

Unseen Battles: The Courage and Struggle of Sex Workers against Violence

Case Studies





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Note: Considering the privacy and safety rights of the participants involved in this Case Studies , names, addresses, and locations of incidents have not been disclosed as necessary.



Reena Lama
Executive Director



My Fight for Justice

I was married to a man who was an alcoholic. He would start fights for no reason, and was very abusive. I lived in constant fear and couldn't handle the abuse anymore, so I decided to leave him. With no other means to sustain my livelihood, I started doing sex work.

On October 23, 2024, a client offered me NPR 1,000 and took me to an old house in Koteshwor. The next day, the same man came back and asked me to go with him again. Thinking he would behave like the first day; I agreed to go with him at the same place. After we finished, he told me to swallow his semen. When I refused, he insisted a lot. Suddenly, I smelled something strange, and everything went black. When I woke up, I was in a bed at Bir Hospital. I think people nearby called the police and an ambulance when they saw me. My phone and NPR 2,000 were also missing.

Later, I found out I had been attacked with a knife on the back of my head and neck which got me 25 stitches. My jaw bone was injured, making me difficulty to speak and eat, and my eyesight was also affected. Although I got some treatment, I am still not fully healed.

My brother came to visit me at the hospital. The police told him about my work, he scolded me badly. After I was discharged, I went to my parents' house, but they only let me stay for 4-5 days so I returned to my rented room.

My family didn't help me file a police report, so I went to the Koteshwor Police Station alone. A few days later, they sent me to the Metropolitan Police Office in Ranipokhari. There, I was told I couldn't file a case without family support.

I sought help from an organization and eventually went to the New Baneshwor Police Circle. The officers there said they needed to identify the attacker to move forward. They told me to check for CCTV footage at Koteshwor Police Station.



When I went back to Koteshwor Police Station, they said they needed call records from my stolen phone of October 23 and 24, 2024, to continue the investigation. They arrested a suspect, but he was released as his involvement was not proved. Nothing has been resolved so far.

I still have physical injuries. My face is disfigured, and I have ongoing vision problems. I feel lost and don't know where to ask for justice. This experience shows how hard it is for sex workers getting justice. Everyone deserves to work in a safe place without violence, exploitation, or discrimination.

A Night in Police Custody without Fault

I have worked as a waiter, house keeper, dancer, and garment worker in my struggling days. Despite all this, it was difficult to manage household and son's education expenses. Eventually, I started doing sex work, and it has been 14 years now.

In 2020, me and my friend were walking along the Naxal road when police suddenly stopped us. They took us to Kamalpokhari for investigation and detained us overnight. The police asked my Facebook ID and password. When I said I didn't know the password, they kept questioning why we were walking together. They allowed us to make two phone calls. I made one call to my family and another to an organization, then they took our phones, switched off, and kept them. They said they would release us if we signed a paper. Out of fear, we signed it without reading, but they still didn't let us go.

That night, we saw the police bring in another woman accused of sex work. They tortured her by banging her head against a pillar, kicking and beating her severely. She cried and begged a lot, but they dragged her away. I was so scared that they might beat me too so I didn't dare to speak and just watched silently. Later that night, everything became quiet.

The next morning, representatives from the National Human Rights Commission and the organization I had called came to the station.

After detaining us, the police took us to Bir Hospital for a medical examination. They drew my blood, but I wasn't told what tests were done. Despite finding nothing in the tests, the police made me pay NPR 50 for the medical examination and for the food I ate during custody. With behold from the National Human Rights Commission and the organization, we were released, as there was no evidence against us except that we were walking on the road.

Even though I was innocent, I had to spend a night in police custody just for walking on the street.



The Client in Police Uniform

After some time of getting married, the constant neglect and endless arguments from my husband and family became unbearable. So, I decided to live separately from him with my 5-year-old child. I have got citizenship from my maternal family side, but my son's citizenship has not been issued because our marriage was never registered.

One day, I had an argument with a neighbor, and he physically assaulted me. When I tried to file a complaint, the police refused to register it, saying I was a sex worker. Instead, they insulted me and even criticized the organization I am involved with. After a lot of request, they finally registered my complaint, but no action was taken against him.

Once, I was with a client at a hotel. In the morning, when I asked for payment, he showed me his ID and said he was a police officer. He threatened me, saying, "Take NPR 1,000 instead of the agreed NPR 5,000, otherwise I will arrest you." Out of fear, I had to accept just NPR 1,000.

Until some time ago, the police officers often came as clients in civil dress and only reveal their identity as police refusing to pay while leaving. If it was a familiar officer, they would refuse to pay later or give low price before leaving. Many of them tried to get services for free, and if I refused, they would threaten to publish my photos or have me arrested. In the past four months, I have faced such incidents twice.

A Non-Citizen without Citizenship

I was sold by my parents to an Indian family when I was 4 years old. Since I was conscious, I used to do all the household work and used to get abused sexually there. When I was 9 years old, an Indian man promised to take me home and brought me to my parents' house in Kirtipur. A few days after I arrived, my parents sent me to work in someone else's house. After some time, I met a man, and I started living with him and we had a daughter. After about three years of living together, he left me. To manage living expense, I gradually got involved in sex work.

A few years later, another man came into my life. He promised to marry me and help me get citizenship, so I began living with him. I even had a son with him. He was aware of my involvement in sex work, but accepted it and, treated me well for a few years. Over time, however, his behavior changed. He started insulting me and physically abusing me over small matters, and began bringing other men in the room. He forced me to do sex work with these men and began taking the money earned from it.

Currently, my son studying in a scholarship from the Kathmandu Metropolitan City, with recommendation by an organization. Despite the constant arguments and abuse, I kept silent. However, in July 2024, after being beaten severely to the point of near-death, I contacted the organization. When they tried to counsel him, he agreed to stop, but the very next day, he began to beat me again, saying why did I contacted the organization. That's when I dialed 100 for the first time. The police arrived, including an Assistant Sub-Inspector (ASI), who was also one of my clients. He occasionally asked for free sex and ask me to find new girls for him.

After the police arrived, I informed the organization, and came to support me. The ASI pretended not to know me, insulted me, and tried to help my husband escape. Then my friend called 100 again and the police from another station arrived. My husband was arrested.

Due to the rule that no one can be detained for more than 24 hours, I was asked to go to the police station the next day to extend his detention. When I arrived, his brother was already there. In the condition to make my son's birth registration certificate I agreed on releasing my husband. I also decided that I would not live with him anymore.

I tolerated violence from him hoping to get citizenship, but to this day, I have not received it, nor have I been able to register my son's birth. I have been living without citizenship. What should I do now?

Many sex workers like me face violence and even the loss of life in their struggle to obtain legal documents like citizenship and birth certificates.



The Body Healed but the Heart Remains Scarred

I belong to a minority community. I was at Thamel, crossing the street, the police there beat me severely to the point of near death. I cried and requested for help, but no one came forward; everyone just watched me getting beaten. The brutal beating by the police left me unable to walk, and one of my friends nearby took me to the hospital for treatment.

A few days later, with the help of an organization, I filed a complaint at the Darbar Marg police station, seeking action against the police who had violated me. After the complaint, the officer who had assaulted me apologized and provided me NPR 3500 for the treatment.

The organization suggested me that we need support of the police in future also, so urged me to settle the matter and not file a legal case, asking me to sign a settlement agreement. However, I have not received that document to this day. Although the external wounds from the torture have healed, the wounds in my heart and the mental anguish did not lessen.

Therefore, for full justice and to prevent such incidents from happening again in the future, I filed a complaint with the National Human Rights Commission, along with the details and evidence of the incident. After the complaint, the National Human Rights Commission mentioned that they would correspond with the police about the incident, but I have not received any response so far.



Confidentiality Violated by the Police

While I was having snacks and beer at a hotel, a person sitting behind me asked for a beer, and I gave him. At that moment, I didn't recognize him as an ASI in civil dress. After drinking the beer, he left, and shortly after, a police van arrived. They grabbed me by the neck and told me to go with them. They did my HIV test, but the report was clear, so they let me go.

On 27th January 2024, the police arrested one of my friends. The next day, when I went to the police station to get my friend released, I was also detained as a "sex worker leader." That night at 1 pm, the DSP called me in, searched me, checked my phone, and asked about my contacts. They did a medical check-up and issued an investigation report. On the third day, they took me to a secret room and started beating me with a stick. In defense I grabbed the stick and hit them back. On the fourth day, my photo was taken and published in a local newspaper with the caption, "This is the leader of sex workers, and she misbehaved with the police." They extended my detention for 17 days, and I was forced to pay NPR 45,000 for bail.

After my photo was published in the local newspaper, my parents found out and told me not to come home anymore. Now, whenever the police see me from a distance, they say, "Hey, why are you sitting on the road here?" and tell me not to stay anywhere in this district.

How Can I File a Complaint in the Police Now?

My husband, who did nothing but argue with me all the time, made me leave the village and come to the city with my children. I did different jobs, but there was always scarcity money for my children's care and education, so gradually I started doing sex work. Now, I am trying to provide my children with a higher education with earnings from this profession.

A friend of mine, who is also in this profession, had a tea shop. The neighbors didn't allow her open the shop. In the month of February 2024, one night, someone set fire to the shop. Me, my friend and members from women's network went to the police station many times, but the culprit has not been caught yet. We gave the name of person we suspected to the police, but they said they couldn't arrest anyone based on suspicion alone and said to take action after they any find evidence. But to this day, there has been no legal action taken against the culprit. Now, my friend is also in sex work profession. Since I went to the police station in connection with her case, my details are now in their records.

After some time, I was waiting for a relative at a hotel near my house. Suddenly, some police officers came to the hotel and said, "Why are you here? Didn't I tell you not to stay anywhere in this district?" They turned to the hotel owner and scolded him in front of everyone, asking why I was allowed to stay there. I asked, "Why can't I stay here?" The police replied, "People like you are not allowed to stay anywhere," and I said, "Well, then I'll do this work in a room." The police said, "Bad work isn't allowed even in a room." Then with a courage I responded, "It's good to do with you and bad work to do with someone else?" After that, they insulted me with bad words and left. The next day, that same police officer called me and said, "I love you." I laughed and replied, "You insult me first and then call to say you love me." After I said that, he hung up the phone.

I have never reported the injustices I've faced from the police because they don't listen to us. They insult us just because they know us, and when we experience violence, how can we go to them to report it?

Can They Deny the Single Woman Allowance for Being a Sex Worker?

I am a single woman. Due to our financial difficulties, I have been involved in sex work since my husband was alive. Because of my profession, neighbors and nearby were constantly offensive and tell me not to live in the village. They also negatively influence my children by saying that their mother does bad work. Due to being a sex worker, the municipality stopped providing me with the single woman allowance. When I repeatedly asked why they weren't giving it to me, they said, "If you had one husband, you would get the allowance, but why should someone sleeping with ten people need it?" and the environment in the village was so toxic that I couldn't even stay there.

With the support of the women's network, organizations, and other sex worker sisters, we repeatedly went to the municipality for over a month, demanding that I should be allowed to stay in the village and should receive the single woman allowance. After several visits and request, they finally agreed to provide the amount of the single woman allowance that had been stopped for six months. I received all the dues in the month of July, 2024.

Can they stop me from living in the village and deny the single woman allowance just because I'm a sex worker?



Seeking Compensation for the Police-Induced Injuries

I was young when my parents passed away. I am responsible for all the expense of my younger siblings. Therefore, to sustain I have been involved in sex work for the past three years.

In May 2024, when I was with a client, the police raided the place. In an attempt to escape, I jumped from the first floor and broke my right leg and ankle. I was admitted to the trauma center for six days, and a steel rod was placed in my right leg. After leaving the hospital, I was with plastered leg for six months and had a continued regular treatment for my leg for two more months. The treatment cost me more than NPR 100,000. Since I didn't have money for treatment, my friends and companions helped pay for the expenses. I am still in debt. I now walk with the help of crutches and can't do the work as like before, so I have no money for food or shelter.

Now, where will I live and how will I manage to feed myself? How will I manage the expenses for my siblings' education and repay the treatment costs? I am overwhelmed with these worries all the time.



The Police Who Own the Hotel

Narrator: A sex worker

For the past five to six months, a police officer assigned to duty runs a hotel where sex work also takes place. He himself comes in civil dress and go with the sex workers in that area. He only seeks out those girls who are innocent or scared.

Sometimes he comes in his police uniform as part of a police group and checks other hotels, but he never inspects his own place. He engages and runs in the same activities but arrest other girls only because he knows them.

Under the guise of his police uniform, he intimidates and harasses sex workers out there. With such actions taking place under the police's control, who will regulate this behavior? Where can we go to report this, and how can we stay safe?

Sex Work is Not My Identity: Life Beyond the Stigma

My father was killed during the Nepalese Civil War (Janayuddha). I have also been abroad for employment and worked there for some years. I got married and got to know my husband was unemployed later. Soon, I got pregnant, and daily fights started due to lack of money. We were struggling with our finances, and even preparing one meal was difficult. I tried to have an abortion several times but couldn't succeed.

Despite many attempts, neither of us could find a job. Without income, life became extremely difficult, and eventually, I began sex work. I continued to do this work even while I was nine months pregnant, up until the day I gave birth. Looking back, I feel scared of how I managed to do this. Thirteen days after giving birth, I resumed working just to earn money. With some savings and hope, I send my husband to Kuwait. But he never came back, and we were abandoned. Now, he lives with another woman, we are not in touch with each other or with other family members.

Once, the police caught me and detained me for three hours, verbally abused me, and then released me. Another day, while eating a snack on the roadside, the police suddenly caught me along with 8 or 9 others and took us to the station. I stayed silent because I had heard that the Police would release us if we stayed quiet, but if we screamed, they threatened to lock us up for indecent behavior. Later, a sister I knew saw the incident and brought my son to the station after school. I requested the police several times to release me, but they kept threatening me, saying, "If you don't keep quiet, we will send you to the Maharajung police station". Around 10 pm, I got released because my son was crying a lot.

Even today, when I go out with my friends or go to pick up my child from school, the policemen warn, and threaten me just because they know me. They say, "Don't walk anywhere in the area." Because of this, it is difficult to even go out and walk. But how am I supposed to make them understand that, I am not a sex worker every time?



The Violence I Faced from the Ward President

After two years of marriage, my husband went to Malaysia for employment. My in-laws didn't support me financially for my children's education and me, I stayed at my mother's home for some time. To be financially independent while raising a 6-year-old son and not to be a burden for my family I started sex work.

In July 2024, I was with the client in the room when someone banged on the door and shouted at us to open it. The ward president stormed in yelling, "Why did it take so long to open the door?" and caught both me and the client. He took our photos, insults at us, and snatched my mobile phone. He kicked and humiliated me in front of everyone, but he warned the client and let him go. At that time, I cried a lot not because of the physical pain but due to humiliation.

A few days later, someone from the ward office called me to collect my cell phone so I went there with my friend. While they warned me saying, "Don't do this from now on, if we ever see or catch you again, do you know What actions we can take against you?". I replied, "I will accept whatever punishment decides."

I felt humiliated, fearful, and anxious at that time. This is my profession, but where is the safer place to do my job? I am not safe even at the places clients choose, where should I go?



Mentally Disturbed: My Struggle with Inner Turmoil

I have been working with an organization advocating for the rights of sex workers for the past 10 years.

In December 2023, three friends and I were having lunch in a hotel in Banepa Municipality and conversation to understand the situation of sex workers. Suddenly, the police arrived, caught the owner along with us, and took us to the police station. After being detained for a day, we were taken to a safe home in Dhulikhel. Only the three of us and one staff member were there. From there, we were taken to OCMC for a medical examination, where a male doctor examined our private parts. The police ceased our citizenship and made us sign a petition in their format, which stated that the hotel owner had forcibly sent to the client. The next morning, they released us, but the owner was kept in prison.

From the day we were caught, we were repeatedly called for court dates in Banepa for three months. After a lot of interrogation and continuous efforts, we began the legal procedure to release the owner by declaring that it was our choice and we were not forced. 45 days after starting the legal procedure, I heard the owner was released. After this incident, I became mentally disturbed.

Seeking Peace Abroad: Uncertain Journey for Security

I got married at the age of 13 and had a son at the age of 16. Since my husband was irresponsible, I started doing sex work to manage my expenses. My husband went Saudi Arabia, but didn't have any saving. Then we had a daughter.

One day, when he asked for money, I didn't have any, he hit me on the head and arms with Khukuri (*a traditional Nepalese weapon*) in anger and threw me from the second floor. I was admitted to the hospital for more than a month and my parents beared the treatment experience. When my parents and other family members confronted my husband, he promised not to beat and drink alcohol anymore. He took care of me for some time, but the situation eventually repeated. Sometimes I had to hide in my sister's house and under the near bridge to save myself. Meanwhile, I am taking care of the children and covering their education expenses. But his abusive behavior never ended. He would sometimes beat me, choke me, or leave the gas cylinder open when I am asleep.

Once I was caught with a client during a police raid. A female officer insulted, slapped me, and detained me for 4-5 hours. I was released with the help of an organization, while the client was freed after reportedly paying a fine.

I don't feel like living here because of the violence from my husband, in-laws, and the police. I recently got a passport as am planning to go abroad.



Endless Struggles: How Much Still?

I reported case of domestic violence against my husband at the Nepal Police Women, Children and Senior Citizen Service Center. Even though the police called and warned him, he didn't change. I even sent him to the Rehabilitation Centre. I don't have any support from his family and my parents. On the day of Dashain Tika, he started torturing me so I fled the house in my nightclothes at midnight. While running on the road, people began chasing me, so I sought help from a nearby Pathao rider, who kindly dropped me at a friend's house. After some time, I returned home but still live in constant fear of when and how he might hurt me next. For my child's sake, I have to stay with him tolerating violence.

During the lockdown, while cleaning a massage parlor with my 9-month-old baby, the police arrived, questioning why it was open. They took me to Sorhakhutte police station and, after repeated requests, allowed a friend to bring my baby. The police threatened to detain us both, saying, "We'll lock up the mother and baby together." Fearing for my child, I said to call the organization where I am member, and they released me that evening.

Earlier, the police used to raid, arrest, abuse, use bad words, ask for free sex and lock us from outside of the room. Nowadays, the incident has become low. Sometimes, they even come for a massage.

I Had to Withdraw My Complaint

The police would often come and take me to the station for questioning, sometimes 5-6 times, while I was working at the massage parlor. One policeman would frequently chase a sister in the parlor. One day, I confronted him about and he was drunk. Suddenly, he grabbed my chest, threw me to the ground, and began attempting to remove my clothes, as if trying to rape me. I screamed loudly, and he eventually let me go.

After the incident, I had a bruise on my chest and felt short of breath. I called the organization, and we went to the police station to report it. Initially, they denied the officer was from their station, but after we insisted, he was called in, questioned, and on duty police made him do sit-ups as punishment. The Inspector kicked him in front of us, saying, “Behave well even when you are drunk.” He apologized, saying ‘I won’t do it from now on’. He apologized, and the Inspector arranged for us to visit the hospital for a check-up, covering the expenses.

We demanded that he be punished and went to OCMC Thapathali, where we prepared a report for wound verification and sealed my inner garments as evidence, following the doctor’s advice and the organization’s guidance. In the case of “Attempt to Rape,” the hospital kept the evidence.

The next day, we filed a complaint of extortion with evidence at the police station, and the policeman was imprisoned. The Inspector urged me to forgive him, assuring that internal action would be taken, and if he reoffended, he would face severe punishment. Fearing the consequences if my family found out about my sex work, and not wanting to become a double victim, I withdrew the case.



Why Do I Have to Suffer this Humiliation?

I do sex work to raise my two daughters. I got HIV from a client while working. As soon as I found out, I started taking regular HIV medication and got cured.

In January 2024, while I was with a client, the police suddenly raided at night. In the chaos, the customer hurriedly ran away with all my clothes. In fear, I got out from the window to the roof of the hotel and spent the whole night naked inside the water tank, with a feeling of fear, restlessness and humiliation. After the situation calmed down and everyone seemed asleep, I came out of the tank, I searched and wrapped my body with a bedsheet and returned to my room.

Even after reaching my room, I could not sleep due to shame and fear of the police. I cried all night, thinking about my future and my children. My morale weakened, but I am trying to strengthen myself for my children's future.

That night, I asked myself, I have been bringing happiness to others through this profession, but why should I be the only one to facing such humiliation?



Where is My Right to Live with Dignity?

Two policemen in uniform came and started to bargain to go with them while I was working with one of my friend. I refused them to go in low price then, they snatched my friend's phone. Suddenly, 8/9 police officers came on bikes and tried to arrest us. I shouted, "What have I done wrong? Do you have an arrest warrant?". They replied, "Bring your friends to the police station tomorrow at 10 o'clock." I said that me and my friend both of us will not come. Then I explained to one of the police officers, "These two came in uniform and have bargained with me many times". After I said that to other police, they were trying to settle the matter, but eventually, everyone left.

One day, while I was at hotel having food, two people teased and tried to misbehave touching me. The police who came on patrol started questioning me. I said that those boys molested me, but the police did not believe me and checked the names, and numbers of those boys on my phone. After no evidence was found, they arrested those boys. I found out that they were released after being imprisoned for 20/25 days and fined 10,000 each.

I get arrested 3-4 times a year for no reason which makes me mentally down.

Most working in contact with hotels, we often face low price rates. We ask for reasonable rate the owners reply, "we have to give a certain amount to the police within 7 or 10 days." My friends also shared that the hotels pay her low rates giving same reason of paying to police.

FAITH

(Friends Affected & Infected Together in Hand)

फैथ (आस्था)

Faith's program aims to build an inclusive, fair and just society, where health-related laws, policies and practices are evidence-based, supporting the principles of inclusiveness and human rights. It advocates for the promotion of the human rights of marginalized girls and women and the empowerment of their institutions, as well as increasing accountability and transparency in health policy and practice.

Founded in 2005, FAITH is a beneficiary-led national NGO that operates as a community-based network dedicated specifically to marginalized girls and women.



For More Information:
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