



Sex Worker Network of Bangladesh (SWNOB)

Inputs from January 23, 2024

1. Most common forms of violence faced by sex workers

In Bangladesh, sex workers are seen with a different lens. Because it is a Muslim country, sex is stigmatized. Sex workers face immense violence and we are unable to speak about our identity.

It is difficult for children of sex workers to attend schools. Sex workers do not get access to justice because they are ridiculed. Earlier sex workers could not go to public places, but now they are venturing out more.

Customers may often lie about the number of clients, and bring more clients than agreed to. They may be denied payment post sex. On demanding money, they risk physical violence.

Even though sex workers vote, they do not receive government services on an equal basis.

Street based sex workers face verbal harassment and bullying – even from rickshaw pullers. Even media persons approach them and take pictures of them without their consent. Media personnel threaten them and extort money.

The police officers routinely insult sex workers and mentally torture them. In the last 23 years, in Dhaka, 12 sex workers have died due to police atrocities.

The landlords of houses they live in on rent often threaten to throw them out without reason, even if they have children.

Eminent people including politicians have control over brothels- they can demand sex and threaten sex workers with violence.

Young female children risk torture and do not get access to health services.

Most sex workers suffer from various diseases due to lack of hospital access.

Thugs/goondas also extort sex workers and threaten them with violence if they do not pay.

When they are taken to court, they are routinely made to accept that they are offenders in trafficking cases and have to pay a fine, otherwise they will be detained in prison as an undertrial for a long time. In case they pay a bribe to police officers, they can avoid this process.

2. How does conflation with victims of trafficking impact sex workers?

The sex workers who have been involved in sex work for some time, can identify who are the victims of trafficking.

Many customers pretend to be friends to young girls and traffic them to another place. Whatever money they earn, is taken away by pimps. Young girls looking for love and affection are more vulnerable.

SWNOB believes that they must support sex workers who willingly do it. They do not encourage people to leave sex work, if they do not want to. Sex workers should be able to choose their profession.

Sex workers try to do their best to locate those who have been trafficked and to hold the perpetrators accountable. This becomes very hard when the person has been trafficked outside the country.

3. What is the impact of punitive laws on the lives of sex workers?

There are generic laws criminalizing public nuisance but they are used to only target sex workers, not others. For instance, someone smoking in public will never be criminalized under this law.

Many sex workers live on the street and do not have access to night shelters. They may face arrest and detention in a vagrancy home.

Metropolitan police officers can arrest people suspected of commission of an offence between sunset and sunrise. Sex workers have to hide at night in order to evade arrest. We are released from detention only if we admit to the crimes we are accused of.

Sex workers are routinely book under the Immoral Traffic Prevention Act, as well as their clients.

The keeping of a brothel next to a temple or mosque is criminalized by law, so sex workers are always apprehensive of being arrested. We have seen instances of establishment of places of worship in order to evict sex workers and vacate brothels in order to capture the land.

The punitive laws applied against us are not very clear, and are selectively applied to target sex workers. The sex workers in brothels are subject to different laws and floating sex workers are subject to different ones.

Sex workers face threats for extortion and bribes, and if they do not comply, they face allegations of violating the law. For instance, a woman with a young child may be arrested and separated from her child.

Shelter homes are worse than jails for us. Sex workers become victims when they are confined to shelters. Sex workers are not considered to be human beings, unless their votes are being sought.

Transgender sex workers also face violence and we are afraid of the threats that they face to their lives due to stigma.

4. What strategies do sex workers use to reduce violence?

We try to talk to eminent persons and politicians whenever violence against a sex worker occurs, in order to ensure that the incident is not repeated.

We work with hospitals and the police so that we are alerted when violence occurs.

We try to negotiate with house owners who demand rent and threaten violence if they are not paid on time.

There is a great amount of one-one-advocacy in such cases.

We also do advocacy with different police stations, but it takes time to establish such relationships.

We offer treatment, legal support and counselling to those who face violence.

5. What options are available to sex workers who wish to leave sex work?

When sex workers do not want to do sex work anymore, we try our best to ensure their rehabilitation.

But unfortunately, the type of work given to sex workers leaving the profession is not dignified and does not pay much. If sex workers want to undertake businesses after leaving sex work, they require money which we cannot always provide. Sex workers have many dependents on them, so they may end up returning to sex work as the money they earn through tailoring may not be sufficient.