

Devadasi assert rights to violence-free life

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A young girl, Adiya, walks alongside a paddy plantation in her village, the overhead sun beating down. Flanked by her family members, as they approach the temple, the priest steps out from the shade. He is waiting for her.

What follows is a ceremony of initiation: as a string is tied around Adiya's neck with red and white beads, a recitation is chanted. And as the chanting comes to an abrupt close, so does Adiya's childhood.

Female children across India have been ritually devoted to temples for many centuries as a symbolic 'marriage' of the girl to the temple's deity. Very often from Scheduled Caste communities (a government classification of lower castes), the girl is no longer permitted to marry a mortal and her entire life is now bestowed to the service of the goddess, Yellama. In Northern Karnataka, the practice is known as devadasi dedication (in Sanskrit: a female servant of God) and, whilst outlawed by the state in 1988, the tradition is still upheld in certain pockets of the region among poorer communities.

After the ceremony takes place in the temple, Adiya returns home with her family. But as soon as she reaches puberty, the second pattam (night of the girl virgin) takes place. She is sent to an important man of standing in the community with whom she undergoes her sexual initiation. Now that Adiya has been through these steps, she is ready: her life as a sex worker will begin.

Life of a Female Sex Worker

At a meeting with KHPT, I learnt that amongst the female sex workers of northern Karnataka, around 85% enter the trade through the devadasi tradition. It was not easy to hear that for girls like Adiya, there is no route out; no chance to pursue an education, nor to marry. They are trapped in this life.

I learnt that over time, many of the sex workers form a close bond with one of their clients, who then become known as their Intimate Partner. Financial transactions cease and their relationship can grow to the extent that he procures special gifts or even buys her somewhere to live. But their relationship is complex. In the vast majority of cases, this man is



married and managing two or more relationships and children with different women.

Sex workers like Adiya have no legal status or rights in these relationships, despite virtually playing the role of a wife. But perhaps because of the imprecise nature of this relationship,

domestic violence slips under the radar and intimate partner violence, also associated with increased HIV risk, is all too too commonplace.

But why, I wondered, was there violence at all, especially when the relationship is supposedly founded on love?

The answer to this is sanctioned by deeply rooted socio-economic factors and harmful, patriarchal gender norms. Core to this are the expectations placed on Adiya and women like her by their intimate partners and, more complicatedly, vice versa. For example, Adiya should care for him well, remain modest and faithful and cease all of her sex work. If she commits a perceived 'mistake,' such as requesting more financial support, insisting upon condom use, raising the subject of marriage or not caring for him in the way he wishes, he views this as justification to beat her. So deep-rooted are the norms of masculinity that it is often felt that they are not true men unless they beat their partners or verbally abuse them.

In return, Adiya expects her intimate partner to take financial and social responsibility for her and her family and to play an active role in her life. At the same time, for many women like Adiya, so low is their self-esteem and sense of security, they believe that they need to be beaten because it means they are in a quasi-stable relationship which is preferable to not having an intimate partner at all. But the gap between such expectations is nebulous. A sex worker is rarely provided with enough money by her intimate partner to support herself and her family, so she is forced to visit clients for paid work. Such ill-defined expectations can, and often do, spill over into distrust and violence.

As for the wider community, partner violence is traditionally regarded as a domestic issue and people are not willing to get involved, a dangerous, silent sanctioning of the status-quo.

Condom Use

The insistence of condom use amongst Adiya and other sex workers is vital to prevent the spread of HIV and sexually transmitted infections. But intimate partners feel they are entitled to condom-free sex in these intimate relationships as they already provide so much. They also view such requests as a sign of continued sex-work and infidelity, resulting in anger and perpetuating the cycle of violence.

If Adiya keeps insisting, her intimate partner threatens to leave her when she has come to depend on him both financially and emotionally. Being a sex worker with one special partner elevates her above other prostitutes. She cannot marry but finally, here is an almost-husband who gives her some kind of support and status, no matter how tenuous. For Adiya and many sex workers, the thought of losing this partner is too terrifying to contemplate. And hard as it is for those of us who have never experienced abuse to understand, the prospect of violence is preferable.

The Work of KHPT

How to change this status quo? How to alter the attitude of Intimate Partners to treat their partners with the respect they deserve and acknowledge the importance of condom use? Simultaneously, how to empower the women themselves to insist upon condom use and to resist violence?

I was happy to hear that in the past, KHPT has successfully reduced violence against sex workers by clients, police and gangs. Yet what persistently remains is violence against the women by their intimate partners. KHPT's Samvedana Plus programme works with 800 sex workers like Adiya and their intimate partners across Northern Karnataka with the dual objectives of reducing violence and increasing condom use amongst these intimate partnerships in order to reduce their vulnerability to HIV.

KHPT runs workshops and counselling sessions on the individual, couple and societal level with the ultimate goal of upholding the right of the women to lead violence-free lives. Mobilised sex workers feel empowered and far bolder than previously to negotiate condom use and stand up to violence, this collective agency helping them to

question the acceptability of beating as a usual form of discipline. These workshops build upon skills to improve communication in relationships, question norms and, significantly, to identify support mechanisms, identify solutions and take positive action. As a result of such programmes, sex workers are more aware of protective laws and their rights and know how to access care and support. As for the intimate partners themselves, there is still a long way to go and it is a path strewn with complications and pitfalls. Behavioural changes and trust-building takes time and a huge amount of skepticism existed in the early days when KHPT male outreach workers began to approach the intimate partner's. This being said, ground is being covered and KHPT recognises the need to build upon this to engage more male role models amongst intimate partners.

A number of intimate partners have attended workshops and are beginning to embrace greater equality in their relationships and separate notions of masculinity and dominance. The intimate partners I spoke to in Bagalkot said that physical violence had reduced and they are trying to influence others and cut down on bad habits, such as drinking.

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As far as the wider community is concerned, awareness is being raised around domestic violence and women's rights. Plays and folk shows have even taken to the streets across villages with prominent men from the community speaking out against intimate partner violence. As such, long-held gender norms and expectations can be challenged so that important conversations around violence against women are initiated.

Malali Village

Speaking to a group of sex workers in the village of Malali, the majority of whom had started their work well before the age of eighteen and had never attended school, the strength and sentiment of their desires was overwhelming. Speaking of her children, Adiya epitomized the aspirations of the group: 'I want them to have their own options,' she said as the other women nodded their agreement. 'I have to work as much as I can now so my children don't have this life.' She said it with no bitterness, just honesty.



An Intimate Partner attending a workshop at Bagalkot

As I was waved goodbye by Adiya and these resilient women, who have suffered untold exploitation over the course of their lives, I reflected on how there was little or no recourse for them. The image of them being initiated into life as a devadasi will haunt me for a long time to come. But for these women, by knowing their rights as sex workers and becoming empowered

through recognising and using the network of support offered through KHPT, community based organisations and government agencies, at the very least they can strive for a better future for their children and future generations.

(Adiya's name has been changed).

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