

Reasons for Women's Entry into Sex Work: A Case Study of Kolkata, India

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Abstract Several studies have cited economic hardships or poverty as the main reason for women's entry into sex work in India. While this may be true, it is still a vague reason. For better understanding and to develop meaningful intervention, we need to dig deeper and find more specific reasons for women's entry into sex work. In addition, while most studies conducted among sex workers in India rely on survey-based approaches to explore women's reasons for entry into sex work, there have been no studies to date which have used cultural biography to examine how sex work becomes a livelihood option for women in Indian society. Based on the analysis of the 46 short-life portraits and three life-history interviews collected from 'flying' or mobile female sex workers over a period of 7 months (December 2009–July 2010) in Kolkata, India, this paper examines the socio-cultural and economic factors that influence women's decisions to enter into sex work. This study found that women choose sex work vis-à-vis other employment opportunities because it provides them with more freedom and autonomy over their bodies, higher earnings, flexible hours of work, and much flexibility to manage their dual responsibilities of a nurturer and provider. Because of this complex structure of causation, HIV prevention programs must address the larger issues of workplace sexual harassment, minimum living wage and child day care policy to disincentivize women's entry into the sex industry.

Keywords Sex work · HIV prevention · Entry into sex work · Trafficking

Introduction

This paper aims to examine the wide range of socio-cultural and economic factors influencing 'flying' or mobile female sex workers' decisions to enter into sex work

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in Kolkata, India. Sex work is a highly stigmatized and risky activity, especially for women in India. Indian women's 'izzat' or honor is tied to her sexuality, which means families gain or lose 'izzat' through women's sexual conduct. As per the gendered ideology of honor, i.e. 'izzat', a woman is the repository of honor as a daughter, wife, and mother, while a man is in charge of regulating her sexuality. Therefore, strict control over women's sexuality is exercised by putting restrictions on her physical mobility. Women are required to be submissive and passive about their sexual desires and maintain virginity until marriage. The patriarchal weapon used to exercise control over all women is that of the "whore stigma"—defined by Gail Pheterson (1990) as "social and legal branding of women who are suspected of being or acting like prostitutes". This notion of honor or 'izzat' has also resulted in honor crimes in certain parts of India, which Abu Odeh defines as the killing of a woman by her father or brother for engaging in, or being suspected of engaging in, sexual practices before or outside marriage, and includes different types of manifest violent behavior against her like assault, confinement, imprisonment, interference with choice in marriage, labeling as minor or insane, and even murder (as cited in Vishwanath and Palakonda 2011, p. 389). Such extreme forms of violence, although not a living reality for all women, negatively impact the minds of young girls and women by creating a climate of fear and terror. However, very few studies have examined how sex work becomes a livelihood option for women, especially when the women are fully aware of the risks and dangers associated with being involved in the sex industry.

Drawing data from a field-based ethnographic research, which used 'cultural biography' (Frank 2000), a method that combines participant observation (defining tool of ethnography) and life-history interviews, this paper fills this gap in the literature by extending our understanding of the realities that shape women's decision to enter into sex work in India. In addition, the findings shed light on the polarized global debate on sex work which either regards sex work to be a legitimate work enjoying the same recognition, protection and rights as those bestowed on other jobs, or views sex work as an oppressive and exploitative system in which women's bodies are exploited by men. The findings can be used to develop meaningful HIV prevention programs aimed at disincentivizing women's entry into sex work by looking into women's need for child care responsibilities, alternate employment opportunities with better pay and working hours, and legal counseling to protect their human right to feel safe and secure in any given environment.

Background and Literature Review

It is estimated that India has 1 million female sex workers (Saggurti et al. 2011a, b). Kolkata, located in the eastern part of India, is home to the largest concentration of sex workers residing in brothels. One study reports 28,000 (Irvine 1997, as cited in Pardasani 2005), while another study estimates 50,000–100,000 women to be engaged in commercial sex work in Kolkata alone (AIIPH 1993, as cited in Evans and Lambert 1997). Due to the geographical proximity with neighboring countries like Nepal and Bangladesh, sites known internationally for human trafficking, and

the north-eastern Indian states of Manipur and Meghalaya, recognized for high prevalence of drug use and drug trafficking, the sex industry proliferates within the region. In addition, scholars have argued that rapidly growing levels of migration, poverty, extensive globalization, privatization, and structural adjustment policies adopted by the government have forced a significant number of women to compete with men in the labor market, but due to limited employment opportunities and omnipresence of workplace sexual harassment, sex work becomes a survival mechanism for vulnerable women with poor literacy skills and lack of family support (Gupta 2004; The Lawyers Collective 2003).

A majority of the women in sex work operate clandestinely through non-brothel-based settings (Dandona et al. 2005). Recent epidemiological studies have found flying or mobile female sex workers in India to be a group with a high risk of HIV infection, as they report high rates of inconsistent use of condoms with clients or regular partners (Dandona et al. 2005; Saggurti et al. 2012; Halli et al. 2010). In comparison to their counterparts residing in brothels, they have no fixed place or time of operation and are hesitant to seek membership of support groups or access the HIV prevention services due to the fear of 'whore stigma' (Pheterson 1990) which results from sheer association with the targeted HIV prevention programs or sex worker support groups. However, most HIV risk-related studies conducted among sex workers in this region have remained focused on visible groups within the sex worker population, such as women residing in brothels (Pardasani 2005). Very limited attention has been given to invisible groups of sex workers such as flying female sex workers, who are a highly marginalized group of sex workers.

Numerous studies have reported substantial differences in the sex work environment, socio-demographic characteristics and HIV risk behaviors across diverse groups of sex workers (Dandona et al. 2005; Blanchard et al. 2005). Yet, it is to be noted that the reasons for women's entry into sex work are typically assumed in the sex work literature to be the same across varied sub-groups of sex workers. Further, most studies tend to lay emphasis on economic necessity or financial hardship as the primary reason for women's entry into sex work in India. Scholars explain women's economic necessity as resulting from factors such as chronic poverty, divorce, widowhood or separation, family debt, lack of education, early marriage, limited economic opportunities or lack of family support (Chattopadhyay et al. 1994; Devine et al. 2010). While this may be true, a recent study based on in-depth interviews with mobile female sex workers in four Indian states, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh, found that a variety of reasons tend to influence women's entry into the sex industry, such as economic conditions, negative social circumstances, force, traditional family activity and out of own pleasure/choice (Saggurti et al. 2011a, b). Similarly, another study conducted in Nagaland reported that women's entry into sex work is through four different pathways: economic, drugs, coercion, and pleasure (Devine et al. 2010). Both these studies suggest that multiple reasons could influence women's entry into sex work, and that the HIV vulnerability of women would differ considerably based on their reported reasons or motivations for entry into sex work. For instance, Devine et al. (2010) found that women who reported pleasure as their reason for entry into sex work were in a relatively advantageous position compared with women who entered

into sex work due to coercion, drugs, or economic reasons, as they were much in control over their lives, as they are in a position to pick and choose their clients. While these studies provide valuable information on the reasons and motivations influencing women's entry into sex work in India, the extent to which these findings can be used to inform program design is limited because women's reasons for entry into sex work are not the same across different states, and the political, geographical, economic and socio-sexual landscapes play a critical role in shaping their HIV vulnerability. Therefore, there is a need for more localized research using ethnographic methods, because most studies conducted among sex workers in India tend to rely on cross-sectional survey-based methods to examine women's reasons for entry into sex work, despite mounting evidence that data derived using the survey-based approach suffers from social-desirability bias. In addition, it is typically assumed in these studies that women's entry into sex work is a one-time decision, when several scholars have argued that women's entry into sex work occurs on multiple occasions and 'quit-re-entry-quit cycles' are a common trend to be observed among sex workers (Manopaiboon et al. 2003; Orchard et al. 2012). The implication for HIV prevention programs is that reasons for entry into sex work tend to vary during the course of women's life as a sex worker and therefore follow-up interventions with women are needed to assess their vulnerability at different points of their life and to cater appropriately to their needs.

HIV/AIDS is a serious problem in India. It is home to the world's third highest number of people living with HIV/AIDS, after South Africa and Nigeria (UNAIDS 2010). As per National AIDS Control Organization (NACO) estimates, there are about 5.2 million people living with HIV infection in India, with 40 % of the infections reported to be among women (Saharabudde and Mehendale 2008). The predominant mode of HIV transmission is through heterosexual contact and commercial sex work plays an important role in the spread of the HIV/AIDS disease in the country. Despite the general awareness about HIV/AIDS in society and Indian government efforts to reach out to sex workers using a targeted approach to HIV prevention, the HIV prevalence rates among women in sex work range from 40 to 60 % in some parts of the country (Amin 2004). Few recent studies based on in-depth interviews with sex workers in India have emphasized the need for HIV prevention programs to take into consideration the complexity of the pre-entry contexts of these women as it directly influences their ability to engage in health-seeking behaviors (Saggurti et al. 2012; Devine et al. 2010; Gupta et al. 2011). However, there have been no studies to date that have used cultural biography to examine women's reasons for entry into sex work. Departing from structured interviews and survey-based approaches typically used in sex work research in India, this study uses cultural biography—a method that is designed to explore the reciprocal relationships between individual personality and socio-cultural and structural-environmental factors that influence women's decisions to enter into sex work. This method diminishes the deterministic view of the individual by treating individuals as having power and agency to influence their cultural environment. It pays particular attention to heterogeneity by taking into the account the individual and the contexts to which they belong. The most important strength of using this approach is that it makes possible the inclusion of women's voices in the discourses

surrounding sex work, as their voices often go unrecognized and silenced amidst the epidemiological experts, HIV-related practitioners, and policy experts.

Methods

This paper is based on data from a larger field-based ethnographic research conducted among mobile female sex workers in Kolkata, India, from December 2009 to July 2010. In particular, the study used ‘cultural biography’, a method that combines participant observation and life-history interviews to examine how flying female sex workers perceive their risk of HIV in the context of other risk experiences in their lives. However, for this paper, the author relies on the 46 short-life interviews, 3 in-depth life histories and field-based observations to examine the motivations for entry into sex work among flying female sex workers in Kolkata, India.

Data Collection Procedure

All data comprising short-life portraits, field-based observations and life-history interviews was collected over a period of 7 months by the author. In the first stage (1–4 months), 46 short-life portraits were collected and in the second stage (5–7 months), 3 in-depth life histories of women were collected. The selection for short-life portraits and life-history informants was made using maximum-variation sampling approach (Miles and Huberman 1994), in order to incorporate the heterogeneous experiences and perspectives of diverse groups of sex workers, such as women who were illiterate versus literate, recent versus longtime members of the sex industry, young versus old, sex worker support group members versus non-members, and from diverse non-brothel-based settings. Although a purposive sampling strategy, it aims at including all extreme viewpoints within the population by maximizing the diversity of the sample. For instance, a woman who is literate might have a different motivation to enter into sex work versus a woman who is illiterate. Similarly, women who are married with responsibilities of raising two girl children might have different reasons to enter into sex work versus women who are married with responsibilities of raising a boy child.

Prior to beginning the process of collecting the short-life interviews, the technique of participant observation was used to build a relationship of trust and rapport with the project staff, peer educators and women outreached in the field. Spending a considerable amount of time observing and assisting the NGO staff carry out the sexual health outreach services during the health clinic hours created the space to interact and bond with the *peer educators*, who are sex workers themselves employed within the project and who play a critical role in linking the organization and the sex work community with HIV prevention messages and resources, such as condoms and sexual health check-ups. Traveling along with the peer educators to the varied solicitation sites of the NGOs, and assisting them in conducting their outreach services in the field, gave the opportunity to understand the needs of the women and the factors that initiate their entry into sex work.

Repeated interview methodology (Wax and Shapiro 1956) was used to reduce the social-desirability bias, and also to check for any inconsistencies and fabrications within their narratives as the relationship between respondent and the researcher developed with frequent encounters. The 46 short-life portraits were collected in the form of contact summary sheets (Miles and Huberman 1994), which included the following information: demographic questions (age, marital status, education, brief history of employment, duration of sex work, number of children, membership of organization); organization of sex work (independent, through intermediaries); family background; risk and safety issues faced during work; HIV risk perceptions; and reasons for entry into sex work.

The interviews were semi-structured and carried out keeping the contact summary sheets as a guide. However, the questions were not administered in a standard order. The interviews began with the question, 'How did you get to the place you are now?' This open-ended question allowed women to discuss several factors that resulted in their choice of sex work as their livelihood option. The interviews were conducted in Bengali or Hindi languages, spoken fluently by the author. Verbal informed consent of the participants was obtained prior to each formal interview. The purpose of the research was explained to the participants each time they were interviewed and they were given time to seek any clarifications

Table 1 Socio-demographic characteristics of the participants

Socio-demographic characteristics	Distribution in Sample ($n = 46$)
Age (at time of interview)	Range: 20–50 years Mean: 34.43 SD: 7.00
Marital status (at time of interview)	Married and living with spouse: 18 Unmarried and living with a partner: 2 Married but abandoned/separated: 18 Married now divorced: 2 Married now widowed: 6
Education (at time of interview)	Illiterate (no schooling): 32 (69.56 %) Less than primary education: 11 (23.91 %) Primary (10th grade completed): 3 (6.52 %)
No. of children (at time of interview)	Mean: 1.98 SD: 3.00
Duration in sex work (at time of interview)	Range: 1–15 years Mean: 7.57
Employed as peer educators (at time of interview)	Yes: 28 (60.86 %) No: 18 (39.13 %)
Age at marriage (at time of interview)	Range: 11–18 years Mean: 14.8 years SD = 7

Table 2 Socio-demographic characteristics of the 3 life-history informants

Socio-demographic characteristics	Shristi	Geejanjali	Trupti
Age	28 years	31 years	40+ years
Education	Illiterate	10th standard	Illiterate
Age of entry into sex work	14 years	26 years	19 years
Caste	Scheduled caste	Upper caste	Scheduled caste (lower caste)
Marital status	Divorced	Separated	Widowed
Religion	Muslim	Hindu/Christian	Hindu
Age of marriage	14 years	16 years	14 years
Family background	Raised by single mother with 3 other siblings, illiterate mother	Raised by biological mother and step-father, with two of her biological sisters	Raised by biological mother and step-father, with two step-sisters and one step-brother
Current living situation	11-year-old son resides in an orphanage. She resides in the brothel and shoulders the responsibility of her old mother and son	Lives separately with 2 children (13-year-old daughter, and 16-year-old son)	Lives alone in a rented house and takes care of her granddaughter and second daughter's family from time to time. She is a mother of two daughters, who are currently married.
Brief history of employment	Started working as a maid at the age of 8 Was introduced to the brothels at the age of 13 Worked in the brothels 1995–2000 Worked as a peer educator in a HIV prevention project of a local NGO from 2000 to 2009 Back into brothels	Worked as a sales representative in a medicine store Worked in a jute factory preparing jute bags Worked as a maid Entered into sex work in 2004 and operates through hotels or lodges	Started working as a maid at the age of 8 Worked in Mumbai brothels for less than a year From Mumbai brothels to Gujarat brothels for 9 years Left sex trade and started poultry farming and agriculture work for 5 years Back into street-based sex work
Type of sex work settings	Began work in brothels, moved out of brothels and worked for 5 years from non-brothel-based settings	Solicits clients from streets and provide services in hotels and red-light areas. In future, wants to own an independent space and provide services from home	Worked in brothels but currently solicits clients from streets and provide services in nearby hotels or red-light areas

concerning the research project. To maintain privacy and confidentiality of the participants, the researchers have made use of pseudonyms. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of South Carolina, Columbia. The participants received a remuneration, which ranged from \$2 to \$10 depending on the amount of time allotted to the project.

Study Participants

The participants of this study were accessed through the sexual health outreach projects of three different local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) reaching out to 'flying' female sex workers in Kolkata, India. The NGOs receive funding from National AIDS Control Organization (NACO), a division of the Indian Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, providing leadership to nationwide HIV/AIDS control programs. A majority of the women in this study were above the age of 30 and were employed within the NGO's sexual health outreach projects as peer educators. Table 1 provides the socio-demographic characteristics of the 46 short-life portraits, and Table 2 illustrates the characteristics of the 3 in-depth life histories. The age of the participants ranged from 22 to 50 years (mean = 34.43; mode = 40; SD = 7.00). The majority of participants reported being one-time married, but were either divorced, widowed, or separated at the time of the interview. The number of children for each participants ranged from 1 to 4 (mean = 1.98; SD = 3:00) which indicates that pressures of marriage and motherhood are huge for Indian women. As many as 67.4 % ($n = 31$) of those interviewed reported being illiterate, 26.1 % ($n = 12$) completed 9th standard or less, and 6.5 % ($n = 3$) had completed 10th grade.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using the qualitative research software, Nvivo 9. First, all audio-taped short-life portraits and life-history interviews were translated and then transcribed verbatim into English by the author who speaks Hindi, English and Bengali fluently. After the interview transcript was prepared, the copies of the transcript were reviewed for accuracy and appropriate representation of the respondents' thoughts by listening to the tape and matching it against the transcript and, wherever necessary, corrections were made. A line-by-line coding was undertaken. Each transcript was read and coded for the prominent themes emerging for reasons for entry into sex work. The themes were refined or new domains added as new data were analyzed and new patterns emerged. The question 'what additional insights about women's reasons for entry into sex work do we get from the 3 life-history narratives' was used to further deepen the analysis that emerged from the 46 short-life portraits about women's entry into sex work.

Results

Poverty or ‘Hungry Stomach’

Consistent with studies that have discussed poverty or financial hardships as reasons for entry into sex work, this study also found that most of the women grew up in poor families, struggling with basic survival needs of food, clothing and shelter. In the first encounter, most of the women tried to depict themselves as helpless and innocent victims who had fallen prey to the sex industry. For instance, one would repeatedly hear comments such as “*hungry stomach,*” “*it is a crime to be poor,*” “*we are poor people*” and “*dire need of money*” when posed with the question “*how did you get to this place*”? Given that sex work is a stigmatized profession, it is quite likely that women would want to evoke sympathy/empathy from the outsiders. However, with prolonged stay in the field and repeated encounters with women on varied occasions and at different venues, the narratives of women changed, especially when a relationship of trust and rapport was built up. It was then that women would speak of sex work as a ‘constrained choice’ arrived at in a given circumstance. They spoke of themselves as “bold” and “brave” in order to survive the system. For instance, Trupti, a 40-year-old life-history informant, in the very first meeting said that it was due to her husband’s accident and her in-laws ill-treatment towards her that she was forced to choose this work. This narrative changed after several meetings with her and getting to know her family and relatives, and paying a home visit. During one of the home visits, she retracted from the earlier account and said:

I should not have lied to you. I got into this work soon after my marriage because my husband was not good. He was a ‘criminal’ type of man. A ‘girl’ offered me a work. I knew she wouldn’t give me any ‘good’ work. I don’t know how to read and write. What job can she offer me that will pay well? I went with her to Mumbai.

Similarly, in the first meeting, Saraswati, one of my key informants employed as peer educator in the NGO’s sexual health outreach project, communicated that she was trafficked into sex work, but her narrative changed after several meetings. She talked about her poor family background, early marriage, marital problems, sole responsibility of rearing her two young children and limited work opportunities as reasons for choosing sex work as a livelihood option.

Lack of “Bhaalo Kaaj” (Decent Employment)

For most of the women in my study, sex work was reported as their last resort. By ‘bhaalo/decent’ employment, women meant work opportunities in which they do not have to face sexual harassment. As illustrated in the narratives of several women below, most of the participants have sought jobs as housemaids, nurses or helpers in construction sites or hotels, but are faced with the demands for repeated sexual favors by the employers/colleagues leaving them with a feeling of being violated of their basic human rights of dignity and respect:

Didi [sister], I used to work in the construction site. If I don't provide sexual favors to the contractors, they will not hire me for the job. I have to dance to their tunes; otherwise I'd lose my job. (Meera, 35 years)

...I used to work as a maid in people's houses but there too the boys would want to do "it" [have sex] with me. I didn't have much to do then and I decided to choose this path for myself... (Dharna, 25 years)

The employer will pick you for the job (daily wage labor) only when he thinks he can mold you as per his wishes. They often pick newcomers since the older women will resist their demands for sexual favor and complain to the Mahila Samiti (a women's forum)... I do not feel good doing this when that is not what I was hired for. I too have some respect (Jharna, 30 years)

While it is widely believed that poor women who are illiterate are subjected to sexual harassment by their employers/colleagues, two of the participants in this study who had completed their 10th grade exams (senior secondary education) spoke about being subjected to repeated sexual harassment at their workplace. For instance, in the narrative of Trishna, it is made evident that by reporting incidents of workplace sexual harassment women run the risk of losing their job. In addition, to seek a raise in their pay or promotion to higher rank, women have to sexually please their employers:

First, I used to work in DTDC (Desk to Desk Courier) office, distributing letters. I used to dress shabbily. One of my colleagues advised me that if I dress up properly, I would get promoted and my work will be recognized. So one day I dressed properly. I wore a sleeveless blouse and went to office. My boss might have liked me. He asked my colleague to arrange a meeting with me outside the office. So I was asked by her to visit Meghdoot Hotel. I went there and then, when my boss started misbehaving; I made a fuss and somehow escaped that place. After a few days, I was served a dismissal letter from office stating that my work was not satisfactory. I was then staying with my mother because my husband used to beat me up. I had two sons to take care of, so my mother insisted that I take up some sort of job. So I then joined the nursing home, to become a nurse. I was told by the head of the nursing home that I did not have any practical knowledge. So he arranged for nurse jobs in one house. In the night, I was sexually molested by the son who hired me. He tucked Rs.1000 (\$50) in my blouse. Next day in the morning, I visited the office to inform about the incident. The boss ignored my complaint and instead took Rs.600 (\$30) from me. My mother who heard this incident created a scene in front of the office about this. After this incident, I took up a clerical job in an office wherein I moved files across the tables. The office boss started to keep me back late on some pretext or the other. He used to give me extra money for late hours. So I thought if I have to be do this (sex work) in all other places, why not directly do it? (Trishna, 48 years, 10th grade)

Similarly, in the case of Geetanjali, a life-history informant, she tried working in a medicine job, a sales job, book stores, cook and also as house-maid but, as made

evident in the narrative below, the reasons that propelled her to choose sex work as her livelihood option was the common experience of sexual harassment. No matter what job she picked, she was asked for sexual favors from her employers/colleagues:

When I left the medicine job, I was not getting any work. My situation was really bad. Wherever I used to go, I would not like the place and people would talk rubbish with me. Then I used to feel bad. Why should I do this type of work? I have respect too. In the end, I got tired and got into this "line." (Geetanjali, 31 years, 10th grade)

The above narratives of women clearly suggest that, irrespective of women's education background, there are a wide range of jobs available for women in Indian society but repeated experiences with discrimination, exploitation and oppression at workplace makes these women believe that sex work as an livelihood option gives them more control and autonomy over their lives.

Autonomy/Freedom Through Sex Work

Quite a few women reported that, in comparison to other jobs, sex work provides them with more control and autonomy over their lives. For instance, in the life-history narratives of Geetanjali, she illustrates that, in doing other jobs, which required long hours of work; her children went neglected and she struggled to meet the expectations of being a mother as well as the provider for the family.

.... I have entered this 'line' (sex work) but I get to eat my meals at least. I worked in the book store but I never got to eat my meals. I would eat "chana chatpati" (peas & bread) and 1 glass of 'pudina' (mint) water in summer to quench my thirst and hunger. I would survive the whole day on this and would board the train at 9:30 in the night. Why was I working so hard? Of course, for the children. Earlier they were neglected and were staying alone while I was working in the offices. They suffered a lot of beatings from my mother; especially my daughter. My mother would feed all rubbish in my children's minds. She would tell them "your mother has gone bad. It is going to be night; she has not got back home. She has gone elsewhere". As a result, my daughter's mind is running in all bad direction these days." Is it good to feed such thoughts in young children? Now I am with them the whole morning. We get to eat together. Really, I am much happy now. (Geetanjali, 31 years, 10th standard)

Less/Flexible Hours and Higher Pay in Sex Work

Quite a few women reported that, unlike other jobs, sex work provides them with higher pay and involves fewer hours of work and gives them a lot of flexibility to manage their dual responsibility of being the provider/nurturer for their family:

I worked at the construction site building roads or with wall painting work. I also worked as a domestic maid in several households. I realized that, in order

to retain my job, I got to provide sexual favors to the employers and people I work with, so why not directly do this (sex work) and earn more money? I get only Rs.100 (\$ 2) toiling all day in the sun and then you are required to fulfill their hunger. (Saraswati, 35 years, Illiterate).

I made incense sticks, and did the hem work in sarees. I earned 4 rupees for making 1 kg incense sticks. It is highly laborious but does not pay well. I was in dire need of money. One man said he will arrange work for me. He got me this work and when I got the money in hand, I got habituated. What to do, I didn't have any other option.' (Payal, 32 years).

Shristi, a life-history informant, who had quit the sex industry and began working as a peer educator in a non-governmental organization regrets making that decision, as the earnings from the job were not sufficient to take care of her basic needs:

I think working in the organization was not bad but the fact that I left sex work to join that project was a wrong decision. I could have earned a lot if I had worked in both places. I have a lot of problems and I am lagging behind with regards to finances. I should have continued both the works. I would have earned quite a bit. I left everything and chose to work with the organization hoping that they would support me in my times of distress. Whenever I am faced with a crisis situation, then money becomes the deciding factor. At the moment, I realize that I made the wrong decision by leaving sex work. I should have continued both. I would have a solid amount by now in my account. I understand that, by working in the project, I am getting educated about things I don't know. I could have used this knowledge in my "practice" but the fact that I left sex work to join this organization with the hope that they would support me in times of my difficulty was wrong. The way the organization behaved with me, I was forced to leave the organization's work and got back to this path again. Everybody gave me false hopes, but when I really needed help, they backed out...I live here so that I can "fulfill" one "main" requirement of my life, which is money. I am able to fulfill this "requirement" 99 %...

'Failed' Marriages

Most of the women in this study reported experiencing intimate-partner violence soon after their marriage in the forms of husband's infidelity or extra-marital affair, drug and alcohol use by husbands, wife-beatings, neglect, and abuse. As per the socio-cultural norms of marriage, women are expected to live with their husbands and consider their husband's home their own; parents no longer have the social responsibility to provide for their daughters. Therefore, when marriages fail women are pretty much on their own, as illustrated in the following narratives:

I was facing a lot of problems [financial] after seeking divorce. For instance, I have a son. He is 10 years old. I want to put him in a good school, but to put him in a good school, one needs to have good money too. Now I have to earn this money. I am doing something but it is not happening. I know a lot of

craftwork. Despite that, I am not able to run my family. Now I live with my parents. I am doing this secretly and trying to give my son a life. (Lipika, 27 years)

He left me when I was carrying my 3-month-old daughter in my stomach. I have no contact with him since then. I have heard he has married someone else. I have no contact with him since last 7 years. I had nowhere to go. If I go to the police, they would do nothing. Instead, you'll end up spending more money. (Harini, 30 years)

My husband stays elsewhere. He does not come home regularly. I have two children. He has married someone else over there. (Sheila, 25 years)

My husband left me because I was illiterate. He left me after giving me two small children. (Swarna, 40 years)

Quite a few women expressed that, although married, their husband's income were too poor and they had little control over his income:

My husband has a poor income and it is not sufficient to run the whole family. If I would have entered this line when I was young, I would have got my own house and earned a lot. I entered very late (Rose, 40 years, illiterate)

I came into this 'line' due to financial hardships. My husband was not good. My husband would not give me any living expenses. He was not good. That's why, how will I save my family in such circumstances? That is why I had to walk this path. Then also I use to hide from him and do some 'kaaj' [sex work]. (Priti, 39 years, peer educator)

I have to feed my two girls who are currently being taken care of by my parents. I was forced to seek out for job when my elder daughter shared with me what other kids in her school tell her. You know what she tells me I felt really bad to know when I heard what other children in school tell my daughter. They tell her "why do you stare at us greedily, why don't you ask your father for some money to bring to school." My husband is least bothered about my children's education, marriage and future. I need to get the girls married and save money for it. So I need a job. 'Didi' [sister], he gives me 30 rupees every day. What can I do with 30 rupees? That does not even meet the cost of 1 kg rice. Do you know how much 1 kg rice costs? It costs 18 rupees. How can I manage in 30 rupees? (Chulbuli, 27 years, married, Illiterate)

Peer Influence

Quite a few women said that they got into sex work seeing their friends/partners doing this work. For instance, Meenati's narrative illustrates that women need to maintain virginity, and sexual relationship outside of marriage is strictly prohibited. In cases where women do admit to be sexually involved with their ex-boyfriends, she is attributed the label of being a 'whore' in society:

I am not into this work. I had a boyfriend. I was only involved with him and no one else, but when I spoke about this to this friend of mine. She said 'If you do it with him or anyone else, then it is the same thing.

Similarly, Kaya, a 38-year-old woman, employed as a peer educator got into sex work after seeing her girlfriend:

I had a friend who did this work. The way I am telling you about my family she knew everything about my family. After knowing everything- every human being desires for a friend. So like a friend she tells me, 'you are going through a lot of difficulty, you need a friend.' So with this friend I got another friend. With the help of a girlfriend, I found a boyfriend. I talked with him frequently. This continued for a while and I fell in love with him. I fell in love. From him, I learned all this. I learned to earn money. I accompanied that friend everywhere and I learned this. One day I went with him, he gave me some money. Those were my difficult times. He gave me Rs. 400 (\$8). With that I fed my son and daughter. I provide them all they need. With that money, I was able to help but I never cheated him.

Similarly, another woman talked about how she was convinced into doing this work by her neighbor:

I had a boyfriend. He cheated me. I wouldn't go and stand in the 'market. I knew this woman who stays close to my house. She knew what I was going through. So one day I went to her house and she said to me 'I see that you are going through a tough time. I have a job which will pay you Rs.1000 (\$20) to Rs.2000 (\$40). This is what you got you do.' I didn't have any option then so I agreed to the offer she made. But I really want to stay alone. I don't want to do all this anymore. I just don't like all this anymore. (Roma, 41 years)

Obstacles to Education

The findings from the short-life portraits suggests that it was typical for girls to first take care of the domestic chores, such as cooking, cleaning and taking care of their younger siblings or sick parents, before they leave for school, which resulted in losing interest in studies:

My mother had a big operation. Her stomach was cut open. Her womb had rotten and they found stones in her gall bladder. I had to look after my mother and then I couldn't give the exams, and couldn't study. They got me married later. I couldn't study anymore. (Madhuri, 28 years)

However, the in-depth life histories of Shristi, Trupti and Geetanjali shed light on the socio-cultural practice of early and arranged marriages in Indian society. Further, it also illustrates how these women's childhood experiences of neglect, abuse and sufferings have a negative impact on their psychological health and well-being, which in turn affects the decisions they make on their daily basis:

My mother had arranged this marriage. I could not understand why she arranged my marriage so early. Nobody wanted to know if I was okay with this marriage. I was told my marriage was being arranged and I got to marry this person. At that age, I didn't understand what marriage meant. I was 14 years when I got married. I didn't understand the 'meaning' of marriage. I didn't know the 'meaning' of 'sex' then. (Shristi, 28 years, HIV positive)

I was given marriage at 14 years of age. I was my daughter's age but I looked much bigger than my age. I was about to give the exams for 10th grade in school. I was during my exams the matrimonial alliance was arranged. They saw me and immediately asked for the marriage date to be fixed. My marriage date was fixed but my mother objected saying "I can't give her marriage so soon because she wants to complete her studies." I too said "I do not want to marry now and would like to complete my studies." But my maternal aunt and uncles made me understand. He said "My daughter you go through so much difficulties while living in this house. You stay here in so much pain. Your mother verbally abuses you and is also tensed because of you. I am sure you too want to live your life and do something that you like doing. I said "Yes, I do." He said "Well, you can do anything once you go to your husband's place." You get married daughter. So I agreed to the wedding. My mother would say "Because of you I am going through all this. If you got married, I would get some relief but who will marry you? Your sisters are so good-looking, they got married, but who will marry you. You are so ugly." Being a mother, she would speak like this about me. She would say a lot. I would feel really bad and wonder why being a mother she speaks like this to me. I don't want to get married. At that time I thought I am getting married and will never go back to my mother's house. I thought if I got married, I will be able to continue my studies with the help of my husband. I didn't know much then about marriage. (Geetanjali, 31 years)

At that time, my marriage was arranged at the age 14 or 15 years. I was quite good-looking too. One day my mother beat me a lot. My clothes were torn by her and I couldn't get out of the house. It was then I went to this lady's house in the neighborhood and was crying there. It was then this boy, my husband, approached me and said "I want to marry you. Your mother beats you every day. I saw that and I feel very bad for you. Your clothes are all torn now. You should get married to me." In that "moment" it seemed like the best solution to escape from my mother's beatings. I agreed to marry him. My landlady and others in the neighborhood also convinced me by saying "The boy is not bad. You get married to him." They too didn't know much. My aunt said "Trupti, get married. When you'll have 'shaka-pola' (conch shell and red coral bangles worn by Bengali women as symbols of their marital status) and 'sindoor' (red powder/vermilion worn by married women), people won't "torture" you much. If anything untoward happens in the future, you can always work in people's houses as a maid and live. This is the same thing that my "boi di" (sister-in-law) said. So I thought getting married was the right thing to do. At least, I will no longer be seen as a single woman. At that time, I didn't

understand these things. Now having gone to several places, I understand life better. (Trupti, 40 years)

Quite a few women reported disruptions from education because of the preference given to boys within families. As made evident in Trupti's narrative, girls are trained early on to prioritize the needs of the male members in the family over their own.

I used to go to school. My mother delivered twin brothers. Then I couldn't go to school because we had to think of brothers' future (Trupti, 40 years)

Several women who were mothers of daughters spoke of the demand for 'dahej' (dowry) and wedding expenses as a cause of their financial worry and putting them in a double bind of investing in their education or marriage, especially when women derive social status through marriage.

Discussion

Similar to the findings of an ethnographic study conducted by Petro (2010) which explored the circumstances in which women feel compelled to enter the industry, this study found that, although most women enter into the profession for economic gain, money is not the only reason why women choose sex work and continue to remain in the industry. If that was the case, all poor women would be sex workers (Chattopadhyay et al. 1994). Instead, this study found that women entered into sex work for multiple, interrelated reasons. For instance, the short-life portraits of women and the in-depth life histories clearly illustrate how childhood poverty, early marriage, early motherhood, denial of education, and the rampant neglect, abuse and exploitation of women both within the family and in society limit them from developing skills that can improve their options for education and employment. Consequently, women are faced with limited employment opportunities and are more vulnerable to economic and sexual exploitation in doing regular jobs due to prevailing norms of gender inequality in Indian society. For instance, most of the women residing in rural areas report traveling to cities in search of livelihood options due to limited employment options in the villages. In addition, they spoke about marital problems, such as husband's infidelity, intimate-partner violence, and having to shoulder the sole responsibility of their children as reasons that were influencing their decision to choose sex work. Unlike their counterparts residing in the brothels, the mobile female sex workers reported their nature of involvement in sex work to be seasonal because they also had to return to their families at the end of the day and attend to their multiple roles and responsibilities as a mother, daughter, sister-in-law, daughter-in law and wife. As argued by Orchard et al. (2012), it is important to distinguish between varieties of sex work in order to understand their unique features and the diversity of their experience and organization of the industry.

Another important finding from this study was the omnipresence of workplace sexual harassment for women involved in informal jobs, such as domestic maids,

textile/jute factory workers, helpers in construction sites, restaurants and hotels. Quite a few women spoke about having tried other informal jobs before choosing sex work as their livelihood option. The data from in-depth life histories clearly suggest that, through their own lived experience of long hours of back-breaking work, poor and unequal wages, no work benefits, and workplace sexual harassment, women come to realize and understand sex work as 'work' because sex work allows them to manage their dual responsibilities of nurturer-cum-provider to their families and gives them a sense of 'freedom' and 'autonomy', by which they mean that they can decide to whom they can provide their services, and how much they need to charge for their services and also when they would work.

This study also suggests that intervention programs aimed at preventing women's entry into sex work should be based on the understanding of the local contexts that shape the lives of these women, rather than a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, especially considering the heterogeneity among the diverse groups of sex workers and the regional differences. For instance, many of the families were affected by the closure of the cotton and textile industries, forcing women to work out of their homes to fend for themselves. Their husbands were unable to find jobs, and women in the rural areas skilled in weaving 'tant' (a natural cotton fabric) suffered from reduced pay, as they would receive only \$1.50 for weaving one 12-m-long 'saree.' The migration of women to the cities in search of jobs and their husbands losing traditional businesses, like the making of 'earth clay pots' to extensive use of Styrofoam cups, indicates the impact of neo-liberal policies of globalization on poor women and their entry into sex work.

Limitations

This study has some limitations which need to be considered while interpreting these results. First, the results cannot be generalized for the entire sex worker population, for it included only mobile female sex workers, mostly residing in rural and suburban areas of Kolkata and traveling to the city for a daily income. It did not include women who worked late at night due to the safety issues involved in accessing women in the night hours. Since the profile of women who work late at nights may differ from the women who choose to work in the daytime, their motivations for entry into sex work could differ significantly from women who worked in the daytime.

Second, while the self-reported data collected in the form of short-life portraits and in-depth life may suffer from recall bias allowing women either to exaggerate, minimize or alter the truthfulness of their experiences, the use of repeated interview methodology checked for inconsistencies in the data. Third, male sex workers were another group known to be operating from the same fields as flying female sex workers, but the women's attitudes toward male sex workers, comprising of transgender and males who have sex with men (MSM) populations, were very negative. They were very reluctant to share any information about this group of sex workers, as they said, "*we don't know what those guys do. I never knew such things existed and I don't even want to know*". It was clear that the presence of

transgendered or gay men in the solicitation sites increased the competition for women, as they were faced with demands for oral and anal sexual practices from their clients. A majority of the women perceived anal and oral sex as sinful practices and were not very open to discussing the existence of such practices. Currently, there are no HIV prevention programs reaching out to this highly vulnerable group in Kolkata, India, despite the fact they are a highly discriminated and stigmatized population due to their non-conformity to the masculinity norms. Future studies might want to explore the motivations of entry into sex work among this group of male sex workers and their experiences with risk.

Implications for HIV Prevention Programs

The findings pertaining to women's reasons for entry into sex work and how it relates to their previous employment history have significant implications for HIV prevention programs and policies for sex workers in India and abroad. It is important that HIV prevention programs reaching out to women sex workers with the goal of preventing women's entry into sex work address the larger structural–environmental conditions, such as workplace sexual harassment, lack of access to child day care services, poor and unequal wages, and unsanitary and unsafe working environments, in order to enable women to make choices and take control over their lives. In addition, while most studies tend to debate women's entry into sex work as being voluntary or involuntary, the findings of this study suggest that women's reasons for entry into sex work are rooted in the complex socio-cultural realities of women's lives and vary across diverse groups of women. There is a need to develop policies and services that are conducive to the needs of women. For instance, HIV prevention programs reaching out to sex workers need to consider programs such as subsidized child care programs, drop-in-centers, and legal counseling to promote their health and ensure their safety and to protect their rights by recognizing sex work as a form of labor.

The study findings also suggest that, while women spoke about experiencing a sense of 'freedom' and autonomy in doing sex work, these women worked in a very restrictive environment. For instance, the criminalized environment towards sex work and the stigma, discrimination and dishonor associated with sex work impact the lives of these women by increasing their vulnerability to HIV and violence. For instance, most of these women choose to operate clandestinely and maintain mobility to avoid being perceived as a 'prostitute' in the society. Therefore, this study would recommend decriminalization of sex work to get rid of the stigma associated with sex work and to provide women who decide to choose sex work legal protection in case of violence and abuse experienced in the sex industry.

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