

The Active Involvement and Reorientation of Internal Stakeholders to Regulate the Sex Trade in Sonagachi, Kolkata

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Abstract

Sex work or prostitution is one of the oldest profession. It is often considered as a form of coercion, poverty, destitution and lack of agency. But research indicates that sex work is more diverse and complex in nature which is needed to be explore. This paper aims to shed light on the multi-layered structure of the profession by sharing themes on the case studies conducted in Sonagachi and Jodabagan areas of Kolkata. This research highlights the socio-economic status of the internal stakeholders and their co-dependency on each-other to regulate and promote the sex trade. It has been evident that the world's oldest profession has gradually changed it's form and conditions a lot, and thus it needs a comprehensive overview. My study explores the lifestyle and livelihood of a sex worker when she is not a seller anymore, then how does she sustain after leaving the profession? This article consists of three parts- 1) Brief analysis of the existence of this oldest profession 2) Role of the internal stake-holders to regulate and promote sex work/prostitution, 3) An analytical approach of this profession by considering it as an integral part of patriarchal capitalism.

Keywords: Capitalism, Internal- stakeholders, Promote, Regulate, Sex work, Sex trade.

Introduction

Prostitution is one of the oldest professions of the world, practiced since the birth of the organized society. Prostitution and sex work is often considered as a form of coercion, poverty, destitution and lack of agency, but recent research indicates that sex work is more diverse and complex in nature which is needed to be explored. From moral reflections to economic analysis, the existing vast literature has portrayed sex workers as a passive victims (Chatterjee 1992) and sex work or prostitution as a highly paid, low skill female occupation alternative to marriage (Edlund and Korn, 2002). Western scholars have tended to portray sex workers in South Asia and other parts of the Global South as only being destitute victims of human trafficking (Strathdee et, al. 2015) , rather than an active agents who make deliberate, intentional choices to engage in sex work. Therefore, when we examine the sex industry, we see that the pimp role as an 'intermediate' and it has become normalized in society. Pimps are a micro-level representation of the capitalist state in the sense that their exploitation of individual marginalized women is just a reflection of the states exploitation of the marginalized female population as a whole (Pimpology 101: Andrew Nevin).

In ancient times sex work was considered as a respectable profession, eventually the contemporary status of sex work in India is characterised by the assault on the dignity of the women, men and transgender who earn their living by it, as well as by violence and discrimination from myriad institutions (Godekar, 2015). Further, the Indian sex workers' movement has attempted to reframe sex work not as an illicit act, but as a means of livelihood (Kotiswaran 2014) and an occupation that merits labour rights. Vijayakumar et. Al. argue that the collective identity of sex workers was formed when internationally funded HIV programs made space for these groups to identify shared circumstances of marginalization with other groups, including queer people and injection drug users. Sex worker organizations have played a fundamental role in creating avenues of access to social services for sex workers who faced challenges in their jobs, and even can pressure local police to address unlawful detainment and police harassment (Argento et. Ai.2011) and may help respond to cases by families, landlords or school officials (Vijayakumar

et, al,2019). But still a sex worker identity often bears significant personal costs because the occupation is still deeply stigmatized (Vijayakumar et. Al.2019).

The purpose of the present study was to broaden the views about sex work in India for the researcher and practitioner and to introspect the issue in depth. This article aims to shed lights on the diversity and complexity of sex work by sharing themes on the study conducted in Sonagachi and Jodabagan areas of Kolkata. This research highlights the socio-economic status of the internal stake-holders such as sex worker, pimp and brothel keeper and their co-dependency on each-other to regulate and promote the sex trade. My study explores the lifestyle and livelihood of former sex workers, how do they sustain after not being a seller anymore. From my research I found that stake-holders are constantly reorienting themselves for their survival .This research consists of three parts, 1) Brief analysis of the existence of this oldest profession, 2) Role of the internal stake-holders to regulate and promote sex work, 3) An analytical approach of this profession by considering it as an integral part of patriarchal capitalism.

This research is an important contribution to the existing literature on sex work as it provides a comprehensive outlook about the profession. Besides that, the existing literature has broadly discussed about the challenges and contemporary nature of this profession but the role of internal stake-holders to regulate the profession, has not been highlighted yet.

Methods

This qualitative study was conducted among 9 respondents who work in Sonagachi in the North of Kolkata, India. Participants in the study were female sex workers (brothel based), brothel keepers (Malkin) and pimps (Dalal). The methodology used for this study was in-depth interviews that lasted 45 min-1.2 hours each. Additionally, informal visits, staying, participation in social and community programme ,frequent informal group discussions were conducted throughout the year by the researcher to know and explore more about the profession and its stake-holders. Since the majority of respondents or participants were unable to read and write, oral consent was used. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant permission. All interviews were conducted in brothel rooms and as per respondent's convenient and safe locations. Each interview was conducted in Bengali, then translated and transcribed into English. Open and axial coding were used to analyse the data.

The study sought to understand the internal stake-holders' reorientation to regulate the sex work and inter-dependency on each other. But it had also explored various aspects of their livelihoods, reason of entry into the sex trade, relationship between buyer and seller etc. These helped to highlight respondents' insider's perspectives and multi-layered earning system.

A Brief Analysis of the Existence of the Sex work

According to Sumerian records dating back to ca. 2400 BCE are the earliest recorded mention of prostitution as an occupation. These describe a temple bordello operated by Sumerian priests in the city of Uruk. In ancient Greece, both women and men were engaged in prostitution. The Greek word for prostitute is "porne" derived from the verb 'pernemí', which means 'to sell'. Female prostitutes could be independent and sometimes influential women. They were required to wear distinctive dresses and had to pay taxes. Male prostitution also common in Greece. In ancient Rome prostitute's legal status was 'infames'. Edwards stated that gladiators, actors and other public performers were also labelled as infames. This designation meant that members of these professions were restricted from various aspects of public life, such as standing for election to magistrate or being allowed to speak in a court of law. Pimps were likewise defined as infames (Gardner 1986,90; Olson 2006,193-194). But prostitution in ancient Rome was legal and licenced. "Pompeii" was the famous city for prostitution. In the Roman civilization, 'Brothel' was called as 'Lupanor' or 'Lupanarium', where 'Lupa' was prostitutes. The owners of the licensed houses were 'lena'(madam) and who looked after them, was called as 'leno'(pimp).

The Arthashastra (Kautilya 1992:223-52, 256-74, 281-87, 294-303, 324-56,) and the Kamsutra (Vatsyayana 2002: 131-160) bear testimony to the existence of rule governed contractual relations, including commoditized sexual relations in ancient India (Chunder 1970). The Rig Veda (C : 1200-900 B.C)

is the first ancient Indian sacred text that contains references to sexual desire (10/129/4-5), marriage (10/85), polygyny (1/62/1, 10/145, 10/160), extra marital affairs (1/117/18), incest (10/10, 10/61/5-7), polyandry (9/5/27, 5/17/8-9) and prostitutes (1/167/4;2/13/12, 15, 17; 4/16/19,30). This textual evidence shows that the various familial and marketized forms of management of human sexuality were already in vogue at that time. In ancient India prostitution was operated from temples and they were called 'Devdasi' (Bayaderes). The Yogimara cave (Ramgarh hills, Madhya Pradesh), is indicating the existence of Devdasi sutanuka, and that is the earliest archaeological evidence about the existence of prostitution in India. (Pradip Bakshi).

In Mauryan age, Pataliputra was at the time of Chandra Gupta Maurya a flourishing center of prostitution (Dr. Smt.S.R Sarode,2015) and it was the first time that state was drawn attention to the colony of prostitutes for its effective control and brought a stabilized taxation system. In Gupta period the institution of the courtesan became fully evolved and played a very important role in the social and cultural life of the people. According to Huen- Tsang there were several dancing girls in the Sun temple of Multan. Several puranas recommended the presence of singing girls in the temples. These singing girls were usually prostitutes (Kincaid, Denis,1973). Arab traveller Abu Zaid al Hasan (867), stated divine prostitutes earning went into the hands of priests and was used for the expenses of the temple (Kazi, Babasaheb, 1999).

These examples suggest that the income from the divine prostitute's helped to enrich the temple's wealth and as well as used for the state treasury. Akbar the Mughal Emperor, maintained a 'Seraglio' in which there were 5000 women, with a separate staff of women officers for its management (Muller, F. Max(ed) 1969). Akbar made some regulations so that the services of prostitutes might not be available very easily to the public. The prostitutes were confined to a outside the capital city (Mun Vasant,1989). There were many examples of famous dancing girls such as Anarkali, Lal Kunwar, Nur Bai who had served their lives for increasing the pleasure of rulers of that period. During the 19th and 20th centuries the colonial government facilitated, regulated and allowed the existence of prostitution. The structuring features of the Cantonment Acts provided for about twelve to fifteen Indian women for each regiment of British soldiers. Each regiment contained about thousand soldiers. These women were kept in brothels called 'Chaklas'. They were licenced by military officials and were allowed to consort with soldiers only. This Act provided for the establishment and extension of hospitals in cantonments. Women working in 'Chaklas' were often required to undergo medical examination once in a week, in order to examine them for traces of venereal diseases. But The Cantonment Act 1895 explicitly outlawed any licencing or official approval of prostitution in cantonments to prevent the spread of venereal disease. And thus, most of the military was opposed to the Act. (Wikipedia.org). Thereafter The Calcutta Suppression of Immoral Traffic 1923, The Bombay Prevention of Prostitution Act,1923, and The Bengal Suppression of Immoral Traffic act, 1933 were passed to make better provision for the suppression of brothels and of traffic in women and girls for immoral purposes.

Role of the Internal Stake-holders to Regulate and Promote Sex Work

Modern literature mainly speaks of 'Sex workers' instead of 'Prostitutes', thus it becomes an emancipated expression and will be used in further discussion also. Sonagachi 'red light' area in the North of Kolkata is the largest of 'its kind in South and south- East Asia', having 'more than 50,000 sex workers' working there (Dasgupta,2011). The brothel is the fundamental unit of Sonagachi's sex industry regardless of the mode of organization of sex work. The brothel is an institution which involves a particular set of organization of labour (mainly sexual and social), living and working arrangements, practices, ideas, norms, ideologies, rituals and consciousness that are unique to the sex industry. Internal stake-holders including brothel owner, pimp, brothel-keeper, sex worker and customer are the integral part of the labour relation in this industry. A sex worker's bargaining position or dominant earning capacity in Sonagachi sex market is determined by her mode of organization of sex work and ability of skilled in this profession.

- **Reason of Entry-**

It has been worldly accepted that the reason of entering into the sex trade are 'acute poverty', 'family dispute', 'sudden financial crisis', 'misguided', 'kidnapped', 'being trafficked', or 'tradition', but according to my study there is another aspect too, which is 'financial irresponsibility'. In the voice of sex workers,

"My husband does not take care of me, if he would have fulfilled my needs, then would I come to this profession? We had faced a sudden financial problem and my husband did not able to solve it. So I came here (at Sonagachi) to earn money." (Sex Worker)

It may look like economic necessity is a primary reason at the time of their entry into the sex industry. But the 'financial irresponsibility of her husband' made her to choose this profession as a survival strategy. But at the same time participant acknowledges that this profession will resolve her problem and can create a new opportunity too,

"I will make money from it (sex work), then I will start a garment's business. I have a son and he has a future, I do not want to continue it in future. When I have involved into this profession, then I will definitely earn more to secure my future."(Sex worker)

But in the case of former sex worker or Malkin, the context of entry into this profession is quite different. They were sold into the 'redlight area' by someone else (boyfriend or close relatives etc.).

"After my husband's death my cousin brother sold me to his 'kept' at Kalighat. At that time my daughter was only six months."(Malkin)

"When I was in class 8, my classmate who was my boyfriend also, brought me to this place (Khidirpur Redlight area) and sold me to a lady (Malkin). I had tried to flee, but couldn't succeed because my malkin did not allow me to go anywhere"(Malkin)

Above passages are clearly indicating that by misguiding or false promising they were introduced to this profession. Eventually they became used to with this profession and by the time they became "Malkin".

In the case of 'Pimp', their instinctive nature, born and brought up in redlight area make them easy entry into the sex trade.

"I was born and brought up in this area (sonagachi). So I know well about this profession. There was financial need, so, I started working as a pimp at Sonagachi. Before that, I was a cook, but that was not enough to sustain a family. Around 50 pimps work here. We all are local inhabitants." (Pimp)

"I had a need of money. I used to drive auto in this route (Sonagachi-Jodabagan). My friends introduced me into this profession. I found nothing wrong with it, I had a need of money, so I had chosen it."(Pimp)

These narratives express participants' financial needs' which make them entry into the sex industry and to born into the red light area have given them an advantage to know this profession very well. Besides that, they make deliberate decisions to become a pimp, over chosen to be other forms of labour.

- **Functional and Dynamic Relationship with Customers-**

The different modes of organization of sex work within brothel-based can encompass different combinations of relational dynamics. As the commercial sexual exchange requires two parties- while sex workers provide sexual services, and the clients or customers of the sex trade are the purchasers of those services. Sex worker and customer relationship is functional as well as dynamic. Therefore customers are stratified in terms of their education, income, occupational status, habits, sexual practice, and choice of the category of sex workers that they frequently visit. There are two distinct category of customer's demand (as per the age) can be drawn, as one participant said,

"About 50 and more than 50 age group clients, want 30-35 age group sex workers. Below 50 age group clients want 24-30 age group sex workers. Sometimes aged customers pay high rate for below 24 age group sex workers."

A service relation between a sex worker and a customer depends on whether they like to enter into a relational contract or discrete contract. A customer engages with a discrete contract may likely to be a repeat customer and may engage in a relational contract in further visit. As per the participant's voice-

"I have some permanent customers. They frequently come here. They advised me to change my profession. They said, 'This is not your place....'"(Sex worker)

But at the same time sex workers often experience abusive customers, who are less care about sex worker's problem.

"We are independent to choose our customers. But sometimes customers do not behave properly or misbehave with us. We tell them to get out of our rooms and do not return their money, if they remove our clothes and then start misbehaving on the bed..why do I return your money? You have already seen my body....this is the only capital of my profession... but if customer starts to misbehave before going to the bed, then we return to his money an say good bye to him...."(Sex worker)

Despite the economic strength of customers and the various factors on which the service relation depends, customer can be physically vulnerable as they are not inhabitant of that place. But if they can afford the service of a 'Dalal or Pimp' who can protect them from any dispute, then customers may obtain a gaining position in the service relation.

"Customers come through my channel do not get into trouble. I inform others, 'Brothers! This customer should not get into trouble, he should return safely....please look after him carefully...as you know there is a fear of police raid and all...'"(Pimp)

The protection from uncertain dispute or harassment makes a strong professional relationship between the customer and third party, if they come again, they prefer to contact 'dalal' to visit the redlight area.

"After the first visit when a customer wants to come again, he contacts with me. I help him to visit one house to another, and he chooses one of them(sex workers) as a sex partner"

Since relational contracts are common in the sex work, an occupational hazard that sex-workers and brothel keeper are wary of, that is- the affective relationship with customers. This category of customers are called 'Babus' or fixed customers, which are classified in two distinct nature-

"There are two types of Babus...one is giving type of babus or 'Denewala Babu' and another one is taking type of babus or 'Khanewala Babu'. My Babu did not take a single paisa from me...rather he spent fifty thousand for my treatment. But now-a-days Babus are not good as before..they beat sex workers in spite of taking money, bike, valueable things, jewellery etc. (Malkin).

- **Individual Input to regulate the sex Trade-**

All of my study included participants ,whether working independently or under control of the pimp, have an individual input to regulate the profession. Former sex workers or Malkins provide shelter/rent to the sex workers and become a recipient of sex worker's earning. These individual had a significant role to regulate the sex trade. Sex workers considered her unique behaviour was the key component to handle aggressor customers, as she said,

"I have handled so many customers who have a bad impression to other sex workers. Those customers have surprisingly behaved well with me. I can easily handle any type of customer whether he is rude or has some abnormal sexual desire. Mostly married customers come here. You know there are many unnatural sexual desires which they cannot do with their wives, so they do those desire with us. Unmarried customers come 10% only and married customers come 90%. Sometimes their wives call them in front of us,"(Sex worker)

Since age is a dominant factor for a service provider, so aging causes a temporary joblessness to a sex worker. When sex workers are not able to be a service provider, they provide shelter or rent to the new girls or other sex workers.

"Four girls are working under my supervision. Besides that I give rooms for rent, as flying sex workers do not reside here ,so they need room for their work."(Malkin)

"Malkin can keep as many girls as she wishes. I have taken permission to my landlord for keeping girls. Landlord needs money only, nothing else. He takes money for every girl with rent."(Malkin)

These passages reveal how former sex workers sustain and overcome their temporary joblessness by keeping girls under their supervision. This is also showing, the steady flow of income to the external stakeholder(Landlord), by giving lessees of rooms in Sonagachi to the ex-sex workers.

- **Co-dependency and Constant Reorientation-**

The relational dynamics among internal-stakeholders of brothel-based sex work in Sonagachi are criminalized under the ITPA (1986). According to this act keeping a brothel (sec-3(1)), living on the earnings of prostitution(sec-4), soliciting for purpose of prostitution (sec-8), etc, are serious offences with the punishment extending to life imprisonment and substantial fines. To continue the fluidity of the market means that the internal stakeholders are constantly reorienting themselves towards each other and have a co-dependency among them.

It has been reported by the participants that mutual understanding and supportive behaviour are making them able to continue this profession, in spite of the police raid by any given time.

"If they (Sex workers) do not inform us then we will face trouble(Police raid). We work together and support each other. Without their support it would not be possible."(Pimp)

A new sex worker, whether she wants to work independently or under some contractual understanding such as 'Adhiya', 'Chhukri' etc, -needs a professional guidance and shelter to continue her work. So, in that case Ex-sex workers or Malkin fulfil their needs.

'When Moumita (name changed) came to me to do this profession(sex work), I took her to the DMSC-SRB board, for checking her original age. Though she had school certificate, voter-ID card etc. I helped her to get DMSC I-Card. To take care about her-is my responsibility. If any trouble or difficulties arise, it should be faced by me first.'(Malkin)

Additionally, participant highlighted the profitable fact of their (Malkin & sex worker) mutual understanding.

"As a sex worker I get full payment from the customer and being a malkin I give my customers to my girls and get half payment per customer...customers want only girls, if they do not choose me, I give them another girls who are working under me...in that way I can keep that customer as a permanent one. If a customer gives me Rs.300/- for the service, he will pay Rs.700/- for a young girl. So I can earn 300/- per customer as well as sex worker also can earn 300/-. So we both can gain in this process..."(Malkin)

The above narratives highlight the constant reorientation of the stakeholders and the changing scenario- which is clearly showing the strategies of survival and the adaptation of changes during the course of time. The fluidity of sex trade mostly depends on the mutual understanding and co-ordination among the key stakeholders.

- **Sex Work- An Integral part of Patriarchal Capitalism-**

Capitalism is a socio-economic system based on private ownership of the means of production and the exploitation of the labour force. Patriarchy is a social system in which positions of dominance and privilege are primarily held by men. As per Carole Pateman's view (1999) 'prostitutes are readily available at all levels of the market for any man who can afford one, and they are frequently provided as part of business, political and diplomatic transactions'. Like other forms of capitalist enterprise, prostitution is seen as private enterprise and arrangement between a buyer and a seller. But sex trade is not related only buyer and seller, there are many stake holders.

Women's bodies are objectified and commodified throughout the capitalist and patriarchal society. Sex is a multi-billion dollar growth industry globally, and it is a central part of many developing countries' economies. Thus, sex worker is also an integral and essential part of this industry. In the existing literature about sex services there is a lot of evidence that sex workers have different kinds and levels of bargaining power. Some have little or none and others have more, for example, whether

or not they can refuse to work with a particular customer or refuse to do certain acts, or they can bargain about the charges for the services. Acts and choices are not simply free or unfree. Rather, freedom is always relative and continuum. For an example, like a poor mother who choose sex work 'not simply as a survival strategy but as an advancement strategy', because they believe that sex work will be more lucrative than other works, and after certain period of time they must be able to start their own business (garments, beauty parlour, car-renting etc.). Sometimes, the conditions under their choices may look free; but these conditions or choices can pose obstacles. Certain kinds of proposals or offers or choices can prevent someone from acting freely. This can be called as 'forcing offer,. Thus, gender biasness, lack of livelihood opportunities, unequal distribution of wealth etc. are forcing women to negotiate their lives. For an example, the need for medical care can force someone to take a dangerous job they hate. Lack of money functions as an obstacle to people acting freely. So, lack of self-confidence, fears, patriarchal ideas of gender roles, guilt or shame, socially excluded, being neglected as a girl child all these kinds of obstacles should be eliminated for women to choose more freely whether or not to be sex worker.

Sex worker is selling certain sexual services and that cannot be separated from the sale of the body that supplies those services. The client or customer is buying the right to use woman's body as he wishes, with the motto of ultimate gratification of pleasure. It is the client's power to determine which kind of sexual service he wants to get from the service provider. The client may be want to dominate a woman, to affirm his masculinity, or to gratify some unnatural sexual desire which he cannot do with his wife. Thus, Carole Pateman pointed out that sexual contract is included with use of a woman body and womanhood both. Therefore, sexual contract enables men to establish themselves as civil masters for a certain time and they wish to obtain acknowledgement of their status. A master requires service with self, not merely a body without self. It is because human sexual experiences are highly connected both physical and emotional that they can range from ecstatic to horrific and everything in between. With the 'Objective' of pleasure gratification, if the client demands more or misbehaves or refuses to pay for not being satisfied enough; then where is the protection in the sexual service contract? Or who will bargain over pay and conditions for sex workers as other trade unions do for their workers, because 'pimp stands outside the contract between client and sex worker, just as the state stands outside, but regulate and enforces, the marriage and employment contracts.'(Carole Pateman,1999).

Conclusion

Though it is evident that the sex work or prostitution is oldest profession and associated with the society from the very beginning, but still people who are attached with this profession- are extensively marginalised. Sex work is a multi-layered system and each layer is interconnected, the effect on one layer would be affecting the other one. This study identified the individual input of each stake-holder and their constant reorientation to regulate the trade. I draw out the complexity of power relations that sustain in redlight area. My analytical approach has highlighted the topic that 'women objectification is lied within our societal structure' and 'lack of money functions' controls a person's choice. The rescue and rehabilitation approach for sex workers generally fails because alternatives are not as financially lucrative or do not supply same level of agency which is availed in sex work. It is very essential to remember that 'sex worker and sex work' is not excluded from the society rather it needs inclusion. Therein lay prospects to articulate a normative theory on sex work.

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