



Know Your Rights

The Supreme Court's 2026 *Prajwala* Judgment

For adult women who do sex work by their own choice.

What the Court said. What to say to police and the judge.



How to use this booklet



Keep this booklet where you can find it quickly.

Read it on your phone.
Screenshot the legal rights pages.
Share with friends.
If police or a shelter home gets
involved, call your lawyer, local CBO,
Me and My World, or WINS.



We should know what the Court said in May 2026.

Police, judges, and shelter homes have often treated sex workers unfairly. But the Court has given clear rules that this is wrong. They want to protect your choice and dignity.

Choice is different from force.



**Work by choice is not the crime.
Forcing someone is the crime.**

The Supreme Court says adult voluntary sex work is legal. Force, threats, cheating, or using a child is trafficking. The police and homes should not mix the two.

What is and is not a crime



Voluntary adult sex work is not itself a crime, but the law still punishes some related acts. Running a brothel, living on another person's earnings, procuring or detaining someone, and some “public-place” conduct are crimes. Public place means within 200 metres of a school, college, temple, mosque, or church.

Prepare before a raid



If you have ID, keep a printed copy somewhere safe. Keep important phone numbers on paper and in memory. Include a trusted friend and lawyer if you have one.

During a raid



"I will speak clearly."

Police enter the room.
Stay calm.
Remember: first, tell the truth
in your own words.

Right 1: Privacy



Police must leave you if you work voluntarily.

The Supreme Court said that if you are above 18 years and doing the work of your own free will, the police must not arrest, punish, harass or forcefully take you away. The media must not take photos or videos.

What to say



**"I am over 18. I work by my own choice.
Please record my words."**

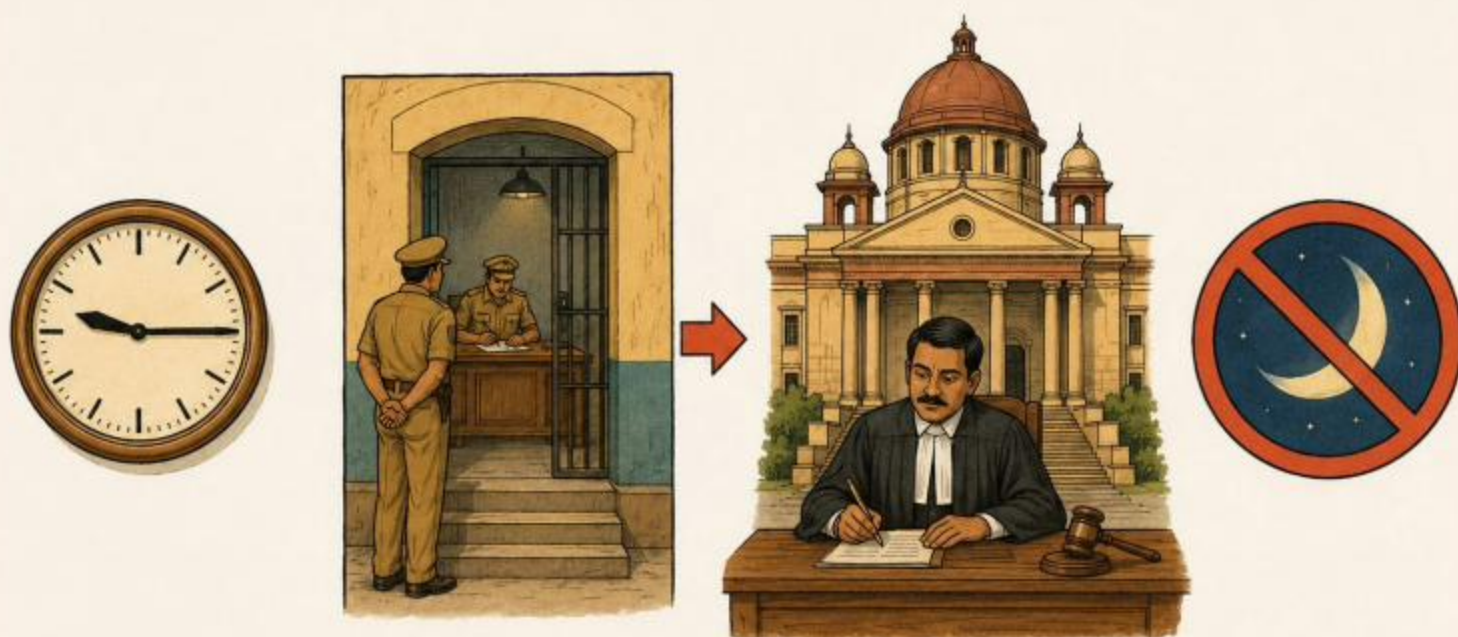
Say this slowly and clearly. Ask them to write your exact words. If they don't leave you, ask for a lawyer.

Belongings and children



Tell your lawyer if your phone, money, or ID were taken. Ask for a list and for them to return your things immediately according to law. Your child should not be separated from you only because you do sex work.

If they still detain you



**"Do not keep me overnight
at the police station."**

You must be taken promptly before a judge. If the same day is impossible, you must not be kept overnight at the police station or AHTU.

Right 2: Your own lawyer



"I want my own lawyer right away."

A lawyer must represent you with the judge. You can choose your own lawyer or DLSA will take your case for free. You can still speak in your own words.

First check by judge



You have a right to be heard by a judge.

The judge must first check:
Are you an adult?
Are you working voluntarily?
Do you refuse to stay in a shelter home?

Your wishes must guide the decision



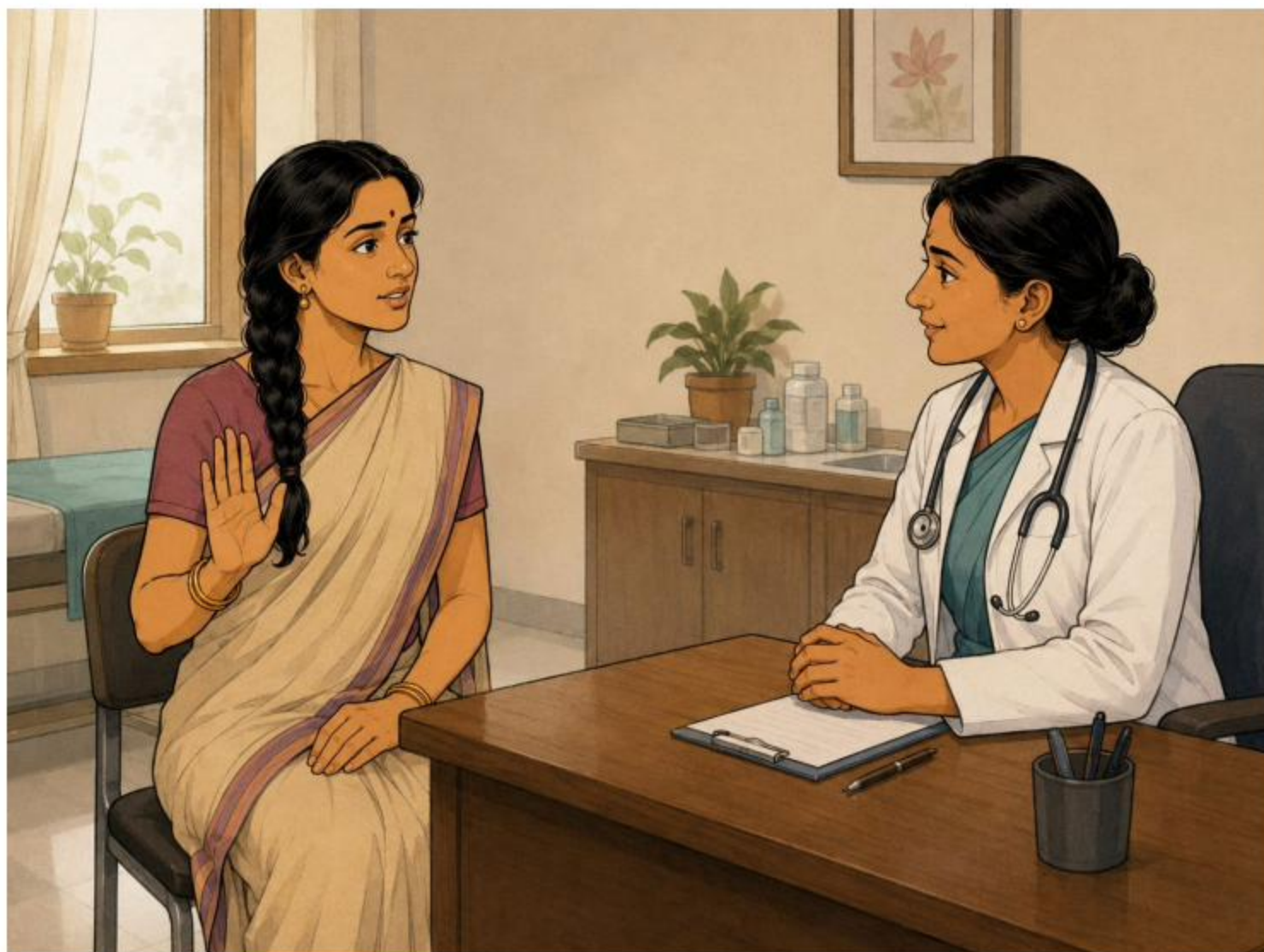
The Supreme Court said that your wishes and consent come first. Only in rare cases can the judge go against them. If the judge chooses to go against your wishes, the reasons must be written and shared with your lawyer.

Right 3: Care and safety



If they keep you in a shelter anyway, the Supreme Court said they must provide: food, clean water, medical care, counselling, your phone and belongings, and your children's needs.

Medical examination and statement



“I need privacy. I am not ready yet.”

A medical exam requires consent and privacy. Ask for a woman doctor. You can wait to have an exam or to give a statement until you feel safe and ready.



RIGHT 4: CONSENT

Your consent should guide all decisions throughout the process. Nothing should be forced on you.

Say clearly what you want to happen.

Temporary custody is different.



During the inquiry, you might be kept in custody for a short period; alternatively, an order may be issued to keep you in a home for a longer duration. Ask your lawyer which order has been issued for you.

Being sent back to family is not automatic



You are not property to be sent back to your parents or husband. If you have built a life elsewhere, say where you want to live. The Court said you should not be forced to return to your relatives if you do not wish it.

After a final custody order



If they continue to keep you in the shelter, after 90 days from the final custody order, you can apply to the judge for release. Ask your lawyer about appealing.

RIGHT 5: RESPECT



"Treat me with respect."

The Court said that you must never be shamed, insulted, beaten, or treated as less human because of your work.

Watch out: home inquiries can expose you



They should not tell your community and neighbours about your work. Tell the judge and lawyer if home inquiries might put you in danger. Ask for a confidential inquiry instead.

Rights at a glance - 1



1. If I am over 18, I can work by my own choice.
2. Police must not arrest, harass, or punish me during a raid.
3. A judge must do the first check.
4. A lawyer of my choice must be there.

Rights at a glance - 2



5. Do not take my belongings or children away from me.
6. My consent must guide all decisions.
7. Treat me with respect.
8. Protect my name and privacy.
9. After a final custody order, ask about release after 90 days.

You are not alone.



When you know your rights, you can ask for them.
Ask your local CBO to help.

CBO email ID: _____

CBO Whatsapp: _____

This booklet explains your rights based on the Court's judgment. During your own case, speak to your lawyer.

[Add CBO and NGO logos here
and replace websites and email ID
below]

Credits and contact



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in collaboration with
Women's Initiatives, Tirupati**

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Sources: *Prajwala v. Union of India, 2026*
Budhadev Karmaskar, 2022

meandmyworld.org | womensinitiatives.in