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CROSSING BOUNDARIES

Bangladeshi sex workers in Calcutta

It is not strange that Munni and Panna seek solace and legitimacy in an identity which is neither here nor there. Nor is it irrational for them to belong *here* while retaining ties of belonging *there*. This dualism stretches across borders between Bangladesh and India, embedded in a world of concealment and exposure where the legal brushes the illegal.

Malini Sur

Munni and Panna are not uncommon names in Sonagachi and Kalighat – Calcutta's brothel areas. Sometimes Munni and Panna take on different, Hindu names. Either way, it's difficult to ascertain whether Munni and Panna are internal migrants from West Bengal or cross-border Bangladeshi migrants. If the latter, they remain unidentified by the Indian state by assimilating within the larger population of sex workers in Calcutta. They presently live in ghettos – a marked departure from their previous mobility. Their entry across an international border into brothels escapes the gaze of the state, which supposedly monitors and controls both movement and prostitution. Though these women are able to mask their nationality and indeed do so, like all migrants they retain ties of belonging with the 'home' left behind. Their trans-nationality poses new questions for understanding women's migration and re-settlement and exposes contradictions within NGO discourses on anti-trafficking measures vis-à-vis commercial sex work.

From sex slaves to sex workers

Munni and Panna (fictitious names) are often represented as 'victims' of sex trafficking – words hurled at international policy forums to convey the deepest form of exploitation. They dwell as alarmist statistics, laced with global concerns on criminal practises that seemingly accompany migrating women.[1] Individual experiences surface in sensitively documented NGO interventions.[2] Typically, women are enticed with false promises of domesticity or better work prospects in a big city. Instead, they change hands several times across the border and beyond, experiencing humiliation and torture before landing in a Calcutta brothel. Upon arrival, they compete for space and clients amongst a multi-ethnic and sometimes underage group. Their first years are spent in bondage with brothel keepers who take the lion's share of their earnings; later they work independently. They negotiate daily with pimps and police and in more recent years with HIV/AIDS interventionists – mainly public health officials and social workers. Pimps, police, social workers and politicians seek them out as stakeholders and trump cards to generate revenue, claim health targets and distribute voter cards.

The demand for the legal recognition of sex work has since 1995 been spearheaded by the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, a platform for sex workers who want prostitution recognised as an occupation, to free it from its underpaid, highly exploitative status. The Durbar and other NGOs' attempts to unionise and confederate the women have improved Munni and Panna's position.[3] The geographic, cultural and linguistic proximity between Bangladesh and West Bengal helps Munni and Panna to pass as natives of either; they can thus conceal their cross-border identities and march ahead undaunted by their status as illegal migrants. With a banner in one hand and a charter of demands in the other, they do not shun public scrutiny but join the voices demanding workers' rights, addressing media and political forums and seeking a better world for their children, most of whom are enrolled in government and NGO-run city schools. They revel in an almost festival-like celebration of their new identity: erecting stalls at public exhibitions, selling placards on safe sex and displaying their culinary skills.

Like others in the brothel areas of Calcutta, they no longer inhabit the world of the forbidden, hidden from public consciousness. By claiming a larger space through much publicised events in and around the city, Munni and Panna cling to the affirmation of NGO support that accords them entitlement to certain rights. NGO interventions have transformed the 'victim' of human trafficking from a disempowered woman shrouded from public view into a 'sex worker' who transgresses social boundaries in order to attain a legitimate place in society.

To home and back

However, Munni and Panna are not just subjects of intervention within brothels. While their physical presence might be used to demand progressive workers' rights legislation, their migration to these ghettos is also a target of NGO intervention to prevent sexual bondage. While some NGOs advocate forging alliances with trade unions, such as the Benodini Trade Union, others (such as Sanlaap) shun forums that demand workers' rights, arguing that it is more crucial to prevent sexual trafficking, especially child prostitution. The public representation of these women reflect NGO ideologies that steer advocacy and intervention.

Typically, when women are identified as Bangladeshi victims of sexual trafficking, they are placed within safe shelters and subsequently sent back to Bangladesh. This transfer back 'home' is seen as the best possible solution to end their trauma, aided by legal guidance, NGO vigilance and diplomatic good will. However, not all of them want to return, and even if they do, they might not find their way 'home'; some spend months or years in similar safe shelters in Bangladesh. Rashida (not her real name), whom I met in Khulna, Bangladesh, in May 2004, was sheltered by a rural NGO. The custodian of a small savings group scheme in her village, she was seduced by her lover to hand over collective funds and travel with him to India. Upon her repatriation to Bangladesh after months of sexual assault and torture, she still waits for her family, her lover and now hostile villagers to accept her.

Munni and Panna are not resigned to a life in Calcutta. Only in moments of trust do they reveal their nationality. Occasionally, they divulge that they travel to Rajshahi in Bangladesh, and not to Bongaon in West Bengal, for *Eid*, sexually bribing the border patrol to claim a 'home' left behind. Their life experiences are not rooted but rather in constant movement back and forth – a state of being that is not always understood by their world of familiar faces in Calcutta. <

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[a d v e r t i s e m e n t]

Notes

1. Internationally, an expansive definition of trafficking includes forms of exploitation other than sexual in the 'Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children' supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime (15 November 2000. UN Assembly Resolution 55/25. http://www.ohchr.org/english/law/protocoltraffic.htm). In contrast, the 2002 SAARC Convention on Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution defines trafficking narrowly, disregarding women's mobility for work (http://www.saarc-sec.org/publication/conv-traffiking.pdf). See also: Kapur, Ratna. Spring 2005. 'Travel Plans: Border Crossings and the Rights of Transnational Migrants'. *Harvard Human Rights Law Journal* 18.
2. I am grateful to Anindita Chakraborty of Sanlaap (Hub) for sharing case studies with me. I benefited enormously from my conversations with Deep Purakayastha (Praajak, West Bengal), Paromita Bannerjee (Diksha, Calcutta) and Kanika Kaul (Lawyers Collective, New Delhi). The conjectures here are my own.
3. See Women's Interlink Foundation and Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee Report of the First National Conference of Sex Workers organised by Durbaar Mahila Samanwaya Committee 14-16 November 1997. Yuba Bharati Krirangan, Calcutta.