

Report of the Interactive Session ‘The Sex Panic Revisited : An Interactive Session on Sex Work’ by Chayanika Shah

An interactive lecture session was organised by the Subject Association of RCWS ‘*The Phenomenal Women*’ on 17th October, 2014 from 2pm to 4pm. Chayanika Shah of LABIA (Lesbians and Bisexuals in Action) and FAOW (Forum Against Oppression of Women) was invited as the guest lecturer. Shradha Shah, the Secretary of the Association, delivered the welcome address .

Chayanika Shah started the session by posing a provocative question as to why issues around sex work need to be debated and why is it that opinions on the same are so divided. She said that the initial position regarding sex work was concerned with the violence against sex workers which happened mostly because of coercion of women into sex work . The second position on sex work stated that the choice of sex work was never a free choice and the violence against the sex workers is a manifestation of the violence that women face in any other space they inhabit.

Living up to its aim of being an interactive session, she asked the audience to give their views on sex work and many varied views came up regarding the power play, context of choice, consumption of women’s bodies, catering only to male sexuality, pornography and also questions about male prostitution. Chayanika Shah said that the concept of sex work can also be approached by looking into the complex connection between the abstract concepts of love and desire. Love need not be a prerequisite for sexual desire and intercourse. One challenge to the notion of sex work is that it is without love, that it is done only for money. Radical theorists contend that this is part of the problem and that is why they want to break the connection between sex and love.

In reaction to the various viewpoints, she said that there is an epistemological dilemma regarding sex work and this is because of the perceived violence associated with the occupation. She argued that sex work had to be understood in the context of intermingling of various factors of “choice” or “no choice”, poverty , male superiority, consumption and power relations of all kinds. So the question that we really need to address is how to make sex work free from violence so that the environment would be easier for sex workers to work in.

She said that amongst all these debates it becomes necessary to hear the voices of the sex workers. Sex workers have said that they have managed some negotiation in their work. There is no camouflage of love and these can be seen in the autobiographical writings of sex workers as well.

Chayanika Shah broadened the topic of discussion by talking about sexual practices which are within the ambit of section 377 and which suffer from a conspiracy of silence in India. Even socially accepted sexual practices suffer from domination, the domination involved in not asking questions of a sexual nature to a good married woman. But sexual acts and sexually coloured remarks are assumed to be a given for a sex worker by the clients, the

society as well as the state and its authorities. The power of these authorities is so far reaching that the sex workers have to deal with their continuous harassment.

This brought the discussion around bar dancers. Bar dancing is often perceived to be sex work since it involves the purchasing of women's bodies. But bar dancers do not consider themselves to be sex workers. They rather see themselves as artists who are earning money for their art of dancing. Because if not considered artistic than other forms of dance should also be seen as sex work etc. For the majority of them, it was the ban that pushed them into the organised realm of the sex industry. Shah expressed that whether it is sex work or bar dancing, it indeed is important to see both as sexual labour as the locations are sexualised.

In reality, every location is sexualised for women because her gendered existence is a part of it. Sexualised beings and sexual presence is a part of everyday life and it is a part of the interactive process in the society.

She ended with the hope of revisioning the world where hierarchy is broken and the question that we all need to ask ourselves is whether sex work will exist in an utopian world. With that lingering question the session came to an end and the vote of thanks was delivered by Karishma Ahmed.

Report submitted by Rudranee Goswami & Nikita Chakravorty(MA II)