

## Sex workers in Gujarat village say no to flesh trade

A silent revolution is sweeping through the dusty terrain of this village, barely 70 km from the India-Pakistan border in Banaskantha district. More than 80 percent of the women here are saying no to their age-old family tradition - flesh trade.

The village with a population of 400 has 180 women and most of them are involved in the flesh trade. The people are nomadic and the desert climate makes agriculture difficult. Consequently, the men while away their time and allow the women to take up sex work to sustain their families.

But thanks to the initiatives of the district administration, things are changing.

Suryaben, 42, said she has not been entertaining 'clients' for the last one year. 'It is sheer poverty that led us to prostitution,' Suryaben, president of the local mahila cooperative society which helps rehabilitate sex workers, told a visiting IANS correspondent.

'When I took to flesh trade, I was following a family tradition. But men who used to come to my doorstep have not turned up ever since I decided to lead a normal life,' Suryaben said.

In a meeting convened by the district officials earlier this month to discuss their rehabilitation, many women pledged to shun prostitution.

District collector Hareet Shukla gave Rs.25,000 each to three families of commercial sex workers for cattle farming and laid the foundation for a community hall in the meeting.

The collector said besides building 70 houses at a cost of Rs.60,000 with the help of a local non-profit organisation, the district administration was also renovating the village school.

Resident deputy collector J.S. Prajapati said: 'The administration with the help of an NGO, the MG Patel Trust of Amirgadh, gave money to three families of sex workers and Rs.36,000 to one Kanjibhai Khodabhai to set up a floor mill in the village.'

He said each family would be given money under the rehabilitation package. 'We have already allotted 205 acres of land to the villagers so that the women can take to alternative vocations.'

Devabhai Malabhai, who has been given a cheque for Rs.36,000 for cattle farming, said: 'We have a source of income now. Why should our women do this degrading work?'

Manisha (name changed) said: 'It was abject poverty that drove me to prostitution. It is good that remedial measures are being suggested and our problems are being highlighted.'

The district collector said: 'The main objective behind our efforts is to see that the village gets rid of its stigma. We want the media to take up the issue and highlight the problem of the village so that the unfortunate women can earn respectable livelihoods.'

*V.N. Balakrishna ( © IANS / India eNews)*