

**Sex Workers on G.B. Road:
Economic Aspects and Prospects
for Upliftment**



CENTRE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	3
Acknowledgement.....	4
Introduction.....	5
Research Methodology.....	5
Definitions.....	7
Sex Work Related Laws and Their Consequences.....	9
Sex Work Industry at G.B. Road.....	10
Demand and Supply Chain.....	10
Pimps: A Necessary Evil for Older Workers.....	11
Work Environment & Income Generation.....	11
Common and Individual Expenditures Involved In A Brothel.....	13
Summary and Conclusion.....	16
Bibliography.....	17

Abstract

Despite the vast research done by various researchers on different dimensions of sex work industry in India, little is known about the perspective of a sex worker and brothel owners; especially the various costs and expenditures involved in being a sex worker or running a brothel. The overall image that emerges from the literature is negative. Either they are portrayed as immoral, unchaste and obscene or as weak, vulnerable and a victim. This study analyses the laws governing sex work in India and their direct impact on working methodology and various costs involved in a brothel to examine the monetary benefits and hindrances received by the sex workers. The positive and negative impact of the laws on economics of sex workers and the brothels were examined by interviewing current and former sex workers, brothel owners, NGO officials and the service providers to sex workers in G. B. Road, New Delhi. An analysis of these interviews challenges the widely held assumption that stigmatizing the sex industry will collapse the market of sex work and will eventually lead to end of sex trafficking. In reality, it has just led to more no. of girls and women entering this profession who are now living a life of negligence due to lack of support needed from the government.

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Introduction

Sex work is a very grey industry. A large section of the society finds it immoral and profane; but willingly or unwillingly, 3 million girls and women¹ in India depend on it for their livelihood. Powerful dominates the weak and the society has given the weak no choice but to remain content under the suppression. Millions in our country have lost their right to take decisions for themselves; poverty does it for them. 59.08% of prostitutes in India states economic distress as a reason for choosing/falling into this profession². In Delhi, it shoots up to 61.17%³. Thus, sex work has a direct link with poverty and unemployment in context of India and thus it is essential to study how it is a source of livelihood for many in spite of its sinful image in the society and lack of supportive measures from the government.

The paper will focus on the economics of prohibited sex work industry running in the brothels at Garstin Bastion Road (G. B. Road) to create better livelihood opportunities for them without fostering conditions to promote trafficking. At present, G. B. Road is the third largest red light area in India with approximately 5,000 sex workers⁴ living in 105 brothels⁵ located at the road.

Research Methodology

The number of sex workers at brothels constitutes 18-19% of the total sex workers in Delhi while home-based sex workers and street based workers constitute the larger proportion⁶. Even though, a research based just on sex work in brothels cannot provide a complete picture, the researchers chose the site because of the ease of gathering information in comparison to home-based or street-based workers which mostly work individually. Also, the collective nature of work in a brothel gives an organizational structure to the system, which makes it easier to study the impact of government policies and NGOs activities over the sex work industry.

This research paper is based on detailed conversations with ten sex workers and owners of five brothels. Out of the five brothels we visited, three brothels had good infrastructural facilities while two of them were just equipped with the bare necessities. The high-end brothels had sex workers of different ages varying from 18-40 years while the other two brothels only had older prostitutes of age more than 35 years. Initially, we took the permission of Pramod Joshi, SHO, Kamla Market police

¹ K. K. Mujherjee and Sutapa Mukherjee, *Girl/Women in Prostitution in India*, (Gram Niyojan Kendra, Ghaziabad supported by Dept. of Women and Child Development, Government of India, New Delhi, 2004), 78.

² Ibid, 262.

³ Ibid, 264.

⁴ Shakti Vahini, *Assessing Vulnerabilities For Trafficking And HIV/AIDS*, (UNDP TAHA Project, 2005), 7.

⁵ B. Dahiya, Head Constable, interviewed by author, G. B. Road, June 27, 2012

⁶ Shakti Vahini, *Assessing Vulnerabilities For Trafficking And HIV/AIDS*, (UNDP TAHA Project, 2005), 7.

station, to gain access to the brothels. On his instructions, B. Dahiya, Head Constable, Kamla Market police station, took us to the brothels and ensured that we had no issues regarding safety in the brothels. The brothel owners and the sex workers were co-operative and answered our questions politely. The owners did not stop us from interacting with any of the workers; as a result we had short conversations with some other workers as well. We were allowed to conduct personal interviews with workers where they talked openly about the issues that they faced. One of the brothels we visited hired pimps to increase their number of customers. We even visited one brothel without any assistance from the police, but the behavior was as cordial as the other brothels. If a worker tried to hide their income or told us an incorrect figure, Mr. Dahiya insisted them to tell the truth and provide us correct information. Responses of workers varied in every brothel which showed the working environment differed in each brothel. To understand the complexity of the system better and to increase the credibility and validity of the results of the sample data, triangulation method was adopted. Apart from interviews of sex workers and brothel owners, we gathered information from 5 officials of two NGOs, Shaktivahini & Bhartiya Patita Udhar Sabha (BPUS), working on different dimensions of prostitution. Also, we had elaborate conversations with a former sex worker currently providing child care services to the sex workers, a jewellery salesman and a head of a hostel that provides lodging facilities to the children of sex workers.

The sample does not portray the complete scenario of G.B. Road since the sample size is not big enough to completely depict the complex nature of the varied brothels. Also, we were not allowed to visit some brothels because of their hostile relations with police and the NGOs; so a particular kind of brothels remained unrepresented in the study. We got some information about them through indirect sources mentioned above but direct interviews could not be conducted. The data collected may not be exhaustive but it still indicates the problems and their magnitude.

Definitions

In our patriarchal society, many defamatory terms have been used since the ancient time for the women providing sexual services to others. It is essential for us to define a few words clearly to avoid any misinterpretation. We have used the standard definitions provided by Immoral Trafficking Prevention Act, 1956 or the United Nations wherever possible but at some instances, general terminology is also used to describe the general perception of the society.

Brothel⁷: As defined in The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956, 'brothel' includes any house, room, conveyance or place, or any portion of any house, room, conveyance or place, which is used for purposes of sexual exploitation or abuse for the gain of another person or for the mutual gain of two or more prostitutes.

Prostitution⁸: As defined in The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956, 'Prostitution' means the sexual exploitation or abuse of persons for commercial purposes, and the expression "prostitute" shall be construed accordingly.

In the act, the term prostitution has been used to describe the various activities involved in sex work. But as mentioned by UNAIDS⁹, "the term 'sex worker' is preferable to 'prostitute' and 'commercial sex worker' which have negative connotations. The term 'sex worker' is non-judgmental and recognizes the fact that people sell their bodies as a means of survival or to earn a living." We would be using the term sex worker for the people involved in this profession and prostitute would be used only if it seems more apt in a particular situation.

The act has used the term 'sexual exploitation' multiple times but it did not define the term. It has been left on the wisdom of court to decide its meaning in different contexts. European commission defines it as "the use of another person in non-consensual sex for profit"¹⁰. As a sexual activity for personal financial gains should be consensual, this definition sees the profession of sex workers as a means of survival and not as a means of sexual exploitation. However, in Secretary-General's bulletin, UN has defined sexual exploitation as "... any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust, for sexual purposes, including, but not limited to, profiting

⁷ Section 2, The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Getting Started: HIV/AIDS Education in School Feeding Programmes, World Food Program, 18.

¹⁰ Glossary, Together Against Trafficking in Human Beings, accessed July 24, 2012, http://ec.europa.eu/anti-trafficking/section.action?sectionId=380a57d0-31bf-4c3a-8a95-5db0e7ddf223§ionType=LIST_ENTITIES_SQUARE_IMAGES

monetarily, socially or politically from the sexual exploitation of another.”¹¹The inclusion of position of vulnerability brings brothel-based sex workers under its purview, as “... lack of economic options for women in vulnerable circumstances may result in prostitution...”¹²

As India has signed the United Nations Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others¹³, we accept this definition as an underlying definition to illustrate ‘sexual exploitation’.

Sex Work Related Laws and Their Consequences

The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956, is the primary law that deals with the activities related to sex work. However, it restricts itself to trafficking and sexual exploitation in prostitution and holds an ambiguous stand towards the legitimacy of voluntary prostitution. Under the lens of laws, even the word ‘voluntary prostitution’ seems self-contradictory as exploitation could never be completely voluntary. Similarly, in the act, brothels are restricted to sexual exploitation and abuse and are not covering the possibility of it being a workplace where workers come to work under their free will without any external pressure or force.

In the act, sex work is not prohibited but it penalizes specific activities related to sex work. Under the act, keeping a brothel or allowing premises to be used as a brothel is a punishable offence. The sexual activities in a brothel lead to gain for another person or for two or more prostitutes. Thus, a sex worker can work individually but cannot live or work with another sex worker. By enforcement of this law, the magistrate holds the right to put an end to all sexual activities in G. B. Road and poses a threat to source of income of thousands of workers.

It is even difficult for a sex worker to get a home on rent as the social stigma attached and the strict laws discourages any person to give his/her home to a sex worker. The legitimacy of a workplace run by a person/non-profit organization which is not earning any profit from providing rental services to an individual sex worker is also unclear. It is doubtful if such a workplace comes under the definition of brothel as only sex worker is receiving any gain in this situation.

Section 4 of the act criminalizes adults living partly or wholly on the earnings of a sex worker. Thus, a sex worker is not allowed to support her family economically or live with her husband. Most of the

¹¹UN Secretary-General’s Bulletin on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) (ST/SGB/2003/13), <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N03/550/40/PDF/N0355040.pdf?OpenElement>, Section 1.

¹²http://www.un.org/en/pseataaskforce/docs/frequently_asked_questions_english.pdf, Ans. 20.

¹³Chapter VII, Traffic In Persons, accessed July 23, 2012, http://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=VII-11-a&chapter=7&lang=en

workers we met in the brothels support their family back in the villages and such a law makes such transactions illegal. One-fourth of all the sex workers in Delhi are part-time sex workers that operate from their homes in slums and their business are mostly managed by their family members¹⁴. The act compels such workers to remain underground which leads to more cases of sexually transmitted diseases among them and acts of criminal violence. Fear of arrest compels them to not report such cases to the police which results in increase in number of criminal activities remaining unreported.

The act bans soliciting in a public place by words, gestures, wilful exposure of body for the purpose of prostitution¹⁵. The failure of implementation is visible from the fact that fifty percent of sex workers in Delhi are street-based sex workers who solicit customers on the street¹⁶. Also, sex workers on G.B. road could be easily seen soliciting from their window which is a punishable offence by law.

The current act has completely failed in its motive to curb trafficking and has just resulted in unfavourable conditions for the sex workers. Instead of preventing trafficking, this has led to a growth of 1700% in prostitution in the past 15 years¹⁷. It is pretty clear from the figures that this has resulted in more and more women living a life of negligence. A sex worker is forced to hide her activities and seek security under the organization of brothels as our legal system has failed to protect her rights. The need of the time is to change the laws to acknowledge sex workers, focus on better working conditions of sex workers and provide them a more secure environment where they can raise their voice against the violence and exploitation faced by them at their workplace.

Sex Work Industry at G.B. Road

The maximum number of brothels in Delhi is located on Swami Shraddhan and Marg, also popularly known as G.B. Road. With hardware shops on the ground floor, brothels are situated on the upper floors. Being a metropolitan city, women from different states come to Delhi in search of a better life. In a survey conducted by Ministry of Women and Child Development, 142 women belonged to

¹⁴Shakti Vahini, Assessing Vulnerabilities For Trafficking And HIV/AIDS,(UNDP TAHA Project, 2005), 7-8.

¹⁵ Section 8 (a & b), Immoral Trafficking Prevention Act, 1956.

¹⁶Shakti Vahini, Assessing Vulnerabilities For Trafficking And HIV/AIDS,(UNDP TAHA Project, 2005), 8.

¹⁷'The sex industry has grown by 17 times in the past 15 years', Ruchira Gupta interviewed by Kim Arora, last modified: July 25, 2011, http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-07-25/edit-page/29812341_1_prostitution-trafficking-apne-aap-women-worldwide

Andhra Pradesh among the 442 women surveyed¹⁸. Many girls and women from neighbouring countries like Nepal & Bangladesh are also trafficked into these brothels.

Non-uniformed distribution of workers from different parts of the country gives unique characteristics to every brothel which results in varied rules and regulation across the brothels. Although in a complex manner, it could be seen that characteristics of brothels are eventually driven by the monetary benefits that different stakeholders gain.

Demand & Supply Chain

The demand is created by every section of the society which includes rickshaw pullers, street dwellers, low wages workers, students, office employees etc. Most of the customers arrive in the night starting between 9 p.m. to 4 a.m. in the morning while the demand is less during the day. One of the brothel owners told us that no. of customers increase during the lunch timings of offices in the vicinity when their employees visit the brothels in the period.

The workers have the freedom to decide their working hours according to their own comfort but the frequency of clients play a major role in deciding it. The workers mostly start their work from 5 p.m. which stretches to 4-5 a.m. in the morning. Even during the day, few sex workers are always available to provide service if a customer comes. As the older sex workers face difficulty in competing with the young ones, they tend to be available during the day when the younger workers' working hours are not. While in the three high-end brothels, only a few workers solicited through the window during the day and none of them had hired a pimp; the other two brothels followed different strategies to lure customers. As the workers in these brothels were older, they had to make extra efforts to get clients. Few of the workers in one of the brothels were soliciting near the stairs, trying to convince the potential customers on the road while the sex workers in other brothel had hired pimps.

Pimps: A Necessary Evil for Older Workers

Hiring a pimp to increase the number of clients is a marketing strategy that has benefits and losses both for the customers and the sex workers. Only 10 out of the 105 brothels had workers who hired pimps for themselves¹⁹. This shows that pimps are unpopular among the workers and the services provided by them are not worth the charges they take. They exploit hesitation among the clients to

¹⁸ K. K. Mujherjee and Sutapa Mukherjee, *Girl/Women in Prostitution in India*, (Gram Niyojan Kendra, Ghaziabad supported by Dept. of Women and Child Development, Government of India, New Delhi, 2004), 122.

¹⁹ B. Dahiya, Head Constable, Kamla Market Police Station and President, *Bhartiya Patita Udhar Sabha*, Delhi unit, interviewed by author, G.B. Road, June 27, 2012.

directly deal with the brothels that arises due to shady environment prevalent in the market. They provide wrong information about the profile of workers to the potential clients and thus charge extra money than the market rate. Usually, it leads to dissatisfaction among the client and sometimes result in feuds between the clients and the customers. This has led to extortion of the clients by the sex workers and the clients have also reported against them to the police²⁰. Thus, engaging pimps could also prove to be a major factor resulting in negative publicity of a brothel over the long run which would hamper their customer base. Also, it is obvious that such experiences on the client side will discourage him to visit the brothel again and would only lead to temporary clients for a worker and the brothel.

Pimps are hired only by the older workers who face a deficit of customers. As told to us by two workers of the brothel, in every transaction, share of the pimp is equal to the share of the sex worker. Thus, earning of a sex worker per client gets halved if a pimp gets into the equation. If a pimp is able to fetch more money from the customer than the usual charge, it goes completely in the pockets of the pimp. Also, pimp has no share in the '*bakhsheesh*²¹' that a worker gets from the client.

As older sex workers have longer working hours and lesser number of customers, hiring a pimp even if their share per client gets reduced is a natural choice. Also, as they are in the last days of their profession, saving money to secure their future could also be a reason behind hiring pimps.

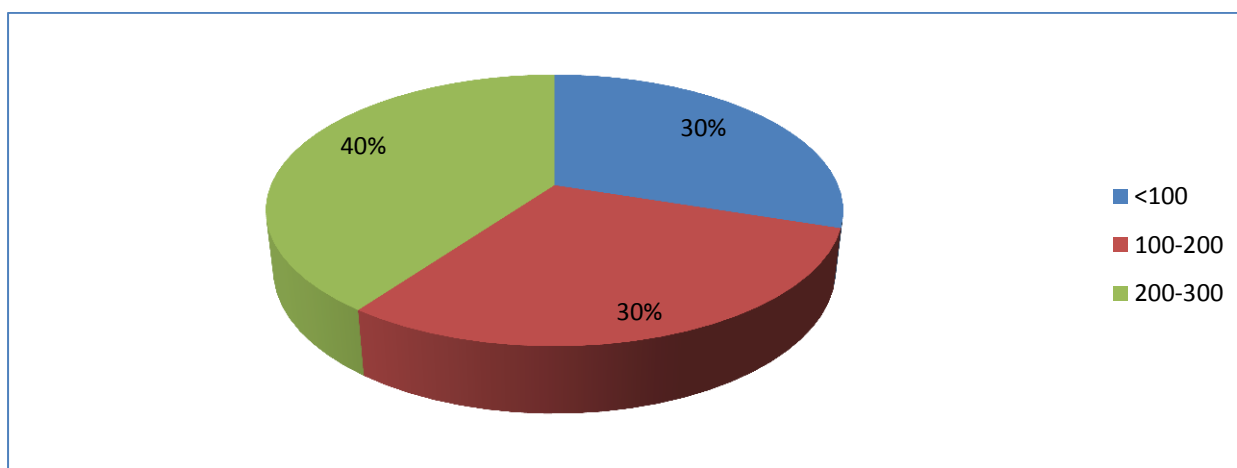
Work Environment & Income Generation

All the sex workers that we interviewed provided services to not more than 3 clients in a day and decide the number of customers on their own will. It also ensures even opportunities for all the workers in a brothel as the number of clients for every worker is almost the same. Charges per client varied from Rs. 100-300 as shown in the pie chart.

Figure 1 Income per client

²⁰President, Bhartiya Patita Udhar Sabha, Delhi unit, interviewed by authot, G.B. Road, June 27, 2012.

²¹ An Urdu word, meaning 'extra reward'



Old workers charge less to a client but the charges are almost double if a client comes through pimps. As already mentioned above, the extra charge goes to pimp and the customer and the worker are at a loss.

The monthly income of a young sex worker lies between Rs. 10,000 – Rs. 15,000 while an old professional is able to earn Rs. 6,000 – Rs. 10,000 per month. As they earn on a daily basis, they don't keep an account of their monthly income but they know their daily income which lied between Rs.200-Rs. 350 for the old workers and Rs. 300- Rs. 500 for the younger workers.

Most of the workers agreed that they earn more money through sex work than through any other job that does not require any specific skills. Also, wages earned per hour is higher in comparison to any other work as a session with a client doesn't last longer than 30 minutes. Thus, the total amount spent with clients in a day is not more than 2 hours per day. The amount of freedom that they get during their working hours is also more in comparison to other jobs.

A sex worker who left the brothel once said that she felt more exploited in her other job that she did in a factory and was sexually exploited by the owner. Thus, she had no choice but to come back to the brothel. Other workers never left the brothel. Lack of choice or the pressure from the brothel owners could be a major reason behind it.

Common and Individual Expenditures Involved In A Brothel

A brothel becomes a workplace and a home for the sex worker. She needs to pay for living and working in a brothel and also has to bear her individual expenditures. The characteristics of the expenditures involved in a brothel resemble both to a workplace and to a home and varied from brothel to brothel.

Various expenditures involved in running a brothel involves salary of cooks, cleaning staff, rent of the brothel, electricity bills, bribe given to police etc.

In the brothels, we found two kinds of systems for division of the income among the various stakeholders.

In the brothels that hired pimps, owners had their fixed shares while half of the remaining income goes to the pimp and the remaining half is left with the prostitute.

In the remaining brothels where pimps were not involved, the income of the worker gets distributed among the owner and the worker. The share of the income that the owner receives depends on the services provided by the owner to its workers.

In two brothels we visited, expenses of food, electricity, health, rent and other common services were managed by the brothel owner and the sex worker had to bear her individual expenses like education of their children, clothes, jewellery etc. In these brothels, sex workers give around half of their income received from each transaction to the owner who in exchange provides the above mentioned services to them.

One of these brothel was managed by a lady who herself was a former sex worker and was currently living with them. She was managing the brothel for the past 6-7 years and the actual owner was not living with them. The brothel had workers of age from 20-35 years and had good infrastructural facilities. The owner charged Rs. 1000 for every small room for the rent and electricity. The manager takes care of health related issues and accompanies the workers to their monthly medical check-ups which are conducted in Gangaram or Sanjeevan Hospital. These expenses are managed by the manager. Every worker has a staff assigned to her who looks at her basic needs. The charges that a worker has to pay to the staff are decided by them according to the services offered and come under the individual expenses. Most of the workers provided education to their children in Bangalore while some of them keep them with their families at home.

The other brothel which was managed by a man was the owner of the brothel and was also a member of an NGO working in the area. The brothel had workers of age more than 35 years and had basic infrastructural necessities. The owner charged 60% of the total income of the workers and provided most of the services to them but he didn't disclose the expenses that are included in it. The environment inside the brothel gave a feeling of a home rather than a work place. There was a room which had sewing machines where women could work in their free time. There was also a computer

on which we could see a small kid of the worker playing games. He advocated that involvement of government should increase and verification of identity of a woman should be necessary when she enters the profession.

In another brothel, every worker paid for their individual expenses including the food and the common expenses were paid by the brothel owner who was a man. All the workers belonged to an age bracket of 35-45 years and had hired pimps to bring clients. 50% of the income out of every transaction of the worker goes to the owner while 25% is taken by the pimp. Thus, the worker gets the remaining one-fourth amount. Every worker cooked food for them and manages their own room. This was the only brothel in which food was not cooked collectively and there were no support staffs for the workers. Charges taken by the owner for the services provided was higher in comparison to other brothels. Lack of unity among the workers and also less income because of the growing age could be a reason for it.

In the remaining two brothels, the owner was a former sex worker and treated workers more like a family than a manager. All the expenses were managed collectively by the workers and they contributed money according to the need of the situation. In one of the brothels, owner didn't share the distribution of expenses and just revealed that all the expenses are born collectively.

In the other brothel, monthly rent of the brothel was Rs. 4,000 and the monthly electricity bill was Rs. 18,000 approximately. The daily collective expenditure of food and the maintenance of the brothel was Rs. 1500. All these expenses were paid collectively by the workers but were not distributed equally. Every worker used to pay according to the earning one gets during the day. The workers were relatively happier in the environment and the infrastructural facilities were better in comparison to other brothels.

All the workers said that the police was helpful in expelling the customers that becomes violent inside the brothel. But two of the brothel owners indicated that police charged high bribes from the brothel owners to provide them the necessary safety which is not provisioned in the law. A former prostitute²² told us that the charges taken by the police to provide brothels the safety that they need varies from brothel to brothel and depends on the monthly income of the brothel. She estimated that the total collection of police is more than Rs 1,000,000 every month from the brothels of G.B. road. She also revealed that in past, the pressure of brothel owners has resulted in transfer of those

²² The person requested us not to disclose whether she was a brothel owner or not.

police officers that didn't agree to the working of brothels. The brothel owners are ready to corrupt the police to any extent which could provide them a monopoly over the sex industry in G.B. road.

Also, if a sex worker finds working environment in their preset brothels unhealthy, then she is not allowed to change her brothel according to her will. This seems to be a strategy of brothel owners to deprive the workers to choose a workplace on their own so that it is easier to suppress the workers.

Summary & Conclusion

The need of the time is to change the perspective through which we frame our laws related to sex work. The demand for sexual services is growing at a rapid pace which results in higher rate of trafficking around the world. In the present scenario, it is difficult to keep a check on trafficking as the environment provided by our laws and the society compels a trafficked girl/woman to remain underground. We need to understand that sex work, either voluntary or a result of trafficking, is the direct consequence of poverty and social inequality prevailing in the society. The insecure working environment for the workers harnesses conditions which lead to criminal activities. A research conducted by UN in nine countries concludes that 60-75% of women in sex work were raped and 70-95% of them were physically assaulted²³. The condition of these women involved in sex work would remain the same unless they get a platform where sex workers could raise their voices instead of environment which only suppresses it.

The brothels have turned into a workplace where they have to work on the sole discretion of the brothel owner. We need to provide better laws and should have more involvement of NGO in the activity of sex workers so that they have the authority to decide the brothel in which they wish to work and should also play a role in framing the working rules of a brothel. The government should empower them by promoting policies that encourage sex workers to form SHGs of their own and thus make them self-dependent to solve their own issues. It is pretty clear from our past experiences that the criminalization of sex work industry neither prevents trafficking nor reduces prostitution. The only thing it results into is creating coercive environment for the sex workers. Thus, instead of stigmatizing the profession, policy and programs should recognize it as a source of livelihood and the focus needs to be shifted to prevention of trafficking rather than elimination of sex work industry.

²³ SEA Frequently Asked Questions, http://www.un.org/en/pseataaskforce/docs/frequently_asked_questions_english.pdf, March 2010, 4.

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