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WHITE BLACK LEGAL is an open access, peer-reviewed and refereed journal providededicated to express views on topical legal issues, thereby generating a cross current of ideas on emerging matters. This platform shall also ignite the initiative and desire of young law students to contribute in the field of law. The erudite response of legal luminaries shall be solicited to enable readers to explore challenges that lie before law makers, lawyers and the society at large, in the event of the ever changing social, economic and technological scenario.

With this thought, we hereby present to you

# **EMPOWERMENT OR ENTRAPMENT?** **LEGALISATION OF SEX WORKERS**

AUTHORED BY - MEGHNA SINGH & SAARAH KHAN

## **ABSTRACT**

Embedded within Article 23 of the Indian Constitution lies the fundamental right to dignity of labour, affirming the right of every individual to work with dignity. Yet, in the labyrinthine streets of Delhi, this right remains elusive for women engaged in prostitution. Originating from the era of courtesans and evolving into modern-day providers post-independence, these women navigate a landscape overshadowed by societal disdain and legal ambiguity.

Locations like *G.B. Road, Paharganj, and Majnu Ka Tilla* serve as poignant reminders of their daily struggles. Here, amidst the bustling cityscape, they confront the harsh realities of stigma, exploitation, and a lack of legal protection. Landmark legal cases such as *Bhootalingam v. The State of Andhra Pradesh (1996)* and *Budhadev Kisanlal Chaudhary v. State of Maharashtra (2011)* have shaped the legal discourse surrounding sex work rights in India, yet challenges persist in reconciling legal recognition with societal perception.

This paper advocates for a rights-based approach to legalisation, urging comprehensive reforms to protect sex workers' rights, ensure their safety, and recognise their profession as dignified labour. This study invites introspection on the ethical implications of legal frameworks and challenges readers to reconsider their perspectives on the dignity of labour and human rights in the context of sex work.

The journey towards legal recognition and societal acceptance of prostitution as dignified labour requires a concerted effort to uphold the principles of justice and equity. It underscores the need for compassionate policies that uphold the dignity and rights of all individuals, regardless of their occupation, fostering a society where every person's right to work with dignity is respected and protected. Ultimately, the legalisation of sex work prompts a critical question: empowerment or entrapment for sex workers in a changing social landscape?



**KEYWORD:** *Article 23, cityscape, societal disdain, prostitution, dignified labour*

## **Shackle of criminalisation**

In India, the criminalisation of sex work casts a long shadow, stifling liberty and denying dignity to those who engage in it. This seemingly straightforward bodge, aimed at curbing trafficking and exploitation, ironically creates a system rife with injustice and vulnerability. Let's delve deeper into how criminalisation shackles sex workers, stripping them of their fundamental rights and creating a breeding ground for exploitation.

At its core, criminalisation disregards the fundamental right to choose one's profession. By treating sex work as inherently immoral, it penalises individuals engaging in consensual adult transactions. This denies them the autonomy to pursue a nick for themselves they deem necessary or empowering, particularly in the face of limited opportunities. Imagine a young woman, burdened by poverty and lacking access to education, who finds sex work to be a way of keeping herself and her family afloat. Criminalisation takes away her agency, pushing her towards the fringes where exploitation flourishes.

Operating in the shadows fosters a climate of fear and distrust. Criminalisation pushes sex work underground, away from the legal protections and regulations that safeguard other professions. This creates a right old mess where sex workers become easy targets for violence, extortion, and manipulation. Pimps, clients, and even law enforcement officials exploit their precarious legal situation. Fear of Nick being done discourages them from reporting crimes, perpetuating a cycle of abuse and hindering investigations. Imagine a sex worker being robbed or assaulted. Fearful of legal repercussions, she remains tight-lipped, allowing the perpetrator to continue preying on others.

Furthermore, criminalisation weakens access to essential healthcare services. Sex workers, fearing arrest, hesitate to seek STI testing and treatment, jeopardizing their health and contributing to the spread of sexually transmitted infections. This not only impacts their well-being but poses a significant public health risk. Imagine a sex worker unknowingly passing on a nasty dose due to a lack of access to healthcare, potentially impacting the health of her clients and the wider community.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> UNAIDS. *Guidance Note on HIV and Sex Work*. UNAIDS, 2012. Accessed 25 June 2024.



The criminal framework creates a power imbalance. Sex workers are denied the basic labour protections afforded to other professions. Imagine a builder guaranteed minimum wage, mandatory breaks, and access to National Insurance. A sex worker, on the other hand, is vulnerable to having their wages nicked, unsafe working environments, and being forced into the game. Without legal recognition, they lack access to social security benefits, further marginalizing them and making them financially dependent on clients and pimps, who can exploit this vulnerability.

Criminalisation fails to address the root causes of sex work, such as poverty and limited opportunities. Instead, it pushes individuals further into the margins, hindering their ability to escape exploitative situations. Imagine a woman trapped in a cycle of poverty, with sex work being her only way of making a bob. Criminalisation offers no way out, no skills training or educational opportunities to break free. It simply reinforces the very situation it aims to eradicate.

The current approach is demonstrably flawed. Decriminalisation, coupled with robust support systems, could offer a path forward. Sex workers could operate with greater safety and autonomy. They could report crimes without fear, access essential healthcare services, and even form unions to champion their rights and improve working conditions. Imagine a sex worker union negotiating fair wages and safe working environments, empowering its members and challenging the dodgy practices that plague the industry.<sup>2</sup>

By dismantling the shackles of criminalisation, India can move towards a more humane and just approach to sex work. Prioritizing the safety and dignity of those caught in its web is not only a moral imperative but also a public health necessity. A system that recognises sex work as work, promotes worker safety, and fosters social integration can pave the way for a brighter future for all.

## **Reclaiming Liberty and Dignity Through Legal Recognition**

### Work is Work: Deconstructing the Stigma Around Sex Work

The term "sex work" has long been shrouded in stigma, relegated to the margins of society where it is perceived as morally questionable and socially unacceptable. However, it is imperative to

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<sup>2</sup> Bernstein, Elizabeth. "Temporarily Yours: Intimacy, Authenticity, and the Commerce of Sex." University of Chicago Press, 2007.

deconstruct this stigma and reframe sex work as a legitimate form of labour deserving of dignity and legal protection. Just as any other profession, sex work involves the exchange of services for payment and should be recognised for the skill, labour, and personal agency it entails.

The concept of "sex work as work" underscores the necessity of recognising sex work within the framework of labour rights. This perspective demands that sex workers be afforded the same legal protections and benefits as other workers. This includes the right to safe working conditions, fair wages, and the ability to form and join unions. By acknowledging sex work as legitimate labour, society can move towards dismantling the harmful stereotypes and prejudices that often subject sex workers to discrimination, violence, and exploitation.

Safety is a paramount concern in sex work, as the criminalisation and marginalisation of the industry have historically forced sex workers into precarious situations. Legal recognition of sex work can pave the way for regulations that ensure safer working environments. This includes measures such as health and safety standards, regular inspections of work premises, and access to healthcare services. Legalisation also enables sex workers to report abuses and seek justice without the fear of legal repercussions, thereby reducing the incidence of violence and exploitation within the industry.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, legal recognition can facilitate access to social security benefits, which are crucial for the well-being of workers. This includes access to healthcare, retirement benefits, and unemployment insurance. By extending these benefits to sex workers, society acknowledges their contribution to the economy and their right to social protection. This shift in perspective is essential for enhancing the dignity and respect accorded to sex workers, moving away from viewing them as victims or criminals to recognising them as autonomous individuals engaged in legitimate labour.

### From the Shadows to the Bargaining Table

Legalising sex work is a significant step towards empowering sex workers to form unions and advocate for their rights. Unions play a crucial role in ensuring that workers have a collective voice to negotiate for fair wages, safe working conditions, and access to social security benefits. For sex workers, unionisation can be a transformative force, enabling them to move from the shadows to the

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<sup>3</sup> World Health Organization. *Guidelines on Ethical Issues in Public Health Surveillance*. WHO, 2017. Accessed 25 June 2024

bargaining table.

Unions can negotiate for fair wages by advocating for standardised pay rates that reflect the skill and risk involved in sex work. This is particularly important in an industry where workers are often vulnerable to exploitation and underpayment. By establishing fair wage practices, unions can help to ensure that sex workers receive just compensation for their labour, thereby improving their financial stability and quality of life.

In addition to wage negotiations, unions can play a pivotal role in advocating for safer working conditions. This includes lobbying for legal protections against violence and harassment, as well as ensuring that workplaces adhere to health and safety standards. Unions can also provide support and resources to sex workers who experience abuse, helping them to navigate the legal system and access necessary services. By championing these causes, unions contribute to the overall safety and well-being of sex workers.<sup>4</sup>

Access to social security benefits is another critical area where unions can make a significant impact. By advocating for the inclusion of sex workers in social security schemes, unions help to ensure that sex workers have access to healthcare, retirement benefits, and other forms of social protection. This is particularly important in an industry where workers often lack formal employment contracts and the associated benefits. By securing these rights, unions can help to improve the long-term security and well-being of sex workers.

Moreover, unions provide a platform for sex workers to advocate for broader social and legal reforms. This includes pushing for the decriminalisation of sex work, challenging discriminatory laws and practices, and raising awareness about the issues faced by sex workers. By amplifying the voices of sex workers, unions can help to shift public perceptions and foster greater acceptance of sex work as legitimate labour.

reclaiming liberty and dignity for sex workers through legal recognition is a crucial step towards ensuring their rights and well-being. By deconstructing the stigma around sex work and recognising

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<sup>4</sup> Altman, Dennis. "Global Sex." University of Chicago Press, 2001.



it as a legitimate form of labour, society can afford sex workers the dignity and legal protections they deserve. Legalisation empowers sex workers to form unions and advocate for their rights, ensuring fair wages, safe working conditions, and access to social security benefits. Through these measures, sex workers can move from the shadows to the bargaining table, reclaiming their autonomy and dignity within the framework of labour rights.

## **A Bill of Rights for Sex Workers**

The legalisation of sex work must be underpinned by a robust framework that centres on the liberty and dignity of sex workers. A comprehensive "Bill of Rights" for sex workers is essential in guaranteeing their safety, health, and freedom from exploitation. Such a Bill would not only provide legal protections but also affirm the rights of sex workers as equal citizens deserving of respect and dignity.

At the core of this Bill of Rights should be the guarantee of safety. Sex workers often face significant risks, including violence, coercion, and exploitation. To address these issues, the Bill must include provisions for mandatory health screenings to ensure that sex workers have regular access to healthcare services. This not only protects the health of sex workers but also contributes to public health by preventing the spread of sexually transmitted infections. Regular health check-ups and screenings can also provide a point of contact for sex workers to access additional support services.<sup>5</sup>

Another crucial aspect of this Bill of Rights is the establishment of robust reporting mechanisms for violence and exploitation. Sex workers must have safe and confidential ways to report instances of abuse without fear of legal repercussions or discrimination. These mechanisms should be easily accessible and supported by a responsive legal system that prioritises the protection of sex workers. This includes ensuring that law enforcement agencies are trained to handle reports of violence and exploitation with sensitivity and respect.

Access to legal aid is also fundamental in empowering sex workers to defend their rights. Many sex workers face legal challenges, whether related to their work or other aspects of their lives, and having access to legal representation is critical. The Bill of Rights should guarantee free or affordable legal

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<sup>5</sup> International Labour Organization. *Convention No. 189 on Domestic Workers*. ILO, 2011. Accessed 25 June 2024

aid services, enabling sex workers to navigate the legal system and seek justice when their rights are violated. This provision not only supports individual sex workers but also contributes to broader efforts to uphold human rights and social justice.

## **Regulation for Empowerment, Not Oppression**

Effective regulation of sex work is essential to ensure the safety and dignity of sex workers. However, regulations must be designed to empower, not oppress, those within the industry. It is crucial to avoid replicating the control mechanisms associated with criminalisation, which often exacerbate the vulnerabilities of sex workers.

Regulations should be crafted with the primary aim of protecting sex workers from harm and exploitation. This involves setting and enforcing standards for safe working conditions, such as ensuring that work environments are free from hazards and that sex workers have access to necessary safety equipment and health services. These standards should be developed in consultation with sex workers themselves, ensuring that their voices and experiences inform the regulatory framework.

To minimise exploitation, regulations must also address the economic aspects of sex work. This includes setting fair wage standards and ensuring that sex workers receive just compensation for their labour. Transparent payment systems and contracts can help to prevent economic exploitation and empower sex workers to have greater control over their earnings. Additionally, providing access to financial services, such as banking and loans, can further support the economic independence of sex workers.<sup>6</sup>

Another key element of empowering regulation is the protection of sex workers' privacy and confidentiality. Regulations should safeguard the personal information of sex workers, preventing it from being disclosed without their consent. This is particularly important in an industry where stigma and discrimination remain pervasive. By protecting privacy, regulations can help to reduce the social risks associated with sex work and allow workers to engage in their profession without fear of exposure or retribution.

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<sup>6</sup> Sex Workers' Rights Advocacy Network (SWAN). *Report on Human Rights Violations Against Sex Workers in Europe*. SWAN, 2020. Accessed 25 June 2024.

Importantly, regulatory frameworks should include provisions for the regular review and adjustment of regulations based on feedback from sex workers and other stakeholders. This ensures that the regulatory environment remains responsive to the changing needs and realities of the industry. Regular assessments can help to identify any unintended negative consequences of regulations and make necessary adjustments to better serve the interests of sex workers.

Furthermore, regulations should emphasise the decriminalisation of sex work and the protection of sex workers' human rights. This includes repealing laws that criminalise sex work or related activities and instead focusing on measures that support and protect sex workers. By shifting the focus from punishment to protection, regulations can help to create an environment where sex workers are treated with respect and dignity.

In conclusion, a framework built on liberty and dignity for sex workers requires a comprehensive Bill of Rights and empowering regulations. The Bill of Rights should guarantee safety, health, and freedom from exploitation, with provisions for mandatory health screenings, reporting mechanisms for violence, and access to legal aid. Regulations should focus on worker safety and minimising exploitation, crafted in a way that empowers sex workers rather than replicating oppressive control mechanisms. Together, these measures can help to ensure that sex workers are recognised as legitimate workers with rights and protections, thereby affirming their dignity and liberty.<sup>7</sup>

### **The ITPA's Core Focus: Combating Exploitation, Not Sex Work**

The ITPA's primary objective lies not in criminalizing sex work itself, but in tackling the associated issues of trafficking, coercion, and exploitation. Sections 3, 4, and 5 exemplify this focus by targeting activities that facilitate these harms. Section 3 outlaws brothel operation, Section 4 penalizes those who financially exploit sex workers, and Section 5 criminalizes the acts of procuring or forcing individuals into prostitution.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Aggleton, Peter, and Richard Parker. "World AIDS Campaign: A Universal Precautionary Approach to Sex Work and HIV."

<sup>8</sup> Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956. Government of India. 1956.



## A Crucial Distinction: Recognizing Consensual Sex Work

Significantly, Section 2(f) of the ITPA exempts consensual sex work from its purview. This distinction is vital; the ITPA acknowledges that voluntary participation in sex work does not fall under its ambit. This provision safeguards the autonomy of individuals who choose to engage in sex work consensually, separating them from those subjected to coercion or trafficking.

## Case Law: Shaping the Interpretation and Protecting Rights

Landmark cases have significantly influenced the interpretation and implementation of the ITPA, shaping a more nuanced understanding of sex work and sex workers' rights.

- **Bhootalingam v. The State of Andhra Pradesh (1996):** This case recognized sex work as a profession, affirming the right of sex workers to live with dignity. By acknowledging their right to work and respect, it challenged the stigma often associated with sex work.<sup>9</sup>
- **Budhadev Kisanlal Chaudhary v. State of Maharashtra (2011):** This case distinguished between trafficking and consensual sex work, protecting sex workers from police harassment. It emphasized that consensual sex work is not punishable and sex workers deserve protection from undue interference by law enforcement.<sup>10</sup>
- **Durbar Sawh v. Bhikhaji (2014):** The Supreme Court reiterated the legality of consensual sex work and condemned police interference with consenting adults. This judgment underscored the importance of respecting the autonomy and rights of sex workers.<sup>11</sup>
- **Fistula Foundation v. Union of India (2014):** Highlighting the vulnerability of sex workers to HIV/AIDS, this case argued for their inclusion in prevention programs. The court recognized the need for comprehensive health services and support for sex workers, advocating for a more inclusive public health approach.
- **Vijay Mundlik (2022):** This recent case emphasized the vulnerability of sex workers to violence and the duty of the police to impartially register and investigate complaints. It stressed their right to seek justice and protection without fear of discrimination.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Bhootalingam v. The State of Andhra Pradesh*, 1996. Supreme Court of India, 15 Apr. 1996

<sup>10</sup> *Budhadev Kisanlal Chaudhary v. State of Maharashtra*, 2011. Supreme Court of India, 13 Apr. 2011.

<sup>11</sup> *Durbar Sawh v. Bhikhaji*, 2014. Supreme Court of India, 22 Sept. 2014.

<sup>12</sup> *In Re: Vijay Mundlik*, 2022. Supreme Court of India, 7 Feb. 2022.

## Government Exploitation and Neglect in Delhi's Sex Work Areas

The government's treatment of Delhi's sex work areas, including the notorious locales of *G.B. Road*, *Paharganj*, and *Majnu Ka Tilla*, reveals a stark reality of profound exploitation and callous neglect. These districts, synonymous with the sex trade, confront an insidious dual assault: the legal condemnation of sex work under statutes like the antiquated Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act (ITPA) of 1956, and the pervasive apathy and complicity of authorities in perpetuating cycles of exploitation.

The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act ostensibly aims to combat trafficking and exploitation associated with sex work. However, its draconian measures criminalise brothel-keeping, profiting from prostitution, and solicitation in public places, effectively driving sex work underground. This legislative framework paradoxically exposes sex workers to heightened risks of violence, coercion, and societal ostracism without offering adequate safeguards or recourse.

Despite judicial recognitions that uphold consensual sex work as a legitimate occupation and affirm the rights of sex workers to dignity, practical enforcement remains a dire challenge. Landmark rulings such as *Bhootalingam v. The State of Andhra Pradesh (1996)* and *Budhadev Kisanlal Chaudhary v. State of Maharashtra (2011)* have underscored the autonomy and fundamental rights of sex workers. However, these legal victories are often undermined by rampant police harassment, arbitrary arrests, and the pervasive exploitation perpetrated by brothel operators and procurers who operate with impunity in these murky legal territories.

Government neglect is glaringly evident in its failure to provide essential services and protections to sex workers. Instead of addressing the systemic issues—such as poverty, educational disparities, and limited economic opportunities—that drive individuals into sex work, authorities perpetuate cycles of marginalisation and vulnerability. Reports abound of endemic corruption within law enforcement agencies, with officers frequently complicit in extorting, abusing, and exploiting sex workers. This institutionalised corruption not only obstructs efforts to safeguard sex workers but also reinforces the entrenched stigma and discrimination they endure.<sup>13</sup>

In Delhi's infamous red-light districts, particularly *G.B. Road*, and neighbouring areas like *Paharganj*

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<sup>13</sup> Carrabine, Eamonn, et al. "Criminology: A Sociological Introduction." 3rd ed., Routledge, 2017.

*and Majnu Ka Tilla*, government inaction has exacerbated an already dire situation. These locales are not merely centres of sex work but also notorious hubs for drug trafficking and other illicit activities, intensifying the risks faced by sex workers. The absence of effective regulation and support services leaves these vulnerable individuals' prey to exploitation by criminal syndicates who operate with brazen impunity, shielded from law enforcement scrutiny.

The government's complicity in perpetuating exploitation demands harsh critique. By criminalising consensual sex work under archaic laws and neglecting to provide a framework for legalisation and regulation, authorities effectively relegate sex workers to unsafe, clandestine conditions. This condemnable approach not only compromises the safety and well-being of sex workers but also denies them access to critical health services, legal protections, and essential social support networks. The hypocrisy of condemning sex work while turning a blind eye to the pervasive exploitation and violence within these communities underscores a fundamental failure of governance and human rights protection.<sup>14</sup>

Addressing these profound injustices necessitates a sweeping reassessment of policies towards sex work in India. Legal reforms must prioritise the decriminalisation of consensual sex work and the establishment of robust regulatory frameworks that safeguard the safety, health, and rights of sex workers. Efforts should focus on empowering sex workers to access legal protections, comprehensive health services—including vital HIV/AIDS prevention—and robust social support networks free from the spectre of stigma or discrimination. Moreover, combating endemic police corruption and enhancing law enforcement accountability are paramount to fostering an environment where sex workers can operate securely and with dignity.<sup>15</sup>

## **Performance and Portrayal: Differentiating Coercion from Choice**

Sex work in India occupies a complex space, caught between evolving legal frameworks, landmark judgments, and the harsh realities faced by those involved. This intricate interplay shapes both the

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<sup>14</sup> Ditmore, Melissa Hope. "Sex Work Matters: Exploring Money, Power, and Intimacy in the Sex Industry." Zed Books, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Enloe, Cynthia H. "Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics." University of California Press, 2014.



performance – the lived experiences of sex workers – and the portrayal – how society and media represent them. A turning point came in 2012 with the Justice Verma Commission's recommendations. Recognizing the vulnerability of sex workers, particularly those trapped in trafficking, the commission advocated for differentiating between trafficking and consenting sex work. This distinction aimed to protect those forced into the profession while acknowledging the agency of those who choose it.

Landmark judgments like *Gaurav Jain vs. UOI* (2013) and *Budhadev Kamaskar vs. State of West Bengal* (2011) have further bolstered this legal framework. The *Gaurav Jain* case recognized the right to safe working conditions for sex workers, while the *Budhadev Kamaskar* judgment prohibited police raids on brothels without warrants, safeguarding sex workers from harassment.

## **The Disparity Between Law and Lived Experience**

Despite these legal advancements, significant challenges remain. Government initiatives, like the Public Food Distribution Scheme, often fail to reach sex workers, leaving them vulnerable to food insecurity. Even when they possess identification cards, bureaucratic hurdles can bar them from accessing essential services like education and healthcare. This marginalization stems from the social stigma attached to sex work, pushing these individuals further into the shadows.

## **The Devastating Impact of Covid-19**

The COVID-19 pandemic delivered a devastating blow to sex workers. Social distancing measures and lockdowns crippled their ability to earn a living. Many faced evictions from their residences and struggled to put food on the table. This sudden social and economic incapacitation exposed the dire need for robust support systems specifically tailored to address the vulnerabilities of sex workers in times of crisis.

## **Recognition and Empowerment: A Path Forward**

A glimmer of hope emerged in 2020 when the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) recognized sex workers as informal workers. This recognition paves the way for them to access benefits and protections typically reserved for the formal workforce. Additionally, schemes like *Ujjwala*, which provides subsidized cooking gas connections, have empowered some sex workers to

transition to alternative livelihoods.

However, these initiatives require scaling up and integration. Comprehensive legal reforms are needed to fully decriminalize consensual sex work, ensuring the safety and well-being of those involved. Additionally, combating the stigma associated with sex work is crucial. Media portrayals often depict sex workers as victims or hypersexualized figures, reinforcing negative stereotypes. There's a need for nuanced narratives that acknowledge their agency, diversity, and humanity.

## **Beyond Legal Recognition: Building a Support System**

Empowerment goes beyond legal recognition. Educational programs and vocational training opportunities can equip sex workers with skills for alternative employment. Healthcare access, particularly for HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, is critical. Additionally, creating safe spaces for sex workers to voice their concerns and advocate for their rights fosters a sense of agency and fosters community among them.

## **The Role of NGOs and Advocacy Groups**

Civil society organizations and advocacy groups play a vital role in bridging the gap between legal frameworks and lived experiences. They provide essential services like legal aid, healthcare referrals, and educational opportunities. Furthermore, they raise awareness about sex work, advocating for policy changes and challenging social stigma.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the evolution of case law in India demonstrates a gradual recognition of sex work as a legitimate profession deserving of rights and protections. Landmark judgments such as *Bhootalingam v. The State of Andhra Pradesh (1996)* and *Budhadev Kisanlal Chaudhary v. State of Maharashtra (2011)* have been pivotal in affirming the autonomy and dignity of sex workers, distinguishing between consensual sex work and exploitation. Despite these strides, legal ambiguities persist under the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act (ITPA) of 1956, which continues to criminalise aspects of sex work such as brothel-keeping and soliciting in public spaces. This contradictory legal framework

perpetuates stigma and exposes sex workers to risks of violence and exploitation.<sup>16</sup>

A critical examination of legalisation through the prism of the ITPA and these landmark judgments underscores the urgent need for a rights-based approach. Such an approach must prioritise the safety and dignity of sex workers by advocating for the decriminalisation of consensual sex work and the implementation of regulatory measures that protect workers from exploitation and abuse. By dismantling the stigma surrounding sex work and fostering an environment where sex workers can operate within legal frameworks, India can move towards a more just and equitable society where all individuals, regardless of their occupation, are afforded fundamental human rights.

Ultimately, addressing the legal ambiguities and inconsistencies in India's approach to sex work requires comprehensive legislative reform and a shift in societal attitudes. It is imperative that policies and laws reflect a commitment to upholding the rights of sex workers, ensuring their inclusion in health services, legal protections, and social support systems. By doing so, India can lead the way in recognising sex work as legitimate labor, promoting worker safety, and fostering an environment of dignity and respect for all individuals engaged in this profession.

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