside the National Network of Sex Workers, were individuals and organizations from diverse fields such as HIV/AIDS, Health, Law and Human Rights, Gender and Sexuality and Queer Rights. Incidentally, a few activists from the Women's Movement, which has hitherto distanced itself from sex workers, also came forward to express solidarity.

Drumbeats, colorful banners, placards, posters, and leaflets in multiple languages marked the rally. Activists carried banners articulating demands that ranged from protecting their right to work to recognizing regulatory boards set up by sex workers. "*Only Rights Can Stop the Wrongs*" signaled one banner, "*Empower sex workers, not Police*" cautioned another. The march was interspersed with speeches and slogans against the criminalisation of sex work.

The pivotal point of protest was, however, the new Section 5C that punishes clients visiting brothels for sexual exploitation. Protesters pointed out that not only does the new provision endanger their earnings but also increases the risk of HIV transmission in commercial sex. "*The new provision will allow the Police to stop and arrest any man who walks into a brothel, irrespective of whether he seeks an adult consenting sex worker or an underage girl/ trafficked survivor. To avoid the Police, clients will solicit sex more clandestinely, in isolated places. Under such circumstances, how can we insist on safer sex and get the client to use a condom?*" questioned sex workers from Sonagachi, the well-known red light area in Kolkata, where condom use is near universal. *Section 5C is a direct assault on our work, health, safety and rights and we will resist it to the very end* - was the collective and uncompromising call of protesters.

Unmindful of the potential consequences of coming out, sex workers posed for cameras, and freely interacted with both media and spectators lining the streets. "*Till now, I stayed away from public events for fear that I will be identified as a whore, but today, when my very survival is at stake, I have come out in protest, notwithstanding public identification or ridicule*" - said a male sex worker, who traveled all the way from East Godavari district in Andhra Pradesh to take part in the rally. .

The protest concluded with representatives submitting a memorandum of appeal to the Prime Minister's Office to reject the *ITPA Amendment Bill* in its present form. Unquestionably, it was a historic day for the Sex workers' Rights Movement in India.