

## **International Sex Workers Rights Day Celebration**

### **Introduction:**

International Sex Workers Rights Day is an annual event celebrated on March 3rd to raise awareness about the rights and well-being of sex workers worldwide. This day's history goes back to 2001, when over 25,000 sex workers gathered in Kolkata for a festival despite efforts from prohibitionist groups who tried to prevent it taking place by pressuring the government to revoke their permit and that event was organized by Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee. From that day sex worker groups across the world have subsequently celebrated 3rd March as an annual international event as International Sex Workers Rights Day.

In celebration of this significant day, Durbar organized a comprehensive programme including speeches, a cultural performance and then a rally with sex workers to emphasize the importance of recognizing and respecting sex workers rights.

### **Objectives:**

- I. Advocating for the recognition of sex workers as legitimate workers and the decriminalization of sex work.
- II. Challenging stigma, discrimination and violence against sex workers and promoting their dignity, agency and human rights.
- III. Building social movements to advance the cause of sex workers' rights.

### **Present dignitaries:**

Mr. Anirban Dutta, Secretary, Indian Football Association  
Ms. Shanti Mullick, Indian Women Footballer & Arjuna Award Winner  
Mr. Rajesh Sinha, 25 no. ward councillor, Kolkata  
Mr. Amitabha Chakraborty, Advocate, Right to Information  
Dr. Bhagwan Mahapatra, HIV Specialist  
Dr. Jaydip Shah, Safe Hands  
Ms. Rehana Khatun, Paschimbanga Khetmajur Samity  
Ms. Rupa Pal, General Secretary of TUCC, Kolkata  
Mr. Supratik Chakraborty, Social Worker, IMSE  
Mr. Goutam Mukherjee, Social Worker  
Mr. Amitabha Ghosh, Social Worker  
Mr. Nirmalya Banerjee, Writer  
Ms. Mili Das, Poet  
Mr. Subhajit Dutta Gupta, We are the Common People  
Mr. Supratik Nath, Social Worker  
Mr. Prodip Roy, Griha Sramik Sangathan

This International Sex Workers Rights Day brought together a diverse group of social activists, scholars, prominent doctors and advocates to shed light on the importance of the day and address the critical issues surrounding the rights of sex workers. Ms. Bishakha Laskar,

Secretary of Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee started the programme as she welcomed all guest and the community people with a history of advocating for the communities, delivered the opening address. She emphasized the historical context of International Sex Workers Rights Day, tracing its origins back to the sex worker-led protests by Durbar in Kolkata in 2001. She also highlighted the ongoing struggle for recognition and respect, urging the audience to challenge societal norms that perpetuate stigma and discrimination against sex workers. She underscored the need for an understanding of the challenges faced by sex workers and stressed the importance of adopting a rights-based approach in policy-making. Ms. Laskar called for the decriminalization of sex work and the creation of supportive frameworks that prioritize the safety and well-being of sex workers by promoting their rights.

During the International Sex Workers' Rights Day event, Mr. Rajesh Singha, 25 no. Kolkata municipality ward councillor delivered a brief yet impactful speech. He acknowledged the significance of the day in advocating for the rights and dignity of sex workers. In his speech, he shared his thoughts on how this profession is stigmatized by the general mainstream population. He concluded by affirming the municipality's commitment to promoting inclusivity and equality for all residents, including sex workers.



Mr. Supratik Chakraborty who is famous for his commitment to social justice issues delivered a keynote speech. He delved into the inter sectionality of sex work, discussing how factors such as gender, economic status, stigma and societal prejudices intersect to create unique challenges for sex workers. He also stressed the importance of acknowledging sex work and advocated for policies that empower them to make choices about their own lives.

Mr. Amitabha Chakraborty, Advocate and RTI activist amplify the voices of sex workers and he said that sex workers deserve the same rights and protections as like any other worker. They deserve legal recourse and safe working environment. The Right to Information Act can be a powerful tool in holding institutions accountable and advocating for policy reforms that uphold their rights.

Rehana Khatun from Paschimbanga Khetmajur Samity stands in solidarity with sex workers worldwide. She also told that their collective mission is to break down barriers, challenge gender disparities and secure equal opportunities. She recognized sex workers dignity and rights. As per her statement, "Just like any other profession, sex work deserves respect, protection and fair labor practices. It's time to dismantle oppressive systems and ensure that all individuals, regardless of their occupation are treated with dignity and equality. Together, let's begin creating a better place where every person's



work are respected.” She also feel honoured to witness the solidarity and passion displayed by community people at Sonagachi in the International Sex Workers Rights Day.

Ms. Shanti Mullick, Indian Women Footballer & Arjuna Award Winner also shared privilege of experiencing International Sex Workers Rights Day in Sonagachi, She told by involving children in football from a young age, we can install values of discipline and resilience into them. She also addressed girls and said “Football provides a platform to challenge gender stereotypes and break barriers then only we can create more opportunities for children regardless of their background to participate in football”. She asked us to build a future where every child has the chance to create their own on and off the field.

Few other social workers from the dignitaries also shared the importance of the day, while they all stressed the need for societal transformation, urging everyone to challenge stereotypes and prejudices surrounding sex work. Also all of them called for a collective effort in dismantling systemic barriers in related to sex work profession.

Following the speeches, the cultural wing of Durbar, Komal Gandhar presented a narrative dance drama performance on the song of ‘Sonagachir ek yug’. These cultural act aimed to not only entertain the audience but also raise the success about the sex workers movement which they got twenty three years back. Komal Gandhar's performances showcased the past struggles and present movement of sex workers, while challenging societal stereotypes.



The event reached its peak with a rally organized by Durbar, featuring approximately eight hundred sex workers from various red light areas of West Bengal marching from Sonagachi to College Street through the streets of Kolkata. Clad in vibrant colours, carrying banners with slogans and a car tablo advocating for their rights, the participants chanted slogans demanding their rights and an end to discrimination. The rally aimed to raise public awareness about the struggles faced by sex workers and to mobilize support for their cause and also



drawing attention to the demands and grievances of sex workers and calling for action and solidarity from the government and the public.



Key mission of the rally:

Decriminalization of sex work -

Participants called for the decriminalization of sex work, arguing that current legal frameworks contribute to the marginalization and vulnerability of sex workers.

Fair working environment -

They emphasized the need for fair working environment, including the protection of sex workers rights to negotiate their services, ensuring their safety and autonomy.



End to discrimination -

The rally aimed to challenge societal prejudices and eliminate discrimination against sex workers. Participants called for an end to the stigma that often leads to their exclusion from various aspects of society.

Recognition and inclusion -

Sex workers demanded recognition as legitimate workers and inclusion in labor laws to ensure they receive the same rights and protections as other professions.

At the end of this rally, Mr. Anirban Dutta, Secretary of Indian Football Association shared his voice to stand before community people, not just as a representative of the beautiful game but as someone who is deeply committed to the values of unity, empowerment and social change. He also felt honoured to witness the passionate gathering displayed by sex workers at Kolkata Street in the International Sex Workers Rights Day rally.

At last Ms. Laskar, Durbar's Secretary thanked all for being a part of this momentous occasion of International Sex Workers Rights Day Rally organized for the community people. She also talked about standing united in pursuit of justice and dignity for sex workers. She also asked for the helping hand from the mainstreamed society people, from police and from other administrative level officer while



addressing the Hon'ble Supreme Court's guidelines on sex work and workers where it is written that sex workers are entitled to equal protection of the law.

**Conclusion:**

Durbar's International Sex Workers Rights Day programme in Sonagachi and the rally in Kolkata street was a resounding success, bringing attention to the challenges faced by sex workers and advocating for their rights. Through speeches, cultural performance and a powerful rally, the event served as a platform for dialogue and action while creating a supportive environment for the sex worker community in West Bengal. The momentum generated by this event will hopefully contribute to ongoing sex workers movement to secure a better and more justice for sex workers in future.