



Innovative Approaches to Combat Trafficking of Women in Sex Trade by Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (Kolkata)

INTRODUCTION

Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC) is an exclusive forum of sexworkers and their children. In July 1995, a group of sexworkers from Sonagachi, one of the oldest and largest sex work sites of Kolkata organised and collective strength among the entire community of sexworkers, to forge a positive identify for themselves as workers, mark out a space for action to change their own lives and demand legal and social recognition of sex work.

The founding members of DMSC had come together through their work as Peer Educators (PEs) of the STD/HIV Intervention Programme (SHIP or 'Sonagachi Project') that began in Sonagachi sex work site in 1992.

From its inception, DMSC activists realised that for creating an enabling environment in which individual sexworkers could exercise choice and practice safer sex, it was necessary to address and challenge various structural barriers that controlled their lives within and outside the sex trade, and in order to achieve this, sexworkers needed to mobilise. This was the impetus for the sexworkers to start their own organisation.

Explicit objectives of DMSC are gaining recognition of sexworkers as workers, a secure socio-economic existence for sexworkers and enhanced life-choices for their children. DMSC therefore runs literacy programmes and vocational training classes for adult sexworkers and their children. DMSC's partner organisations Usha and Komol Gandhar run a cooperative bank and a cultural team respectively. In response to the felt-needs of sexworkers, DMSC is active in reducing the rampant criminalisation that exists in sex work sites. The Organisation fights for the rights of sexworkers and raises its voice against all kinds of exploitation and oppression within and outside sex trade.

Section 1: Anti-Trafficking initiatives of DMSC: The Context of Self-regulatory Boards

1.1 Time Period:

Since 1997, the Organisation decided to develop strategies to solve the problem of underage girls trafficked into sex work sites and of unwilling women duped/coerced/forced into sex work. Informal rescue of underage girls who came into sex work sites by DMSC began in 1997. Over the next two years, the structure of DMSC Self-regulatory Boards (SRBs) was formalised. This document describes experience of **DMSC Self-regulatory Boards** from the time period **1997 to 2006**. The anti-trafficking activities of DMSC can be broadly divided into following phases:

- a) Phase-1 (1997-1998) : Voicing concern about underage trafficking, informal approaches and advocacy and demand creation within the Organisation.
- b) Phase-2 (1998-1999): Piloting of formal Self-regulatory Boards in selected sex work sites in Kolkata and advocacy in forums outside the Organisation.
- c) Phase-3 (1999-2000): Demand generation and increasing reach of SRBs

- d) Phase-4 (2000-2006): Self-regulatory Boards established throughout sex work sites in West Bengal and formalising of activities and efforts.

1.2 Need for Self-regulatory Boards of DMSC:

Movement and migration of human beings across national and international borders is not new. Globally, a large number of people migrate from their places of origin seeking better livelihood opportunities and for other reasons. People who migrate also do so because there is a demand for their labour in the destination countries/sites. Such (often illegal) labour are cheap as they are always at the mercy of their recruiters who can easily get them evicted if they are organised or protest against exploitative trade practices or demand proper wages and/or benefits. As in other sectors, this demand for cheap labour from outside destination zone (be it cross-border or within-country) is present in the sex sector as well in addition, majority of labour that come in through irregular channels are people who come from low socio-economic backgrounds with little or no literacy and limited skills. Migration to unknown areas/countries by poor people, without proper travel permits or adequate knowledge is often with the help of unscrupulous persons or groups-who traffic unsuspecting people seeking better opportunities from sites of origin to destination sites. Although well known, this 'unofficial' migration of people has been going on for a long time. Recent evidence suggests that in response to the increased demand for labour, and for other causes including loss of traditional livelihoods due to globalisation, trafficking of human beings have intensified. Addressing this critical issue, in particular, to its impact on the sex sector, requires innovative approaches and strategies.

Ever since 1997, when DMSC activists articulated the issue at the First National Conference of Sex Workers, the Organisation has grappled with the problem of underage girls trafficked into sex work sites and of unwilling women duped/coerced/forced into sex work. DMSC is active in addressing and challenging the structural issues that frame the everyday reality of sexworkers lives as they relate to their material deprivation and social exclusion. From this standpoint, it stands against any form of exploitation and infringement of rights of human beings that includes sexworkers and their children. DMSC is explicit, too, about its stand vis-a-vis forced or coerced labour in any form- if sexwork is work like any other, then it must be subject to certain norms and conditions- decided upon and enforced by the workers in the trade- that must be fulfilled before anyone can start as a sexworkers. Hence, DMSC is strictly against trafficking of minor girls and unwilling adult women into sex profession. It is also DSC's experience that Immoral Trafficking (Prevention) Act (ITPA), as enforced by police, is insufficient to combat this trafficking with any great success. *Therefore, DMSC felt the need to constitute Self-regulatory Boards (SRBs) in the sex work sites. DMSC reasoned that these SRBs would serve as a double check to prevent entry of minor girls and unwilling adult women into sex trade, control the exploitative practices in the trade, regulate the rules and practices of the trade and institute social welfare measures for sexworkers and their children.* DMSC also reasoned that illegal movement of people across international borders maybe prevented (to some extent) by enforcement agencies and border police, but intra-country movement cannot be prevented in this fashion. Moreover, there was *no existing effective mechanism to combat trafficking in destination (or sex work) sites and only a committed group of sexworkers could prevent entry of trafficked underage girls or unwilling women into sex trade.*

1.3 Objectives of DMSC Self-regulatory Boards are as follows:

- 1.3.1 **Preventing trafficking of women and under-age girls into sex work:** Sex workers are uniquely positioned as they live and work in sex work sites and are first to know when a minor girl has been brought into a brothel/sex work site; and the place/house/brothel where she is held. Consequently, they are in the best position to speak with the concerned brothel-manger and other stakeholders on prevention of minors from entering the trade. They are also specially placed to meet and interact with the trafficked girl, to win her confidence, to know her place of origin (address) and to discuss options open to her in a fair manner. Additionally, Self-regulatory Boards present in each sex work site are uniquely positioned to intervene in, and prevent trafficking into sex work, minor girls and unwilling women from international, national or local areas. The mechanism operative in the borders to prevent trafficking for sex-work intervenes only at international level (e.g., at the border between Bangladesh and India or Nepal and India). No such mechanism is either present or possible to prevent inter-district or inter state trafficking. However, as the self-regulatory boards are located in the sex work site, trafficking from district or state level can be monitored and entry of underage girls and unwilling women into the grade can be prevented, irrespective of their place of origin.
- 1.3.2 **Changing inefficient laws controlling sex work:** The police use provisions of Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act of the Government of India primarily to raid sex work sites indiscriminately and arrest or 'pick' women from streets and brothels on the charge that they are all 'minors'. Once these women are brought to the local police station, they are forced to pay for their release or are harassed further. Active and running Self-regulatory Boards prevent this from happening.
- 1.3.3 **Stopping exploitation in sex trade:** Self-regulatory Boards act as controlling bodies in sex work sites and put an end to exploitative practices that range from exploitative contractual agreements through violence and sexual exploitation by local men, power-brokers and hoodlums, to financial exploitation of sex workers.
- 1.3.4 **Carrying out social welfare measures for sexworkers and their children:** Self-regulatory boards have heterogeneous membership. Apart from members of DMSC, each board has the local councillor/ panchayat representative, local doctor, local lawyers (if available) and any other community leader/influencer who is willing to participate. This group is therefore in a position to demand social welfare schemes, oversee government works to be undertaken in sex work sites and see that social welfare measures reach the target group including children and retired sex workers. The Board acts, as a pressure group, and is able to pressurise the government to allot and undertake various welfare and development activities for betterment of sexworkers and their children. These activities include adult literacy classes, children's education and handicrafts and skills training.

Section 2: Newness/Originality of the Self-regulatory Boards of Durbar

The Self-regulatory Boards of DMSC are innovative in the field of anti-trafficking activities in the following ways.

2.1 Partnership with Depts. Of health, Labour and Social Welfare, Govt. of West Bengal: From its inception, SRBs have developed links with Depts. Of health, Labour and Social Welfare of the Govt. of West Bengal. advocacy among Ministers-in-Charge and Department Secretaries are done regularly. Of late interactions are going on with the State Government on registering a State-level Coordination Committee of SRBs to facilitate rehabilitation of women and girls rescued by DMSC and to ensure that they get another chance at changing their lives.

2.2 Innovative public-private partnership: Self-regulatory Boards are collaborative efforts of sex workers and people from the 'mainstream' society. Sixty per cent of the membership is from the sexworker community and comprise sexworkers, DMSC branch committee members and peer educators of different intervention projects. Forty percent of members of SRBs comprise local doctors, lawyers, councillors, Panchayat functionaries and local opinion leaders. Efforts are taken to include, wherever possible, Social Welfare Officers, State Women's Commission members, and other government functionaries.

2.3 Focus of SRBs is to make recruitment of underage girls into sex trade unviable to brothel-managers and madams, Central strategy is therefore, rescue and rehabilitation of underage girls or unwilling women forced/coerced into sex work sites; SRBs concentrate their maximum energy and effort at identifying; rescuing and repatriating/rehabilitating girls/women trafficked into sex work. DMSC feels, the central focus should be on the trafficked girl/woman and efforts should be to rescue, repatriate and/or rehabilitate her. DMSC activists, being sexworkers and residing in sex work sites, are uniquely positioned to do this task successfully. In areas where SRBs are functioning, trafficking of girls/women for sex work ahs becomes unviable for traffickers and other trade controllers.

2.4 Standardised guidelines, and history-taking and medical examination formats are used by SRBs for rescue, repatriation, rehabilitation and follow-up of women trafficked into sex trade.

2.5 Networking and partnership with police: SRB members regularly liase with local police and continue advocacy of their activities with district and state police. In a number of sex work sites, local police entrust SRB with rescue/rehabilitation of underage girls.

2.6 Maintenance of comprehensive documentation, including photographs of rescued persons by DMSC.

2.7 Rehabilitation of rescued girls in state-approved shelters and maintaining contact with them to ensure overall development of rescued girls with the aim to improve their chances in life. This is the central post-rescue thrust area for DMSC- providing access to the rescued girls to non-formal education, vocational trainings and cultural activities. This is in contrast to rescue of underage girls by law enforcement agencies- whose work ends, for practical purposes, after the girls is rescued and put into a Govt. run rehabilitation home.

2.8 Other efforts: To improve quality of lives of sexworkers and their children and to give rescued women/underage girls chances in life, DSC runs adult literacy classes; education centres for children/underage girls and provides skills training in handicrafts.

Section 3: Implementation of Innovation

3.1 Implementation of SRBs of DMSC a brief profile:

Year	Events
1997	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First began in Tollygunj sex work site • First National Conference of Sexworkers organised by DMSC in November <p>Processes, Activities and Challenges Overcome:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actual event: An underage girl, who was trafficked and forced into sex trade in Tollygunj, was rescued by DMSC activists and repatriated home. • Demand creation and advocacy within the organisation • Reasons for initiating formation of self-regulatory boards articulated by DMSC activists for the first time: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☛ To reduce police raids in sex work sites ☛ To prevent trafficking and entry of underage girls and unwilling adults into sex trade ☛ To control practices in sex trade as a professional body like the Bar Council or Indian medical Association ☛ To provide welfare services to sexworkers and their children in sex work sites, viz., clean drinking water and sanitation, education, handicrafts training, etc. • When decision to start SRBs was taken, resistance came from madams, local clubs and local police • Resistance was overcome through frequent meetings and discussions with madams, pimps and local clubs- it was pointed out that trafficking of underage girls into the site would lead to frequent raids by local police and consequently all stakeholders would suffer.
1998	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Piloting of SRB in 3 sex work sites in Kolkata
1999	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demand to form SRBs came from other sex work sites in Kolkata. • SRBs expanded to other sex work sites in Kolkata-Khidirpore, Kalighat, Chetla, etc.
2000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support to form SRBs in district sex work sites (Durgapur and Asansol) provided by Action Aid.
2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SRBs created in all district intervention sites of DMSC • A Rapid Assessment Survey conducted in Changrabandha (Cooch Behar), Lalgola (Murshidabad), Hilly (Uttar Dinajpur) and Basirhat (North 24 Parganas). The survey was funded by UNDP and primarily addressed sites where informal cross-border movement between Bangladesh and India (West Bengal) occurred. • Meeting to address interventions around cross-border (Indo-Bangladesh) movement was organised in September at Dhaka. CARE-Bangladesh, DMSC, Bhoruka Welfare Trust and Bangladeshi organisations participated.

	<p>Processes, Activities and Challenges Overcome:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extension of Anti-trafficking activities of DMSC through collaborating with other organisations/NGOs who worked in cross-border transit sites between Bangladesh and India. • Result of the Rapid Assessment Survey founded by UNDP: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☛ Orientation Meetings with local clubs, NGOs, policy makers ☛ Short-stay Home "Bhalobasha" established in Maldah
2006	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DMSC runs three Ant-trafficking programs in partnership with Action Aid, UNDP and Terre des Hommes(TDH) • A total of 31 SRBs organized and run by DMSC work in sex work sties • Workshops held to plan formation of the Steering Committee of Self Regulatory Boards • Consultations held with Lawyers' Collective (New Delhi) and other organisations around the issue of law and trafficking. This was part of a national debate around repeal/abrogation/change of the ITPA of Govt. of India. Approximately 4000 sex workers marched towards Indian Parliament with the demand to repeal ITPA. • Detailed ToR of SRB at state, district and local level prepared; guidelines for field workers and formats after rescue and repatriation of underage girls/unwilling women developed and implemented.
	<p>Process, Activities and Challenges Overcome:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sensitisation of SRB functioning done with sex workers and other stakeholders of sex trade. • Regular meetings of SRB initiated in sex work sites whenever a girl was rescued • DMSC team follow-up 10% of girls rescued- visiting them at homes. • DMSC teams regularly visit government-approved shelter-homes and monitor conditions of rescued girls who have been placed there by their SRBs.

3.2 Perceived challenges and planned future activities:

<p>Perceived Challenges:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Repatriation/rehabilitation of foreign underage girls/women rescued through the SRBs b. Formal Registration of SRBs and of DMSC Short-Stay Home c. Development and registration of Central Steering Committee for SRB with participation of State-level government representatives. d. Re-entry of underage girls rescued by DMSC SRBs, into sex trade due to extreme poverty and discrimination the face once they are repatriated. <p>Future Plans:</p>
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