

Sex workers demand welfare board, other govt benefits

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Chennai: Geetha started 'working' when she was 23. The job she found, according to her, was like any other. But her neighbours didn't think so. She had to find a new place to live and work. At 40, today, she doesn't own a voter's ID or ration card. Even without a bank account, Geetha has been taking care of her family for 17 years. She never regrets for being a sex worker. "It's like any other job. I am not stealing or committing a crime," she said.

At least 15 sex workers from various states in the country on Thursday met to discuss how to raise their voices at a national platform. During the two-day meeting of the All India Network of Sex Workers (AINSW), held in the city, several issues related to sex workers were discussed. AINSW is a membership based network of sex

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workers in India. Many complained that they are exploited by the police and the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956 should be amended. "Immoral traffic and sex work are two different things. Sex work is a job like teaching or stitching. Police misuse the Act and exploit people like us," said A Kusum, the Delhi representative of AINSW.

Speaking on the struggles sex workers undergo in Tamil Nadu, Geetha, said they are unaware of many programmes and schemes by the government. "Even though

the Centre runs a number of programmes for sex workers, we are not involved in many. In Tamil Nadu, we are unorganised. If the state government can start a welfare centre for us the way it did for the transgenders, it would definitely help us," said Geetha, who represents Tamil Nadu in AINSW. "Officials will never accept our residential proof. So we are not entitled to any benefits from the government," she said

A Kusum said it's high time the Centre made arrangement for health cards for every sex worker. Setting up of social welfare boards in each state, inclusion of sex work in the list of labour department and vocational training for sex workers and their children were among the other demands raised by the members. "We will conduct a demonstration in Delhi raising our demands on July 25 and 26," said Kusum.