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Notes on unlearning

Our feminisms, their childhoods

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When we first watched the documentary film *Born into Brothels (BiB)* in 2008,¹ little did we know that a couple of years later we would be urged by a group of children of sex workers,² not unlike those in *BiB*, to make a film to counter its narrative. As feminist human rights lawyers, our first impulse on watching *BiB* was an amazement at the film's omission of any references to a vibrant sex workers' collective right next door to where the film had been shot in the Sonagachi red-light district in Kolkata.³ The Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC), a sex worker-led organisation with more than 65,000 female, male and transgender sex worker members, has been active there since 1997. However, *BiB* chose to make no mention of them. For us, such active exclusion was of grave consequence because we believed it only added to and strengthened a dominant narrative that worked to create an image of the sex worker as helpless, incapable and in need of rescue. Such narratives also lend legitimacy to a global saviour impulse that is put into practice by a whole host of state and non-state actors, even when sex workers refute the asserted need for external interventions in their lives.⁴

The DMSC protested against the film's voyeuristic and denigrating portrayal of the lives of sex workers and their children.⁵ But the directors' portrayal of their own struggle to rescue children of sex workers in Kolkata from their suffering had won hearts – and also the Oscar for best documentary in 2005. The film had become famous for the distanced publics of global compassion that it mobilised.⁶ The filmmakers were celebrated for their display of courage in the face of indigenous patriarchy, an underdeveloped and corrupt state and the incompetent, immoral parents of

the children. If it was not for their intervention, the film suggested in no uncertain terms, the children would have had to remain captive within the hellish brothels, a location that was their home. The removal of the children from their homes, from their mothers, was the valiant mission that the filmmakers were undertaking. The directors were the protagonists of the film; it was their story about their triumph over Third World miseries.

When we first watched *BiB* we had already been associated with the DMSC as feminist allies for many years. We supported their struggles for the right to sex work, and the rights of sex workers. We had been part of their rallies and written about their activism. As human rights lawyers we had held legal awareness workshops with their members. In the course of our interactions with sex worker activists we had learnt a key lesson in feminist politics, which was conveyed to us through a well-known slogan of the global sex workers' rights movement: 'nothing about us without us'. We learnt that the communities of people with whom a feminist engages and works must be regarded as active subjects capable of knowing, evaluating and deciding on what is best for their lives; that the feminist self who claims to be an ally in the struggles of marginalised people must not also claim superiority of knowledge and being.

Over the years, during our visits to the DMSC's offices in north Kolkata, we would meet many of the children of the sex workers milling about and participating in the DMSC's work. We would join with them to raise slogans at protests. Yet until we had watched *BiB* it did not occur to us with full clarity that children of sex workers are a group exploited by abolitionist feminists to trump arguments in favour of the right to sex work. *BiB* was, in many ways, an extension of such a feminist position, and reinforced an image similar to that of the Third World sex worker without agency, as was deployed in the 1996 Emmy Award-winning documentary *The Selling of Innocents*.⁷ These films have portrayed children born to sex workers as being trafficked at birth. By marshalling specific filmmaking techniques – the use of grainy, red-filtered, shaky images and haunting background scores – the films pursued a pedagogical mission: to train their viewers to believe that children of sex workers would naturally grow up to be prostitutes if they were girls and pimps if they were boys. Their fates were sealed – unless the abolitionist feminists intervened.

Strangely enough, as pro-sex-work feminists, we had seldom thought of the children of sex workers from the DMSC as fully agential subjects. Our focus was almost solely on the rights of sex workers and their right to sex work. This included their right to the custody of their children, but not necessarily the children's right not to be forcibly removed from their mothers. However, the fact that the children had

stakes in their mothers' struggles, that they too were political actors who were an integral part of the sex workers' rights movement, didn't dawn on us until we attended a DMSC protest rally led by Amra Padatik (AP), a collective of children of sex workers formed under the aegis of the DMSC.

On the evening of 3 March 2009 – International Sex Worker Rights Day – over 3,000 children of sex workers (aged between 6 and 25 years), all from Kolkata's Sonagachi and surrounding red light districts, marched through College Street. They held placards and shouted slogans demanding their rights as children to be free from stigma and discrimination. They also demanded their mothers' rights to perform sex work. The rally was organised and led by AP.



Fig. 5.1 At the Amra Padatik Rally, Kolkata, on International Sex Workers' Rights Day, 3 March 2009. (Photograph by Oishik Sircar)

One of the marchers' most popular slogans targeted India's then Minister for Women and Child Development: '*Renuka Chaudhary's Kalo Hath Guriye Dao, Guriye Dao*' (Smash Renuka Chaudhary's Black Hand). In using this slogan the children in the march were alluding to an amendment that the ministry had been seeking to make to the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956, to criminalise clients of sex workers. This move would have pushed sex work underground and exposed the children's mothers to additional violence and extortion. Along with this, they were also protesting against a provision in the same law that would allow the state to remove children attaining the age of majority from their mothers if they were defined as living off their mothers' earnings (in other words, living with them).

It was at this rally that we conceived the idea of a project on the collectivisation of children of sex workers, and their activism as political actors.⁸ We felt that it was necessary for the human rights world, of which we were a part by profession, to hear this story that we were learning about. In the light of a film like *BiB*, we aimed to foreground the experiences of these children from Sonagachi to challenge the singularity of focus on suffering that their ostensible plight has attracted. We did not mean to dismiss it, but to bring to light the multiple and overlapping realities of coercion, celebration, negotiation and determination that marked their lives. It was also an attempt at exposing how a singular focus on suffering worked to erase the complexity of their lived experiences – in turn, denying these children an opportunity to be recognised as citizens who have the capacity and vision to give meaning to how their lives are to be perceived or lived. While children of sex workers are on the receiving end of multiple forms of disadvantage they are also active agents in resisting disadvantage and formulating daily negotiation strategies which constitute an exemplary show of resilience.⁹ When they are minors, age not only leads to the violation of the rights of these children: it also becomes the reason why compassionate interventions do not consider them as citizens whose voices matter.

As feminists whose politics were strongly informed by a postcolonial sensibility,¹⁰ we assumed that our idea already carried an ethical heft. As part of our participatory methodology, we discussed our idea with a group of members from AP to get their feedback. While the group, which comprised AP's office-holders Pinky, Gobinda, Ratan, Mithu and Chaitali, were happy about a project of this nature, they raised doubts about its transformative capacity. They were concerned that we would end up publishing the outcome in English, in an academic journal, which would be of no use to them: it would benefit only us. The suggestion came from

one of them that we make a film that could both offer a counter-story to that of *BiB* and that AP could use as a part of their own advocacy work. Both Pinky and Gobinda had watched *BiB*, and they were troubled by how a film that demeans them and their mothers could find such widespread appeal, not only globally but also in India.

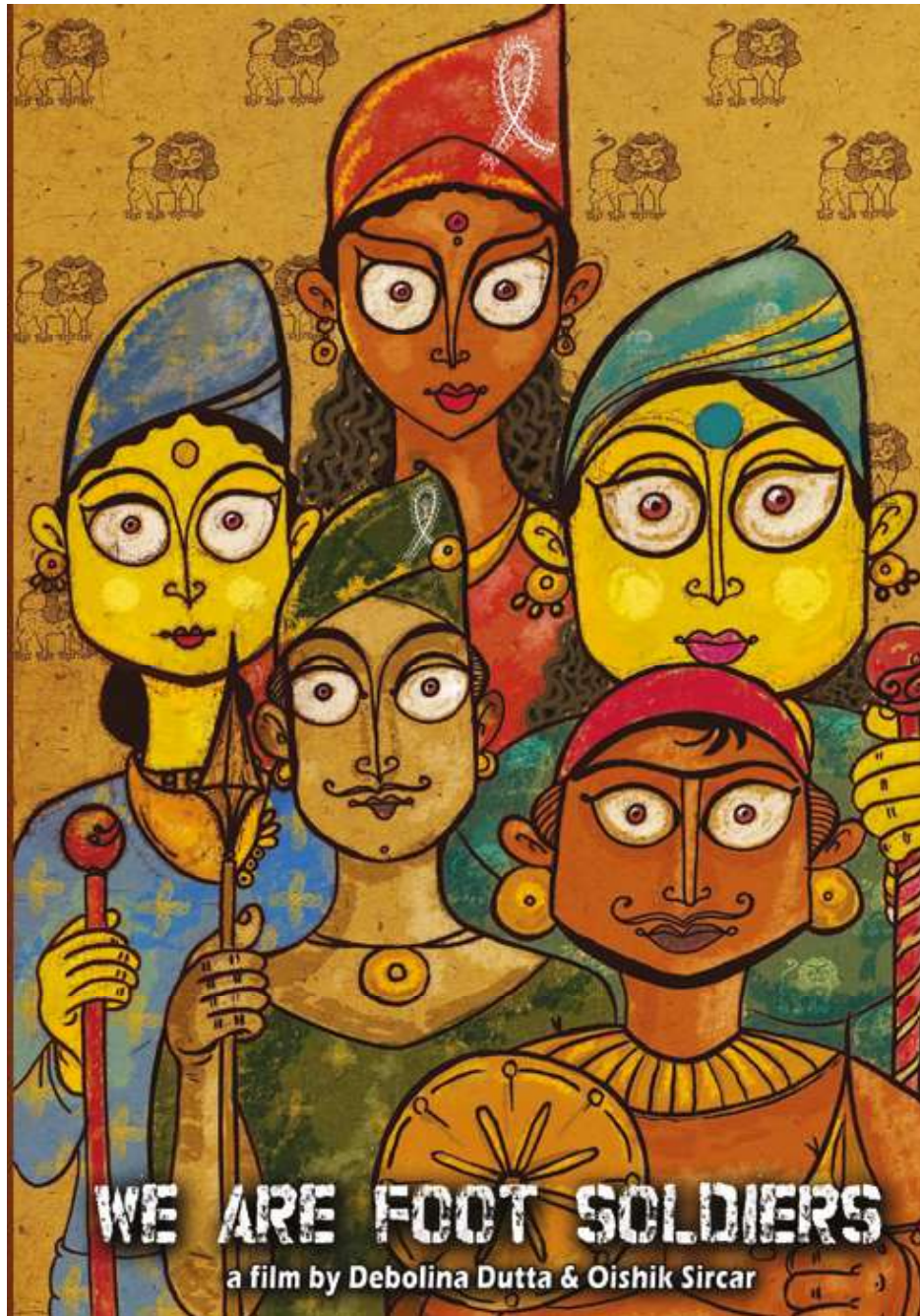


Fig. 5.2 Film poster artwork by Anirban Ghosh depicting the five protagonists. (Source: Anirban Ghosh)

In 2011, we completed the documentary film *We Are Foot Soldiers*,¹¹ which featured as protagonists the five members of AP mentioned above. We also published an article that accompanied the film.¹² While writing the article was a rehearsal of activist-academic conventions in feminism and jurisprudence, making the film was a provocation to unlearn a lot of these very conventions. It was not our inexperience in the technique of filmmaking that was the cause for this provocation. That challenge, although pertinent, we had overcome by bringing on board like-minded friends who had the requisite technical knowledge.¹³ Rather, it was the challenge of thinking about a form of storytelling that was able to bring our pro-sex-work feminism into conversation with the politics of AP. The risk in such a conversation was of letting our feminist interpretive lens become a totalising explanatory framework for AP's narratives of childhoods. How do we tell a story which is both ours and theirs? How do we tell a story in which the aesthetics will not overwhelm the politics and vice versa?

The film was a collaborative exercise and yet not. It appeared to us that the children were, through active participation in the filming, assuming ownership of the film which was seeking to tell their stories. But as directors we exercised creative control and authority. At the time



Fig. 5.3 Debolina with Gobinda, at his residence, during the filming of WAFS. (Photograph by Anindya Shankar Das)

of filming, we decided never to enter the frame of the camera during interviews. Yet, from over 12 hours of footage, the decision of which frames to retain into the final 26-minute cut was ours.¹⁴

Of course, these are standard dilemmas regarding the ethics of documentary filmmaking, especially when there is a clear differential in power between the filmmakers and the human subjects of the film. But for us, negotiating these dilemmas was more than a practice of professional ethics. These negotiations enabled us to witness a material encounter between our feminisms and a politics of their childhoods. Within pro-sex-work feminist discourses, children of sex workers often appear either as an apology or a justification for their mothers' choice of occupation. Through the conversations with our protagonists we realised that we needed to walk a fine line between foregrounding a pro-sex-work politics and at the same time not making that politics the sole foundational peg for the film. How could the film foreground an account by one of our protagonists who, while supporting the right to sex work, did not like identifying as the child of a sex worker all the time? How were we to present disagreements between children and their mothers without being predisposed to either position? If the children were to occupy centre stage in a narrative about their lives, the film had to make space for accounts that were not entirely in alignment with our pro-sex-work feminism. This necessitated that both we and the sex workers remain entirely out of the frames; thus, we decided to not interview any sex-working mothers.

The encounter between feminisms and childhoods that we saw was not one of rivalry, but unfolded as a dialogue in which we had to confront the fact that feminism, even in its best-intentioned and most self-reflexive versions, must recognise its limitations. For us, this recognition hasn't been a paralyzing force. The encounter has shown us the merits of unlearning to make way for learning anew.

NOTES

- 1 *Born into Brothels*, directed by Zana Brisky and Ross Kaufman (2004; New York: THINKFilm).
- 2 Our use of the term 'children' does not denote minors: it refers to those born to sex workers, or those whose mothers sell sexual services for a living. The protagonists in our film, mostly adults, referred to themselves as 'children of sex workers' and used it as an identity category.
- 3 Sonagachi has been a zoned red-light district in Kolkata since the days of colonial occupation. Its proximity to the Calcutta port enabled easy access for sailors and officers of the East India Company to the prostitutes. In those days the red-light district was marked out, for the purposes of quarantine and surveillance, by the Contagious Diseases Act, which sought to protect English soldiers. For a detailed historical insight into Sonagachi, see Sumanta Banerjee, *Dangerous Outcaste: The Prostitute in Nineteenth Century Bengal* (Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2000).

- 4 Jo Doezema, *Sex Slaves and Discourse Masters: The Construction of Trafficking* (London: Zed Books, 2010).
- 5 Swapna Gayen, 'Nightmares on Celluloid,' *The Telegraph*, 15 March 2005. Available at: https://www.telegraphindia.com/1050315/asp/opinion/story_4491793.asp.
- 6 Birgitta Höjjer, 'The Discourse of Global Compassion: The Audience and Media Reporting of Human Suffering,' *Media Culture and Society* 26, no. 4 (2004): 513–31.
- 7 *Selling of Innocents*, directed by Ruchira Gupta (1996; Toronto: Associated Producers Ltd.).
- 8 The initial funding for this project came from the National Child Rights Fellowship, which we had received from Child Rights and You (CRY) in 2009 to write a research paper on Amra Padatik's activism.
- 9 We want to note that the lives of children of sex workers aren't homogeneous. There are many different forms of sex work – brothel-based, home-based, street-based etc. – which means that the lives of the children take varied forms. While children of sex workers living in brothels become easily identifiable, and therefore more vulnerable on certain counts, it also means that they are likely to have a community of people, including other sex workers' children, around them that is not available to others.
- 10 Ratna Kapur, *Erotic Justice: Law and the New Politics of Postcolonialism* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2005); Sarada Balagopalan, *Inhabiting 'Childhood': Children, Labour and Schooling in Postcolonial India* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
- 11 *We Are Foot Soldiers*, directed by Debolina Dutta and Oishik Sircar (2011; New Delhi: Public Service Broadcasting Trust). Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bfm06qBo4c4>
- 12 Oishik Sircar and Debolina Dutta, 'Beyond Compassion: Children of Sex Workers in Kolkata's Sonagachi,' *Childhood* 18, no. 3 (2011): 333–49.
- 13 Our team comprised Anindya Shankar Das, Prachi Tulshan, Anirban Ghosh and Sakyadeb Chowdhury. We would like to acknowledge the inspiration drawn from Shohini Ghosh's important documentary film on the DMSC. See *Tales of the Night Fairies*, directed by Shohini Ghosh (2002; New Delhi: Mediastorm Collective). See also Shohini Ghosh, 'Sex Workers and Video Activism: Tales of the Night Fairies: A Filmmaker's Journey,' *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 7, no. 2 (2006): 341–43.
- 14 The decision to keep the film to exactly 26 minutes wasn't entirely ours. All PSBT-funded films are broadcast on national television, and thus must satisfy particular timings.