

The boy zone

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From gigolos to strippers, nautch dancers to maalishwalas, male prostitution is becoming alarmingly common. However, it's still a phenomenon that's pretty much swept under the carpet

Joeanna Rebello Fernandes:

Every month, about eight to 12 boys under 18 arrive in Mumbai from the hinterland to work as 'masseurs' (read commercial sex workers). They land here with correct estimates of the money they stand to make, but cloudy ideas about the job description. Few can guess how prostitution will transform them psychologically, socially and perhaps even physically.

That's when non-profit Samabhavana Society steps in to elaborate in graphic detail such occupational hazards. "We advise them to go back home," says Jasmir Thakur, Secretary & EO of Samabhavana, "but they say they will only give simple massages and not have sex with clients, no matter what." Jasmir then pulls out the props. He holds out a wad of Rs 1,000 to the boys - a denomination they've rarely ever touched - and questions whether their self-made stipulation would hold fast before such bait. "We show the 12-year-old a condom and ask if it would even fit him. We show him a dildo and ask him to imagine what it would be like to have anal sex with a client. We show him pictures of men with Sexually Transmitted Infections and of men with AIDS and tell him that could happen to him without a condom. That they could die before they hit adulthood," finishes Jasmir with some sweat. So does the spiel work? He pauses, as if considering the futility, and then smiles resignedly, "No," he says. "They never go back. I can't fight poverty and hunger with fear, and I certainly can't do it alone."

Last year, 21 boys under 18 contracted HIV in Bombay. Seven succumbed to 'professional hazards'. Migration of men from the mofussils to the metros has been a centuries-old transition, and while patterns and compulsions of movement remain more or less unbroken, motives have got distorted. Young boys (mainly heterosexual), who in the throes of these times mature sooner and show physical signs of such ripening, have discovered a new inroad to money, and contrary to belief, it isn't easy money. This is a profession where youth and physical beauty have high stock. To understand this, process the recent commoditisation of masculinity, where smooth figures with waxed chests and shining hair move with a sensuality previously only imputed to femininity in the ads. Men sell sexuality as well as women today, if not better. (Perhaps that's why we see so much of John Abraham.)

Young, smooth-skinned pubescent boys are cut of similar stone. That's why the age limit of male prostitution has perilously dropped to as low as 12 years. By the time boys become men at 25, they're considered too old for the game and required to exit. Their shelf life is typically five years. Their monthly income ranges between Rs 6,000 and Rs 1 lakh, contingent on looks, versatility and, predictably, length of organ. Most have predecessors - boys who've entered the night garden and return holding out passion fruit to the hungry young.

Mobile masseurs

The 2009 estimate of the number of children in prostitution in India is a conservative 1.2 million. It has been assumed that girls form the greater percentage, and one can only guess at the number of boys simply because they subvert institutionalised systems. Jasmir counts 9,584 masseurs in Mumbai alone. "Most of the male sex workers under 18 cover up as 'masseurs'," he says. "They are street-based and mobile and emerge after 8 pm. Masseurs are the entry point for prostitution, and since the job requires vigour and strength, young boys are believed to do a better job".

In a country where the laws on immoral trafficking and child sexual abuse are still paper tigers, the situation is worsened by a systemic gender bias. It is still believed that it is largely women and girls who are victims of commercial sexual abuse; the exploitation of boys is nonsexual, in areas like labour camps and camel jockeying. The

entrenched notions of gender in this heteropatriarchal country have vaunted masculinity to such social and psychological heights that boys are generally believed to be untouched by the sexual violations that threaten girls. These biases naturally deny boys the scope of aid and support held out to girls. We'd like to believe that boys don't cry, and are certainly not prostituted. What's worse, the pressures on the male child to support the family have pressed many boys into giving out their bodies willingly on rent.

In the safe anonymity and license of cities, boys walk the whole plank of sexual offices - from plying as gigolos, escorts, strippers, nautch dancers and call boys, but according to Samabhavana, children and minors, especially those from impoverished rural backgrounds, are most visible as 'maalishwalas'. Their migration into the city is seasonal, staying here through the festival calendar, and returning home to meet the onset of farming. To their folk back home, their sons' occupations are 'bare-concealed' secrets.

In the city, the boys' clients are tabled as men who have sex with men (including men who don't identify as gay); sugar mummies and daddies; wives of male clients and visitors (businesspeople and tourists). "Many closet homosexuals in conjugal situations employ masseurs for sexual gratification," says Jasmir.

His non-profit outfit not only furnishes legal and medical advocacy, but attempts to relocate the boys to safer environments of work and living. Samabhavana has successfully proselytised 52 such boys by equipping them with soft skills and training them in automobile mechanics, where they now earn their bread. He wants to set up a vocational training centre in Mumbai and Mathura, UP, the home of many masseurs, and make livelihood options available for boys at the source to stem the inflow. While he is patently opposed to children trading on their flesh, he knows the only way he can reverse the commercial sex tide is if he gains the community's confidence and offers profitable alternatives.

Dancing boys

If public discourse limits the tradition of male prostitution to modern licentiousness, it denies the heritage of the laundas - the effeminate boys who danced at weddings in feudal UP and Bihar. In 2007, Kolkata PLUS, a non-profit organisation supporting sexual minorities, studied the prevalence of the launda tradition, and the eventual prostitution and brutalisation of these boys, of whom 30 per cent of the sample set were between 15 and 19 years. In his report titled Dancing Boys, Agniva Lahiri, executive director of PLUS noted, 'In India, young gender-variant boys (males with feminine demeanor) are victims of social stigma and human rights violations, which preclude them from joining mainstream occupations.'

The absence of alternatives leads many to the "Hijra" (eunuch) community where they undergo illegal, secret and crude castrations at risk to their lives. The other alternative is launda dancing. The dancers mainly belong to indigent families from West Bengal, Bihar, UP and Maharashtra and also from Nepal and Bangladesh. Often at weddings, the dancers' backs are slashed with blades through backless cholis. Often they are bitten and/or stubbed. A group of 10 to 15 men could easily carry a dancer to a field and gang-rape him, which is a very common trend. In parts of rural Bihar and UP, men satisfy their wild sexual urges with these effeminate young men because, they are available, identified, socially sanctioned for prostitution, and having sex with them proves their mardangi.'

"Many don't even consider themselves victims of sexual exploitation," says Lahiri, pointing out the normalisation of violence. For them, prostitution is par for the course - the price for living and earning among equals. Lahiri's report catalogued several misconceptions about the migration of adolescents and young boys for sexual exploitation - all fixed in the patriarchal view that it is an issue related solely to homosexuality and child sex tourism. Results demonstrated that the perpetrators are largely from the local heterosexual population and not solely homosexual men or tourists.

In the course of this article, several specialised non-profits were contacted for statistics or case studies of male prostitutes under 18 years. There was ignorance, if not denial of the subject. They had all rescued girls, but never encountered boys being trafficked for sex.

Follow the money

According to Samabhavana, male prostitution in India is not institutional. Boys offering sex for favours or money are transient, moving to where the money is. Boys as young as six are trained to approach foreigners and moneyed older Indians, touching them strategically, and offering 'homo sex' and 'suck'. They then repair to cheap lodges in the vicinity or are ferried away in cars. There is usually a pimp who runs these rings.

Mohammed Aftab, national Child Protection Manager at Save The Children, admits there is no empirical evidence on the subject. "Our observations show that such children are compelled by circumstances, primarily poverty, and this creates 'supply'. Where there is supply, there is demand," he reasons. And demand peaks at places of tourism - black holes where all discretions are swallowed and forgotten. And as Mohammed points out, as tourism gains, so will hunting grounds spread.

The tourist trap

In 2009, the research and advocacy outfit Equations launched a study in concert with ECPAT International, a Bangkok-based body that strives to end child prostitution. The project was called 'Unholy Nexus: Male Child Exploitation in Pilgrim Tourism Sites in India'. The inquiry investigated the religious cities of Tirupati, Puri and Guruvayoor and reported that in all places, children between eight and 12 were engaged in prostitution. The clients in Tirupati were largely domestic tourists, in Guruvayoor it was the local ones, and in Puri, foreigners. "We learnt that many of these boys had been abused when under six, and an innocuous familiarity with sexual advances drew them closer in as they grew older," says S Vidya, Equations' Project Coordinator of the department of Child and Tourism.

By 12, the boys know whom to solicit, which public places to retreat to and how much to charge. "They said Indian tourists often had sex but refused to pay at the end, threatening to take the boys to the cops. Foreigners gave them money, clothes, food and took them along for the ride," she says. The study indicates that tourists cast a wider net for boys than girls because they are more amenable, easier to find and can't get pregnant. Finally coming home to the problem of exploitation within its jurisdiction, the tourism ministry broadcast a Code of Conduct for Safe and Honorable Tourism early this month. It is to be seen if it makes a dent.

Advocacy groups, in the meanwhile, want people to know that the transactional space of prostitution is occupied by men too, particularly boys under 18. They hope government legislation becomes gender-neutral and pays the boy child equal attention (for example, sections 366, 366A and 366B of the IPC deal with the kidnap, procurement and import of the girl child, not the boy). They hope that a thorough and comprehensive law on child sexual abuse is enacted and compasses both genders. They hope the law goes beyond paper. They hope people report cases of the sexual abuse of boy children too, because whether they consent or not, they don't know any better. And then boys won't always be boys.

joeanna.rebello@timesgroup.com