

IHRP Internship Report

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As part of the IHRP internship programme I worked with the Durbar Mahila Samanyaya Committee (DMSC), a sex workers' collective in Kolkata between May and August 2008. DMSC's main office is located in Nilmoni Mitra Street, in the north of Kolkata, adjacent to the well known Sonagachi red light district.

DMSC, a collective of 60,000 sex workers living across West Bengal and its suburbs began as a public health initiative of the All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health (AIIHP) of the government of West Bengal in 1992 to control the spread of HIV/ AIDS and STDs. This initiative was popularly known as the Sonagachi Project because of its location. An innovative and successful feature of this project was its peer educator programme which recruited sex workers from the brothels in the area and trained them with information on HIV/ AIDS, STDs and condoms and then sent them as peer educators to the homes of other sex workers to spread awareness. The interactions between the peers led to a building of solidarity among them and their eventual formal collectivization into a full fledged people's movement over the years with the political objective of fighting for recognition of sex work as work through the repeal of the Immoral Traffic Prevention Act (ITPA), the law on trafficking in India which is done through various programmes and projects run at DMSC.

As an intern I have been involved in two programs run by DMSC – one, the Self Regulatory Board (SRB) which is a non-governmental mechanism to combat trafficking in women and children and Amra Padatik (AP) a program run by the children of sex workers who are members of DMSC. The SRB at the state level is a committee of sex workers, officials from the labor department, the medical association, the health and family welfare department, lawyers, members of the women's commission and so on. At the local level there are 31 SRBs also consisting of sex workers, government officials and social workers. The SRBs appoint sex workers to conduct uninformed visits into the brothels every evening to keep track of cases of trafficking. If such an incident happens the woman/ girl is rescued and produced in front of the board and decision is taken about her restoration. In the first two months of my internship I have conducted structured legal trainings for the sex workers who do rescue work for the SRBs. The trainings included basic information on national and international laws on trafficking, domestic violence and the rights of an arrestee.

The contents of the training was decided after a brief meeting with the sex workers where they told me about the kinds of problems they faced while conducting rescue operations as well as in their daily lives. Sex workers, their children and other family members are harassed by the police and local goons on a daily basis. Children of sex workers have even been arrested from school on the pretext of living on the expenses of a sex worker under a provision in the ITPA which criminalizes anyone living on the incomes of a sex

worker if he or she is an adult. The rights of an arrestee thus seemed to be the most useful component of the training not only for the adults but also for the children of AP.

AP is a collective of about 1000 children of sex workers from Kolkata and its suburbs. A majority of the members of AP are minors and only some of them are above the age of 18 years. AP was started under the aegis of DMSC in 2005 with the realization that no civil society interventions create enabling conditions for children of sex workers to enjoy all guarantees of child rights, as well as be able to positively respect their mothers' livelihood choices to be able to live with dignity. AP's objective is to strengthen the collective by bringing in more and more such children into their fold and to empower them to become self supportive as well as a support base for others to be able to fight stigma and discrimination.

My engagement with AP has been a fascinating and enriching experience for me unlike any other. The resilience and determination with which the group carries out its work is exemplary. This collective of young activists have their own president and secretary elected through secret ballot and whose task is to monitor the overall functioning of the group. The members of AP organize monthly discussion sessions and workshops with children of sex workers where they speak about the kinds of problems faced by them and also come up with solutions for such problems. During my internship, every such meeting by AP was followed by a workshop that I conducted for them. I attended the previous days meeting before every workshop so that I could include topics that were relevant to their lives and would also be useful.

It came out during the discussions that a lot of these children witness domestic violence, violence in the hands of the police and goons. Since the police are themselves involved in such atrocities lodging police complaints become impossible and the cycle of violence continues unabated. Regular raids are carried out in these brothels and these children who live with their mothers are picked up and sent to shelter homes only to be brought back after a few days when their mothers have paid heavy bribes to the officials. Some of the children complained of sexual harassment by the officials in the shelter homes as well as the police.

Keeping all this in mind, the content of my workshops were on child rights, rights of an arrestee, domestic violence and laws on sexual assault. The methodology used to conduct these workshops were interactive discussion sessions, activities, games and exercises. In the end, the children were asked to list all child rights guarantees on sheets of paper that could be put up in their club houses and can be used for reference whenever needed. The children also drew up a declaration of rights for themselves which can be used for doing child rights work as well as reference material for research purposes.

I devoted the last week of my internship to train three staff members of DMSC's legal cell to conduct follow up workshops with the members of AP as well as the sex workers to ensure that all those who have attended my workshops are able to use the information on rights to inform their peers through informal interactions and discussions. I have also prepared a module for conducting legal awareness trainings for sex workers and child rights workshops with children of sex workers.