“I might do sex work, but I am also a mother, daughter and a lover”: A study of sex work, social relations, and violence in the lives of female sex workers in Eastern India

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Roadmap for today’s webinar

First part

- Overview
- Need
- Methodology
- Location
- Sample
- Areas of analysis

Second part

- Social relations in a RLA
- Pathways into sex work
- Concluding thoughts

Start

Finish
WHAT: OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH

- PhD research in International Development situated at the School of International Development (DEV) University of East Anglia. Supervised by Prof. Nitya Rao and Prof. Cecile (Sam) Jackson.
- Funded by the Postgraduate Internationalisation Studentship, Social Sciences Faculty, UEA.
- A qualitative research on the lives of women in sex work (former and current) in Eastern India, started in 2013.
- A study of social relations, sex work and violence: The ‘social worlds’ of women in sex work. Female sex workers as ‘social entities’. Exploring how female sex workers’ everyday experiences and negotiations with power and violence are influenced by, and influence their participation in social relationships.
“...studies of sex workers (in India) often reduce complex lives into simplistic binaries, most commonly: an understanding of female sex workers as freely engaging in, or forced into sex work. This is both inaccurate and insufficient. Much relevant information is ignored such as family and social-economic background, caste and religious segregations, sexual identities, marital status, not to mention work identities other than and in addition to sex work.”


“The unbroken historical thread of prostitution as a category of abjection and violence” (pp.18) .... “prostitution as a medicalized category, where disease is rendered as being an inherent characteristic of prostitution itself” (pp.22)

“These assumption contribute toward the production of prostitution as an exceptional phenomenon in the lives of women who sell sexual services, one that requires exceptional intervention” (pp.26)

*Shah (2014) Street Corner Secrets: Sex, Work and Migration in the City of Mumbai*
Some ways in which my research addresses these gaps...

- **Argues** that women enter sex work as a livelihood strategy, but also as a product of experiences within social relations.

- **Addresses intersectionality:** “…emphasizes how different dimensions of social life cannot be separated out into different and pure strands; as such, a woman may be a mother and a sex worker and the one role may impact upon the performance of the other” (Zalwango, et al, 2010; pp 73).

- **Is rooted in context:** linking discussion on female sex workers’ lives with larger scholarship on women’s negotiations with patriarchy and power, violence against women, women’s work in the unregulated labour market, participation in social relations in India.

- **Analyses anti-trafficking ‘rescue, rehabilitation’ and HIV/AIDS interventions within a context of social relations** – how they affect, facilitate, interrupt social relations in their practice.
HOW: METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

Qualitative Research is concerned... “with how the social world is interpreted, understood, experienced or produced ... based on methods of data generation which are flexible and sensitive to the social context in which data are produced”. (Mason, 1996;pp.4)

- Generated data that maps the trajectory of the journey of a woman who has entered sex work in Eastern India.
- Collected data across 8 months of fieldwork, preceded by 1.5 months of a scoping (pre-fieldwork) visit.
- Life-history interviewing: “Please tell me about your life.” Allowing the focus to not be on sex work, alone.
- Adapted methods based on sites of data collection.
WHERE: SITES OF DATA COLLECTION

- 2 prominent red-light areas in Kolkata, the capital city of the state of West Bengal in Eastern India: Kalighat and Sonagachi

- An NGO run, government funded anti-trafficking shelter home for women rescued from sex work in Narendrapur, a southern suburb of Kolkata

- Rural communities in the district of South 24 Parganas, a region known for high rates of trafficking, female urban migration, crimes against women (HDRCC, 2009)
Total number of respondents: 51
Pimps: 2
Key informants: 4
Child marriage ‘victims’: 4
Women in sex work (former/current) = 41

### WHO: DATA SAMPLE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data sites</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Sample group</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Months</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kalighat</td>
<td>South Kolkata</td>
<td>Peer workers (current/ex sex workers) working with a sex workers’ organisation</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Brothel-based full time sex workers (includes ex-victims of trafficking who have returned to the trade)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Flying/ part time sex workers</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonagachi</td>
<td>North Kolkata</td>
<td>Retired sex workers</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Madame (ex/current sex workers) between the ages of 30-50 years</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pimp (also doubling up as ‘babus’, fixed client of the sex worker)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNEHA shelter home</td>
<td>N’dpur (a southern suburb of Kolkata)</td>
<td>Rescued ‘minors’ from different professions in the sex industry (bar dancing, brothel based sex work)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cross-border trafficking ‘victims’/illegal immigrants from Bangladesh</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Child Marriage ‘Victims’</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural communities</td>
<td>South-24 district Paragnas</td>
<td>Rural women who ‘returned’ in 2012 as part of anti-trafficking rehabilitation programmes from red light areas/escaped themselves and then contacted community NGOs. These women stayed on/leave the village and returned/are thinking of leaving again (over the last three years)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Rural women who have just returned/‘rescued’ from sex work either by themselves or through the assistance of anti-trafficking interventions</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Across all four sites</td>
<td></td>
<td>Anti-trafficking practitioners</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.5</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sex workers’ rights activists</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
WHO: DATA SAMPLE

- Initial access to sample was facilitated by NGOs working with children of sex workers, on HIV/AIDS awareness and against human trafficking. This access point shaped the nature of my sample: their socio-economic background.

- The women within my sample were from rural and peri-urban backgrounds, in residential localities located across villages in the South 24 Parganas district, and towns neighbouring Kolkata, respectively. The age range was quite large, the youngest being 18 years and the oldest 65 (self-reported).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social categories</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Indian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>58.5% (24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married (formerly/currently)</td>
<td>41.5% (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>Nepal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>58.5% (25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>60.9% (25)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data excludes 4 child marriage ‘victims’ who were Indians, 2 Muslim and 2 Hindu, and none had children.
AREAS OF ANALYSIS

Social relations

A. Pathways into sex work

I. Social relations in natal and marital families

B. Experiences of power and violence in sex work

II. Social relations with madams, pimps, peers and children in a red-light area

C. Pathways out of sex work

III. Experiences of ‘rescue’, ‘escape’ and ‘exit from sex work; effect on social relations
• Food discrimination, physical and verbal abuse (not always linked to poverty) (Miller, 1997) (Munro and McIntyre, 2014)

• Social rank and power within the household: Direct conflict within social relations with female heads of households, stepmothers, sisters-in-law; shaped by male partner’s economic power in the household

• Neglect and abuse – need for social (marriage) independence or work (economic independence)

• Precarity of ‘home’ – natal family is home until married, after marriage this space becomes precarious

• Domestic violence – within spousal arguments over husband’s drinking and gambling habits, inability to find work, suspicion over wife’s fidelity, birth of female child

• Dowry issues – conflict with in-laws (in spite of husband’s support – economic power played a role)

• Natal families’ refusal to take the women back OR control of women’s lives and mobility if acceptance is present

• “Ke bhaar nebe?” (who will take responsibility?)

• Desperation for kono kaaj (any work) to secure social and economic reliance. Work also as a means to establish one’s own residence

• Seeking new marital attachments through romance to regain respectability

• Lack of information/awareness about job ‘prospects’ and decreased vigilance about romantic attachments: trafficked into sex work

• Experience of low pay and sexual harassment in work in the irregular labour market (domestic work, factories)

• Consensual entry into sex work through social networks: family/community members

• Entry into sex work
Social Relations Framework
(Kabeer Naila, Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought, 1994.

I. Explore and address gender inequalities within the distribution of resources, responsibilities and power in society

II. Unpack relationships (of power) between people, and people and resources, activities

III. How these relationships are reworked through ‘institutions’ like the State, Market, Community, and Family

- **Institutions:** framework of rules to achieve certain economic and social goals, in the production, reinforcement, and reproduction of social relations and social inequalities

- **Institutional interdependence:** Gender ideologies and norms created in the households affect women’s and men’s participation in Market (nature of work) and interaction with State (claims, rights) and Community (benefits, services)
Regulation of the red-light area: ‘rescue’, law and order, corruption. NGOs’ services: childcare, child protection, health services, conflict resolution.

Commercial activities of madams, pimps, customers.

Motherhood, partner intimacy, dependence on madams.

Institutions in a RLA: Rules, People, Resources, Activities and Power, overlap to affect the nature of female sex workers’ social relations with their families, employers, customers, peers, NGOs and the Police.

ARGUMENT:

i. Experiences and negotiations with power and violence shaped by these institutional overlaps.

ii. Boundaries of and expectations within social relations controlled by these overlaps: source of tension, conflict, power inequalities and violence.
Findings: Institutional interactions shape social relations, and experiences and negotiations with power and violence within them

1. Cross-over of people between Household and Market: E.g customers become partners, madams take on caregiving duties and responsibilities, children enter sex work

i. **Transactional relationships with customers imbued with expectations of intimacy and attachment**: Experiences of manipulation by customers (money); self-directed violence (self harm, alcohol consumption) to cope with infidelity, betrayal

ii. **Relationships prioritised based on traditional family structures**: Madams seek membership into households over customers; romantic relationships with customers seen as a way out of sex work (notun shongshar) – feelings of abandonment (madams), rejection by partner’s family (stigma)

iii. **NGOs and Police step in to regulate cross-overs supportively and confrontationally**: NGOs provide drop-in-centres, resolve conflicts in social relations (domestic violence, money disputes with madams); ‘rescue’ of women from madams and pimps, and removal of children from mothers to prevent second-generation prostitution. Experiences of disempowerment, oppression, instrumentalisation even in ‘supportive’ services (health, child care)
Findings: Institutional interactions shape social relations, and experiences and negotiations with power and violence within them

2. **Rules of Market intersecting with Household obligations:**

i. **Inability to articulate experiences of physical and sexual violence with customers as an adhiya (half independent) or independent – to protect livelihoods of peer sex workers**

“If I tell the NGO, they'll confront the pimp who sources the customers for the madams. The pimps will complain to the madam and threaten to close down the brothel. And that will be the end of us all. Even if I do it for my benefit, *ami ki bhaabhe onno ekta meyer ghor bhangte pari?* How can I break another's woman home/livelihood?” (19 year old Mukta, Sonagachi)

ii. **Long-distance motherhood due to unsafe environment to raise children (Sonagachi)**

Tensions with members of natal (female members – involved in child-rearing), and marital (husband, in-laws) families about childcare – social and economic dependence (which led to entry into sex work) comes back into play.

“Today, the same step-mother, who drove me into sex work, is taking care of my daughter. This hurts a lot you know, but I can’t help it. Hopefully if I give her enough money, my daughter will be fine” Shampa, 20 year, Sonagachi
Some concluding thoughts:

- How can (and do) our interventions with female sex workers take their ‘social worlds’ and ‘intersectional identities’ into account?
- How can our interventions engage with how institutional overlaps affect female sex workers’ experiences with power and violence?
- How can our interventions address the specificities of power inequalities and violence within sex work without taking away women’s agency?
- How can our interventions respect agency without dismissing the patriarchal, unequal foundations of sex work?
References


Thank you!

QUESTIONS, COMMENT AND FEEDBACK WELCOME