



ON A GREEN CRUSADE

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BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

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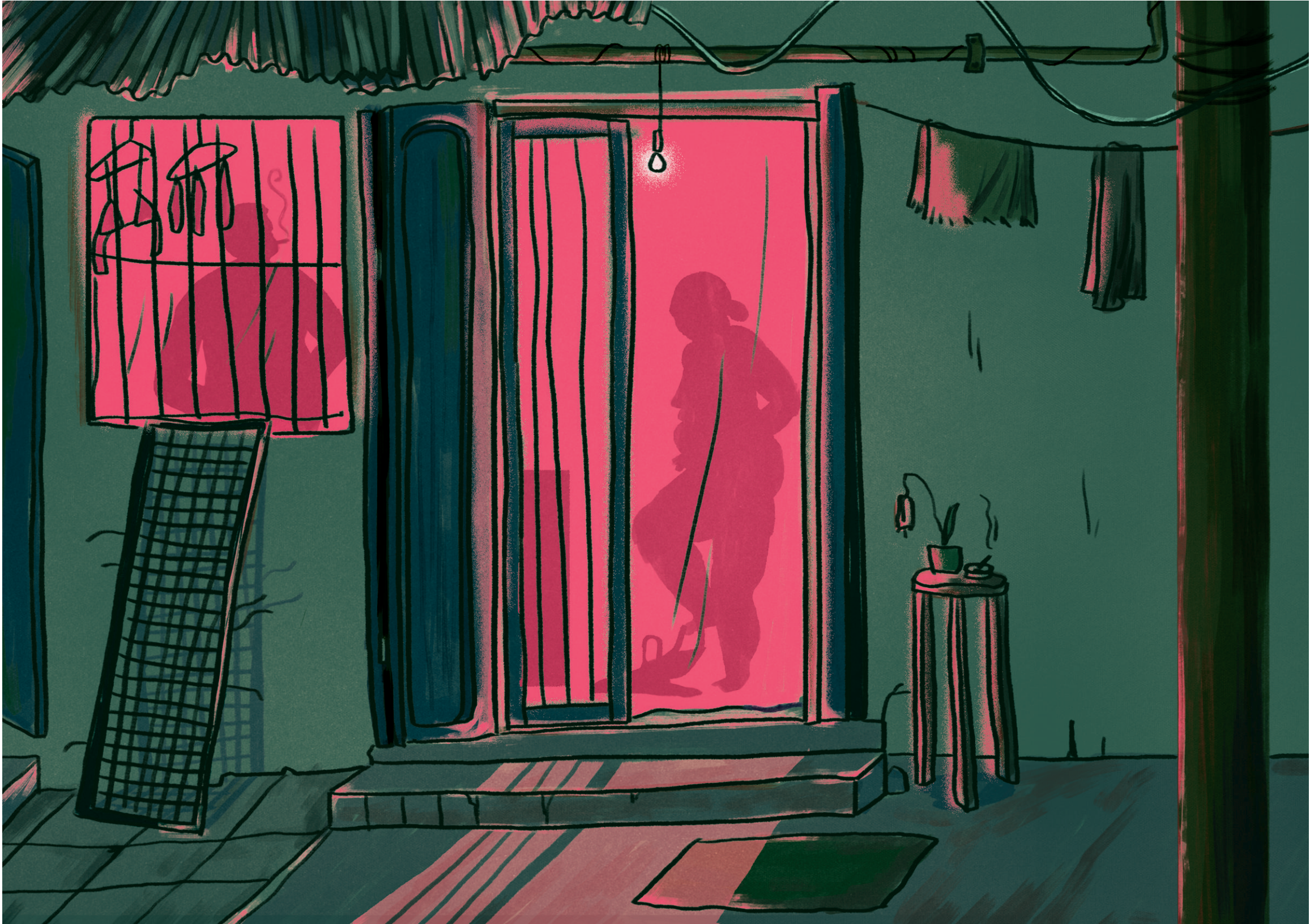


Illustration: Kaiz Lee

Trapped in the shadows

Rekha is among the thousands of women stuck in the notorious Garstin Bastion Road red light district in New Delhi. And, at 47, she says she has little hope of escape

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“When I was first pushed into this, unlike other girls I did not resist,” Rekha says, tears welling in her eyes. “Other girls who tried to run away or were not cooperating were beaten by the kotha maliks [brothel owners] as if they were not human.”

Rekha saw no way to escape her demeaning life as a sex worker. “It was a river of fire on one side and bed of thorns on the other. Where would I run to?”

One of more than 5,000 women plying their trade in Garstin Bastion Road – known as GB Road – in the ruins of the old walled city of Shahjahanabad in central New Delhi, Rekha knows her future looks grim.

Stretching for a kilometre or two from the Ajmeri Gate to the Lahori Gate, GB Road is one of the largest red light districts in India, with more than 100 brothels above the street-level shops.

Rekha works in an establishment reserved for older women, over the age of about 45. The walls

are bereft of decoration except for a faded 2017 calendar. Potatoes are frying in a nearby kitchen and outside in the hall a song from the soundtrack of Muzaffar Ali’s film *Umrao Jaan*, about a courtesan’s rise to fame, can be heard: “Dil cheez kya hai aap meri jaan lejiye” (“Forget my heart, take my life instead”).

“The world I live in is different from yours. We have different gods and demons

REKHA, SEX WORKER

Sex workers wait for customers outside a brothel in New Delhi; and a cubicle at a brothel. Photos: Shoaib Shafi

Rekha has an almond-shaped face. Her lipstick is reddish-brown. Her nose is pierced and her oiled hair is finely parted in the middle. The coloured cream she has put on her face contrasts with the skin of her throat. Rekha is beautiful, but she has a broken incisor tooth.

“My life is worse than dogs,”

she says. “Sometimes I think even they would have a better life than me. What would I tell you? The world I live in is different from yours. We have different gods and demons.”

In India, the laws related to sex work are ambiguous. It is not illegal for a woman to charge for sex work, but owning a brothel or a place where sex is commercialised is a punishable offence. The brothels on GB Road could be shut down at any time by government order, but so far the authorities have turned a blind eye.

When she was 14, Rekha was sexually assaulted by a neighbour who was 12 years older than her. Rekha’s father, a farmer in Andhra Pradesh state, was furious when he found out about the rape.

The rage made him violent and he would “flog me every night until I lost consciousness”, Rekha says. He started drinking, and when he could no longer pay for liquor, he sold her to the shopkeeper “for a few more bottles of alcohol”.

Like thousands of women in India, Rekha has spent many years in the shadowy world of

prostitution. She spent a long time in the brothels of Kolkata before coming to Delhi. It has been impossible to escape sex work, she says. Now 47, she has never been to school, and can neither read nor write, so finding alternative employment is a difficult task. She has a five-year-old son to support, so must keep earning enough money to feed them both.

When she was young she could earn 10,000 rupees (HK\$1,100) to 15,000 rupees a month, but now she is older. “Men like young virgin bodies with firm breasts, and not a decrepit woman with saggy and wrinkled breasts,” she says. Her monthly income has fallen to between 5,000 and 6,000 rupees.

Her rate for sex is now 200 rupees per client, but for a regular customer she lowers it to 150 rupees, half of which goes to the brothel owner. When she has five to seven clients in a day, she eats two omelettes that night.

Sex workers are outcasts in Indian society. In a country where millions of people survive on less than US\$1 per day and unemployment is surging, sex workers see no way of leaving their demeaning profession.

A report, “Sex Workers on GB Road: Economic Aspects and Prospects for Upliftment”, by independent researchers Divish Gupta and Simrat Ahluwalia and published by the New Delhi-based Centre for Civil Society, concludes that “sex work, either voluntary or a result of trafficking, is the direct consequence of poverty and social inequality prevailing in society”.

Several organisations have been set up to help rehabilitate the GB Road sex workers and their children. Kat-katha, a non-profit group, runs a community school for the children of sex workers, located just behind GB Road. Apart from education and academic support, the school provides training in dance, theatre and photography for the children, and alternative livelihood options for their mothers.



5,000

There are more than this many female sex workers in Garstin Bastion Road in New Delhi, one of India’s biggest red light districts

“Our vision is to end enforced sex work not by force but with love and compassion, providing [sex workers] with alternate life choices that they don’t have,” says Anurag Garg, who has worked with Kat-katha for seven years.

“It’s a very painful and humiliating job. We have to live a life of ignominy and shame

REKHA

“We don’t just want to rescue them and put them in rehabilitation centres, but empower them. We give them skills, and through their skills they can make the choice to leave. We are in touch with 800 to 1,000 women and we have projects in the brothels, like literacy programmes. Our volunteers go to the brothels and educate [the sex workers].

“We all know that what they

are doing is not by choice, and no one knows the reality of how they were trapped and forced and trafficked into this. They have a lot of potential to do something and it’s just that we have to break down that barrier and accept them, and be with them and share that love.”

Many Indian women earning a living from sex work were duped into the trade by people they once trusted. Stories abound of women being deceived and maltreated. A woman was pressurised by her lover to elope with him before he sold her off. Another was kidnapped by her brother’s friend while she was resting in the fields during the harvest season and then sold into the flesh trade. Yet another woman took up sex work voluntarily because she did not see any other way to support herself and feed her two children.

Rekha says all she wants from life is “to feel loved” and a place to call her own, but her income is barely enough to keep her. “I have always longed for a home,” she says. “I try to save some money but I don’t see any hope. I don’t think I can ever make my dream come true.”

Along with several other women, she sleeps in the lobby of the brothel on makeshift charpoys, India’s traditional woven beds. The women share a bathroom and a kitchen. Rekha prefers to stay indoors, and she does not go out unless there is an emergency. She has no feelings for her clients.

People who have never lived as sex workers cannot possibly understand how awful it can be, Rekha says. Her clients almost always use condoms, and she has monthly check-ups at a local hospital in Delhi, yet the psychological trauma is intense.

“It’s a very painful and humiliating job,” she says. “We have to live a life of ignominy and shame. One might enjoy it for the first time or the second, but when you have to do this to earn a living and do it every day, your body no longer remains yours. It becomes public property.”

