

Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network

HIV/AIDS POLICY & LAW REVIEW

VOLUME 9, NUMBER 3, DECEMBER 2004

Still underground: searching for progress in realizing the human rights of women in prostitution

After more than 20 years of global consensus on the need to work respectfully with sex trade workers as a central anti-HIV/AIDS strategy, the abuse and demonization of women and others in sex work remain major impediments to progress in both defending human rights and fighting AIDS. In this article, Joanne Csete and Meena Saraswathi Seshu discuss the nature of human rights abuses faced by women in prostitution and describe impediments to reducing those abuses. The authors suggest measures that would help to advance the human rights of women in prostitution and to create an environment conducive to the realization of their crucial role in combating HIV/AIDS.

This article is based in part on “The Violence of Stigmatization,” an essay prepared by Ms Seshu, based on her experience working with women in prostitution in central India.¹ Ms Seshu is with SANGRAM (Sampada Grameen Mahila Sanstha), an organization based in Sangli, India, that works in six districts of Maharashtra and Karnataka states. Since 1993 SANGRAM has worked for the empowerment of women in prostitution, including mobilizing them for HIV-related peer education. Some 120 SANGRAM peer educators distribute 350,000 condoms to 5000 women every month. In 1996 this work broadened into the organization of a collective of women in prostitution called VAMP (Veshya AIDS Muqabla Parishad). Reflections from members of the VAMP collective are included in a box at the end of the article.

cont'd on page 8

Bangkok Supplement

Issues concerning the rights of women and of injection drug users figured prominently at the XV International AIDS Conference held in July 2004 in Bangkok, Thailand.

This issue of the *HIV/AIDS Policy & Law Review* includes a special section containing the most relevant presentations on legal, ethical, and human rights issues from the conference and its many satellite meetings. The section also contains selected abstracts.

See page 67.



Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS

UNAIDS

UNHCR-UNICEF-WFP-UNDP-UNFPA
UNODC-ILO-UNESCO-WHO-WORLD BANK



CANADIAN | RÉSEAU
HIV/AIDS | JURIDIQUE
L E G A L | CANADIEN
NETWORK | VIH•SIDA

Production of the *HIV/AIDS Policy & Law Review* has been made possible, in part, by funding from the Public Health Agency of Canada under the Canadian Strategy on HIV/AIDS. The financial contribution of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS toward the publication of this issue is gratefully acknowledged.

Still underground: searching for progress in realizing the human rights of women in prostitution

cont'd from page 1

Introduction

In June 2004 the government of the Indian state of Goa forcibly displaced hundreds of women in prostitution from the Baina beach neighbourhood by destroying their 250 homes, making way for the commercial development of the beachfront property. Responding to a court order requiring them to offer livelihood alternatives to the Baina residents before any displacement could happen, state authorities offered the women the opportunity to be housed behind barbed wire in a former children's home to learn new commercial skills, including candle-making and embroidery. None of the women saw this as a viable alternative. The eviction occurred at the height of the monsoon season.²

Women in prostitution in Baina had worked effectively as a group to empower themselves to demand condom use of their clients, and they fought child trafficking into Goa. India is home to some of the world's most successful and internationally lauded collectives of women in prostitution who work together to prevent HIV and educate their clients and the larger community about AIDS. But the Goa authorities apparently had no regard for the impact on the women and the entire community of dispersing these HIV/AIDS activities, just as they had no regard for the property, rights, or well-being of these women.

In June 2003 the US Congress passed the Global AIDS Bill authorizing the White House initiative that has

come to be known as PEPFAR, the President's Emergency Program for AIDS Relief. It is well known that the Global AIDS Bill requires that one-third of PEPFAR funds allocated to prevention efforts must go to programs that promote sexual abstinence outside marriage as their key prevention strategy. What is perhaps less well known is that the bill also prohibits the granting of funds to "any group or organization that does not have a policy explicitly opposing prostitution."³ Chris Smith, a Republican from the state of New Jersey in the House of Representatives, who authored this provision, told the press that "it would simply be wrong for the United States to ... serve as an enabler for traffickers and pimps by providing money to combat AIDS to organizations who believe in the misguided approach [of] legalized prostitution and 'safe sex.'"⁴

The two developments noted above vividly illustrate the abuse and demonization of women and others involved in the sex trade.

Denying the capacity to consent

Sex work has featured in analyses of the AIDS epidemic from the beginning – for some, looming large as a problem; for others, understood for its potential as part of the solution. The latter group saw that the human rights of sex workers would have to be defended to protect them from HIV/AIDS and to combat the disease more broadly. While a few positive steps have been taken in recent years

to embody human rights of sex workers in national and local responses to AIDS, there has been an alarming shift recently against policy and programmatic support for interventions concerned with the rights and health of people engaged in sex work, even where such interventions have proven effective. The setbacks are due in part to the power of the anti-trafficking lobby in the US, which, as noted above, has effectively encouraged the demonization of both prostitution and trafficking and also, in the process, has systematically blurred the distinction between the two.

There has been an alarming shift against policy and programmatic support for interventions concerned with the rights and health of people engaged in sex work.

This confounding of trafficking with prostitution by political conservatives and religious fundamentalists in the US found fertile ground in a discourse on sex work already dominated by moral judgementalism, fear-mongering, and abolitionism. It is easy for those who confound sex work and trafficking to make the case that all sex work is the equivalent of trafficking when abolitionists, including some feminists, have long argued

that all sex workers have been forced into the institution of prostitution, and that making money from sex is synonymous with violent sexual exploitation. Complete abolition of prostitution is the logical solution for those who make this argument. But abolition in this case means criminalizing the manifestations of sex work such as soliciting, pimping, brothel-keeping, and trafficking, an approach likely to spill over into criminalizing the woman in prostitution.

There is no question that the motivations for sex work are complex and varied, and that some women enter prostitution because of poverty and because other livelihood alternatives are extremely limited. But to reduce prostitution to something involving no choice or agency on the part of the women practising it is as demeaning and as much a human rights violation as the violence and stigma that sex workers regularly face. Hilary Kinnell, of the UK Network of Sex Work Projects, notes that consent can be distinguished from coercion by applying clear criteria – such as whether a woman was subject to force or threats of force, was abducted or unlawfully detained, was unconscious, etc when she entered prostitution. Where coercion is not present, according to Kinnell,

to deny sex workers the right to consent to sex in exchange for money would put them in the same category as children under the age of thirteen and adults with severe learning disabilities or mental disorders – in other words, a return to the days when women could be sent to mental hospitals for having illegitimate children or acting in ways that embarrassed their adult male relatives.⁵

Framing women sex workers as hapless victims of exploitation is hardly a

step up from the more common historical view of them as “fallen women.” Depictions of prostitutes have long relied on images of wantonness, debauchery (making “valueless” money from sex), and moral weakness. The “whore” stigma emphasized the evil influence of these women on the “good” moral character of society, deeming them deviant and base. The concept of the fallen, debased, and deviant woman has always governed public opinion, policy, and law.

Criminalization and violence

Caught between their supposed victimhood and supposed wantonness, women in prostitution unsurprisingly face laws and policies in most countries that seek either to “protect” or to criminalize them, or both. Laws and policy on sex work have tended to reflect both the nearly universal social disdain of sex workers and the core beliefs about sex and sex work of policy-makers (mostly men). Even where national laws do not criminalize prostitution directly, they nearly always allow the police great latitude in

Social attitudes allow police a free hand for extortion, unlawful detention, and sexual abuse of women in prostitution.

detaining sex workers on charges such as vagrancy or loitering. Social attitudes add to that latitude and allow police a free hand for extortion, unlawful detention, and sexual abuse of women in prostitution, which are widely practised the world over.

Not only do police in many countries engage in such abuse with

impunity; they also turn a blind eye when criminal gangs, immigration and other officials, pimps, and clients abuse sex workers. Sex workers are in the impossible position in most countries of working essentially outside the law, but in a business in which police profit from prostitution – in the form of money or sex – and have no incentive to change the status quo. Police, government officials, and all of society drill into women in prostitution that their lives are illicit. The police’s selective use of the law and its trappings allows criminals and gangs – for example, the so-called goonda element in India – to use the site of sex work to practise their criminal activity, which relies on the vulnerability of the women. The result is an uneasy alliance between the state, criminals, and the women. No wonder it is impossible in so many countries for women in prostitution to escape the “protection” of a pimp or brothel owner or some criminal element.

A survey of sex workers in 13 districts in Tamil Nadu, India, in 2000 found that almost 70 percent of women in prostitution had been beaten by police and that over 80 percent had been arrested unlawfully.⁶ There is every reason to suppose that these patterns are representative of the situation in many countries where sex workers come from the lowest class or caste. It is obvious that when abused by the police, women in prostitution are unable to make an official complaint or prosecute that abuse. Unfortunately, this is true of sexual and other violent abuse against women in prostitution even when the police are not the perpetrators.

Women in prostitution, therefore, are frequently forced to accept conditions of abuse in their daily working lives. Madhuri Sawant, a woman in prostitution who had been trafficked

to Mumbai from elsewhere in India, related to the VAMP collective her experience of being caged in a small room without ventilation, not allowed to talk to her colleagues, and having to service clients that pimps brought to the room, without her having any power to choose whom to accept or reject. She felt she had relinquished her life to the trafficker and madam. After her escape, she said, “It is because Mumbai is so big and frightening that I felt alone and helpless. I thought that the dalal [pimp] from Mumbai would treat me like a human being, but he was ruthless. Even a woman like me who had 10 years’ experience in prostitution and sex work could not deal with the goondas in Mumbai. What must be happening to new, young girls? They must be really brutalized.”

The violence of stigma

Stigma, which has its roots in the standards set by patriarchal morality, is experienced by women in prostitution as perhaps the most important impediment to realizing their human rights. The impact of stigma on them is multi-faceted – denying them freedom from physical and mental abuse, and impeding their right to education and information, health care, housing, social security, and welfare services.

Being women in prostitution puts these women into a caste/class of their own. This caste/class occupies the lowest rung in the social hierarchy; it may even be considered outside the hierarchy as we know it. Mobility for these women is therefore almost impossible; when it is possible, it is only through deceit or money. The need to protect family members, especially children, from this stigma is an everyday struggle. As Bandawwa Makadwale from VAMP said, “All the money we have earned cannot help us

to live in peace. The outside world pushes us out and does not even accept our children who are not in the business of making money out of sex. Our health and our children suffer the most due to this stigma and discrimination.”

Stigma is perhaps the most important impediment to women in prostitution realizing their human rights.

The baseline survey of the sex worker community in Sangli conducted by SANGRAM in 1992 showed that less than two percent of the women have ever been to school of any kind, and that less than half of them reached high school. Though most of the children of these women were going to school, the survey showed a very high drop-out rate, especially after primary school. As one of their daughters said, “It is very painful to listen to your peers make snide remarks about your own mother. When my own teacher came to the community for sex, I ran and ran till I was breathless. I was so frightened. I never went back to school.” This stigma persists even when daughters of sex workers achieve prominence in other careers. A young woman whose mother worked in the sex trade was able to complete her studies and be awarded a master’s degree in business. She reported that she left her job in a local bank because the manager took to calling her in to ask questions about her mother and the other women in the community.

Stigma and discrimination against sex workers in access to health care are widespread. Women in prostitution reported to the National Commission of Women in India that

doctors and other medical staff at government hospitals treated them in a callous way, often asking irrelevant and humiliating questions about sexual positions and the like. There were reports of doctors assuming that the women were “AIDS carriers” and refusing to touch them, preferring to have attendants or nurses conduct physical examinations. Some women reported that doctors or social workers forced them to have sex.

The impact of HIV/AIDS

The HIV/AIDS epidemic should have provided an opportunity for a deeper understanding of the importance of respecting the rights of sex workers as an important end in and of itself, and as an essential step in the struggle against AIDS. Women in prostitution, after all, constitute a community that bears and will continue to bear the greatest impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in India and many countries, not least because HIV transmission is most efficient when sex is violent and abusive.

Instead, the lens of the HIV/AIDS epidemic has too often caused women in prostitution to be seen as “carriers,” “vectors,” and “core transmitters” of HIV. Portraying women in prostitution in this way reinforces the moral and judgmental attitudes of prostitution-bashers and the prejudice that AIDS is an “impure” disease that afflicts immoral persons. If these images are not countered, the result is to open the door wider to social stigma and violence against sex workers, decrease their ability to assert themselves, allow customers even more latitude to force unsafe sex upon them, and impede their access to health care and other services.

HIV/AIDS-related interventions and policies that target sex workers only as tools for reducing HIV trans-

mission may ignore the risks faced by sex workers that need to be addressed for their protection, and for anti-AIDS strategies to work. Fear of police and legal repression is a major reason why women shy away from outreach workers. In situations where a person has been trafficked or is an illegal migrant, it is almost impossible to expect that she, fearing repatriation (among other things), will seek prevention and treatment services for HIV simply because they are available. Likewise, it is almost impossible to conduct outreach to women who are under the “protection” of the criminal nexus and trafficking syndicates.

The 100 percent condom use strategy is rarely pursued in a way that respects the rights of sex workers.

One strategy for HIV prevention work among women in prostitution that has received international praise is the so-called “100 percent condom use” program, of which Thailand’s is probably the best known. In such programs, managers of commercial sex establishments agree to enforce condom use in the activities undertaken on their premises, and sex workers are instructed to refuse sex to any client refusing condom use. As UNAIDS notes, if all commercial sex venues abide by the rules of the program, clients will essentially be forced to use condoms.

While this strategy has undoubtedly increased condom use in many places where it has been pursued, it is rarely pursued in a way that respects the rights of sex workers. As Loff and others have noted, many 100 percent

programs have led to repressive surveillance of sex workers, compulsory HIV and sexually transmitted disease (STD) testing, and the arrests of women in prostitution when condoms are not used.⁷ In some cases, these programs have not ensured continuous availability of condoms, and sex workers have paid the price. Those prosecuted for not using condoms may end up having to work in more remote or hidden parts of the sex industry where they will be at increased risk of HIV and of abuse. In their worst forms, these programs are the antithesis of peer education efforts of organizations like SANGRAM, whose success has been based on the presence of sex workers themselves in decision-making roles in programs.

Contradictions and lacunae in the management of the HIV/AIDS programs in many countries also impede the realization of sex workers’ rights. Short project-oriented interventions cannot hope to achieve a sustained response to a problem as complex as abuse of sex workers. In situations where access to treatment services to the general population is difficult and sporadic, a service for vulnerable groups is an almost impossible dream. Programs that view women in sex work as a means to reaching the sexually active male population rather than the sex workers themselves are doomed from the start; they are likely to alienate women in prostitution rather than empower them to combat HIV.

In spite of the well-documented successes of sex worker-run collectives in controlling the spread of HIV in their communities, the crucial role of sex workers in HIV/AIDS prevention is too little recognized. It is clear from experiences in India and elsewhere that women in prostitution are the best educators of their male

clients. This has been recognized by “best practice” analyses of UNAIDS and by many experts, but still government and donor resources are most plentiful for top-down programs that effectively disempower sex workers.

A study of “targeted interventions” for HIV prevention among sex workers in India by the US-based NGO, CHANGE, found that these programs often reinforce stigma, particularly where there is no commitment by authorities to address human rights abuses against sex workers. The Indian government recognizes the importance of sex workers as peer educators and HIV/AIDS outreach workers, but has not been inclined to address the human rights violations that are so central to the vulnerability of sex workers to HIV.⁸

Even where the government supports peer education programs for sex workers, it has done nothing to address sex workers’ exposure to HIV through sexual violence at the hands of police, brothel owners, and criminals or, for that matter, the inability they share with many other women to negotiate safe sex with regular partners. Espousal of the rights of sex workers only goes as far as is needed to make programs run. As one NGO worker told CHANGE, “So [seeing to] the rights of women in prostitution is not because they as citizens have rights, but because from an HIV programmatic point of view, they have to have a few rights to enable them to use condoms.”⁹

Making rights meaningful

There is an urgent need to turn human rights discourse into a tangible reality where women in prostitution are concerned. Unfortunately, international human rights law is not extremely useful toward this end. The first international human rights instrument on

trafficking (the 1949 Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others) recognizes in a complicated way the theoretical right of adult women in prostitution to ply their trade, but is based on the premise that all sex work should end, and implicitly endorses the view that adult sex workers should be saved from themselves and rehabilitated.¹⁰ The convention prohibits prostitution of a person even when that person consents to prostitution.¹¹

The newer international law on trafficking, the so-called Trafficking Protocol of 2000 (Protocol to Suppress, Prevent and Punish the Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the U.N. Convention on Transnational Organized Crime) uses language similar to that of the earlier convention and certainly represents no advance on the matter of respecting the rights and agency of women in prostitution. As Loff observes, “The failure to recognise the distinction between forced and unforced prostitution [in international law] allows the claims of prostitutes’ rights groups to be ignored.”¹²

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women of 1981 (CEDAW) condemns sexual exploitation and calls on governments to take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to suppress all forms of traffic in women and exploitation of prostitution of women. General Recommendation No 19 of the UN Committee on CEDAW enjoins states to ensure equal protection under the law for prostitutes and notes that prostitutes “are especially vulnerable to violence because their status, which may be unlawful, tends to marginalize them.”¹³ Jordan, in her extensive

analysis of the subject, suggests that the suggestion in the General Recommendation of the importance of legal protection for prostitutes is as close to an espousal of the human rights of women in prostitution as can be found in the current body of international law.¹⁴

Decriminalization and anti-discriminatory measures have been effective in improving health and work conditions of sex workers.

As a function of national law, prostitution in most countries is illegal. In addition, in some countries people engaged or assumed to be engaged in sex work are required to be tested for HIV; in others, sex workers may face detention and involuntary health and “rehabilitation” services, all of which may have the effect of pushing them further underground. Evidence exists that decriminalization and anti-discriminatory measures at the national level have been effective in improving health and work conditions of sex workers. Kinnell, for example, cites evidence from several countries that women in prostitution who vote and whose freedom to assemble and organize is not impeded are also more likely to report consistent condom use with clients.¹⁵

In India, the Immoral Trafficking Prevention Act, 1986 (ITPA) is meant to punish traffickers, but in practice ends up victimizing women in prostitution. Again, it portrays all sex workers as victims of exploitation.¹⁶ The ITPA has the further discriminatory twist of much harsher penalties for women convicted of “soliciting” (six months for a first offence and up to

one year for subsequent offences) compared to men (seven days to three months). Jordan notes that the effect of this law is to punish women in prostitution harshly and to give male pimps a slap on the wrist. She also asserts that in the way it authorizes states to establish red-light districts, the ITPA effectively requires women to make deals with exploitative pimps and madams.¹⁷

Recommendations

The most important and practicable way to make human rights meaningful for sex workers in the context of the AIDS epidemic is to show respect for their humanity, not only by listening to them and learning from their experience, but also by ensuring that they manage their own anti-AIDS efforts and have decision-making authority in programs that affect them. HIV/AIDS interventions “targeting” them should be of, by, and for them. Peer education and training programs among sex workers have an outstanding record when they are truly participatory; they have proven that the impossible is possible. Sex workers also do reach out to sympathetic social workers with the right attitude. The VAMP collective working in southern Maharashtra and Karnataka border areas exemplifies a human rights-based approach (see box on page 14).

An obvious key to empowering sex workers both to protect themselves from HIV and to help fight AIDS in their communities is to take formal, very public, and well-financed measures to address violence and other abuse against sex workers. Formal decriminalization of sex work is likely to be an important step toward this end in many countries. In addition, police need to be trained about HIV/AIDS and the unique capacities

that sex workers bring to combating AIDS, and they must be brought to accountability for their abuses against women in prostitution. All governments should have strategies for reducing social stigma against persons in sex work, including, as suggested by CHANGE,¹⁸ sensitizing mass media to portray sex workers in a humane manner and to report on incidents of violence and abuse against them, including cases of denial of access to services.

The track record of sex worker collectives fighting HIV/AIDS and other experiences lead to some particular recommendations for programs and other action, including the following:

- As also noted by CHANGE, sex workers called upon to educate their peers on HIV/AIDS – indeed all sex workers – should have the same access as everyone in the community to voluntary and confidential HIV testing, treatment, and care for HIV-related illness; condoms; and information on HIV/AIDS. Confidentiality is essential for the success of any medical services for women in prostitution.
- HIV/AIDS interventions for women in prostitution should be made available as part of comprehensive reproductive health services (including safe abortion).

Finally, it would be useful to have international law or declarations from key human rights bodies that call on states explicitly to protect and promote the human rights of women in prostitution and to respect their agency and capacity for consent. A declaration from one of the UN human rights bodies calling for decriminalization of sex work would be an important step forward. It is hard to imagine how women in prostitution will realize their right to work at an occupation of their choosing, their right to security and bodily integrity, their right to the highest attainable standard of health, and their right to be free of discrimination, without the decriminalization of their work. There is also an immediate need to clearly define the term trafficking in a way that would not only serve to enhance efforts to protect the rights of trafficked persons, but would also make a distinction between those coerced into sex trafficking and those working by choice in the sex trade.

– Joanne Csete and
Meena Saraswathi Seshu

At the time of writing, Joanne Csete was director of the HIV/AIDS Program at Human Rights Watch. Meena Saraswathi Seshu is the general secretary of SANGRAM and can be reached at meenase-shu@yahoo.com.

¹ Copies of the essay are available from the author.

² See, for example, Human Rights Watch. Eviction of sex workers boosts HIV risk. News release, 7 July 2004. Available at www.hrw.org/english/docs/2004/07/06/india9010.htm.

³ United States Congress. United States Leadership Against HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria Act of 2003, (Public Law No: 108-25, 108th Congress, 117 Stat 711) s 301, inserting s 104A (Assistance to Combat HIV/AIDS) into Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 (22 USC 2151).

⁴ Office of US Representative Chris Smith. House committee passes AIDS bill with key Smith amendment on human trafficking and prostitution. News release, 2 April 2003.

⁵ H Kinnell. Why feminists should rethink on sex workers' rights. Paper prepared for the Beyond Contract Seminar Series, London, 16 December 2002.

⁶ SANGRAM. Fact File. *Of Veshyas, Vamps, Whores and Women* 2002; 1(3): 4.

⁷ B Loff, C Overs, P Longo. Can health programs lead to mistreatment of sex workers? *Lancet* 2003; 361(9373): 1982.

⁸ A Amin. Risk, morality and blame: a critical analysis of government and US donor responses to HIV infections among sex workers in India. Report by CHANGE, the Center for Health and Gender Equity, January 2004, at 20, 22. Available at www.genderhealth.org/pubs/AminHIVAmongSexWorkersinIndiaJan2004.pdf.

⁹ *Ibid* at 20.

¹⁰ AD Jordan. Commercial sex workers in Asia: a blind spot in human rights law. In Askin and Koenig (eds). *Women and International Human Rights Law*. Ardsley, New York (USA): Transnational, 2000, vol 2 at 548.

¹¹ B Loff, B Gaze, C Farley. Prostitution, public health and human rights law. *Lancet* 2000; 356(9243): 1764.

¹² *Ibid*.

¹³ United Nations Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. UN Doc No A/47/38, 1992, article 6(15). Available at www.dirittiu-mani.donne.aidos.it/bibl_2_testi/c_testi_interpr_ufficiali/c_comit_cedaw/racc19_violenza_engl.pdf.

¹⁴ *Supra*, note 10 at 550.

¹⁵ *Supra*, note 5 at 13.

¹⁶ *Supra*, note 10 at 556.

¹⁷ *Ibid*.

¹⁸ *Supra*, note 8 at 26.

The voices of VAMP: listening to women in prostitution

Activists of the VAMP collective of 5000 women in prostitution and sex work in central India have collected narratives from their members and their peers. Some of these are excerpted below. They are introduced by a joint statement from SANGRAM, the Sangli-based NGO from which VAMP grew, which addresses the transformation of mentality and of terminology that is required to create an environment of respect for the human rights of women in prostitution.

From SANGRAM and VAMP:

As our involvement with the women [in prostitution] deepened, our beliefs, ideas, and notions about prostitution and women in prostitution underwent a sea change. Our perception of prostitution as “exploitation, victimization, oppression, loose, immoral, illegal,” was shaken to the core. Indeed, not only did our ideas and beliefs have to be questioned and reformulated, but even the very use of language to describe the women had to be transformed. “Whore,” “harlot,” “veshya” – have been used as abuses for the “fallen woman” – the subject of much public discourse. We have tried to help reclaim some of the terminology, and assert identities with positive meaning. We revised our vocabulary to weed out words that reinforce the stigmatization and marginalization of women in prostitution.

Besides, we realized that the terminology used for generations by mainstream society to refer to “the fallen woman” was more often than not derogatory, within the moral space of sacredness. The need to reclaim womanhood also became necessary since this sanctified moral space refused to acknowledge the fact that the very identity (of being a woman) was obliterated by the “whore, harlot, veshya” image. Hence, the importance of the use of terminology like “women in prostitution” instead of the commonly used term “prostitute.”

Women who practise prostitution use the term “women in business” while referring to themselves. Now, after much discussion among ourselves, we have adopted the term “people in prostitution and sex work (PPS) to include all persons who “make money out of sex.”

From the VAMP collective:

- On the matter of the right to practise the business of making money from sex: “We protest against a society that deems us immoral and illegal mainly because we do not accept its mores, rules, and governance. We protest against the various forces of mainstream society that deny us the right to liberty, security, fair administration of justice, respect for our lives, discrimination, freedom of expression and association.”
- On the violence of stigma: “As people who experience violence as a part of our daily lives, we are being more and more penalized by increasing violence in a society that is trying to order and control our lifestyles. As women in prostitution we protest against a society that forces on us the violence of a judgmental attitude.”
- On women’s sexuality: “We believe that a woman’s sexuality is an integral part of her as a woman, as varied as her mothering, domestic, and such other skills. We do not believe that sex has a sacred space and women who have sex for reasons other than its reproductive importance are violating this space. Or if they choose to make money from the transaction they are immoral or debauched.”
- From VAMP activist Durga Pujari: “Over the years, we have become ‘commercial sex-workers’ from ‘common prostitutes.’ Debates are held about us and we are discussed in documents, covenants, and declarations. The problem, however, is that when we try to inform the arguments, our stories are disbelieved and we are treated as if we cannot comprehend our own lives. Thus we are either romanticized, victimized, or worse, and our reality gets buried and distorted.”