

NGOS, SEX WORKERS' MOVEMENT AND HIV: A CASE OF BANGLADESH

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Abstract

Following eviction from several brothels, the sex workers of Bangladesh started their movement in the 1990s. Through their activism, the sex workers demanded their rights. Just about the same period, NGOs were working with the sex workers on HIV-related issues focusing on their empowerment alongside condom promotion. Through their involvement with the NGOs and HIV programmes, the sex workers have gained visibility in the public domain. Due to availability of funds from the NGOs sex workers were able to participate in international gatherings where they learnt about sex work as a form of labour. In claiming their rights, the sex workers exhibited active agency which corresponds to pro-sex work feminist discourse. However, despite some positive outcomes of the sex workers' movement, the demand for their rights became blurred as they got more and more involved in the arena of HIV. Using a feminist methodology, this article draws on the experiences of women's rights activists, sex worker activists as well as sex workers to understand the trajectory that the struggles of the sex workers have taken place due to their involvement with NGOs and HIV-related programmes. In doing so it explores the nature of such interrelationship from the perspective of the global south.

Keywords: Sex workers, movement, activism, rights, HIV, NGO

Introduction

Sex work and sex workers have become an area of sustained interest after the emergence of the HIV crisis. Globally sex workers became identified as a risk

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group with the potential of spreading transmission of HIV. Likewise, the Bangladeshi female sex workers also became identified as a risk group along with others such as the injecting drug users, the transgender and the MSM (Men who have sex with men) (Azim et al., 2009). Recognizing sex workers as the carriers of HIV, international, national as well as local development agencies, also known as Non Government Organizations (NGOs) started working on sex workers' empowerment alongside social marketing of condoms; sex workers became part of their programmes on capacity building, leadership skills and human development (Chowdhury, 2006). Chowdhury (2006) argues that sex workers' movement became an emerging event in the 1990s, a period when there was a growing concern over the HIV/AIDS epidemic. In the context of Bangladesh, the sex workers movement emerged following their eviction from some brothels. The sex workers, through their movement, questioned their stigma, raised questions about the state's oppression towards them and challenged the social perceptions supporting their oppression (Chowdhury, 2006).

Globally, the question of sex work has given rise to a complex debate among the pro and anti-sex work feminists. The debate considers sex workers either as agents or as victims. It brings into fore arguments such as whether sex work should be understood as a form of male domination (Dworkin, 1997), male sexual violence (Jeffreys, 1997), public affirmation of male sexual right (Pateman, 1999) and dehumanization of women (Barry, 1995) or as a form of work (Kempadoo, 1998). Because of the liberal feminist's interventions, sex workers agency has been associated with the arena of sex worker's autonomy and rights (Rajan, 2003). The international sex worker's rights movement which emerged in Western Europe and the United States in the 1970s, in its early years, was dominated by activists from the global north (Mgbako, 2016). Mgbako (2016) argues that southern sex workers eventually became part of the international movement because of donor funding; AIDS activism provided them with the resources and opportunities to participate in international arenas and form global alliances.

The Bangladeshi sex worker's movement has also brought the issue of rights and work into the public purview. In claiming their status as workers, sex worker groups have aligned themselves with the pro-sex work discourse and portrayed themselves as agents (Sultana, 2020). However, there are some practical issues pointed out by Rajan (2003) which need attention: in many areas of the third

world, young girls are forced and deceived into sex work; furthermore, it is also true that several sex workers' organizations in India are led by brothel keepers having close connection with politicians. Against this background, the purpose of this article is to understand the trajectory of the sex workers activism in Bangladesh. In doing so this paper aims to provide an overview of the interplay among the sex workers' activism, the role played by NGOs and women's groups and HIV programmes to show the precise direction that the sex workers' struggle has taken place. Kempadoo (1998) notes that contemporary writings on sex workers are derived from the struggles of the first world women; the Third World sex worker's experiences have received little research or theorization. This article, by providing an understanding of the nexus between the sex worker activism, NGOs and HIV programmes will offer important insights into the nature of sex worker's struggles from context of the global south.

The first part of this article discusses the methodology, which is followed by a historical account of sex work. The following section describes the social attitude of Bangladeshi society towards sex work, followed by a discussion on the relationship between sex workers' activism and HIV-related funding. The next section includes a discussion on the role of NGOs and Women's groups in sex workers' activism and the influence of HIV programmes on sex workers. The final section of this article discusses how sex workers' rights have been overshadowed by too much focus on HIV programmes.

Methodology

Methodology shapes how specific research is to be approached and how it is to be conducted (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012). Whereas methodology in social research is concerned with "rules that specify how social investigation should be approached" (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002), methods are defined as the techniques used to access the research problem (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012). This article is based on fieldwork in a Bangladeshi brothel, the name of which will be kept anonymous due to ethical issues. Feminist methodology has been used in this research. Hesse-Biber & Leavy (2007) notes: "Feminist research is a holistic endeavour that incorporates all stages of the research process, from the theoretical to the practical, from the formulation of research questions to the write-up of research findings". Feminist methodology highlights the validity of personal experiences (Hammersley, 1992). Feminist perspectives, by focusing on

the lives and experiences of those who are “often silenced in public discourse”, can offer new understandings, and thereby challenge the conventional assumptions that not only influence our lives but also shape policies (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012). The data for this research was collected from 41 sex workers and four activists. Furthermore, this research also draws insights from discussion with activists from different organizations such as Naripokkho, Bangladesh National Women Lawyer’s Association as well as Sex Workers’ Network of Bangladesh. The interviews were semi-structured in nature. While some interviews were over 40 minutes long, others were as short as 15 to 20 minutes. To recruit informants for interviews, purposive sampling was used. Purposeful sampling aims to select information-rich cases so that answers to the questions of the study can be sought (Patton, 2001). To protect the identity of the informants, pseudonyms were used. Interviews were transcribed and translated into English. The data was analysed through thematic analysis.

This study focused on the life stories of the sex workers. Information about the general socio-economic organization of the brothel and modes of operation was cross-checked with other informants. Along with interviews, observation was used as an additional tool. Field diaries were maintained. Furthermore, triangulation during conversation was also ensured. Triangulation can occur naturally in conversations as well as in intensive investigatory work (Fetterman, 2010). Fetterman (2010) argues that in self-contained triangulation, a person’s own statements support or undermine his stated position, acting as an important measure for internal consistency.

Within feminist qualitative research the questions of validity, which are at times discussed in relation to objectivity, are a contested arena (McHugh, 2014). McHugh (2014) notes that as opposed to universal truth, the current approaches highlight knowledge as partial and situated. What affirms the validity of knowledge is — dialogue with participating communities (McHugh, 2014).

Sex work from a historical standpoint

The ancient practitioners of sex work were distinct from the modern sex workers of capitalist societies (Banerjee, 2000). Bell argues that sex workers had not always had a polluted image in history (Bell, 1994). Hetaera and Diotima of the ancient Greece were not just mere sellers of human flesh but were considered sacred (Bell, 1994). Likewise, the Indian courtesans and temple dancers of the

past were part of the state enterprise; they enjoyed state privileges and protections in return of their service to the public (Banerjee, 2000). The *baijis*, *tawaiifs* or courtesans sold emotional, cultural, and sexual labour to their patrons; like the geisha of Japan, their companionship had an artistic and stylized aura (Brown, 2007).

In the 19th century, two distinct kinds of sex workers —the *baijis* (the descendants of the courtesans, singers, and dancers of the north India feudal courts) and the *khemtawalis* (the practitioners of strongly rhythmical dance accompanying ebullient love songs) used to live side by side in the red-light areas of Dhaka, Calcutta, and other cities (Banerjee, 2000). As sex work developed as an industry in the 19th century Bengal, the daughters, and wives of *kulin* Brahmin families – who, for almost 700 years, had suffered deprivation and humiliation due to *kulin* obligations, found an avenue of escape (Banerjee, 2000). Banerjee (2000) shows that in the 19th century Bengal, actresses were recruited from the red-light areas by the Bengal stage.

Sex workers have also been historically associated with diseases. Ghosh (2005) notes that the Indian sex workers were criminalized, had to undergo periodic medical check-ups and were subject to confinement in lock hospitals under laws such as the Cantonments Act XXII of 1864, the Contagious Diseases Act XIV of 1868 and the Indian penal code (Ghosh, 2005). As the AIDS epidemic emerged globally, sexual boundaries revamped, and sex workers came to be seen as potential bearers of the disease (Ghosh, 2005). Globally, sex workers became targets of HIV/AIDS interventions. In Bangladesh, female sex workers have been targets for HIV and STI prevention services for almost 20 years (Azim T, Khan SI, Nahar Q, et al. 2009 as cited in Khanam et al., 2017). The services that they receive at the Drop-in Centres (DICs) include behaviour change communication, distribution of condoms and lubricants, Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI) management, and HIV testing and counselling (HTC) (Khanam et al., 2017). The position of the Bangladeshi sex workers at present is different from their predecessors in different periods of history. While courtesans were known for their stylized performances of music and dance, the contemporary sex workers not only became associated with AIDS they also became mere sellers of human flesh.

Social Attitude towards Sex Workers in Contemporary Bangladesh

The number of sex workers operating in brothels, hotels, residences, and streets in Bangladesh ranges between 63,600 and 74,300 (NASP, 2009 as cited in Khanam et al., 2017). Sex workers occupy a marginalized status in contemporary Bangladeshi society. Associated with sex workers is a stigma—the “whore stigma” which is similar to “a mark of shame or disease on an unchaste female slave or criminal” (Pheterson, 1996). While a sex worker is considered as an inherently bad person for who she is, the client is only regarded as a “naughty boy or dirty old man with sleazy habits” who is bad for what he does (Pheterson, 1996, as cited in Kong, 2006). Haque (2015) argues that the fact that sex workers are stigmatized while the behaviour of clients and pimps is not questioned, points to the prevalence of gender bias. In this regard, sex work in Bangladesh is understood in an ambivalent way (Huq, 2008). Sex workers are perceived as safety-valves who save good women from incursions or sexual harassment (Huq, 2008). The attitude of the Bangladeshi society towards sex work therefore reflects a double standard because purchase of sex is tolerated and regarded as permissible on the ground that it protects chaste women from the carnal desires of men; yet at the same time, women who are sex workers are considered impure, wasted, and polluted.

This attitude of the wider society was challenged through the sex workers’ movement in the 1990s. This was the time when brothel-based sex workers became targets of eviction. This incidence of eviction of sex workers received exceptional media coverage and public attention (Huq, 2012). Through their movement sex workers brought forward the issue of their rights. The following section discusses the sex workers’ movement in relation to HIV programmes in Bangladesh.

Sex Workers’ Activism and HIV Related Funding

When the residents of Kandupotti brothel were evicted in 1997, the evicted sex workers, with the help of Naripokkho, formed ULKA — a movement organization (Chowdhury, 2006). In 1999 the sex workers from Tanbazaar and Nimtoli areas of Narayanganj were evicted (Huq, 2003). As the sex workers’ movement started, 86 development NGOs and human rights organizations expressed their solidarity to defend sex workers’ rights (Chowdhury, 2006). As the sex workers’ realities and demands drew public attention through media coverage, there emerged a fear of —“what an uncontrolled un-demarcated arena

of sex work may do to the social fabric” (Huq, 2006). The agenda of sexual right and sexual freedom cropped up in the sex workers' demands (Huq, 2006). They followed the framework of rights to demand their recognition as citizens and legitimate workers (Azim, 2005). As Azim (2011) notes,

[T]he women had claimed their rights as citizens of the country. In the face of a threat of eviction, the women had used this press conference to assert their rights to live and ply their trade in Tanbazar brothel. They were making this claim, they said, as citizens, as women and as workers. (p. 49)

While claiming the status of legitimate citizens of the state, they showed evidence of municipal tax papers that they have been paying (Azim, 2012). A notable outcome of the sex workers' movement can be seen in the shift in the use of terminology in print media where the word “prostitute” (literally meaning the fallen one) has been replaced with the word “sex worker”(Huq, 2006).

In the 1990s, the world witnessed a growing concern regarding HIV epidemic, because of which NGOs shifted their focus on sex workers (Chowdhury, 2006). For those NGOs who had been working with or were led by sex workers, HIV prevention interventions became a major source of funding besides those working on forced labour or eradication of human trafficking (Dorf, 2006). Haque (2015) notes that international and local NGOs have been working with sex workers to boost their sense of self-respect to achieve long term development solutions. Haque (2015) further argues that external actors helped in sex workers' activism by providing material resources, ideological support, as well as working on rights-based discourse, advocacy, and organizational skills. Eventually, sex workers formed their own organizations with the help of external agencies to establish their rights (Haque, 2015). The sex worker organizations ultimately acquired institutional structure and applied for funding on AIDS (Azim, 2011).

Empowerment: Women's Groups, NGOs, Sex Workers and HIV

Approaches related to development and women have varied over the period. The Women in Development (WID) approach acknowledged power disparity between men and women and argued that the reasons for women's subordination are rooted in their exclusion from the marketplace (Miller & Razavi, 1995). The Women and Development (WAD) approach which emerged in the second half of the 1970s highlighted that women's economic roles both inside and outside the household are crucial for the survival of the family unit (Zwart, 1992). The

Gender and Development strategy (GAD), strategy which cropped up in the 1980s questioned the traditional views of gender roles and focused on strategies for women's empowerment (Zwart, 1992). It considered women not as passive recipients of development assistance, but as agents of change (Rathgeber, 1990 as cited in Zwart, 1992). Subsequently, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted in 2015 aim to end all forms of discrimination including trafficking, sexual and other types of exploitation against all women and girls in all places (UN Women, n.d). It focused on equal rights and opportunities and emphasized a life free of violence and discrimination for women (UN Women, n.d).

NGOs working in the development arena have become prominent in recent years; in the 1980s they became identified as partners in development by multilateral funding agencies and donor governments (Miller & Razavi, 1995). Miller and Razavi (1995) argue that throughout the 1980s, increasing portions of funding from the donor governments and multilateral funding agencies have been handled by the NGO sector. This is also true for Bangladesh where the NGO sector has exhibited strong presence since the liberation war. In incorporating women in development activities, the Bangladeshi NGOs are considered to have acted as the best actors (Halim, 2003). Bangladeshi NGOs have been actively working on several issues including women's rights and gender equity (Nazneen, 2017). Nazneen (2017) argues that women have become targets of many NGOs who focused on employment generation and provided their clients with access to microcredit. Organizations such as Ain-O-Salish Kendra, Madaripur Legal Aid Association, Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST), the Bangladesh National Women Lawyer's Association, Naripokkho, Women for Women, Bangladesh Mohila Parishad and Centre for Women and Children's Studies Bangladesh have been working on women's rights and empowerment (Halim, 2003). The women groups in Bangladesh have different positions: Bangladesh Mohila Parishad (BMP), Karmojibi Nari (Working Women) had links with the left-wing political parties (Banu, 2015 as cited in Nazneen, 2017). Others such as Women for Women were influenced by liberal feminist analysis and women in development (WID) discourse (Nazneen, 2017). Some women's rights groups consider Naripokkho as radical for its focus on women's autonomy and willingness to raise women's sexuality and bodily integrity related issues publicly (Azim, 2016 as cited in Nazneen, 2017). On the eve of the upcoming fourth world conference on women or the Beijing conference most Bangladeshi women groups registered themselves as NGOs to access donor funding because of which

these organizations emerged as hybrid organizations that run funded projects and programmes along with autonomous voluntary campaign-based works (Azim, 2012).

NGOs played a number of important roles with regard to sex work in Bangladesh. Firstly, the NGOs played an important role in sensitizing sex workers about their rights which gave them an informed idea about their situation. As one of the sex worker activists said: “[Development agencies in their trainings] told us that we are not bad. We are victims of situations, and therefore we have become the way we are.” Such kind of motivational work from the NGOs gave sex workers inspiration and helped them deal with the agony they have been suffering from for engaging in the sale of human flesh.

Secondly, the NGOs also helped sex workers create their own organizations. Development agencies supported sex workers form their own groups such as Nari Mukti Songho in Tangail, Joy Nari Kollayan Somiti in Faridpur, and Mukti Mohila Somiti in Daulatdia (Chowdhury, 2006). According to a sex worker activist: “If NGOs were not there, we would not have had our organization... They gave us economic assistance”. Therefore, NGOs provided sex workers with economic assistance with which the sex workers were able to form their own organizations.

Thirdly, sex workers became increasingly aware about their rights through HIV programmes implemented by the NGOs. As an informant shared: “We could not have talked about our rights if HIV [programmes] was not there.” HIV-related programmes targeted sex workers and imparted awareness on their rights, making the sex workers capable of raising their voice. Due to the sex workers' movement as well as the work of the NGOs sex workers have gained visibility and recognition. As one of the informants shared:

We can voice our concerns now. We can talk about different issues with [both the] government and [the] NGOs. When we reveal our identity, they do not criticize us upfront... The term prostitution connotes bad meaning. [It] means we are bad women, that we are fallen... Now, even the government officials do not use the term prostitute. Everybody uses the term sex worker. We have received some kind of validity of this occupation. The world knows about us.

Fourthly, sex workers were sent to an international gathering where they had the opportunity to meet sex workers from different parts of the world. A sex worker activist, who received such an opportunity shared:

They [an NGO] sent us to India...We joined a gathering at Shonagachi brothel where we met sex workers from India and all over the world. They chanted the slogan that Gotor Khatiyeh Khai, Shromiker Odhikar Chai [We demand the rights of labourers as we live by working our body parts]. We became encouraged.

The gathering provided the Bangladeshi sex workers with the opportunity to meet their peers from all around the world. They heard them chant encouraging slogans through which they demanded the rights of laborers. They learnt that sex work could also be seen as a form of work. Such discourses of rights motivated the Bangladeshi sex workers about their rights. They became oriented towards the “sex work as work” discourse, which is a major demand of pro-sex work feminist organizations worldwide. Several sex workers’ organizations worldwide promote this discourse of “sex work as work” which cropped up during the second wave feminism in the 1970s (Outshoorn, 2004). For example, sex workers’ advocacy group Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics (COYOTE) claims sex work to be a legitimate and voluntarily chosen work (Jenness, 1990). Likewise, the International Committee for Prostitutes’ Rights (ICPR) also considers sex workers as legitimate workers (Jeffreys, 2004).

The reason which made it possible for the NGOs to facilitate sex workers’ gatherings was the funding available on HIV issues. According to Kempadoo (2003):

Under-funded sex worker organizations in both the First and Third Worlds who would have been hard-pressed to persuade their funders of the necessity of sending a representative to a "whores' conference" found it easier to get money when public health was, supposedly, at stake. Thus, the AIDS conferences provided a platform for a revitalization of the international movement, and, for the first time, signalled the presence of Third World sex workers as equal participants in the international scene. (p. 147)

Mgbako (2020) argues that it was due to the HIV/AIDS crisis and its impact on the global sex workers’ rights community that the sex workers’ rights movement could become internationalized (Mgbako, 2020). In the wake of HIV/AIDS, the Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP), which is the leading international umbrella organization of sex workers’ rights organizations, played a key role in globalizing sex workers’ movement (Mgbako, 2020). Mgbako (2020) notes that the NSWP which advocated for human rights for both male and female sex workers played a key role in motivating international actors to use the term sex

work/ sex workers instead of prostitution/ prostitutes. In doing so, the NSWP helped reframe “sex workers as rights-bearing human beings and laborers rather than stigmatized others” (Mgbako, 2020). The issue of work also lurked behind the scenes during the movement on sex workers' rights in Bangladesh involving human rights and women rights organizations. However, it was carefully avoided to retain the solidarity among the different organizations supporting the movement. As Huq (2012) shared:

Is sex work, work? If sex work is work, then what is sex in marriage? These were potentially divisive questions. We chose to sidestep these questions because having these organisations with us gave us much needed political leverage and protection. We could not afford to lose it. Instead, we talked about the rights of the women in sex work. (p.17)

Because of the sensitivity of the issue, the sex workers were asked by the women leaders supporting sex workers' movement to move forward over the issue of “sex as work” on their own. The Sex Workers' Network of Bangladesh, formed in 2002 (Chowdhury, 2006), has been persistent in demanding sex workers' rights. The sex workers' network demanded that sex work should be recognized as a profession like other professions that have institutional and governmental recognition (Sex Workers Network, 2013).

Health Issues and Other Rights

Despite some positive outcomes of the sex workers' activism sex workers continue to experience stigma. As one of the informants said:

Society does not treat us well. [Since we are sex workers] we are not able to rent houses. We find it difficult to enrol our children into schools. We are deprived of basic rights...We have already internalized that we are bad. We are deprived of rights.

The above narrative shows that basic human needs such as the ability to rent a house or to enrol children at schools are denied to sex workers due to their stigmatized status. This finding is also supported by Sumon (2012) who notes that due to their stigmatized status sex workers have been deprived of major rights which among many other things include not being able to send their children to schools.

Amidst sex workers' experiences of denial of services and stigma, HIV programmes gave sex workers visibility and provided them with access to

treatment of Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs). A sex worker activist said: “Government hospitals tease sex workers. But NGO clinics are better; sex workers are willing to go there.” Sex workers’ involvement with HIV programmes and their engagement with NGOs have enabled them to avail HIV and STD related services. However, the issue of rights which emerged during the sex workers’ movement in the 1990s was lost in the realm of HIV and other health-related programmes.

The sex workers’ movement which was an organic movement took a different trajectory due to the involvement of the NGOs. As one of the respondents who is a women’s right activist argues: “[T]he movement was very much organic, but it might have taken a particular shape because of NGO intervention”. Another women’s rights activist said: “[T]hey [sex workers] then started giving priority to HIV. [They moved away from] rights of housing, education, social acceptance, frequent police arrest... we do not have finance. [They do not want to come to us]. If we insist a lot only then they come.” This finding is also supported by Azim (2012) who argues:

But as the donor agencies and funded programs moved into this arena, the emphasis turned to service delivery, and as such, issues of women’s sexual rights or the rights of sex workers became subsumed under the needs of a better health delivery system and the emphasis on rights and status was diffused. (p. 270)

The fact that the sex workers have moved away from their rights is also acknowledged by a sex worker activist. As she shared:

Our main problem is deprivation of rights. HIV is only a health issue. It has given us visibility. [It has] created opportunities for treatment of STDs. It not good to talk about HIV only. Our other problems should also be addressed ...HIV is not our real problem.

It is evident from the sex worker’s narratives that sex workers think that HIV-related problems are not their real problems. They have other problems which they consider more daunting and experience in their day to day lives—experience of violence is one of them. As a respondent shared: “Both police and hooligans torture us; [They] beat us up”. Tahmina and Moral share similar findings and argue that sex workers experience abuse from their clients, hoodlums, representatives of landlords, and police (Tahmina & Moral, 2000). Furthermore, there are other factors affecting sex workers’ lives. For example,

intergenerational sex work is still prevalent in brothels. Girl children are often forced by circumstances to join sex trade as soon as they reach puberty to supplement the declining income of their sex worker mothers.

Furthermore, a major area of discrimination that the sex workers face is the deprivation of religious funeral rites. It was reported by an informant that for decades sex workers' bodies were not allowed to be buried in the graveyard of the general people. Rather, the bodies would be either buried in the *char* lands (river islands) or thrown away in the river. One of the informants shared what happened to the body of a sex worker when she was secretly buried in a public graveyard. As she said:

A landlady was shot dead [a] few days ago. She had no family... Her body was buried in a good place [graveyard used by the public]. But after her burial, people came to know that she used to live in this bad place [brothel] ... Then her body was dug up from her grave and left open on the ground... They did not allow anyone to take her body [for burial].

Until recently, sex workers, in general, would be buried without any formal prayers or *zanazah*. For the first time in the history, a sex worker of Daulatdia brothel received a formal Islamic funeral which took place due to the efforts of a coalition of sex workers who pleaded her case to local police to convince the spiritual leader—the imam to offer religious funeral prayers (BBC, 2020).

The denial of burial of sex workers' bodies in a general graveyard points to the gendered aspect of the stigma attached to sex workers. One of the sex worker activists asked a burning question:

But now I think, why a separate graveyard for us — sex workers only? If a client's body can be buried in a community graveyard, why not ours?... We have demanded separate graveyards for sex workers... Those who come to us as customers, are they not fallen as we are?

The fact that a customer visiting sex workers is not denied burial in a community graveyard points out that only the sex worker is regarded as fallen and not the customer. It also points out that sex workers are denied social acceptance. Huq (2008) notes that the issue of social acceptance cropped up during the campaign of sex workers:

The struggle for sex workers' rights has the potential to overturn these established norms and conventions and redefine the boundaries of women's activism and the meaning of rights work. The campaign in their support in 1990s

Bangladesh not only mobilized a whole new constituency of women for our movement, it also challenged our own concepts, views, and attitudes. Our campaign questioned these ‘rehabilitation’ prescriptions and instead raised an agenda of ‘social acceptance’ involving recognizing sex work as a legitimate occupation and accepting sex workers in our midst – in our movements, in our workplaces and in our homes. (p. 185)

Sex workers’ rights advocates argue that the legal protection principles such as rights to work, health, privacy, movement, association, access to justice, freedom from violence and discrimination which are documented in international human rights treaties also apply to sex workers (Mgbako, 2020). A human rights approach to sex work and HIV/AIDS acknowledges that if these violations of human rights which include health care discrimination, sexual abuse from police and criminals as well as denied access to justice are not addressed, HIV/AIDS among sex workers will not be addressed (Mgbako, 2020). In this regard, Nussbaum (1998) considers it appropriate to use laws to protect sex workers from assault, safeguard their rights to their earnings “against the exorbitant behaviour of the pimps”, protect poor women from developing countries from being victims of forced trafficking and deceitful offers, and treat them as equals in criminal and civil laws by offering them full civil rights (in their countries of destination). The Sex Workers Network (SWN), Bangladesh along with Sex Workers and Allies in South Asia (SWASA), Bangladesh Chapter in their submission to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in 2016 also called for decriminalization of sex work (Sex Workers Network Bangladesh, & Sex Workers and Allies in South Asia, 2016). It is argued that decriminalization is a precondition for the sex workers’ rights to life and labour, their reproductive and sexual rights, their rights to health and their overall physical and emotional inviolability (Sex Workers Network Bangladesh, & Sex Workers and Allies in South Asia, 2016). It is therefore important for the development agencies as well as sex workers’ rights organizations of Bangladesh to shift their focus on issues of social justice which include inclusion of rights in all aspects of sex workers’ lives, and not just health issues.

Conclusion

Feminists are divided over the question of sex work. While the pro-sex work feminists associate sex work with agency, the anti-sex work feminists consider sex workers as victims. The sex workers’ movement exhibits agency in terms of

demanding rights. However, what needs careful attention is — what is the nature of the sex workers' movement in a country in the global south such as Bangladesh. To understand the nature of this movement, this article has discussed the role played by NGO and HIV programmes in relation to the sex workers' activism in Bangladesh.

This article has shown that sex workers gained visibility due to their involvement with NGOs and their activism. NGOs have been acting as important partners in achieving development goals and have funded different projects on sex workers' empowerment. Sex workers were able to form their own organizations with the assistance of NGOs. Due to a NGO's support the sex workers had the opportunity to meet sex workers from different parts of the world and learn about sex work as a kind of work which is part of the global pro-sex work discourse. It was the funding available for HIV that made it possible for the NGOs to provide assistance to the sex workers.

It was about the same time that sex workers' movement cropped out following their eviction from brothels. Through their activism, sex workers demanded their rights. In their day to day lives, sex workers are deprived of basic rights: they are not able to enrol their children at schools, they experience abuses in their day to day lives, they are not able to rent houses and until recently they were deprived of funeral rights. They do not consider HIV to be their real problem; rather the issue of deprivation of basic rights is more daunting for them. The discrimination that the sex workers experience is rooted in the structural level and has a gendered aspect. A client does not experience these discriminations, but a sex worker does. While it is argued by global sex workers' rights advocates those rights documented in the international human rights framework should also be applied to sex workers, in the case of Bangladesh, the issue of rights became obscured within the purview of health and HIV-related issues—a finding which is supported by Azim (2012). What is really needed is a human rights-based approach which addresses violation of rights and incorporates a broad range of issues such as health care discrimination, violence, and denial of justice.

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