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ABSTRACT

EXPERIENCES OF VIOLENCE AND SEX WORK AMONG WOMEN SEX WORKERS IN WEST BENGAL, INDIA:
A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

by

Shruti Dasgupta

There are different narratives about sex workers in both public discourse and scholarly literature. It is critical to explore the most important voices about the nature and meaning of sex work, associated challenges, and needed resources: the voices of the workers' themselves. These perspectives can inform broader debates about sex work, and generate ideas about provision of resources for sex workers. The purpose of the present research study was to understand Indian women sex workers' experiences related to sex work, gender, and violence within the socio-cultural and political context in which they work. Twelve women were recruited through a sex-worker advocacy group in Kolkata, a large urban city in India for qualitative interviewing. Using semi-structured interviews, the participant women were asked open-ended questions related to how they started as sex workers and how they make meaning of their experiences, among others. A qualitative thematic analyses of the women's narratives yielded five major themes and seven subthemes (i) life conditions leading to sex work, (ii) dual pride, independence, control (pride in working and being able to provide for themselves and their families, pride in providing a service to the society, ambivalence), (iii) worker rights (wanting recognition and respect for their work, improvement of working conditions), (iv) women's experience of violence and subsequent meaning making, and (iv) salience of intimate interpersonal relations (hurt related to relational unfulfillment, satisfaction in intimate interpersonal connections). Unlike the understanding of psychological trauma in Western psychological literature as being caused by a violation of individual's physical or psychological integrity, the women in this study described traumatic events as resulting from relational role unfulfillment. Participants also challenged the narrative of forced victimhood for sex workers through their expression of pride from being in control of their own body and having economic power. The findings have implications for understanding the life of sex workers through intersecting identities based on class, gender, and culture, and for developing programs that support their needs.

EXPERIENCES OF VIOLENCE AND SEX WORK AMONG WOMEN SEX WORKERS IN WEST BENGAL, INDIA: A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

A DISSERTATION

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by

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There has been a recent interest in attending to the perspectives of sex workers and advocating for their rights globally. United Nations (2011) considers sex workers as people over the age of 18 who, in return for some form of payment, sell "consensual sexual services." For explicitly political reasons, I use the term "sex worker" instead of "prostitute" or other common terms throughout this document. My intention is to bring forward the voices of sex workers and how they view their work, their lives, and people around them. History positions women sex workers as condemned, fallen, helpless victims of male power play among others, which subordinate their economic interests as "perverted, irresponsible, indecent" (Kempadoo & Doezama, 1998) or as forced victimhood. The shift in focus of sex workers as working members of the society attempts to give them, along with their economic, personal, emotional needs and experiences, an equal footing in the global arena.

Similarly, research on sex workers often is framed as part of an implicit (but often explicit) argument about how such work should be abolished or is solely a result of male patriarchy (Weitzer, 2005)[1]. Although such academic arguments are important to have, focusing exclusively on such political implications in research tends to further marginalize, objectify, and dehumanize the actual women (and their experiences) who are most directly affected by sex work. Rather than situating research on sex workers within a legal argument about abolishment, in this study, I hope to re-center the lived experiences and narratives of women sex workers without focusing explicitly on a "for" or "against" position about whether sex work should be abolished.

[1] Weitzer (2005) discusses this to predominantly critique the "unscientific" nature of methodology in research related to sex work as well as to seemingly criticize "radical feminism"

Studies pertaining to sex work often also focus on physical health implications such as the spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted illnesses or on education and vocational training of sex workers and their possible re-entry into society as non-sex workers (Beattie, et al., 2010; Cohan et al., 2006; Gupta, Reed, Kershaw & Blankership, 2011; Panchanadeswaran et al., 2008). Once again, while these studies are important, they still fail to take into account the perspectives of sex workers about their day-to-day lived experiences. By legitimizing and prioritizing the perspectives of sex workers in such research and not automatically categorizing them into a victim status, the most important voices about the nature of sex work (and what should be done about it) can be incorporated into the broader legal debate and provision of resources. Thus, the purpose of this research study is to understand Indian women sex workers' experiences related to sex work, gender, and violence within the socio-cultural and political context in which they work.

One way of reducing this automatic victim categorization of women sex workers is to recognize sexual labor as *labor* (Kempadoo & Doezama, 1998). This sets the platform to discuss exploitation and rights of workers involved in sex work. This is important because sex workers face violence on a regular basis from their clients as well as non-clients, such as law enforcement officers (UNAIDS, 2014). However, because sex workers are viewed at a societal and legal level as irresponsible or perverted, they often end up isolated and silenced about their experiences of violence. There seem to be very few studies that discuss interpersonal violence experienced by women sex workers by clients and/or non-clients in their present life (e.g. Beattie, et al., 2010; Cohan et al., 2006; Panchanadeswaran et al., 2008). Instead most studies seem to equate sex work to violence against women (Briere & Jordan, 2004; Singh, 2012; Wahed & Bhuiya, 2007). Moreover, on a societal level, there is a persistent denial that sex workers can experience

interpersonal violence, solely because of their profession (Kohli, 2012). For those who accept that women sex workers can experience physical or sexual violence perpetrated by their clients, as well as physical violence perpetrated by police offers, the solution is typically to abolish sex work rather than to identify ways to reduce violence within sex work.

In the paragraphs below, I first review and critique contemporary Western conceptualizations of interpersonal violence and its limited applicability to understand violence against women globally. Subsequently, I describe women's lived experiences in India within a socio-cultural-historical framework to provide a larger frame of reference for the experiences of sex workers, followed by a review of the limited research on sex workers in India. Finally, I describe gaps in the existing literature and describe the present study.

Women's Lived Experiences including Interpersonal Violence

Violence against women is a major public health problem globally and an estimated 35% of women around the world experience such violence in their lifetime (WHO, 2014).Violence against women is typically defined as any gender-based act of violence or threat of violence that violates a woman's or a group of women's physical, sexual or psychological integrity in public and/or private spheres of life (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2004; Watts & Zimmerman, 2002; UN, 1994). In India, women experience violence in a number of different contexts (Mishra, 2013; Nosheen, 2011) such as domestic (i.e., within the household), public (i.e., harassment, gang rape), and employment (i.e., skilled or unskilled labor, sex work). Much of the scholarly literature pertaining to violence against women is generated primarily in Western cultures (i.e., United States, Canada, United Kingdom, and Western Europe) just like other psychology literature (Arnett, 2008; Henrich, Heine & Norenzayan, 2010). The scarce literature in India has

primarily focused on domestic violence, with very little work on violence experienced by sex workers.

The Western scholarly literature suggests that depending on the type of violence experienced, women's mental and physical health is significantly compromised. In particular, they may experience problems ranging from depression, anxiety, lowered self-esteem, substance abuse, and sexual problems to chronic pain, chronic inflammatory disorders, and lowered immune system functioning (Briere & Jordan, 2004; Campbell, Greeson, Bybee & Raja, 2008). The psychological impact of violence is typically understood within the context of trauma, described as the outcome of being confronted with an event so severe that it overwhelms an individual's adaptive or coping capabilities (Herman, 1997).

In particular, the predominant theoretical frameworks to understand the impact of interpersonal violence (i.e., the cognitivist framework) often focus on the intrapsychic emotional and cognitive responses of the individual to determine what is traumatic for that individual (Bracken, 2002). The understanding of the psychological impact of interpersonal violence as intrapsychic carries with it deep cultural and moral assumptions that are embedded in White middle-class worldviews in the United States and other Western cultures. In particular, these theoretical frameworks are rooted in an individualist or independent cultural model that construes individuals in the context of their personal attributes, their needs, and desires (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). According to this framework, social behavior is guided by an individual's thoughts, desires and feelings, and other people primarily provide validation of one's individualistic characteristics.

To assume that an understanding of trauma that is rooted in individualistic, Western cultural worldviews can accurately capture a universal experience of trauma is highly

problematic. In particular, Indian women (and men) are considered to have a familial self (Roland, 1988) – a varied organization of a number of characteristics such as a symbiotic and reciprocal relationship of emotional connectedness and responsibility in a socially hierarchical society, where self-esteem is derived from family and community and functioning is highly contextualized. These construals imply a self heavily interdependent on interpersonal relationships and community for esteem and positive emotions. Thus, it can be expected that interpersonal violence would be experienced and made meaning of in a very different light as compared to an individual who construes their sense of self primarily in the context of their own needs, desires, goals, and personality attributes.

To understand a diverse set of women's experiences and avoid "exporting" Western conceptualizations of normality and psychopathology, it is important to have a grasp of multiple worldviews and social identities of an individual and how they co-constitute one another. This is significant especially for an Indian self which is highly context-dependent, and thus the context of the self affects experience. The intersectionality perspective argues that a person's experiences can be best understood in the context of their multiple and intersecting social identities that are based on their nationality or broader culture (including historical and legal), gender, social class, religion, and other identities that are most salient to the individual (Crenshaw, 1991). From this perspective, experiences of women who are sex workers and are situated in India may have very different perceptions of interpersonal violence they may experience than White middle-class women in United States who experience violence in domestic contexts. Thus, it is important to contextualize women's experiences within local gender norms, historical and legal contexts related to gender and violence, and women's day-to-day realities.

Historical and Legal Context

Women in India are an extremely diverse group with varied religious affiliations, education levels, social classes, and regional subcultures. India consists of over two thousand ethnic groups, 22 different languages and multiple dialects, multiple major religions, a wide range of socioeconomic statuses, and various distinct cultures (Central Intelligence Agency, n.d.). Some of the heterogeneity of women's experiences arises from influences of local and national norms that differ because of urban/rural, cultural, religious, caste/class, literacy, marital status, marital/natal family power structures, wage earning capacity/differential and historical context (Burte, 2013a). Therefore the specificity of the "social weave" or the subculture a woman is from is important to recognize to understand her experience. Historically, gender norms and sexual morality in India have undergone significant shifts, oscillating customs and beliefs from periods of relative progressivism to relative conservatism. Over the course of history, multiple foreign groups have invaded and occupied India starting from Aryans to Islamic rulers from Persia to European colonialists. India also has gone through periods with distinct religious influences – Dravidian indigenous religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity (Banerji, 2008).

The post-colonial Democratic period is relatively new (approximately 70 years) and gender and sex norms are still in flux. Even post-colonial women's movements in India until very recently have always included communalism, and sentiments that are anti-big corporations and anti-cultural imperialism (Burte, 2013b). While there have been multiple advances in the women's movement since the turn of the 19th century, there has also been a strong push-back towards any overt sign of "Western influence" or ideas often because of the proselytizing nature of these ideologies (Kishwar, 2004) as well as the signs of cultural imperialism (Banerji, 2008).

Currently, cultural norms regarding women are somewhat paradoxical at this time. While women are revered in religious contexts, and a full scope of laws favoring women have existed since the birth of the Indian constitution, there is also an overwhelming presence of systemic subjugation of woman and the feminine, ultimately distorting the reality of women's lives and experiences.

Currently many families in traditional communities in India, with norms heavily influenced by its Abrahamic colonial predecessors, are usually described as patrilineal (kinship is traced through the father), patrilocal (married couple lives with the husband's family), and patriarchal (father/husband is the head of the family) (Dube, 1988; Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001). Effects of patriarchal systems are exacerbated when associated with other systems of oppression such as social class, education, and rural-urban settings (Gupte, 2013). These along with processes of globalization and capitalism have led to a wide variation in how this new-found "traditional" emphasis on patriarchy plays out in individual families in India (Chaudhury, 2004; Mohanty, 2003).

Even though the modern Indian constitution and laws attempt to promote progressive norms and gender equality in different aspects of life, the implementation and enforcement of the laws is inconsistent throughout the country, especially given the emphasis on localized governance of rural areas. There are very specific laws against perpetrators of violence against women (National Crime Records Bureau, 2012; Roy, 2013), including the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA) which was amended in 2005, though one of the main problems many women in India outside of urban middle to upper class face is accessibility to their own rights.

Now that I have discussed a brief historical and legal context regarding women's lived experiences about interpersonal violence more broadly, I will review this context for sex workers in particular.

Sex Workers in India

Religious and Historic Context

While India is secular constitutionally and home to many religions, Hinduism has a major influence on Indian norms. One particular historic practice within Hinduism has been discussed frequently in reference to women sex workers in India. While there are regional differences in its forms, the most commonly used name for women in this system is Devdasi (Chawla, 2002; Ghatage, 2012; Orchard, 2007). The term Devdasi literally translates as "God's Servant." Both boys and girls can be, and were recruited for this, however I will be focusing on cis-gendered girls' and women's' experiences. Historically, some girls and women were recruited to be the devadasis, they were married to a deity, and they performed temple related sacred tasks of worship such as organizing and handling religious offerings, cleaning religious and devotional items as well as dancing for the deity during festivals. Devdasis were required to read and write, and were able to acquire material wealth in form of land or other donations. Usually kings and emperors were the patrons of temples and so they provided for temple personnel's (which included Devdasis) upkeep. Devdasis also had the option of choosing lovers to have sexual relations with, which with the advent of Abrahamic religions in India became less of a choice and more of a requirement (Chawla, 2002; Ghatage, 2012; Orchard, 2007). However, they still had only one or two such relations during their entire lifetime.

After the British occupied India, Devdasis were suddenly required to register as prostitutes and soon the British started to outlaw them. There are varying narratives about

Devdasis, some claiming they are ‘nuns’ and some depicting them as helpless but evil ‘prostitutes’(Orchard, 2007). Some philosophers refer to this as a tradition that never involved forced prostitution (e.g. Chawla, 2002) but instead was a revered position that involved learning and performing classical dancing and singing. However, it is difficult to determine if this claim is politically motivated or reflects reality because before the advent of Abrahamic religions in India, sex was less taboo and freely practiced. There are other scholars who are vehemently opposed to Devdasi practice because of their understanding of this as child prostitution and an obvious violation of women’s rights (e.g. Ghatage, 2012). However, while India and the outside world have campaigners against child prostitution, the children situated at the center of these discussions have rarely been asked about their conceptualization of trauma, and it seems that the way anti child prostitution advocates and child sex workers understand “prostitution” differ widely (Montgomery, 1998). Third World prostitution, such as Devdasi, is often seen through a neo-orientalist “colonial gaze” (even among other reformist Indians) and deemed to be caused by strict and oppressive cultural traditions that are inflicted on naïve, poor women with limited or no agency (Orchard, 2007). We need to acknowledge the pain and suffering caused in the name of ‘tradition’ and also recognize that different cultural socialization leads to very different understandings of this system that cannot be grasped by absolute and universalist conceptualization of prostitution. Orchard’s (2007) ethnographic study determined that the matrilineal system of Devdasis do not have only a negative impact on girls. These girls may even have upbringings similar to girls, who are not Devdasis, and in addition these girls have the option of being an earning member of the family, and their sole purpose is not to be someone’s wife. However, because some girls and women are often implicitly or explicitly pressured into being a Devdasi because of societal or family demands, not all of them have a support network to

help them through their first sexual experience (Ghatage, 2012) even though some others do (Orchard, 2007). In some situations, because of the disadvantages associated with crippling poverty, lower caste, rural background, discriminations, and/or other situations in family, Devdasis are forced into prostitution and have to experience sex with little to no knowledge of sex or sexual health (Ghatage, 2012) which led to more traumatic situations and experiences of violence. Overall, these contrasting views about Devdasis demonstrate the complexity of the lives of women in such roles and public perceptions of these women.

Legal Context

Sex work or "prostitution" is not illegal in India, however, under The Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Girls Act (SITA) of 1956, as well as The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act of 1986 and its latest amendment of 2006, all related activities are criminalized (Singh, 2012). That is, seeking services from a sex worker, owning or managing a brothel, aiding, abetting or compelling prostitution, trafficking, living off of the wages earned by a sex worker among a few others are criminalized. By law, Indian government is also bound to provide shelter and sustenance for women "rescued" from sex work. However, much like many other laws, the implementation of the laws preventing sex work and protecting women from violence in India is inconsistently applied in practice.

Research related to Sex Workers

Women enter into sex work in India multiple ways. Economic restraint, societal demands and violence experienced in the family home may contribute to sex-trafficking and prostitution (Huda, 2006; Orchard, 2007; Raval, Raval, & Raj, 2010; Silverman et al., 2007). Current sex workers who were trafficked have reported that they often have been misled by traffickers and then forced into sex-work. For example, a trafficker may develop a romantic relationship with a

woman, promise marriage, and encourage her to flee her family home with him. Once she flees, he would force her to enter sex work.

Silverman et al. (2007) gathered information from case and medical records, which were documented by staff and affiliated professionals, of 160 women sex workers who were residing in a non-profit rescue and shelter center at Mumbai, a metropolitan city in Western India. The researchers did not directly interact with the sex workers, and it is unclear how any of the constructs (e.g. domestic violence, abandonment) were defined. Findings indicated that a majority of the women in the study were from India, while some were from neighboring countries such as Nepal, Bangladesh among others. Many of the women were living below the poverty line, had family conflicts such as experience of domestic violence, abandonment, widowhood, divorce or running away from home, and most of them were underage when they were trafficked. It was found that the traffickers often misled women by promising them of economic opportunities, offer to marry them, or offering a ride. On some occasions, women were drugged and kidnapped or forcibly kidnapped.

Another study conducted in a major city in Andhra Pradesh (a state in southeast India) with 812 female sex workers explored violence and other factors associated with sex work for trafficked women (Gupta, et al., 2011). The researchers did qualitative field work before designing survey instruments to determine the reason for entry into sex work, recent experiences of violence, condom usage, risk of contracting HIV and education about HIV. Trafficked sex workers faced significantly more violence whether sexual, physical or emotional than non-trafficked sex workers. Additionally women who were trafficked were on average 10 years younger when they entered sex work than were non-trafficked sex workers. The authors also suggested that in general, trafficked sex workers had lower education than non-trafficked

women, had lower awareness of community resources, and less information about sexual health. Even though both trafficked and non-trafficked sex workers have a higher risk of being infected with HIV, there is a slightly greater vulnerability for HIV among trafficked women. Huda (2006) reported that sex tourism from European, Middle Eastern and American countries have been redirected recently towards South Asia and this also creates a "viable" market for brothels and traffickers.

In the public health field, feminist studies and some sociological/legal work, there are also strong counter-narratives to the notion that prostitution or sex work is only exploitation of women. For example, Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (meaning: Unstoppable Women's Coordination Committee) is an organization with around 65,000 female, transgender and male sex workers ("Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee," n.d.; Pal, Mukherjee, Jaiswal & Dutta, 1998). Pal and colleagues (1998), members of this committee, discussed that they chose the path of "flesh trade" because they had no other options for earning money. However, they argued that sex work is their job, and they demand the right to be seen as job-holders and want the same social rights, benefits, legal support as any other workers. Since the 1998 article, the committee has established programs focusing on adult education, sex education, vocational training opportunities, banking systems, and peer counseling opportunities for the sex worker community in Sonagachhi which is situated in Kolkata, India.

Bandyopadhyay and colleagues (2004) discussed reframing the debate against the abolitionist position, with a strong support of the work position. The authors discuss that there are common myths around sex workers in developing nations. Often the notion of trafficking is solely connected with sexual exploitation of women and children, ignoring that many trafficked individuals are migrant men looking for better employment opportunities. In their exploratory

qualitative study, Bandyopadhyay and colleagues (2004) reported that they talked with 60 women sex workers from Sonagachhi in Kolkata, West Bengal (the same site as the present study). Of these, stories of three sex workers are narrated in the article. Consistent with other psychological work in this field, these researchers reported that in general women faced with poverty, inaccessibility to viable means of livelihood, and/or violence in marital/natal families come into the labor market seeking financial independence. The entry point to sex work followed one of three trajectories: (1) someone mentioning sex work during their search for employment, (2) they were sold into a brothel by someone who promised to give them work, or (3) they were conned into it with promises of other opportunities. Once they started sex work, most chose to stay on, not because of factors such as coercion by brothel benefactors but because either (1) they feared being rejected by society in general for having been once a sex workers, (2) sex work provided viable livelihood through financial gain or (3) fear of violence that they experienced previously in their marital/natal home or any combination of these. Bandyopadhyay and colleagues (2004) also noted that being "dutiful daughters" often would make them consider their family's wishes more significantly than their own wishes. The authors emphasized that women sex workers have an agential role in their lives and they are not stereotypical victims of trafficking.

To understand lived experiences of women involved in sex work, we therefore need to understand the historical and cultural context in which these women are situated. We also need to understand that lives of sex workers are much more nuanced than a singular understanding of sex-workers as helpless, exploited victims or as a confirmation of patriarchy and male dominance (Kempadoo & Doezama, 2008). We cannot take a-priori conceptualizations of what sex-workers experience because of the nuance and contradictory narratives that are present about

their lived experiences. These contrasting views about sex workers demonstrate the many complexities that are associated with women in such roles and also emphasize the importance of localized narratives that are influenced by local and global cultural norms. Additionally, these views also emphasize the importance of doing more bottom-up work that empowers women involved in sex-work to have a say in the stories of their own lives.

Present Study

The present study focused on understanding lived experiences of violence, sex work, and gender among Indian women sex workers using narrative methodology. From the perspective of standpoint theory, dominant cultures have the luxury of over-generalizing their way of being and experiencing because their position in society, coupled with social, political, and economic power, allows their experiences to not be challenged (Harding, 1991). Hence the dominant group is able to ignore experiences that are inconsistent or conflicting with their own conceptualization and over-generalize their conceptualizations to others. This type of overgeneralization marginalizes socio-cultural and socio-political influences on an individual (Bracken, 2002) such as a woman sex worker in a widely different culture such as India. It seems that social science and humanities research often involve some element of appropriation of knowledge because of the inherent power imbalance between the people who research and the ones that are being researched on (Opie, 2008). On some level social science researchers take the information and understanding of life experiences acquired by the participants and claim ownership of this knowledge. This is especially problematic when the participants belong to marginalized and colonized populations and their experiences are interpreted by the dominant group (Said, 1989). Researchers in positions of "expertise" deny the voice of the participant(s) by taking a position that is supposedly supported by undeniable "scientific fact" or as Apter (1996) discusses "the

expert refuses to budge his narrative and sees others as stubborn or unenlightened or repressed" (pp. 25). Information obtained from participants are often "drawn and quartered into favored theory" and important and relevant contextual information that does not fit these pre-conceived frameworks is dismissed. In contrast to this mainstream approach to research in social sciences, the primary ontological "truth" of lived experiences is foundational to narrative methodology (Josselson, 2011). Narrative research focuses on how participants perceive and organize events in their life more than obtaining the factual record of what "objectively" happened.

If the conceptual framework and perspective of the participant is contextualized and epistemologically privileged in the research process, and the participants that are chosen are from groups that are traditionally marginalized and silenced, the researcher can, in some ways, serve as an advocate for the participants' perspectives by hearing, validating, and disseminating that perspective. Additionally, for me, being an Indian woman studying experiences of Indian women provides a unique outsider-within perspective. Having been socialized in Western academia, and having experienced realities that do not fit within dominant scholarly literature's universalist and essentialist psychological constructs, my "outsider allegiance" as Hill-Collins (1986) describes persuades me against choosing a full insider status and motivates me to maintain being an outsider within this field.

Through the use of narrative methodology, I have explicitly positioned myself and my perspective within the broader context of this research project rather than make a (futile) attempt to negate my "personal bias" and assume objectivity through a commitment to positivist science. Because of my outsider-within status, my positioning in this project, in particular, provides a relatively unique perspective from which to facilitate construction of experiential narratives that are more closely connected to Indian women's experiences. In narrative research, having specific

research questions that need to be answered is often discouraged because through the process certain information becomes more essential and questions change (Riessman, 2002). Consistent with this spirit, in the present exploratory study, my broad aim is to understand the localized narratives surrounding these women sex workers' subjective processes of making meaning out of being women sex workers and potentially traumatic (or not) lived experiences related to sex work.

Method

Participants

The initial sample included 12 women sex workers recruited through Durbar Mahila Samanwaya, an organization for sex workers located in the 'red-light district' of Sonagachhi in the city of Kolkata in in West Bengal, India. One of the women, of stated age 20, was not included in the final analyses because of her lack of engagement in the interview which yielded an incomplete interview, leading to 11 participants for the final analyses. As per their report, participants ranged in age from 20 to 60 years. It is important to note that some women from rural background in India, who do not have much exposure to formal education do not place importance on accuracy of chronological ages and often state their ages in the context of the message that they are trying to get across to the other person. While it was possible for me to check their actual ages as recorded by the organization, I chose to use the age stated by the interviewee.All participant women except one were originally from the state of West Bengal, with one individual from a neighboring state. Some women from the city of Kolkata while others from nearby towns and villages. The participants' education level also ranged from a few days at a rural non-standardized primary school to a few years in a school system in Kolkata. As per their report, all participants were from marginalized castes/religions and low socioeconomic

brackets. Except for one woman who reported that she was Muslim, the others reported that they were Hindu.

The duration for which participant women were engaged in sex work varied from one year to 45 years. Women sex workers in Sonagachhi are divided in three categories by venue or type: Women who are in Category A are deemed to be young, beautiful, more educated, westernized, they may know how to dance and perform, and they charge the highest rate in the region. Women who are in Category C are often from abject poverty, charge their customers a lower rate, do not usually perform dances, and often do not stay in the region. Women in Category B are usually somewhere in between, but they are closer to Category C women than Category A. The sex workers I interviewed were either Class B or C, with 6 women living in brothels and 5 commuting from home. 6 of the 11 women reported that they started sex work on their own volition after hearing about it from friends, family members or others and 5 of the 11 women reported being deceived into sex work initially but then choosing to stay on themselves.

Procedure

I contacted Durbar Mahila Samanwaya via email and phone (see Appendix A), Durbar also wanted a detailed description of the study, and thus, a modified version of a literature review and proposed methodology from this document were sent to them. Durbar's committee reviewed the request and asked the request to be resubmitted to their Ethics Review Board with further modifications. The study was approved by Miami University Institutional Review Board and permission was granted by Durbar Mahila Samanwaya. After obtaining these approvals and permissions, I traveled to the city of Kolkata in West Bengal, India. Durbar coordinator for research met with me and interviewed me before giving their final approval. One of the project managers then helped to recruit participants through peer counselors and word of mouth. The

project manager and one of the peer counselors also took me on a field tour of the brothel houses to help orient me and learn about Sonagachhi.

Translation process. I translated the consent form and the interview protocol from English to Bengali with input from other bilingual speakers to ensure conceptual and linguistic equivalence with particular focus on using everyday colloquial language. Another bilingual speaker separately translated both documents from English to Bengali. Then, both translations were compared to come up with a version that represented the linguistic equivalence while retaining colloquial language use.

All of my conversations with the participants took place in Bengali. I met participants in a private room at one of the field offices of Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee. I conducted one to two interviews per day depending on the participants' availability. During these meetings, I informed the participant about the purpose of the interview and the study, as well as the fact that participation is voluntary and that she may choose to not answer questions or stop participating in the interview at any point. I verbally reviewed the information from the consent form and asked the participant to sign if she wished to participate (see Appendix B). I attended to the narrator's vulnerabilities and respected requests to exclude specific details as needed. After signing the consent form, I conducted an individual semi-structured interview in Bengali (see Appendix C). The interview also included sociodemographic questions about their age, religion and their place of birth. The interview took between one to two and a half hours. Each interview was audio recorded. While the participants were not paid, consistent with local norms, each participant was given a small purse as a token of appreciation.

The Interview Context and Approach

Interviewing participants using narrative research methodology requires acknowledgement of the influences of personal biases and subjectivity (Riessman, 2002). It requires an understanding that the relationship between the researcher and participant affects the "data" that is being gathered and that this relationship is also influenced by the sociopolitical context and positionality of both the researcher and the participant.

Researcher positionality and reflections before conducting interviews. I approached this research project from a constructivist narrative theoretical orientation. I anticipated that my personal identity as a Bengali woman from the United States would affect my interviews with women who are involved in sex work in Kolkata, West Bengal, including how I would be perceived, our interactions, and how I would interpret what was being said. I anticipated that my upbringing in Kolkata and my fluency with the language Bengali would facilitate the interview process. However, my current status as a graduate student in Ohio, USA and my experiences of growing up in a family with an upper socioeconomic status in Kolkata might make participants feel distant from me or possibly give them the idea that I would never understand what they have been through. I expected that that my outsider-within allegiance and deep respect for the life experiences of marginalized women will counter the distance between us created by our roles as the academic researcher and the sex worker. My respect for their subjective understanding would also lead me to avoid "fact-checking" questions and other questions/comments from a skeptical attitude, and might help in establishing better rapport.

Guiding interview questions/statements with sex workers. While keeping in mind that narrative research is less structured and does not involve a standardized set of questions, I also wanted to make sure that some topics are covered. As per Riessman (2002), it is important to not

ask sociological or theory questions because of the abstract nature of these questions and also because it is harder for participants to connect their own personal experiences to broader social phenomena. Furthermore, I feared that asking questions about social phenomena leads the participants to think about their experiences through my interpretive lens. Given that experiences of violence cannot be understood in isolation, I included questions about experiences related to growing up, experiences related to sex work, those about potential violence experienced, and those related to the organization through which I recruited participants. Appendix C contains the guiding questions that I used to discuss participants' experiences. In some instances, I did not ask all of the questions, and in others, I further prompted participants to get more information, depending on the participant and her personal style of narrative.

Anticipated problems. Because of the personal and politically charged nature of the topic, I anticipated some difficulty in generating rapport and acquiring genuine responses from the participants. In particular, the possibility of intense emotional reactions to the subject matter, possible anger and frustration with the nature of the interview, and disengaged reporting (rather than engaging in genuine dialogue) on the part of participants all seemed likely. My hope was that such reactions will be reduced because (1) our conversations in Bengali would help build trust, (2) I would be very clear about how they can withdraw part or all of their responses at any time, and can stop the interview at any time without penalty, and (3) the participants would be volunteers who will not be paid, so the possibility of subtle coercion for participation would be minimized. If the participant had an intense emotional response or I was not able to engage the participant, I could stop the interview and ask if the participant would like their responses excluded from the study.

Approach to Data Analyses

Theoretical frame of reference. The primary approach I used to analyze and interpret the interview data adapts narrative analysis techniques based on Riessman (2002) and Josselson (2011). As both Riessman (2002) and Josselson (2011) state, narrative research does not have a fixed form of analysis and interpretation as long as it achieves its goals of truly understanding and conceptualizing human experience. However, there are certain decisions that I can make as a researcher that fall within the narrative framework. For example, within the framework, narrative truth is understood to be constructed through the linkages between the narrative and its association with the participant's other experiences, the audience the narrative is directed at, and the sociocultural as well as the historical context in which the narration occurs (Josselson, 2011). Researchers operating under this framework also acknowledge and incorporate the notion that each narrative can have multiple interpretations and that their own life experiences influence the interpretations they make. Riessman (2002) notes that there are five levels of representation and interpretation that happens in the research process, namely, 1) when an individual initially attends to the experience, 2) when this individual tells about this experience to someone (e.g. social scientist/researcher), 3) when the researcher transcribes or records this experience as told to them by the individual, and 4) the analysis of this transcribed experience and lastly (5) reading of this experience.

Data analytic process. I conducted the data analysis in Bengali to remain as close as possible to the participants' perspectives and meaning making process. After conducting each interview, I noted down my impressions to help document my immediate understanding of their experience, and their engagement with me to ensure validity of the interview. After all interviews were complete, instead of transcribing all interviews verbatim in Bengali, I started listening to

the audio recordings of each interview multiple times, and noted down potential themes using Microsoft OneNote. Research has suggested that transcribing can often add a different layer of interpretation of data, which can be avoided by using the direct audio recordings in conjunction with modern software such as OneNote (Markle, West & Rich, 2011; Tessier, 2012). Given this, I chose to analyze the data from interview recordings using OneNote. OneNote is equivalent to a virtual filing cabinet, with search functions, ability to embed audio files as well as various Microsoft Office and PDF software for easy data management, access, transcription among others.

For each interview recording, I listened to the recording noting down potential themes. I also documented multiple emerging patterns as brought up by the narrators in their stories. I went back to listen to the recordings multiple times to modify and validate potential themes, and checked these themes against the notes I made after each interview was conducted. I created a working draft of potential broad themes and subthemes, and through listening and re-listening to the audio recordings I modified this document. I sent the initial version of this themes document that I generated from listening to the interviews to my advisor and over a series of phone meetings, we discussed whether something is a theme, how to label it in a way that we stay close to the participants' words, and how to best organize subthemes. Particular attention was paid to centrality of interpersonal violence in their lives, their views of the perpetrator and potential traumatic reactions. Additionally themes of gendered narratives and the role of agency/powerlessness within the sociocultural and historical context of the sociocultural history were noted. Once the themes and subthemes were finalized, I went back to the interview recordings and wrote down exact statements/direct quotes from the narratives that illustrate each theme and subthemes. I initially wrote down the quotes in Bengali and later I translated them to

English. In this process of translating quotes, I strived towards linguistic equivalence through a rigorous process of consulting bilingual speakers, translation engines, and dictionaries. While it was at times difficult to determine how to translate certain colloquial and slang terms, I worked to ensure conceptual equivalence through consultation with others. For example, when participants used a colloquial slang term for 'having sex' it was difficult to determine which word, such as "screw" or "fuck", would capture the essence of what they attempted to portray. In this instance, I decided to use "screw" because the connotation for "fuck" was stronger than the word used by the women, even though it can be argued that "screw" is not strong enough.

Reliability and Validity

Determination of validity in narrative research differs from that of quantitative research (Polkinghorne, 2007). The purpose of narrative research is to uphold the stories people narrativize to determine their experiences and their personal meaning making surrounding those experiences. As noted previously, narrative research relies heavily on ontological truth as opposed to some objective or historical truth. Thus validity in this data is determined through the extent to which an interviewee participated and engaged with their narrative and experiential meaning making. It was also noted if the interviewee engaged with me. This was ensured through the extent to which the participant felt comfortable delving into their stories. This was partially assessed by asking participants about their feelings about the interview at the end of the session. Additionally, other research and scholarly studies on sex work in and out of the field of psychology also helped to corroborate some of the findings in this study to indicate reliability.

With respect to transferability or generalizability of the themes, I anticipated that depending on the nature and extent of commonality across the participants' narrated experiences, some broader conclusions about the experience of sex workers in India might be possible,

particularly with respect to the primary needs of this community. However, the presence of Durbar in the region that they work likely influenced my participants' narratives, and thus, the generalizability of my findings to sex workers who work without such institutional support is limited.

Data saturation is an important consideration in qualitative research, the point at which no new information emerges. In my data, on one hand, there were diversity of stories that the women shared that represented their diverse set of life experiences and the uniqueness of each narrative. On the other hand, there were commonalities in their experiences that formed the basis for my themes and subthemes. With respect to these commonalities, I decided to stop at interview 12 because data saturation was reached. These shared realities interacted with each woman's unique personal experience and narrative backstory.

Results

Research Context

The findings of this study need to be understood in the broader sociocultural context of participant women including how the sex-work scene in the Sonagachhi region of Kolkata is organized. Intersections of multiple identities for participant women, West Bengal's political background, and the context of Durbar's advocacy in the region influenced the narratives shared by women about their views on sex work, family life, their rights as well as the way they conducted themselves. Sonagachhi is a prominent and well known "red-light district" of South Asia. This place has been a source of interest to non-profits, documentarians, researchers as wells as various other organizations across the world, and sex workers here are used to seeing people from all over the world come to talk with them. Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee serves over 65,000 women, men and trans* individuals and their family members in this region

and surrounding areas since 1992, and works to emphasize sex-workers' rights and freedom. Durbar also tries to act as a gateway to these global organizations who are interested in Sonagachhi, in its attempt to ensure that the marginalized population of sex workers is not exploited. However, Sonagachhi continues to be seen through a neocolonialist Western lens as a place of doom, with journalists documenting their attempts to 'save' the poor brown woman such as the book Half the Sky by Kristoff (2009).

I talked to women who were a part of this study and whom I interviewed in a Durbar office, and I also interacted informally with other women during my trips inside the brothels with the program manager, peer counselors, and others. Through these interactions, I learned that from the time Durbar has established itself in the region, abuses from pimps, customers, and police have reduced significantly and sex workers feel that even if they do not engage with Durbar themselves, they are safer to do their work. Durbar has relations with state and national health boards and has obtained grants to help with HIV/AIDS prevention. Durbar has multiple clinics spread in the area that houses sex workers' children's clubs, banks for sex workers, and a health clinic. They have hired social workers, medical doctors/nurses, as well as peer counselors, who go to individual brothels and disseminate sex education as well as peer counseling related to mental and physical health as well as potential risks/benefits. Durbar also has established with each brothel that any new sex worker needs to first come to Durbar, where their age, their willingness to work, and potential dangers will be assessed. Durbar attempts to implement this rule through the vigilance of peer counselors, close working associations with the region's police station, and some working relations with whoever the current regional politician is.

Each brothel house is called a "linebaari" and the owners of these linebaaris are called Malik (male) or Malkin (female). Sex workers can either rent a room as they need from the

Malik/Malkin for a few hours or on a weekly basis or they can go through the "Aadheya" system. Aadheya is when sex workers live in a room (or share a room with another sex worker) in the linebaari. If a sex worker is in the Aadheya system, they usually get half of what the customer is charged in return for resources and services such as a room to live in and work, servants who cook for them and run errands, access to customers, and safety and protection if they need help. Women who are Category A sex-workers (as per the classification system described in the method section) often are in the Aadheya system, and they are also the most restricted in what they are allowed to do.

There are also some common terms that women sex workers used throughout the interview process such as *babu, linebaari, malkin, malik,* and *aadheya*. The term *babu* has multiple meanings in Bengali language depending on the context in which it is used. It can be an equivalent term to "Mister," or an honorable term used as a suffix after a man's name. In general, addressing a man as *babu* indicates respect for him because he has higher or equivalent social status. In the context of sex workers in Kolkata, this term usually means a man who has authority or ownership over the sex workers and may serve as a husband or lover substitute for the sex worker. Some sex workers, in my interactions with them were vehemently against "keeping a *babu*" because then they would have to listen to him and be tied to him. Often the *babu* would demand money from the sex worker and exploit their relationship to collect money from her. However, some sex workers stated that "keeping a *babu*" meant that they have a "husband" who will protect them.

Researcher Reflexivity During and After the Interviews

Given my explicit positionality of growing up in Kolkata as a middle to upper middle class, upper caste woman from a highly educated family, who had relocated to the United States

17 years back with my immediate family, I came to this research with multiple explicit and implicit biases as well as a lack of awareness. My education and my upbringing had a Western, urban and higher caste/social class influence to it that has privileged me to not know how it is like to grow up as a 'Dalit' (lower caste) or lower socioeconomic class woman in rural Bengal in abject poverty. Additionally, though I have attempted to be mindful about our mainstream societal beliefs about where sex workers stay, how they become sex workers and possible ways sex workers view the world, these broader societal beliefs have in some way influenced my initial approach. For example, my loved ones and well-wishers which include my friends, family members, and my academic colleagues either expressed concern or respect/admiration at my decision to collect interview data from sex workers. I, myself, felt pride in being able to 'follow my passion' of working with marginalized women who have experienced trauma in my home city. In fact, my understanding of trauma by itself, influenced by my experience in trauma psychology and educational exposure had been limited to the narrow scholarly understanding of interpersonal trauma as defined by western scholarly and societal systems. These are just some of the biases I came with, before I even sat down with the women for my dissertation project. Additionally, in the room with the women, my spoken dialect of Bengali, my lighter skin tone in relation to some of the women I interviewed, my equipment (backpack, audio recorder, notebook, folder), my clothes, my gestures among many other factors created an immediate distance between myself and the interviewee because it made it clear to them that I have more resources and privileges than they did. My interviews with sex workers were nerve wracking, because of my unfamiliarity with this research mode, because of my conscientiousness related to how certain psychological phrases are being translated into Bengali as well my explicit positioning to be respectful. I was very conscious of how my dialect of Bengali can be

considered to be "more educated" and if I am somehow portraying myself as "better" simply by my use of the language. Conversing with the women was also strangely affirming and validating because it helped to articulate and solidify what I have thought and felt about how Indian psyche works, and what aggravates or mitigates distress for many South Asians.

How they responded to me. My intention during the interviews, as stated before, was to use my position as a researcher to advocate by hearing, validating, and disseminating my participants' perspectives. I attempted to be present and explicitly position myself as someone curious to know about their lives. Participants, in general, reacted positively to being heard. One woman reported that she did not like being recorded and stated that as long as she does not end up on TV, she is okay. In this context, she described having to hide her work from the rest of her family and community. Women also reported that they did not usually get someone asking them questions like this, and they felt lighter after being able to tell their story to someone who would listen. When I mentioned that they can talk to their in-house counselor provided by Durbar, they appeared confused as to why they would do that. Instead, it seemed from their reports that they benefited from talking to peer counselors who come by their brothels or other sex workers who check in on them.

There was obvious respect that they bestowed on me, given the way they talked. For example they would often call me *Didi* which is a common term for older sister that people would use as a sign of respect in Bengali culture. In Bengali language, there are three specific terms for the pronoun "you," and depending on the other person's age, social position, and one's familiarity with that individual, one of the three terms is used. A number of the participant women addressed me using the Bengali pronoun *Aapni*, which is used with people who are older, who are of a higher position, or adult strangers. Some women would also pause before using

slang terms or apologize after using a slang term in context of the conversation. Additionally, there were also instances of when women felt the need to separate themselves from other sex workers and prove to me that they come from a good background. This may be because of societal stigma related to sex work or this may also be because of the obvious social class difference between me as the interviewer and the interviewees.

Major Themes and Subthemes

The research findings are categorized in to five major themes and seven subthemes: (i) life conditions leading to sex work, (ii) dual pride, independence, control (pride in working and being able to provide for themselves and their families, pride in providing a service to the society, ambivalence), (iii) worker rights (wanting recognition and respect for their work, improvement of working conditions), (iv) women's experience of violence and subsequent meaning making, and (iv) salience of intimate interpersonal relations (hurt related to relational unfulfillment, satisfaction in intimate interpersonal connections) (See Table 1). It is important to note that while these themes are divided into distinct categories, they are at times overlapping. Especially the intersection of gender and class is found to be woven through the narratives in the way women sex workers chose their line of profession, took pride in their work, related to others including myself and made meaning out of their experiences.

In the following section, I describe the themes and subthemes followed by the quotes that illustrate specific themes and subthemes. To protect participant privacy, all the names used here are pseudonyms. It is important to note that even though I did not ask questions about gender and class, the narratives that developed as a result of conversations between myself and narrators occurred within certain parameters of gender, class, caste, and rural/urban divide as well as

structural issues of socioeconomic poverty. The intersecting identities formed through these varied experiences were interwoven throughout all the major themes.

Life conditions leading to sex work. Participants referenced life circumstances such as poverty in the natal home, loss of bread winner in the family, sexual harassment in other employment pursued (e.g., labor) as conditions that led them to pursue sex work.

Sabita, a woman in mid to late 40s, described the abject poverty she grew up in, where as a child she would use soil by the lake to rub and clean her hair, because her family could not afford to buy soap or shampoo. She explained why she came to work as a sex worker and why she believes she is better off now.

> Sabita: We grew up eating rice, *moori* (puffed rice), we have seen very little of *ruti* (Indian bread similar to tortilla), *luchi* (puffed fried tortilla) in our childhood. Where would our mothers find all that oil or *ghee* (clarified butter) to fry them? They would make fish, *shaak* (plant leaves e.g. lettuce, spinach), *daal* (lentil/legume soup) and we would eat everything. Now, I mean, everywhere things have changed, now everywhere everything [has improved] a little, but that wasn't the case before, right? We saw that in our childhood, we suffered a lot. We would go to the fields, pick up some plants and leaves, tended to cows and goats… from the suffering we endured, I never imagined I would get here. But luck brought us here, but the way we were, I think now…now we are good I mean we are healthy.
>
> I: You said, luck brought you here, is that a good thing, or a bad thing?
>
> Sabita: No no no, of course it's a good thing. Before the way we endured difficulties…that's not the case anymore. I work here on my own [terms], I am earning two *paisa* (equivalent to cents) that I can keep in my hand successfully, can look after my

kid, given all of that I am happy now. Compared to before… went through so much…25 *paisa* …at that time hair oil was 25 *paisa* or 50 *paisa* at the stores. But I couldn't put oil in my hair for those 25 *paisas*. If we had 25 *paisas*, then I could go to the store to get hair oil, but did not even have that. Now that is not the case anymore. Now, for example, I can look after my own needs and desires, and I am alive with my own needs met.

I: So then it's good.

Sabita: Yes it is good for me. Before I could not get hair oil for 25 *paisa*, now I can buy a whole big bottle of hair oil and use it. I can use a good soap, wear a nice *saree* (traditional Indian garment) , which I would not get before…[…]…and now I can buy luxury items for myself, because I have money, I can eat what I desire….[…]…What else was I supposed to do as a woman?

Piya, a 47-year-old woman, started sex work after her husband died. She described how her husband had a "brain stroke" and then left her with a failing tea stall and two children. She discussed the months after her husband died, where she would roam around willing to do any work and she worked as a painter, a construction worker, and various other forms of manual labor. However, every place she went, the head worker usually expected her to sleep with him. She described having to come up with different excuses every time trying to evade these men, and how that led her to frequently change jobs, when her excuses ran thin. She described after about six months of this, one day she was talking with some other women in the train station, who seemed to work as manual laborers too. One such woman gave her some advice, which made her think about what she wants to do to survive.

Piya: One of the *Didi*s (at the train station) told me, 'Whatever work you do, you cannot maintain your *satitva* (chastity); you won't be able to save your *ijjat* (propriety) in this

line. Because your age is less, you have your own hunger, your own desire…everything is connected to your age. At this age, can you really stay without a husband? Your husband is dead for 5 or 6 months already. So anyways, don't fall in love with anyone. Talk with the money. Whoever gives you money, do it with them. How many days (do you think) you can escape this? How many days will you roam around like this? What will you do? Whoever you go with, first take the money. If they offer you 40 rupees, ask for 40 more….that give me 40 more and then I will sleep with you.'

I got out of there, had a cup of tea, and after drinking the tea thought about it….what these women are saying. All these men trying to impose on me, where will I go? If I want to keep my children alive, then I have to crush my *ijjat*. Otherwise, I won't survive, how would I survive? Wherever I go, I have to work for the job and then I have to give them my *ijjat*. Does that make any sense? I am working, and so I should get money. Why are you snatching my *ijjat*?

Eventually she met a man, who brought her to Sonagachhi. She described her first night being drunk and not wanting to participate. However, he forced himself on her and then gave her more money than she expected. This incident changed her mind, and few weeks after that she finally decided to start working in the region as a sex worker.

Another woman, Shikha, who left home early between the ages of 13 and 15 years, had survived multiple instances of interpersonal violence, poverty etc. Her mother left when she was a toddler and her father was a strict disciplinarian, who was often physically violent. She described a childhood where her father would go off to work for the whole day and come back, hear complaints about his children from neighbors and then beat them. She discussed that she would run away to her neighbor's home and then eventually got "ruined" with other boys in the

area. She started working as a domestic helper in brothel houses at Sonagachhi, but then customers would often impose themselves on her, till she decided to get a room of her own and begin sex work.

> Shikha: So my father used to sew towels in the morning, sell them at the market in the evening, and at night when he would come back, [the neighbors] would complain, and he would beat me. And if he beat me, I would go hide at different people's home, and then as I stayed at other people's home, here and there, with the lads, I became bad.
>
> I: Meaning?
>
> Shikha: Lads meaning boys from that area… mingling with them, going here and there at nighttime, in the jungle area. Yeah all of that. Roaming around at night… because there wasn't anyone looking over me… […]… so then he would beat me, and I got one women…[…]… who brought me here. Then she told me to work (as a helper). I would work here. And then, I would be working, and the woman would go somewhere, and her customer, her husband would try to impose on me. And, I would do him, and then I didn't stay there anymore… I left. I told the local boys, [who found me another work as a helper around the *linebaari*] and I started there. Same events. Then I thought, no, instead of doing random people here and there, I should rent a room for myself. Then I took a room [at one of the *linebaari*s]. My age was 15. I took a room. On my own, I took a room. Then I would sleep with men for 4 or 5 rupees, 50 to 60 rupees for the night. At that time… I am talking about a time 40 years back. 40-45 years back. 4 or 5 Rupees customers then… all these 500 Rupee note, 1000 Rupee note… coming in at hundreds and thousands… there wasn't this much money flowing around then. Money was less then. When we started, money was less. You see the scratches in my face? Because I

loved a guy after another... I wouldn't look at money back then. If he looked like a hero, good looking…I would do him, keep him in my room, feed him, give him money. He would gamble, do whores, do everything…and then beat me.

Shikha discussed that at this point in her life, she was working because she was taking care of her disabled grandson but she would not need to work if she had a man. In fact she kept repeating throughout her narrative that "a woman needs a man in her life." When asked to clarify if she needed a man or just another person to rely on, she insisted that as a woman she needs a man, which is why she had kept five different *babu*s. Unfortunately, for her each of those men had been financially and physically abusive with her.

I: Have they ever helped you? You say that it's good to keep a man with you. Did they help?

Shikha: Never helped. Alcohol, and alcohol and brutishness…fighting in the streets, biting each other, undressing in the middle of the streets…that happened more. Never helped.… […]…

I: So the men in your life were abusive. Never helped. Then what makes you say that you need a man? You have done (for yourself) more than a man ever could.

Shikha: No that is a wrong thing you said.

I: What is the wrong thing I said?

Shikha: The thing is you see…mine, let me tell you…Let's say, I went somewhere, alone. Yes. There let's say I don't know how to read and write, and I don't know something else, and let's say you have to look at a paper, find out what to write, what to do, what not to do, if there is a man besides you, he can help.

It is almost as if Shikha wanted a male ambassador to navigate the man's world, where the system seems to privilege men over women. The above narrative excerpts indicate how intersections of various systems of oppression (i.e., economic conditions, gender, class (and caste), rural background, lack of viable means of livelihood) led these women to choose sex work as their profession. Throughout the narratives, the theme of abject poverty combined with being a woman, without access to proper employment that men or women of middle or upper class might have, was prominent in choosing this profession. 5 of the 11 women also reported being deceived into sex work by their acquaintances, friends or family members. It is important to note that these women were not brought into sex workers by any organized criminal activity but by individual members. However, as the next section shows, even when life conditions leading to sex work are a result of intersections of oppressive systems, there is pride among sex workers of financial independence and providing meaningful service to others.

Dual pride, independence, and control. Participant women described dual pride, pride in providing for oneself and open's family, as well as pride in providing a service to the society (to the men being served and their families). A few participants also described some ambivalence that focused on pride alongside the view that this was dirty work. Related to the pride in providing for oneself and one's family was financial independence and control over one's life and one's body that participants felt were afforded by this profession.

Pride in providing for oneself and one's family. In describing their current work life and their feelings about it, all 11 participants expressed pride in being a woman who has a job and who is providing for her family. The following narrative co-created between Nisha, a woman in her early 30s and myself on her thoughts about her job demonstrates this pride. Nisha started sex work when her husband became unemployable after being diagnosed with a traumatic brain

injury from a car accident. Because of this, she searched for different employment opportunities but was unable to find anything where she felt she had agency over her body and her work. In the following excerpt, Nisha describes pride in her independence of choosing her work, not having to answer to someone she is employed by, and having control of her own body.

I: What do you think about this job? I mean what are some of your thoughts surrounding this job?

Nisha: I think it's good.

I: What do you mean by good?

Nisha: The reason I think it is good is, let me tell you… think about it from all angles… when you go to factory to work, even then someone will tell you, stay with me, you have to let me sleep with you, you have to do this, you have to do that. If you go to a bag factory, or you go to a mill factory this is all [you get]. Compared to that, here I have my own independence. If I like someone, I can sleep with him, if I don't [like him], I won't. There's no one demanding/forcing me. Again…you with me if you see… in your home…let's say I go to work at your home, you are a man who is using me, making me work [as a house cleaner], and then threatening [me] that if [I] don't give [sex] to you then you will fire me. That is, I have to let you sleep with me, and you are threatening me that you will fire me. So, I have to live with so much fear. But here I have no such fear. If I like it, I work, if I don't I can leave. No one will tell me why aren't you working, what is your reason for not working, why aren't you working? All this… stuff… isn't there. I, myself, think very well of this job. I have suffered a lot in many different places. Wherever I went, I had to deal with this.

Gunjan elaborated on the similar idea of feeling independent, and finding economic power as she described what gains she has made in her life because of her work. Gunjan's husband was a construction worker, but he would spend money on alcohol and other women, and would beat her if she asked him for any money for food, shelter or daily needs of their family. She had to borrow money from others, and he would often confiscate that money. So she left her husband, tried looking for different employment opportunities before she took up sex-work. She describes that because of her work, she can take care of her family now and managed to pay off loans of over Rs. 100,000 that her husband made her accrue.

> Gunjan: About my job… it's good. People are alive by working here. Sometimes people say you are doing that work! I can say I am doing this work, but I can put rice in my mouth working here…whoever needs whatever to survive. I work here now. All that time I suffered a lot. Doing this work I can stand on my own two feet, able to live well, can eat good food, can feed my children, [my children are] getting educated, I can give them what they need or desire. They are not asking their father, because they don't live with him, they live with me. 'Mom I need this or that today', they say. Because of my full engagement with my job, I can fulfill their wishes, their needs, their wishes. I can fulfill my own needs and desires too. So I think this is a good job. I don't think bad of it…[…]…Let me tell you, in this market, people who work as dishwashers in other people's houses…I can myself… feet on, how do you say ground under feet…yes under my feet, roof over my head. If I create a home, and in that home my two children are getting education, I am spending money for them…if I worked as a dishwasher at someone else's home I surely will not get a lot of money. Let's say they give me 200 [rupees] or 150 or even 500, but I won't be able to do anything with that work.

> I…actually… my… to [have my children] grow up to be good humans I had to work here. I have to accept that I have done this. I have worked here at Sonagachhi and paid off all those loans. I can live well… the [my] parents who could not stand me, would curse me and say get out of the house, I put money in their hands now, they love me, they love my children

Gunjan's quote also establishes that employment that is often available to women with her socioeconomic and educational background does not pay living wage.

Pride in providing a service to the society. In addition to feeling independent and having economic power, women also expressed pride in providing the necessary services to customers and keeping the society clean. Bhargavi, a woman who has been in the area since before Durbar was established, shared her thoughts related to how she feels she contributes to society.

> Bhargavi: A lot of times, they say look there goes a whore. This is a very bad word, isn't it? This society made us. And, because we are here, society is working well. In their homes, their wives, their sisters... They can walk with their chest up in the air [/head held high]. In exchange for money, we are keeping them cool. We are keeping our roads clean. If not for us, every house would have [chaos? *inaudible*], I say every house would have [chaos?] if we weren't there, right? Then what bad did we do? A man comes here after some conflict at home, I don't know what his particular conflict was about, maybe he doesn't get happiness from his wife, he gets nothing, he doesn't get love…and he needs something. He fought at home and then came to me. So, we calm them down. Is that illegal? We got some money in exchange. He stayed with me for 3 hours. Had some alcohol, told me some happy and sad stories, I serviced him well, gave him some love

and maybe he came back again because of the love [I gave him]. If so, I didn't do anything wrong! I didn't steal! So why am I being blamed?

Bhargavi expressed pride in being able to calm her male customers down and expresses indignation at being stigmatized despite providing a service that made a difference in those men's lives. Shefali, who was sold to sex work under false pretenses of being given a job, is currently a peer counselor working for Durbar part time and a sex worker at other times. She expressed similar sentiments as Bhargavi.

Shefali: See, more important than money is the behavior. One… you have to keep this in mind, that when one boy is befriending me… it's not as if they are becoming my bedpartner immediately. He is having a conversation with me, in this conversation both of us are giving and getting something…talking about money or whatever. And at this time, it is learnt that he has a family, he has a wife at home. Even so, he is liking me… why? He must have something lacking somewhere. So, whatever he is missing… he is here with me because of this lacking, and paying me money. Then I have to fill whatever he is missing.

Do you understand? I have to fill whatever he is missing. So I am still saying, that all of the friends that come to me… yes there is physical relation. Many here have this thing, that if I am paying money for physical relation it means I will do it many times, many times or many ways. No. With me, the friends I have befriended, they of course want a maximum amount of physical relation for a portion of time. Maybe not multiple times, maybe once. But the rest of the time, he is working to maintain that friendship.

Shefali sees sex work as providing a service that is beyond the specific physical act of sex. She prides in being able to assess and fulfill someone else's needs. She makes it a point to call her

customers “friends.” Throughout her interview, she described the different friendships she has and how the interaction plus relation between a sex worker and her client is mutually beneficial. In other words, they challenge societal determination of sex work as morally depraved or patriarchal violence or of lower credence. As Asha said, “I get enjoyment, and I give enjoyment.”

Ambivalence regarding sex work. Although all participant women described pride in their profession, a few expressed contradictory statements as well. Aloka, whose first husband made her join the profession, left it for a few years after she met someone else. However, when her current partner was fired from his job, she decided to restart as a sex worker because of financial difficulties.

> Aloka: Everyone knows that I work at a medical clinic. To tell you the truth, about my job, I don’t like it. Because I am in a bind, I have to do this, because I’m in a bind, otherwise I wouldn’t ever do this work. Truth.
>
> I: Can I ask you something strange… Why?
>
> Aloka: Why… I am not sure. The kind of family I am from…if my father's family members know then I would have no way besides death.
>
> I: Can you tell me more?
>
> Aloka: That is it, because of that. Then I thought, this thing… this thing is only for one person….the one who will be my husband, this is the only thing for him. But, so many men are using this, that's not right. But, because I am in a bind, I need to put some rice in my daughter's mouth that is why I am forced to do this work. But, I never wanted to do this work from my heart.
>
> I: What would your (natal) family do?

Aloka: Nobody will keep any relation with me.

I: I mean… would they not try to understand?

Aloka: No one will try to understand. They will ask only one question, why did you go there? Was there no other work? You had to go there? You had to go to a dirty place to do dirty work? In fact a few of them almost found out that I work here. I fought with them even… that who told you I do this dirty work?

I: Dirty work.

Aloka: This… this work, the business that we do, let us assume it is dirty. Some people think this is dirty work. Some other people agree with them.

I: Do you think this is dirty work?

Aloka: This is dirty work. Yes I think this is dirty work. But then again I think this is also a job like every other job. This is also a job. I am able to feed myself because of this work! Exactly!

Aloka, at a different point of the interview, also described pride in being a financially independent woman and difficulties in attaining that position through other jobs. Similar to Aloka, a few other participants also expressed some ambivalence. Although they did not frame sex work as dirty, they tried hard to separate themselves from the stereotypical sex worker and prove to me that they come from a "good background." Given they are situated in a hierarchical social system, where higher social class means one "deserves" more respect, this inclination to separate self seems to serve a purpose. Asha, who was born and brought up in the brothel, discussed this point with me.

I: You were born here [in the brothel]? And you grew up here. So in 200-

Asha: Born here in the sense I was in the womb. We are not from this line, we … everything is [because of] dad.

I: What?

Asha: As in we are… I mean… we are not from here, this line [of work]… with the customers. All this is [because of] dad. When I was in the womb, my dad left us here, [mom] was 8 months pregnant. It was during the flood of '78.

It was important for Asha, along with a few other sex workers I interviewed to not be associated with the "undeserving poor" from the lower strata of the hierarchical socioeconomic class system.

Worker rights. Open-ended interview questions, such as "What do you think about your work?/How do you make sense of it?" or "What are some benefits, if any, of this job and what do you not like about it?" as well as more specific questions such as "What kind of services would you like to get from this organization/community/government?" or "What do you think about the laws surrounding sex work?" elicited responses that are organized into two subthemes that fall under the broad spectrum of worker rights: Wanting recognition and respect for their work, as well as the need to improve working conditions.

Recognition and respect for their labor. All the women interviewed expressed desire for recognition of their work like any other type of a job and expressed frustration at being degraded for their work, especially since all 11 of them felt that societal conditions such as poverty and inaccessibility to viable livelihood forced them to uptake sex work. For example, when Nisha was asked what she would like from the society, she reported that everyone wants recognition.

Nisha: Yes, everyone wants recognition. Everyone wants recognition. Nobody gives you recognition for this work, but everyone wants recognition.

I: Yes because this is work.

Nisha: Yes this is work. If everyone in society accepts us, then it is beneficial for us, that's what we want.

I: Ok, so if society accepted you, then would you tell your family members?

Nisha: Yes, what is there to not tell? When we get recognition, when society has accepted us, what is there to not tell? This is also work.

I: So why aren't you saying anything?

Nisha: That… if I say anything now, they will say she is Sonagachhi's whore.

I: Ok so they will badmouth you.

Nisha: Yes, since we still have this… yes they will give me a bad name, and they will … my sons. They will yell [/give us a bad name]. We had to come here because of society, now society badmouth us, but society will not feed us.

Nisha's difficulty with this job comes from lack of recognition of her labor and stigmatization of sex work. While she feels proud to be a financial provider for her disabled husband, daughter and her mother-in-law, she is unable to disclose what her job is. She feels upset by being compelled socioeconomically into sex work and then being degraded for it. Similarly Munni who has worked in this area for over 20 years also expressed her discontent about the stigmatization and lack of recognition. Munni was physically and sexually abused by her husband, who remarried after she had two children. Her natal family refused to take care of her and her children, financially, despite the fact that they married her off right after her first menstruation and did not invest in her education. She struggled to find suitable employment and at one low point, when she attempted to kill herself, a stranger told her about this line of work. Since then she has managed to feed herself, her extended family and has built a proper brick house (as opposed to

mud/straw house) for her family and even opened a corner store in her locality outside of Kolkata. She also financially supported her daughter, who struggled with severe mental health issues before she killed herself. While she feels pride about how she turned her life around, she is worried about how her granddaughters' future marriage prospects may be harmed if people find out that she is a sex worker.

I: What are some of negatives of working here?

Munni: Negatives… now there is so much family, sometimes now I think if I could get away from it all, maybe it would be better.

I: Why?

Munni: Because of respectability…

I: Respectability.

Munni: Otherwise I have no problem.

I: So besides from disrespect from society, there is no problem?

Munni: No. Yes. This is good to me, the work is also good, but in terms of respect… my two granddaughters are getting older, they have to get married.

Bhargavi also expressed her frustration at the lack of recognition and feeling degraded by others.

Bhargavi: If I didn't come here, I wouldn't have known people. I learnt a lot, I learnt a lot, I understand a lot. How society is. [You know] how people say we are bad. We are not bad.

I: Society isn't giving you recognition. You are not bad.

Bhargavi: We are not bad. We… Why? People from this society come to us. Gentlemen from good homes.

I: Why is it not their fault, but yours?

Bhargavi: Exactly! They are sleeping with us, they calling us this or that name… you are this, you are in that market, you are this. But they don't stink?

I: They are the ones coming.

Bhargavi: Yes they are the ones coming. You know, once a lawyer came to me. Because… in conversation… I just asked what do you do? Sweetheart, what job do you do? So he says, I work in the court as a lawyer. Then that lawyer even came to me. A doctor came too. The doctor who sees patients came to me. So everyone can come, and then sleep with us, but then if they see us the next moment, they don't even talk with us? They would turn their face away, not even recognize us, what crime did we do?

I: Yes they came. Would you have a job, if they did not come?

Bhargavi: Exactly! Would I [have a job]? Then you tell me... They made me bad. Did I go because I wanted to? Screw me, screw me? They are the ones who dragged me and screwed me. That's what I think about, we…us… why do they badmouth us? Nobody can tolerate us, this place is bad, red light is bad, the people there are bad. Some people from domestic homes… well they used to be… Sonagachhi (facial expression)… contort their faces. Why? What crime did we do?

I: Yes...

Bhargavi: Before… anywhere we would go, if they know that I am coming from Sonagachhi, or live in a similar place, they would ignore you, not pay any attention to you. Why?

Bhargavi's enragement comes from being treated as less than, despite being a working member of society just like many of her customers. She expresses confusion at why the people who come to sex workers are not maltreated by society, but she is, even though she is providing a service

that she believes to be good, as she has described in a previous quote. As Aloka described previously, women often had to pretend they worked elsewhere or adjust their schedule, such as taking some weekends off or pretending to come to work even when they are menstruating and don't plan on entertaining customers so family members or neighbors didn't know what their job was.

***Improvement of working conditions*.** In addition to wanting respect for their work like any other job, participants also complained about lack of clean working conditions, and job security among other issues. While they discussed improvement of working conditions because of Durbar, they still described problems. Sabita complained about lack of sanitary working conditions in her brothel house, where she has to share a toilet with customers and other sex workers, which "disgusts" her. Shikha, Bhargavi, Munni and Piya were among the older sex workers (~50 years old or above) who discussed worrying about their future given they will not get a government pension like other job holders. Some younger sex workers such as Nisha, and Sandhya reported that they have bank accounts at the Durbar's in house bank and they save money for the future.

Violence and meaning making. Women often denied experiencing any violence in response to direct questions, though references to physical abuse within the natal family or by one's husband, as well as references to forced sexual acts by male partners or employers were made in different contexts of conversation. However, often it seemed that this was either not an issue they worry about (e.g., "part of life, why dwell on it"), or they actively denied ("husband loved me very much" despite the fact that he forced himself on her) or they described what they would do if customers violated them. Mostly the common view was that because of Durbar's presence in the community, violence from customers was not an issue anymore. Bhargavi, who

has been in Sonagachhi since before Durbar was well established in the region, described several forced sexual experiences.

I: You mentioned that the very first day, first time [you were forced to have sex]… were there other instances where you were unwilling, or someone physically forced you to have sex, or physically abused?

Bhargavi: Yes they have. People have. Pimps have. They forced themselves on me, didn't pay me. So much pain. Forcefully anywhere, once under the stairs they dragged me… I didn't understand or know back then.

I: Towards the beginning?

Bhargavi: Yes, they screwed me and went away. The guys in this locality would threaten me and screw me, take away all my money. There was a lot of torture. But it doesn't happen anymore.

I: Is it because of Durbar or is it because you know more now?

Bhargavi: I know, Durbar is also by my side and nothing as such happens anymore. Previously there was torture.

I: So what would you do [back then]?

Bhargavi: I lived in fear. What could I do, just give it all away. Lived in fear.

However, she stated that now she does not allow such incidents to happen. Her sentiments about how she deals with customers who will not listen resonated with other interviewees as well.

Bhargavi: There's such a thing as genteel society. But it's society… there are lots of bad people. Do very bad things…you see they come from good, nice homes but they do such dirty, dirty things, I can't tell you!

I: As in work? Your job? What do you mean?

Bhargavi: So like let's say one man came, and then some will say give some to me from the back, or some will ask can you perform oral sex. The things that we don't like... I came here to work, why would I do those things. Why would I take you on the back? So then there is usually some argument. Come on let me do this or that. No I won't…and he won't come back.

I: Did anyone ever force you like that?

Bhargavi: No not by force. They asked me. This one time, we drank and then I fell asleep and was lying there. He tried to do it (from the back)…he pushed so forcefully that I woke up…it hurt. And when I got up, I gave him a resounding slap. I said how can you try to do this, did you tell me? I am sleeping. Do you consciously think this is good behavior? Get up! And then kicked him out. He said 'But where will I go this late at night?' So I said ok lay down quietly down in the floor. Don't try anything with me… [...]…I did because where will he go? He is after all another human being.

When asked if these incidents caused distress, Bhargavi initially talked about feeling sad because she does not have a husband who could take care of her. I asked further to determine if these incidents of interpersonal violence caused her any sadness or hurt. She explained that sure it is distressing, and she may even punch one of the guys who did this if she sees them again but she persisted

Bhargavi: My…I blame myself that this must have been my fate. This is my fault. Otherwise I…why did I come here? My father got me married, I could have stayed at home, could have stayed at my husband's home. It must have been my fate, which is why this happened. This makes me feel regret. Such as… blaming other people is pointless.

> This is my fate's fault. In my previous life, maybe I grabbed away someone else's husband, which is why in this life I have no husband.

Bhargavi's way of integrating the trauma narrative in her life, involved discussing her assumed failure of fulfilling her role as a wife. While she exhibited self-blame, this was contextualized within her local social, cultural, and religious worldviews and appears to be qualitatively different from the Western model of trauma meaning making. To her, her experience of pain, which was not specific to experiences of assault, must be for a reason such as fate, or her past life's actions. She did not follow the Western linear and causal self-blame path that typically includes what she wore, where she was or any such actions. Instead, she identified pre-determined fate as a cause of her role failure.

Asha, a 38 year old woman, was born in the brothel. Her father left her pregnant mother and an older sister in the brothel, and she grew up in Sonagachhi. She reported that she had a normal childhood, but she did not trust men. This is because she witnessed what her mother had to go through when her father left, and also witnessed her sister's husband abusing and leaving her sister. She decided that she will not get married but will join this line of work instead, because she did not want to depend on another person for her financial freedom. At some point her family moved to a suburb of Kolkata, where they built a home. Her brothers and sisters work in public transportation, they have a corner store and as per Asha's reports, her natal family is doing well currently. However, Asha continues to stay here because of financial freedom. She also describes her work as enjoyable to her. Even so, Asha's first night as a sex worker was a difficult one.

Asha: The first day… I could not ruin it [virginity]. It was painful. The window had these rods, and I kept thinking I will jump out. But then I thought I will probably break my leg instead [of dying].

On the other hand, Shikha, who is around 60 years of age, and has worked as a sex worker for about 40 years or more, had a hard time with the question of whether she was ever coerced into sex work. When I expressed surprise that she never had any bad experiences as a sex worker, she appeared somewhat frustrated.

Shikha: No, never with me. Previously I was always drunk. What would I understand? I would take off my own clothes. Wouldn't understand myself. I would be drunk at all times. In my own pain I spent life being in love and being drunk.

Shikha's experiences with customers was not an issue she wanted to spend time on, because as she stated that she would take off her own clothes if someone wanted to have sex. However, Shikha was more interested in discussing how she would get into fights with her then Babu, who would beat her, and she would be too drunk to protest, all out on the streets. Her concern focused on the significant interpersonal relations in her life, just as it did for Bhargavi. When asked if anyone ever intervened during the many fights, she reported that "There weren't any clubs [i.e. Durbar] or [local political] party office back then." Additionally, since the men in the neighborhood were often friends of her Babu(s), they would not intervene on her behalf. Among many of the incidents of physical fights with Babu(s) she described, she discussed a cycle of her and her Babu, of the time, getting drunk, fighting over money that she would earn, fighting over anything and everything out in the streets where she would be physically hurt or bleed but be too drunk to do anything about it. She would sometimes go and complain to the police who would capture the Babu but then she would have to go release the Babu on bail because she was in love

with him or because the Babu's male friends would harass her. One such example, Shikha gave was as follows.

> Shikha: It was raining, we both were so drunk, right here by Shitola Temple, and it's raining, and he held me under water, I didn't even understand, I was so drunk. I didn't have my senses with me because of alcohol. So he held me under water. Punched my nose…so many cuts and bruises here... He would beat me. But because I was drunk, didn't have my senses with me, it wouldn't hurt then. But once I would get sober, then I would understand how much it hurt. Aaah so much pain.
>
> I: So then did you say anything to him?
>
> Shikha: What would I say? I had to share my bed with him. And, I have to live with him. And then …and I am talking about those times… what would I say to him?

It seems that the personal significance of violence was higher when the perpetrator was a man with whom the woman had a significant interpersonal relationship with, than when it was a customer. When discussing their relationships outside of customers, it appears 10 of the 11 women experienced some form of physical and/or sexual violence from husbands/lovers. Even though at times women expressed how much their husband loved them, they also reported forced sexual experiences. For example, Nisha reported that her husband was a good guy and it was her fault that her husband forced himself on her.

> I: Then how was it? I mean towards the beginning …at 12 years of age, how did you know what to do with your husband?
>
> Nisha: No … I mean… with husband you know my…actually you know how people say…that type of rape (chuckle) my husband forced… and that one time…I had menses… and that led to my daughter.

I: Oh so he forced himself on you.

Nisha: Yes.

I: So [would you say] you didn't have a good relation with your husband?

Nisha: I couldn’t even accept it. I couldn’t fathom that he was my husband. I understand it now, but I couldn’t …that much before. My family would try to help me understand, mom, dad, then my *Jaa* (husband's brother's wife), in laws, everyone tried to help me understand.

I: What would they say?

Nisha: My *Jaa* would always say, ‘why do you do him like this…that is your husband… that is your husband.’ [I would say] 'Shut up, you say [odd/strange] things'. She would say 'he is your everything. You see me today, you see him, everyone is like this. Everything is like this.'

I: So you said forcefully, like they say rape, that's what he did.

Nisha: Yes like that, then you know what… with my husband… when my *Jaa* came, I told her, ‘do you know what your brother-in-law did today with me?’ She asked ‘what?’ Then I said you know with force…force he did this this this with me. And my *Jaa* got quiet. Then she scolded him, you did this…but it was not his fault, not his fault. Actually see mom and dad looked around, got you married, after that you your no matter how much you try to help your wife understand, if you will not understand… he was also of growing age. He couldn’t have done anything. And he didn’t do this to someone outside, it was to his own wife.

I: So you used the word rape, which is what I am thinking about.

Nisha: Yes I used to think like that (chuckle)

I: You don’t think that way now.

Nisha: No.

I: Did you at that time?

Nisha: No.

I: Then did it hurt (emotionally)?

Nisha: Yes it hurt then, that, why would he do something like that with me. This is not done. Then when my *Jaa* sat me down and talked to me… my *Jaa* always said, 'your brother in law also does the same with me. My brother-in-law…you think your brother in law leaves me alone, brought me for nothing? Just to feed me and clothe me? No no, he also does this.' And then I slowly understood, and I was fine after.

I: So afterwards, how was your relation with your husband? It was hard to accept, he would force himself on you…

Nisha: No, he forced himself on me only that one day. Never… he you know… at the beginning he wouldn’t force himself, but you… if a man is laying there in bed, and sometimes puts his hand on your body, and then you start kicking and screaming…then the fault is mine actually. He has no fault. And so he had to force himself.

Nisha’s way of making meaning of marital rape was that this is part of her role as a wife, which she did not understand initially and that lack of understanding was what caused her to hurt. From a western feminist perspective, this can be attributed to internalized misogyny. However, it is important to note that for her while she has self-blame, she does not feel victimized by this in a way that a women in a western or western influenced cultural setting may feel. This may be because, while Nisha recognizes the practice as problematic because of her word choice of ‘rape’ to describe the incident, she accepts it as part of what happens, which alters her perception of it.

Sandhya, who started working as a sex worker barely a year back, reported that her husband did not want to get married to her, because he was in love with someone else. However, their marriage was arranged by their parents, and her husband was sexually, physically and emotionally abusive to her. She described a particularly gruesome situation when her husband was beating her with a bamboo broom, a thin bamboo stick from the broom, pierced her hand, and she had to be rushed to the hospital. She left her husband's home because of the incessant abuse, and was not even allowed to bring back her children borne out of that marriage with him. In fact, her husband apparently told her children that she died and then he married someone else. She expressed sadness when she discussed "What happens with girls on the night of their marriage, did not happen with me," indicating that she did not experience her husband's love in the form of sexual interaction. Even though she was saddened by her failure of role fulfillment, she reported that she still respects her husband. In a follow up conversation, she reported her father would also beat her mother, and when I asked if her mother ever hit her father back, she sounded incredulous and stated "Women put hand on their husband's body, ever? [One] should never. No matter what! Our place is at our husband's feet. *Didi*, even though I left my husband, I still respect my husband."

Overall, trauma for these women did not seem to be tied to the violation of their physical and psychological integrity. Instead, the distress was experienced as a result of not experiencing what a wife typically experiences and as a result not being able to live and fulfil this role of a woman.

The salience of intimate interpersonal relations. Participants consistently expressed hurt as a result of what they conceptualized as unfulfillment in intimate or familial relationships, for example, feeling like one is not a good wife, a good mother, or a good daughter or not having

a “man in [her] life.” Not surprisingly, they also yearned for these connections, and were quick to forgive those who had wronged them if they could rely on that connection again.

Hurt related to relational unfulfillment. Towards the end of the interview, I listed the experiences the interviewee had mentioned and asked “Which was the worst experience?” This question often elicited responses related to interpersonal hurt. This was often because they felt that they were unable to fulfill the prescribed and proscribed gender roles that are deemed acceptable by them and their families. Women participants seemed more impacted from relational hurt than by interpersonal violence.

For example, Shefali expressed sadness at not being able to fulfill her roles as a wife or a mother and shared a desire to protect her daughter from such disappointments. She discussed that she had to have her daughter grow up in an orphanage because she did not trust her family members to take good care of her with the money she earned. She also discussed that her primary goal was to get her daughter educated. Her daughter is in now in college, so that she does not have a fate like herself.

> Shefali: I will never…for my kid... I will never do anything disapproving [for my kid]. But I do tell my kid that don't do anything that you will suffer like I still do. What have I gotten in my life? Even though I am a girl… when a girl reaches maturity, after her marriage she can spend time with her husband, gets to tend to the household, husband's affection, love… never got any of this in my life. I became a mother… I have gotten my desires, yearnings met but I haven't gotten anything in my life. I became a mother, but as a mother was I able to keep my child near me ever? I couldn’t. Because, as soon as my kid grew a little… I had to come here in search of money. I couldn't keep my child near my chest and love her. One… thirdly, husband… never got husband's adoration and

> affection. What do I get here? People pay money, and in exchange of money I have to give them work. But a girl also has needs, but can I fulfill those wishes? I can't. I can't. Then as a girl in my life I didn't get much, and I would never want my child to be dissatisfied that way.

Bhargavi also mourned the lack of a meaningful and loving relationship in her life.

> Bhargavi: In a human life… you see… I maybe in this line [of work], but I have a heart. I can love someone. But no one becomes ours, you know *Didi*. No one becomes ours. I am still alone today, but I have to wear *sindoor*. I am still alone. … […]…No one loves us, *Didi*. We are like this. So many aristocrat aristocrat people come to us. Spend the night with us, but cannot recognize us in the morning. No one loves us. We also have a heart, no one sees that. Do you understand? It hurts a lot. This is why the years of life I have left, I want to make sure my son is well settled…after he is ready I can go. There is no one else around me but my son.

Satisfaction in intimate interpersonal connections. Sometimes, even when family members had hurt them previously, women still desired for those connections and to be able to give back to those family members. They desired those connections and highlighted the depth of relational interdependence even after bad experiences with them in the past. Bhargavi discussed wanting to give a *saree* to her step-mother, the one who abused her when she was growing up to ensure her stepmother felt appreciated. Shefali also described close relational ties with some of her customers, who she also considers her friends but not *Babu*. She reported feeling that some of these customers are present to help her with her daily needs beyond sex work related activities. Gunjan, who previously discussed feeling that her parents did not support her emotionally or financially when she came back from her abusive husband's home to stay with

them, happily discussed that when she goes back home every night after work, her father comes to pick her up.

> Gunjan: Yes my dad still comes to get me. Still comes to get me… […]… I get scared in the dark roads, nobody is in the street, I am alone, and I can't walk because I am afraid. That's why he comes to get me. He still does. He calls 'Where are you, which train are you on?' He calls and then waits at the [train] station. My dad waits, and sometimes I see my dad, my two sons…everyone is there [at the station] to come walk me home.

Asha, who was born raised in the brothel, and refused to get married to anyone because she did not trust men, was also encouraged by her mother to get a child to call her own (which she did). Shikha discussed how once she started taking care of her disabled grandson, she understood the value of money. She discussed that before she laid eyes on her grandson, she would squander money on her *Babu*(s) but since she started taking care of her grandson, she has "bettered" herself. Shikha also elaborated on what incident in her life was most distressing. She reported that once she found herself in the outskirts of Kolkata in the middle of the night, because she was pursuing potential work with a customer. This was because she was particularly low on cash, but she needed some money for the home health care masseuse who comes in the morning for her grandson. After the customer dropped her off in that desolate area outside of Kolkata, she was unsure how to get back home. She saw a regional police station but did not want to go in there, in fear that the police will harass her and hold her which would delay her ability to get back to her grandson before he wakes up. She decided to flag a truck down, but before she could get on the truck some local goons dragged her down from the truck on knifepoint. She reported that her fear was that they will kill her but not even for a second was she afraid of being sexually assaulted. In fact, she reported that if they wanted sex, she would have been fine with it but if they killed her

then what would happen to her grandson? She managed to talk her way out of the situation by mentioning to them that she is from Sonagachhi, and she was here because of her sick grandchild who was in a local hospital and in need of blood. It was unclear why they let her go after hearing this story, but they did and she managed her way back home. Anytime Shikha was asked about a distressing or traumatic event, she referred to this incident. Shikha's examples demonstrate a number of factors. She does not seem to associate a violation of physical or bodily integrity with potentially scary sexual interaction. The salient factors in her life are interpersonal in nature as shown by her multiple claims of needing a man in her life or worries she has about her grandson. Shikha also harbors strong negative feelings towards her own two daughters, even though she is taking care of one of her daughter's son. She was unable to explain why she dislikes her daughters, reporting that they are adults and they can do whatever they want to do with their lives. She also did not report any strong ties with them, when they were growing up reporting that she was busy with her *Babus*. This seems to be contradictory to other sex workers' feelings towards their family members. Additionally, her storied texts also reveal the protection Durbar seems to offer to brotheled sex workers in the Sonagachhi region, since its establishment.

Discussion

In this study, I aimed to explore the meaning of sex work, violence, and gender among Indian cis-gendered women sex workers by centralizing their voices, in order to better understand the nature of sex work. The narrative approach was used for analysis particularly for the purpose of giving women sex workers equal footing as any other working women with a broad range of positive and negative experiences. Thematic analysis of participant narratives revealed five broad themes (and seven subthemes) that are closely interrelated and supplement

one another to form a broader narrative depicting the experiential lives of cis-gendered women sex workers who work out of brothels in Kolkata, India.

The particular position that women sex workers in this study held in the social matrix at the intersection of identities that comes from urban-rural divide, caste/class hierarchy, literacy, wage earning capacity, marital status, religion, natal and marital family statuses, gender, and physical and psychological health created a specific subculture of its own with its own norms and rules. This subculture's norms at times overlap with broader mainstream Indian culture with respect to ways of being and thinking, and at other times, these norms and worldviews were quite specific to the subculture. Further, participant women were situated in the Sonagachhi region of Kolkata, in the state of West Bengal. The state of West Bengal is well known for its communist political context, with a long history of focusing on human rights. Within this broader sociopolitical context of the state, Durbar, an organization for sex workers is active in promoting the rights and welfare of sex workers in the Sonagachhi region, and the presence of Durbar against the backdrop of communist leanings of West Bengal very likely contribute to the experiences of sex workers in the region and impacted the stories shared by the participant women.

Intersectionality

Each of the participant narratives revealed how financial difficulties, being a woman, being from lower social class and in some cases, lower caste, and poor schooling intersect with one another to create an oppressive system of unviable living conditions. While the women did not explicitly mention the influence of religion in their daily lives, as discussed previously, Hindu religious norms also have an influence on their beliefs, norms and daily life. Lack of finances in the family (often due to unavailability of a male earning member) led women to seek

work opportunities such as domestic helper, construction workers, or other non-sex work related manual labor. However, in each of these jobs women described workplace sexual harassment, assault, and propositions from their employers "to sleep with them" in addition to the work required for their job. If women were fortunate enough to not experience such sexual harassment, they quickly learned that their daily wages were not sufficient to support themselves and their families. Women who were deceived into entering sex work also chose to stay on even when they were not forced to because sex work provided a viable livelihood or because of concerns about being socially excluded due to having been a sex worker. Overall, the trajectories leading to sex work and continuation in this profession described by women in the present study are similar to what Bandyopadhyay et al., (2004) documented in their study of women sex workers from the same region. Reasons for entering sex work such as poverty, escaping marital/natal family violence, lower daily wages in other labor-related jobs are also consistent with previous research (e.g. Huda, 2006; Orchard, 2007; Silverman et al., 2007). In their narratives, women often compared their previous living conditions to their current life, where they could not afford basic amenities (i.e., soap) and provide for other family members' needs.

It can be argued here that the intersections of oppressive systems of patriarchy and global capitalism create an economic situation where poor women from the Global South are forced out of viable employment and into exploitative professions (Mohanty, 2003). Patriarchy is closely related to other systems of oppression, and so for poor, *Dalit* (low caste) women, the effects of these systems are much more severe than for their *Savarna* (upper caste and class) counterparts (Gupte, 2013). Therefore mechanisms of class/caste, gender, rural conditions, economic hardships, and lack of schooling aggravated their experiences and affected work trajectories. As the interviewed women described, because of financial hardships, their parents could not afford

to send them to school and had to get them married off right after their first menstruation. Because of lack of proper school education, when they later needed jobs, they were not qualified for jobs that paid adequate living wages. Marginalization due to socioeconomic class, caste, rural status, and gender also rendered them without power and thus their voices may have been silenced (Gupte, 2013) making it easy for perpetrators in non-sex work related employment settings to target them. These women reported facing rampant sexual harassment and assault in work situations in non-sex-work related employment, where they would be threatened with unemployment if they voiced their protests, reducing their options for employment.

While people across the gender spectrum engage in sex work, and often sex work as a trans* individual is more dangerous (Poteat et. al, 2015), societally sex work is often degraded and gendered as women's work (Kempadoo & Doezema, 1998). Given the stigmatization of sex work and the prevalence of degradation, women in this study seemed to be driven into sex work because of the lack of viable livelihood for someone at the intersection of these identities. Their identities based on class, caste, gender, and broader culture continue to shape their experiences in sex work. Even though women sex workers are taking part in a gendered work that puts them at greater risk for abuse and exploitation (Rekart, 2005) scholars have argued that it is possible for women who are in oppressive conditions to still have agency (Mahmood, 2001; Menon, 2004), while acknowledging that definitions of oppression and agency may vary socioculturally. This essentially persuades them to own feminine work and strive to achieve a meaningful life within its narrow range. Therefore, even within this supposed system of oppressions, women often negotiate agency and independence as expressed in the theme of pride.

Agency and Pride

Ahearn (2001) argues that agency is often equated in Western culture with 'free will' that is being able to have intentional and conscious control over one's actions. Faced with oppressive systems, agency is equated with active 'resistance' to being systemically controlled. However, while this definition may have utility in an individualized Western culture, it may not be useful in other regions of the world. Instead, defining agency as a "socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (pg. 112) seems to have more validity for the purposes of this study. Similarly, Mahmood (2001) argues that women's agency, faced with sociohistorical structures of domination, is not defined by their active participation in outright resistance but by choosing to navigate these structures to create space for their own needs. These definitions allow for a more contextualized and nuanced understanding of agency that meaningfully fits the women sex workers' concrete and material circumstances. This allows us to conceptualize women's agency within the narrow space they were afforded, in the intersecting oppressive systems of patriarchy and capitalism, which may have led them to 'choose' sex work because of financial reasons even when some women expressed disdain for their line of work. Using the word 'choose' can be contested because for some of the women interviewed their external circumstances did not leave them many other venues to gain financial freedom. However, these women should be afforded the dignity of having agency when they had to actively weigh out their potential options and make a conscious decision in their capacity of what work they will engage in.

In the current study, all participants expressed pride in being able to provide for themselves and their families, despite being women from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Some women described their work as just another means to earn money similar to individuals in any other kind of employment. They described feeling independent in their work financially, as well as feeling free to choose when they work, and who they choose as their

customers. Given that women are negotiating the limited scope of work that they are provided with to assert as much agency as they can, it seems neither of the concepts in the binary of sex workers being fully independent or being helpless victims of patriarchy capture their experiences. However, since under capitalism, people often have to sell labor in exchange for sustenance (Overall, 1992), without the moral judgment, in some ways sex work can be construed as similar to any other form of exploited labor in a globalized capitalist system which exploits labor from marginalized individuals, especially Third World women (Mohanty, 2003). The common beliefs about Third World sex workers are that they are poor, helpless women and children who were trafficked and have no say over what happens to them (Bandyopadhyay et al. 2004). While this may be true for some women, Bandopadhyay and colleagues (2004) discussed that the majority of trafficking in the Third World involves migrant workers in search of a better financial future, and who are mostly men. Unlike the above mentioned commonly held stereotype, in this study women reported that in sex work as compared to other manual labor, they experienced more agency because they felt that they had more control over their own body and their work.

Additionally, some of the women also expressed pride in being able to contribute to society through their work. They discussed that the service they provide gives their customers enjoyment and that they are filling a gap in their customers' lives that customers' families cannot fill, be it sex, friendship, emotional needs, conflict resolution or other areas that they feel a void in. This is a form of affective labor, which is defined as labor that produces or manipulates feelings such as well-being, satisfaction, passion, etc. (Hardt & Negri, 2004). This claim of providing a valuable service challenges some current societal notions about sex being a private matter that should not be mixed with business and also notes that sex work is another way of

policing the way women are allowed to use their bodies for personal gain (Zatz, 1997). In general, affective work done by women in private and professional realms is often not given its full recognition. Similarly, for sex workers, even though they are paid, they may not be receiving the full recognition for their affective labor.

The participants also described their relationship with customers as mutually beneficial furthering their claim of their labor being meaningful. These narratives challenge the caricature of Third World women sex workers as victims and provide them with an agentic role in their own lives. However, society's failure in recognizing their affective labor as worthy creates a difficult limbo state, where they have to constantly navigate their new found financial freedom that affords them amenities needed for survival with constant societal shame and stigma. Therefore, the framework used in this study is of understanding sex workers as situated somewhere within the victim-agent continuum.

The social matrix women sex workers are situated in has different perspectives on where women's self-actualization and agentic role lies. For example, the significance given to familial roles and fulfillment of how women contribute to society as dictated by current sociohistorical norms of the community play a key role in understanding what self-actualization and agency may look like for these women (Menon, 2004). This framework avoids the liberal cultural relativism standpoint that avoids criticizing the system that has led women at the intersection of the above-mentioned identities to choose sex work. It also avoids the other extreme of the radical feminist perspective of abolitionism of sex work, which falsely equates sex workers as helpless victims with no agency.

The Need for Respect and Basic Workers' Rights

As referenced earlier the participant women were situated in Kolkata, West Bengal which has a history of communist/Marxist leanings as evidenced by being ruled for over 30 years by a communist government. This political history creates a unique context, where workers rights and advocacy of marginalized population is ingrained in the general population's ideology, even though it is not fully reflected in governmental policy and daily interactions. Given this context, it makes sense that Durbar's presence in the region has proliferated, that women sex workers buy into advocating for their own rights and the city's tolerance of having a large area from the city housed by sex workers' brothels. Obviously, not every individual in the city is tolerant and liberal about marginalized women's or sex workers' issues, though the socio-political context allows for women sex workers to be vocal about advocating for their rights more so than what might be possible in other regions of India.

Some women expressed dissatisfaction with their line of work because of the degradation they experience and the lengths they have to go through to hide their work from family members and neighbors. This need to detach was also apparent in their conversations with me where they tried to separate themselves from being associated with other sex workers by explicitly stating that they are not from this line of work. Stigmatizing social perceptions about poverty, sex work, and a women's role in society may also contribute to these attempts to distance self from other sex workers. This type of societal repudiation, however, is problematic since sexual labor has been present in different time periods throughout history for different purposes in human society (Truong, 1990). Equating sex work with exploitation is ahistorical, decontextualized, and often associated with essentialist morality surrounding what sex means (Kempadoo & Doezema, 1998).

Given the women themselves believe that they are providing a service that is worthwhile, and the fact that society did not leave them many other opportunities, they discussed feeling frustrated about a lack of recognition for their labor. They were vocal about their rights as working members of society, partly due to their association with Durbar and the work Durbar has done to help these women achieve some basic rights, and partly perhaps because they themselves also feel this way. Kempadoo and Doezema (1998) posited that women's rights and sex workers rights are inseparable from each other. It seems that problems that women face in seeking labor and in the workforce are magnified among developing world's marginalized women workers. Agustin (2007) in her work noted that migrant women sex workers, in European countries had primarily two different views related to their work. While some sex workers stayed away from claiming any identities, many women noted their work as equivalent to therapy or an art while some others saw it similar to typing or machine work and both groups claimed the title "sex worker." Furthering the argument about sex work being equivalent to affective or emotional labor, it can be argued that emotional labor is commodified and commercialized in sex work, which is not necessarily as harmful as a hegemonic masculinist society may deem it as (Kempadoo & Doezema, 1998). These authors argue that this is because women are able to distinguish between their role as a sex worker in the job and intimacy in personal lives, just like actors or therapists. This once again provides support to the agentic role that women sex workers have over their lives and their job choice.

As noted before, the above arguments are not to romanticize sex work or to deny the very real predicament of marginalized women who are exploited in their positions as sex workers or in any other type of skilled or unskilled labor. In fact, it is often seen that poor women, in general, in a globalized system of capitalism face exploitation in multiple aspects of their lives

(Mohanty, 2003). Global societal systems of hierarchy caused by neocolonialist, racialized capitalism in conjunction with Indian system of caste/class system creates a unique lack of space in the labor market for women in the lowest rungs of this system. That is, in the global division of labor, Third World women who are in recognized/unrecognized, skilled/unskilled labor market face economic violence (Mohanty, 2003), which coupled with a highly patriarchal Indian society causes sexual acts by women for their economic interests to be deemed as irresponsible and immoral (Kempadoo & Doezema, 1998). Instead, the purpose is to advocate for the women who participated in this study and emphasize their idea that this income generating activity is deserving of basic worker and human rights, decent working conditions and cognizance as it was entrenched in their self-narratives of their lives.

The Salience of Intimate Interpersonal Relations for Individuals with the Familial Self

Based on his clinical work of providing psychotherapy to clients in India, Roland (1988) describes the self-construal of people in India as familial. An individual, with the familial self, (i) often demonstrates intense, emotional intimacy in their interdependent relationships, (ii) derives self-esteem from maintenance of reputation and honor of family, (iii) are particular about reciprocal responsibility and obligations in a hierarchical family order, and (iv) manages to simultaneously maintain a private core self that is only revealed when they feel that the other is empathic and receptive (Roland, 1988). The author further reported that (i) individuals from India often experience a socially contextual "we-self" that is intrinsically related and "enmeshed" with familial and communal others, (ii) their cognition often follows a pattern of how things relate to one another, with metonymic thinking from a mythic orientation, (iii) with work and activity being only meaningful in context of interpersonally significant relationships, and (iv) with less emphasis on universalist abstractions. Along these lines, cultural anthropologist Menon

(2004) describes Hindu women following a strict adherence to a traditional code of conduct that involve self-control, self-improvement, duty to family members and finding meaning from fulfillment of these family roles. The author argues that western feminist models rooted in individualism often discredit the importance of these familial relations in Indian women's lives. Dismantling oppressive structures, which can include the patriarchal family structure, may be in opposition to women's self-actualization within the familial context of self.

Similarly, Lamb (1997) argues that an Indian individual is an assemblage of family, society, caste, and village and for an Indian woman this assemblage is broken down and remade during marriage. An Indian woman's identity is essentially connected to her marital family, more so than her natal family and if disconnected from these ties, a woman may not be considered as free as she may be in Western contexts. While these generalizations of the Indian self vary widely depending on the specific social matrix an individual is situated in, the conceptualization of familial self helps in understanding the salience of familial relations for women sex workers in the present study. Women in this study reported experiencing happiness or distress in their lives through the interpersonal connections that were present or were important in the past. Within the context of familial self, women participants' yearning for meaningful interpersonally significant relationships, and feeling severely hurt from any breakage of reciprocal symbiotic relationships make sense. Interviewed women who were significantly hurt in interpersonal relationships had a discrepancy in their ideal and real relationships with their partners or spouses.

In this subculture of rural, lower class/caste West Bengal, a typical woman would expect that when she got married she would be taken care of by her husband (who is at a hierarchically higher status than she is), she would have an intimate emotional and sexual relationship, and she would be able to dote on her children and tend to her domestic life. However, when her life did

not follow that ideal path of this meaningful reciprocal relationship and she had to be partnerless or she had to look after her own needs, there was a rupture in her self-narrative. As per the meaning making model of trauma, the rupture between ideal and real after a life threatening incident causes traumatic reaction (Park, 2010). In this context, this rupture is what creates a traumatic reaction. Further research about interpersonal hurt and traumatic reaction is needed to explore whether the relational hurt or the perceived loss of one's role as a wife and the life one imagined can be construed as a traumatic event that may be associated with post-traumatic responses (i.e., post-traumatic growth or symptoms of post-traumatic stress). Interestingly, women in the present study reported seeking out meaningful relationships in order to regain this purpose of fulfilling her role as a caregiver and/or her role as being taken care of by someone.

Making sense of violence in the context of familial self. Within the context of violence, Gupte (2013) discussed that Indian women often face direct or indirect, intended or unintended acts that disenfranchises them in sociocultural, political, and economic aspects, which create a space for a system of marginalization, violence, and discriminatory practices. These practices are further aggravated instead of reduced by local systems of family, community, and economics which lead to a cycle of violence that may be specific to the South Asian context. However, the author does not consider interpersonal violence, at least in the Indian context, to be a private or personal issue. The author noted that women often have 'multiplied powerlessness' in this system because of similar intersections and assemblages of factors that form who an Indian woman is. In these systems, men abuse women because of the social, emotional, and economic power he holds. The author further describes two distinct cycles of violence in the marital home and the natal home that women often face. After women face abuse from their husbands in the marital home and return to the natal home, they may initially receive sympathy and care. Soon

that gives way to gossips in the larger family as well as immediate local community. Women are urged to compromise with the marital family, and they soon face stigma and humiliation, which forces them to go back to the marital home. When the woman leaves the marital home for good, the same natal family who married her off at a young age, and did not invest in her education wants her to fend for herself almost as a punitive measure for not being able to fulfill her gendered role of a wife. Participants in the current study often described a similar situation in their lives, where they essentially felt redundant because of their role unfulfillment, disruptions in relationships with their family, or disruptions in the intimate relationships they formed outside of the traditional family with their customers or other actors in sex work such as their colleagues or *Malkins*, etc. Interestingly, while participants were able to identify these experiences of violence as negative, they also expressed emotional hurt from being unable to fulfill their roles.

As stated earlier, women's way of making meaning out of experiences of violence or other difficult life situations such as disruptions in intimate interpersonal relations implied that emotional hurt from interpersonal relations were more significant than traumatic encounters. When women were asked about experiences of violence, conversation usually focused on instances of when women felt disconnected from significant interpersonal relations (e.g., with family members or romantic partners). Four of the women in this study discussed experiences of violence from their customers or others in sex work, while 10 women reported instances of abuse in significant interpersonal relationships (e.g., with fathers, husbands, lovers or in-laws). However, women also reported higher instances of violence from their customers or pimps before Durbar was established in the region.

Currently, though when women experienced violence in their interactions with their customers, they usually did not seem to consider them as particularly significant as evidenced by

multiple factors. For example, some women denied experiencing violence from customers, even when at another time in the interview they would cite examples that by scholarly definitions would be considered assault or abuse. In other cases, women who admitted to experiencing violence would simultaneously state that they know how to protect themselves by calling out for others in the brothel house, or talking down their customers or even defending themselves by kicking or hitting. However, most of the women interviewed reported difficulty on their first night as a sex worker, even when they claimed that they enjoy their work overall. This is consistent with previous research (e.g. Ghatage, 2012) which stated that women are often not taught what to expect during their first sexual encounter in general and often do not fully understand the role of a sex worker before starting their job. Additionally, this may be attributed to societal norms around women's bodies, beliefs surrounding sex/physical intimacy, and societal stigma of sex workers.

Women who were abused by interpersonally significant people would also still long for those connections even if they do not approve of the individual who inflicted them with abuse. For example, if they were abused by their husband, they may not necessarily want to return to that spouse, but they lamented not being able to be a wife with a full domestic life, who could serve their husband. This was also true for those relationships where they felt that disconnections happened due to no fault of either party such as when they reported a happy marriage before their husband died at a young age. The process of meaning making revealed self-blame (contextualized within her local, social, cultural and religious worldviews) such as not knowing better, previous life's actions, fate, as well as rationalizing perpetrator's actions, noting that this is what happens in life, and there's no sense in focusing on what has not worked out perfectly.

There can be multiple interpretations of why women interpreted experiences of violence this way. Riessman (2002) discussed that when using personal narratives as data, it is important to remember that when participants "narrativize" their lives for the researcher they often focus around significant events of their lives. Often, breaches between ideal and real is narrativized into long stories to justify the action. However, she also argued that survivors of trauma often silence themselves and are also otherwise silenced when discussing painful events because they have difficulty naming and exploring these events. While this may be the case for why the women glossed over certain experiences of violence, it does not seem like women had difficulty naming their experiences of violence as violence.

Although the women recognize violence and are able to name it as violence, the experience of violence from loved ones do not seem to cause post-traumatic symptoms as would be expected. While we in the academic or intellectual communities can argue about how or why patriarchal systems has made these women see some violence as permissible or internalize misogyny, the fact is that this is how they have integrated the experiences of violence into their narrative. As Western scholarly literature suggests, trauma causes breakage in the flow of a self-narrative. Traumatic memories are often unintegrated into the self-narrative and this causes the rupture of trust in others or beliefs about safety in the world (Herman, 1997). An incident is considered to be traumatic, in the process of meaning making, when there is a discrepancy between the assessment of the potentially traumatic incident and one's own global belief system (Park, 2010). Thus it may be possible that explanations of marital violence that seem to be prevalent in the subculture of Bengali women sex workers are, in fact, acting as a protective factor against trauma symptoms in these women's lives by helping them reintegrate the incident as part of the narrative of their lives. Similarly, experiences of violence in the line of work, is

recognized as violence but does not seem to warrant much discussion. This once again, may be because the women may be silenced about their trauma because of the pain or societal shaming. It also may be that these incidents have been accepted as part of the job and less personal. Therefore, for the Bengali women sex workers I interviewed, there seemed to be no discrepancy between the appraisal of the incident and their global meaning making system, and thus, the incident is likely not experienced as "traumatic" as described by Park (2010).

Overall, women's experiences of relational hurt, harassment, violence, and assault in various settings of their lives point to the problem of mistreatment of women across settings. So sex work may not be only a source for violence or is not equated to violence by the women interviewed. However, the problem continues to be mistreatment of women and a lack of societal and structural safeguard against acts of violence across settings, which may include sex work.

Limitations

This study offers a glimpse of women sex workers' lives in Kolkata, India. However, this study was limited by the fact that the participants were sex workers situated in a well-known brothel. By some accounts, brothel housed sex workers are only a small proportion of all sex workers (Kotiswaran, 2011). Additionally, the participants were closely associated with Durbar Mahila Samnwaya Committee, which is an agency known for its advocacy of sex workers' rights along with ensuring that sex workers in the region are provided with basic needs of medical care, banking, community bonding, safety, and peer counseling. The generalizability of current findings is further limited because our participants included only cis women sex workers. While there are sex workers who are transwomen and cismen in the Sonagachhi region of Kolkata, the current study focused on cis women's experiences. Informed by these limitations, future studies

should focus on transwomen, as well as sex workers not situated in brothels and with less organizational support to understand their experiences.

The current study only included interviews with women sex workers themselves. In order to fully understand women sex workers' lives and experiences, it would be important to gather information from other stakeholders: the *Malkins*, the advocacy groups, the pimps, the individual traffickers, the non sex workers who protect or work in brothel houses, the customers as well as the women's family members. This will help to better understand the structural causes of violence that women sex workers experience in their lives and create and target better interventions.

Implications and Directions for Future Research

The findings of this study suggest that psychological research on sex work needs to involve more input from sex workers themselves. Given this background of a highly contextual, embedded, familial self, a decontextualized survey study often does not capture the experiences of violence, mental health, or interpersonal issues. Indian feminists (Kotiswaran, 2011) have also noted that an explicit stance of socialist or materialist feminism that considers the intersections of patriarchy and capitalism also seems helpful in understanding how the broader structural system may play a role in women's lives. To understand such complexities, studies that utilize qualitative or mixed-methods and that gather data from multiple stakeholders are needed.

In addition, future researchers investigating trauma need to consider some fundamental questions about what constitutes trauma or traumatic incidents and whether this may vary depending on intersecting identities and contexts for individuals. Trauma is defined as a violation of one's psychological or physical integrity, though what is considered to be a violation of psychological and physical integrity, and what it means to be "powerless" may differ across

cultural settings. For example, one of the interviewees discussed that when she was stopped by people threatening her with a razor blade, her fear was for her life. She explicitly stated that if they wanted to have sex, she would have gladly had sex, but she was worried that she would not be able to come back home to ensure her grandson who was waiting for her was taken care of. In western scholarly studies, trauma symptoms are intrinsic, and while there is recognition that interpersonal relationships have a role in how symptoms manifest, the official diagnostic manual does not include the centrality of relationships and disconnections as a part of trauma symptoms (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). However, in South Asian contexts, the emphasis on how one performs in their social and interpersonal roles is a major factor in how trauma symptoms manifest (Fernando, 2008). Additionally, the metonymic thinking with a mythic orientation for Indian women may lead to a different type of meaning making for trauma symptoms. For example, women in this study often blamed their fate or their past lives for the painful experiences in their current life, instead of exhibiting intrapsychic traumatic reactions. Additionally, when women experienced violence and they found a socially acceptable rationalization to deem it permissible, which may not make any sense to women from Western/Western-influenced cultures, they were able to reintegrate that experience into their lives. Thus, trauma researchers need to consider alternative experiences and construals of what is considered traumatic and a wide range of post-traumatic reactions beyond symptoms of post-traumatic stress.

Trauma researchers also need to consider macro factors such as broader structural violence faced by Third World women to understand exploitation, harassment and difficult life situations that women experience. As evidenced in interpersonal trauma research, experiencing violence leads to long term mental and physical health consequences such as lowered immune

system, lower self-esteem, trauma symptoms, depression, anxiety etc. (Briere & Jordan, 2004; Campbell, Greeson, Bybee & Raja, 2008). It is important to incorporate factors such as structural economic violence in trauma research to gain a better understanding of trauma symptomatology, resiliency, prognosis, and treatment and intervention efficacy. In the current study, it is difficult to determine whether some of the women may or may not have entered sex work if they were given viable livelihood free from sexual harassment. However future studies, focusing on how structural issues related to economics and societal neglect of married but widowed/divorced/separated women in South Asia may help shed light on these issues. In the current models of trauma, trauma is focused on the individual intrapsychic event. To better understand the trauma experienced by Third World women, it is critical that we consider the contexts in which they live and structural systems of oppression.

Policy related to Sex Workers

The women sex workers who participated in the current study were from Sonagachhi in Kolkata, where an organization, Durbar, has been active in advocating for their rights and providing education and support. Throughout the interviews, Durbar's strong presence in Sonagachhi was evident as the women talked about their daily experiences, as well as basic rights. Kotiswaran (2013) noted four different sex work related policy options: (1) complete criminalization of everything related to sex work, (2) partial criminalization, where sex workers are not criminalized but everything else, i.e. customers, brothel houses, etc, are, (3) complete decriminalization, where anti-sex work laws are repealed and already existing laws regulate sex workers, and (4) legalization, where in addition to repealing anti-sex work laws, specific laws regulating sex work are created. Legal policies are culture dependent and positioning one's views on a specific policy over others on absolutist terms may not be helpful for a researcher. However,

based on my interactions with sex workers for this study, I personally believe legalization to be most consistent with what the women I interviewed were advocating for. The participants in this study corroborated that Durbar's strong presence in Sonagachhi, their public health model that involves sex education, creating small clubs and communities to support sex workers, create equal opportunity by providing banking services, health clinics etc. mitigated the experiences of violence and victimhood that sex workers in the region faced before Durbar was established. It seemed that women were open to talking with the Durbar *Didi*s (peer counselors) who come by their brothels and disseminate sex education, advocacy issues etc. than they were with the official counselor at the agency. This is consistent with some research that suggests that counseling provided by one's peers is the most preferred approach to intervention for mental health in India (e.g. Singla et al., 2014). It is important to focus on accommodating sex workers into a broader culture and system with additional sociolegal and mental health protections, and respecting and meeting their material needs. Because of the allocation of sex work as feminized, gendered labor (Kempadoo & Doezema, 1998), women's rights and sex workers rights overlap with each other and are intrinsically connected. Policy makers in India and other similar cultural settings need to consider legalization as a viable option to afford sex workers a valued position in the society.

Conclusion

This study adds to the feminist, anthropological, sociological and psychological studies on sex work by elaborating on trauma and meaning making in the context of the familial self. It also reflects on the diversity of sex workers' experiences, as well as the ambivalence of the sex workers' position on the victim-agent continuum. Sex work challenges the heterosexist and monogamous societal enforcement of women's sexual expression being private, and the notion

that women's affective work cannot reap economic benefits. However, sex work also often is a result of heterosexual, patriarchal systems in conjunction with a global capitalistic system that ensnares some women with no other viable livelihood. Thus, sex work is located within an ambiguous middle of exploitation and empowerment, of agency and victimhood.

This study also further demonstrated the diversity of trauma and meaning making experiences in women, challenging the essentializing universalism of current psychological studies on trauma. The prevalent positivist and cognitivist framework of trauma shaped by the Western culture in which it is situated define trauma reactions within individualist and intrapsychic terms (Bracken, 2002). However, for the Indian familial self, traumatic incidents are interpreted through a different lens which is influenced by cultural norms of gender roles and interpersonal relations. This leads to an incident being deemed distressful when it goes against societal norms (e.g. first sexual encounter as a sex worker was difficult) but another similar incident can be considered not traumatic when societal norms state that the experience is normative within the interpersonal context (e.g. a pre-teen/early teen's first forced sexual experience with her husband). Additionally, what is more traumatic to women in the context of a familial self may be a disruption in interpersonal relationships or lack of meaningful relationships, rather than a violation of psychological or physical integrity. Psychological research on trauma and sex work needs to consider interdisciplinary sources to better understand alternative experiences and definitions of what constitutes trauma in developing a more comprehensive and global understanding of the subject.

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Table 1

Themes/Subthemes

Life Conditions leading to sex work
Dual Pride, Independence, and Control
Pride in providing for oneself and one's family
Pride in providing a service to society
Ambivalence regarding sex work
Worker Rights
Recognition and respect for their work
Improvement of working conditions
Violence and Meaning Making
The Salience of Intimate Interpersonal Relations
Hurt related to relational unfulfillment
Satisfaction in intimate interpersonal connections

Appendix A

Initial Contact Email

To
Mr. Pintu Maity
Durbar Mahila Samanwaya

Dear Sir,

My name is Shruti Dasgupta. I am a graduate student at Miami University, which is situated in the state of Ohio in USA. I contacted you Friday 14th August, 2015 asking you about the procedures involved in working with members of your organization, who are involved in sex work.

My primary interest involves understanding women's experiences in their work as sex workers in Kolkata. For this I plan on conducting one-on-one in person interviews. Women who are willing to participate will be informed that the interview is strictly on a volunteer basis and they can withdraw part or all of their responses at any time, and can stop the interview at any time without any repercussion. They will also be informed that their responses will be taped for research purposes but will be completely confidential.

The following is a sample of the kinds of questions I may ask women who are willing to participate. I will conduct the interview in Bengali.

- Tell me about you.
- How did you start working at [their place of work]?
- What do you think about your work? (/How do you make sense of it?)
- What do you do besides this work? Tell me about your life (family, friends).
- What do you do when you feel bad/stressed/upset?
- What do you think about this organization? What part do you play in this organization?
- What kinds of services do you get from this organization? Do you get to talk to other sex-workers?
- What kinds of services would you like to get from this organization/community/ government?
- Have there been times, when you felt coerced or forced into performing sexual/physical acts in your work? How did you make sense of it?
- What do you think about the laws surrounding sex work? Would you like the laws to change? In what way?

Please let me know if there is any more information you would require. I appreciate your time.

Thanking you,
Shruti Dasgupta

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

1. You are invited to participate in a research study undertaken by Shruti Dasgupta, MA doctoral student in psychology and Vaishali Raval, PhD Associate Professor of Psychology at Miami University. This study has been approved by Miami University IRB (01213r). Please read this information carefully and decide whether you would like to participate.

2. The purpose of this research is to explore experiences of women who are involved in sex work. If you decide to continue your participation in this study, you will be asked about your experiences your experiences growing up, and your experiences related to sex work including any experience of violence. This will take approximately 1 to 2 hours.

3. The interview will be audio-recorded and then transcribed. Quotes may be used verbatim from your interview, in de-identified form.

4. Your participation in this research is voluntary. You may skip any question that you prefer not to answer. If you would like to withdraw from the study at any stage, you can simply stop answering questions without any clarification or penalty.

5. This consent form that contains your name will be stored in a locked cabinet separately from the questionnaire you will complete. The audio file of your recorded interview will be stored on a password-protected computer, accessible only to the researchers and trained research assistants associated with this project.

6. Participation in this research may give you an opportunity to think about your experiences related to sex work. The findings of this study will benefit community of sex workers by increasing our understanding of experiences of women.

7. It is possible that thinking about their emotional states and experiences may be upsetting for some people. If this occurs, please feel free to take a break, or you may discontinue participation without explanation. I, Shruti Dasgupta, am also available to talk further about topics that are upsetting you.

8. If you have any questions about this research, you can contact Shruti Dasgupta, MA at dasgups@miamioh.edu, or Vaishali Raval, PhD at 001-513-529-6209 or ravalvv@miamioh.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Office of Advancement of Research and Scholarship of Miami University at 001-513-529-3600 or humansubjects@miamioh.edu

Thank you for your consideration. We are very grateful for your help.
By signing my name below, I am indicating that I have understood the information provided about the research project mentioned above, and I have been satisfied with the answers provided to my questions.
Please initial each of the following:

_____I acknowledge that I am 18 years or older. I have read the preceding statements and I voluntarily agree to participate.

_____I give my permission for the researcher to digitally audio-record and transcribe my interview.

_____ I give my permission for the researcher to quote from my interview responses, verbatim, in part or in whole in any reports of this research. Prior to completion of this research or publication of any related articles, I am free to withdraw this consent for any reason. There is no penalty associated with withdrawing this consent.

_____

Signature of participant Date

_____

Signature of primary researcher Date

Appendix C

Guiding Questions for Semi-Structured Interview

I am interested in learning about what it is like to be working as a sex worker. I will be talking with you about your life, and asking you some questions. I realize that it might be strange talking about your life with someone like me whom you don't know. You can tell me as much as you feel comfortable and you don't have to answer any question that you don't want to.

Current experiences (including those related to sex work)

- Tell me about you. How old are you?
- How did you start working [here]?
- How long have you been working?
- What do you think about your work? (/How do you make sense of it?) What do others around you think about it?
- Walk me through a typical day in your life when you are working starting with the time you wake up in the morning to when you go to sleep.
- What are some benefits, if any, of this job and what do you not like about it?
- How easy or difficult it is to find work?
- What are some rules, norms, or customs (spoken or unspoken) of this work?
- What do you do besides this work? Do you have days off when you are not working? How do you spend those days? Walk me through a typical day when you are not working.
- Are you religious? What religion do you follow? What kinds of religious activities do you engage in?
- What kinds of things make you happy, fine, or satisfied?
- What kinds of things make you feel bad/stressed/upset? What do you do when you feel bad/stressed/ upset?

Experiences growing up

- Tell me about your experiences growing up. Where were you born? Where did you grow up? Who did you live with? How were your relationships with [name of the persons] you grew up with?
- Were there any conflicts growing up? Did you feel like there was adequate care and attention from adults in your life?
- How long have you lived in Kolkata? Tell me about your experiences in this city.
- Do you stay in contact with [name of the persons] you grew up with? What is your relationship like now?
- How far did you go in school? How was it like? Why did you stop going to school?

Experiences related to violence

- Have there been times when you heard about others being forced or coerced into sex work?
- Have there been times, when you felt coerced or forced into performing sexual/physical acts in your work? How did you make sense of it?

- If you have, how frequently? What do you think about this? How common is this among other sex workers?
- Have there been times when you felt coerced or forced into performing sexual acts outside of work in your present life by a partner or non-clients?
- Have you ever had any unwanted sexual or physical experiences before you started sex work?
- Which experience was the most hurtful emotionally? Why?

Experiences with the organization, community, etc.

- What do you think about this organization? What part do you play in this organization?
- What kinds of services do you get from this organization? Do you get to talk to other sex-workers? Does that help/not?
- What kinds of services would you like to get from this organization/community/ government?
- What do you think about the laws surrounding sex work? Would you like the laws to change? In what way?
- What is your experience like with authorities like police officers?
- How was this interview like for you? What would you have liked to be different?