

The dominant paradigm of development is focused on the expansion of economic growth, which, according to a top-down approach would allow resources to trickle down to the poor, thereby improving their social status. Social interventions made with this idea in mind simply focus on improving the efficiency of processes that increase economic growth. However, this dominant ideology has failed to ensure the welfare of the marginalised and instead has ended up reproducing unequal social systems. True social change involves a transformation in the social structure, which can only emerge if there is a change in the development discourse and mindset. This involves the capacity to question accepted norms and imagine a new kind of world, as suggested by the slogan of the World Social Forum. This article discusses two social interventions, which, in my opinion, have been able to imagine and bring into being a more socially just atmosphere, within their areas of influence.

The first intervention discussed in this article is being carried out by Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC), a forum of sex workers in West Bengal, headquartered at Kolkata. Durbar supports the rights of sex workers and carries out anti-trafficking movements. The overall aim is to ensure that women are not deprived of their agency. The essay “Streetwalkers Show the Way”: Reframing the Debate on Trafficking from Sex Workers’ Perspective” (Bandyopadhyay et al. 2004) discusses these interventions.

Durbar’s approach makes a clear distinction between sex trafficking and sex work. It defines trafficking as “the outcome of a process where people are recruited and moved within or across national borders without informed consent, coerced into a ‘job’ against their will and as a result lose control over their lives” (Bandyopadhyay et al. 2004: 108). Sex work, in contrast, is seen as a service which is given in return for payment and involves the consent of both partners, who are adults. The crucial distinction is that of control and agency of the persons performing the sexual act.

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<sup>1</sup> Rhea Kaikobad is currently a second year student of the MA in Development Programme at Azim Premji University, Bangalore. Her major interests are in the fields of gender and mental health. Email: rhea.kaikobad17\_mad@apu.edu.in

Durbar`s anti-trafficking initiative consists of the establishment and functioning of self-regulatory boards in red light areas in various districts of West Bengal. Such boards, composed of six sex workers and four non-sex workers, establish networks through which they track whether individuals are being trafficked into brothels. In the case of trafficked adults, the board provides counselling services and gives them the space to make a choice on whether they want to come out of sex work or not. In case of children, the board organises rehabilitation services for them and makes sure that they are not stigmatised.

Durbar supports sex workers and affirms voluntary sex work as a legitimate profession by providing them with services that they might not get due to social stigma. Such services include: providing ration cards, helping them to access government schemes and improving sanitation facilities in red-light areas. The self-regulatory boards also keep a check on violence inflicted upon sex workers.

Durbar`s work displays the capacity to imagine a new social structure in which the agency of women is respected. It aims to create a world in which the patriarchal norms that enslave women do not exist. The distinction between trafficking and sex work that it makes is very important in this regard. Durbar`s opposition to trafficking shows that it seeks to prevent women from being forcibly exploited. At the same time, its recognition of the fact that sex work should be seen as an expression of a woman`s agency and should be respected shows that it does not subscribe to the patriarchal norm that a woman engaging in sexual activity for money is either helpless or morally wrong. It acknowledges that rescue and rehabilitation processes for trafficking survivors often increase stigma and exploitation and that the conscious choice of sex workers to avoid rehabilitation for these reasons should be respected. While Durbar seeks to prevent exploitation, the respect for women`s agency and the choices that they have made is always a priority. In this way, Durbar imagines a world in which each individual is given respect and dignity and is not judged according to fixed norms of morality.

Durbar`s intervention has the consequence of giving a voice to the subaltern. Generally, others` opinions about their situation are imposed on sex workers. Institutions often claim to represent the interest of sex workers without actually asking them what they want. This concept of faulty representation is brought out in the article “The Ambivalence of Advocacy: Representation and Contestation in Global NGO Advocacy for Child Workers and Sex Workers” (Hahn and Holzscheiter 2013). Many international organisations

portray sex workers as innocent victims who need to be rescued due to the patriarchal notion that no moral woman would voluntarily engage in sexual activity for money. They do not represent what sex workers want but only what the elite think sex workers should want. Durbar seeks to change this by allowing sex workers to choose whether they would like to stay in sex work or not. The non-sex worker members do not seek to represent sex workers; instead they enable them to come together and represent themselves. A majority of the members of self-regulatory boards are sex workers, who not only carry out interventions but also advocate for changing the dominant discourse.

One of the most vital features of Durbar's approach is that it recognises the complexity of events and aims to respect women's choices within these contexts. Durbar acknowledges that even when a woman has been trafficked into sex work, it does not mean that she has permanently lost her agency and become helpless. She may exercise her agency either by running away or by choosing to continue with sex work. Durbar accepts the validity of staying within sex work for whatever reasons women choose, whether it be to earn an income or to avoid the stigma of rehabilitation processes. Tridip Suhrud, in his article on Gandhi's ideals titled "Conscience, the Source of Dissent" has brought out this concept of willingness to move away from a strict ideal in order to accommodate the context. Though a believer in ahimsa (non-violence), Gandhi justified the killing of a calf on the grounds that it would be put out of its pain. While this went against the strict statement of his ideal, the context called for this action. While speaking about adherence to the scriptures, Gandhi asserted: "I exercise my judgement about every scripture...I cannot let scriptural text supersede my reason" (Suhrud 2016: 2). Similarly, Durbar's acceptance of sex workers' choices recognises that individual actions are all based on context and should be respected. This is acknowledgement of the fact that nothing is black and white—all decisions have to be made in complex circumstances with some compromises. In order to truly establish women as agents, even these compromises should be seen as valid.

In this way, Durbar not only envisions a world in which women are free from patriarchal norms and marginalised women are given a voice but also displays the capacity to bring about this world within a flawed social system. We cannot deny that trafficked women were deprived of their agency while being trafficked but we also cannot deny them their agency in making a choice to stay within the circumstances that they were once forced into. This may be seen as problematic since they were coerced and exploited to begin

with. However, a new social structure cannot be created overnight—it is only by negotiating with these complex and problematic social realities that steps can be taken to establish the imagined world of equality.

The second intervention discussed in this article enables men to understand how dominant patriarchal norms cause gender inequalities. The key concept used in this intervention is that of intersectionality—the idea that different identities, such as gender, caste, class and religion, intersect to determine one’s position in the social hierarchy and the advantages and disadvantages that one experiences. The essay “Intersectionality: A Key for Men to Break Out of Patriarchal Prison?” (Edström et al. 2016) discusses how this kind of an intervention has been implemented with the support of the Centre for Health and Social Justice (CHSJ), an organisation based in Delhi. In Uttar Pradesh, this was called Men’s Action to Stop Violence Against Women (MASVAW) and was aimed at increasing the number of male proponents of gender equality in institutions such as universities and gram panchayats. In 100 villages of rural Maharashtra, this intervention was titled Samajhdar Jodidar (meaning ‘Understanding Partner’) and aimed to motivate men to get rid of gender-based violence and discrimination within their families and encourage women to actively participate in politics.

The intervention takes place through a reflective process. It creates a deliberative space in which the participants discuss their experiences in order to understand the workings of society. Edström et al. (2016) dwell on two major concepts that influence the framing and execution of the discussions. The first is the idea that gender binaries—with specific attitudes and behaviours (like aggression) associated with men and other attitudes and behaviours (like passivity) associated with women—need to be broken down. The second concept is that of intersectionality. The participants discuss how experiences of gender discrimination faced by women are also influenced by their caste and class. An example of this mentioned in the essay (ibid.) is of women from lower classes who contest elections for gram panchayats and are opposed by men from upper classes. In this case, the dimension of gender inequality cannot be looked at in isolation as it is compounded by class-based domination. By giving men the space to discuss and identify how the social system works, CHSJ enables them to confront their own ingrained patriarchal mindsets and reduce discrimination in the personal sphere. This would also enable them to understand the position of women whose disadvantages are made more complex by other factors such as caste and class, and to negotiate a way through these complexities in order to support their participation in local institutions.

This kind of an intervention questions the established social structure and displays a capacity to imagine an equal world, in which gender discrimination does not exist. It has a unique place as it complements the intervention that directly increases women's political participation by giving them reservations. The system of reservations is not sufficient in itself as women also need a conducive environment to empower themselves. As asserted by Batliwala and Dhanraj (2004) in their essay "Gender Myths that Instrumentalise Women: A View from the Indian Frontline", women in power are often limited by their caste and class identities and often espouse the patriarchal views that they have been brought up with. It is often seen that while women have a title, it is actually men who exercise the power. The intervention enabled by CHSJ helps to create a support system for women in power by changing the mindsets of men around them regarding different dimensions of the social structure. This would enable women to actually exercise their power and move towards gender equality.

MASVAW and Samajhdar Jodidar engage participants in an extremely reflective personal journey. Participants recognise conflicts within themselves and bring about a change in their ways of thinking. A fundamental change in mindset is the starting point for effective systemic and structural change in the long term. This approach assumes that human beings are inherently disposed towards justice and fairness and the need is for them to become aware of the injustice taking place around them. This concept is seen in Suhrud's article (2016), where he talks about Gandhi's emphasis on personal reflection and the recognition of right and wrong through the conscience as opposed to the selfish desires of the ego. The ego of the participants of MASVAW and Samajhdar Jodidar may encourage them to perpetuate their own power but the recognition of justice and fairness through the conscience leads them to create social change.

Both interventions discussed in this article demonstrate the capacity to imagine and realise a different world, in which restrictive patriarchal norms do not exist. Both organisations recognise and respect the individual as the core agent of change. Yet, they acknowledge that social structures are complex and work within these complexities. Durbar does this by respecting individual contextual decisions and CHSJ does this by making intersectionality the focus of its intervention. They address problematic mindsets that are the root causes of social inequalities. Durbar strives to change the mindsets of people outside the community of sex workers while the participants in CHSJ's interventions strive to change their own mindsets through a process of reflection. Both interventions seek to better the lives of disadvantaged communities. Durbar

does so by giving voices to the marginalised communities and CHSJ does so by creating a support system for such communities. Both these approaches are necessary for social transformation. By replicating such interventions in different places, depending on the context, we can strive to bring about a socially just world.

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