SELLING SEX TO SURVIVE: PROSTITUTION, TRAFFICKING AND AGENCY WITHIN THE INDIAN SEX INDUSTRY.

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Introduction

The female body is a site of constant contention and critique. Around the world, various cultures and religions prescribe holy or admirable behavior to women, creating skewed and misogynistic ideals that girls aspire to fulfill, thereby perpetuating global, patriarchal power structures. One of the foremost capacities in which many women lack agency and autonomy is sexuality. A popularized notion of female sex workers – especially those in the global south – portrays them as brutalized victims, incapable of autonomy or agency. Abolitionist feminists propagate this image, often with the intention of ending the global sex trade. Although I find their motives worthy insofar as they hope to end cycle of violence that finds women in positions of little or no control over how or when they have sex, abolishing the sex trade is infeasible and founded on problematic assumptions that deny women of the global south agency, pleasure and navigational capabilities.

In the coming pages I analyze the sex industry in Southern India, specifically the state of Karnataka with particular emphasis on instances of sex worker empowerment. Two notable examples of sex-worker collectives (Ashodaya and Sonagachi) continue to gain popularity and political sway. I also examine the role of a governmental organization, Karnataka Health Promotion Trust (KHPT), as it aims to strengthen and empower vulnerable communities, especially sex workers. Empowerment theory literature suggests that in order to end gender-based marginalization, various structural factors such as poverty, education and ethnicity must all be addressed and contextualized before any type of programming can be truly effective. The Sonagachi and Ashodaya collectives embody this because they are grass roots based, so the people who are being helped are also the
ones providing the aid. This type of localized, peer-based contextualization is capable of dissolving problematic, rescue-based initiatives, which are often corrupt and colonial in practice. KHPT is also focused on contextualizing its programs so as to serve and empower as many people as possible.

In order to address the sexual exploitation of women in a way that neither reinforces colonialism nor negates women’s agency, one must first dismantle sensationalized notions of what it means to perform sex work, especially in non-western, global south contexts. It may seem easy to dismiss sex work as completely different than any other type of service-based work, but to do so denies sex workers the inherent ability to navigate within their specific situation, which includes varying degrees of control, risk reduction and profit maximization. India is a complex example of this phenomenon because of the highly stratified nature of the class and caste system, as well as the burden of poverty faced by many women. Even under these circumstances women have found ways of pushing back against the constraints under which they live.
Methodology

Before departing for India, I worked with my advisor (Dr. Patricia Stokes) in addition to my principal Indian contact (Supradeep Vijaya Kumar) to develop a set of questions to guide the series of semi-structured interviews (see appendix A). I also drew heavily on field notes that I took during and after my trip, as well as a personal journal.

Before leaving for the trip, I secured appointments with three Indian professionals who understood my project and agreed to help me by participating in semi-structured interviews. Two of those interviews occurred while the third morphed into my participation in a weeklong training workshop for psychologists who would be working with sex workers and eventually training others to do the same. My first semi-structured interview was with Dr. Reynold Washington, Director of Karnataka Health Promotion Trust (KHPT). I also interviewed Dr. Dayaprasad Kulkarny, the director of Doctors for SEVA and Youth for SEVA. These two much smaller non-profit organizations coordinate the volunteer efforts of both youth and medical doctors so as to provide medical care to poor, rural areas.

Dr. Reynold has been working with KHPT for over ten years; his educational background is as a medical doctor. During our interview, he and I discussed his experiences working directly with sex workers in southern India as well as the nature of the sex industry in India more broadly. KHPT is funded in part by the Indian government but also through various grants and awards from organizations like the Gates Foundation and USAID. The goals of KHPT, as summarized by Dr. Reynold, include empowering communities to assert rights and dignity, as well as protecting and preserving health.

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1This is by no means an exhaustive list; my intention was not to understand the financial strategy but rather to focus on the projects undertaken by KHPT.
Dr. Dayaprasad Kulkarny also agreed to participate in a semi-structured interview, which provided me with deep cultural background information and framework. Having become disenchanted with the traditional NGO model, he chose to start his own. He was very honest about the limitations of his organization, but he was also hopeful for the future and proud of the services that Doctors for SEVA provides for villages in Southern India. Dr. Daya also worked closely with a number of small organizations; one he spoke of in particular was called Jagruthi. This rescue-based initiative helps women and girls exit the sex industry, then trains them as artisans or provides basic education.

I was also invited by Dr. Prabha Chandra, a faculty member of the Psychology Department at the National Institute of Mental Health and Neuroscience (NIMHANS), to attend a weeklong training session for psychologists who will be providing services to sex workers. Although much of the programming was in Kannada, it was still a valuable experience to hear and see how sex workers were treated for mental health and illness. There were portions of lectures, discussions and various exercises that were conducted in English for my benefit, including multiple discussions on violence. Different forms of violence and coercion were recurring themes throughout the week and played a large role in the suggested treatment of sex workers.

Aside from this primary research, my methods consisted of secondary research analyzing scholarly journal articles from around the world. Many of my secondary sources were written by Indian and American scholars. As discussed above, Uma Narayan’s book, *Dislocating Cultures* and Laura Maria Agustin’s book, *Sex at the Margins*, provided the theoretical framework for my argument.
Finally, my understanding of the cultural context was shaped in large part by my trip to Bangalore. While living with the Kumars, I was able to experience aspects of Indian society that would have been otherwise lost to me. Much of this experience consisted of limited mobility due in part to the language barrier, but mainly due to the oppressive, patriarchal structures that Indian women must constantly navigate. My experience as a foreign woman in India is certainly limited, but it allowed me a glimpse into some of the challenges and biases that a woman in India may experience. Looking back on my field notes, I am reminded of the isolation and lack of mobility I experienced.
My Experience in India

I initially decided to write my Senior Honor’s Thesis for the Women’s and Gender Studies Departmental Honor’s Program on a topic that encapsulated my interest in the study of sexuality. I had not yet chosen a focus, but my feminist scholarly interest was piqued as my friend Supradeep Vijaya Kumar and I talked about the complexities of Indian society and the challenges faced by governmental and non-governmental agencies in dealing with sex work. I wrote my junior capstone project on sex work in the United States with a particular focus on legalization and the legalized brothels that exist in Nevada. At this early point in my research, I was familiar with the feminist arguments and critiques of sex work in a western, developed context.

In choosing to study sex workers in India, I knew that there would be major differences compared to the United States. I tried to keep my specific research question open-ended because I wanted to absorb and observe as much as I possibly could during my time in India without bringing in my own assumptions or biases. For this reason, my focus was on learning about the challenges faced by the Indian government as well as by non-governmental organizations in trying to deal with the issue of sex work. The scope of my project was limited in that I was not able to spend an extended amount of time in India (including travel, we were in Bangalore for a total of three weeks). I also had no knowledge of the language and although I picked up a few words and phrases, I found the language barrier to be extremely isolating and frustrating.

I knew that Supradeep would be a valuable asset in trying to gather research on sex work in India; what I did not realize is how generous and enthusiastic he would be in helping me delve deeper into Indian culture. Two months later, on December 11, 2012,
we arrived in Bangalore, Karnataka, India. The timing worked out so that I could accompany Supradeep on a trip back home to see his family before he moved to Boston to begin his post-master’s career as a mechanical engineer.

While in India, I stayed in Supradeep’s familial home with his mother, father and younger sister. His immediate and extended family were very kind and welcoming towards me. His maternal cousins lived two floors above. I became very close friends with these cousins (both female), as well as with his younger sister, Supriya. Supradeep’s family is of the Brahmin caste, which means they are very strict vegetarians. No raw animal product (milk, egg, cheese) is ever supposed to enter the house because it would be offensive to the house god that resides in a small shrine in a corner of the kitchen. I would often walk past the kitchen and see his mother or father kneeling on the floor in front of the god, sometimes speaking, sometimes silent. It was also a very strict rule that no shoes could be worn in the same room as the god.

Because his father (Vijaya) injured his back a number of years ago, his mother, Manjula, is the sole breadwinner in the house. This is rare in India because men are considered to be the head of the household and subsequently men are more likely to be gainfully employed. Supradeep often reminded me apologetically that his family was by no means wealthy. In fact they had once been on the brink of poverty because Manjula was of a very low rank in the bank where she worked and Vijaya was in a great deal of medical debt from his recent spinal injury, which happened during the renovation of the building in which they currently live and partially rent out to other families. Fortunately, Manjula is now a manager and earns enough to live comfortably and support her family. This unconventional family dynamic was of great interest to me because I found that
even though Manjula had to go to work, she still did the vast majority of domestic duties (mostly cooking and cleaning). If she was unavailable, the chores fell on the shoulders of Supriya.

During my visit, the tragic and highly publicized Delhi Rape Case occurred. I came home late one night with Supradeep to find his family gathered around the television, transfixed by the breaking news story of a young female student who had been gang-raped and savagely beaten on a bus in Delhi. Early the next morning, Manjula came into my room and told me in her own words what had happened. She said that she had been wrought with worry about me all night and that I must be increasingly cognizant of what I wore and where I went. At first she wanted me to cancel my remaining interviews so that I could stay in the house where she could keep an eye on me, but in the end, she agreed that I could come and go, as long as I was accompanied by Supradeep and his friends (whenever possible). Supradeep had already lectured me multiple times about safety and never leaving his side. She also told me that I was not to leave the house unless my arms and legs were covered. Having bare shoulders is a sign of immodesty, and since my light skin already attracted unwanted attention everywhere I went, I promised her that I would keep my arms, legs and head covered.

Truth be told, I hated being confined to the house. I hated the dupatta (long scarf) that I had to wear to cover my head and shoulders, and most of all I hated that I couldn’t go anywhere by myself. There was a sprawling city full of sights, smells, tastes and experiences, and I couldn’t be a part of it without a man by my side. The women in his family stayed in or around the house all day, except for one of his cousins who had recently graduated from college (whom I will describe below). Most days Supradeep
would be gone before I woke up and not return until after dark, at which point I was not supposed to leave the house, even with male supervision. This was really difficult for me. I was lonely and depressed a lot of the time; I felt useless and the language barrier exponentially amplified this isolation.

During my time in India, I witnessed institutionalized misogyny firsthand. For instance, Supriya (Supradeep’s younger sister) was adopted. This was a point of shame for her personally and for the family. Supradeep warned me never to mention it because it would humiliate everyone. Secondly, although she was in her first year of university study, she never spoke of her post-baccalaureate employment goals. Instead, she spoke only of her impending marriage. When I asked how old she thought was appropriate for marriage, she just blushed and said she still had lots of time (she was 18 when we had this conversation). Although she was receiving an advanced, formal education (a luxury that many Indian women will never know), she knew that she would one day leave her mother and father to live with her husband’s family, and no matter what degree she received, she would still be bound to the domestic duties of her new home.

A notable exception to confinement at home was a female cousin of Supradeep who also lived in the same building with her younger sister, mother and father. She had just completed her degree in Computer Engineering and had a lucrative job with the American company, Hewlett Packard, which had a massive office suite and software development facility in Bangalore. She was 23 and fiercely independent. Her name is Sharmili, but I soon came to call her by her pet name, Shamu. She was one of the few women I saw ride a two-wheeler alone. Motor scooters were the fastest and most economical way to get around the city. In a car, one would often sit in traffic for three to
four hours to travel less than five miles. It was uncommon to see a woman, especially a
two-wheeler or car by herself. Sharmili would often ask me
about my boyfriend and whether I missed him. Of course I did, but when I asked if she
had a boyfriend, she was quick to respond that she tried not to think about the possibility
of marriage. This was particularly interesting to me because she and her sister were her
parents’ only children. According to traditional social practice, both daughters would
move away upon their marriages, leaving their parents to fend for themselves in their old
age. I did not connect the dots at the time, but when Sharmili expressed concern for her
parents’ wellbeing, especially her mother who did not leave the house most days, it was
because she knew when she left, a large portion of the household income would go with
her, in addition to whatever dowry offering they could produce.
Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

In this paper I will be examining the issues of human trafficking and sex work as they pertain to the agency of women in the global sex industry with a particular focus on southern India, specifically the state of Karnataka. India is of particular importance in part because of the complex social fabric and wide cultural variation that exists throughout the country. In combination with the global shift towards neo-liberal economic practices, the feminization of poverty has led to increased vulnerability for an already at-risk female population. These global power structures work to maintain a violent and exploitative patriarchal system of oppression and degradation. Given that many scholars of prostitution focus solely on oppressive power structures, I find it important to discuss the variety of ways in which women navigate these structures and express agency. Female agency is imperative to acknowledge because without it, women are denied the most basic human rights.

I would first like to address the concept of agency as it pertains to sexuality. Carol Vance famously examines the tension between sexual pleasure and danger in “Pleasure and Danger: Toward a Politics of Sexuality”:

Sexuality is simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression and danger as well as a domain of exploration, pleasure and agency. To focus only on pleasure and gratification ignores the patriarchal structure in which women act, yet to speak only of sexual violence and oppression ignores women’s experience with sexual agency and choice and unwittingly increases the sexual terror and despair in which women live.²

I find this juxtaposition to be relevant yet notably absent in discussions of human trafficking in global sex networks. Feminist theorists and activists have engaged in a tenacious debate for decades as to whether or not agency can be exercised while performing sex work. Yet precisely this question continues to be a struggle in the lives of individual women who must consider the pleasures and profits of sexuality against its cost in their daily calculations, choices and actions. Sadly, female sex workers (FSW) can be some of the most vulnerable populations, facing the most severe forms of violence and brutality. But for others (particularly those practicing sex work in a decriminalized, hygienic, usually western context) sex can be explorative, intimate, sensual, adventurous, exciting and profitable.

Traditional abolitionist feminist arguments create new ways of shaming women about their sexual desires and actions. In her book *The Idea of Prostitution*, Sheila Jeffreys repudiates any amount of agency that could be had by women in sex work in her reference to them as “prostituted women.” Her definition of prostitution demarcates every form of commercial sex as violence. She elaborates on the ways in which prostitution is a form of male sexual behavior:

Male sexual behavior characterized by three elements variously combined: barter, promiscuity, emotional indifference. Any man is a prostitution abuser who, for the purposes of his sexual satisfaction, habitually or intermittently reduces another

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4 Vance, 327.
human being to a sexual object by the use of money or other mercenary considerations.⁶

She goes on to examine the use of the term sex work as way to normalize prostitution, choosing instead to embrace the word prostitution as a way to conceptualize commercial sex as a form of violence, a crime against women. She uses the term prostituted women rather than prostitutes for similar reasons.⁷ In doing so she shifts the locus of agency entirely way from the woman and onto the client. This is severely problematic because it does not allow for any type of agency to be exercised by the woman performing the sexual labor; instead it shames and degrades her as a hyper-sexualized victim with no voice and no mobility.

This sentiment is echoed and expanded by Catharine Mackinnon, Melissa Farley and other abolitionist scholars.⁸ Mackinnon explains that sexual objectification is fundamental to women’s status as second class and that restriction, constraint, contortion, passivity, self-mutilation, humiliation and presentation of the self as beautiful are built into the content of sex for women by a patriarchal, misogynistic societal definition of gender and sexuality.⁹ Sex work in this view, is merely an intensified expression of women’s oppression through sexuality.

By contrast, Carol Vance poses the question of whether women can transcend these patriarchal barriers and characterizations of passivity, helplessness and victimization so as to navigate as sexual actors with agency and the capacity for desire

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⁶ Jeffreys, 4.
⁷ Jeffreys, 4.
and pleasure, to which I answer resoundingly, YES.\textsuperscript{10} But with this affirmation must come an understanding of the complex intersection of politics, society, culture, economics, history, experimentation, personal thought, fantasy and action, because oppression and stigma still exist on a large scale as evidenced by the continuation of privileged forms of sexuality. As Vance writes:

Privileged forms of sexuality, for example heterosexuality, marriage, and procreation, are protected and rewarded by the state and subsidized through social and economic incentives . . . Less privileged forms of sexuality are regulated and interdicted by the state, religion, medicine, and public opinion. Those practicing less privileged forms of sexuality . . . suffer from stigma and invisibility, although they also resist.\textsuperscript{11}

This includes but is not limited to sex workers in the global south. Vance thus rightly states that to study and understand sex and sexuality, feminist scholars must employ complex methodologies and analyses to allow the recognition of each discrete domain as well as their multiple intersections. Furthermore, Vance recognizes that “the hallmark of sexuality is its complexity: its multiple meanings, sensations and connections.”\textsuperscript{12} This truth must be embraced and illuminated by legislative policy and cultural acceptance so as to relinquish dogmas that destructively aims to define women’s sexuality for them.\textsuperscript{13}

While Vance acknowledges both the capacity for pleasure and danger located in the search for sexual fulfillment within an imperfect, exploitative patriarchal structure, she lacks an in-depth discussion of the interplay between the male sexual entitlement and

\textsuperscript{10} Vance, 328.
\textsuperscript{11} Vance, 331.
\textsuperscript{12} Vance, 328.
\textsuperscript{13} Vance, 328.
the human rights issue of sexual pleasure. This is of great importance to the issue of how agency exists in marginalized women’s navigation of the global sex industry, because the construction of pleasure as gender-neutral in much sexual rights literature often conceals the global patriarchal structure in which men have far outstripped women in buying power for sexual services as well as the social acceptability of sexual pleasure.

For instance, Jennifer Oriel’s main critique targets the gender-neutral language found in the World Association for Sexology’s “Declaration of Sexual Rights,” which was adopted by the World Health Organization (WHO) at the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) in 2000. This document does not address the fact that sexual rights and freedoms may affect men and women differently. In Oriel’s words, “the omission of a feminist analysis of gender from sexual rights principles means that they are difficult to apply to political reality,” which stops change from occurring because there is no room for legislative implementation. Female sexual pleasure and equality are also important goals from a public health perspective because the spread of HIV/AIDS from men to women directly involves the pursuit of (generally male) sexual pleasure. A substantial body of research shows that lower rates of HIV transmission (due to increased condom usage) are directly linked to lower levels of violence and coercion.

In societies that devalue female sexual pleasure, the underlying denial of women’s agency also promotes and excuses sexual violence perpetrated by men against

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women, thus making it more likely. The notion of consent as a means to stop sexual violence rests on the idea that all people are free to say no and control sex in the private sphere, and yet even in the most developed, western countries where legal systems are thought to be the most swift and just, rape is often not reported or unjustly acquitted. If a woman cannot use an established legal system to stop violence, it seems unlikely that uttering the word “no” would yield any more success.

In order to fully capture the complexity of sexual pleasure as a human right, there must be a nuanced understanding of the relationship between gender, power and sexuality. The widely recognized social construction of masculinity as fundamentally violent and coercive is manifested through sexual objectification, rape and domestic violence. These aspects of masculinity certainly render sex risky and dangerous, but that is not the whole story. Although prostitution and pornography have long been framed as giving men unlimited access to women’s bodies as vehicles for their own sexual pleasure, this simplistic definition negates a woman’s ability to navigate within these patriarchal structures, establishing their own agency to find pleasure and profit in their work.

Because I have chosen to focus my study on Southern India, the intricate interplay of caste, class, gender and geography must first be addressed in order to understand the complex array of challenges. However, before I examine the effects of class and caste on gender relations and the effects of discrimination on female sex workers, I first turn to the major themes and ideas of Uma Narayan in her book, Dislocating Cultures, which serves as a theoretical framework for my analysis. Narayan writes extensively about the effects of colonialization and westernization on the fabric of Indian society. While I will be using

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16 Jessica Valenti and Jaclyn Friedman, Yes Means Yes: Visions of Female Sexual Power and a World Without Rape (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008).
17 Oriel, 396.
words like “culture,” “religion” and “tradition,” I want to clarify that I subscribe to Narayan’s notion of the political relativity of these words. Although presented as factual, these terms (culture, religion, tradition, etc.) are actually political notions used to prescribe which groups are important and deserving of honor for their way of life. That being said, I find it easier to use “culture,” “tradition” and “religion” in a relative context with the understanding that they do not necessarily describe a life that is holy, honorable or just. This idea of honor and respectability is particularly important when discussing castism and classism within the Indian cultural context. It is of even greater importance to understand the relativity of these terms in relation to the intersection of gender, class and caste as it affects Indian women.

Social structures around the world are stratified to a degree that (almost always) places women and femininity at a disadvantage with respect to the status of men and masculinity. This is also true of the socio-economic patterns, religious ceremonies and “traditional” gender ideals based on the binary male/female system. Women have been coerced through centuries of patriarchy and misogyny to occupy a place in society where their agency and self-worth can be diminished to a point of virtual non-existence. And yet, despite these systemic oppressions, many women find ways of navigating and manipulating their individual situations. All of these factors play an undeniable role in the status of women, displaying deeply rooted mores based in patriarchy and misogyny, extending beyond the Indian context, within the global framework of male privilege and power.

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19 Narayan, 17.
This is exemplified in the second section of Narayan’s first chapter where she unpacks the varying interests that surfaced in the late nineteenth century as male dominated Indian nationalists began to agitate against their male-dominated British colonial rulers. Since both groups saw it as their duty to liberate Indian women, the status of women in Indian society was inexorably linked to the political and discursive struggle that marked the Indian-British colonial exchange. The colonial government used female oppression and the mistreatment of marginalized groups as a justification for their imperialistic actions. By casting Indian culture as primitive, backward and in need of western influence via modernization/colonialization, British colonizers aimed to justify their rule and influence by problematizing religious and caste-based traditions that defined women’s place within their culture. Instead of coming to a full understanding of how and why these customs existed, the British rulers and law-makers aimed to portray Indian culture as inferior, irrational and incapable of change, thus creating a place for themselves as liberators and modernizers despite their pitiful lack of understanding of the historical and cultural context.

This early pattern of victimization and reform-minded intervention has imbedded an androcentric superiority complex in many “western” aid efforts. The pattern perpetuates the ineffective and unsustainable goal of solving problems of inequality and injustice without a full understanding or consideration of the implications of any specific plan of action. This has had a profound effect on the perception of “western” ideas and

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20 Narayan, 16.
21 Narayan, 17.
principles, especially with regard to women’s status. By selectively labeling feminism and gender equality as “western,” religious fundamentalists and cultural conservatives have been able to discredit the validity of these notions by casting them as an inorganic reaction to colonization and outside influence. In doing so, they have also created a cultural standard that justifies perpetuating patriarchal and blatantly misogynistic practices and labeling them “traditional” or “nationalistic.” Cultural stigma surrounding female sexuality, feminization of poverty, and the caste-based purity principle are also major factors in understanding the precarious position of Indian female sex workers.

Yet precarious does not always mean helpless. Laura Maria Agustin’s book *Sex at the Margins* challenges us to examine the potential agency of Indian sex workers (and service-based work more broadly). Despite the limitations of her (acknowledged) Eurocentric focus, her dissection of popularized definitions of trafficking contributes significantly to the continuing debate surrounding international commercialized sex networks. It also serves as a framework for my discussion of female sexual agency. Agustin “demonstrates the discursive gaps and silences into which poorer and undocumented people slip, especially women who sell sex.” This occurs through a process in which sex workers are often sensationalized in the media (and by authority figures), creating a victimized and denigrated notion of sex work and those who perform it. By examining the discursive gaps occupied by migrant sex workers, Agustin argues that there is a complex intersection of class, culture, consumerism and coercion that

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23 Narayan, 17.
24 These positions of power are unsurprisingly vastly male-dominated.
26 Agustin, 5.
complicates the standardized, traditional view of sex workers as hapless victims and oppressed women.

Although Agustin’s argument is based on the migration of (mostly) women from the periphery to the epicenter of European development, there are still many viable connections to be made between sex work in Europe and the global sex industry as it pertains to FSW in the global south. This is reflected in Agustin’s discussion of sex work and the victimized identities that are conferred on women, thereby creating a colonialist operation where NGO helpers become “saviors” and victims are the “passive receptacles” and “mute sufferers” in need of protection.\(^\text{27}\) This is problematic for a number of reasons, the most important of which is the perpetuation of the notion that women in the global south are backward and in need of western enlightenment. This characterization links back to Narayan’s theory of cultural imperialism, creating a vicious cycle of misunderstanding and oppression in which westernized ideals of morality, modernity and legality are forced onto marginalized populations by NGOs and governments.\(^\text{28}\)

One of Agustin’s most important concepts (for this research) is the idea of the multiplicity of human desire. She argues, “Every job is easy for some people and impossibly difficult for others.”\(^\text{29}\) This holds true for those who perform sexual services because they, just like any other service sector worker, try to figure out how to satisfy customers, through movement and manipulation, thereby receiving the most money for the least amount of work.\(^\text{30}\) Although I believe this holds true to varying degrees for many Indian sex workers, the mobility of women is limited in Indian culture in a way that

\(^{27}\) Agustin, 39.  
\(^{28}\) Mohanty, 322.  
\(^{29}\) Agustin, 68.  
\(^{30}\) Agustin, 68.
prevents them from having the same freedom of expression as a sex worker in Amsterdam, for example. Although I will discuss this idea at greater length in the Sex for Sale section, I would like to emphasize that the differences in culture, religion, economic development, educational opportunities, and overall female mobility and agency have a significant negative impact on the lives of female sex workers in India, in a way that does not exist for the migrant sex workers that Agustin studies.

Creating a useful theoretical framework for the aforementioned idea of the multiplicity of human desire, Agustin examines at length the consumption and commodification of service-based jobs. While women, especially in a western/first world context, have moved from the private sphere into the public, the same trend can be seen in India as more and more women are gaining education and entrance into the formal economy and paid labor. Despite this surge of educated women into the formal economy, their traditional domestic duties such as cooking, cleaning and childcare are not being shared equally with their male partners, so there is a high demand for paid domestic service, the status of which is overwhelmingly informal, underpaid and loosely regulated, allowing for gross exploitation. The commodification of “female-gendered labor” does not stop at domestic upkeep. Caring for both the young and the old and providing sexual services have been and continue to be commodified, which fosters varying degrees of exploitation on a global scale.

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31 Although this is not without problems and hitches, see my sections on the feminization of poverty and Indian cultural context for a full discussion of how women are distinctly disadvantaged when pursuing education and formal employment. But it should also be noted that just because there is disparity between the education and employment of the sexes, more women than ever before are emerging from the home and earning money in a job that requires varying degrees of education.

32 Agustin, 74-76.
Migration, by Agustin’s definition, involves movement from one place to another. Under globalized neo-liberal economic practices, uneducated females, usually from a rural background, commonly move from the periphery to the core of development seeking employment, only to have their labor exploited by factory owners, pimps, traffickers, etc. This pertains to the Indian context because India is a source, destination and transitional space within the larger global sex market where people migrate under variable degrees and types of coercion.

The last significant argument Agustin makes is concerning the motivations to buy and sell sex (supply and demand). Before discussing the various factors that bring any particular woman to peddle sexual services, it must first be established that there is a booming market for said services. Although I deplore the idea of a male right to sex, it is undeniable that sex is more widely commodified and available now than ever before. Not only can one literally purchase a sexual encounter, but sex is used in advertising all around the world. As consumers we are constantly reminded of sex, especially female sexuality and desirability, to the point where even television commercials for Barilla pasta have overt sexual and gender identity connotations.

Many sex workers in the west have an undeniable amount of privilege that in certain instances allows them to reconcile the sexual nature of their work with their personal identity, thereby allowing for a positive construction of their sexuality. It is much more difficult for sex workers in the global south to do so because of social, economic and cultural circumstances. By retaining control over how, when and with whom they have sex, privileged first world sex workers are far more likely to find a sense

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33 See the literature review for a full discussion of sexual pleasure as a non-gendered human right.
34 See Appendix B: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ajO-uacZ1Ro.
of satisfaction and enjoyment that is possible only with a high degree of control and agency. This also allows for feelings of relative safety, from both physical violence and the health risks associated with high numbers of sexual partners. This starkly contrasts with the less privileged space occupied by Indian sex workers, who face violence and disease at alarmingly high rates. There is virtually no room for any type of sexual pleasure or safety within the rigid confines of “traditional” Indian culture, which means that a woman who participates in paid sexual service is highly vulnerable, marginalized and stigmatized.35

35 Even though privilege exists in the first world, it is not equally distributed. Not every sex worker in a westernized, first world context is there by choice, nor can it be assumed that he/she is satisfied with their sexual identity. There is also a large amount of stigmatization and marginalization involved in sex work whether it is performed in the first, second or third worlds.
Neoliberalism and the Feminization of Poverty

Even in the economically and socially developed ‘West,’ women’s work is undervalued and underpaid. This trend is magnified and multiplied in countries with emergent economies and conservative social policies (whether these policies are mandated by law or a product of “traditional culture”). These policies are debilitating to the recognition of women’s contributions. Female poverty is both a result and a determining factor of women’s oppression throughout the world. One of the most integral contributing factors to female poverty is the existence of gendered labor in a hierarchy that devalues women’s work. Domestic duties ranging from cooking/cleaning to raising children and caring for the elderly are almost never paid and yet overwhelmingly across the globe, they are considered to be a woman’s responsibility. Additionally, women have the biological ability to reproduce, so if there is not adequate access to contraception, a woman can become pregnant (sometimes against her will). Pregnancy and the resulting child further impede her ability to be gainfully employed. Moreover, in developing countries where educational systems are not easily accessible, a girl child is far less likely to be educated than a boy child, further hurting her chances of finding employment when she reaches adulthood.

Social programs that would increase or maintain access to education, healthcare and other basic needs are among the first to be cut when Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP) are enforced by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). These cuts occur because education and healthcare are not highly prioritized by governments or the lending organization. The IMF is one of many international organizations that has pushed forward

36 Narayan, 55.
globalization by offering loans or other financial incentives to countries that agree to liberalize trade, privatize industries, devalue currency and open markets for foreign investment, or some combination thereof.

As stated on its website, “the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is an organization of 188 countries, working to foster global monetary cooperation, secure financial stability, facilitate international trade, promote high employment and sustainable economic growth, and reduce poverty around the world.”

Unfortunately, while the IMF has succeeded in facilitating global trade, this has come at a very high cost. In order to receive a loan in 1991, India was forced to implement the New Economic Policy, which was a Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) created by the IMF. This new program devalued the currency, privatized certain industries, and liberalized domestic and international economic policies.

Instead of fostering financial stability or sustainable employment, this new economic policy allowed the market to be flooded with foreign direct investment by multinational corporations. These corporations were not interested in fostering sustainable economic growth; instead they sought the cheapest form of labor to populate their factories and warehouses. Because India’s economy was historically based on rural agriculture, there was extensive poverty, which fostered predation. There were also no protective barriers in place that could keep predatory investors from exploiting India’s human and environmental resources.

Indian men are historically the educated breadwinners of the family, so rural women who had previously

37 IMF Website Overview.
39 Argiropoulos, 612.
been involved in subsistence agriculture were found to be the cheapest form of labor available.

This type of unchecked development is a common theme of globalization and the structural adjustment system. It is not unusual for the global north to exploit the global south in the name of development. This type of economic exploitation is frequently referred to and justified as neo-liberal economic policy. While the Indian example is of great importance, the neo-liberal processes of globalization have had profound effects in shaping the economies of countries around the globe. The neo-liberal policies of the World Bank, IMF and World Trade Organization, which all promote globalization, erode or eliminate the abilities of countries to control their own economies.

The types of unskilled jobs that are often outsourced by multinational corporations to developing countries with SAPs are frequently the only source of employment available to poor, unskilled workers (often women who have been denied educational opportunities). Typically there is little or no governmental oversight to protect workers from hazardous working conditions. Female employees are a convenient target for dangerous and exploitative working conditions due to widespread cultural biases that characterize women as docile and less likely to unionize. Women are also perceived to be an auxiliary labor force, which means their unskilled contribution is easily replaceable and grossly underpaid.

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Because factory jobs are so poorly paid with so little employment protection, many women with no education are forced to seek wage labor in the informal sector. This labor migration from formal to informal puts women at risk for a number of exploitative practices that exist because the labor is part of a shadow industry with no rules or regulations. Exploitative working arrangements may make sex work appear relatively profitable and appealing by contrast. While this is a global trend, it is exacerbated in India by the persistence of patriarchal structures and class/caste distinctions, which will be explored in the following section.
Indian Cultural Context: The Intersectionality of Caste, Class, Gender and Post-Colonialism

Even before the British colonial invasion, India was (and continues to be) one of the most stratified societies in the world. On top of huge income disparities exist caste, religious, language and regional community differences that remain deeply embedded in everyday social interaction.\(^2\) Although there are no phenotypical differences between the members of different castes, the Hindu varna system initially dictated four broad groups, brahmins (priests and teachers) kshatriyas (warriors, often royalty), vaisyas (traders, retailers and money lenders) and sudras (manual labor). The idea of untouchability, or ati-sudra (those doing the most menial labor), surfaced circa 1020 A.D. Most scholars consider it an integral part of the caste system.\(^3\) The Hindu holy writings refer to specific substances within the body that separate the pure from the polluted.\(^4\) This hierarchy of purity and pollution starts with brahmins, who are thought to be the purest, and ends with the ati-sudras, who are thought to be the most polluting.

As the Indian economy grew more complex circa the 11\(^{th}\) century, traditional varnas evolved into jatis. While there are many similar similarities between the two, jatis are not clear subsets of the former varna system, and the link between jatis is much looser than that of varna. These systems of stratification have not remained static over the past millennium. “Migration, emulation, isolation, segregation, occupational specialization, conversion, incorporation of tribal groups—all of these factors have

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\(^4\) Gupta, 409-410.
resulted in addition, fission and fusion of castes and changes to their relative hierarchical standing."\(^{45}\)

The British colonial period in India was significant for a plethora of reasons, many of which continue to reverberate in modern Indian cultural practices and beliefs in both the public and private spheres. During this period, many wealthy western countries were colonizing less developed countries in the name of modernization, the cultural impact of foreign officials dictating laws and social policies was harmful and exploitative. In the Indian context, British officials gave enormous privilege to the brahmin caste by consistently taking their advice as to honorable, respectable customary procedure. This blatant favoritism ignored the diverse and complex cultural reality of Indian society and custom and eventually led to the anti-brahmin riots that erupted in southern India in 1948.\(^{46}\) Additionally, in the wake of the 1911 census, a number of castes objected to being placed at lower levels of the hierarchy or wanted to be known differently from the traditional occupation assigned to them. By forcibly ascribing rank and prestige, the British authorities superimposed a western gaze on the social stratification system, thereby creating social unrest and resentment among castes.\(^{47}\)

The census mandate also called for enumeration of ostensibly backward castes. This was reiterated by the Moreley-Minto reforms of 1909, which created separate electorates for non-Brahmin castes by lumping them together and ignoring their diverse representational needs.\(^{48}\) When the Indian Constitution outlawed “untouchability” in 1934, the government implemented a series of social welfare programs designed to quell

\(^{45}\) Deshpande, “Quest,” 155.
\(^{46}\) Gupta, 410.
\(^{47}\) Gupta cites L.S.S. O’Malley on how the 1911 Indian Census shaped colonial political systems on caste.
\(^{48}\) Gupta, 411.
the massive disparity between the ex-untouchables and the other castes. Ex-untouchables have adopted the term dalit to refer to themselves.49 Today, the jati hierarchy can be broken down into three basic levels, upper, middle and dalit castes. Members of the lowest castes still experience significant inequality in access to quality education, without discrimination.50

This hierarchical positioning of groups within the Indian social structure embeds inequality and disparity in the social system, which continues to have a wide range of negative impacts on members of the lower castes, specifically the former untouchables. In large part, middle and upper castes do not adhere to the traditional occupation set forth by their caste identity, but despite the weakness of this caste-occupation link, the overlap between caste and status persists. Therefore “polluting” jobs are still done by members of the caste to which they were traditionally assigned. Former untouchables are subjected to deprivation, discrimination, oppression, violence, exclusion and stigmatized ethnic identity.51

In an attempt to lessen this structural inequality, the Indian government has implemented a series of affirmative action programs designed to encourage and enable members of the lowest castes to receive an education and participate in the formal employment sector. Although affirmative action is a hotly debated method of incorporation, material inequality, labor market discrimination, stigmatized ethnic identity, and historical origins of untouchability have all been so thoroughly embedded in the social fabric and labor market that the Indian government was forced to take action.52

49 Gupta, 409.
50 Deshpande, “Quest,” 158.
51 Deshpande, “Quest,” 159.
52 Deshpande, “Quest,” 158.
In order to empower and educate members of the scheduled castes, affirmative action laws were passed. But as Deshpande explains in “Quest for Equality, Affirmative Action in India”: “A big problem with the [affirmative action] program is that there is no monitoring done and indeed, there are no penalties for evading it. Thus, the mere announcement of quotas is seen as sufficient.” It is also important to note that quotas (if they are filled) are simply a means of increasing employment and income. This does not address the root of the disparity, which lies deeply embedded in social, religious and cultural prejudice.

In any modern, global economy, education and literacy play a large role in employment opportunities. For persons of a scheduled caste background this is detrimental because they largely continue to regard unskilled, casual labor as their hereditary occupation with little or no emphasis on the importance of formal education. This contrasts with mid-level castes such as the Kayasths, who have a long history of being engaged in administrative occupations, requiring them to regard literacy and education as important. This complex educational disparity contributes to the economic inequalities that exist between castes despite Article 17 of the Indian Constitution, which outlawed untouchability.

Despite the attempt at labor market integration of ex-untouchables, the impact of large scale economic integration and neo-liberal policies has most adversely affected the groups of people who have been historically most severely marginalized, which in this case happens to be the former untouchables. Large amounts of literature have examined

53 Deshpande, “Quest,” 161.
55 Patkar, 403.
the disparities among gender and caste, concluding that disparities have increased since the neo-liberal reforms. As previously discussed in The Feminization of Poverty section, the neoliberal economic policies that took hold in the late twentieth century had tremendous impact on the various social stratifications of Indian society. One of the most pronounced was the dissolution of the closed village system, giving rise to an explosion of urban metropolises, democratic politics and a globalized economy. These changes exacerbated the competitive element embedded in the caste system.56

In the previous paragraphs I have examined some of the most basic facets of the caste system in India and how socioeconomic class plays a large role in an individual’s experience in any given caste. I would now like to analyze the complex relationship that exists between caste, class and gender. There are other important factors that determine one’s experience inside this complex interplay, such as region, community, and religious conservatism. Here my focus will be primarily on class, caste, gender and religiosity. “Women’s status in society is a multi-faceted concept referring to women’s control over materials and resources and or women’s power and autonomy.”57 These abilities are structural forces in society made clear by a gendered division of labor, inheritance rules, religious practices (including marriage) and family formation.58

To examine the overlap of caste, class and gender, there must first be an understanding of the distinction between class and caste. Although overwhelmingly a higher caste signifies a higher position socioeconomically, important outliers exist and disrupt the traditional caste/class hierarchy. Widespread neoliberal economic changes

56 Gupta, 417.
57 Patkar, 405.
have interrupted the land ownership patterns and traditional economies that once sustained the caste/class hierarchy. Bearing that in mind, women’s status in the upper echelons of caste and socioeconomic class can vary dramatically from that of women in the poverty-stricken scheduled castes. Part of the reason for this variation is the strong caste-religion connection that has historically existed among the upper castes because they view themselves as custodians of established religious traditions.\(^{59}\) Under the assumption that the subordination of women was crucial to the development of the caste hierarchy, women are then placed under increasing constraints the higher the caste.\(^{60}\) Thus one might expect a trade-off to exist between material conditions (upper-caste) and autonomy (scheduled castes).

This notion of a trade-off between material wealth and autonomy is contested by Deshpande, however. She writes that the relative freedom of scheduled caste women is increasingly illusory because of widespread Sanskritization, the process by which lower castes emulate the practices of upper castes to symbolically elevate their position.\(^{61}\) This implies that although material wealth may vary widely, women’s status is subject to similar patriarchal limitations and expectations.

Based on this idea of shared constraints despite caste, I would like to examine the increased hardship faced by impoverished women who are forced to partake in informal labor to survive. In a study published in Spring 2012, Rashmi Umexh Arora concludes: “[L]ow per capita income was found to be associated with higher gender

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\(^{60}\) Deshpande, “Assets,” 25.

This suggests that women of low socioeconomic backgrounds (who are also likely to be of a low caste background) must contend with the burdens of economic instability (which also includes lack of food security, insufficient healthcare, and a low likelihood of literacy) and increased inequality in both the private sphere (household) and public sphere (community). Any person born into a scheduled caste would also have significantly fewer educational opportunities than someone born into one of higher rank. Bearing this in mind, a woman born into a low caste is doubly unlikely to receive an education. In fact, a woman of low caste rank suffers the triple burden of poverty, patriarchy, and untouchability.

In India, women’s ability to work outside the home is strictly dictated by the norms of kinship, caste and socioeconomic class. As previously discussed, conservative Hindu leaders promote ideological sanctions against female mobility outside the home. This limits interaction outside of the home, making women less likely to be gainfully employed, especially in the formal sector. They also face issues of isolation and psychological distress. As described in Playing with Fire, women who come from families with a higher degree of economic stability (and likely higher caste ranking) may not have issues of food security or lack of healthcare, but the increased familial pressure and isolation can be debilitating.

There is a certain stigma attached to women being employed because it insinuates that the man of the household is unable to provide for his family, thus breaking with the Indian ideal of masculinity and bringing shame upon the family, which transcends caste boundaries. I witnessed this in India because Manjula worked, and Vijaya was retired due

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to an injury he sustained while renovating their house. This was a challenge, especially when Vijaya was first injured, because they family had gone into enormous debt to finance the renovation. Manjula was of a low rank at the bank where she was employed, so her salary was barely enough to sustain a family of four. Supradeep explained that sometimes he would go to bed hungry and even wonder if there would be money to pay his school fees. Thankfully, Manjula is now a senior manager and the renovation has paid for itself by allowing them to rent out the top floors of their home.

Sons are a source of security because they are able to inherit property and receive a dowry upon marriage. Accordingly, the birth of a baby girl in India is often met with disappointment, despair and hostility. Son preference is a long-standing Indian tradition with religious, cultural and economic implications. Such misogynistic cultural conditions shape girls’ self-worth and create attitudinal biases that transcend generational divides, creating a lasting impression of low female self-worth and denigration of daughters. Son preference also plays a major role in individual familial educational decisions, resulting in fewer literate women and continued devaluation of women’s work and societal contribution. As Patkar writes: “This complex interplay of caste, class, gender, age and religion produces an intricate matrix where education and socio-economic status are key players in reproduction, maintenance and transmission of gender disparities from generation to generation.”

A further manifestation of patriarchy is the enduring custom of patrilocality, which dictates that a woman must leave her natal home upon marriage to join her husband and his family in their home. Physical separation reduces the possibility that the

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64 Patkar, 402.
woman’s family will intervene if the new living situation is abusive or unhappy, and also the chance that she will claim her share of inherited land. This is one of many institutionalized examples of patriarchy that severely limit women’s economic and social autonomy in relation to that of men. This interlocking religious, social, political, economic and cultural system constrains women over their lifetimes and prevents them from achieving economic independence. This results in limited access to resources in both the public sphere and private, household domain. Male entitlement exists at every level; nutrition, education, health-care and decision-making are traditionally determined first by the father, then husband and son. Elder women (specifically mothers-in-law) are also frequently given decision-making power over sons’ wives.

In sum, the highly stratified nature of Indian society allows for huge income disparities. This income gap is made more pronounced and prolonged by the hereditary occupational nature of the caste system. This, coupled with caste discrimination and gender inequity, creates a structural system that constantly bars women (most especially poor women of lower castes) from receiving education, adequate healthcare, and nutrition. All of these factors contribute to the inability of many Indian women to find gainful employment and economic independence. Because they lack the skills and ability to enter the formal economy as employees, many women are forced to partake in casual labor in the informal sector. Recent studies have shown that the influx of neoliberal economic practices has brought about an increase in the casualization of women’s labor,

65 Patkar, 403.
66 Patkar, 402.
67 Sangtin Writers and Richa Nagar, Playing with Fire: Feminist Thought and Activism through Seven Lives in India (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press: 2006).
as discussed above. This leaves women increasingly vulnerable to exploitative, informal working conditions including but not limited to street and brothel-based sex work.
Sex For Sale

The commodification and sale of sex occurs in all parts of the world. The transnational supply and demand for sexual services is an inescapable reality of our modern, globalized society. The popular image of sex work focuses on the sensationalized and frequently violent, coercive nature of the work. Participants in the global sex industry carry the heavy burden of stigmatization, marginalization, risk of violence, disease, and conflicting notions of morality and personal identity. Moreover, the practices of human trafficking and prostitution are heavily feminized. As discussed in my literature review, abolitionist feminists’ analyses of sex work in the global south often focus solely on the violent, patriarchal structure, thus effacing the possibility of female agency or even pleasure among those who perform this work. This narrow-minded analysis is highly problematic because it casts these women as passive and helpless, which further degrades their already victimized identity of a female sex worker in the global south.

In fact, the burdens and risks associated with sex work are not equally distributed. Some women have the ability to leave the sex industry at any time without the risk of violent repercussion or abject poverty; others are pressured to remain there through varying coercive dynamics. This tension between of choice and coercion is central to the debate on how to deal with global commercial sex networks. Indeed, part of the reason why gross sexual exploitation continues to exist is because sex work remains illegal in most of the world. This “shadow industry” remains unregulated and unchecked, allowing for massive amounts of violence and coercion, which stands in stark contrast to

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68 See for instance Mackinnon, “Sexuality,” as well as my discussion of masculine sexual entitlement and abolitionist feminism.
the opportunities afforded to the privileged few who perform sex work in relatively safe, controlled space in the first, usually western world. 69

Coercion is most blatant where young children are involved. There are circumstances when agency is virtually non-existent based on age. It is difficult to imagine a five-year-old exercising agency or autonomy in a meaningful way. A rescue-based approach is necessary in order to remove the child from harm as quickly as possible. Dr. Sunita Krishnan gives a heartbreaking TEDtalks presentation, detailing her work in rescuing young girls from the sex industry and working to end sexual slavery. 70 One of the young girls she rescued suffered grievous injuries and died as a result of the brutality she experienced within the sex industry.

Even where adults are concerned, one of the major challenges in dealing with sex work in India is the massive stigma that is attached to female sexuality. This was exemplified during one of the training sessions I attended at NIMHANS. During a role-playing exercise in which one participant played the part of the sex worker seeking psychological treatment, and the other acted as her counselor, there was strong sense of shame and criticism. The exchange occurred in Kannada and was translated for me later by Supradeep. This regressive pattern was repeated by the other participants, and even encouraged by the training facilitator.

Although many problematic perceptions and social constructions of sex and sex work still exist in India, the Indian government is relatively progressive in its dealings

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69 As discussed in my literature review, it is not my intention to assume or propagate the idea that consensual commercial sex only exists in the first world, or in a western context for that matter. My aim instead is to show the reader that although western culture is a long way from gender equality, there is often greater liberty and infrastructure for increasingly safe spaces where commercial sex can happen with minimal risk and maximum agency.
70 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jeOumyTMC18
with Indian sex workers. This is surprising in some ways because Narayan cites many instances where the Indian government is conservative and colonial in its approach to the issue of female mobility. The past ten years have seen major advances in terms of harm reduction and pragmatic social programming designed to reduce the risk of violence and empower communities where sex work is prevalent.

Despite massive domestic and international efforts to quell the growing global sex industry, women who sell sexual services remain marginalized, stigmatized and victimized. This oppression is also perpetuated in part by a system of rescue that is meant to liberate them from their assumed lives of shame, poverty and filth. Even in a westernized, first world context where it is becoming increasingly possible for women to practice sex work in relatively safe conditions, stigma, marginalization and victimization still exist to varying degrees. In order to understand the problematic aspects of the rescue industry and the ensuing problematic treatment of sex workers, it must first be understood that the commodification of sex and the female body has created a demand (some would argue expectation) for sexual services that continues to flourish in an unmistakably misogynistic and patriarchal global society. The idea of masculine sexual entitlement is not new, but it is deeply implicated in the debate surrounding the sex industry. This increasing demand, combined with globalization and the feminization of poverty, creates a setting where it can be highly profitable to traffic women for sex.

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71 Reynold interview.
72 Narayan.
74 Agustin, 5.
75 A full discussion of masculine sexual entitlement and the female right to sexual pleasure can be found in the literature review.
Problematizing Trafficking

Human trafficking (as it is referred to in vast amounts of scholarly literature and sensationalized media coverage) is the largest and most highly profitable illegal industry worldwide, rivaled only by the drug trade. In 2000, in Palermo, Sicily, the United Nations drafted the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Human Trafficking, Especially Women and Children. The enactment of this standardized definition, which came to be referred to as the Palermo Protocols, generated large amounts of governmental and NGO interest in human trafficking. As established in 2000, the Palermo definition of human trafficking is:

The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of abuse of a power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.  

Most governments and aid organizations base their own definitions of trafficking on the above definition because prior to 2000 when this definition was drafted, there was no internationally agreed upon definition. Geographer Sallie Yea explains that while the sex industry claims a large number of trafficking victims, the global phenomenon of forced labor is not limited to sexual exploitation. Young boys of Indian, Bangladeshi and Pakistani decent are often trafficked to the Middle East (specifically the United Arab Emirates) to be trained as camel jockeys. There is also a lively market in the Philippines for the sale of internal organs. In various parts of the world people with disabilities are

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bought and sold to serve as beggars in popular tourist locations.\textsuperscript{77} Yea also notes that trafficking has been documented in many economic sectors including but not limited to begging, domestic servitude, mining, fishing, agriculture, construction, factories and sweatshops.\textsuperscript{78} While the idea of coercion varies slightly in all of these examples, it is important to understand that even if physical force may not have been employed, other coercive techniques were, possibly including economic necessity, threat, abduction or fraud as outlined by the Palermo Protocol. Although Yea does not discuss the issue of gender in this particular article, I find it important to note that the male body is desired above the female body in most instances of trafficking due to perceptions of male physical strength.

While an exact count of trafficked persons around the world is impossible to calculate because of the clandestine nature of the activity, the International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates the minimum number of persons at any given time to be 2.5 million. As Agustin points out, these numbers are highly ambiguous and likely to be much higher.\textsuperscript{79} Yet these figures are still heavily referenced and touted as absolute truth. I find this to be incredibly problematic because the obsession with quantifying a number that can never be accurately determined distracts from creating policy that is responsive to sex workers’ needs. Many of the secondary sources I found to be useful in the beginning of my writing process began to seem oppressive and colonial in their gaze and framework, once I began to employ the dismantling lens of Agustin and Narayan. For the purposes of length and clarity, I will continue to use the words “trafficking” and

\textsuperscript{77} Philippines has been identified as one of the top five organ trafficking nations by the World Health Organization. The others include Egypt, Columbia, China and Pakistan.
\textsuperscript{78} Yea, 5.
\textsuperscript{79} Agustin, 16.
“trafficked” to describe persons who have been forced to partake in labor by deception, wrongful use of privilege, violence and other forms of coercion or threats thereof. However, by using this terminology I do not mean to erase the agency of the people involved.

As discussed in the literature review, Agustin tries to locate women’s agency within the context of the European sex industry and in many ways she succeeds. In her own words, “The trafficking discourse relies on the notion that poorer women are better off staying at home than leaving and possibly getting into trouble; men are routinely expected to encounter and overcome trouble, but women may be irreparably damaged by it.”80 By going beyond the popular characterization of FSW as victims of an oppressive, patriarchal system, she complicates the notions of choice and coercion. In her research, this gray area is occupied by women who have chosen to migrate from the periphery (second and third world) to the European economic core (first world) with the understanding that they will perform some type of service-based work.

Although some of her arguments are Eurocentric and do not readily translate into the Indian context, I find her problematization of the blanket term “trafficking” to be extremely relevant. Much of the scholarly literature that I reference in this section uses the term ‘trafficked’ to refer to women who are then cast as hapless victims of global systems of violence and misogyny. Their experiences are combined into one big, amorphous globule of passive victimhood, most often through a colonial lens. I acknowledge that global systems of patriarchal oppression exist, but it is problematic to continually undermine a woman’s ability to navigate the nuances of agency within the admittedly exploitative global sex network. The process by which governments and aid

80 Agustin, 39.
organizations seek to help trafficked women mirrors these victimized identities that are often conferred upon them, thereby perpetuating stereotypes of submissive, colonial victimhood. These problematic identities are being perpetuated by the very system that was put in place to help women who have been exploited.

This process of “rescue” is often rendered futile because the rescue industry cannot or will not deal with the complex structural inequalities that led to the “rescued” woman’s initial entrance into the sex industry. The system is also known for corruption and exploitation as women and girls are often sold back into the sex industry after being “rescued.” Because of these structural preconditions, “rescued” women, especially those under the age of 18, are often rescued multiple times, indicating an unproductive and fragmented system.  

Human trafficking is certainly not limited to forced sexual labor, but for the remainder of this paper that is the type of trafficking on which I will be focusing. It is important to note that the instances in which the male body is preferred are very specific (e.g., camel jockeying) whereas the female body is much more vulnerable and versatile (e.g., any type of service work, including domestic labor and sex work). Women are more vulnerable to being trafficked for sex due to the higher demand for their sexual services. While men can be vulnerable and exploited, patriarchal customs coupled with the feminization of poverty have allowed for women’s sexualized vulnerability to far exceed that of men.  

82 In my interview with Dr. Reynold, we also discussed the male and transgender presence in the Indian sex industry. For the sake of time and space, I will not be discussing this concept at length, but I find it important to note that there is increased cognizance and acceptance of the existence of non-normative sexualities and genders within India as a whole. The organization that Reynold directs has sponsored many programs of varying success aimed at educating and minimizing risk for the male and transgender sex
While there is no doubt that it is inherently wrong to exploit another person for financial gain, complications arise when deciding the best way to help those who have been exploited. For Agustin, the entire notion of force and exploitation must be dismantled to fully understand the discrete power structures that affect a woman’s entrance into the sex industry. Agustin acknowledges “international structural conditions” like armed conflict and capital restructuring as forces that would prompt a woman to leave her home. Agustin goes on to entertain the notions of “desire, aspiration, anxiety and other states of the soul” as reasons for leaving. This is a prime example of the “multiplicity of human” desire that absolutely cannot be denied to poor women, especially those from developing countries. Too often women (and men) of the global south are cast as regressive and degenerate, therefore incapable of leisure travel or self-discovery. As Indian women continue to become more economically active despite the continued implementation of neoliberal economic practices, it is increasingly likely and possible for a woman to achieve economic independence outside of her home, a possibility that has not been readily available in the past.

Though the problem of human trafficking is not limited to any particular country or region, some of the most alarmingly high rates of ‘disappearing’ women (presumably trafficked women) occur in India where massive economic disparity coupled with long-standing patriarchal traditions place women in distinctly disadvantaged situations in worker population. I find this to be of considerable importance because it broadens the scope of people seen as affected by sex work and acknowledges that non-normative genders do exist, thus allowing for programming aimed at minimizing risk of violence and disease.

83 Agustin, 17.
84 Agustin, 17-18.
which the entrance into sex work is over-determined. In discussions of global sex trafficking there are common themes of youth (below age 18), helplessness, violence, and barbaric conditions. These are repeated frequently with little variation, placing the gaze squarely on the non-western (non-European) ‘other’ who has been violently forced into the sex industry. This pattern exists to a large degree in popular understandings of Indian sex work. While it is certainly not my intention to downplay the experiences of any person who has suffered this type of violent coercion, I would like to broaden ideas about entry into sex work to include some kind of navigational ability and control for the women who live and work within these parameters. This broadened scope is intended to include specifically Indian women who are not necessarily forced (or deceived) into the sex industry, but rather choose it as the best of a number of bad options due to any number of unfortunate circumstances.

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87 Agustin, 3.
88 Magar, 620.
Entry into Sex Work

There are many factors that play a role in a woman’s entrance into the sex industry in India, one of the most common being poverty. Per my interview with Dr. Reynold, there are three major pathways (all revolving around poverty) by which women become involved in sex work: death, divorce (desertion) and the Devadasi tradition. Death and divorce both deprive a woman of male protection in a highly patriarchal society.89 This status as an unmarried woman (and potentially a mother) is highly stigmatized in India, and those who are uneducated and/or from poor (often low caste) families are especially vulnerable. In the likely case that the woman in question is in fact uneducated, her job prospects are extremely limited. To sustain themselves (and their children), many women are forced to work in the factories and export processing zones that have grown in the last 30-40 years (as previously discussed in the Feminization of Poverty section). This neo-liberal economic environment blatantly exploits female workers who are unfairly paid and often sexually exploited by supervisors and managers.90

Reynold recounted many conversations with FSW who told him personal accounts of working in factories (specifically garment factories) where sexual exploitation occurred. Male supervisors would seek sexual favors and if the women didn’t oblige, they would be fired or otherwise punished. This would happen to numerous women any number of times until eventually they would realize that they were being paid a pittance to perform hard labor, under terrible conditions, all while being blackmailed and sexually exploited. Suddenly full-time sex work did not seem like a bad alternative. If they became

89 Legal divorce is extremely rare in India; if a man no longer wishes to be married, it is often easier to simply desert his wife.
90 Reynold interview.
a sex worker, there would be no more factory-style labor, and they would be doing something they had already become desensitized to by their male supervisors.  

Reynold also noted that rural women could become extremely vulnerable when men from their village offer to help with some task that their deceased or divorced husband would usually perform, often with the open expectation of sexual reciprocation. These women may feel required to accommodate this type of sexual advance out of cultural, social or economic obligation. In these ways divorced, deserted or widowed women often find themselves in compromising positions as they negotiate their place in society.

Caste also plays a role in gender-based exploitation. Often in villages, those of low caste backgrounds will be geographically isolated within the village, usually on a particular street. Although shifting land ownership patterns have notably upset the wealth distribution amongst castes, generally the lower the caste, the lower the socioeconomic status. This leaves women of low caste at a triple disadvantage, creating that much more vulnerability should her husband divorce, die or desert. Extreme poverty may also force women into sex work even if her husband is alive and available. In addition, gambling and alcohol addictions have been found to be more common in lower a caste, which lead to economically unproductive husbands and increasingly vulnerable wives. Reynold also noted that women (especially those with children) would find sex work economically necessary just to survive.

91 Reynold interview.
92 Gupta, 402.
Devadasi

In northern Karnataka, the Devadasi tradition is a common avenue into sex work (especially for young, underage girls). Historically, Devadasi were girls dedicated through marriage to various gods and goddesses. This system originated in southern India around the sixth century AD. As wives of deities, the duties of the Devadasi included cleaning the temple, dancing in festivals and delivering prayers and food to gods, all of which were considered sacred forms of worship. Since the Devadasis were "married," they never assumed the socially and morally stigmatized status of widowhood. Some Devadasis were even afforded the opportunity to learn to read and write. But along with their privileged status and ritually significant positions, they were also obliged to perform sexual services for the male priests and formen regarded as important donors or patrons. This "sacred sexualization" intensified from 1300-1700 AD during the reign of the "warrior kings." During this time a transition occurred where Devadasis went from being "persons with agency and ritual significance, to symbols of divine sexuality for the enjoyment of royalty, wealthy donors and attendants." While this devolution was not immediate, the Devadasi system continued to be important within the religious worship and practices set forth by kings, priests and wealthy land barons, strengthening the connection between women, sex work and the sacred eroticism that is often assumed to be an inherent feature of the Devadasi tradition.

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93 Teela Rae Orchard, "Girl, Woman, Lover, Mother: Towards a New Understanding of Child Prostitution Among Young Devadasis in Rural Karnataka, India," *Social Sciences and Medicine*, no. 64 (2007): 2379-2390.
94 Orchard, 2379.
95 Orchard, 2381.
96 Orchard, 2381.
Although legislation was passed in 1984 that banned the tradition and stripped modern Devadasis of their former socio-religious status, it is estimated that each year between 1,000-10,000 young girls are dedicated in Northern Karnataka, where the custom is most widely practiced. The system has changed drastically over time and the contemporary working conditions vary among villages. Most Devadasis in the North Karnataka region live and work in their natal communities (which are often marked by their low caste status and profession), although they sometimes travel to larger rural centers to practice sex work in small-scale brothels or lodges. For a girl to become a Devadasi, a priest must perform a ritual, which usually occurs between the ages of 5 and 10. Because of the illegality of the tradition, priests typically charge a heavy price for the performance of the ritual. After menarche, the girls are ready to begin working (or conducting dhandha as it is referred to in Kannada), with the first client paying an increased price for the “honor” of taking her virginity.

During my time in Bangalore, I had multiple casual conversations with various family members about the Devadasi tradition. Each agreed that it was once a noble and respectable path for a woman to take, but they also acknowledged that it had changed dramatically. Manjula was very open about the fact that she often listened to folk music performed by a famous Devadasi singer and encouraged me to do the same. Her brother-in-law explained to me how and why the tradition had come to be dishonorable:

Many years ago, it was rare and sacred to become a Devadasi. The position was revered for its spiritual significance. But it became problematic for women to be living without a male guardian or protector, so the Devadasi would move in with

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97 Orchard, 2381.
98 Some girls may become Devadasis after puberty due to unwanted pregnancy or other familial circumstances.
a family in the village. As part of the living situation, the Devadasi would have a sexual relationship with the husband and the wife often became jealous or angry. Other men in the village would also become jealous or angry because they had wanted the Devadasi to come live with them. Feuds erupted and the original sacred task of temple maintenance and upkeep fell by the wayside, replaced by sexual objectification and lust.\textsuperscript{99}

Though anecdotal, these conversations confirm that Devadasi are presently seen primarily as prostitutes.

\textsuperscript{99} Paraphrased conversation that occurred on December 17, 2012.
Rescuing Women

Having briefly described the Devadasi tradition, I aim to utilize Narayan’s analytical framework to further complicate the notion of “religious tradition.” By asking who has perpetuated these customs, she examines who is benefitting; just because a long-standing historical tradition exists does not automatically make it justifiable or non-exploitative. Although Narayan does not assess the Devadasi custom specifically, she does complicate and problematize popular notions regarding Sati (bride-burning) and dowry murder, which are both highly misogynistic customs with traditional religious significance. This phenomenon is examined in painful detail in the third chapter of Dislocating Culture, where Narayan cuts apart Mary Daly’s representation of practices of Sati and dowry murder. By problematizing Daly’s illustration of Sati and dowry murder as examples of misogyny within Indian culture, Narayan exposes the western gaze that exists in both scholarly documentation of women in the global south and action-oriented aid and development programs that work together to perpetuate a westernized construction of the third world woman as an incapable victim in need of rescue.

This construction is especially evident in the rescue-based initiatives that dominate the aid programs designed to remove women from the sex industry. In an ethnographic study of the Devadasi tradition, Teela Orchard briefly discusses this notion of a colonial-gaze by citing race and “third world” status as determining factors in the popular depiction of young sex workers in the global south as “poor, naïve, without agency and oppressed by cultural traditions.” She further describes this characterization as young girls being “reviled for their misplaced sexuality, pitied for

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101 Orchard, 2380.
their plight and deemed for their participation in ‘other’ cultural practices.” Following Heather Montgomery, Orchard argues that these “dogmatic” images work only to maintain ‘western’ notions of childhood, sexuality, work, and traditions instead of getting to the heart of what these practices mean for children, families and the local economies that have come to increasingly depend on the sexual labor of daughters.\footnote{Orchard, 2380.}

Researchers have begun to investigate the socio-economic, religious and emotional dynamics associated with child prostitution. This raises the question as to who is benefitting from the constructed “traditional” Devadasi practice and who is relying on its perpetuation. The young girls who are marginalized, stigmatized and put at risk for sexually transmitted diseases are not reaping the same economic and spiritual benefits as their family/village.\footnote{This precarious socio-moral position is examined at length in Orchard’s study of North Karnatacan villages where the Devadasi tradition is still widely practiced.} Money that the young Devadasis earn is generally sent back to their families, thereby stimulating the overall village economy. Furthermore, since men usually control their family’s financial resources, it can be inferred that they are the primary beneficiaries of their daughters’ sexual labor.
The Scope of the Problem

In 2008 it was estimated that 800,000 Indian women and children were trafficked across international borders, 80% of which ended in forced sexual labor.\textsuperscript{104} This number does not include trafficked persons within national borders which occurs frequently in India, especially in the ‘Pink Triangle’ between Calcutta, Mumbai and Delhi.\textsuperscript{105} A number of environmental, economic, social, cultural, and governance factors contribute to whether or not a person or community is at risk for trafficking.\textsuperscript{106} India is home to a very unique combination of various factors that often lead to the sexual exploitation of women. Due to the geographical location of India and its porous borders with both Bangladesh and Nepal, women born in India are not the only ones at risk for domestic and/or transnational trafficking. This should be understood in conjunction with the status of India as a source, destination and transitional route within the larger global sex market.

Sex work is also complicated by the varying nature of the work. Around the world there are hundreds of ways in which one may take part in the sex industry and India is no exception. Pornography, strip clubs, massage parlors, brothels, lodges, swingers clubs, and escort services exist in different locales with varying degrees of legality.\textsuperscript{107} There is also variation in the type of sex work depending on whether the setting is urban or rural. Immense inconsistencies occur based on the location and context of the sexual service, especially in India where the urban/rural divide is as stark as the massive wealth disparity. In terms of the southern Indian state of Karnataka, FSW are generally of local origin, practicing sex work near their natal village or in their home, perhaps traveling on

\textsuperscript{104} Joffres, 1.
\textsuperscript{105} Joffres, 3.
\textsuperscript{106} Joffres, 7.
\textsuperscript{107} Agustin, 68.
occasion to a neighboring state or village. The existence of a global sex network is not as active here as it is in more urban settings like Delhi, Kolkata or Mumbai.¹⁰⁸

In the cities of Bangalore and Mysore, which are the largest urban settings near Karnataka, Reynold reported that the vast majority of sex work is not brothel based, but rather carried out in private homes through a system of FSW connections.¹⁰⁹ This means that the women who practice sex work are generally of local Indian origin and not sourced from another country. The specific nature of sex work as it is practiced in southern India, that is, the state of Karnataka and to a lesser extent Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra, is rarely brothel based. Rather, sex workers practice sex work out of their homes, usually in or near their natal villages. Networks and friendships form among sex workers so that if one picks up a customer, she can go to the home of a friend to perform the sex act, this allows for an increased degree of anonymity and flexibility.¹¹⁰

One of KHPT’s most outstanding accomplishments is the dramatic decrease in female sex workers infected with HIV. This goal has been accomplished through various programs and initiatives aimed at empowering FSW to negotiate condom use and other risk reduction techniques. The initial grant that allowed for the formation of KHPT was put to use targeting female sex workers (and later male sex workers and transgendered sex workers) for risk reduction, education and empowerment. While KHPT currently runs multiple programs from hand washing to condom negotiation, the focus for this interview revolved around the issues facing female sex workers. Reynold has seen the sex industry change in the 10 years he has been involved with KHPT. In those 10 years, KHPT has been able to provide facilities within the city where female sex workers can

¹⁰⁸ Reynold interview.
¹⁰⁹ Reynold interview.
¹¹⁰ Reynold interview.
wash themselves and seek medical treatment for sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. Since then the goals of the organization have shifted and the needs that are emerging are more complex than running water and medical care; cultural biases, stigmatization, marginalization and poverty cycles must be dismantled before sweeping change can occur.\footnote{Reynold Interview}

Although I will not be discussing male sex workers at any great length, homosexuality and transgender sexualities are of growing visibility in India and around the world. In conjunction with these non-normative sexualities, Dr. Reynold’s comments were mainly limited to the spread of HIV and other STDs, but there is a growing population of men who have sex with men. In fact, many of these men (both those who sell and buy homosexual services) are married to women and often have families. There has been increased visibility of this once invisible population, and according to Dr. Washington, in many government offices there is a gender neutral bathroom, indicating increased acceptance and recognition of a third gender.
Locating Women’s Agency

Empowerment theory literature focuses on enhancing the status, mobility and agency of women, all of which must be more commonly addressed in development economics. Gender-based marginalization is exacerbated by poverty, and caste/class/ethnicity-based discrimination is evident in low levels of education and limited economic opportunities, reinforcing the perception that girl children are burdens and economic liabilities.\textsuperscript{112} While NGO and governmental efforts at STD/HIV prevention among sex workers are generally well intentioned, often “no space remains to recognize and validate the choices that women make when confronted with limited economic opportunities.”\textsuperscript{113} This has resulted in anti-trafficking/anti-sex work measures that are colonial and ineffective because they are disconnected from the individuals who they claim to help. Part of this approach includes raid and rescue missions, which are usually carried out by law enforcement officials. Ideally the “rescued” sex workers would be interviewed, provided with healthcare services and placed in a certified safe house.\textsuperscript{114} But this is not usually the case as rescue missions can be forceful and traumatizing to sex workers, who face abuse and re-trafficking from corrupt safe house operators. This is of particular relevance in modern India where lack of education and economic opportunity push young girls into sex work (who are most likely to be the subjects of raid and rescue operations).\textsuperscript{115}

Despite the daunting challenges and complexities of the Indian sex industry, there are some positive improvements that have occurred in the last decade and continue to

\textsuperscript{112}Swenderman, 1158.
\textsuperscript{113}Magar, 620.
\textsuperscript{114}Magar, 622.
\textsuperscript{115}Magar, 622.
expand in scope and progressiveness. There also exists a certain complexity to Indian federal law as it governs sex work. The 1986 Immoral Trafficking Prevention Act (ITPA) does not criminalize the commercial exchange of sex between two consenting, heterosexual adults.\footnote{Biradavolu, 1543.} It does, however, establish a legal framework that aims at preventing a third party from profiting from the commercial sex exchange, thus making all associated activities illegal. When Indian police officers choose to arrest sex workers, “they are charged with creating a ‘public nuisance’ under the less stringent Sections 290 or 294 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) of 1890.”\footnote{Biradavolu, 1543.} By drawing on contemporary theories of governance and non-state regulation to analyze the evolving strategies of HIV prevention, Monica Biradavolu supplements the legal framework of successful collectivization strategies being employed by sex worker-led community based organizations (often under the umbrella of larger NGO) to reduce stigma and increase agency. Police brutality and harassment occurs most often when the sex workers operate in urban centers, especially along major highways and publicly known brothel areas.\footnote{Biradavolu, 1543.} “Whereas sex workers who took precautions to keep their identity secret by practicing in rural areas, or operating mostly from homes and rarely reported police problems . . . Sex workers themselves accepted that discretion was the operative rule and that therefore indiscreet colleagues were troublesome and deserved to be arrested.”\footnote{Biradavolu, 1544.}

Police sensitization has been a focus of KHPT and other NGOs and CBOs, especially as condoms have became more widely available through peer education systems. In years past, police officers would often arrest a woman simply for carrying

\begin{footnotes}
\item Biradavolu, 1543.
\item Biradavolu, 1543.
\item Biradavolu, 1543.
\item Biradavolu, 1543.
\item Biradavolu, 1544.
\end{footnotes}
condoms the assumption that she was a sex worker. The sensitization and intervention programs have met with resounding success as they continue to “challenge stigmatized notions of sex work, and highlight how police can assist in HIV prevention.”\textsuperscript{120} KHPT, among other NGOs and CBOs, has seen this success first hand. Reynold explained the details of a phone-tree network that is currently used to combat unjust arrests. One phone call is made and dozens of people are notified and make their way to the police station where the sex worker in question is being held. This collective process has been proven to be successful in giving a voice to sex workers who were once scattered and voiceless.

There are two notable Indian sex worker collectivization projects that have gained scholarly attention, Sonagachi and Ashodaya Samithi. Both set out with the goals of combatting the multiple forms of violence faced by sex workers in an attempt to increase condom usage and reduce the spread of HIV. The Sonagachi Project, which inherited its name from the Sonagachi district (the largest red light district in Kolkata), began as a system of peer educators and a series of sexual health clinics. Twelve sex workers were recruited to work as peer educators distributing information on HIV transmission and prevention, promoting condom usage and encouraging fellow sex workers to visit the sexual health clinics. Dr. Smarajit Jana from the All-India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health was charged with heading the operation. As the project developed, gaining the trust of the FSW it was serving, so too did the goals and responsibilities of its members and it is now over 60,000 members strong, working in 60+ communities. By mobilizing diverse financial resources, Sonagachi has been able to intervene at multiple levels including structural, community, social network and individual.\textsuperscript{121} This multi-

\textsuperscript{120} Biradavolu, 1544.
\textsuperscript{121} Swenderman, 1157.
faceted approach has yielded positive results and gained notoriety for Sonagachi as a model program for replication. One of the outstanding factors of Sonagachi’s approach includes transformative measures of communication and management, enabling sex workers to hold leadership roles, and increasingly politicized goals of wider social change.\footnote{Swenderman, 1158.} This type of grass roots approach has engaged sex workers in social infrastructures to effectively lead social change.

The Durbar Mahila Saman Waya Committee was formed to unite sex workers in the fight for their rights and representation within larger, more powerful groups. The original Sonagachi Project meanwhile “expanded from clinic-based sexual health promotion to a range of social interventions, including the establishment of a cooperative bank for sex workers, advocating on sex workers’ behalf in relation to police, brothel managers, or exploitative local men and influencing the opinion leaders such as journalists and politicians,” all while empowering sex workers to take on leadership roles within the project.\footnote{Swenderman, 1158.} This method has evolved into a widely diffused model called the “empowerment approach” to STD/HIV prevention.\footnote{Swenderman, 1157.} By intervening at multiple levels this model has helped its members to: “1) provide a frame to motivate change; 2) increase knowledge of risk and protective factors; 3) build cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills; 4) reduce environmental barriers to change; 5) build ongoing social support sustained overtime.”\footnote{Swenderman, 1158.} Overtime, compared to standard STD clinics, condom promotion and peer education, the additional empowerment intervention strategies:
1) improved knowledge of STDs and condom protection form STD and HIV, and maintained STD/HIV risk perceptions despite treatment; 2) provided a frame to motivate change based on reframing sex work as valid work and reflected by increased disclosure of profession to non-sex workers by self employed sex workers, and instilling a hopeful future orientation reflected in desire for more education or training; 3) improved cognitive, affective and behavioral skills in sexual and workplace negotiations reflected in shifts in condom decision-making cognitions, increased refusal abilities, and ability to change work contract; 4) built social support among sex workers by increasing social interactions outside work, social function participation, and helping other sex workers when harassed; and 5) addressed environmental barriers based on economic vulnerability and insecurity by increasing savings, and alternative income sources for older sex workers, which Sonagachi prioritizes due to lack of alternative income opportunities and decreasing earnings from sex work with older age.126

All of these outcomes prove that while many STD/HIV prevention programs may provide necessary clinical services and education, they do not address the broad, underlying factors that initially push women into sex work.127

Another example of successful structural intervention is the Ashodaya Samithi collective, which originated in Mysore in Southern India. Based on the knowledge that sex workers often face multiple forms of violence ranging from verbal, psychological and

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126 Swenderman, 1165.
127 Swenderman, 1165.
emotional abuse to economic extortion, physical and sexual violence, which are all directly linked to lower levels of condom use and increased levels of HIV exposure, Ashodaya’s community-led response proved to be effective at curbing the amount of violence faced by the sex worker members.\textsuperscript{128} Although there are differences in the models utilized by Ashodaya and Sonagachi, both function on the basic notion that effective HIV prevention and community empowerment “require locally contextualized approaches that address both individuals and social norms and structures.”\textsuperscript{129} The methods utilized by Ashodaya have included “community mapping, peer-based outreach, community organizing, advocacy, building allies, networking for creating an enabling environment and related environmental structural interventions.”\textsuperscript{130} This type of community-led response has had similarly positive effects on the status and agency of FSW and HIV/STD prevention. By addressing the key structural issues of vulnerability, stigmatization, high levels of physical and sexual violence, Ashodaya’s four-stage strategy of engagement, involvement, ownership and sustainability has proved “highly synergistic and effective in confronting structural violence and addressing its root causes.”\textsuperscript{131}

\textsuperscript{128} Reza-Paul, 98.  
\textsuperscript{129} Reza-Paul, 99.  
\textsuperscript{130} Reza-Paul, 99.  
\textsuperscript{131} Reza-Paul, 100.
Conclusion

In closing, I would like to reiterate the importance of deconstructing colonial perceptions of sex workers in the global south as hapless victims and replace it with a new understanding of global, patriarchal power structures as it relates to the performance of sex work. Although the existence of misogynistic cultural biases contributes to the victimized identities of FSW, it must be understood that agency does exist even if relative mobility and safety are generally far more limited than the westernized, first world ideal. This truth must be understood with the knowledge that women all over the world are systematically oppressed by varying degrees of control and silence; to be a FSW is to be a part of a dramatically marginalized group that faces inordinate amounts of risk, violence and stigma.

Even under these circumstances FSW can demonstrate agency and assert control over their choices. This has been proven most effective when occurring in the context of community-based structural intervention as outlined by the Sonagachi and Ashodaya models. Under these circumstances it becomes easier for FSW to develop leadership skills, find personal acceptance, support each other, minimize their risk of violence and disease, successfully negotiate prices and condom use and potentially regain sexual pleasure. In utilizing this empowerment model, many problematic, colonial aspects of large-scale NGO and governmental interventions are overcome simply by listening to the voices of sex workers and responding accordingly. This has led to the transformation of Indian sex workers from an invisible group to a target of health welfare and surveillance programs.¹³² The colonial ways in which sex workers were characterized and acted upon have begun to change as a result of the leadership skills, autonomy and agency that have

¹³² Magar, 621.
been gained through these types of community-led structural interventions. The future empowerment of Indian sex workers will depend on them increasingly gaining a voice in their own situation and fate through collective action and assertion of agency.
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