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DURBAR MAHILA SAMANWAYA COMMITTEE

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DURBAR MAHILA SAMANWAYA COMMITTEE – A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Introduction:

Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC), an organization of sex workers, functions as an exclusive forum of female, male and transgender sex workers and their children, from both brothel based and mobile populations. DMSC has 52 branches and a membership of about 40,000 sex workers across West Bengal, India. DMSC demands decriminalization of adult sex work in all its aspects, social recognition of sex work as a service sector occupation and establishment of sex workers' right to self-determination. DMSC also seeks to abolish or reform all laws which restrict the human rights of sex workers and limit their enfranchisement as full citizens.

Vision of Durbar:

Durbar seeks a world where all marginalized communities live in an environment with equal respects, rights status and dignity. We hope for a social order where there will be no discrimination based on class, caste, gender, religion or occupation. All the people of the world will live in peace and harmony.

Mission:

Durbar's mission is to enhance a process of social and political change in order to establish rights, dignity and improvement of social status including quality of life for all sex workers as a part of the global movement to establish the rights of marginalized people through the following:

- Changing the attitude of the people towards marginalized people in general and towards the sex workers in particular.
- Strengthening the struggle for enhancing self-respect of sex workers.
- Changing the unjust and illogical practices, laws, customs and policies that surround sexual services and sex workers.
- Uniting sex workers and empowering them through capacity building.
- Challenging the power-based relations within and outside the sex sector.
- Building networks among various individuals, groups, organizations and movements.

Activities of Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee in the year 2023 – 2024

Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, our core values are not just statements; they are the foundation of our identity and actions. These values guide our interactions, inform our strategies, and shape our vision for a more equitable society. As we reflect on the past year, we take pride in how our commitment to Respect, Recognition, Integrity and Commitment has driven our initiatives and empowered the marginalized communities we serve, including sex workers, Nachnis, Sabars, Mundas and others.

Over the past year, we have exemplified our commitment by tirelessly working to empower these marginalized communities. Our multifaceted approach encompasses education, healthcare and cultural enrichment, building an inclusive environment where every individual can thrive. Through our efforts, we have created opportunities for personal and professional growth, ensuring that community members are equipped with the resources and support they need to lead fulfilling lives.

Grassroots Day Celebration

Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee and its Sports Academy celebrated Grassroots Day on 20th May 2023, encouraging children from marginalized communities to participate in football and develop their physical and mental well-being through sports. Thirty-six boys and girls joined the event, which aimed to promote constructive thinking and deter child labour. Children were divided into small groups and engaged in fun activities of their choice for one and a half hours, with regular breaks for water and food. A 20-minute session with parents highlighted the importance of sports in children's lives. Licensed coaches, including Arya Basu Roy, Biswajit Majumder and Deepti Kalyan Sen, ensured the children's satisfaction with their games. The event took place at two grounds in Baruipur, South 24 Parganas and concluded with efforts to promote AIFF's Grassroots Day Celebration nationwide.



Establishing two social centres for Nachnis and Jhumurs in Purulia District (ETSC)

Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee led project Effective Functioning of Two Social Centres for Nachni & Jhumur Communities in Purulia District, progressed in several critical areas in this year. The program focused on enhancing the educational, nutritional, and social well-being of marginalized Nachni and Jhumur communities, primarily through two social centers. The centers aimed to reduce malnutrition, improve educational outcomes, and provide a discrimination-free environment for community members.

Throughout the year, these two centers served 134 children and 48 younger ones in the creche section, focusing on creating an engaging and age-appropriate learning environment. The centers provided regular academic support, with an average attendance of 52.64%. To address high dropout rates and nutritional needs, this program supplemented the children's diet and actively engaged with families through home visits. The staff continuously monitored each child's health and educational progress, incorporating assessment metrics like height, weight and skill acquisition and supporting special dietary needs to reduce malnutrition rates effectively.



The centers also emphasized healthcare support through partnerships with local health agencies. Immunization drives, alongside awareness programs on maternal health, resulted in 85.19% of eligible children receiving vaccinations, while all expectant and new mothers were registered for antenatal and postnatal care. Community-based interventions addressed domestic violence, child labor, and early marriage, and only one incident of domestic violence was reported and resolved through local mediation. These outcomes highlighted the project's role in fostering a safe, discrimination-free environment for participants.



Beyond health and education, Durbar also pursued extensive advocacy, establishing relationships with local government officials to improve social welfare access for the community. The centers also facilitated access to governmental schemes like Kanyashree and Janani Suraksha Yojana, enrolling community members and assisting with the issuance of essential documents like Aadhar and ration cards. Our outreach extended to 120 families, offering social security awareness and connecting beneficiaries with schemes designed to improve household stability and child welfare.

However, challenges persisted, including poor attendance due to environmental factors and community obligations, such as farming. Economic limitations within the community impacted local contributions to the centers, with efforts to increase engagement from self-help groups (SHGs) showing minimal financial gains. Despite SHG involvement in catering services, broader income generation remained elusive.



Durbar plans to address some of these obstacles through additional capacity-building and advocacy efforts, aiming to enhance resilience and self-sufficiency in the community. Continued focus on educational support, increased access to welfare programs and improved healthcare resources will be key areas for further development in the next fiscal year to overcome structural challenges and reinforce the project's long-term sustainability.



May Day March demanding Worker's Rights

On May 1, 2023, Durbar's May Day celebration highlighted a moving commitment to workers' rights as sex workers took to the streets in a powerful display of solidarity and advocacy. Under the slogan “মে দিবসের অঙ্গীকার, যৌনপেশার পূর্ণ অধিকার” (On May Day, We pledge full rights for sex work), we demanded equitable treatment, respect and acknowledgment, challenging entrenched social stigma. Marching with posters and chanting slogans, community people boldly addressed issues of discrimination and exploitation, articulating both struggles and aspirations for justice and dignity. The event also featured educational workshops focused on empowerment, legal rights and understanding worker rights, equipping participants with essential tools for advocacy. This collective action underscored the resilience of the sex workers, demonstrating united resolve to drive meaningful change. May Day stood as a powerful reminder of the necessity to uphold the rights and dignity of all workers, irrespective of profession.

Durbar Celebrated its 28th Birthday

We celebrated Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee's 28th Birthday on July 12, 2024 with a focus on promoting education among marginalized communities, particularly the children of sex workers, Sabar, Nachni, and Jhumur communities. The event recognized the academic



achievements of students who passed their Secondary and Higher Secondary exams in 2023. Sixteen students from the sex worker community, ten from the Nachni and Jhumur communities, four tribal students, and two from Rahul Vidya Niketan received financial aid, gifts and educational supplies to support their future studies. Dignitaries like Dr. Akhter Jawed from Karkinos Health Care Pvt. Ltd. and representatives from organizations like All India Democratic Women's Association and Inner Wheel Club were present. Cultural performances by Komal Gandhar added vibrancy to the event. Speeches by Durbar's Secretary, Bishakha Laskar and other dignitaries emphasized the importance of education in empowering marginalized communities and changing societal perspectives. Students were praised for overcoming challenges, and the event aimed to inspire others to pursue academic success.



A press conference followed the celebration, where the Secretary highlighted Durbar's ongoing efforts to advocate for sex workers' rights and the importance of education in breaking the cycle of poverty. The event concluded with a strong message of hope, inclusivity, and community spirit, reinforcing Durbar's commitment to creating an empowered society where every child has the opportunity to thrive.



Rakhi Bandhan Celebration and Khuti Puja by Durbar

On 30th August 2023, Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee celebrated Rakhi Bandhan and Khuti Puja at Sonagachi, marking the 11th year of our Durga Puja festival. Khuti Puja, the ritualistic beginning of Durga Puja, holds deep cultural and religious significance in West Bengal, symbolizing unity and empowerment. The event highlighted inclusivity and community resilience, as the sex worker community of Sonagachi organized Durga Puja to break social stigmas and building solidarity.



The event commenced with traditional Bengali rituals, attended by dignitaries including Dr. Sashi Panja, Minister of Child Development & Women Development, and Mr. Madan Mitra, MLA. Dr. Panja emphasized the importance of respecting the rights and dignity of sex workers, advocating



for the inclusion in mainstream society. Mr. Mitra, President of Durbar Durga Puja Committee, praised the strength and resilience of the community, emphasizing that Durbar's Khuti Puja is the true beginning of Durga Puja in Bengal.

A highlight of the celebration was the Rakhi tying ceremony, where sex workers tied Rakhis on the wrists of guests, symbolizing love, protection and acceptance. This powerful gesture reinforced the importance of breaking down barriers of discrimination. The event concluded with a message of unity, empowerment and cultural pride. It not only celebrated Durga Puja but also advocated for the rights and dignity of sex workers, sending a strong message of social change and inclusion. The Khuti Puja serves as a beacon of hope for a more understanding and inclusive society, where all communities can celebrate cultural heritage with pride and dignity.



Durga Puja Inauguration: A Celebration of Resilience and Perseverance

Durga Puja Inauguration by Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee on October 17, 2023, was a vibrant celebration that emphasized resilience, perseverance, and inclusivity. Hosted in Sonagachi, Kolkata, the event aimed to unite sex workers, promote rights and challenge societal stereotypes. The theme, “আমাদের পুজো, আমরাই মুখ” (“We are the face of our own puja”),



underscored that the sex workers' community is central to the festival and does not need external representation.

The inauguration featured notable dignitaries, including Dr. Sashi Panja, Minister of Child Development, and other political and social figures. It focused on building community spirit and raising awareness about the challenges sex workers face. The event aimed to empower marginalized women by involving them in the traditional celebration and advocating for community's legal and social inclusion.



The celebration featured diverse cultural performances, speeches from dignitaries, and religious leaders promoting equality and unity. The Durga idol, symbolizing strength and female empowerment, resonated with the event's theme of dignity for all. Dr. Panja and other speakers emphasized the need for social change and highlighted the bravery of sex workers, drawing parallels between the struggles and the goddess Durga's fight against injustice.

The event concluded with a vote of thanks, recognizing the collective effort to advance sex workers' rights. This Puja celebration marked a significant step toward greater social acceptance and inclusivity for marginalized communities.

Protect the Unprotected - A HPV testing Program by Durbar

The HPV screening camp, held on October 9th, 10th and 12th, 2023 in Sonagachi, Kolkata, was organized by Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, in collaboration with Karkinos Healthcare and funded by Marwari Relief Society. Its goal was to raise awareness about cervical cancer and provide HPV screening to vulnerable women, particularly sex workers, who face barriers to healthcare access.



The camp registered 125 participants and conducted screenings for six common types of cancer, including cervical, breast and oral cancers. Of the participants, a notable portion was identified to be at elevated risk for cervical cancer, with ten individuals testing positive for HPV. Younger sex workers, particularly those under the age of 30, were found to be especially vulnerable. The screening process strictly adhered to medical standards, ensuring that all procedures were conducted with the utmost respect for participants' dignity and privacy.

Outcomes highlighted the lack of awareness about cervical cancer symptoms. The way forward includes follow-up diagnostics, biopsies, continuous awareness sessions and targeted education. This initiative underscored the need for more mass screenings and education programs, setting a model for future healthcare efforts aimed at underserved populations.

Bhai Phonta Celebration

On November 15, 2023, Durbar celebrated Bhai Phonta, also known as Bhai Dooj, honoring the unique bonds among community members. Gathering at the central office, sex workers, clients and DMSC staff observed the festival in a traditional manner, with tilak ceremonies and blessings. The women applied tilak to the foreheads of clients and colleagues, reciting mantras meant for the occasion and exchanged heartfelt blessings to reinforce shared commitment. This meaningful celebration underscored a family-like unity that transcends conventional boundaries, symbolizing the strength, solidarity and mutual support within Durbar. Through the Bhai Phonta observance, we reasserted its dedication to fostering an inclusive, supportive environment, embracing every member as a valued part of its extended family.

Health Camps at Amlasole/Lagadori

Every year Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee organizes health camps in Amlasole and Lagadori in Jhargram district, West Bengal. This year also, a number of health camps were held in those areas with the goal of addressing the Adivasi and marginalized community's healthcare needs and building wellbeing. Under the direction of DMSC's healthcare professionals and volunteers, the camps provided basic medical services such as immunizations, general checkups, and medication delivery. To increase awareness and give residents the tools they need to take charge of their health, some educational sessions on diet, hygiene and preventative healthcare were provided. These programs have been crucial in closing gaps in healthcare access and encouraging early sickness diagnosis and treatment in Amlasole's underprivileged communities.

Durbar and Self Regulatory Board

DMSC is against any force exercised on sex workers, be it by clients, pimps, brothel owners, local goons, police or traffickers. Following the principal objective to dissociate sex work from all sorts of criminal association, by 2000, it formulated an anti-trafficking program through a platform called 'Self Regulatory Board' or SRB. SRBs are established in 30 sex work sites in West Bengal, rigorously monitoring entry of young girls (below 18 years of age) and women into sex trade or are somehow forced or coerced into selling sex who are unwilling. SRBs comprise of five to six members of the sex worker community, a MP (Member of Parliament) or Councilor, a representative of the local police, local medical officer, a lawyer and a representative from a Civil Society Organization. In this financial year SRB has brought to the Board a total of 743 individuals of which only two underage girls were identified and the rest of them wanted to continue sex work willingly.

Durbar also organized quarterly SRB meetings with the presence of the executive board members and SRB team in all its fields to discuss the facts regarding the problems and possible solutions. On this year, Durbar also organized several SRB meetings in various red light areas.





Durbar Celebrated World AIDS Day

On December 1, 2023, Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee celebrated World AIDS Day in Sonagachi with an impactful awareness program. The event brought together representatives from various sectors of society, including healthcare professionals, activists and local community leaders, all united in raising awareness about HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment. Through speeches, interactive sessions and informational materials, the program emphasized the importance of regular testing, safe practices, and reducing the stigma surrounding HIV. The gathering demonstrated the collective effort to fight the HIV epidemic, empowering vulnerable communities and promoting solidarity in the fight against AIDS.



Insightful Session on HIV/AIDS and other STIs

On December 23, 2023 Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, hosted a HIV/AIDS awareness session for the children of sex workers. Facilitated by Dr. Protim Ray, the workshop aimed to increase awareness, dispel myths and provide skills to protect against HIV transmission. Dr. Ray explained HIV and AIDS in simple terms, highlighting the vulnerability of core populations, including sex workers and injecting drug users. He also discussed the bridge population, such as truckers and migrant labourers, who act as transmission links to the general population. Dr. Ray also shared global and Indian HIV/AIDS statistics, along with data on other STIs, hepatitis, tuberculosis and COVID. He emphasized the importance of ongoing awareness efforts, especially for vulnerable communities, to create a healthier, more informed society.



Awareness program on health, hygiene and wellness essentials with Shabar & Munda Women

An awareness campaign on sexual health, reproductive health and menstrual hygiene was organized by Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC) on December 27, 2023 for the women of Shabar and Munda communities. The facilitator from DMSC shared valuable insights on these crucial topics, focusing on the importance of hygiene and wellness practices. Participants were educated on the basics of reproductive health and the significance of menstrual

hygiene, along with practical, simple ways to maintain hygiene daily. This empowering session helped equip the women with knowledge and techniques to support well-being and break taboos around these essential health aspects.



Unity through Sports: Celebrated Sabar Adhikar Dibash

Birsha Munda Gram Unnayan Committee, supported by Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, celebrated 'Sabar Adhikar Dibash' in Amlasole. The four-day event took place in Jhargram, with activities held in Lagadori and Amlasole. Sports and cultural events, the highlights of the celebration, began on 27th December and continued until 30th December. A Soccer competition, known as the "Sabar Cup," took center stage, featuring 16 football teams from communities like Sabar, Munda and Lodha. Other events, including Handi Bhanga, races, musical chairs and archery, attracted participants of all ages. The final matches on 30th December drew enthusiastic crowds, bringing the community together in support of their teams.



Staff Meeting of Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee

On January 10, 2024, Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC) held a staff meeting at Subham Community Hall, Kolkata. Representatives from all the red-light areas where DMSC operates participated, sharing their experiences, challenges, and proposed solutions with the central executive committee.

The meeting opened with a welcome address by a member of the central executive committee, followed by an open forum where representatives from various red-light areas, including Kalna, Titagarh, Kanthi, Jalpaiguri, Durgapur, Suri, Sonagachi, and others took turns sharing their issues. The primary concerns raised included harassment by police, customers, landladies, and local goons; lack of access to healthcare in areas where Targeted Intervention (TI) programs are not operational; stigma from local communities; and economic hardships worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Each representative also highlighted how Durbar has helped address these challenges.

In response, the central executive committee provided guidance on working strategies, emphasizing the importance of collective bargaining with local authorities and sustained engagement with prominent figures in society. They assured the representatives that DMSC would take the necessary steps to resolve ongoing issues and support them in their efforts.

The meeting concluded with a commitment from the central leadership to collaborate with all the red-light areas to implement the shared solutions and improve the overall welfare of the community.



Blankets Distributions to Elderly Sex Workers

On January 25, 2024, Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC), in collaboration with Shree Cement, conducted a blanket distribution drive aimed at supporting elderly sex workers in Sonagachi, Kolkata. This initiative was part of DMSC's ongoing efforts to uplift vulnerable communities and provide essential support to those in need.

The event specifically targeted elderly sex workers, many of whom face harsh living conditions, especially during the winter months. Recognizing the challenges these women endure, Durbar

with the generous support of Shree Cement, distributed warm blankets to provide comfort and relief from the cold. The distribution event was held in Sonagachi in advocating for the rights and welfare of sex workers.

The beneficiaries expressed immense gratitude for the thoughtful gesture, which came at a time when winter chills make life even more difficult for the elderly. Through this drive, Durbar reinforced its commitment to supporting marginalized communities, while Shree Cement's involvement highlighted its role in corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts. Together, both organizations demonstrated the power of collaboration in making a tangible difference in the lives of the most vulnerable members of society.



Press Meeting on the occasion of International Sex Workers' Rights Day

On February 28, 2024, a press meeting was held in Press Club Kolkata to discuss issues ahead of the 24th International Sex Workers' Rights Day, observed by Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee on March 3. The meeting addressed challenges faced by sex workers both in India and internationally. Speakers, including Ms. Rama Debnath, Ms. Aparajita Chowdhury, Ms. Sangita Pal and Ms. Bishakha Laskar highlighted key issues: the right to engage in sex work

voluntarily, the need for children of sex workers to have access to education while living with their mothers, and the recognition of sex work as legitimate labor.

The speakers emphasized decriminalizing this work to protect the health, safety and human rights of sex workers. They called for nonjudgmental and culturally sensitive support from governments, healthcare providers and civil society. Solidarity among sex workers and allies in fighting stigma and discrimination was also stressed. The press meeting reinforced the commitment to advancing justice and human rights for sex workers, underlining the importance of dialogue and support for building a more inclusive and equitable society.



International Sex Workers' Rights Day

International Sex Workers' Rights Day, celebrated annually on March 3rd, traces its roots to a 2001 gathering in Kolkata where 25,000 sex workers united to demand rights despite opposition. Organized by Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, this event continues to be marked globally, focusing on advocating for sex workers' recognition, dignity, and human rights.



Durbar's celebration of this day in this year in Sonagachi included speeches, cultural performances, and a rally with approximately 800 sex workers. The event aimed to promote the decriminalization of sex work, challenge stigma, and ensure sex workers' inclusion in labour laws. Key dignitaries, including social activists, doctors and government officials, delivered impactful speeches. Ms. Bishakha Laskar, Durbar's Secretary, emphasized the historical struggle for recognition and called for the adoption of a rights-based approach in policymaking. Other speakers, like social worker Supratik Chakraborty and Advocate Amitabha Chowdhury, highlighted the Intersectionality of sex work and the need for safe working environments and legal protections for sex workers. Footballer Shanti Mullick linked sports and social change, encouraging opportunities for children from marginalized backgrounds. Komal Gandhar, showcased the ongoing sex workers' movement, celebrating past successes while challenging societal stereotypes. The event culminated in a vibrant rally where participants marched through Kolkata, demanding decriminalization, fair working conditions, and an end to discrimination. The rally aimed to raise public awareness and mobilize support for the cause.



The event concluded with a call for unity, dignity and justice for sex workers, as Mr. Anirban Dutta and Ms. Laskar urged society, the police and government officials to support sex workers' rights, citing the Supreme Court's guidelines on equal legal protection. Durbar's efforts through this event underscored the need for ongoing advocacy to improve the lives and rights of sex workers in West Bengal.



Education Program Support by Durbar

Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee recognizes the challenges faced by sex workers and their children, who are marginalized and stigmatized by society. Sex workers, often from poor socio-economic backgrounds, are deprived of access to education, healthcare and social support, making it difficult to raise their children in a healthy environment. Despite these barriers, sex workers aspire for better lives for their children.

DMSC addresses these challenges through its educational program, based on the principles of Respect, Reliance and Recognition. This program aims to create a supportive environment where the children of sex workers can grow into responsible citizens with improved self-esteem and confidence. Initially launched in drop-in centers in red-light districts across multiple locations, such as Asansol, Kalna, Titagarh and others, the program provides educational materials and resources.

With funding from Rossari Biotech Limited, DMSC equipped each center with necessary supplies, including furniture, boards, chalk and mats. We also distributed school bags and stationery to children, tailored to their educational level. This initiative seeks to improve the children's access to education and help them build a respectable social identity.



Colors of Unity: Holi Celebration

The Holi celebration in Sonagachi marked a significant cultural moment on March 22, 2024 which was organized by Durbar. Sex workers celebrated alongside the general public, bringing together people from diverse backgrounds to partake in the festivities. Holi, known for symbolizing the arrival of spring and the triumph of good over evil, is a festival that promotes social harmony, inclusion and unity.

The event saw the streets of Sonagachi come alive with laughter and color, as residents and visitors joyfully covered each other with vibrant and splashed colored water. Traditional Holi songs and Rabindra Sangeet enhanced the lively atmosphere, creating a sense of collective joy. The occasion was also graced by notable figures, including Sunanda Sarkar from the Kolkata Municipal Corporation, Bisakha Laskar from Durbar and other dignitaries. Children from Komal Gandhar performed a special dance for the event.



Beyond the colorful revelry, the celebration held deeper significance by creating a sense of community and solidarity. Holi offered a break from the challenges of everyday life and allowed people from all walks of life to come together. Durbar used the platform to raise awareness about social issues, promote inclusion in society.
