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## HUMAN RIGHTS

# Sex work or slavery?: Why human rights discourse is no longer a tool for liberation

Testimonies from women at a global event in Delhi in January show that sexual exploitation and slavery still exist.

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After nearly four decades as a human rights lawyer and teacher, I have realised that the human rights discourse is no longer a tool for emancipation and liberation but an instrument of foreign policy used by the West to control and dominate the world.

In the last two months, I have heard powerful testimonies by women from different parts of the world to break any illusion about the future of the human rights discourse as a tool for change.

In the article *The Case Against Human Rights* in the *Guardian*, the writer lamented:

“We live in an age in which most of the major human rights treaties – there are nine ‘core’ treaties – have been ratified by the vast majority of countries. Yet it seems that the human rights agenda has fallen on hard times... Europe has turned inward as it has struggled with a sovereign debt crisis, xenophobia towards its Muslim communities and disillusionment with Brussels. The United States, which used torture in the years after 9/11 and continues to kill civilians with drone strikes, has lost much of its moral authority. Even age-old scourges such as slavery continue to exist. A recent report estimates that nearly 30 million people are forced against their will to work. It wasn’t supposed to be like this.”

## Patriarchy a human rights violation

The article was written in 2014, the same year the European Commission allowed member states of the European Union to increase their national wealth by including the turnover from prostitution in the calculation of their gross domestic product. Traffickers make an estimated \$32 billion annually, and human trafficking is one of the world's most shameful crimes, one that robs people of their dignity and basic rights, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the UN body dealing with organised crime.

An articulate but small section of feminists have argued that a prostitute has the right to choose, and that hers is a profession like any other. That is how they interpret Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees to every person “the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment”.

Some feminists have argued that prostitution is work. They call it sex work. But almost all women who have been in prostitution call it slavery. And slavery is specifically forbidden under Article 4 of the declaration: “No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.”

Often, feminists fail to notice the patriarchal foundation of the UN declaration and, therefore, the slogan that human rights are women's rights may be true but women's right to dignity takes on an entirely different meaning. Even in a liberal democratic society, human rights do not offer protection against extreme patriarchy. Rachel Moran, a survivor of trafficking from Ireland, has passionately argued in her book, “Prostitution exists everywhere on this earth because of the male demand for it, and women's position in prostitution is simply a response to dire circumstances.” Moran has argued that prostitution is the male exploitation of female bodies, and that there is nothing empowering about such exploitation.

## **Grizelda Grootboom's story**

Grizelda Grootboom from South Africa tells her story in her book *Exit!* (Blackbird Books, 2016). She has written that when people ask her who she is, she replies “a recovered drug addict”. She has described her journey as a prostitute, the violence, the beatings, the sex games that included “holding a burning cigarette in your cookie while holding your legs up and open...we’d get burnt a lot...”, the blow jobs that left her mouth full of blisters, and the forced abortions, torture, humiliation and jail.

“What drove me to drugs and prostitution was the anger and pain I felt after being gang raped at the age of nine,” she has said. “I did not choose to be a prostitute because I liked or wanted drugs. Some activists groups advocate that prostitution should be decriminalised because girls [and boys] are forced into this exploitation. But I feel strongly that we must recognise the social conditions that exist in our communities that support this type of exploitation. There were circumstances that led to my engagement in sex work and drugs, and I met these conditions before I was trafficked.”

I heard Grootboom speak at the second World Congress Against the Sexual Exploitation of Women and Girls in New Delhi in January – an event organised by Apne Aap Women Worldwide, the Coalition for Abolition of Prostitution, and Vivel, in partnership with the All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar. The passion with which she spoke and the barely suppressed outrage she felt when she said, “It is only the survivors of trafficking who can speak on behalf of the trafficked.”

Grootboom was supported by Jackie Lynne, a survivor from the First Nations indigenous group in Canada, who said, “Women mouthpieces for the pimp industry who say we are here by choice – I’m a survivor. It’s not a choice.”

## **Equal right to live under a bridge**

The UN declaration on human rights enshrines the right to equality. Article 3 states: “Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.” But the meaning of

equality is quite different for the poor and for the rich. We do not always remember how unequal this world is. Some statisticians have worked it out for us.

When you shrink the world's population down to only 100 people, you start to get an idea of just how **unequal** the world is. More than 70% earn \$10 or less a day, while 15% make less than \$2 a day. One person earns more than \$90 a day. And this same person controls 50% of the wealth.

The French philosopher Anatole France explained it all with this quip: “La majestueuse égalité des lois, qui interdit au riche comme au pauvre de coucher sous les ponts, de mendier dans les rues et de voler du pain.” In its majestic equality, the law forbids rich and poor alike to sleep under bridges, beg in the streets and steal loaves of bread.

Grizelda Grootboom, a street child from South Africa who had not read Anatole France, described the meaning of freedom and equality for children like her:

“What we street kids couldn't understand was why so many people had flocked to Cape Town's Grand Parade five days before Madiba's inauguration speech in May 1994. What were they all doing on the streets, our streets, all these people from all over the world?

“There were celebrations in town every day and suddenly there were all these road blocks and we didn't understand – it sometimes irritated us because they were messing with our escape routes, the routes we normally took when we'd stolen something from Shoprite.

“So we climbed the walls of the City Hall, and the library, and the clock tower, and sat in the shade, watching all these people.

“We heard people yelling, ‘Freedom!’

“And we robbed the visitors, stealing their money and bags. By 2 am every night, our sleeping quarters under the bridge would look like a frickin’ Chinese shop! It was an amazing time for us as we moved through the crowds.

“Our special treat was fish and chips – that was what we’d buy when we had earned more money than usual, which we did on those amazing days. If one of them said, ‘Who is this Mandela guy?’, we’d tell him to shut up.”

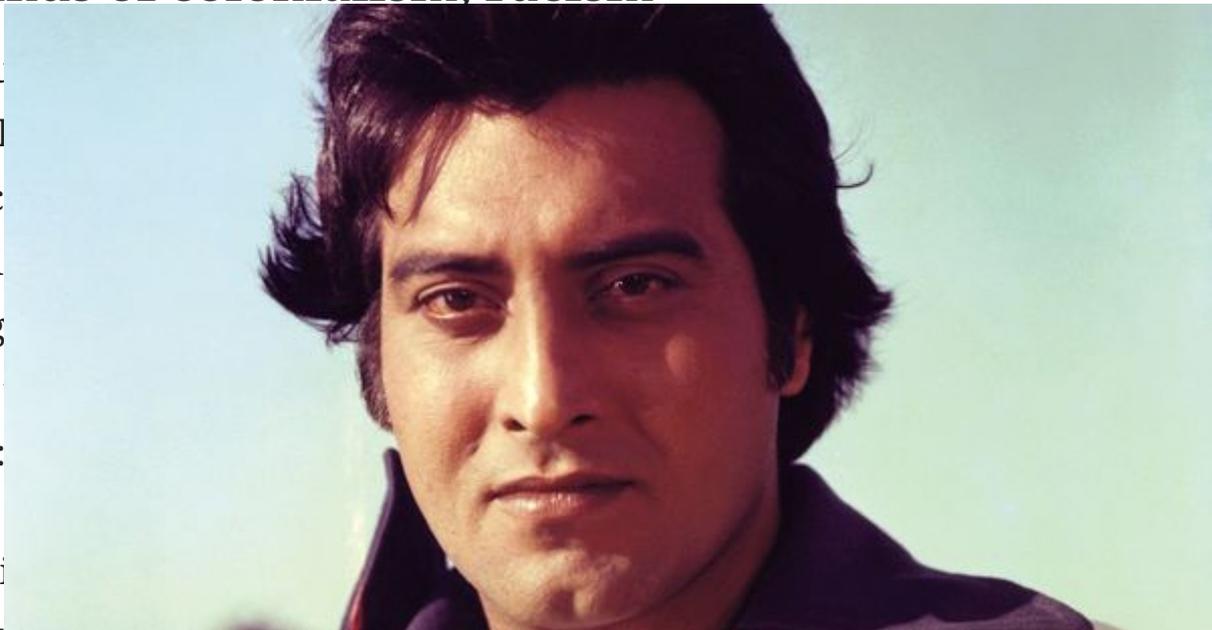


“The day after our liberation speech, we had celebrated our freedom and were high on drugs.”

128 fake high on drugs in Manipur alone: Why the Supreme Court judgement on AFSPA matters

TRENDING  
**Wounds of colonialism, racism**

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Vinod Khanna (1946-2017): Villain, hero, sanyasi, politician and perennial heartthrob

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I heard **Leane** recite her poem at the Hyderabad Literary Festival in January. I watched an indigenous woman poet from the Philippines wipe her tears as she sat on the dais with Leane.

Indian schools are using WhatsApp to enslave mothers and crush children's independence

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India's love for Labradors and German Shepherds is driving its indigenous dog breeds to extinction

*Nandita Haksar is a human rights lawyer, teacher, activist and writer.*

We welcome your comments at [letters@scroll.in](mailto:letters@scroll.in).

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Between the lines: What's driving the media to blame liberals for everything from Kashmir to Sukma

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# These GIFs show you what it means to miss breakfast

That monstrous roar is your empty stomach.

Published 7 hours ago.



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Let's take a glance at your every day morning routine. You crawl out of bed, go for a quick shower, pull out and wear your neatly ironed clothes at the speed of light and then rush out of the house, making sure you have your keys and wallet in place.



Giphy

You walk into office, relieved because you have made it to work on time. Stifling yawns and checking emails, you wonder how your colleagues are charged up and buzzing with energy. "What is wrong with these people" you mumble to yourself.

A meme with a solid red background. The text "I HATE EVERYTHING!!!" is overlaid in large, white, bold, sans-serif font with a black outline.



Giphy

Slowly, you start to change. You start snapping at colleagues and start arguing with your computer. You take out your frustration on anything or anyone in sight.

To add to the aggressive behaviour, you've completely lost your focus. After some time, you simply forget what you were doing.



Giphy

Unable to bear the hunger pangs, you go for a mid-morning snack. It is only when a colleague asks you for a bite do you realize that you have developed into a fully formed, hunger fueled, monster. Try not to look at yourself in the mirror.



Giphy

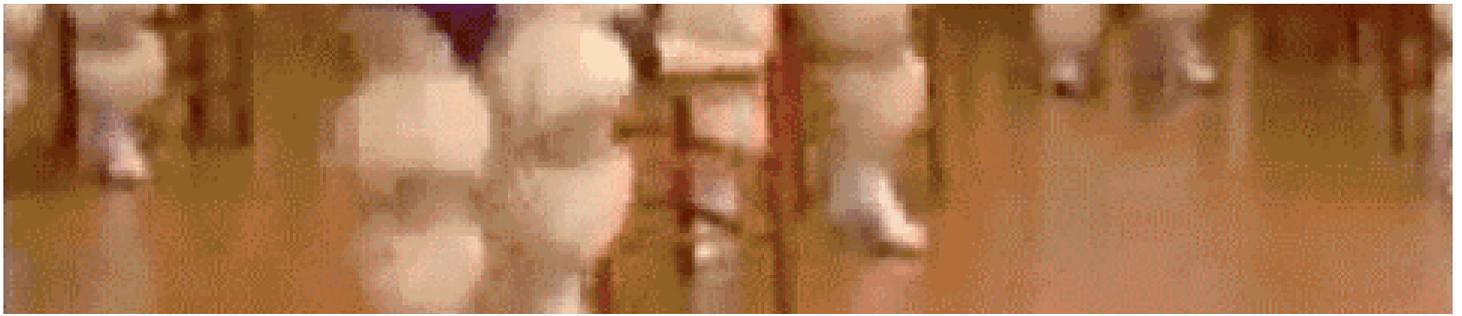
If only you had spared not even twenty or ten but just 5 minutes in the morning and not skipped breakfast, your story would look completely different - as you will see in this video.

The fast dip in your mood and lack of focus is because your body has missed its most important meal of the day – breakfast. Research has shown that skipping a meal, especially in the morning, worsens the mood because there is a drop in the blood sugar. This in turn affects the levels of serotonin and dopamine, the chemicals produced in the brain that control our moods and feelings. In simpler English, not having breakfast is going to make you really cranky and confused!

Morning is also when the body needs maximum nutrition to function efficiently through the day as you've just woken up from a full 7 hours of no food (and if you're sleeping less than that, that's a whole other article).

So in short, having a breakfast could make you go from looking like the earlier GIFs to this:





Giphy

But with changing lifestyles and most people hard pressed for time, a healthy breakfast is taking the backseat. However, it doesn't have to be that way. **MTR** has come up with a range of widely loved Indian delicacies like Poha, Upma and Halwa which can be made in (hold you breath) just 3 minutes! All you have to do is add hot water and wait for 3 minutes to get a delicious and filling breakfast.



Giphy

These amazing and delicious breakfasts can be made in a jiffy and consumed with the least hassle, even in the midst of your frenetic morning routine. So grab your [#MTRbreakfastin3](#) to start the day on an awesome note.

[Click here](#) to make breakfast a part of your morning routine.

*This article was produced by the Scroll marketing team on behalf of MTR and not by the Scroll editorial team.*

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