

REVIEW



Divided by unscalable iron wall: psychological consequences of botched social image among female commercial sex workers: a qualitative study from Kolkata, India

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ABSTRACT

Background: Despite the longstanding history of mainstream society utilizing the services of female commercial sex workers (FCSWs), Indian culture still struggles to embrace them as part of their community fully. In recent decades, the clandestine sex trade has significantly increased activity throughout the country. The focus of this study is to assess the perspectives of commercial sex workers regarding society, law enforcement, Indian Acts and legislations associated with the sex trade and human trafficking and their current psychological status.

Methods: This qualitative study was conducted on twenty FCSWs who were selected using convenience sampling techniques from the red-light district of Sonagachhi, Kolkata, and West Bengal. This focused group discussion (FGD) with twenty respondents (four groups of five women) and five case studies of active FCSWs were carried out during the months of January 2021 to April 2021. Therefore, randomly, twenty women were selected, conveniently belonging to the age range of 23-45 years. In this study, four FGD in four separate groups, each comprised of five women, were carried out. From the twenty FCSWs, five women were selected randomly for case studies.

Results: Results suggested that the selected commercial sex workers often feel insecure and stigmatized, anticipating being ostracized by mainstream society and its agencies and they do not have much information about legislation and protective measures related to human trafficking.

Conclusion: Sex workers had a deep sense of distraughtness and dejection due to the inimical views of mainstream society towards them.

KEYWORDS

Sex work; Prostitution; Sex trade; Society; Taboo

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Introduction

Commercial sex work involves exchanging sexual services for money, goods, or other benefits. This work blurs the lines between emotional, erotic, and economic labor and is often viewed through a gendered, sexualized, and racialized lens. There are distinct characteristics of commercial sex work, including its nature as an occupation, an act of selling, a sexual exchange, and a promiscuous act devoid of emotional attachment [1]. Sociologist Ronald Weitzer has identified six types of prostitution: street prostitution, private prostitution, brothel prostitution, bar or casino prostitution, window prostitution, and escort prostitution [2-4]. Some traditional views consider prostitution emblematic of patriarchal gender relations, while others view it as a safety valve that helps maintain the respectability of marriage in society. Critics of prostitution often focus on its negative aspects, such as objectification, exploitation, gender hierarchy, and harm. Some theories suggest that engaging in delinquent or deviant lifestyles may lead to prostitution, while others attribute it to macroeconomic and socio-cultural factors. Ultimately, many complex factors contribute to the continuation of commercial sex work [5-11].

Prostitution in ancient India was categorized by philosopher Chanakya in his book Arthshastra as (a) Ganika, (b) Rupajiva,

and (c) Pumsachali. "Ganika" prostitutes were controlled by the state and only allowed to operate in state-owned establishments. "Rupajiva" prostitutes were independent practitioners working in smaller places the state did not support, and "Pumsachali" were concubines. Before being labeled as "prostitutes," women ranged from temple dancers to concubines. These ideas about "morality" and "prostitution" in India were not simply adopted from Europe but stemmed from a complex negotiation process across the subcontinent. In modern India, commercial sex work is often associated with specific localities within cities where social outcasts come to find housing due to discrimination based on marital status, caste, lack of finances, and stigmatized professions. These localities often have inadequate infrastructure and limited access to basic amenities.

People in these areas also face economic discrepancies, as they are usually informal settlements and are repeatedly denied access to mainstream educational and financial systems. The organized sex trade is prevalent in larger cities and urban conglomerations like Mumbai, Kolkata, Varanasi, Hyderabad, Delhi, and Bengaluru, and high prostitute supply provinces are Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Bihar, Jharkhand, and West Bengal.

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Causes of commercial sex work in India include poor parental care, family prostitutes, social customs, lack of sex education, media influence, poverty, and financial crises. Psychological causes include the desire for physical pleasure, greed, and dejection. However, most women enter this profession involuntarily [12-15].

On May 19, 2022, the Supreme Court of India made a landmark ruling directing the police to treat sex workers with dignity and respect and refrain from verbal or physical abuse towards them. The court condemned the police administration for their objectionable behavior towards sex workers and reminded them of their responsibilities. The court emphasized that sex workers should not be viewed as a class whose rights are not recognized in the Indian Constitution. Human trafficking is considered a severe crime in India, and multiple constitutional and legal provisions criminalize any act of human trafficking for the sex trade [1,12-16].

The challenges faced by female commercial sex workers (FCSWs), can contribute to their vulnerability to mental health problems. These challenges include financial difficulties, limited access to education, and exposure to violence, addiction, and social marginalization. Unfortunately, the negative stereotypes and misunderstandings associated with this profession can lead to internal and external stigmatization, which can cause anxiety, loneliness, and poor mental health [17-22].

In this study, we aimed to qualitatively assess the views and attitudes of commercial sex workers actively involved in the sex trade towards law enforcement authorities, society, and the cultural divide between their environment and the dominant culture and how daily hassles and traumatic incidents affect their current psychological health.

Materials and Methods

Study location

Our study was conducted in Kolkata, the third largest city in India and the administrative capital of West Bengal State. The research occurred in Sonagachhi, a well-known red-light area in the city's northern suburbs, where over 11,000 sex workers resided in 2018. The Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC), a prominent NGO that supports sex workers in West Bengal, particularly those based in Sonagachhi, Kolkata, assisted our team in conducting the study.

Research design

In this study, we conducted qualitative research by applying an experimental design. For data collection, we have used focused group discussion (from now on, FGD) and in-depth interviews on the selected subjects (FCSWs based at Sonagachhi, Kolkata, India). We recorded the lived experiences of sex workers in the red-light district of Sonagachhi during those two previously mentioned qualitative measures.

Samples and sampling

We conducted a study with the help of a non-governmental organization, DMSC, that works towards the welfare and rights protection of FCSWs in India, particularly those located in the Sonagachhi area of Kolkata. Between January and April 2021, we conducted FGDs with 20 participants, divided into four groups of five women each. We randomly selected these 20 women from a list of active FCSWs provided by the DMSC, aged between 23 to 45 years and had worked there for at least

two years. The FGDs were conducted in four groups, each consisting of five women. Additionally, we randomly selected five women from the 20 participants to conduct case studies using the lottery method. Each woman on the list was assigned a specific code, and a counselor working in the NGO DMSC, who was not part of the study, was asked to pick five paper chits randomly containing the code names of the 20 FCSWs. None of the twenty women, including whose names were selected, was aware of their selection for the case studies. This way, a 'double-blind selection process' was applied here to select the five subjects for 'Case Studies'. The mental health status of the selected five women for case studies was assessed by using some questions which were based on questions given in Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale - 21 (DASS-21) [23]. This measure was taken as a reference for asking questions of these five selected women for conducting the case studies (Figure 1).

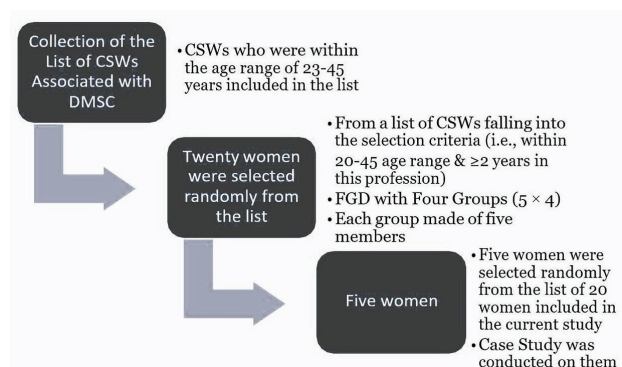


Figure 1. Sampling plan.

Data collection

Socio-demographic data Sheet: For socio-demographic profiling of the selected 20 women, a brief socio-demographic data sheet was prepared, which included variables like "age," "education," "age of entry in this profession," "monthly income," "duration in this occupation," "religion," "mother tongue," etc.

Focused group discussion (FGD): FGD is frequently used as a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of social issues.

FGD guide:

- Duration of working as FCSW
- Causal factors of entry into this occupation
- How is your economic condition now compared to before?
- How do the police behave with you?
- In what ways would you want the law to protect you?
- Do you think your rights and needs are treated equally with any other citizen?
- What is your view about your position in society?
- What is your opinion about overall societal reaction and reception towards you?
- How do you interpret men's attitude and behaviour to you and your profession?
- Do you feel stressed out or extremely worried or tensed?
- Do you feel that your life is a misery; there is no meaning of life, feel helpless and hopeless about your life?
- Do you feel that, it would have been better if you died or do you ever feel that it is better to end your life by committing suicide?

Structure of the Group:

A Members- A¹, A², A³, A⁴, and A⁵ Group

B Members- B¹, B², B³, B⁴, and B⁵ Group

C Members- C¹, C², C³, C⁴, and C⁵ Group

D Members- D¹, D², D³, D⁴, and D⁵ Group

[*We have replaced the selected women's names with alpha-numeric digits to protect their anonymity]

Case study: We conducted an extensive study on the sex trade and commercial sex work. We handpicked five sex workers to participate in our case studies to understand their perspectives on their profession, societal attitudes, perceptions of the organization, legal rights, their perception of stress and psychological health. In addition, we asked them to share their experiences before entering the profession. By using intrinsic and instrumental case study approaches, we comprehensively understood the individual and societal issues surrounding this complex issue. Our case studies were designed to help us better understand the experiences and needs of sex workers in real-life situations.

Data analysis

For our study, we intentionally focused on a specific group of 20 women rather than gathering data from a more extensive and diverse population. We conducted four in-depth FGD with five participants to explore their views on legal protection, civil and human rights, and societal reactions and acceptance. Throughout the talks, we encouraged the women to share their experiences and knowledge of civic and law-enforcing agencies, sex trade and human trafficking laws and regulations. We reassured them that their anonymity and confidentiality were protected and obtained informed consent before commencing the study. We used deductive and inductive coding and a

thematic framework to analyze the data to identify common themes and differences among the four groups. We also employed NVivo software and had two independent peer reviewers with experience in qualitative research review our analysis to increase its validity. Our primary objective was to gain insight into the selected women's perceptions of the civic system and society and their current psychological status. The information in this section of the current study represents the researchers' interpretation based on the following things:

- Notes taken during the FGDs.
- A comprehensive review of the audio recordings of the FGDs.
- A content analysis of the typed transcripts from the four FGDs.

Results

We used a category content model of narrative analysis to guide our data analysis. This means we categorized the data based on their relevance to our research questions and placed them into different categories (Table 1). We identified three categories: "generic views of FCSWs towards society and its components," "views on Acts, laws and legislations related to sex trade and human trafficking," "their subjective feelings on current psychological status, perception of stress and worry," "views on law enforcing authority (police service)." Initially, the FCSWs showed reluctance to participate in our FGD because they saw us as part of mainstream society. However, they began to behave appropriately once they saw that we were with representatives from the DMSC, an organization that works for the welfare of commercial sex workers in the Sonagachchi red-light area. DMSC acts as a bridge between the FCSWs and mainstream society.

Table 1. Socio-demographic and occupational profile of the selected FCSWs (N=20).

Variable	Description	
Age	34.60 ± 7.07 (Range 23-45 years)	
Age of Entry in Profession	22.00 ± 3.72 (Range 15-28 years)	
Monthly Income	Rs. 6150.00 ± 1278.36 (Range 4500-9500)	
Present Marital Status	Married	2 (10%)
	Never Married	5 (25%)
	Separated/Divorced	13 (65%)
Religion	Hindu	12 (60%)
	Muslim	5 (25%)
	Others	3 (15%)
Education	Illiterate	11 (55%)
	Middle Level	7 (35%)
	School Leaving Certificate (10 th Standard)	2 (10%)
Habitat	Rural	16 (80%)
	Urban	4 (20%)
Reasons for Entering this Profession	Poverty & Unemployment	9 (45%)
	Deserted by Spouse & Lack of Spousal Support	7 (35%)
	Multiple Reasons	4 (20%)
Living Status at Red-light	Permanent Residents in the Red-light Area	10 (50%)

Area	Floating Sex Workers	10 (50%)
Frequency of Police Harassment/Misbehaviour	Rarely Occurs (One or Two Minor Events)	2 (10%)
	Moderately Occurs (One Major Event/3 months)	13 (65%)
	Regularly Occurs (>One Major Event/Month)	3 (15%)
	Not Commented	2 (10%)
Reasons for Conflicts with Clients	Rate/Charge of Service/Financial Issues	7 (35%)
	Addicted/Inebriated Client	2 (10%)
	Multiple Reasons	8 (40%)
	Not Commented	3 (15%)

This table demonstrated the socio-demographic profiles of the selected 20 CSAs. The mean age of the chosen FCSWs was 34.60 ± 7.07 (Range 23-45 years), and the mean age of their entry into this profession was 22.00 ± 3.72 (Range 15-28 years). Their average monthly income was Rs. 7475.00 \pm 1129.45 (Range 5000-9500) (Indian Currency). Of the FCSWs selected, only two reported that their conjugal relationship was intact, but the majority said they were abandoned by their husbands (n=13). Five of them indicated they had never been in a conjugal relationship. Regarding religious affiliation, most were Hindus, followed by Islam (n=5). Only three of them turned out to be believers in Christianity. In terms of education, the majority were illiterate (n=11), and seven had middle levels of education (\leq 8th Standard). Only two reported passing the school final education examination (10th Standard). Most were from rural areas (n=16), whereas only four were from urban areas. About entering this profession, there were three reasons, i.e., poverty (n=9), abandonment by husbands (n=7) and multiple reasons (n=4). Regarding the residential status of the selected FCSWs, half are permanent residents, and the other half are floating sex workers. Most reported that they frequently experience police harassment and misbehavior (n=13) (at least One Major Event/in the last 3 months). However, two did not report significant police harassment, and two others abstained from commenting. From these selected 20 FCSWs, the primary reasons for conflicts with customers were rate/charge of service (n=7), customers coming into an addicted or inebriated state (n=2), and multiple reasons (n=8). However, the remaining three made no effort to comment on this question.

Generic views on Indian society and its component

We noted that the women had a deep sense of embitterment about society because they would feel society and its components kept a wrongful and ostracized view towards them and their occupation. They had reported quite categorically that society and its agencies would never be sympathetic towards them and their helplessness; the community and its people would only see their sufferings from a distance and keep a sense of bigotry and abhorrence towards them. Nonetheless, some would say good words, but they added all those are rhetorical-just empty words. The selected FCSWs asserted that they do not expect better behavior from society. They also expressed their views on society by saying that as society has made them outcasts, they do not care what society thinks about them. The societal taboo related to the sex trade and sex workers does not make any difference to them, and neither have they cared about societal taboos. They say they are well and alive and have enough to feed their families; some have even built their

own houses, and they owe it all to their profession. They do not concern themselves with what society thinks at all. They only want society to stay away from their lives and let them live. The selected FCSWs unequivocally stated that they want society to accept and recognize them as other ordinary citizens. They vehemently reject the prevailing view of society on them and their occupation by saying that society sees one side of their profession but does not ask why they had to take up this profession- nobody wants to see her in such a demeaning position. They unequivocally stated that they were only concerned about their survival. They do not expect good things from society. They do not have many ideas about the status of the global sex trade, and neither do they even familiar with countries where the sex trade or commercial sex work is a common thing. However, some know about incidents of women trafficking from neighboring countries like Nepal and Bangladesh and involving them in the promiscuous sex trade in Indian metros, e.g., Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, etc. The selected FCSWs are not hopeful about India's present civic and judiciary systems in protecting their lives and rights. They would keep repeating that "even women of mainstream society do not get justice, feel safe, then how can we expect those things from the system- we are nowhere- we are hapless- living in a wretched condition." Somehow, we could notice that they are oscillating around two mutually opposing ideological stands, i.e., "trying to remain indifferent to societal views towards them" and, simultaneously, "a covert plea to society and its system to secure their safety, rights, and social positions." Societal abhorrence and repulsion towards them seemed to hurt them very significantly. They overtly became emotionally charged and vocal while talking about the societal precept of enjoying their service but not showing any sense of coherence to them.

Views on Acts, laws and legislations related to the sex trade and human trafficking

During our discussions with women of all ages in the FGDs, we realized they needed to learn about laws and regulations protecting their fundamental and civic rights. They seemed uninterested in learning about these things, as they believed that legal provisions and Acts were only meant for people in mainstream society and not for people like them. They have lost hope in law enforcement and the judiciary because their cries and demands have never been heard.

They feel that society does not pay attention to their needs because they are seen as denigrators or deviated people with questionable morality. They also face problems in accessing financial and banking systems due to societal stigma and

abhorrence. We found that it is crucial to provide basic information about the fundamental rights enshrined in the Indian Constitution and various Acts and legislations. Additionally, there is a need for more interaction between individuals from mainstream society and those in the red-light area beyond customers, agents, police officers, and people associated with NGOs and voluntary organizations. Ordinary people rarely visit this area, and it is essential to bridge this gap.

Views on law enforcing authority (police service)

The FCSWs who were chosen expressed their dislike and distrust towards the police system. They believed the police were more harmful than regular people and did not provide the necessary support to protect them. Instead, they often exploit them for financial gain. The women had witnessed many police raids, which they felt were merely a facade for accepting bribes. If they refused to comply with the police's demands, the officers would threaten to charge them with minor crimes. The police would also mistreat them by using lewd comments and demeaning behavior. The FCSWs felt that if the police were more vigilant and responsible, the Sonagachhi area would be safer for them. They believed the police officers' "don't care or above everything attitude" was due to their association with local goons, agents, and politicians. Since society does not support them, their problems are not highlighted, and the police mistreat them easily.

Subjective feelings on current psychological status, perception of stress and worry

The selected twenty FCSWs were found to be edgy while talking about issues related to their mental health. Some of them became overtly apprehensive when they were asked about mental health. They would not say initially significant about their mental health issues. However, they subsequently started expressing and sharing facts about their current psychological status. Many said they feel distressed seeing their social position and ordinary people's reactions towards them and their profession. Due to life difficulties, traumas and the stigma associated with sex work and chances of developing sexually transmitted diseases like HIV/AIDS, many participants had expressed that they often have mental health problems, such as severe stress, anxiety, insomnia, and depression, and some had even significant feelings of hopelessness and helplessness occasional ideations of ending their lives. Some of them had reported that they would even take various types of addiction (mainly alcohol) to cope with the difficulties of their lives and with emotional problems and feelings of distress. They said their life is very miserable, full of traumatic events, humiliation and disrespectful encounters with people, and they often feel distraught. They also have an overwhelming feeling of lack of self-respect and self-esteem.

Illustrative quotations from four focused group discussions (*Assigned Group Number)

Mainstream society, its agencies, systems, and people

- "Why should I care for society? Would society feed my children and me? Tell me what else I could have done. I did not have a formal education nor any vocational training besides living with my alcohol-addicted husband. Life was miserable for me then; now, I am financially stable. I do not care what your society says about me or my profession." A^{3*}
- "I think society should feel thankful to us because of us

females of mainstream society can go out of their homes." B^{4*}

- "Why has society been so deceitful to us- are we causing any harm to people? Why do people see us and our profession so disdainfully? Those who talk about morality come to us regularly after dusk." C^{2*}
- "We are treated inhumanly by the formal agencies, banks, and other civic organizations; officials and staff of those organizations misbehave with us very often; we are the subject of hatred for them." D^{1*}
- "If I start digging into my past and start asking myself why me? Why I cannot enjoy a life like a person in mainstream society do." Then, I would ruin both my present and future. "Let's accept life as it is." B^{5*}
- "We live today; we do not want to spend time thinking about the past or the future; it is simply a waste of time. I do not want to think about society and what people think about us because nobody will be available at the time of need." C^{4*}

Acts, laws, and legislations related to sex trade and human trafficking

- "I don't understand Acts, laws, and rules- I don't find any relevance to these things in our life, in our profession; anyway, there may be laws or Acts – but for using those things are useless; Acts and laws are meant for rich people, educated people, and people belonging to gentlemen's societies, not for us." B^{1*}
- "I don't have the knowledge of law, nor do I want to know about it; those are complex issues, and I don't have the education and understanding to think about them." A^{3*}
- "What is Act? I have never felt that the Act is saving the rights of people like us. What are you asking me? Acts, rules, and legislation are all rubbish! At least I do not want to take them seriously- all those things for "Bhadraloks" (gentlemen)." D^{5*}
- "There may be Acts, but in what way are those helping us, we are already in this profession for a long time– do those Acts have the capacity to give us a normal life like others?" C^{3*}

Law enforcing authority (police service)

- If you ask me what the most imminent threat I routinely face is, I would say police officers. They are the greatest threat to me and others like me (Sonagachchi, Kolkata). Instead of protecting us, they (police officers) try to create all kinds of problems for us and ask us to give them money regularly. They keep on threatening us by misusing their power." D^{4*}
- "The police are supposed to protect us, but instead of protecting us, policemen exploit us by taking money from us; if we deny it, they threaten to throw us out of this place and arrest us." C^{2*}
- "Why are you asking about the police? Don't you know how they treat ordinary or helpless people like us? They listen only to politicians and rich people." A^{4*}

Psychological Health

- "I often feel my life is meaningless and a lousy life. What is the point of living if somebody fails to earn respect and recognition from others? Money cannot achieve a positive social image and respect". D^{5*}
- "I always feel apprehensive and tensed immediately after waking up – what awaits me for the rest of the day. I had

some traumatic experiences in the past in the form of physical assaults and police harassment. Memories of those events always haunt me". B^{2*}

- "Sometimes, I feel so frustrated and grumpy with my life that I wish to end it." C^{1*}
- "My experiences are not typical of a woman's life. They are filled with negativity, events, and issues that no woman

would willingly subject herself to. It is a demeaning and disrespectful position to be in, and although I am alive, my soul has felt dead ever since I entered this profession." A^{2*}

Table 2 represents examples of meaning units, summarized meaning units, sub-themes, and themes extracted from interviews regarding societal perceptions and experiences of sex workers.

Table 2. Examples of meaning units, summarized meaning units, sub-themes, and themes.

Meaning Units	Summarized Meaning Units	Sub-themes	Themes
"I do not have be concerned about society – I know my profession is socially condemned and denigrated, because of this reason society will never include me as its part. No woman will adopt this profession knowingly in this country – nobody will try to know why I had to take up this profession."	Rationalizing and defending taking up this profession & disapproving societal stance to them	Expression of enagement to society	Mainstream society, its agencies, systems, and people
"I think society should feel thankful to us because of us females of mainstream society can go out of their homes."	Admonishing the society and effort to show their value	Justifying sex work	Mainstream society, its agencies, systems, and people
"Why has society been so deceitful to us- are we causing any harm to people? Why do people see us and our profession so disdainfully? Those who talk about morality come to us regularly after dusk."	Seeking assuage or support from mainstream society with a deep sense of frustration	Pleading to society	Mainstream society, its agencies, systems, and people
"I don't understand Acts, laws, and rules- I don't find any relevance to these things in our life, in our profession; anyway, there may be laws or Acts- but for using those things are useless. Acts and laws are meant for rich people, educated people, and people belonging to gentlemen's societies, not for us."	Expressing no trust on formal systems safeguarding the rights of people	Lack of knowledge and mistrust on Acts	Acts, laws, and legislations related to sex trade and human trafficking

"What is Act? I have never felt that Act is saving the rights of people like us. What are you asking me? Acts, rules, and legislation are all rubbish! At least I do not want to take them seriously- all those things for "Bhadraloks" (gentlemen or white- collar people)."	Expression of least expectation from formal system on supporting them and address their interests	Hopelessness and frustration on legal system	Acts, laws, and legislations related to sex trade and human trafficking
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Case Studies

Through our case studies, we rigorously interviewed individuals regarding their pre- and post-entering profession experiences. We aimed to gain invaluable insight into their knowledge of laws and regulations against human trafficking and which laws they deemed imperative. However, an immense discrepancy exists in India between how sex workers are perceived by society and how they view mainstream society. There have been several issues between the two parties, resulting in an unbridgeable gap.

Case study 1

Name: A⁵

Index participant A⁵, aged 45, came from a rural area of West Bengal. In her family of origin, she would live with her grandparents, parents, siblings, and other relatives. It was a traditional, rural, agrarian Indian joint family. She said that despite financial problems, she had never felt any inadequacy or unhappiness during her childhood. She received adequate care from her parents. She studied till class 9 and got married at the age of 14. She gave birth to two sons. She lost her husband when she was 35 years of age. Since then, she started to work as a tailor, and both her sons used to assist her. With the income of three people, they managed to survive somehow. But seven years ago, her elder son got married, and her daughter-in-law did not want to live with her or maintain any relationship with her. So, her elder son moved out with his wife and started to live in his in-laws' house. Her younger son is only 16 years old and is still studying, so he cannot help his mother out as much as the elder son could. Soon, financial problems became more complex, and she had immense difficulty maintaining her family. She started to look for different jobs that would help her earn more. One day, a man in her neighborhood approached her with work; he told her about Sonagachhi and what she would have to do there. She agreed, and the man brought her to Sonagachhi. She has been here for 5 years now. When asked to describe a typical day, she said that she gets up at 5 AM and starts doing her daily chores such as filling the water, cleaning her room, washing her clothes, bathing, performing her daily rituals of prayer, cooking etc. Around 10 AM, she goes out to work and looks for customers. After 2- 3 hours, she eats and rests for a while, and again, from 4 PM, she starts working and works till 10 PM. She said that society should be grateful towards them because of them women of mainstream society can go out of their houses safely. Otherwise, women could not roam freely in society or go to work. She said that she did not know of any laws that were available for or against them. She said that she had seen a lot of injustice in her time here, and girls have hit her for no reason, but she has seen that police do not

help people like her, so she does not embroil with them. There is not even a public toilet in this area for women, which makes it very difficult to work sometimes, but the unavailability of such a basic amenity has taught her that nobody will help her there. She has no expectations from society, nor does she feel optimistic about society's age-old notions about this profession. She said, "I do not see any hope that society will feel our problem, people will start empathizing with us and treat us as fellow citizens- no, not possible". On asking issues related to her mental health, she said, "I always remain edgy, worried and apprehensive about my profession- but, at the same time I console myself by saying what else I could have done- I was so helpless. Sometimes, I feel very low and sad when ordinary people mistreat us and our profession".

Case Study 2

Name: C³

Participant C³, a 42-year-old woman from a lower socio-economic family, endured a difficult childhood due to financial struggles and a challenging family environment. At 13, she married a man who worked in a tailor shop and had four children with him. Her husband abandoned her for someone else about a decade ago, resulting in financial difficulties once again. Selling vegetables in her neighborhood was insufficient to support her family, so she entered her current profession to repay her debts. She lives in a village 40 km away from the city and tells her family that she works as a bedside hospital assistant in Kolkata. Despite not possessing much knowledge of her profession's laws or constitutional rights, she has yet to encounter any significant issues or interactions with the police. She is frustrated with society's negative perception of her profession but believes it is a necessary safety valve for women to pursue education and employment. This lady became a bit apprehensive while asking questions related to her current psychological status and mental health. However, subsequently, she showed signs of cooperation and started talking about these issues. She said, "It is disheartening for me to compare myself with other women who seem to be leading a normal life without any restrictions or challenges. Unlike them, I often face humiliating situations and do not receive social recognition. I am unable to enjoy a healthy lifestyle like them, which makes me feel like I am missing out on a lot. Every day feels like a struggle, and I feel defeated by the end of it. However, I try to gather my strength and start a fresh every morning, hoping for a better day".

Case Study 3

Name: B⁵

Index participant B⁵, 40 years old, is one of the sex workers who do not stay in Sonagachhi (Red light area) but work here. Such sex workers come here daily from their respective houses and return at night. They are referred to as 'Flying Sex Workers' here. She hails from a small-town Habra, which is 45 km away from Kolkata city, India. She has 2 sisters and 1 brother. She used to live with her parents and her siblings in their house. She has studied till class 10. She said that her childhood was beautiful, and she never faced any problems; she feels that her childhood was the best part of her life. She got married at the age of 15, and her problem started. She has one daughter and one son. When her son was around 10, her husband deserted her for another woman. After he left, she suffered from a financial crisis and would not get much help from others, including her family of origin. Then, a friend of her, a sex worker, brought her here. Since then, she has been working here. Now, her son is studying in class 10, and her daughter is doing an MA. She pays for all their expenses through sex work. But she must tell her children and neighbors that she works as an ayah in Kolkata. She is terrified that if ever her children or her neighbors come to know the truth, then what will happen to her? She has always been very apprehensive about her fate and the fate of her children if people learn about her occupation. She comes to Sonagachhi from her residence every day after preparing food for her children. She works here from 10 AM to 6 PM and returns home again. She said that she is unaware of any laws for them; she thinks there are laws for resolving fights. She has seen raids conducted here but has never faced the police herself. She has seen some girls here snatching away the customers' materials and said that it affects their work negatively. She wishes the police would do something about it so that such incidents do not occur. Besides, she is not concerned about it much and just wants to do her work quietly. On her psychological health, she said, "Our life is the other name of pain and ordeal, and I knew that I should never enjoy the life of an ordinary mainstream citizen". During this part of the interview, she seemed sad and tearful. She also said that her family members and neighbors do not know her actual profession, and she always remains very tense and worried about the disclosure of her sex worker identity.

Case Study 4

Name: D¹

Index participant D¹ is a 35-year-old woman from a rural lower-socioeconomic background. She used to stay in a village not far from the city, where she lived with her parents and siblings. Her family was large, with 10 members. And they had an immense financial crisis. Her father was unemployed, so her parents could not afford education for the children, and they survived many financial problems. At the age of 18, she got married to the son of a wealthy farmer. She recounted a strange story about her marriage; she said it is called "dhorabiye" in her community. "Dhorabiye" means that on the day of the wedding, if the bride or groom does not arrive, then the groom or the bride, depending on the situation, gets married to someone attending the wedding with their consent. In rural India, this practice is significantly present. One day she was attending the wedding of that man, but due to some problem, his bride did not come to marry him. So, from the guests present, she was asked to match the groom, and she did. But this did not go down well with her mother-in-law. She did not like that the index

participant (D¹), being from such a poor family, had married his son. Her husband was lovely, but he depended on his family for financial matters. His mother did not like her and beat and abused her regularly. She would make her do all the household chores and not give her food to eat. She has 1 son, now 14 years of age, 1 daughter, 17 years and her husband. But when she was 25 years old, her mother-in-law sent her back to her home. After returning, her husband never tried to contact her or their children again. Her daughter is married now, and her son is in school. After being deserted by her husband, she used to work as a helper on construction sites, but the money she got was not enough. Her supervisor also used to demand sex in exchange for her salary. Then, a man working at the same site brought her to Sonagachhi. He did not tell her about this place; instead, he told her he was taking her to another location for work. On reaching Sonagachhi, she understood that the women in this area are sex workers. But she was too poor and needed money, so she started working here. She is a "flying sex worker."

She comes here daily by 10 AM and leaves by 6 PM or 6.30 PM. She said that she knows that society considers this an evil profession, but she can do nothing about it. She must work here so that she can feed her son. She is not aware of any laws for women like her. She has seen the police picking up women but does not know why. She said many problems occur here- lots of fights between people, girls snatching away phones and money from customers, etc. but she never sees the police doing anything about it. However, she has a deep fear and anticipation about her identity and always remains edgy about her job. She fears that if her community people know her identity, she will find herself in a difficult situation. She and her children will lose their social position. She mentioned that she frequently attempts to discover the purpose and objectives of her life. She views herself as a victim of circumstances beyond her control and attributes her current condition to fate. She often becomes enraged when faced with the hostility of mainstream society and societal condemnation.

Case Study 5

Name: C⁵

Index participant C⁵, 36 years of age, lives in a suburban area of Kolkata. She said that her childhood was good. She used to live with her parents and siblings. Her father was a mason, and though they were not well off, she never felt the family faced a financial crisis. She studied till class 4. She got married at 18; her husband is a vegetable seller. But he is addicted to heroin and spends all his money there. He also steals when he does not have money for heroin and lies for no reason. She has 1 daughter and 1 son, and they both attend school. She used to work as a maidservant in several houses, but the money was not enough. So, she came here 3 years ago to pay for the necessities of life. She came to Sonagachhi with a neighbor and knew what she would have to do here. Once, her husband visited her in Sonagachhi to see what she does here, so she told him she works at DMSC. She said that she knows how society sees this profession, but she can do nothing about it. She is better off now and can pay for her children's education. She is not aware of any law, but she feels that the police should not catch the customers because they do not cause any problems, and it affects their business. On explicitly asked about her mental health, she said very categorically she does not allow her mind for worrisome thoughts and ideas. She said, "I did not have the option; neither

had I the education nor did I know any vocational skills which could help me to earn money in a dignified manner.” However, she looked to be a bit sad while saying those statements related to her current psychological status.

Discussion

According to the findings of this study, the majority of individuals working as FCSWs originated from rural regions and had limited literacy levels. Additionally, a significant portion of these individuals had experienced separation or divorce. On average, individuals entered this profession at the age of 22, and the majority identified as Hindu, as evidenced in Table 1.

Previous studies on the sex trade in India have indicated that women from lower socio-economic backgrounds in rural areas are more likely to enter this line of work due to factors such as poverty, lack of opportunities, and financial hardship [1,5-7,12,14,24,25]. In the current study, too, almost all the selected FCSWs had socioeconomic reasons like unemployment, poverty, fewer options for livelihood, a lack of support from others, and a tormented marital life for entering this profession (Table 1). In Indian society, prostitution has always been considered a disgraceful occupation. The mainstream society of India keeps raising issues like morality, autonomy over the body, dignity, decency, and obeisance to society-defined rules on sexuality while talking about the legitimacy of sex work in India.

Feel that sex work is inevitable and that sex workers should be treated like any other citizen. However, others want to treat this profession as a "mark of deviance" and "disgraceful" [2-4,14,24,25]. The current study also showed that selected FCSWs reported societal abhorrence and abomination overtly and covertly because of their profession. Though they have a sense of shame in the back of their minds for their professional pursuits, at the same time, they want to make it clear that they know what society thinks and says about them and their profession. They do not care; instead, they express anguish about the insensitive attitude of society towards them (FGD; case studies). We noted from the FGD and case studies that they do not feel remorse about their decision to adopt this profession. They had to take up this profession due to unsurmountable pressures and did not have adequate resources to deal with them. They cannot leave this job, nor do they want to. Mainstream society tends to exert a scathing attitude towards prostitution or people involved in this practice, and there is a massive fissure between ordinary people and FCSWs. Mainstream society has been repulsive towards these people. People show signs of aghastness towards them, fearing society's moral degradation or diminishing of its old value system. Attitudes and behaviors associated with consensual adult prostitution are often justified in society regarding the anticipated negative consequences for the communities that provide venues for "the sex trade" or support its existence [26]. In the current study, selected FCSWs reported that societal bigotry towards them is not limited to marginalization. Rather, they face significant difficulties in doing important formal tasks like banking and financial activities, other formal activities, applying for necessary amenities, etc. Nearly all of them reported experiencing police atrocities and harassment regularly. They even reported that instead of understanding their pathetic condition and empathizing with them, police

officers would try to take advantage of them. They extort money from them. Previously, several authors noted similar kinds of occurrences in different parts of the world. The authors also commented that there is a need for a better understanding of people's attitudes towards this profession and how and why women get into it. Lingering adverse and unsupportive attitudinal positions towards them could lead to adverse effects on sex workers' lives, including their access to important areas of life, i.e., health, justice, safety, and social support [4,10-12,15,22,27-32]. Selected FCSWs of the current study tried to make it clear that they are very much alive with the fact that society will never accept them like others, but at the same time, they also do not expect any support from society; they want a peaceful and trouble-free life where the unwanted intrusion of others will not be there. Almost all selected FCSWs reported being unaware of any acts or legislation protecting their plight and safety. Rather, they expressed a deep-seated sense of deprivation and repulsion from society. They overtly expressed their anguish for not giving them a chance to understand their helplessness and compulsion to select a profession (FGD; case studies). Two cases explicitly stated that instead of being grateful to them, common people show a disgraceful attitude towards them (Case Studies 1 and 2). Similar findings were also noted in some past studies, where FCSWs had expressed similar views [4,7,10,11,15,33,34]. In the current study, aged FCSWs (40+) had expressed relatively lesser intimidation to societal and perceived stigma about their profession. They might have got acclimatized to the negative facets of this profession and, ultimately, acceptance of it as their fate and source of livelihood [32,35,36]. With regard to their current psychological health, many of them had overtly expressed that they feel demoralized remain sad, anxious and grumpy chiefly because of negative aspects associated with their profession, e.g., 'marked societal rejection and abhorrence' (FGD and Case Studies), 'comparing their social status and image with other ordinary women of the mainstream society', 'fear of disclosure of their sex-worker identity (applicable to non-resident floating sex-workers)' and 'not getting adequate opportunities from the formal agencies of the mainstream society'. They seemed to be anxious, tensed, sad, and many of them even questioned justifiability of remaining alive or expressed desire to end their lives. Those findings were seemed to be aligned with some studies done in past on FCSWs and other sex-workers [17,21,35,37-39].

However, this study has some limitations, e.g., small sample size, homogeneous population, selection of subjects from a single location, and lack of corroborativeness of the data shared by the selected FCSWs.

Conclusions

Based on our research, individuals engaged in commercial sex work harbor deep-seated mistrust and animosity towards society and its institutions. They have expressed frustration and distress towards civic and law enforcement entities for failing to offer them the opportunities they rightfully deserve. It is crucial that these individuals receive legal protection to safeguard their rights. Regrettably, society tends to neglect their needs, depriving them of access to mainstream culture and further impinging on their rights. Myths, misconceptions, stigma, and prejudices only exacerbate their challenges, leading to marginalization and fostering conditions for violence against them. The state and society must shoulder the responsibility of

implementing the necessary welfare activities to address these issues. Achieving this objective requires breaking down the barrier between them and mainstream culture, and concerted efforts must be made to achieve this end.

Ethical Approval

The Ethical Committee of the Visva Bharati University, Shantiniketan, India has approved this study.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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