



Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee - A collectivization of 65000 Sex workers

The Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee & Movement of Sex Workers in Kolkata, India

When did your movement begin? And what was the “spark” that ignited the movement?



- An HIV/AIDS research and intervention program was launched in 1992 in the Sonagachi area of Kolkata city in India (the country’s largest red light area) that inducted sex workers as “peer educators” and “outreach workers”. However, sex workers were unable to access the services and act on the information they received due to police raids, extortion by the local goons, the biases of the researchers and health care providers.
- The peer educators realized that a different approach was needed – one that empowered sex workers at the individual and community level to go beyond health issues and organize themselves as a strong and vocal group.
- This process emerged, in 1995, with the formation of the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee. Durbar is a Bengali word that means unbeatable or unstoppable. It is pronounced as [doo - r - bar].
- DMSC began organizing sex workers throughout the city of Kolkata – raising awareness of their rights, building their individual and collective self-esteem, challenging the “fallen women” image and the “moral-immoral” binary, and confronting the exploitation and social discrimination they faced as sex workers.
- Thus was a movement born that has built the collective power of sex workers to improve the quality of their lives, ensure clients comply with safe sex practices, and enhanced the long-term economic security of its members.

What injustices / issues does your movement focus on?



- Changing the negative self-image and building the individual and collective power of sex workers who are among the most economically and socially marginalized people in society
- The biased social norms and formal policies and practices that stigmatize and exclude sex workers and deny them their rights
- Widespread social stigma against sex work and sex workers and the mainstream discourse of “rescue and rehabilitation” that treats sex workers as victims, not agents
- Lack of recognition of sex work as work, and therefore sex workers’ rights as workers’ rights
- Economic insecurity and the “debt trap” that makes sex workers economically vulnerable - creation of their own credit cooperative to meet their savings and credit needs.
- Lack of access to basic services (including health care, education for children, civic services, etc.)
- Trafficking of minor girls and coercion of unwilling women into the sex trade

What are the key demands or rights being claimed by your movement?
Who are you making these demands to?



- Durbar seeks to build a world where all marginalized communities live in an environment of respect, rights and dignity. Durbar hopes for a new social order where there is no discrimination by class, caste, gender or occupation and all individuals communities live in peace and harmony as global citizens.
- Specifically, Durbar demands recognition of sex work as work and, of sex workers as workers.
- These demands are made to state and central government, civil society, women's groups, and society at large – to shift public attitudes towards sex work

How is your movement organized? Who are your members / participants?



- Durbar represents 65 000 sex-workers (Male, Female & Transgender) and is active in identifying and challenging the underlying socio-structural factors that help perpetuate stigma material deprivation and social exclusion of sex-workers.
- Durbar involves sex worker community in all decision-making process be it connected to Health or other development program. Durbar is active in forging broader alliances to promote health and with special reference to HIV intervention program which includes prevention, care and support.
- The creation of “Self Regulatory Boards” in each red light area,
- More information needed about the structure of the movement

What are the key ideas and concepts used by / in your movement? And how do you define them?



- Durbar since its inception articulated three interconnected principles which are known as 3R i.e., Respect, Reliance and Recognition.
 1. Respect and dignity for sex work and sex workers
 2. Reliance on the knowledge and wisdom of the community of sex workers.
 3. Recognition of sex work as an occupation and preserving and protecting their occupational and human rights.

- Durbar's shared mission is to enhance a process of social and political change with an objective to establish, promote and strengthen the rights, dignity, social status, and improvement of the quality of life of all sex worker communities. Durbar wishes to integrate the sex workers movement with the broader global movement to establish rights of all marginalized communities in the globe through.
 1. Improvement in the image and self-esteem of marginalized communities
 2. Influencing existing norms, policies and practices, operating at all levels in the society and out the nation state.
 3. Empowering communities through a process of collectivisation and capacity building
 4. Addressing power relations within the trade and outside
 5. Building Formal and informal alliances with individuals, groups, institutions and movements.

Where is your movement active?



- Kolkata City in India
- National sex workers initiatives and alliances – e.g., the All India Network of Sex Workers, and the Network of Sex Work Projects, India
- International sex workers initiatives and alliances
- Levels
 - Local – DMSC works in all red light districts of the city of Kolkata
 - Nationally, DMSC is one of the founders of the National Sex Workers
 - DMSC is also active and plays a leadership role in the struggles of unorganized sector women workers in its own province of West Bengal, and in India as a whole
 - Transnational / Globally: DMSC is one of the original founders of the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers, whose founder members include Empower Thailand, Sweetly Japan, Pink Triangle Malaysia, and the Scarlet Alliance Australia

What are some of your key achievements and gains as a movement?



- A large movement of 65,000 ++ organized sex workers that has effectively reduced violence and discrimination against sex workers and improved their overall health, wellbeing, citizenship rights, and empowerment.
- Creating a space for sex workers from other gender identities (e.g. transwomen) and non-heterosexual orientation
- Creating a cooperative society and credit cooperative to meet the economic needs and long-term security of sex workers
- Creating a strong and effective movement against the trafficking of minor girls and unwilling adult women
- Creating strong national and international alliances of sex workers that speak for, not on behalf of, sex workers
- Challenging negative legislation and social attitudes that violate the rights of sex workers, and making strides towards the decriminalization of sex work
- Creating strong associations of children and partners of sex workers
- Claiming our rights as workers and citizens, and joining hands with others similarly excluded

What would make your movement stronger?

- Building strong alliances with the unorganized labour sector would position sex workers' movement as part of broader Labor movement in India specifically
- Strong national level advocacy & lobbying would enhance changes in the existing act (ITPA) which indirectly criminalises sex work/sex work environment.
- Collaborative effort to encourage National & State level research & on continuing discourse on sex, sexuality, sexual minorities across all sections of the society would create an supportive environment.
- Integrating sex workers movement with other State & National level coalitions fighting against sexual violence, gender based violence etc
- To create a strong support base through active engagement with the media and academia would facilitate to fulfill the objective to challenge the stereotype image of sex workers projected in our society.



How does your movement define solidarity? What would greater support and solidarity look like for your movement?

- Standing by the side of sex workers movement means accepting sex work as work without which fight for sex workers rights movement is meaningless
- Expression of solidarity calls for acceptance of the agency of sex workers & their collectives as well as leadership of the sex workers community
- Distinguishing trafficking & sex work would increase support base from within the society for sex workers right movement
- Moral & negative judgmental stand towards sex and sex workers has to be addressed through challenging the mindset of policy makers & their constituencies

How does your movement define solidarity? What would greater support and solidarity look like for your movement?

- Solidarity should be based on the acceptance of the rights to sex work and rights of sex workers which are inseparable[, eg Right to self determination & basic human rights of sex workers]
- To strengthen solidarity one needs to comprehend his or her rights in choosing and seeking pleasure as one of the basic human issue albeit human rights agenda too
- Accepting women, men or transgender sex workers as an average human being and not stereotyped as an 'unique' or special category of people
- Mainstreaming sex workers agenda in all other ongoing human and labor Rights movement in the country and abroad would certainly help in building support & solidarity towards sex worker

Where could people learn more about your movement?



- Reports & documentation: [Durbar's own publications]
 1. A Continuing Battle to Regain Dignity - Profiling an Inspiring Journey to Regain Rights & Dignity of a Sex Workers' Collective
 2. Community Led Anti Trafficking and Child Protection Program
 3. DMSC Annual Reports
- Websites / social media:
 1. www.durbar.org
 2. www.durbarblog.org
 3. <https://www.facebook.com/Durbar-Mahila-Samanwaya-Committee-153667147990062/>