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Narratives of Resistance: Negotiating Agency and Violence in Commercial Sex Work ***Direnış Anlatıları: Seks Ticaretinde Őiddet ve Mőzakere***

Abstract

The article highlights the voices of commercial sex workers from Kolkata, India, as they delineate their acts of resistance in the face of continual adversity. The narratives of the sex workers revolve around several themes. These include the framing of commercial sex work and cultural narratives surrounding their profession, implications of rescue and rehabilitation propositions, the impact of violence in sex work and the negotiation with violence in their daily lives. The article shows that even high-risk marginalized populations like sex workers can engage with and overcome barriers like criminalization, stigmatization and violence in highly gendered sectors of labor like commercial sex work. The article renders the sex workers as subjects central to their own study, generates voices for the traditionally voiceless and examines how they communicatively construct their own reality. It is explored how enunciations of the sex workers influence their identity construction and negotiation of their vocation in direct non-conformity to mainstream discourses and cultural narratives.

Öz

Bu makale Hindistan Kalküta bölgesindeki seks iŐçilerinin süregelen zorluklara karŐı direniŐ eylemlerine ve isyanlarına odaklanıyor. Sek iŐçilerinin anlatıları birkaç tema etrafında bir araya geliyor. Bunlar, seks ticaretinin ve iŐçilerin mesleklerini saran kültürel anlatıların kurtarma ve rehabilitasyon önerilerinin sonuçlarının; seks iŐçiliđi Őiddetin etkisinin; ve gündelik hayatta gördükleri Őiddetle nasıl müzakere ettiklerinin çerçevesini çizmekten oluşuyor. Makale, seks ticareti gibi yüksek oranda cinsiyetçiliđin olduđu iŐ kolunda çalışın, seks iŐçileri gibi yüksek oranda marjinalize edilmiş toplulukların kriminalizasyon, damgalama ve Őiddet gibi engellerle nasıl başa çıktıklarını ve aŐtıklarını gösteriyor. Aynı zamanda bu makale, seks iŐçilerini kendi çalışmalarının merkezi haline getiriyor, geleneksel olarak sessiz kalmışların sesi oluyor, ve kendi gerçekliklerinin iletişimsel inŐası nasıl kurduklarını inceliyor. Seks iŐçilerinin ifadelerinin, ana akım medya ve kültürel anlatılar içerisinde, kimlik inŐasını ve mesleki müzakerelerini nasıl etkilediklerini inceliyor.

Keywords

Commercial sex work, narratives, criminalization, rescue and rehabilitation, violence, community mobilization, empowerment

Anahtar Kelimeler

Seks ticareti, anlatılar, kriminalizasyon, kurtarma ve rehabilitasyon, Őiddet, toplumsal hareketlilik, güçlendirme

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Introduction

This article focuses on the narratives of commercial female sex workers hailing from Kolkata, India. The voices of the sex workers are highlighted as they delineate their acts of resistance in the face of continual adversity of their lived realities. The sex workers articulate their opinions on several topics. They talk about the public framing of sex work and how they perceive their own profession. They elaborate on what rescue and rehabilitation propositions mean for them as they are globally perceived as “victims of commercial sexual exploitation”. They also discuss the impact of violence in sex work and how they negotiate with violence in their lives.

The sex workers whose narratives are highlighted in the article are aware of their status as marginalized and delegitimized entities. They are aware of their own disenfranchisement and they are desperate to have their voices heard. The voices of the sex workers show palpable rage at their own disempowerment, yet they are consistently cognizant of their rights that are declined to them. As Basu (2017, p. 1517) noted, narratives of sex workers often do not find “the traction to influence mainstream discourse. Furthermore, such narratives are framed against the grain of the dominant cultural narrative; they are resistive texts, and they depict enactments of resistance to the normal order.” The current article renders the sex workers as subjects central to their own study, generates voices for the traditionally voiceless and examines how they communicatively construct their own reality. It is explored how enunciations of the sex workers influence their identity construction and negotiation of their vocation in direct non-conformity to mainstream discourses and cultural narratives.

The current research was conducted in *Sonagachi*, a red-light district of Kolkata, India. A red-light district is a specifically demarcated area comprising neighborhoods where sex workers solicit clients and commercial sale of sex takes place in residences owned or rented by the sex workers. With a population of more than 50,000 commercial sex workers, *Sonagachi* is one of the largest red-light districts in South and Southeast Asia. The sex workers of *Sonagachi* are unionized and spearheading a campaign to increase condom usage compliance and reduce rates of HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STI) among their colleagues. This campaign is called the *Sonagachi Project* which is a peer outreach based and community-oriented HIV/AIDS intervention initiative undertaken among commercial sex workers. A brief description of the *Sonagachi Project* follows.

Sonagachi Project

The *Sonagachi Project* started in 1991 to ascertain and arrest the incidence of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and HIV/AIDS among sex workers in and around the *Sonagachi* district in Kolkata (Jana et al., 2004). The project was initially funded by a national healthcare research institute and later by the state-based West Bengal AIDS prevention council (Jana et

al., 2004). However, from 1995 onwards, the project was spearheaded by the sex workers themselves, who acted as peer outreach workers (Jana et al., 2004).

Mobilization of sex workers as peer educators who disseminated information and awareness among colleagues was the initial activity of the project. Gradually the project developed to promote work on community development and intervention at different levels to handle crises and environmental barriers faced by the sex workers. The original aim of the project was to disseminate awareness information about STDs and HIV/AIDS among sex workers, and arrest the infection incidence among the latter population. Statistics from UNAIDS and National AIDS Control Organization (NACO) of India show a significant reduction in STI infection rates and a significant increase in condom usage in *Sonagachi* after the project was implemented. Condom use has been consistently rising among sex workers in Kolkata--from 3% in 1992 to 95% in 1999 to 94% in 2009 to 97% in 2017 to 98% in 2019--compared with significantly lower condom usage rates among sex workers in other Indian metros (NACO, 1992, 1999, 2009, 2017, 2019). HIV infection incidence remains low, being less than five percent, notwithstanding the presence of more than fifty thousand active commercial sex workers (NACO, 2019).

In addition to the targeted goals, the project achieved outcomes like unionization of the sex workers and establishing micro-credit societies and vocational training centers for the sex workers (Jana, Banerjee, Saha & Dutta, 1999). The union of the sex workers is called *Durbar Mahila Samanway Committee* (DMSC) and it has offices in the heart of *Sonagachi* itself. Since commercial sex work is illegal in India the union is registered as a non-governmental organization run by “housewives” in Kolkata. The DMSC comprises central and branch management committees selected through elections conducted every two years. The *Sonagachi Project* is still going on in Kolkata as a peer outreach and participation-based program, under the guidance of the sex workers.

Sex work in India

Indian legislation on sex work criminalizes sex workers, their clients, pimps and brothel owners subjecting them to a fine and imprisonment of three to five years on prosecution. The clause 2(f) of the Immoral Trafficking (Prevention) Act (ITA) of India defines sex work as prostitution which is “sexual exploitation or abuse of persons for commercial purposes or for consideration of money or in any other kind” (Government of India publication, 2017, p.1) The clause 4(a) of the ITA also criminalizes sustenance off a sex worker’s earnings which creates a precarious situation for the offspring and family members of the sex workers. The articulation of sex work as an unlawful and oppressive vocation leaves the sex workers as illegal beings themselves with little rights or opportunities.

Framing of sex work

The common term used for sex work is prostitution, which is in itself controversial as people associated with the profession generally tend to refer to themselves as sex workers rather than prostitutes. The latter term is widely considered as stigma-inducing and derogatory. “The core debate is that for many stakeholders, the category of sex workers includes consenting adults who sell sex of their own volition, and who have called for recognition of their rights as worker” (Masenior and Beyrer, 2007, p. 1159).

A volition on part of sex workers in executing their profession is not acknowledged universally. The articulation of sex workers as passive victims of trafficking, abuse and slavery-like practices has been a mainstay of global health policy makers especially those pertaining to HIV/AIDS prevention and intervention. The Trafficking in persons (TIP) report (2017) which equates sex work with trafficking refers to both activities as exploitation and servitude. The TIP report (2017) notes that “there can be no exceptions and no cultural or socioeconomic rationalizations that prevent the rescue ..from sexual servitude” (p.22). UNIFEM which explicitly portrays sex workers as victims of trafficking and coercion vocalizes the need for “control and suppression of prostitution through the legal system”, “rescue and rehabilitation for women and girl victims of trafficking” and “supply reduction through the provision of alternative employment and income-earning opportunities for women and girls” (UNIFEM Factsheet, 2009, p. 5).

Sex work can be exploitative, and remains illegal in many countries. But the propositions of global aid organizations like the Global AIDS program that provides funding for major donors like USAID has laid a funding freeze on those initiatives that strive for decriminalization or legalization of sex work. Thus, attempts to vocalize the rights of the much-maligned sex workers can result in loss of funds for advocating legalization of prostitution.

The discourse of “rescue” and “rehabilitation” for sex workers

Combating sex work through “rescue” and “rehabilitation” of the women involved is a complex proposition. As Cohen (2005, p. 12) notes in a report published by Guttmacher report,

The moral imperative to rescue women from brothels is compelling when young girls are involved or there is clear evidence of duress, but ‘rescuing’ adult women from brothels against their will can mean an end to their health care and economic survival. In countries and situations in which basic survival is a daily struggle, the distinction between free agency and oppression may be more a gray area than a bright line.

Cohen (2005) notes that sex workers may resist rehabilitation because there may not be viable economic alternatives to sustain themselves and their families. Proposed rehabilitation

of sex workers or coercive measures such as mandatory examination for HIV/AIDS and venereal diseases are often not feasible as shown by previous research. “Mandatory HIV testing of people who are or are assumed to be engaged in sex work, detention and specialized health and ‘rehabilitation’ services all may be understood to push the people engaged in this work further underground” (UNAIDS issue paper, 2003, p. 2).

Violence and sex work

Existing literature indicates that violence perpetrated on sex workers include physical violence, sexual assault, economic exploitation and psychological violence (Dalla & Kennedy, 2003). The perpetrators involve a variety of agents including pimps, intimate partners, brothel owners, clients, local criminals and law enforcement agents. Research shows that long-term clients who become intimate partners tend to oppress and control sex workers by threats and acts of violence (Karandikar & Prospero, 2010). Intimate partners can also serve the role of pimps for sex workers and can become physically, emotionally, and sexually violent as well as economically exploitative (Karandikar & Prospero, 2010). The dual role of partner and pimp can result in escalating violence in sex workers’ lives (Jenkins, 2006; Karandikar & Prospero, 2010). Across the globe sexual violence was the commonest type of violence experienced by sex workers, followed by economic, physical violence and psychological violence. The main perpetrators of sexual violence were clients, brothel managers including owners and pimps, intimate partners and local criminals (Fawole & Dagunduro, 2014). Besides clients, pimps and partners, sex workers are also oppressed by law enforcement agents. A 2013 report by the World Health Organization showed that in India, 70% of sex workers reported being physically assaulted by the police and more than 80% had been arrested without evidence.

In addition, sex workers are victims of structural violence, a fallout of structural inequities that limit their access to education, healthcare and other sociopolitical resources. Structural violence legitimizes discrimination against sex workers and enable violence against them and perpetuates oppression, marginalization and poverty (Winter & Leighton, 2001; Farmer, 2003; Basnyat, 2017). “In addition to the physical violence and abuse suffered by sex workers, structural violence plays out in their lives in the forms of denied health care, lack of protection by the law, the taint of social stigma, and greater risk of acquiring AIDS/HIV infection and sexually transmitted infections” (Basnyat, 2017, p. 193)

Rape seldom comprises protected sex. Coerced sex is often accompanied by physical violence that can result in injuries, increasing the chances of infection transmission (Beattie et al., 2010; Panchanadeswaran, Johnson, Sivaram, Srikrishnan, Latkin, Bentley, Solomon, Go & Celentano, 2008). The perpetrators of rape are more likely to have multiple partners, which increases the chances of infection (Dunkle, Jewkes, Nduna, Levin J, Jama, Khuzwayo, Koss & Duvvury, 2006). Sex work is illegal and considered a criminal activity in many parts of the globe; hence prosecution of violence against sex workers is difficult and often rare (Dunkle et

al., 2006; Beattie, Bhattacharjee, Ramesh, Gurnani. Anthony, Isac, Mohan, Ramakrishnan, Wheeler, Bradley, Blanchard & Moses, 2010).

The implications of Connell's (1987) integrative theory of gender and power can be used to elaborate on the impact of violence on the lived experiences of commercial sex workers. Connell (1987) identified three major structures that shape gendered relationships--these were the sexual division of labor, the sexual division of power, and the structure of cathexis (Connell, 1987). The sexual division of labor and sexual division of power emphasized the characteristics of socioeconomic inequities and power differentials between the two sexes, whereas the structure of cathexis was intended to address the affective component of relationships. Wingood and DiClemente (2000) noted that, "From a public health and psychological perspective, it is these gender-based inequities and disparities in expectations that generate the exposures or acquired risks, and the risk factors that adversely affect women's health. Connell's seminal work on gender and power has direct relevance for understanding issues with regard to women's health" (p. 541). The sexual division of labor produces socioeconomic inequities that legitimizes violence which in turn increases risk factors for women for poor health practices and enhances health disparities and adverse health outcomes (Wingood & DiClemente, 2000).

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Conventional social norms and affective attachments reinforce traditional gender stereotypes and acceptable notions on female sexuality, and often limit a female sex worker's agency toward seeking redress against institutionalized and legitimized violence. For a commercial female sex worker, the social taboo against female sexuality can effectively marginalize and disempower her on account of her choice of profession and limit her means to seek redress against the perpetrated violence and socioeconomic inequities (Dasgupta, 2013). Sex workers thus are easily abused, oppressed and exploited by a variety of forces.

Method

The sex work sites visited by the researcher include North Kolkata neighborhoods comprise the heart of the red-light district. There were concentrated pockets of sex work zones amid regular neighborhoods in these said areas. At the entrance of each neighborhood the sex workers stood in colorful garbs and painted faces, soliciting the clients. This practice was colloquially referred to as "standing at the gates" and signified the presence of sex work sites within the neighborhood. Interviews were conducted with sex workers' union *Durbar Mahila Samanway Committee* (DMSC) committee members, peer educators, and non-peer sex workers from these areas.

Prior permission was obtained from DMSC central governing committee before the commencement of any research work and interviewing along with Institutional Review Board (IRB) research approval. A total of 33 interviews of commercial female sex workers were obtained. Among the 33 interviewees, 30 were either current or past member of DMSC administ-

rative committees or peer outreach workers. The participants were interviewed in the DMSC offices located in the heart of *Sonagachi* and in project sites within *Sonagachi* and adjoining areas. No incentives were given and participation was purely voluntary. The interviews were conducted between August 2015 and January 2016.

A semi-structured interview pattern with open-ended questions was used. The researcher had a basic guideline for questioning. However, conversations were not limited to answering questions. Each of the interviews lasted between one hour and one and one-half hours on average. All communication took place in Bengali, the native language of the researcher and the interviewees. The interview questions and answers were recorded with pen and paper in Bengali. No videotaping or audiotaping was performed. None of the names given by the interviewees are their actual names for the prevalent practice among Indian sex workers is using a pseudonym.

Narratives: ***Rearticulation of sex work: Demanding legitimacy***

The narratives revolved around a prominent theme which was the sex workers' re-articulation of commercial sex work—including the status of sex work itself—and demanding for legitimization. Sex work was asserted to be a valid form of employment whose legalization and decriminalization were demanded. The rights of the sex workers to demand benefits such as healthcare for themselves and educational opportunities for their children were emphasized by the interviewees.

The interviewees also laid importance on the rights for self-determination which included the right to choose the occupation of a sex worker as a livelihood without interference from legal, social and moral authorities. As the manifesto produced by DMSC (2017) asserted “Sex work needs to be seen as a contractual service, negotiated between consenting adults. In such a service contract there ought to be no coercion or deception. DMSC is against any force exercised against sex workers, be it by the client, labor contractors of the sex sector, room owners, pimps, local goons, the police or the traffickers” (p.1). Legalization of the profession was noted to be a necessary step for protecting the health and securing the rights of the sex workers.

The initiatives of the *Sonagachi* women to promote sex work as a legitimate form of labor are in direct opposition to the agenda of many global HIV/AIDS policy makers and international legal resolutions that intend to curb trafficking. The latter portray sex work as a profession inter-related to and produced by trafficking itself. Hence sex work is often articulated by these agencies as a profession incompatible to human dignity and welfare and which needed to be delegitimized on an urgent basis.

The USAID grant policy explicitly stresses the need to eradicate sex work to counter the impact of HIV/AIDS and ensure global health. Some feminist scholars support policies seeking

a legal ban on sex work and endeavoring to rehabilitate the sex workers. An example may be cited in the words of Hughes (2000):

“Prostitution and trafficking are extreme forms of gender discrimination and exist as a result of the powerlessness of women as a class. Sexual exploitation is more than an act; it is a systematic way to abuse and control women that socializes and coerces women and girls until they comply, take ownership of their own subordinate status, and say, “I choose this.” Legalization of this violence to women restricts women’s freedom and citizenship rights. If women are allowed to become a legitimate commodity, they are consigned to a second-class citizenship. No state can be a true democracy, if half of its citizens can potentially be treated as commodities.”

The interviews obtained by the researcher make it apparent that the women of *Sonagachi* might disagree with Hughes and many international policy-makers. As Sapna excitedly noted, “We are considered to be sex slaves and sold or trafficked into this profession by the media, by all the important people and by the entire society. Why doesn’t anybody ask us?”

All of the 33 interviewees noted sex work to be a valid form of labor. Two of the interviewees admitted that their profession was morally questionable according to social norms but added that sex work should be considered to be a legitimate vocation. All of the interviewees wanted their profession to be given legal status. Decriminalization of sex work was noted to be an emergent need to protect the rights of the sex workers and to establish and maintain the reduction of HIV/AIDS and STI infection incidence.

All of the 33 interviewees emphasized sex work to be like any other job. Santana noted:

“Our profession helps us to sustain our families, our children. We work hard, use our bodies to make our clients happy and earn money to survive. How are we different from workers who use manual labor to make an income? How are we different from government workers who work hard in their offices to feed and educate their children? At least we do not engage in corruption like some of the government officials do. The money we make comes in exchange of hard physical labor to make our clients happy. If that is not a valid form of labor, then tell me what labor is?”

Bishakha added:

“Our job involves its own sort of physical and mental exertion. Tell me which job does not create exertion? You are an interviewer, you have come here to interview me, for that you have woken up early in the morning. Haven’t you undergone some exertion for your job of interviewing? But your work serves your interest for doing your study. Similarly my work also has its stresses but it looks after my interest—my interest of keeping myself and my family in comfort. Plus you like what you do, right? I also like what I do. So how is my work any less valid than yours or anybody else’s? The people who want to ban sex work.. they are rich people. They sit high up, in air-conditioned rooms. They need to climb down a bit, to our level, to think like us.”

Criminalization of sex work was questioned and strongly castigated by the interviewees. The latter noted the propensity among media and sections of society in general to equate sex work with criminal activity in an endeavor to ban it. Krishna observed:

“Sometimes people tell us sex work is criminal, it is akin to stealing, robbing and murder. They say if sex work is to be legalized then one should legalize stealing, robbing and murder too. I would like to remind them that stealing, robbing and murder cause fear, anxiety and grief. But the clients of sex workers come to them to get sexual service, and pleasure. Nobody can say that the sex workers cause fear, anxiety and grief to the clients. If they had, the clients would not have been coming back again and again. Well somebody from the media once asked me that one may get happiness by taking heroin and marijuana, in that case should the seller of these drugs be given legal status? I would like to add here that heroin and marijuana ruin a person’s health. It is a proven fact, is it not? But show me one study which says a client having sex with a sex worker using condoms is ruining his health.”

One of the primary demands of DMSC was reiterated in the words of the interviewees---“*gautore khatiyे khai, taai sromiker adhikar chaai*” which translates as “we use our bodies to work hard, so we need to get legitimate worker rights”. Eight of the interviewees noted their work to be a part of service industry. “We provide service to our clients” and “we are part of the service industry” was reiterated by a number of interviewees.

Thirteen of the interviewees reported sexual assault in prior professions which included domestic sector work, construction work, brick kiln labor, and secretarial jobs. Krishna who had previously worked a secretarial job recalled how she had been sexually harassed by her employer during her tenure. “I was compelled to offer sexual favors to my boss. Yet my salary was a pittance. I was finding it really hard to make ends meet. Well, then I decided I might as well get paid for sex”.

Interviewees also noted the mechanism of sexual harassment in place in construction and menial labor industries in India. “To get a job and maintain it in bricklaying, masonry and construction, you have to sleep with the *rajmistri*”, his assistant and respective subordinates. You need to keep them happy and also do back-breaking physical work to earn your meager salary”, noted Purnima. Her views echoed that of Krishna, “You see after being exploited by a string of supervisors I decided if I give my sex I might as well get paid for it”. Sapna recounted being raped by her employer while working as a domestic helper. “No more free and forced sex”, she quipped.

All of the 33 interviewees emphasized the drawbacks of delegitimization of sex work. 14 noted how rendering sex work illegal created an unsafe environment for the sex workers and hindered the implementation of safe sex practices. Kalavati said:

** *Rajmistri* refers to head mason in Bengali

“See when our profession is illegal what will the women do? They will have to earn a living after all. Else who will feed the kids? So they go in hiding. They do their trade in hidden and dark lanes and allies. The chances of violence against them in such hidden locations increase. The anti-socials will target these women. Rape the women, and no money paid. And safe sex, condoms...there is no safe sex in rape.”

Kajal added,

“Our profession is illegal. We are criminals according to law. So if we get raped what justice can we get? The police can tell us, in fact the police had told us in the past that a criminal cannot get raped. And sex workers who live on their sex cannot get raped. And yes, the police has raped us in the past. But now with Durbar we have learnt how to live with our heads high. The police is wary of us because of our union, they register our complains, treat us with respect. But what happens to the sex workers in other states of India? They are raped regularly, by clients, pimps, police. There is no justice, for where is the crime? The sex workers are criminals, their profession is illegal. Do you think rapists use condoms? I tell the government that if they want to stop HIV then make sex work legal. Give these women a solid ground to stand on, to protest and make their demands known.”

From the interviews it becomes apparent that delegitimization and criminalization compel sex workers to operate in subterfuge, such as in dark and isolated geographical spots. Their attempt at concealment in order to escape from detection and prosecution by law enforcement agencies exacerbated their vulnerability to rape and assault. Such sexual violence rarely includes safe sex measures and hence the chances of HIV/AIDS and STI infection transmission are greatly increased. Legalization and decriminalization of sex work are noted by the interviewees to be a step in the right direction for HIV/AIDS harm reduction and securing the rights and health of the average sex worker.

The emphasis is thus on the welfare of the women who are “here to stay” by legalizing and decriminalizing them. As Sadhana observed, “Our clients are not criminals and neither are we. They come in pursuit of physical pleasure and happiness which we give to them. We are adults and there is no crime in that”.

Rescue and Rehabilitation of sex workers

The interviews with the sex workers of *Sonagachi* showed that propositions of rescue and rehabilitation were not considered to be feasible options. Rather the interviewees considered the rehabilitation approach impracticable for several reasons. One of the reasons voiced against the rescue and rehabilitation option was that such a proposition violated the rights of the sex workers as a legitimate labor group. Fourteen of the interviewees subscribed to this notion that rescue and rehabilitation entailed the violation of the rights and dignity of a sex worker. The

interviewees noted that rehabilitation is applicable for the poor and destitute, the homeless and the dispossessed. The sex workers were noted to belong to none of the aforesaid categories. The interviewees also noted that individuals in dangerous or coercive situation have to be rescued. The sex workers were pursuing their vocation voluntarily, and were not in distressed circumstances. Hence the proposition of rescuing the sex workers was questionable. Santana noted:

“Well, if they have to rehabilitate, why don’t they rehabilitate the homeless people, the people displaced by floods, the street dwellers who are starving? We are not starving, we have a job. Why don’t they rehabilitate the poor beggars? Does the government classify us as beggars. We are not beggars. We have a job. We can look after ourselves and our families. We don’t need rehabilitation.”

The rescue and rehabilitation proposition was also repudiated by the interviewees. Rama remarked:

“What are they rescuing us from? From our professions? We are adult women who have engaged in this profession willingly. Nobody has sold us into this, nobody is forcibly keeping us in this. Why do we need to be rescued then? Is it because the government or the outside agencies cannot accept the fact that we follow our profession voluntarily? Does it pain them to accept that we sell sex willingly?”

Most of the interviewees hold the assumption that the rescue and rehabilitation proposition for sex workers had moralistic undertones. Such schemes framed by moralistic motives were noted to be in violation of the dignity of the sex worker and her profession.

Another reason for rejecting the rescue/rehabilitation proposition was economic. It was noted by 16 interviewees that rehabilitation was not feasible for financial reasons, for the income generated by sex work was often greater than that gained from suggested alternate professions. These women noted that sex workers were mostly illiterate and lacked educational skills that would enable them to be placed in anything other than minimum wage jobs. Alternative vocations like handicrafts and domestic labor which were considered “honorable” rehabilitation options for sex workers by aid agencies, government and NGOs were not financially viable to be considered feasible.

Another reason for dismissing the rehabilitation proposition was the prospect of sexual violation and exploitation in the process of rehabilitation itself. 11 of the sex workers noted that such rehabilitation projects had failed previously because rehabilitated sex workers were often sexually harassed by the concerned officials engaged in the process. It appeared from the interviewee’s statements that such rescue and rehabilitation endeavors were often motivated by ulterior factors and were futile. Logistical realities such as stigmatization, ostracization and

sexual harassment of rehabilitated sex workers might render such efforts futile. And sexual exploitation of sex workers by rehabilitation workers might be a reality in red light areas that unravel the impact of such external interventions.

Violence in sex work

The women at *Sonagachi* have been victims of intermittent violence, as their statements show. The violence was perpetrated against them by local criminals, pimps, brothel owners, and law enforcement agencies. Of the 33 sex workers interviewed, 12 recalled specific acts of violence perpetrated in the past against themselves or their compatriots. It was found that most of the reported incidences of violence occurred prior to the functioning of the union (DMSC) or during the early years of its operation. The sex workers can be subjected to violence by brothel owners or *malkins* as they are called locally. There are various types of contracts that the sex workers form with the brothel-owners. One of them is called the *aadbiya* arrangement in which the sex worker gets half of her income while the other half goes to the brothel owner. Another is the *chhukri* system, in which the sex worker gets the free usage of the brothel-owner's place for her entire earning for a year and contractual payments for subsequent years. Being a *chhukri* generates the scope and incidence of abuse, as Sadhana pointed out:

“The malkin can physically assault the chhukri and get away with it. She can force her to have unsafe sex without fear of retaliation from the sex worker. The latter cannot protest for she has hardly any income and the brothel-owner can turn her out in the streets to starve.”

One of the greatest menaces that sex workers faced comes in the form of harassment and assault by local anti-social elements who would insist on becoming the first customers of newcomers to the red-light area. Rama noted:

“Of course, these anti-socials never paid, and they never used condoms. You could not protest for then they would beat you to death. And you could not register a complaint for the police would refuse to listen to you or even worse, try to extort money from those of us who went to complain.”

The law enforcement agencies had also proved to be less than empathetic. Parvati explained:

“In the name of conducting raids the police periodically harassed the sex workers and the brothel owners. They would extort money and if we could not pay up they would arrest us and put us in jail. Our colleagues would then bribe them to get us free. The police had in the past sexually assaulted the women whom they rounded up in raids. One of the interviewees told of

an incident when her colleagues were picked up from Kalighat and taken for a ride in a desolate spot in a police jeep. The officer in charge and his subordinates raped the women by turn.”

Intimate partner violence and rape is a common occurrence among sex workers as it is evident from the women’s testimonies. Sapna noted:

“My partner was a drug addict and he lived on my income. He would regularly beat me up for money. One day I told him I cannot pay for his addictions any more. Later that day he asked me to see him in front of Kantapukur morgue. He arrived there and suddenly left. Suddenly I saw four men in front of me. They dragged me to an isolated spot and gang raped me. They told me that my partner had taken money from them and promised my sexual services. I was three months pregnant at that time.”

Sapna provided a further example of brutalization by her partner:

“My partner stole money from me. When I refused to listen to his incessant demands he would beat me up. He forced me to sell blood at hospitals thrice. One day after hitting me in front of my friends he dragged me inside my house, poured kerosene all over me and tried to set fire on me. I ran out of the house and jumped into a nearby pond. I swam and reached the opposite bank and ran in the direction of the bus stand. There I saw a bus going in the direction of Amtala and jumped into it. That was the end of our relationship.”

Intimate partner violence can contribute to mental health morbidity among sex workers and reduce the impetus to be healthy and maintain safe sex practices. It is important here to note that none of the interviewed sex workers identified clients as perpetrators of violence. However, local anti-socials who aspire to be clients and were thwarted often resorted to violence against the sex workers. The clients of sex workers were noted to be people whose main intention would be to gain pleasure from the sex workers and not assault the sex workers. Shivani explained:

“See our clients are involving themselves in an illegal activity by availing our services. They are scared of being approached or rounded up by the police. They are scared of their family members or acquaintances spotting them in red light districts. They have to operate under subterfuge too. They come here to gain pleasure, not to brutalize us.”

Interestingly long-term clients can turn into intimate partners and the latter were noted to perpetrate violence on the sex workers. The interviews showed that clients with whom the sex workers shared a professional relationship and interacted intermittently were much less likely to be violent. These clients involved regular ones and short-term visitors. As Rina noted:

“Why would the clients be violent towards us? In this country, it is not a crime to steal or hate but it is a crime to have sex in exchange of money. The clients are criminals just like us. They try to hide themselves from public. They will not be violent and attract attention towards themselves and get arrested.”

Non-violent clients are not always the case with sex workers elsewhere as it is evident from previous studies (Jenkins, 2006; Karandikar & Prospero, 2010; Fawole & Dagunduro, 2014). That the regular clients in *Sonagachi* are not engaged in violence--as asserted by the interviewed sex workers--might have an impact on the positive health practices implemented by the women there.

A multilayered strategy to combat violence

By the sex workers' own admission violence has been reduced sharply in the last decade during which DMSC with all its subunits became fully functional. The interviewees noted that currently incidents of violence against sex workers were not rare but greatly reduced. The rate of condom usage in *Sonagachi* was 97% in 2017 (NACO) which indicates that structural barriers to safe sex practices like violence have been overcome to a great extent. The sex workers identify the following steps for violence intervention.

The first step was the unionization and formation of a collective platform for voicing common concerns. The union of sex workers DMSC is noted to have provided the means for vocalization of the sex workers' demands. The formation of DMSC provided an important platform through which sex workers could directly raise their immediate needs and concerns. The pressing need to remedy violence and harassment against sex workers was conveyed to the government and police officials. The local antisocial and political goons also refrained from indulging in direct confrontation with individual sex workers for they feared retaliation from a collective group. Law enforcement agencies remained apprehensive of massive demonstrations by DMSC and vocal protestations by the sex workers in cases of violence, extortion and unjust incarcerations.

The second step in combating violence was the identification of stakeholders and stakeholder negotiation. These stakeholders include pimps, clients, law enforcement agencies and members of political parties--most have been guilty of perpetrating violence against the sex workers. One of the main goals of such negotiation is to emphasize the status of sex work as a legitimate labor industry that sustains the stakeholders and losses of the stakeholders were highlighted if high rates of HIV/STI infection wiped out the sex worker population. Maintaining a process of collective decision-making with the external agents--such as clients, brothel owners, political leaders, law enforcement agencies and media organizations--was noted to be necessary for sustaining the participatory process generated within *Sonagachi*. Sapna said:

“We need to go on talking with the external agents. Talking with them about their needs and our needs will enable us to know what their arguments are-- for us and against us. Such communication is necessary to smooth any problem between their interest and our interest. At the end of the day we want to keep our project going. For that it is necessary to increase the involvement of the outside people, the non-sex workers. There is no better way to involve them in the project than by talking with them.”

At *Sonagachi*, peer outreach workers highlight how violence and opposition to safe sex practices can result in an epidemic of STIs and HIV/AIDS among the sex workers populace causing deaths or debilitation among them. A dead or ill work force is in nobody’s interest for it results in the loss of income for all. As Sadhana put it, “We tell them [pimps] if we catch AIDS we die. And that means you die too.”

In addition to unionization, community mobilization was facilitated by peer outreach and education, one of the primary activities undertaken at *Sonagachi* (Jana, Basu, Rothe-ram-Borus & Newman, 2004; Cornish & Ghosh, 2007, Dasgupta 2019). Peer outreach was primarily geared towards addressing health issues such as imparting STI information, distributing free condoms and disseminating safe sex awareness (Jana et al., 2004). Bishakha further highlighted the importance of peer outreach education and communication:

“A sex worker will not be comfortable sharing her problems with outsiders such as healthcare workers, researchers, scientists or NGOs. But if it is another of her colleague, then it is a different story. She will not have much problems opening up to her colleague. We share the same happiness, same sorrows, same pains, same hopes. It is not talking about health or safe sex alone, it is talking about life and all its needs and problems. If a sex worker is being subjected to violence by her landlord who she will like to open up with? A peer worker who is also her colleague, obviously. The peer outreach worker can not only talk about condoms, and STIs, she can also give the sex worker advice on how to handle a tough situation to her best advantage. That is why peer outreach works so well in Sonagachi.”

There were no external agencies determining the processes and outcomes of the peer outreach project at *Sonagachi*. The sense of ownership and organizational pride cemented community allegiance, which in turn reinforced local activism against violence in *Sonagachi* (Dasgupta, 2013; Dasgupta, 2019). The conglomeration of the sex workers achieved in DMSC was perceived as an able platform to run a counterforce against violence and societal injustices. The importance of collective action was repeatedly highlighted by tarried he interviewees. Madhabi noted:

“We need to fight and fight together, one cannot do it alone. The battle cannot be won alone, if all of us are together only then we taste victory. See, previously the police would call me a whore and chase me off like an insect. Now they treat me with respect, offer me a seat at the police station, listen to and register my complaint. Because we, the women of Sonagachi are

together, because we work within a union, the good times have been possible. There is strength in numbers, there is strength in unity and finally there is strength in being ourselves. We, the sex workers, run this project and the responsibility lies with us to make our lives and futures better.”

Conclusion

The article does not purport to conclude that sex workers are not trafficked or coerced into their profession. But the voices of the sex workers point out that not all of them are victims of trafficking and sexual servitude. The narratives of the *Sonagachi* women indicate that they chose this profession under financial exigencies. And they ask their choice of livelihood to be respected and not be subjected to moralistic evaluation. They demand legalization and decriminalization of their vocation and acquisition of labor rights guided by international labor regulations.

Previous research shows that delegitimization and criminalization of sex work can jeopardize the health and safety of sex workers and increase unsafe sex practices and consequently HIV/STI infection rates (Draughon Moret et al., 2016; Go et al., 2011; Shannon et al., 2014). Heeding the demand for legalization and being granted labor rights can ensure the sustainability of an already successful health outreach initiative among the sex workers. The rescue and rehabilitation propositions for sex workers are often not feasible options (Cohen, 2005; Cornish & Ghosh, 2007). The interviewed women emphasize the impracticability of these propositions and repudiate them vigorously. The ground realities of the trade, as indicated by the interviews, ensure that such rescue and rehabilitation schemes continue to fail. The interviewees also expressed serious reservations about the moral compunctions that precipitated such rescue and rehabilitation schemes. Evidently rescue and rehabilitation propositions are not always the appropriate objectives in intervention projects among sex workers. In such a situation one is led to question the policies of international donor organizations which deprives sex workers groups from funding if rescue and rehabilitation propositions are not implemented.

The institutionalization of gender inequalities, the cultural construction of commercial sex work, and the interplay of gender dynamics with economic structure and class, legitimizes and perpetuates violence as means of control and disempowerment, and increases the behavioral risk factors for poorer health outcomes. Conventional social norms reinforce traditional gender stereotypes and acceptable notions on female sexuality, and severely limit sex workers' agency. Violence additionally increases the sex worker's behavioral risk factors for unsafe sexual practices, for the sake of monetary gain besides rendering her vulnerable to STIs and mental health morbidity through non-consensual sex.

The voices of the sex workers indicate that the women at *Sonagachi* have been subject to violence perpetrated by different sources including pimps, brothel owners, law enforcement

agencies, political goons, local criminals and intimate partners. But the unionization of the sex workers and formation of DMSC resulted in a drastic reduction of violence perpetrated against the sex workers. An identification of stakeholders within and outside the realm of sex work, and engaging the stakeholders in dialogue, helped in generating empathy and significantly diminishing the incidence of violence.

The content of the interviews bears the practical implications of this study. It becomes apparent that high-risk marginalized populations like sex workers can engage with and overcome structural barriers like criminalization, stigmatization and violence in highly gendered sectors of labor like commercial sex work through multi-stakeholder collaborative approach resulting in identifying and resolving of said barriers. The *Sonagachi* model of peer outreach-based community mobilization, HIV/STI education and unionization of sex workers can perhaps be replicated to form successful interventions in commercial sex work sites in South Asia and other parts of the developing world. The legalization of sex work is also a major avenue to ensure that commercial sex workers are treated fairly for their labor without fear of oppression. An understanding of the social acceptability of sexual labor needs to be an underlying feature of any social intervention targeting sex workers in India thereby recognizing women's fundamental right to make choices regarding their own bodies. In the end it is essential to remember that the daily battle of the commercial sex workers in India is not simply to gain access to structural resources but "to be productive and contributing members of society. It is not a fight against society, but rather...it is a fight to be a part of society or to be allowed to be good citizens within society" (de Souza, 2010, p. 34).

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