

# RESEARCH ESSAY

## SEX WORK, SEX WORKERS AND INTERSECTIONALITIES

---

**Daksha**

*Research Scholar*

*Tata Institute of Social Sciences*

*Mumbai*

*Email: daksha998@gmail.com*

The discussion about sex work in the Indian Public Sphere often dwindles between an abolitionist and an anti-abolitionist perspective. The debates are fraught between articulations like “sex work is work like any other work” or positions such as that of Madhu Kishwar, who states that “no self-respecting society should legalise the dehumanisation of women who are forced into flesh trade through force, abduction and violence”. What is interesting to note here is what are the connotations attached to the phrase ‘self-respecting society’. The phrase and the position of the likes of Madhu Kishwar is laden with moralistic value judgements, one that devalues the labour entailed in sex-work, one that views sex and sexual as something strictly to be within the bonds of conjugality. Further, in the anti-abolitionist camp, there are differing viewpoints: one that vouches for decriminalisation and other that pushes for legalisation. While, the former implies that all existing legislation be abolished because the law itself operates with a certain moralistic viewpoint, the former implies a call for regulation that seeks to protect the sex-workers. The term ‘protection’ also carries with itself certain connotations, that of the paternalistic state and other institutions that seek to control by care. Feminists have been conscious and cautious about this, and perhaps this is the reason why the decriminalisation faction holds their position. What this layout of the various debates around sex-work points towards is that, at the core of the arguments each faction strives for the well-being of sex-workers, but still there are differences. The question that then arises is that are all sex workers the same? Can sex-workers and sex-work be thought through from the

---

perspective of intersectionality? I would argue that to think of sex-work and sex-workers as an analytical and political category, it is crucial to situate them within the framework of intersectionality and engage with the differences arising out owing to the class, caste, gender, racial and other identity markers. As Prabha Kotiswaran (2001, 2008) has also pointed out, sex-work does not exist as a unified category, there are different sex-work practices and regulations on each practice and the different types of sex-workers have varied meanings.

When sex-work is analysed from a labour perspective, the debate proceeds from the point of transcending the victim/agent dichotomy. It then becomes possible to analyse the diverse sex-work practices with the distinct stakeholders involved. The concept of labour positions sex work within a broader category of intimate and gendered labour. But it is equally crucial to remember that sex work is also a unique site of labour involving distinct forms of violence and agency. The economic sphere of work is more than often socio-culturally constructed. The notion of work is rather the conglomeration of the economic ideas (labour, exchange and value) and the sociocultural parameters (caste, religion and gender). Such construction is dependent both on the economic return of a work as well as the social perception related to the work which is to say that there is a relation between the work, its perception and the person who performs it. This paper situates sex-work within the perspective that it is a form of labour like other forms of informal labour. More so, I would situate sex-work in the category of marginal informal labour. Sex workers face gender oppression, sexual violence, discrimination and exploitation in their job. It is informal labour because women in sex work often move in and out of sex work into other informal occupations. This highlights that sex work operates as one form of work within varied and often precarious, labour network.

The case of conflation of caste and sex-work gets complicated owing to the notions of sexuality attached to the lower-caste women by the Brahmanical Patriarchal structures. The sexuality of lower caste women is constructed as transgressive and promiscuous, one that is always available. As pointed out by Meena Gopal, feminists were confronted by this dilemma in the wake of the ban on dance bars in Maharashtra. While a section of savarna feminists from autonomous women collectives opposed the ban from the labour perspective, and because it deprived women the right to livelihood, another section of Dalit-Bahujan feminists

---

argued that a lot of the women were part of caste communities where dance was a form of caste practice, and that under the argument of right to livelihood savarna feminists are reinforcing the existence caste-based occupations and stigmas attached to them (Gopal, 2012). When this debate of ban on dance bars is extrapolated into other forms of sexual labour (like Devadasi), a similar set of dilemmas emerge. The practice of Devadasi, where young girls from lower-caste would be dedicated to the temple deity was a caste-segregated profession. The young girls termed as Devadasi meaning the god's servant, would go on to become common prostitutes for the upper-caste men. There have been times when Dalit feminists of Maharashtra vehemently condemned the Devadasi tradition that pushed their ancestors into subjugation, at other times women from the Devadasi communities of Western India have become collectivised as sex workers to battle against police atrocities. The marginalities of caste then open questions about the way forward for feminist politics within the domain of sex-work.

For Transgender women, the path to enter sex-work opens owing to the discrimination they face because of their gender and sexual identity. Most of the transwomen are forced to migrate to unfamiliar places at a very young age due to the abuse faced at their parental homes. They enter sex-work when they are unable to sustain themselves economically in any other labour sector due to gender discrimination. In the process of finding a community for themselves, many trans women find solace in the *Hijra* community, which is linked to cultural and religious dimensions. These earnings are mostly spent in sustaining the chosen family for themselves, gender-affirming surgeries and bribing the police officers. Violence inflicted by police officials is also a common feature of sex work among transgender women.

In this regard, a study by the Peoples' Union for Civil Liberties, Karnataka, concluded that the police's attitude seems to be that since they are engaging in sex-work they are not entitled to any rights of sexual citizenship (PUCL-K, 2003). In addition to the stigma associated with sex work, transgender women face additional violence as they are perceived to be a threat to the gendered social order. Their visibility itself becomes the reason for provocation of anger, rage, and violence from the police and among the general public. Although, people engaged in sex-work largely are at a higher risk of contracting HIV and other Sexually Transmitted Infections, transgender persons involved in sex-

---

work are statistically amongst the population group most affected by HIV. Their HIV vulnerability is linked to physical and sexual violence is associated with inconsistent condom use, and increased HIV/sexually transmitted infection (STI) vulnerability among sex workers (Ganju, 2017).

The State, while working through legalities, institutions, and state personnel, hold immense power in constructing and deconstructing the other. The legal binaries of legality versus illegality determine the normal versus the other. The transgenders are deprived of equal participation in social and cultural life, shunned by family and society, and have restricted access to education. They have less access to health services and public spaces as well. They exercise limited civil, political, and economic rights, their life, citizenship, and identity transits between legality and illegality of civil and criminal law (Skylab, 2019). What this does is that it makes them more marginal, in the already existing marginality. This abandonment by the State renders a category of people vulnerable to forms of abuse and violence. The cases of murders of trans women, who engage in sex-work like that of Sweet Maria, go unnoticed and un-investigated because the system considers them to be second-class citizens. These women are more than often murdered out of blatant transphobia, just because of rage caused due to disclosure of their identity. One such case was that of Pravallika in Hyderabad. The man, named Venkat had murdered several transwomen including Pravallika out of the hatred and disgust he had for the community.

The case of Living Smile Vidya, a Dalit trans woman becomes crucial to look at in this regard, as she points out the exclusions and discriminations faced by her owing to her caste and gender identity. In an interview, when asked to compare caste discrimination and transgender discrimination, she points out how transgenders who are working class have no dignity of labour as they have to either beg or resort to sex work. She points out the occupational fixity in both the forms of discrimination due to which “manual scavenging becomes an occupation enforced on Dalits through the exclusion of access to other jobs; in a similar way begging and sex work are forced occupations for transgenders through exclusion from other jobs” (Living, 2013). What Living Smile Vidya has to say about identities and intersectionality also points towards a strategy, a vision for transversal politics where people occupying different identities broaden their viewpoint and stand

---

in solidarity and unity against various oppressive factors. Particularly, in the domain of sex work, one needs to see it as work, as a form of labour. Although, it is oppressive owing to the violence and stigma that the society holds but so is existence in the form of any marginalised identity. The problem then is not in the identity or the work itself, but the stigmatic notions around it.

Through this discussion on various forms of sex-work and related professions (like bar dancers, devadasi and the workers occupying different identity positions of caste and gender) who are part of this labour network, I have tried to highlight the varied issues that the sex-workers face. In doing so, my attempt has been to point out how an intersectional approach is useful to examine the category of sex-worker as it brings to light the various issues that workers might face owing to their gender, caste, class position in the society. Sex work and Sex workers cannot be conflated into one category, and there is need for more intersectional analysis to highlight the specific issues that sex-workers face. Caste and gender in intersection with sex-work opens various questions and problems, related to visibility, increased vulnerability, and caste-based occupation. As pointed out earlier there are controversies within the Dalit-Bahujan feminists too regarding their position on sex-work and related professions. I think these contests can be points of deliberation for the future of politics of sex-work.

**Author Bionote:** *Daksha has completed their Masters in Women's Studies from Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. Their research interests lie at the intersection of Gender, Culture and Media, e-mail: daksha998@gmail.com*

## References

- Chacko, Shubha, Subadra Panchanadeswaran, and Gowri Vijayakumar (2016). "Sex Work as Livelihood: Women, Men and Transgender Sex Workers in Karnataka". Ed. Bina Fernandez, Meena Gopal and Orlanda Ruthven. *Land, Labour and Livelihoods: Indian Women's Perspectives*. Springer.
- Ganju, Deepika and Niranjana Saggurti (2017). "Stigma, violence and HIV vulnerability among transgender persons in sex work in Maharashtra, India". *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 19:8, pp. 903-917. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2016.1271141>
- Gopal, Meena (2013). "Ruptures and Reproduction in Caste/Gender/Labour". *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 48, No. 18, pp. 91-97. <http://www.jstor.com/stable/23527313>

- 
- Gopal, Meena (2019). "Towards Greater Civility: Public Morality and Transversal Queer/Feminist Politics in India". *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2019.1583815>
- Gopal, Meena (2012). "Caste, sexuality and labour: The troubled connection". *Current Sociology*, 60(2), pp. 222–238. <http://csi.sagepub.com/content/60/2/222>
- John, Mary (2013). "The Problem of Women's Labour: Some Autobiographical Perspectives". *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 20(2), pp. 177–212. <http://ijg.sagepub.com/content/20/2/177>
- Kotiswaran, Prabha (2001). "Preparing for Civil Disobedience: Indian Sex Workers and the Law". *BC Third World LJ* 21: 161.
- Kotiswaran, Prabha (2008). "Born unto Brothels—Toward a Legal Ethnography of Sex Work in an Indian Red-Light Area". *Law & Social Inquiry* 33(3), pp. 579–629.
- Living Smile Vidya (2013). *(Trans) Gender and Caste Lived Experience -Transphobia as a Form of Brahminism*. An Interview by K Karthik and G Suleiman. Round Table India - (Trans)gender and caste lived experience - Transphobia as a form of Brahminism: An Interview of Living Smile Vidya
- Peoples' Union for Civil Liberties, Karnataka. (2003). *Human Rights Violations Against the Transgender Community: A Study of Kothi and Hijra Sex Workers in Bangalore, India*. PUCL-K. <http://ai.eecs.umich.edu/people/conway/TS/PUCL/PUCLpercent20Report.html>
- Sukthankar, Ashwini (2012). "Queering Approaches to Sex, Gender, and Labor in India: Examining Paths to Sex Worker Unionism". Ed. Ania Loomba and Ritty A. Lukose. *South Asian Feminisms*, pp. 306–332. Duke University Press.
- Sahu, Skylab (2019). "Identity and Other: Women and Transgender Sex Workers in Karnataka". *Sociological Bulletin* 68(1), pp. 44–59. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038022918819366>
- Vijayakumar, Gowri, Shubha Chacko, and Subadra Panchanadeswaran (2015). "As Human Beings and As Workers': Sex Worker Unionization in Karnataka, India". *Global Labour Journal*, 6(1), pp. 79–95.