

“Sex is Not Work and Our Bodies Are Not for Sale”

Speech from the 4th World Forum on Human Rights

By Ruchira Gupta

This speech was given by Ruchira Gupta on July 1, 2010 at the 4th World Forum on Human Rights in Nantes, France. Ruchira Gupta is the Founder and President of Apne Aap Women Worldwide, a grassroots organization she founded in 2002, which works on the issue of human trafficking and women's rights. Gupta has worked for 25 years for the rights of women and girls, especially for the abolition of prostitution and sex trafficking. Today Apne Aap impacts the lives and livelihoods of thousands of women and children. Take part and support the efforts of Apne Aap. Contact: Apne Aap International, 250 West 57th St., Suite 1527, New York, NY 10107, 646-233-3064 or D-56, Third Floor, Anand Niketan, New Delhi-110021, India, Ph: +91 11 24110056/ 46015940, email: contact@apneaap.org, www.apneaap.org.

Namaste. I bring greetings from the ten thousand and seventy two girls and women who are members of my organization, Apne Aap in India. Many of them are victims and survivors of prostitution. I bring a message from them to the conference as we debate the strengthening of the right to work at a time of economic crisis.

The women of Apne Aap appeal to all human rights activists **not** to accept their exploitation as work. They appeal to us to reject the normalization of their sexual exploitation by those who say it is a choice. They say their prostitution and sex-trafficking is not a choice but absence of choice. They did not choose to be born poor, low caste or female. Apne Aap members have decided to use the term ‘women in prostitution’ for adults and the term ‘prostituted child’ instead of ‘child prostitutes or child sex-worker’ for girls and boys.

Apne Aap members feel that:

1. The term sex-worker sterilizes the inherently exploitative nature of prostitution and invalidates the women’s traumatic experiences of subjugation, degradation and pain.
2. The term sex-worker naturalizes and makes acceptable in society the exploitation of women or children.
3. The term sex-worker makes it convenient for different states and governments to ignore the structural social, economic and political policies that force women into prostitution.
4. Very often governments, policy makers and buyers of prostituted sex argue that women chose prostitution as a work option over working in sweatshops, domestic servitude or other forms of hard or cheap labour. They forget, or choose to make invisible, that for women, other options have been limited in terms of highly paid employment (especially when higher education is lacking or husbands/fathers decide or have control over a woman’s time), and prostitution and pornography remain among the more highly paid occupations available to women. They refuse to look at or re-examine the fact that economic and social policies make other lucrative employment unavailable to women and that gender discrimination and occupational segregation funnel women into particular occupations.
5. The term sex-worker categorizes prostitution as a kind of work. They say that prostitution cannot be categorized as work (even exploitative work in sweatshops or domestic servitude) as it disconnects the self from the activity. It always involves penetration of the body or body invasion. To cope with the experience, many Apne Aap members detach themselves emotionally from their bodies — effectively segmenting themselves, or entering into out of body experiences. So besides risking disease or death they suffer from the deep psychological trauma of alienation from their own bodies.

While labour movements can and do guarantee certain minimum conditions and standards for workers, providing for energy and time needed for the worker to be a fulfilled human being, prostitution inherently cannot do so. I will mention four points here:

- a. All labour movements strive for **minimum wages**. In prostitution there is no guarantee of minimum wages, as the price of a woman comes down with age and time of night, and sometimes location. Moreover, in brothel-based sex there is no such thing as minimum wages. For the first five years, the brothel owner owns the woman or child and keeps her like a bonded slave. For the next five years, she may give half of what she earns, later she is allowed to keep all that she earns but her earning capacity comes down.
- b. All labour movements aspire to certain **minimum working conditions**. In prostitution, all women face violence that cannot be legislated away as they are ultimately alone with the buyer of prostituted sex. In an upscale legal brothel in Australia, for example, rooms are equipped with panic buttons, but a bouncer reports that the women's calls for help can never be answered quickly enough to prevent violence by johns, which occurs regularly. In both brothel-based and non-brothel based prostitution, women are forced to speed up the process of earning more money by servicing an increasing number of buyers, sometimes up to 20. They are also forced to provide all kinds of services and high risk activities like sex without a condom as most often they are not in any negotiating position. They are kept locked up in brothels, have no

access to medical care or education and often are sold when they are children. Their children play on the floor while they service their buyers. They live in small rooms with barred windows, end up with insomnia, repeated abortions, jaundice TB, cigarette burns, HIV, AIDS and trauma. And while some of these conditions can be regulated in brothel-based sex, they cannot be regulated in street-based sex at all. Mortality rates in prostitution are high due to sexual violence, sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV and AIDS and repeated abortions and suicide attempts related to psycho-social trauma. The average age of death of a woman in prostitution in India is now 35 years.

In Kolkata, I talked with a group of women who had asked for the unionization of prostitution to guarantee workers rights. All the members I interviewed admitted to facing violence when they are alone with the client. “The bed was covered with blood.” “He stubbed cigarette butts out on my breasts.” “They paid for it, we cannot stop it.” A doctor working for this group told me that he left after having to stitch up the vagina of a fifteen-year-old Nepali girl for the third time.

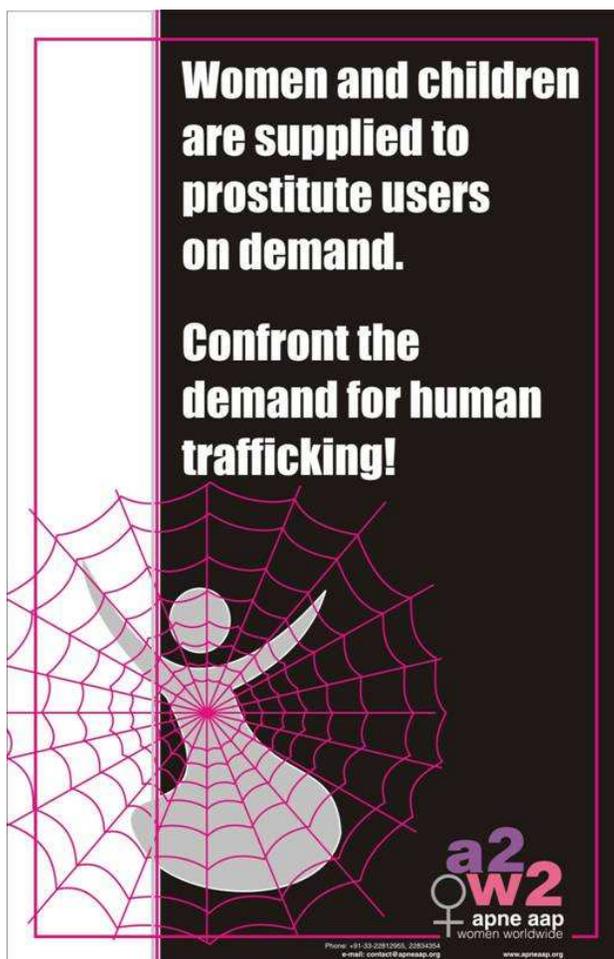
- c. All labour movements work to guarantee **retirement benefits** such as old age pension. Prostitution cannot guarantee old age benefits as there is no defined employer in street based sex and in brothel based sex, the women or child is often sold again and again from one brothel owner to another. The older a women in prostitution gets, the less she is able to earn an income and very often ends up on the streets, with no income, a disease ridden body and a few children. In Germany and in an area near Las Vegas in the US where prostitution has been legalized, government agencies tried to make applicants for unemployment benefits show that they had attempted to find “work” in the so-called “hospitality industry” of prostitution in order to become eligible for such benefits.
- d. Finally and most importantly for labour movements is

the question of dignity of the worker. Labour movements have insured that miners do not have to crawl into mines anymore but walk upright. However, in prostitution the woman or child is constantly humiliated physically, emotionally and psychologically. Her price is constantly negotiated as the night wears on or as she grows older. She is forced to sexualize her body for a time — period and then desexualize it again at another time.

The term ‘sex-worker’ gives a false impression of agency and choice exercised by women and children in prostitution. Apne Aap members’ life-experiences reveal that the choice and agency in prostitution, talked about in some policy circles, is a choice allowed by the exploiter in an exploitative situation as in the days of slavery. We can examine the exercise of choice in the life-cycle of a woman in prostitution over a period of 20 years from when she is 15 to when she is 35. This is a hopeful projection, as most Apne Aap members say that the normal time-span that

the body of a woman can cope with prostitution is no more than ten years.

- **The first five years (15-20):** In this period, girls kidnapped, stolen, tricked, sold and lured are locked up in small rooms with barred windows only brought out by the brothel madam to serve up to 15-20 buyers of prostituted sex every night. They are served one meal a day, given some clothes and toiletries, but they are not given any of the money that the buyer pays for them. They are in slave-like conditions and have no choice. In every conversation with them, they talk about wanting to go home.
- **The second five years (20-25):** There is a period of socialization within the brothels and the women are taught to become dependent on drugs and alcohol. Brothel madams also make sure that they have one or two children so that the women cannot think about returning home anymore. In this period, the women are allowed by the brothel madam to keep half of what they earn. Memories of home become hazy due to repeated violence and psychosocial trauma and they begin to



suffer from the Stockholm Syndrome, where the small mercies meted out by the kidnapper seem of great moment. With children, suffering from depression and diseases, they do not see a way out. At this time, when asked the women say they want to stay in the brothels and not go back home.

- **The third five years (25-30):** After ten years of physical abuse, malnutrition and drug and alcohol dependency, the earning capacity of the women comes down. Buyers of prostituted sex look for younger girls. They are allowed to keep all of their earnings but earnings go down and the needs of their children go up. At this time, they want to leave prostitution, but don't have the life-skills or the physical health to do so. They have no choice.
- **The fourth five years (30-35):** In this period, the women have no buyers of prostituted sex, no income; have two or three children and disease ridden bodies. They are thrown out of the brothels and end up on the sidewalk. They cannot afford even one meal or even access to a toilet. They have no options and are forced to die on the streets. In a period of 20 years, women talk about wanting to exercise a choice to stay in prostitution for about five years. And even this exercise of choice or agency is in a situation where the women feel they have no other options and try to make the best of what there is.

Therefore, Apne Aap members don't use the term sex-worker. They are in the middle of a heroic struggle with our government and some international foundations to change the Indian anti-trafficking law to punish those who exploit them and to remove all clauses in the law which punish victims on charges of solicitation.

In running this campaign, Apne Aap Women Worldwide has come up against some entrenched interests. Ironically, this opposition has included many HIV/AIDS management projects funded by international foundations that work in red-light areas and hire pimps and brothel managers as "peer educators" to gain easy access to the brothels for the purpose of condom distribution. They turn a blind eye to the little girls and adult women kept in a system of bondage and control, who cannot say no to unwanted sex let alone unprotected sex. They are more interested in protecting male buyers of prostituted sex from disease rather than protecting women and girls from the buyers. These are the same solutions that colonialist powers used to control syphilis in the 18th and 19th centu-

ries.

The new challenges thrown up by the economic crisis at a time of rising neo-liberalism is that we are being asked to accept once again the legitimacy of exploitation as work. We are told that if we choose to be exploited then we are not exploited. We are never told that a choice

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must at least have two options. We are then asked to notice and feel empowered by finding "agency" within exploitation. We are told that prostitution is inevitable and we must accept it and negotiate to mitigate its circumstances.

When a problem is very big and profits

a powerful group, there is a time-honored temptation to sweep it under the rug by assuming it is inevitable. This was true of slavery until the abolitionist movement of the 19th century, and of colonialism until the contagion of independence movements in the 20th century.

Now these same forces are at work in attitudes toward the global and national realities of sex slavery. The biggest normalizer of profiteering from the rental, sale and invasion of human bodies is the idea that it is too big to fight, that it has always existed, and that it can be swept under the rug by legalizing and just accepting it. Those who profit — in this case, the global network of sex traffickers, sex tourism operators and brothel owners — are the major force behind the argument to legalize and increase profits that already rival those from the global arms and drug trade. As with the slavery and colonialism of the past, this argument has force with those in power who are so distant from the reality that they don't know the consequences as well as those who profit from it themselves, whether economically, politically, or as men addicted to dominance.

What will diminish and end this injustice? *Exposing its reality*: the lack of alternatives for those who are prostituted; the addiction and inability to empathize among those who create the demand and the uniformly disastrous results wherever the selling or renting of human beings for sexual purposes has been legalized and normalized.

Thank you.

