

Feminist Contributions from the Margins: Shifting Conceptions of Work and Performance of the Bar Dancers of Mumbai

FORUM AGAINST THE OPPRESSION OF WOMEN

With the case against the ban on dance bars in Mumbai still pending in the Supreme Court, this paper analyses two studies – “Background and Working Conditions of Women Working in Dance Bars in Mumbai” and “After the Ban: Women Working in Dance Bars of Mumbai” – which have unearthed the hitherto unknown lives of women dancers. It highlights the shifts that feminists have made in their understanding of how women from a poor background have charted and defined their work and lives. It also reminds us that like in all workplaces which are not regulated, and as with other unorganised workers, it is important that the bar dancers be organised to fight for their rights, such as pensions, working hours, the prevention of entry of minors into the profession, maternity benefits, crèche facilities, etc.

This paper draws from two research studies¹ conducted by several feminist groups in Mumbai following the ban imposed by the Maharashtra government on women dancing in bars in the state in 2005. The studies themselves unearthed the hitherto unknown lives of women bar dancers, their social backgrounds and working conditions. They brought to the forefront several contested feminist issues. Women's own articulation of their work and the labouring body; performance and the male gaze; sexual harassment in the workplace and women's trade unions in the entertainment sector were some of the issues that evoked an intense debate among those who undertook the research. Significantly, while leading to such debate, the study has highlighted the shifts that feminists have made in their understanding of how women, in this instance from poor backgrounds, have charted and defined their work and lives.

In contemporary social and economic circumstances, women are seeking livelihoods within extremely constricted options, determining for themselves where and how they will work. At such junctures, when the state as well as sections of society seek to control and arbitrate women's lives, feminists have to confront not just patriarchy, but a morality that benefits only the powerful. The bar dancers worked in tandem with feminist researchers to question existing categories of knowledge in order to understand their lives. This study, in effect, reaffirms how knowledge is generated from the margins.

Following this introduction is the rationale for why a group of feminists undertook these two studies. This is followed by a section on the specific methodologies adopted in undertaking the two studies, one before the ban came into effect, and the second study nearly nine months after the ban came into effect. Subsequent to this are some general findings of both studies that are relevant to the issues presented in the paper, as well as some comparable findings across the two studies. Finally, the paper looks at some of the conceptual shifts that feminists have had to make, and how the lives of the bar dancers have pushed the contours of knowledge and existence, not just for themselves but for the feminists who now have to contend with newer articulations of women's lives.

Why We Wanted to Do These Studies

The issue of women in dance bars projected itself into public discussion in March 2005, with the Maharashtra government announcing a statewide ban on women dancing in bars, reasoning

A draft version of the paper was presented in the XIIth National Conference of Indian Association of Women's Studies, held at Lucknow under the sub-theme, “Rethinking Feminist Methodologies” coordinated by Anandhi S and Meera Velayudhan.

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that they were corrupting the youth and tainting the moral fabric of society. Subsequently, on 16 August 2005, the Government of Maharashtra amended the Bombay Police Act, bringing into effect the ban. The ban was then successfully challenged in the High Court of Bombay by way of writ petitions filed by the associations of bar owners, the bar dancers' union as well as a number of women's rights and human rights groups, including the Forum Against Oppression of Women (FAOW). The state of Maharashtra, then filed a special leave petition in the Supreme Court of India. The matter has been pending for final hearing ever since. In the months before the ban came into force, women's organisations were concerned about this draconian measure that would render thousands of women and other workers in the bars jobless, in a situation of already spiralling unemployment. But even among the women's organisations there were several groups who supported the ban, stating that women who dance in bars were being trafficked into prostitution, and that dancing in bars was itself exploitation. For example, Dance Bar Virodhi Manch, a network of 24 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) said that it would support the Maharashtra government in the implementation of the ordinance promulgating the ban on dance bars (*The Indian Express* 2005).

Beer bars had been issued entertainment licences to operate by all previous ruling governments in the state. And yet, suddenly, the banning of these licensed business establishments was an issue that the government was concerned about, ostensibly in order to (contradictorily) "rescue" the women from this exploitative situation and to rescue male youth from the corrupting influence of these women and beer bars. Much was written in favour of and against the proposed ban on women dancing in bars and restaurants. The statistics quoted were very disparate – for example, the figures for the number of bars in Mumbai city varied from 307 to 1,350; the number of women employed there varied from 15,000 to 75,000; the percentage of women who were from outside India varied from 4 to 75% of the workers.

Real questions, like who were these women who danced in the bars, where did they come from and what were their livelihood concerns, etc, were relegated to the background in the government's urgency to press for the ban on women dancing in the bars. As those located within the women's movement, FAOW, Mumbai, along with the Research Centre for Women's Studies (RCWS), SNDT Women's University, Mumbai, felt the need to understand the government's rationale for proposing the ban as well as to understand the lived realities of the women dancing in the bars. We were also looking for answers to obvious questions like "why are women dancing in the bars being specifically targeted?"

Once the ban was announced, the discussion in the public domain primarily raised issues related to morality and behaviour. There was no official or academic effort to understand the situation of women dancing in bars. Apart from the voices of the women heard through their official union, there has been a serious absence of any systematic study of the women in the profession. The only study that has been quoted by the Maharashtra State Women's Commission has a very small sample, and is

hence, not really representative of the large number of women working in this profession.² After the ban came into effect, the dancers were not left alone. They continued to be hounded by the media, and even the police. They continued to be constantly under the public gaze. On the one hand, their limited access to public space was taken away, and on the other, they were denied their basic right to privacy.

Given the lack of any concrete data on the working conditions and backgrounds of the bar dancers, a survey was conducted of a larger sample of women in order to have a rational debate on the issue, and also to indicate the grey areas that might need further systematic investigation. For social policy and legislation, a systematic study is necessary, particularly to avoid rash decisions being taken by the government; decisions which might yield an immediate political mileage to some leaders but which might jeopardise the lives and livelihoods of a large number of people, especially women. Far from doing such a study, the government in this case created, and persists in disseminating, myths about the women that warped public opinion and did not allow for a rational debate. A study was needed then also to counter the disinformation being spread through various myths and loose statements, such as that almost 70% to 75% of the dancers were from Bangladesh and were being trafficked for sex work, or that women were in it for easy money, that minors were being trafficked into the profession, that bars were actually spaces for carrying out sex work, and so on. We also saw the usefulness of arriving at an understanding of the women's working conditions and the context of the profession in case there were any legal remedies to be sought or rights asked for.

The first study did serve these objectives and gave us a new understanding of the women who danced in the bars, their working conditions, their socio-economic backgrounds, how they saw their working environments, and their perception of the impending ban and its likely impact on their lives. After the ban, against the background of the findings of the first study, the need to understand the changes the ban had brought about in the living conditions of the bar dancers was felt more acutely than ever. The findings from the first study showed that the women who dance in dance bars are, by and large, undereducated or illiterate. These women do not come from communities that own land or where people are salaried, even. Most are from communities in which people earn their living as daily wage workers. Thus, women in these communities could either be dancing, earning their living as domestic workers, agricultural labourers and construction workers, or doing piece work or some other form of labour in one of the myriad informal economies functioning in India. The conclusion we reached was that the ban on dancing in bars would deprive thousands of women of their livelihood, and make them and their families vulnerable in more ways than one.

The second study was intended to cross-check the conclusions to which our previous study pointed. We wished to see in what ways and to what extent the ban affected the lives of women bar dancers, as well as their children and dependents. By studying the present living conditions of the women who had been

previously working as bar dancers, we wanted to understand if they had been rendered more vulnerable through the ban. We also wanted to investigate whether the bar dancers' "exploitation" had been mitigated, if not completely eliminated, after dancing in bars was banned.

Methodology

As feminists we were utterly conscious of the bar dancers' social situation, aware that the ban would have an adverse impact on their lives, and were awaiting evidence of its detrimental effect. Besides, we were also conscious of our own social location as both researchers and sympathisers, voicing the bar dancers' concerns. Our subjective position was explicit, and reflected what standpoint theorists like Sandra Harding have reiterated through the concept of "strong objectivity", that comes from taking the experiences of the researcher and researched into account, while also being cognisant of the differences in power, or what Dorothy Smith calls the process of deriving theory from the "everyday lived experiences of women that incorporates the social relations of their subordination" (Naples 2003; Code 2000).

The rationale for the first study was that there was no substantive understanding of the lives of the women dancers in dance bars in the city of Mumbai. This whole sector of the entertainment industry – the work of the dance bar women – was an unknown entity, and that dictated the methodology, the sampling distribution and size of the sample for the first study. The spread and diversity of Mumbai had to be taken into consideration in order to obtain a representative sample of the bars in the city. In order to cover such a large sample, the study employed the survey method.

The sample size included 500 women in 50 bars across the city of Mumbai, between Tardeo and Mira Road-Bhayandar on the Western Railway line, Dadar and Thane on the Central Railway line, and Sandhurst Road and Vashi on the Harbour line. These represented the geographical and class variations for bars in the city. The survey was conducted in the period following the government pronouncement of the ban and was completed before it actually came into effect, over a period of three months between May and July 2005. The survey schedule/questionnaire comprised questions that sought information on the women's age, caste, religion, marital status, socio-economic background; it explored their work and migration trajectories; their working conditions; average income and expenditure; also their own perceptions of their work spaces, the nature of the exploitation that they faced there and the futures they envisaged in case the dance bars closed down. The questions also attempted to test some of the statements made so far either for or against the ban.

The investigators approached the women bar dancers at night, in the bars, during their working hours. This also enabled the research team to have an opportunity to observe the actual working conditions in these dance bars. The contacts for the different bars across the city were made through the dance bar owners and the Bharatiya Bar Girls' Union,³ but the women were selected at random, depending on who was free to talk to the team at any given time.

Thus, although the research team had absolutely no knowledge of this entertainment industry, and despite its unorganised nature, going via the bar owners and the Bar Girls' Union enabled the rapport that was necessary to ensure the cooperation of the women bar dancers, who were now under surveillance by the state, which had threatened their livelihood with the impending ban. Although several aspects of the likely impact of the ban on the lives of the women became evident in the course of this study, it was necessary to conduct another study to understand the comprehensive impact of the government-imposed ban on their lives.

The second study was undertaken almost nine months after the ban came into effect. The actual impact of the ban was thus an important variable that was focused upon in this study. Both the design and the process of the study were undertaken by the same research team that had conducted the earlier study – RCWS and FAOW.

While the earlier study had been conducted by approaching women at their workplaces, i.e., the bars spread across the city of Mumbai, after the ban it was extremely difficult to find the women bar dancers who had worked in these bars. Several of the women who were part of the earlier sample were now unavailable; they had either left for their villages or were doing some other work and could not be approached. With a common profession and shared working space now being non-existent, it was also difficult to contact women through the union. As a result the sample comprised only 80 women compared with the earlier study's sample of 500 women. This study generated both quantitative and qualitative data, as an attempt was made to capture the voices of women who had experienced massive changes in their lives in the short span of less than a year.

The research team approached the same bars that had served as the sample in the earlier study. The bars continued to operate, as the state government had obtained a stay only on the women's dancing in these places. The researchers found that some of the women were still present in the bars, either working as waitresses or returning to seek work. These women, who had also participated in the earlier survey, had tried coming back after the ban was temporarily lifted following the high court order, but had to compete with other women for the waitress jobs.

Methodologically, the idea behind trying to locate women at their workplaces, as in the case of the previous study, was to obtain an idea about the sources of livelihood sought by the women in the absence of dancing. The women who continued to work in the bars, we reasoned, would also be able to provide some information about those who had left because they had been unable to get other jobs in the bars. In-depth interviews and conversations were conducted to grasp the processes that women were pushed into when suddenly deprived of their livelihood.

While we met some of the 80 women respondents for the second study in the bars, several others had to be sought out in their homes. This was a cumbersome procedure, as many women had no idea where the others who had worked with them earlier, now lived. Women who had no support structures could not be located; those who had some help or support as they continued to

look for jobs while living in the city were the ones we approached at their homes, and these formed the majority of the sample in the second study. The process of conducting interviews both at the bars and in the homes of the women gave us a clearer understanding of their vulnerable condition, the various levels of deprivation the ban had imposed on them and the nature and particularities of the work they now did.

The second study focused on the following aspects of the women's lives: their socio-economic profiles, migration patterns, impact on livelihood, education, health and nutrition, travel and living conditions, earning and expenses before and after the ban, as well as their experiences with the police, customers and neighbours. In addition, the survey recorded their perceptions of the current situation in the bars if they were still employed there in newer capacities, including their interaction with bar owners and clients. The entire process of doing the interviews provided us with valuable glimpses into the subtle and silent areas of these women's emotional and personal lives. Along with quantitative data on where the women were from, the caste to which they belonged, and economic information about them before and after the ban, qualitative data was also collected to obtain a more textured and nuanced sense of how the ban affected the lives of these women and their families; to gain some insight into how they made livelihood decisions; to learn about their experiences with the police and other local authorities.

A total of 80 women working in 22 bars in the city were interviewed. The bars were located between Mira Road/Borivili/Andheri/Dadar to Grant Road/Marine Lines/Flora Fountain on the Western Railway line; between Thane to Ghatkopar to Dongri on the Central line; and in Chembur/Sion on the Harbour line. Interviews with 17 women were conducted at their homes at Congress House, Mira Road, Thane and Chembur. The Bharatiya Bar Girls' Union also helped the investigators meet with some women who had been displaced from the bars and were currently unemployed.

The sample for this study was chosen from the same universe as the first RCWS and FAOW study, which was useful for an effective comparison of the situation of the women prior to and after the ban was implemented. In order to make some comparable observations, the samples from the two studies were correlated with respect to the following parameters: age profile, marital status, educational level and skill training, the states from which the women had migrated, whether they were from traditional dancing or sex work communities, other earning members in the family and the number of dependents.

As scholars and activists coming from the domain of women's studies and the women's movement, our methodological concern was to reflect the voices of the women bar dancers, especially with regard to how they defined their work and livelihood, the exploitations that they recognised and faced, and their vision of the future.

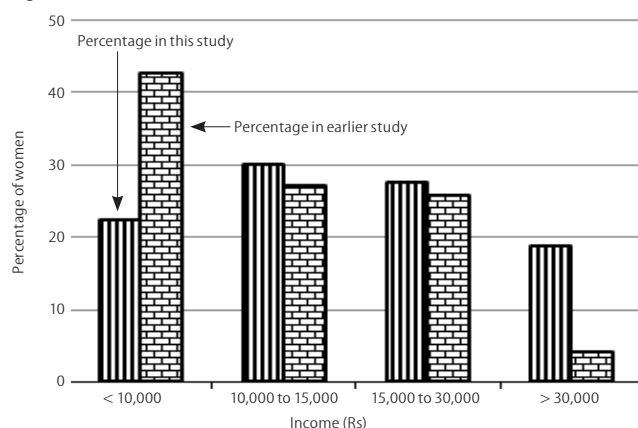
Some General Findings

Migration of Women: This delineates the specific conditions under which women migrate, in this case to dance bars in Mumbai. Nearly 82.6% of the women were from outside the city, 5% being

from other parts of Maharashtra. The largest number of women, nearly 25%, was from Uttar Pradesh, followed by West Bengal, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi and Andhra Pradesh. Mumbai itself accounted for about 12%. As with most migrants, these women had come to the city due to poverty and destitution, seeking a better life for themselves and their dependents.

One hundred and seventeen out of 500 women had worked in other jobs before beginning to work in dance bars. They had worked as domestic workers, rag pickers, in small-time factories, doing piece work like assembling pens, packing boxes, printing wedding cards, making computer plugs, bandages, mirror work, in sales jobs, nursing, catering, tailoring, giving tuitions, and working in STD booths. Some women had tried to do stage shows, modelling, singing *mujras* before working in the dance bars. One woman had moved from doing sex work to working in the bars. None of the women said they had been trafficked or bought or sold into the dance bars. Most of them had come to know of dance bars through family members, community contacts, neighbours, or it was common knowledge. Most of the women had worked in three or four bars over a period of time, and felt they could change bars as and when they liked.

Figure 1: Income Profile Before and After Ban



There has been much written on the absence (Agarwal 2006) of such specific understanding of women's migratory histories, and their entry into sexual labour of any sort. The findings of this study contribute significantly to placing in context the rather polarised debate on coercion versus choice in women's engagement in sexual labour.

Caste Profile: Many of the women (nearly 42%) were from communities where women are traditionally the bread earners, either by doing sex work or through dancing for men. Within these communities, girls are provided no opportunities for education, or training in any skill. Nor do the state institutions reach out to these impoverished groups. Often, due to the fact that livelihood is linked to caste in most parts of the country, opportunities to move into other areas of work are limited. Many bar dancers said that while they only danced (and did not do sex work), they had some regular customers who were their main sources of income and whom they specifically entertained in the bars. They seemed to have a degree of comfort and of negotiation power with these customers, which allowed them to confine their work to dancing

alone. In the event of the closure of the dance bars they felt they would be forced to do sex work.

Profile of the Bars and Conditions of Work: The bars surveyed belonged to a range of grades, determined by the number of dance floors in the bar, the number of women employed and the price of liquor served. Some of the bars worked two shifts, one from 3 pm to 9 pm, and a night shift from 8 pm to 1.30 am. The number of women employed also varied, with some bars employing 25 to 30 women dancers, while others employed 40 to 60 women dancers. At any point of time, a group of 8-12 women would be dancing on a particular floor, and once they got off the floor, another group would take their place. With respect to working conditions, the women said that these were safe and that their personal safety was taken care of by the bar owners.

Comparable Findings

Impact of the Ban: One of the main outcomes of the ban was the loss of livelihood for the women dancers, many of whom were now unemployed, or working as waitresses in the bars. There was a significant reduction in incomes (Figure 1, p 51), with more women appearing in the below Rs 10,000 per month category in the second study, unlike in the earlier study which showed an equal number of women who earned less than Rs 10,000 and those who earned between Rs 10,000 and Rs 20,000 or between Rs 20,000 and Rs 30,000. Most of the women now lived off their savings; they had to stop the education of their children and their dependents' children; to move from secure housing to cramped abodes; to compromise on household purchases and health expenses.

In addition to all these blows, their social vulnerabilities had mounted. They faced increased harassment by the police, who now harassed them both inside the bars through continuous raids that their newly acquired powers allowed them to carry out, and through sexual harassment outside the bars. It had now become much more difficult for women to negotiate and to resist the sexual advances of customers, since dancing had been prohibited. Still, many women continued to work as waitresses or as part of the orchestra in the bars. And they did not get the same sort of support that the bar owners had provided them earlier, when their dancing was responsible for bringing men into the bars and for keeping the business running.

Some of the important findings of the first study were reinforced/confirmed by the second, for instance, the findings regarding education levels and skill training. A very large number of the women (Table 1) were illiterate (42% in the first study and 46% in the second study), and most had a very little formal education. A vast majority (Table 2) (86.4% in the first study and 89% in the second study) had not had any skill training, either, apart from dancing. An interesting observation could be made through this comparison: in the second study, about 91% did not have any education after the eighth standard, as against 83% in the first study, indicating that those with less education were less able to get other jobs and find other sources of livelihood. These were the women who had depended most on the bars for survival, and so were among those worst-affected by the ban.

Table 1: Educational Level

| Education | First Study | | Second Study | |
|----------------------------|-------------|------------|--------------|------------|
| | Number | Percentage | Number | Percentage |
| Non-literate | 210 | 42 | 37 | 46 |
| Up to 5th Std | 101 | 20.2 | 13 | 16 |
| Up to 8th Std | 103 | 20.6 | 23 | 29 |
| Up to SSC | 64 | 12.8 | 5 | 6 |
| Higher secondary and above | 22 | 4.4 | 2 | 3 |
| Total | 500 | 100 | 80 | 100 |

Table 2: Skill Training

| Had Skill Training | First Study | | Second Study | |
|--------------------|-------------|------------|--------------|------------|
| | Number | Percentage | Number | Percentage |
| Yes | 68 | 13.6 | 9 | 11 |
| No | 432 | 86.4 | 71 | 89 |
| Total | 500 | 100 | 80 | 100 |

In the first study, a comparison of the educational level of all women showed that "...most of the women from sex work and dance communities are worse off. A higher proportion of women in these communities (52.1%) were illiterate compared to those in other communities (34.6%)." It also showed that almost 42% of the 500 women we spoke to came from the dancing and sex work communities. This meant that their livelihoods would definitely be affected by the ban, as the second study proved. In fact, there are other studies to show that women from these communities in the states of Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh do seek out dance bars in Mumbai as a livelihood option (Agarwal 2008 and 2006).

Like the first study, the second study also indicated that most women had migrated from other states to Mumbai (Table 3). However, the number of women from Mumbai in the second sample was smaller because many of them were neither at the bars nor could they be contacted at home. With growing stigmatisation, it was difficult to identify these women in their residential areas. Many migrant women who had worked in dance bars lived in specific neighbourhoods in clusters, and so were somewhat easier to locate. This was why more women from Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan were present in the sample for the second study. The number of women from West Bengal was also lower in the second sample. This could be due to two reasons. First, there was no area where these women lived together, neither was there a specific cluster of bars where they worked, as they lived in precarious housing conditions and their addresses changed often. Second, following the ban, a large number of Bengali bar dancers

Table 3: Place of Origin of Bar Dancers

| State | First Study | | Second Study | |
|---------------------|-------------|------------|--------------|------------|
| | Number | Percentage | Number | Percentage |
| Andhra Pradesh | 13 | 2.6 | 1 | 1 |
| Delhi | 28 | 5.6 | 4 | 5 |
| Maharashtra | 25 | 5 | 4 | 5 |
| Mumbai | 62 | 12.4 | 3 | 4 |
| Madhya Pradesh | 45 | 9 | 3 | 4 |
| Rajasthan | 60 | 12 | 20 | 25 |
| Uttar Pradesh | 124 | 24.8 | 32 | 40 |
| West Bengal | 103 | 20.6 | 7 | 9 |
| Rest of the country | 34 | 6.8 | 6 | 8 |
| Outside | 6 | 1.2 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 500 | 100 | 80 | 100 |

had been arrested and taken into custody, under the allegation that they were illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. The fear of arrests had spread to all women from Bengal, with the result that the research team was unable to approach many of them.

In both studies, the data on caste and community proved useful. The number of women from communities where they were the breadwinners, either by means of dancing for men or sex work, was much larger in the second study. This clearly indicates that for these women coming from these communities, there were even fewer options outside of the bars. Their need to

Table 4: Earners in Household

| Earners | First Study | | Second Study | |
|----------------------------|-------------|------------|--------------|------------|
| | Number | Percentage | Number | Percentage |
| Only self | 364 | 72.8 | 55 | 69 |
| Self and women from family | 90 | 18 | 18 | 23 |
| Self and men and women | 35 | 7 | 4 | 5 |
| Self and husband | 11 | 2.2 | 3 | 4 |
| Total | 500 | 100 | 80 | 100 |

earn was also probably greater as they were, by tradition, the main breadwinners for their extended families. Given their background of poor education and other skills, it is evident that it becomes more difficult for these women to find other sources of livelihood. Both studies revealed that a majority of the women (Table 4) were the sole earning members in their families. Some women belonged to households in which only women were earning members. A very few women belonged to households where men contributed to the income.

A vast majority of women (Table 5) – 97% in both samples – were supporting dependents, with 84% in the second study and 87.8% in the first study supporting up to 10 dependents. There were slight differences in the number of dependents: 30.2% of the women were supporting one to three dependents in the first sample, whereas in the second sample, this percentage was 18%. Similarly, whereas 37% were supporting four to six dependents in the first sample, in the second it was 45%. These dependents might have been living here in the city, with the women, or with their extended families back home. The second study had more women in the city, who supported a larger number of dependents. Since these women needed to look for jobs and livelihoods with greater urgency, we were more easily able to find them here, looking for opportunities for survival.

Table 5: Number of Dependents

| Number of Dependents | First Study | | Second Study | |
|----------------------|-------------|------------|--------------|------------|
| | Number | Percentage | Number | Percentage |
| 0 | 15 | 3 | 2 | 3 |
| 1-3 | 151 | 30.2 | 14 | 18 |
| 4-6 | 185 | 37 | 36 | 45 |
| 7-10 | 103 | 20.6 | 17 | 21 |
| 11-15 | 28 | 5.6 | 3 | 4 |
| 16-24 | 15 | 3 | 6 | 8 |
| 25-30 | 3 | 0.6 | 2 | 3 |
| Total | 500 | 100 | 80 | 100 |

Conceptual Shifts

Apart from the findings that mapped some of the hitherto unknown terrain of women workers in an entertainment sector, several other substantive issues for debate (both conceptual and

empirical) were thrown up during the course of the study, and in the subsequent debates that ensued in several forums, for feminists and women's studies scholars to engage with.

(1) Sexual Labour as Livelihood: Any activity that earns a livelihood or monetary returns for those people who engage in it counts as work/paid labour. When several such workers come together to bargain for their rights, they acquire legitimacy from the state and society. And yet, though the women who worked in the dance bars were engaging in legitimate work, and several thousands of them were also unionised, the state refused to recognise it as such and banned their work as illegal. As feminist scholars, this debate on the legitimacy of sexual labour as work has engaged us too as a contentious issue. In their work of dancing in the bars, the women dancers were attentive to the presentation of their bodies and to the care for their looks, the skill required to negotiate with the male gaze and to keep up with the performance, all of which were indicative of the value of their labour. In the labour market of bar dancers, a woman had only a limited period of existence given that newer and younger women were always pushing the older women out, and so the women working in the bars had to make the most of their time there.

Additionally, their relationship to the bar owners was also a tenuous but imperative one. They were in effect self-employed, although they worked under the bar owner's eye. They relied on the bar owners for protection from police harassment and from unruly clients, and for support such as arrangements for transport or food. But the bars that were essentially beer bars ran primarily because of the dancers, with the sales of liquor determined by the women's talent for bringing in customers. Prior to the ban imposed by Maharashtra, the bar girls' union had been working to negotiate and establish certain terms of a contract between the bar dancers and the bar owners, so that the women might regularise some of the terms of their work, and expect better working conditions.

The bar dancers were also constantly negotiating, as feminists would do, with notions of autonomy, financial independence, decision-making, not just in their work, but in their lives, with their families and with other constituents of society. These phenomena have been apparent in other organised groups of women as well, such as women in numerous self-help groups across the country, women working in precarious labour situations such as Special Economic/Export Processing Zones and so on – women who are self-employed and in newly evolving employment sectors of the economy.

(2) Migration as an Issue: Just as there is recognition of migration by people and specifically women in several sectors, for livelihood, not just with their families but as independent agents across the country, so also the agency of bar dancers as migrants need to be recognised. Feminist advocacy for recognition of migration by women in sectors such as construction, mining, brick kilns, even international domestic labour, has also been accompanied by campaigns to legislate for social security and other support services (Arya and Roy 2006; Agarwal 2006).

Needless to say that the pressures to migrate are a reflection of the relentless pursuit of the current model of development that only provides its fruits to a few in select centres of development, while displacing and making destitute a multitude of other people, whose labours are anyway harnessed to perpetuate that model of development.

How do feminists understand and theorise these movements by women? What are the understandings of the household situations of women who choose to migrate? What are the networks that these women have and tap to deal with oppressive situations? These are questions that resonate with the experience of the women bar dancers from the two studies.

(3) Exploitation: In our traditional feminist understanding, any form of sexual labour, be it sex work or dancing in bars, is per se exploitation of women. This linear understanding takes away from any desire or choice/option/freedom that women may have exercised in the performance of such work. It also negates any skill or ability that women use or possess in order to perform that work. In addition, banning any exploitation is not an answer or solution to stop such exploitation. It only serves to hide the source of exploitation, further reducing the space available for negotiating exploitative situations.

While on the one hand, there is a call for banning any work/labour/activity that is seen as "inherently exploitative", such a reaction is never expressed in the case of marriage. It is the reality of most women that they do not "choose" to get married, but almost always is the only means to economic as well as social existence.

Marriage as a patriarchal institution is inherently exploitative of women. Yet, nowhere have we as feminists asked for the banning of marriage. Just as some women may have been able to negotiate a better marriage for themselves, some women dancing in bars have been able to negotiate better conditions of work. The refusal to view the connections between the situations of institutionalised marriage and sex work/dancing in bars is problematic.

(4) Male Gaze: Men look at/ogle women everywhere, be it at a workplace like a bank, in the streets, and in other public and social spaces. In a patriarchal and unequal society, many men feel that it is their absolute right to stare at and harass and abuse women (verbally, physically and sexually). Even in a dance bar, it is these very men who ogle women. This fact that men ogle is what enables some women to make a living out of it. By making a living out of a situation which is seen from the outside as exploitative, women have been able to turn it into an advantage, in whatever limited way. At the same time, it has to be acknowledged that while in a public space it is not legitimate that men ogle, in a dance bar it is imperative that men ogle so that women may earn a living. This contradictory experience of the male gaze, and of the negotiations with that gaze that the bar dancers are able to conduct/have, is an issue that needs to be further analysed, especially in terms of other structures that are seen as disadvantageous to women.

(5) Morality: In a society as stratified by class as ours, different norms of morality are applied to people of different classes. The



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same kinds of dances, when performed by film stars on screen or even in live shows, do not invite the same kind of denouncement as when performed by the women dancers in bars. It is hypocritical to criticise one while appreciating the other. Besides, almost all popular dancing, whether it happens in the dance bars or during marriage and religious processions or in college programmes or in talent search/reality show competitions, tends to be influenced by the latest films; to term one vulgar and to endorse the other by watching indulgently while "our own youngsters" do it, and to call one obscene, while approving the talents displayed in the other is a double-standard of morality that needs to be much more widely recognised as such. In addition to societal morality, women dancing in bars also have faced flak from what can be termed "feminist morality". Whether it is by looking at dancing in bars as exploitative alone, or as activity/work which ought not to be done by "good women", traditional feminist thought has unilaterally aided in the marginalisation of women dancing in bars rather than giving them the space to articulate their own positions and concerns.

Feminism from the Margins

What these studies do is to highlight the complexities of women's lives by drawing attention to the diversity of circumstances, opportunities and choices that women make. It has served to extend the parameters of feminist debates and politics, altering the tendency to reduce women's lives into binaries or polarised existences. Primarily, of course, they highlight the reality of the lives of a group of women by bringing out their voices to extend feminist debates rather than reinforce traditional feminist assumptions.

It is important for us as feminists to focus on studies of livelihood, especially in an economic scenario where livelihood or survival options for women are being touted by everyone from self-help groups to joint forest management programmes to training schemes for agro-production, often at the behest of the state or multinational companies. Unlike feminists, these agencies do not stress women's needs and desires, or their conditions of work and terms of employment, which are of importance when structures

of change continue to reinforce traditional roles and burdens on women. At no point are we saying that the conditions of work within dance bars are devoid of exploitation or oppression. Like in all workplaces which are not regulated, and as with other unorganised workers, it is important that the bar dancers be organised to fight for rights such as old age pension, working hours, the prevention of entry of minors into the profession, maternity benefits, crèche facilities, etc. That the ban was successfully challenged (though later still pending in the Supreme Court) by women's groups and human rights groups as well as by the Bar Dancers Union underscores the importance of the women's movements standing in solidarity with marginalised women. This would essentially mean that as feminists we move away from our "traditional feminist understanding" and be accepting of feminisms from the margins.

Additionally, what the lives of the bar dancers (through their voices) have demonstrated, not just for feminists, is an effort to eschew the victim mantle, so dear to the traditional feminist and social cause! These women do not see their lives as isolated instances, but deeply and organically linked to the lives of women and men across the social spectrum, for example, when they speak of their earnings and expenses: why should their children not go to good schools, or why should they not live in secure and privacy-laden homes, or why should they be forced to live off their fast-depleting savings?

Through their graphic and transparent depiction of their lives as single earners, supporting dependents, working hard despite occupational health problems, being part of a union, women bar dancers were placing the legitimacy of sexual labour as a livelihood option very clearly within and thereby extending the feminist debates on women's work.

These studies, along with the debates following the bar dancers controversy, has posed an interesting challenge to feminist pluralism in making a case for the women bar dancers' articulations of autonomy, redefinitions of work, notions of family and support structures, and a new feminist morality (joining hands with other women on the margins such as sex workers, etc). In effect we feel this comprises feminism from the margins.

NOTES

- 1 "Background and Working Conditions of Women Working in Dance Bars in Mumbai", by Research Centre for Women's Studies (RCWS), SNTD Women's University and Forum Against Oppression of Women (FAOW) Mumbai, 2005; "After the Ban: Women Working in Dance Bars of Mumbai" by RCWS, SNTD Women's University and FAOW, Mumbai, 2006.
- 2 The study commissioned by the Maharashtra State Commission for Women and conducted by researchers of the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Mumbai, with interviews of 16 women working as dancers in the dance bars, cited in RCWS and FAOW, 2005, p 2.
- 3 The Bar Girls' Union is a registered union for the women working as dancers and waitresses in the dance bars and was formed in August 2004. It has a membership of about 40,000 women and is spearheading the fight on behalf of the women dancers. Before the announcement of the possibility of the ban, the union was fighting against the police raids common on bars when women were picked up and harassed. It has also been negotiating with the bar owners to get a better

deal for the dancers, who technically do not get a wage but pay a commission to the bar owner of the tips that they individually earn. Successful negotiations with the union had helped reduce the owners' cuts in many bars from 70-80% to 60%. Since the announcement of the ban, however, the union is forced to join hands with the owners and fight for their collective interest of keeping the bars open, cited in RCWS and FAOW, 2005, p 5.

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