

**VOICE
FOR
CHANGE**

**Collective Action For Safe Spaces
By Sex Workers And Sexual Minorities**

A Praxis Publication (2013)

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**Part 1: Collective Action For Safe Spaces
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Voice for Change: Collective Action For Safe Spaces By Sex Workers And Sexual Minorities



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Preface

Praxis – Institute for Participatory Practices is a not-for-profit, autonomous, development organisation, committed to the democratisation of development processes. It is devoted to advocating for community-led development initiatives and governance practices that centralise the perspectives of marginalised groups. In order to do this, Praxis endeavours to identify opportunities and forums in which vulnerable and excluded groups are able to voice their concerns and aspirations in a meaningful way.

Set against the context of a growing interest among global civil society and state actors on the process to decide what should replace the Millennium Development Goals after 2015, a United Nations High-Level Panel has been constituted with three co-chairs, the Prime Minister of United Kingdom and the Presidents of Indonesia and Liberia. The High-Level Panel has come up with its report of recommendations in this regard.

Praxis is part of the Participatory Research Group of the Participate initiative co-convened by the Institute for Development Studies, Sussex (IDS), and the global civil society campaign Beyond2015. The on going participatory research projects are gathering perspectives on the post-2015 debate from the people most affected by poverty and exclusion.

As part of various initiatives to influence Post-2015 development agenda, Praxis has produced a Voice For Change series that attempts to enhance the participation of vulnerable communities to analyse, dialogue and voice their perspectives on development goals. Praxis acknowledges that participation is not a technical or a mechanical process that can be realised through the application of a set of static and universal tools and techniques, but rather a political process that requires challenging the existing power structure. It sees communities not as objects but as agents of change.

The first issue in the Voice For Change series, *Collective Action for Safe Spaces by Sexual Minorities and Sex Workers* is focused on members of the transgender, sex worker and homosexual communities who are often left out of development processes because of the stigma attached to their identities. It takes the reader through a series of narratives that are often unheard by those who frame policies and implement programmes - Why do they face discrimination? How do they cope with it? When have they succeeded and when have they failed? Given these, how do they envision the world? It is the result of a series of engagements with these groups and attempts to amplify voices of these communities on issues underlying these questions. Also appended are audio-visual materials in the form of a participatory video, which was created by members of the transgender community.

Praxis acknowledges the valuable contributions of The Tamil Nadu AIDS Initiative (TAI) administered by Voluntary Health Services (VHS), V-CAN a state level network of sex workers and sexual minorities in Tamil Nadu, participants of the Participatory Video process, Real Time, Institute for Development Studies, Participate, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and all the sex workers and sexual minorities who shared their experiences to help produce this document.

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Setting the Context

Involvement of multiple stakeholders in research on issues of sexual minorities received attention in the context of the national HIV programme in India, which has, in the last decade, facilitated the mobilisation of communities of sexual minorities and female and male sex workers with the agenda of HIV prevention. These communities have over time, used this mobilisation strategy to organise themselves and form a number of community based groups, organisations and networks to look at issues concerning them beyond the HIV agenda. These issues include those that are unique to their identities as sex workers or sexual minorities and are related to:

- (a) Crises faced by communities
- (b) Struggles on realising their rights and entitlements as citizens and
- (c) Stigma and exclusion in other aspects of their lives

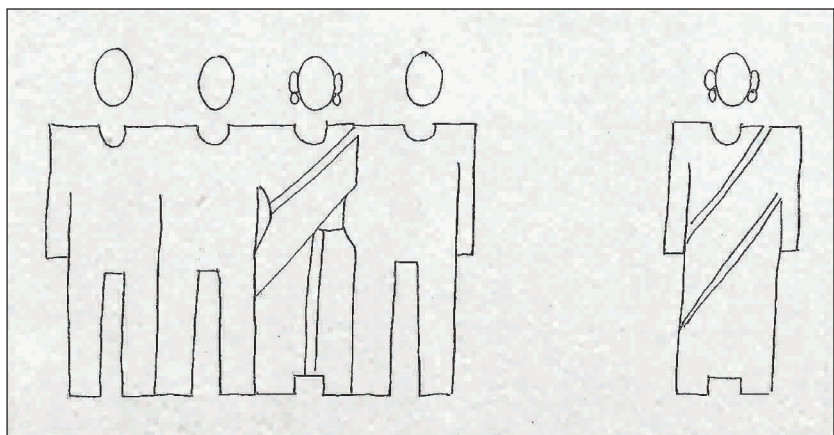
The report is based on participatory research done with sexual minorities and sex workers. It includes the following stages: (a) compilation of case stories collected in the context of documentation of good practices of community based organisations of female sex workers, transgender communities and men who have sex with men and their coping mechanisms to deal with crisis, denial of rights and stigma, (b) a process facilitated for scripting a participatory video with members of transgender groups in Tamil Nadu in the context of what should replace the MDGs, post 2015; (c) using participatory tools, facilitating discussions with community participants to cull out different arguments that the analysis needs to contain; and (d) presenting a draft report to community participants for their concluding remarks. Names of all community members quoted in this document have been changed to protect their identity.

“You do not treat us as one among you”

While evolving a method of understanding responses by community groups to issues of stigma, one important challenge was to understand how the community groups associate the term 'stigma' with their problems. Owing to their association with HIV sector projects, the term stigma has been in their vocabulary but defining the term was not easy. They best described the meaning of the term through illustrations and statements as seen below.

Gowri belongs to a dominant caste built around a strong masculine identity. “Effeminate expressions among boys are firmly seen as a disgrace to our caste identity.

However, I felt more than inclined from childhood to participate in any activity, both social and cultural, that helped me express my effeminate nature. When I was 12 years old, I participated in a cultural event where I cross-dressed and gave a remarkable dance performance during a village celebration. My uncle (who was to become my father in law as per my community traditions) told my father that he should have come to my family to seek a bride and not a groom. This angered my father to such an extent that he beat me up and disowned me”. Gowri ran away from home, and was a victim of extensive abuse in Kerala and Mumbai, where she was forced into sex work.



Amit said that he does not need sympathy, but definitely craves for respect and connectedness. He was verbally abused on a daily basis. He said, “I started living away from the family. I rented a room in a lodge nearby and used to stay there. If my sexual orientation gets known to wider society, the local villagers would chase me to death.” Janaki, the leader of a sex workers collective, narrated an incident about a member of her group who was HIV infected and passed away recently - “She was not permitted to be buried in her native place. Villagers believed that if the body of a PLHIV (person living with HIV) was buried it would give out insects that would harm the health of villagers.”

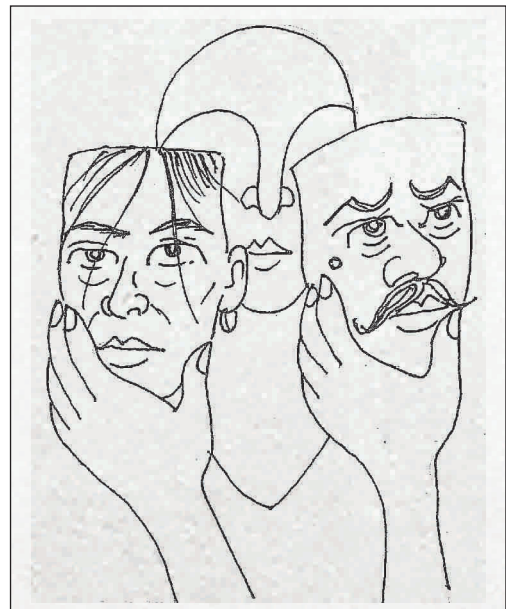
The discrimination operates by trying to “other” a particular group – in this case sex workers and sexual minorities. A community leader, Jinu, stated, “An eight year-old child of a sex worker had to drop out from school because the girl was continuously abused verbally by teachers as 'prostitute'. Has that girl done any harm?” Abhishek said, “Even one case of theft by a homosexual would be projected as if the entire community is made up of thieves and robbers. If a heterosexual man commits rape, can we call all heterosexual men rapists?” A number of community leaders stated that it was very difficult to get a place on rent to set up drop-in centres or sexually transmitted infection clinics. Aruna said “En velayayekevalamaparkirangal... customer regularakadaikeerangal-naangaleppavumirrupom-annalmaidippuillamal!” (My work is seen as undignified, but clients regularly come to us. That means this community (of sex workers) will always be there. However, we will never be valued in society!) Madhavi said, “A group of 14 men raped me. I was lying on the road crying when a community leader took me to the hospital. I did not inform the police because I know that rather than finding the men who did this they would instead look for a way to falsely implicate me in a crime because they know I am a sex worker.”

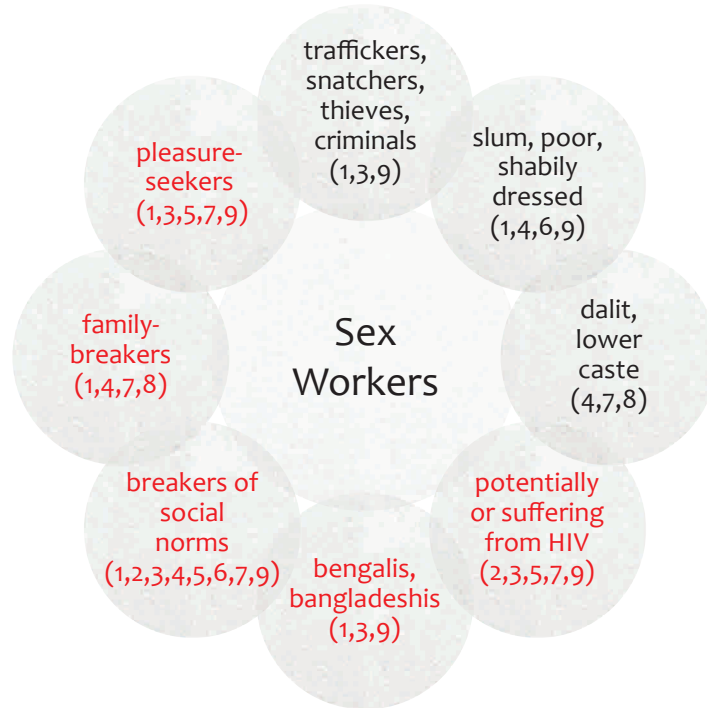
For members of the community of sex workers and sexual minorities, the lack of even minimal efforts by the larger society in trying to understand the real problems is what they feel truly stigmatises them. “Society has evolved a social norm for itself which has no place for the problems faced by these community members. According to them, larger society makes a statement that these people deserve this treatment as they have deviated from the acceptable moral norms of society. For us (sex workers and sexual minorities), this is stigma.”

“We are not just sex workers. We are also stereotyped as criminals or discriminated as Dalits”

In a participatory exercise with nine sex workers, multiple identities that they ascribe their discrimination to were mapped. These included such identities that they are presumed to be carrying even though they may not be. These are often driven by stereotypes that society imposes. Some of them such as - family-breakers, tradition-breakers and potential or being HIV infected, are stereotypes that are associated with sex workers. Others such as Dalit and Bengalis are the supplementary identities inherited from birth or geography (often structured around constructs of being 'lesser').

The figure below details the identities that the nine sex workers had been associated with.





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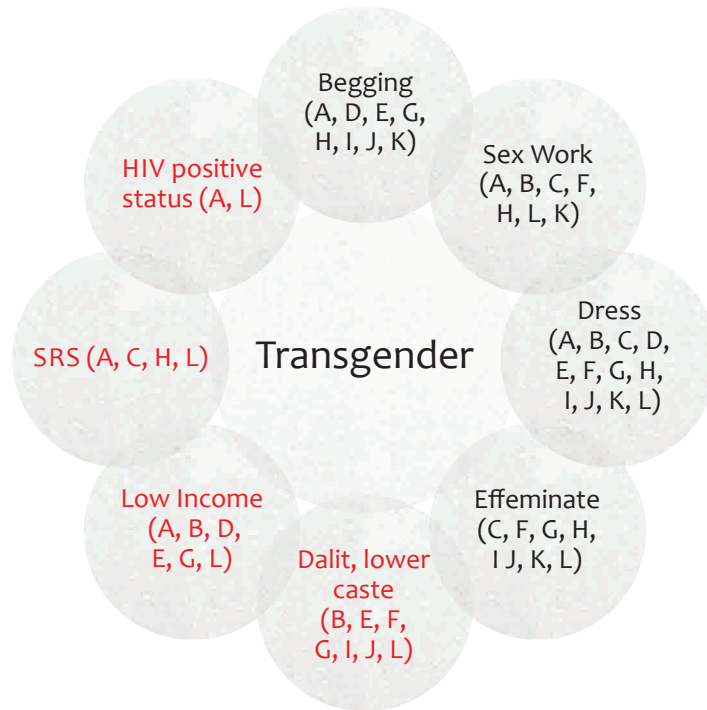
- The numbers in parenthesis indicate those allocated to the nine participants in the exercise
- The circles with text in black indicate the supplementary identities inherited from birth, which cause discrimination and
- The circles with text in red indicate perceived identities or stereotypes, which cause discrimination

“We are transgender and whether we do sex work or not we are assumed to be sex workers”

In an exercise done with twelve transgender community members, what came to light is that very broadly, the stigma and discrimination faced by transgender women can be divided into two categories:

1. External or societal stigmatisation, which results from a disapproval of their transgender status, which is seen as a threat to hetero-normative society. Underpinned on trans-phobia, this stigmatisation manifests itself in terms of disapproval of effeminate boys, censoring of dress code among transgender women, added perceptions around the sex worker and HIV status of transgender women as well as stigma that is driven by these communities being associated with begging.
2. Internal stigmatisation which is what they face from other transgenders. This is based on caste, income generating potential, HIV status, physical appearance (including skin colour and hair) and status with respect to the Sex Realignment Surgery (SRS). Those who have not undergone SRS for instance, and those who are unattractive in appearance are stigmatised and discriminated within the community of transgenders.





In the figure above:

- The letters in parenthesis indicate those allocated to the nine participants in the exercise
- The circles with text in red indicate those characteristics that cause internal discrimination and
- The circles with text in black are those that cause external discrimination

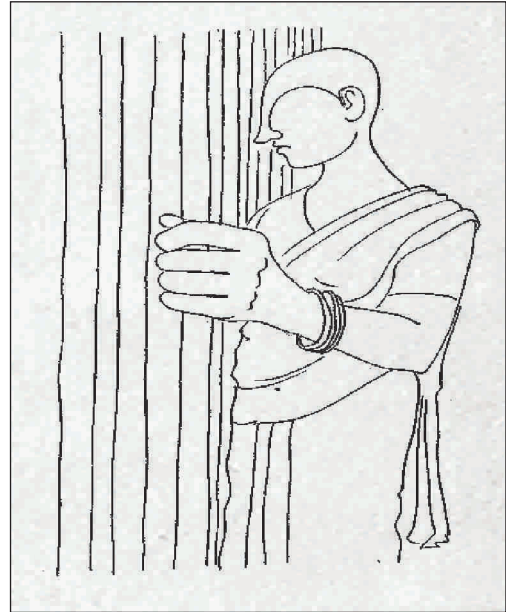
In order to understand the level of stigma they faced from different stake holders in society the participants of the two exercises had a discussion and arrived at the information presented in the matrix below:

	Important Stakeholders	Sex Workers			Transgenders	
		Why are they important to you?	How they harm you?	How easy is it to engage with them?	How they harm you?	How easy is it to engage with them?
1	Goondas, Shopkeepers, Lodge owners, Drivers, pimps, Husbands, Partners	Smooth business	Physical violence	Easy	Verbal and physical harassment	Easy
2	Clinics, designated health workers	Health	Insult but not openly	Easy	Ignore, Refuse treatment	Moderate
3	Workers Union, Women's groups, NGOs	Social security	Insult openly	Difficult	-	-
4	Political Parties/ Politicians	Social standing	Insult, Ignore	Easy	Insult, Ignore	Moderate
5	Advocates, Lawyers	Social Standing	Insult, Ignore	Difficult	Ignore openly	Easy
6	Media	Social security	Insult, Ignore	Difficult	Ignore	Difficult
7	Faith-Leaders	Social standing	Insult openly	Very Difficult	Insult openly	Very Difficult
8	Neighbourhood Community, Local clubs	Social standing	Verbal abuse	Very Difficult	Verbal abuse, Insult, Ignore	Very difficult

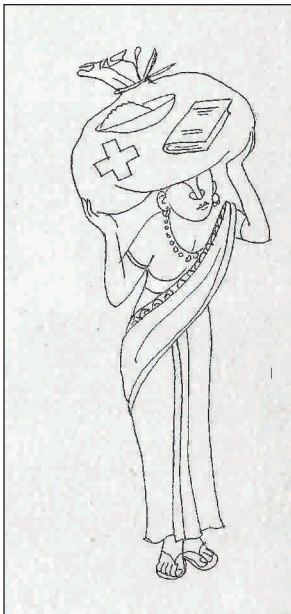
Living with Stigma: Experiences of Sex Workers and Sexual Minorities

Many sex workers and sexual minorities have a stigmatised existence as a result of multiple factors. Their lives are characterised by absolute poverty, absence of family support, insensitivity of government functionaries and the non-existence of safe spaces for them to collectivise. Many of these characteristics together have “othered” these communities into isolated groups both in the minds of society at large and the State, which is duty bound to ensure rights and entitlements of these citizens.

Parineeta, a transgender leader concluded a long conversation about the plight of the community with, “There is a saying that a lot of penance must have gone into being born as a human being. We are born as human beings, without any disabilities – we are not deaf, dumb or blind. Yet society calls us 'Aravani' (transgender), makes fun of us and demeans us. Is being born this way our fault? Definitely not. Is it God's fault? We haven't yet found an answer to this.”



“Meeting our daily needs is our primary concern”



In the past two decades as a sex worker, Sheela's life has been marked by a constant sense of drudgery. “I live on the streets and that is how I brought up my kids and got them married. Now my children come to visit me and they do not mind my being a sex worker.” Sex work is not the only work that sex workers do. They do take every opportunity to be involved with different tasks that help them to earn a daily income. Sheeba did catering but earned only Rs. 100 per day. “It was not enough to sustain me and my three children, so I got into sex work.” Similarly, Geeta, who has three children, said, “The constant thought of how to educate them bothers me. I do not even have the bare minimum to feed myself and my kids and sex work pays for it.” In Shalu's case, her daily expenses, the electricity bill, water bill, children's university fee and others add up to a lot. She says, “These can never be covered by a regular low-paying job, and I'm not highly educated. I can't leave the (sex-work) profession even if I want to - where is the money going to come from?”

Often poverty imposes certain situations that force parents to sell their children. Savita says, “Those who took me there paid the police and my mother Rs. 5000 each and bought me. From there my tragedy began and now I can't go back to my family.” Having been or being a sex worker often denies many entry into other kinds of employment as

well. Rekha faced the same fate. She worked as a part-time domestic help, and said “Once my malkin (employer) got to know that I was a sex worker she stopped me from entering her house”.

“I am not part of their social imagination. My body is that of a boy but my heart is of a girl”

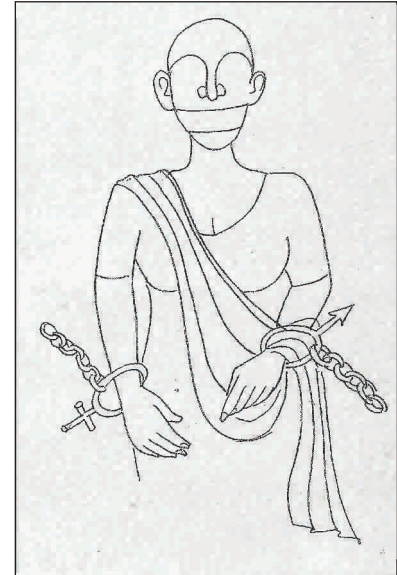
Transgender and sexual minority groups tend to discover their alternate sexualities during adolescence. At this stage, instead of support, most parents who find out about the effeminate behaviour of their sons, react negatively while some react with hostility, as in Shanta's case. “My relatives and neighbours were confused about my gender. They saw me as a source of humiliation.” Raju, said, “My father is an alcoholic and unemployed. When he got to know about my identity from outsiders he beat me up a number of times. The mark that you see on my forehead is a



result of the physical violence that I was subjected to at home. I have not been on talking terms with my father for the past seven years.” Radha from Madurai faced a similar situation. “My father came and scolded me for behaving like a girl. When I started crying, my parents beat me up and even burnt my hand as a punishment.” Vinay from Tuticorin said, “My brother has repeatedly told me that he would kill me because I was born like this.”

While mothers sometimes extended their support and acceptance they were unable to express this, worried about what their spouses would say. Fearing backlash, mothers often persuaded and pressurised sons with effeminate behaviour to change themselves without understanding the underlying causes. Soumya said, “I would be reprimanded and asked to play with boys of my age, to walk and behave like other boys, to learn to ride a cycle - but I wasn't interested in those things. I liked talking to girls, and would find myself drawing 'kolam' (floor decoration) in the house, or putting 'mehendi' (henna).”

Such instances pushed them to the corner and forced them to repress their feelings, fearing rejection from their parents, siblings and relatives. Alisha says, “My father got to know about my identity from outsiders. He beat me up a number of times. I ran away from home and am separated from my family for the last decade. The worst thing we experience is the absence of family support”. Even extended relatives isolate transgenders. “My relatives don't talk to me either. They all talk ill about me and because of this I don't attend any family functions.”



Most transgender and sexual minorities stated that when they were in their adolescence they were unable to understand why their behaviour and feelings were inconsistent with their assigned gender. They said that this confusion continued until they met someone in a similar situation. “My parents would accept offspring with physical deformities but not children like me who displayed incongruence between my sex and gender.” Savitri's father told her “You are my son. You can drink, smoke and if you want rape a woman. I will not say anything. But you should not become a transgender.” Irked and embarrassed by comments of relatives and neighbours, parents start rejecting such children and even become hostile. There is no attempt to understand their behavioural patterns. “As a result of this, I have never enjoyed my childhood”, remarked Sheela. She added, “Most boys did not like to interact with me, and I was forced to play with girls. My aunts and uncles did not let my male cousins play with me because they felt if their sons mingled with me they too would become effeminate like me”.

“If we assert, our identity gets known, the abuse multiplies”

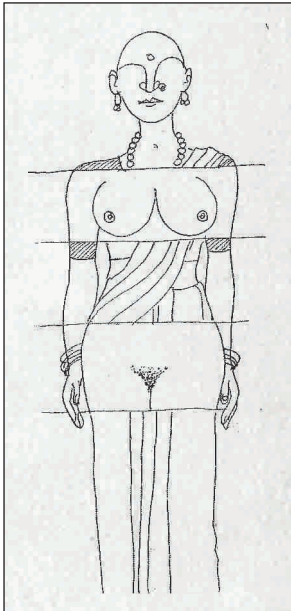
Various groups of sexual minorities emphasised that harassment and stigmatisation from schoolmates was very common. Their non-conformist behaviour manifested itself early in life and teasing, derogatory remarks, spreading of rumours about their sexuality, bullying, verbal and often physical and sexual abuse by peers, students and teachers, especially male, were regular occurrences. Vijay stated “I was in an all boys' school. I fell in love with my classmate but he rejected me saying I was a eunuch”. It often leads to the child's discontinuation of education. Raju said, “I don't remember a single day when I sat at my desk and studied. I always sat on the floor, because I wasn't considered an equal. The boys would pinch and touch me inappropriately. I left school”. Ramu said, “In college, there was a lot of ragging. I began to realise that this was one of the reasons why transgender people did not attend school or college. I would cry every night, thinking of the humiliation I faced.”

Even children of sex workers are not spared. They are associated with this identity and taunted. Mala said that when she went to school, the boys of her class use to ask, “What is your father's name?” because they knew that she did not know. They asked where she lived and what her mother did for a living. The teachers were not far behind– they

taunted her with similar questions and ridiculed her because she lived in Khetwadi, a red light area. They all knew where she came from and used this information to constantly humiliate her.

A lot of sexual minorities find it difficult to procure rented accommodation. Landlords are often hesitant to rent their houses out, fearing that the tenant will make it a place of business. The ones who finally do let their houses out make the deal at a fat bargain. Sheela's landlord knew her identity as a sex worker and used to supply the water at a high price, assuming that sex work gave her a hefty income. She put up with it knowing that it was very difficult to find another house in the city. This went on until he found a new tenant at which point she was thrown out of the house and he refused to return her security deposit. "I have since been shifting from one house to another." Ganesh's landlord gave him a place to stay but when Ganesh started dressing in a saree, he was thrown out. "They feared that I would bring unwanted people into the house on a regular basis." In Kannagi's case, her "house owner charges a lump sum for electricity and expects me to treat him every day with food or with a bottle of alcohol. If I do not comply, he threatens to throw me out of the house. That's how I have managed to live in this rented house for the last five years."

"We are human beings but all men see us as sex objects"



Patriarchy, a structure and ideology of oppression, unfortunately defines norms of morality and masculinity. Malligai comes from a caste group in Tamil Nadu that trace their genealogy to warriors. Any effeminate expressions among boys were seen as a disgrace to the caste identity so being a transgender was blasphemous. These concepts of masculinity did not just exist and exclude people at the family level but also often shaped the dynamics of engagement at the village and community level. "We were most accepted by those from Dalit communities, our mothers and sisters. We were excluded by our fathers, brothers and community groups who were higher up the caste hierarchy".

It is the same structure of patriarchy that defines morality and sanctions the use of women's bodies as sites of revenge politics. The label of a sex worker or a sexual minority who is a sex worker is very difficult to get rid of because of the weight that this patriarchy-influenced label carries. Such labels lead to the creation of identities, which are ingrained in the minds of people. Rupa was born into a family of devadasis and resisted taking up sex work. She managed to stay away from the profession until her grandmother was alive, but soon after her death, Rupa was forced into the same tradition. It was her grandmother's brother who "Used to point at my vagina and ask

what's wrong with me because I was not entertaining customers. He used to say that my grandmother was good at sex work and I would be too."

Chandani, who gave up sex work, was often taunted by her old customers because they wanted her to come back to the profession. She did not want to be seen as just "a piece of meat" and often asserted that, "Women have excelled in every field. Then why should men look down upon them? Kandhe se kandha milaa ke chalna chahiye (We should have the same place in society). A woman can do the same thing that a man can do. For instance, women are also pilots like men should they not be treated as equals?" Maya, who quit sex work, says, "A man is born out of a woman's womb yet his outlook towards women is bad. They should not look at women as sex objects. This outlook is what should be changed".

Sudha feels that she fails to fall within the strict parameters of what a woman should be like. She is treated merely as a sex object. Her grouse is that, "Within me, I am a woman. But no matter how much pain I go through, how much



blood I shed to become a woman, society still sees me only as a transgender.” She feels used by men, “A man who treats us with love and desire at night, saying we are more beautiful than a woman, ignores us during the day. They look at us as if we are disgusting insects. They just use us for sex and throw us away”.

In hospitals too, transgender sex workers are treated as sex objects. Shalu had gone to a well-known private hospital for a consultation for her surgery, “Where the attending doctor (a known physiotherapist) asked if he could see my private parts. After that he asked me to come the next day and said he would help me get the surgery on the condition that I perform oral sex on him. That's all he saw me as – someone to give him pleasure and not as a patient.”

Sexual exploitation is not restricted only to women and transgenders. When Raj had his first sexual encounter with a man and was coming to terms about it, he says “That man threatened to tell my family about my sexual behaviour unless I had sex with him. This blackmailing for sex was done by 36 other men in the same village as the news of my sexual behaviour travelled from person to person”. This forced him to leave the village.

The police are not far behind when it comes to treating current and ex-sex workers merely as objects of pleasure. Radhika once went to a police station accompanying a friend who was gang-raped. But the police, instead of helping the friend, started physically hitting and kicking her. They raped her too, saying that if having sex is what she did for a living then it didn't matter if they did the same. Seema wonders, “If we do not look at women in our families as sex objects then why should we not treat women outside the home the same way?”

The most essential requirement for human beings to exist in society is to be treated with dignity, something which a lot of sex workers and sexual minorities find difficult to come by. “I have faced a lot of harassment being a transgender. People on the road used to throw stones at me, call me names, and shopkeepers used to beat me for begging near their shops.” Radha's case is not isolated.

Malti has struggled to assert her other identities over that of being a sex worker. In the office where she works as a secretary, she is identified with what she does after office hours. People take her out only if it's for sex, just like her clients do. “Once they have sex, they leave us as they would not like their families to see them with us. I am a sex worker but I am also a secretary in an organisation, a woman and a human being.” She wants these other identities to be acknowledged as well.

Obstruction to the Achievement of Goals

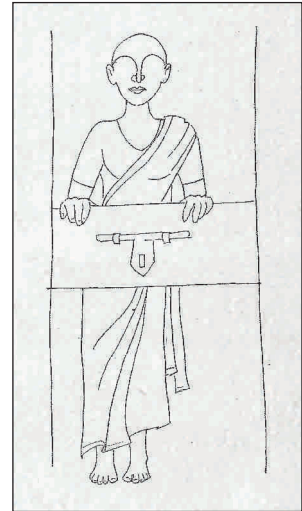
While the Constitution of India, numerous treaties, international conventions, laws and policies guarantee that no human being will be denied rights and entitlements or discriminated against as a result of their identity or gender preference, reality is starkly different. Starting from the first point of interaction with those who are meant to safeguard rights, these groups face discrimination, forcing them to live on the margins of society with very low acceptance and status within the wider community. This section details the nature of denial of rights and entitlements to these groups.

“Doctors see us as objects of disgust”

Sex workers and sexual minorities, like everyone else in society, fall sick, contract various illnesses and face medical complications. But their treatment is very different from others in society. Their identity as that of a sex worker or sexual minority tends to take precedence over all else, leading to discrimination from doctors and associated medical personnel. Ravi went to a hospital to get some sores on his lip treated. After some routine questions, Ravi thought he should reveal his homosexual status to the doctor, in case it aided the diagnosis and treatment. “Once he found out I was homosexual, he moved his chair away from me and asked me to leave the room, saying that if I did such 'dirty' work, then I deserved to look dirty as well”. In Gautam's case as well, he often had chapped lips in winter. He went to the hospital, got an appointment to see the doctor and while being taken in, the attendant told the doctor that Gautam was a homosexual. Having heard that, the doctor asked whether he always had oral sex with men. He also asked how many men he had sex with every day. “He said things like how could you suck men's genitals with the mouth with which you eat; don't you feel ashamed doing that? He verbally abused me. I argued with him saying that the wound in the lips was because of the weather and not because of oral sex. The doctor said that there were no medicines for this and told me that it was due to AIDS. He referred me to the STI department. I only had wounded lips. But the doctor in the STI department asked me to show him my genitals. Then, he forced me to bend down and show my anus. The STI test was then carried out. After four days, I got the report from the STI department, which said that the wound was not a sexually transmitted infection.”

HIV counsellors too, who are believed to be sensitised to the complexities of the lives of sexual minorities, often become the discriminators. Rahul, when he was 19 years old, went to an HIV counsellor asking to get tested. When he told the counsellor that he was gay and was worried because he had had sex without protection, instead of encouraging him to talk about his fears, the counsellor started asking him questions about his personal life like, “How many sexual encounters I had, what kind of sex I had, and how I felt about it. I was ashamed and embarrassed by these questions and decided not to get tested there.”

The complexities of health issues of sexual minorities and sex workers are often exacerbated given the risk associated with their professions and their susceptibility to sexually transmitted infections and HIV. Suneeta was diagnosed with a sexually transmitted infection and went to the civil hospital for treatment. She said, “When I go to hospitals for treatment the doctors and nurses never come near me. They maintain distance. So I keep a smiling face and try to be friendly with them. Then I explain to them that we (transgenders) are also human beings.” Several people mentioned being discriminated because of their professional status as well as sexual preference. In Yamini's case, she once fell and had an open wound and had to be rushed to the hospital to be stitched up. “Fearing that I might be HIV positive, the doctor refused to attend to me and did not give me any treatment. I had to consult a doctor in a private clinic. So most of the time I end up consulting private doctors except for my regular sex change surgery treatment for which I go to the government hospital.”



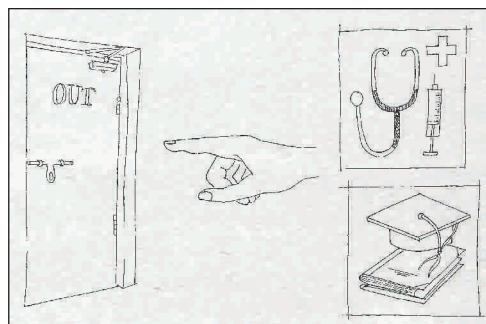
The complexities of the health issues faced by the transgender community are extremely challenging. There are very few doctors that transgenders feel comfortable going to because they have often experienced feeling like guinea pigs at the hands of doctors who don't know how to treat them and sometimes even take very serious risks because of this lack of knowledge. Sheetal once took a transgender friend to the civil hospital and was waiting outside while her friend interacted with the doctor. When the doctor found out about her identity, he asked her to take her clothes off and called four other doctors to the room to watch while he examined her. They asked her questions about her private parts and what she did with them. She was so humiliated by this that she grabbed her clothes and ran out of the room. When Rama went to meet a doctor, he did not treat her but asked her to return the next day. She went back only to see that he had called a meeting, which was attended by 34 counsellors from different government hospitals and clinics. Once they finished the review of her health issues, they asked her to go on stage. "They introduced me as a transgender and opened the floor for questions. Their questions focused on my sexual encounters and they made me describe these at great length. They did not care about hurting my feelings with their probing and there was nothing medical about it". Radha feels that "Doctors in private hospitals in many cities do not have basic knowledge about us (transgenders). A private doctor did my surgery (sexual reconstruction surgery). But they probably did not know what to do. They did not know what had happened when the operation was done. Ten days after the surgery I was not able to urinate. So I was taken back but they still did not know what to do. They did not attend to me. Though they were doctors they were clueless."

Such behaviour from doctors, nurses, counsellors and other medical personnel put off a lot of these community members from seeking medical attention. Vikas was so upset with the way he was treated at the hospital that "I didn't go to any hospital and just stayed at home without consulting any doctor again thinking that I might receive the same treatment or will be victimised again."

"You don't belong in college, but in a brothel"

The right to education is a universal human right that is recognised worldwide. But when it comes to sexual minorities, they are discriminated not just by their peers and classmates but also by those who are entrusted with upholding these rights – the teachers.

Teachers often see the early signs of alternate sexuality manifesting itself in students and in some cases have tended to take advantage of the situation. In Adi's case, he stated that he displayed effeminate characteristics and one of his male teachers had noticed this and tried to touch him. He was called to the staff room one day and asked to enter some data into the computer. Adi did this until everyone had left the staff room and was then cornered by his teacher who "came near me and forced me to have sex saying he would give me poor marks if I did not". Thyagu was weak in mathematics and his teacher often made him stay back after class. "One day he sent all students except me out of the class and when I went to get my answers corrected, he did not even bother to look at it and forced me to have sex in the classroom itself."



Besides sexual harassment and rape, the insensitivity expressed by the teachers too can be scarring. Junaid was studying psychology in college where one of his teachers asked him "Why are you coming to study when you should be working in a red-light area" and then sent him out of his class. Karan at one point during his college life had attended a rural camp. "One day, I stayed back in the hostel because I was not feeling well. When one teacher heard about my absence, she assumed I was attending to clients and said, 'People like this (homosexuals) are like that only. They have 'friends' (clients) everywhere.' When I got to know about this comment from one of my friends, I confronted her. She never even bothered to apologise."

Pradeep wanted to join college and continue his studies by doing a PhD. He approached the Vice-Chancellor for the opportunity but once his homosexual status was known, the application was rejected. “He told me ‘People like you shouldn’t join college or even enter it.’ As human beings, don’t we have the right to education? I went and lodged a complaint at the police station. But no one supported me.” Vasu, finished school but had to struggle to gain admission into college. “I went to many colleges and since I disclosed my identity as a transgender when I went to seek admission, my right to education was denied. Many transgenders have the desire to study but they lack the opportunities and facilities to do so.”

“Government conducts a census of even wild animals, but not us (transgenders). No one cares.”

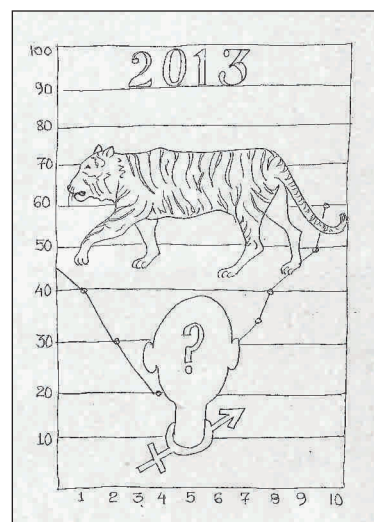
Besides health and education, there are several other rights and entitlements that sex workers and sexual minorities are denied. Kiran believes that the state must provide laws for sexual minorities. “It’s not acceptable to follow laws framed in the 1850s. At that time only male and female were the accepted sexes”. Many like Kiran feel that the government and society must ensure that there is an end to discrimination against sexual minorities. Priyanka thinks, “The government should ensure the right to property, to adopt kids, to marry, reservation (affirmative action) job opportunities etc. These rights must be provided for us by the state. Just the way there is reservation for women, there should be reservation for transgenders too.”

Sheetal laments, “If you see society and Indian culture, we recognise only marriages between men and women. A man should marry only a woman and a woman should only marry a man. Even if we are born as men, our emotions, feelings, mind-sets are all that of women. Even our thoughts are feminine. To feel more feminine physically, we put our bodies through a lot of pain. If you look closely at sex change, we go through numerous surgeries so that we can be reborn as women. We take rebirth so we can live as women. So when I am a woman, to myself and society, why can’t I love a man or get married to him?” Anamika feels they become transgenders so that they can live like women. “When that is the case, then our identity should ideally not come in the way of marriage. As transgenders, society says I cannot marry a man. Even I have emotions, feelings, and desires. I too want to marry a man. But that is not allowed.”

Even in the case of job opportunities, Pragnya said, “While the constitution guarantees the right to work, to all citizens of the country no matter what their sex, I was denied a job in several offices – I was rejected repeatedly because of this one reason – that I am a transgender. I didn’t know what to do. So I resumed collection (begging) at shops even though I have a bachelor’s degree”. Priyanka believes that transgender community members are extremely strong and powerful, even physically and “have the courage and experience to withstand rowdies (hoodlums) if they attack. Why can we not be recruited in the police force?”

The police who are agents and upholders of the law have been reported as the worst abusers when it comes to these communities. Mona was trafficked to Mumbai and she managed to escape after a struggle. When she went to the police station to get a complaint registered they refused to do it as it came from a transgender. Manu says that the police often round up transgender community members at any given opportunity. At the police stations, “They hit us with sticks. We were treated like animals; they do not ask us anything about our lives or what we do. They only say that there were complaints against us.”

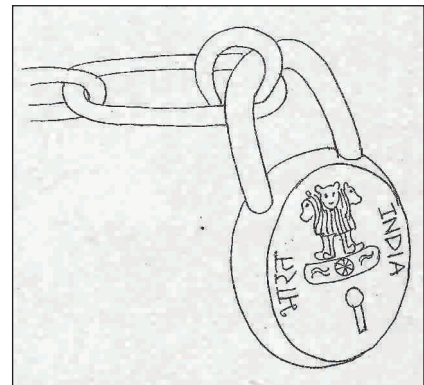
Charu even tried to strategically entice the police but they still rounded up her friends and her. “They don’t do anything to the people who approach me for sex, but insist that I am the one who’s doing something



wrong.”Sheeba also believes that “We sex workers need protection, especially from the police.” Under the pretext of robberies, theft of phones and valuables, transgenders often find themselves in police lock ups because they are always the first set of suspects and an easy target for the police in several locations. The suspicion sometimes crosses the line like in Lakshmi's case. When she was travelling to Delhi to attend a function that was organised for the transgender community with a group of 25, her adopted daughter Maya was with them. Some policemen spotted them in the train and insisted that Lakshmi had kidnapped the child. They were unwilling to believe that Lakshmi could have an adopted daughter. It took a lot of convincing including Maya's own statements that finally convinced the police. This frustrates the community to a tremendous extent and Lakshmi asks, “If single men and women are allowed to adopt children in this country then why not us?”

“There is no Government for us”

Just as all citizens have rights, entitlements are also guaranteed by the welfare state in an attempt to reduce inequality and to uphold the principle of equity. While the intention is positive, the reality of how this manifests itself is antithetical. “Like many other poor citizens, we also face deprivations. But, wherever we go, our identity is used to taunt us and to ignore our requests”. Preeti is not alone in this. When Reena went to apply for a ration card, “Despite repeated assertion of my rights as an Indian citizen, it took me two years to get one.” She was sent from pillar to post during the application because she was known to be a sex worker. Even after she procured the card, the harassment did not stop. “When I used to go to the ration shop, they always used to make me wait longer than others. It was the same with voting they would always allow others in line to go first.” She had tried in vain to lodge complaints but there too she was rebuked by the police. Nanda also made several attempts to procure a house through a scheme. “I had gone to ZilaParishad and did not get anything from there. They asked me to get my address proof but since I had no house I could not get a ration card, voter ID and so on. I used to stay on the road and that is where I brought up my kids.” When some champions from within these communities try to procure entitlements of others, there continue to be issues. Mamta had managed to get basic identity cards for herself and many others in her brothel but when she decided that she wanted to formally work on behalf of sex workers through an organisation, women activists and the police opposed her work and leadership. “The income tax commissioner refrained from approving 80G exemptions to the organisation. Not only that, he asked us to vacate his office as soon as we said we were sex workers.”



In Anil's case, though he was granted a subsidised travel card for HIV positive people without much difficulty, despite him being homosexual, his fear of re-stigmatisation is what prevents him from using it. He says, “The card clearly says 'HIV positive' which immediately marks me out to the bus driver and I'm scared of what he will say and how others will react.”

Transgender community members cannot hide their identity even if they choose to. Their dressing, demeanour and mannerisms give them away. They are targeted more frequently and Queenie says, “Transgender people are denied basic entitlements like ration card, voter ID, etc. When we go to the department (Social Welfare Department in the Government), they ask us to return the next day or the day after. They do not entertain us. This is because we lack rights. The law doesn't give us rights and people speak of us insultingly. For this to be resolved, the government must give us all the rights and privileges it gives men and women too.”

Sexual minorities and sex workers continue to be challenged by governmental authorities and civil servants who are governed by a rigid moral framework that excludes those who belong to these groups. It is for this reason that Gunwati believes “The State does not protect us.”

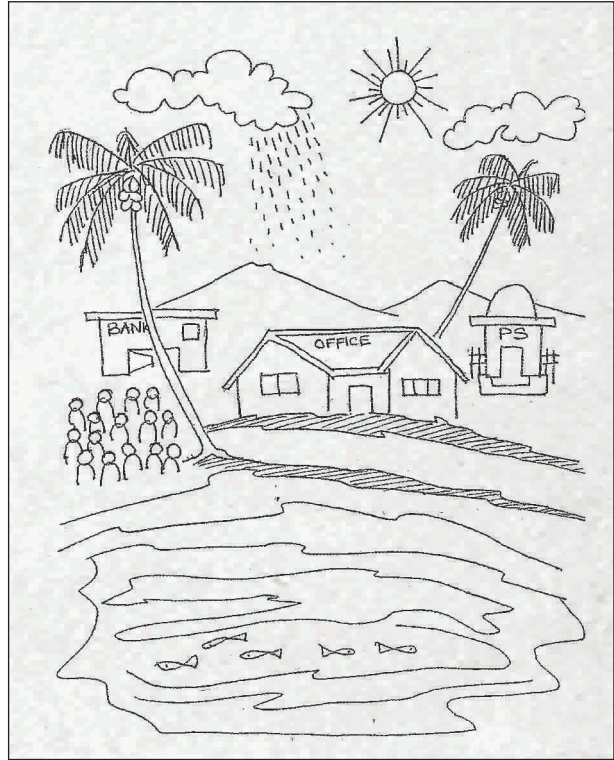
Bastions of Hope - Stories of Success

Nietzsche's often-quoted statement “That which does not kill us makes us stronger” is personified by the ways and means that these groups of sex workers and sexual minorities have coped with stigma and discrimination.

“We have created a safe space for us to discuss and be enlightened”

By collectivising people in similar situations, sex workers and sexual minorities, have formed Community Based Organisations (CBOs) to provide services to those susceptible and vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. These have over a period of time now become spaces where these community members find it easy and safe to discuss issues that affect their lives, beyond HIV. Many such CBOs developed highly effective systems and practices in their engagement with communities and their issues.

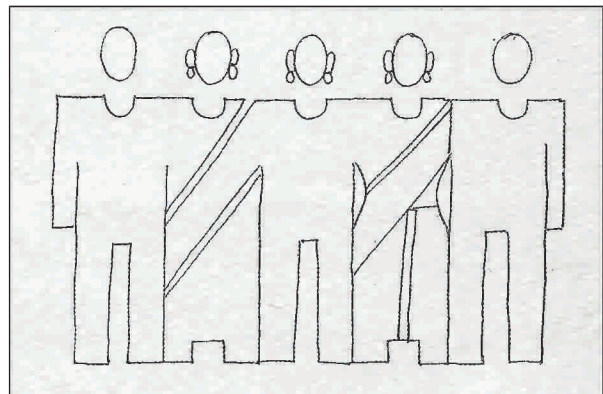
Members of a CBO, stated that, “This has now become a space that provides for the mutual support and interaction between transgenders from Dalit and dominant caste backgrounds - something that is taboo in the general community. It is today known as a CBO of, for and by the transgender community. Many come to us seeking refuge as families reject effeminate boys. We counsel them and ask if they are willing to make efforts towards being reintegrated with their families. This gives us the opportunity to dialogue with families of various castes. We tell them that effeminate expressions are not limited by caste. We show them how our members are from diverse caste backgrounds and how the CBO has become a space where all can interact as equals.” This injects a feeling of solidarity among members – allows them to articulate without feeling judged. Gomati succinctly puts this down, “I know that when I need someone to support me my family will not come forward. Only my community will stand by me. I feel like I am with my family. They are my strength and support.”



“We need to organise ourselves to overcome the barrier of stigma”

Several sex workers and sexual minorities have braved the storm and tried to organise others in similar situations to come together and seek strength in numbers for their cause.

Rakhi did sex work because she had no family support and her husband treated her badly. He forced her to continue in the profession. “It was while doing sex work that I came across many other women like me who had been forced into sex work. This made me think seriously about my community. In the beginning I did not get support even from other community members. It was at that time that I



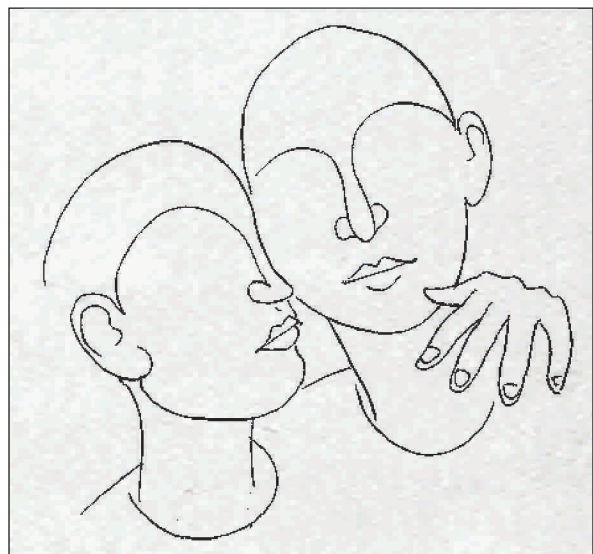
came in contact with a social worker, who guided me until I came across other like minded women. I organised them into a group and formed an association. This was the beginning of change in my life.”

Similarly, Geeta was from a dominant caste and a transgender, something that was seen as unacceptable so she had to run away. She was provided refuge by a Dalit family and decade later, as a tribute to them, she constructed a temple into which she invited Dalits. Everyone eats and prays together – something, which has challenged the caste norm to a tremendous extent. Geeta also established a community-based organisation for homosexuals and the transgender community which today boasts of a membership strength of 700.

Champions who emerge among the sex workers and sexual minorities are an inspiration to several others in similar situations. Rita considers herself an empowered person. She has undergone training at various levels from the year 1999 in the area of HIV/AIDS, leadership development, financial management and governance. She has been a Trainer of Trainees and part of an evaluation team to assess organisational capacities, as part of CBO Module Preparation for the National AIDS Control Organisation's (NACO) Phase-IV Programme 2012-2017. “I had filed a petition in 2004 against the police department for forcible HIV testing of sex workers. Though I had never had to face this humiliation myself, I had seen others who faced it. I was even kept in the police lock-up for this. The case is still pending in the Andhra Pradesh high court. This was my first experience of the arrogance of the police. I have been part of several protests and demonstrations in front of police stations against the illegal beating / torture and filing of false cases by the police against female sex workers. I have been awarded a Naveena Mahila Award by a television channel for fighting for the rights of my community members.” Others, like Chetna have been felicitated in the presence of large groups for the work that they have done in improving life for the transgender community. She says, “My proudest moment was receiving the award at the district solidarity event. I was sitting next to a minister on the dais who told me that this was the first time he was seeing a transgender get awards. When I sat beside the minister, a policeman who had once refused to take down my complaint was very respectful of me. Whoever we are, however we are, we are human beings. I realised that discrimination is more because familiarity is less. We can do lots of things by getting involved in work. Once the general community is familiar with us then they will love us like their children because we are doing good work and we don't harm anyone.”

“I work to help them overcome hardships that I faced”

There are several sex workers like Meena who work with their peers to counsel and talk them through difficulties they face as a result of their identity and help them secure their rights and entitlements from the Government. “I joined them voluntarily as a peer educator. Today, I work as an outreach worker for them and also work in the night at the community care centre. I am happy that my work has always been appreciated”. Peer educators and outreach workers, are often mocked by wider society because they are also sex workers. Harini feels that the biggest achievement for her is the ability to overcome the resistance she faced from the wider community when she and others like her went for condom distribution and other targeted intervention services. “Now, there is a lot more openness to accepting us. Our targeted intervention (TI) work has also been positively affected as more people now approach us for TI services when we go to communities with income generation programme products or ideas.”



Several sex workers and sexual minorities also champion the causes of their communities in accessing rights and entitlements. When Manju saw that 38 members of the CBO she was associated had not received their old age pension months after they had applied, she decided to persistently follow this up. The officer tried to shrug the issue off by saying he had not received the application but she managed to produce photocopies of these, which she maintained and kept following it up. Her efforts paid off when she finally managed to secure the pensions for these members. Many others have been able to secure land pattas (plots) for members of transgender communities through State Government schemes. CBOs also conduct workshops on rights and entitlements for their members and several leaders of the CBOs attend trainings on other issues and themes in different places. These have helped in securing several entitlements for these communities.

A variety of strategies have been developed by different community members to be able to engage meaningfully with the state in order to secure rights for sex workers and sexual minorities. Beena said, “We now make it a point to visit the District Collector’s Office without exception every Monday to find out about the status of available schemes. As our women are mostly from families below the poverty line and marginalised, we have been able to help them procure essential documents and identity cards that in turn have helped them access various entitlements and schemes that have been promoted for women.” Raji’s CBO uses a different route – “We have conducted various events to raise awareness among our community members and we use these opportunities to invite district level officials and other important people in the district as special guests. During these meetings we ask them to make public commitments to support our community members access services and entitlements. These events further serve in building our credibility and foster significant relationships that help our community members access various rights and entitlements.” And yet some others like Manju feel that something as simple as a “thank you card that we sent to the Social Welfare Department when some members got ration cards, has paved the way for many more from our CBO to secure them.”

“We offer them options”

Several sexual minorities and women are forced into sex work with no viable exit – something that many stories in the sections above have highlighted. So creating options of alternate livelihoods for those who want to supplement or exit sex work is something many CBOs started working on. In Jaya’s case, when their CBO toyed with the idea of providing training to members to start small business initiatives, not all community members came on board. So the leadership team decided to start work with two or three members whose initiatives showed results and decided to use this to demonstrate the success of the model. “During the monthly meetings at the CBO, we showcased the successes and motivated more members to acquire skills to set up small businesses. We started to build rapport with readymade garment companies, small business centres and petty shops to link them with members who started businesses.” A lot of women who took up these trainings, benefitted from the supplementary income that this provided to them.

In other CBOs too where this was tried, Manasi mentions that it snowballed. “Once the idea of income generation programmes (IGP) took off, group meetings were held regularly. During the meetings the community members would request for trainings that they were interested in. Some products like washing powder and murukku (a snack) making were easy, so the trained community members would demonstrate and train the others, either one to one or in a group. Our CBO additionally trained members in pickle making, tailoring, saree business, making dry snacks, embroidering nighties (nightclothes), making curry powders and paper plate making.”

Linking the production with marketing was the next obvious step for many CBOs. While some CBOs requested NGOs that they were associated with to help them with the marketing aspects, many used innovative methods to sell products, like Malti recounts. “One of the strategies is while collecting monthly fees. When the members go to collect the monthly due, they also demonstrate other new products and sell these to nearby houses. The eatables are also purchased by the CBO and used during the meetings.”



A Vision for the Future

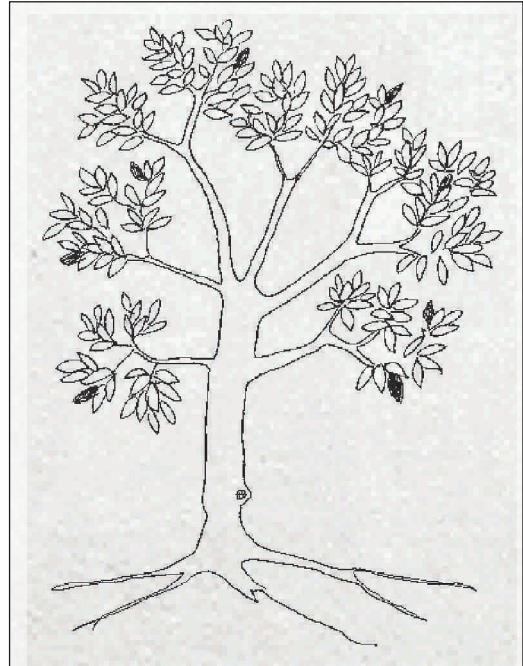
Several sex workers and sexual minorities stated what they wanted their future to be like – for themselves and their loved ones. These have been shared below:

A world without stigma

“I am a sex worker but I am also a woman and a human being and the society's perspective should change towards me. I just want to be treated with dignity” - Sabina

“Nothing is easy. At the same time nothing is impossible if I have a clear-cut vision to look forward to. My vision is to empower vulnerable children, youth and women and to address issues of man-made social injustice like stigma, abuse and poverty and to help build a healthier future.” - Ami

“This society should be sensitised to understand that sex work is not a criminal activity” - Almas



A remedy for HIV

“I want both my children to get married and become engineers. I want to keep working in the same organisation and handle big projects. And I want a remedy for AIDS to be discovered by then so everyone can live happily.” - Shanta

“I want HIV to be eradicated and I also want the children of sex workers to get good jobs and be affluent. I also wish that my sisters go on vacation to foreign countries.” - Sumi

“HIV should be eradicated in ten years and my organisation should move ahead. Every sex worker should come to the mainstream, and I want to help them achieve respect in society” – Deepika

A good future for children of sex workers

“I have a desire to meet new people, to build a school for children who are aware of their mothers' profession (sex workers children), to find a job for my child and work more with sex workers to help them achieve dignity” - Sudha

“I want to keep working in the organisation and desire to have certain government plans for housing facilities for the marginalised. I also desire to build a school for sex workers' children” – Manjula

“I want to help the children of sex workers to access the same education as other children, be healthy like other children and help change the perception of society towards sex workers” - Asha

Transgenders recognised as equal

“Though I am a transgender, my dream is to become an actress. But society sees us as an object of ridicule - I don't know why. We also have some talents - we have the talent to act, to dance to do everything. In fact, we have these talents in greater measure than men or women. God has given us all these talents. So transgenders like me want to be allowed to join the cinema sector” - Saraswati

“I also want the government to introduce schemes like old-age pension for the transgender who are having no source of employment” – Sita

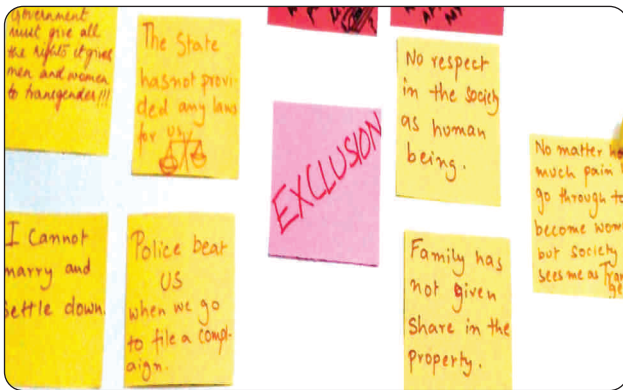
Voice for Change: The way forward

The issues, struggles, success and experiences shared in the sections above emerged through discussions and group processes. While these were facilitated in Tamil, a reproduction of one such discussion is presented in the images below, which summarises the above sections.

Discussions revealed that root causes of problems were attributed to existing patriarchal norms and stereotyping. This and other causes were as seen in the image below:



The group shared that they experience exclusion in different ways. This was split into two – exclusion experienced in general and in specific contexts. The images below detail these:



While these images simplistically summarise the forms stigma and discrimination faced by sex workers and sexual minorities, they also discussed ways and means to make their visions and aspirations a reality. What emerged in this regard are:

- Stigma and discrimination on the one hand lead to access barriers and at the same time to a loss of the individual's agency. Self-stigmatisation, which is a natural outcome of the latter, is a barrier to collectivisation and there is a need for creation of safe spaces to overcome this.
- Patriarchal norms define dignity, morality and in turn the social order. This also sets the high standards of “masculinity” and at the same time perpetuates the use of women and sexual minorities as sites for revenge politics.
- The concepts right and wrong, which patriarchal norms define, lead to stigma and discrimination based on people's identities as sex workers and sexual minorities but the bottom line is that as human beings, they deserve all their due rights and entitlements.

Owing to the nature of marginalisation, a community that is stigmatised cannot expect proactive support from the State or the society. Stigmatised communities only want recognition. They do not want special provisions – just an effort at facilitation so that they can live just like other citizens. They want to be allowed to organise themselves and to create safe spaces to share and discuss.

“Every person has the right to live. A woman who is a sex worker has the right to live as much as a rich and 'chaste' woman. In order to make that a reality every woman should come together and form collectives (that is power)”



Annex 1: Acknowledgements

Praxis acknowledges the valuable contributions of The Tamil Nadu AIDS Initiative (TAI) administered by Voluntary Health Services (VHS), V-CAN a state level network sex workers and sexual minorities in Tamil Nadu, participants of the Participatory Video process, Real Time, Institute for Development Studies, Participate, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and all the sex workers and sexual minorities who shared their experiences, to help produce this document. Participants from the following organisations shared their stories:

1	Anbukarangal Samuga Nala Sangam
2	Annai Theresa Makkal Sevai Mayam
3	Dharampuri Maavatta Pengal Mempattu Sangam
4	Dindugal Pengal Munettra Sangam
5	Erode Mavatta Pengal Suyasakthi Sangam
6	Gnana Deepam Sevai Maiyam
7	Jhansi Rani Pengal Nala Sangam
8	Social Welfare Development Society
9	Namakkal Maavatta Sabarmathi Pengal Mempattu Sangam
10	Salem Pengal Nalasangam
11	Salem Thirunangaigal Nala Sangam
12	Sri lakshmi Pengal Munettra Sangam
13	Sudaroli Pengal Munettra Sangam
14	Thenni Mavatta Pengal Samuga Porularatha Munettra Sangam
15	Vellore Pengal Mempattu Sangam
16	Vidivelli Thirunangaigal Nalavaazvu Sangam

In addition, the participants of the participatory video process include: Inba, Jeeva, Kaavya, Mohan, Nisha, Roja, Swathy and Thenmozhi.

The following members of the Praxis team contributed to compiling and producing this document: Anusha, Aruna, Deepti, Gayathri, Kavitha, Mary, Mohan, Moulasha, Paromita, Pradeep, Sahana, Shalini, Sowmyaa and Stanley.

The concepts shared by community members found creative expression through the artistic strokes of Shirshendu Ghosh

About Praxis

Praxis - Institute for Participatory Practices is a knowledge-based, not-for-profit development support organisation, registered in 1997 under the Indian Societies Registration Act of 1860. Since its humble beginnings, Praxis has emerged as an independent one-stop centre for undertaking action research, training and documentation dealing with multiple facets of participatory development. Our work vindicates the growing mandate across geographical boundaries that for development to be sustainable and equitable, there is an urgent need to ensure good governance practices and processes. Our strategic networking capability with like-minded people and organisations helps maximise our outreach and increases manifold the impact of our interventions.

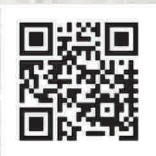
Our vision:

A world without poverty in which every person has the right to participate in decision-making processes, and to a life with dignity and choices.

Our Mission:

To strive for the democratisation of development processes and institutions to ensure that the voices of poor women, men, transgenders, girls and boys are heard and acted upon.

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