

HIV Transmission and Peer Influence on Female Sex Workers in India

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Abstract

This initial project was designed to become acquainted with the lifestyles, issues, and concerns of female sex workers in Vadapalani, Anna Nagar, Saidapet and Thyagaraya Nagar regions of the city of Chennai, India in order to determine whether or not peer influence is a central reason that women enter the sex work industry. It is known that many women enter the commercial sex business to support their families, and provide for their children's needs, but the extent to which the female sex workers are influenced by others to enter this field of work is unknown. The study contains 20 personal interviews with women from these areas ranging in age from 26 to 52 focusing on how female sex workers come to enter this field, the influence that women in sex work have on each other to enter the field, the pressures that are produced by certain groups in society to enter this field, and from whom these pressures arise. Results indicated that the highest influential factors on these women to enter the sex work do in fact come from the pressure and influence of others including friends, family members, and neighbors. The study also assessed how different women respond to stigma, and how women from different backgrounds feel about their work. Additionally, I asked questions regarding HIV/AIDS to gauge concerns about HIV and the ease with which women can access HIV tests. Overall, I found that meeting family economic needs are the biggest reason women enter this field, and 95 percent of the women claimed that they discussed, were pressured, or influenced to enter the sex work field by another person.

Introduction

It is believed that HIV/AIDS entered India for the first time through sex workers in the late 1980's, but the HIV virus in India was not diagnosed as such until 1986.⁵ Dr. Suniti Solomon and her team were the first to diagnose HIV at Madras (now called Chennai) Medical College when testing the blood samples of 100 arrested prostitutes.² The Center for South Asian Studies at the University of Michigan sponsored my study under the topic of female commercial sex workers and HIV transmission in Chennai, India allowing me the privilege of working in Dr. Solomon's organization, YRG Care, Center for AIDS

Research and Education, in the city where the virus was first diagnosed.

Aims and Objectives

This study was designed to understand the extent to which peer pressure affects women's entrance into sex work, particularly that from friends, neighbors and/or family members. The study aims to understand how female sex workers personally feel about their work and the stigma associated with their job by asking questions relating to outsiders knowledge about their work. I also focused on HIV transmission and the concerns of female sex workers about HIV/AIDS by asking questions in regards to HIV testing, test accessibility, and the status of the test. This research study offers data about many of the feelings of stigma, HIV, and peer pressure in the commercial sex business for females in Chennai. This research may help develop more sustainable programs in HIV/AIDS education and women's rights/ roles and help support women coping with the stigma associated with sex work and/or HIV/AIDS.

Study Design and Method

A questionnaire was conducted with 20 voluntary female participants in the commercial sex business who utilized the YRG Care Community Research Facility for alternative studies and services, such as regular HIV testing, HIV education programs for women, maternal health testing, domestic violence education and empowerment programs. Although two of the women in the sample work for a brothel, in all of the cases they were not physically forced into their work, but made the decision based on many outside factors. In this study, every woman except one mentioned that they entered either because of a suggestion from a friend or by contacting someone close to them that was in the sex work field or had knowledge about how to enter it.

The study also contained a group of randomly selected volunteers from a cruising venue in Vadapalani, Chennai. The questionnaire (supplementary information) was conducted and audio recorded by a native English speaker with translations completed by two native Tamil speakers. For each participant informed consent was taken and each interview was confidential. Depending on the responses received, each interview took between 15 and 30 minutes.

Since many of the questions in this study are considered personal questions, the voluntary participants had the opportunity to refuse to answer any question, or stop the study at any point in the interview. After the interviews were completed, participants received compensation of 50 rupees for their time and effort.

The data was transcribed from audio to an excel matrix questionnaire in order to quantify their answers.

Results

Overview of Sex Work

From my observations, sex work and prostitution in India is distinct from other developed countries. Not only does India “lack the scientific laboratories, research facilities, equipment and medical personnel to deal with an AIDS epidemic, [but there are also extremely high] cultural taboos against discussion of sexual practices”.⁵ When women enter sex work in India, it is typically due to a financial struggle to support themselves and their family, but they cannot discuss their sex work freely with anyone. It is a topic that is pertinent to the spread of HIV, but it is also a difficult topic to discuss with Indian women because it is a “cultural taboo” in India.⁵

All the women I spoke with indicated that they are in the business because of financial struggle and need to pay for a good life for their children. Unlike the United States and other developed countries, and due to cultural differences between the role of men and women in society, it is very difficult for women to find an adequately paying job, let alone to find a job at all in India. The majority of women in India do not work for pay; they are stay-at-home wives and mothers who take care of all the housework. Additionally, many marriages in Chennai are arranged marriages and may lead to unhealthy marriages, or a feeling of unfairness among the women.⁴ A high rate of domestic violence within these marriages in Chennai slums affects “women’s ability to protect themselves from HIV/AIDS”⁴ and may also be a reason that women turn to sex work to escape this lifestyle.⁴ All of these factors – arranged marriages, difficulty for women to find work, and needing to support a family – are reasons that many women have turned to find work in the sex business in the slum areas of Chennai.⁴

There are many different aspects to sex work in India and all over the world. Specifically in India, sex work is very high in the four largest cities of Delhi, Mumbai, Calcutta, and Chennai. However, the mode of sex work varies in each of these cities. There is a brothel type of sex work where women are often forced into sex work by a relative or friend and they typically pay commission to the owner of the brothel. “Although sex work is not strictly illegal in India, associated activities- such as running a brothel- are”. It is more difficult to study brothel types of sex work because it tends to be very secretive, so we cannot estimate its prevalence. Then there is the cruising venue sex work, which is the majority of sex work that we know about in Chennai.

This includes women finding their clients at different venues around the city. There are 5 different zones in Chennai, and in each zone there are different locales that a female may go to meet a client. These cruising venues typically include bus stands, but now also include many cinema theaters. Lastly, there is also a market for prostitutes in the university student population.¹ Moni¹ states that:

Some findings indicate that a sizable proportion of unmarried students visit prostitutes. For example, a survey conducted in a red-light area of Calcutta found that eight per cent of the customers of prostitutes were students and another survey in a Bombay red-light area found the corresponding figure as high as 30 per cent.

In addition to the modes of sex work that characterize Indian cities, it can be difficult to obtain a sample of female sex workers in India because they do not visually stand out the same way as prostitutes stand out in many other countries, such as the United States. In the U.S., sex workers are often seen wearing a certain type of clothing that distinguishes them as a sex worker, but in India the women are dressed and conduct themselves in the same manner as many other women. It is difficult to distinguish female sex workers in the communities unless you spend enough time in the community, getting to know the families and the roles of different community members. By spending time in the community a researcher can establish relationships that allow discussion of difficult topics, specifically relating to the area of sex work. Fortunately, YRG Care has established relationships in the communities of the women that I interviewed, so the sex workers in these communities were easily identifiable with the assistance of researchers that had been working in this field.

Reason for Entering Sex Work

One woman aged 46, who has been in sex work for 12 years, said she initially worked in a plastic company before coming to sex work, but she was harassed as a woman in her workplace so she left her job. She didn’t want to enter the field of sex work but she had no other option. Additionally, she only found out about the risks of HIV/AIDS and other STDs after having entered the field.

Another woman explained, “I went seeking for a job, and the person said ‘Why are you coming to this job, I will introduce you to a better job’”.³ My interviewee stated that such brokers are making huge commissions via innocent women, upwards of 500 rupees (\$12.50) per client, which in many cases could be close to 100 percent of the female sex worker’s earnings per client, so they are left with barely enough to get by. Although she wishes she didn’t choose sex work, this woman thinks that she would have joined it sometime in the future even if she had not met the two women in her workplace (who were recruiting and helping women find clients in order to make commission), because it is the only job that she

has found that can meet her financial needs.

These examples reiterate that the reason most of these women have entered the sex work field is because of the money. This was voiced by a 40 year old woman that has been in the business for 10 years. She explained that after having two kids, they were the reason she came to this work after her husband left her. In Chennai, entering sex work has a focus beyond the prostitute's individual needs, but it is, about being the support that a woman's family deserves. In other places around the world, sex work is sometimes perceived by certain women as a means to luxuriously support oneself, in Chennai, these particular sex workers are striving to make enough to support their families. Many of these workers are able to make much more than they would in a more formal job. For example, one woman who entered the field 20 years ago explained that making 1500 rupees (\$37.50) per month at an ordinary job was "simply not enough", and the only other option to make enough money to make ends meet was by working in the sex work field. Now she is making upwards of 2000 rupees (\$50) a day, and has the economical means to support herself and her family. As one woman told me, "I am only happy about my work because I am solving my family problems".³ Further, another woman entered the field of sex work after her late twenties because her child was having liver problems and her family was facing many medical expenses. During this time her husband was not working, he was only staying around the house and he would beat her. The woman claims that she had no other choice but to seek out a job in order to pay for her child's medical expenses.

Sometimes the women I interviewed had to take action even when their husbands did have jobs. One 30 year-old woman lived with her three children and her husband, a cycle rickshaw driver but her husband had failed to work recently, and they lost the ability to send their children to school. Sometimes even when a woman's husband is working, he may only be making a meager income, as little as 100 rupees (\$2.50) a day and only providing the woman with 20-30 rupees (50-70 cents) per day to take care of the family. In other instances, when women are widowed they are left with few options but to enter the field of sex work. Three women I interviewed sought work in a different sector such as the construction field or a plastic company, but either the job did not provide enough income or they were pressured by someone at that job to go into the sex work.

Finally, there are other cases in which women just get thrown into sex work. These women are vulnerable and tired of searching for other options, and when someone gives them an opportunity they take it. Many times it may start off as simple as a neighbor's offer, "Come with me I will take you to a place where you can make a lot of money".³

Summary of the Mode of Entry into Sex Work

For a quarter of my sample, it was typical for a neighbor to introduce the women to one client and get feed-

back from the woman about her independent decision to do this kind of work. It is not difficult for the woman to then find more clients, but sometimes the neighbor will assist in getting them started. In one instance, a male friend referred his friends to a woman as clients, but in other cases the neighbor or friend will take the women to a cruising venue in the city and stand with her while clients approach her in order to introduce her to the business.

In other cases, interested women will go straight to individuals that they know are involved in the sex work business to find out how to start their work in the business. I talked with one woman who sought out the sex work field on her own because she was facing financial difficulty. She went to a meeting where a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) was conducting an awareness program, she utilized the meeting to meet more people and find out about the field. At this meeting, women currently involved in sex work would not actually help the woman interested to find clients, but the interested woman was able to gather information about the issues and concerns that the sex workers face.

Finally, women can become involved via brothels as well. One woman was approached by her neighbor who asked her why she was going for work outside of the home because she could earn a lot more money if she worked for her brothel. What happened in this case was that the woman running the brothel introduced a prospective sex worker to a client and sent the woman and the client to one of the rented houses in the brothel system. As a result, the woman turned to sex work because it offered better financial choices, and she was not warned about the risks. In the second case involving a brothel the husband of a woman was running a brothel in their home without her knowledge. The woman did not know about the brothel until after her husband passed away. After her husband died she was left with nothing and she took over the business, and thus entered the field.

Overall, it is women who are in financial trouble that are sharing information about this type of work with a close friend, relative or neighbor, and through them the option of becoming a sex workers arises and entices the women to join. Frequently, it is only after a discussion with another person that they decide to start this work.

Unfortunately, only once did a woman tell me that her friend told her about HIV/AIDS and to use a condom when entering this field. For the most part the women learned about the risks of HIV/AIDS after entering the field, and learned about condom use through NGOs. For this reason many of them now realize the impact of HIV/AIDS and how important it is to use a condom. Now many of these women from the previous generations in sex work are informing future sex workers about the risks and how important it is to use a condom because of the importance of taking precautionary measures to limit exposure to STDs.

Peer Influence

I asked the women I interviewed: "If another woman approached you asking for help in joining the sex work profession, would you help them?" One woman replied: "Definitely I will help them. If they are willing to join I will specifically tell them about HIV/AIDS".⁴ In contrast, another woman replied "Definitely not, I would feel too shy and embarrassed so I will not tell them to do this work. I would offer them housemaid work".³

In most instances, women found out about this field because of someone in their support group. Women within small villages live as a part of a close knit and intimately interactive community. These women often confide in their neighbors about personal issues such as family and financial problems. Women often discuss means of making extra money. Interviews revealed that 19 out of 20 women did not actually decide to enter into sex work until after consulting with neighbors, friends and family members in their support system.

Over half of the women interviewed have not had a chance to have any influence on others, but 40 percent of the women responded that theoretically they would help others enter the business if they were given the chance. "I would just help them to solve their financial problem, that is all. Once they start in the field I would not really be in touch with them".³ On the other hand, 60 percent of women said that they would never tell other women to enter this field. Overall, most of the women expressed that it was important to present the risks involved with entering the field, and leave the final decision up to the women.

Only two out of twenty women I talked to expressed strong feelings against women entering the field of sex work. "I would never advise anyone to go into this field. It is a bad field; you can go to any other job" (52 year old, retired female sex worker). Another woman said that when other women approach her she will hand them whatever money she had, and tell them to go another way and say, "I am facing a lot of problems, you do not want to join this work".³ Another woman expressed that she advises others against the sex work industry as she would to her own children. For instance she would say:

*Why don't you go work in a company? I have three children who have studied up to undergraduate level and if any girl like my daughter approached me I would look at them like my daughter and would advise her as such and tell her she wouldn't want to join [this job]. I think I need to play a parental role and give good advice [to women].*³

Interactions outside of sex work- Stigma:

For the most part, these women do not ever share all their concerns with one another. Many self-help groups exist within communities in Chennai, especially for women in the sex work field, but the subject is never explored in much depth among sex workers nor with women outside women face when talking about their work with others:

"I feel guilty that I am going the wrong way".³ These women fear others will form a poor opinion of them. The more people that are aware of an individual's involvement in the sex industry, the more opportunities there are for complications in the future.

For example, one woman claims, "I don't tell the neighbors because at any moment, if we have a fight, the women will tell my husband that I am going for sex work".³ Moreover, another woman who says that she helped three other women enter the field says that if she helps many people, too many people will come to know that she is in this field. Therefore, some women may choose to help other women facing financial difficulty enter the field but thereafter, these women typically limit their interaction with each other because they do not want their involvement in sex work to be discovered.

Some women share the knowledge of this private work with their family. However, most keep it a secret. Often times, families, especially children, would be devastated if they were to uncover this secret. I listened to the concerns of woman who feared that her children would find out. In contrast, I saw some female sex workers bring their children to our NGO educational meetings. The woman's willingness to share information about her profession varies greatly depending on whether the woman feels ashamed that their families find out about their work. One woman told me, "If [my children] come to know I will tell them frankly, I would try to explain to them [my work]. Otherwise if my children found out I would tell them that I would leave the job, but at the same time I would still have to go out for this work".³

Some women will go so far as to tell others that they are going outside the house during the day for housework. For example, during the day after the children leave, the mother will also leave to meet clients, but will hide it by informing very few people. Community members often wonder where the family is getting the money to provide for its expenses, but because the information on personal finances remains undisclosed, they often assume that it comes from friends or relatives.

Although most of the women are confident, many of them still have a strong underlying fear of being found out as a sex worker in their communities, so they cover it up in order to continue to make the money to make ends meet.

Commission

Some women enter the sex work field through a third party who charge a certain percentage on each client that the woman services. Many times commission is only charged in the beginning when the women are first introduced to the field and do not have any of their own clients. But there are still other cases where some women who are in brothel sex work are still charged a certain amount on each client. Therefore, when these women recruit other women to the industry, they charge them commission on their clients, and assume a percentage of their income. In many cases it is the women sex workers

themselves who are perpetuating the sex services business by encouraging its expansion and increasing their own profits. "I want to help women to join so I can make more money. I can make more commission from helping other women find clients".³ I talked with one woman who showed more than five women their initial clients in the sex work business, but she said: "Only if they give commission I will help, otherwise I can't give [them a] client."³ This woman asked a minimum of 50 rupees (\$1.25) per client.

Conversely, there are other women who are completely opposed to charging commission on clients to new women entering the field. One woman states, "I will not get money from them because they are also coming because they have a problem. This would be like a robbery".³ Another woman says, "I will not get any money. They have a problem and I am getting an opportunity to help them".³ Overall, there was a difference between the women running the brothels who were not actual sex workers themselves, but organized the clients and therefore had to make a profit somehow, and that is why they charged commission. The majority of the female sex workers decided not to charge commission because they were already making enough money through their clients. This was an individual choice and varied throughout the sample.

Social Support System in Sex Work

In Chennai, the evidence I found for a social support system between females in sex worker was surprisingly low. All 20 of the women stated that they did not have a strong support system between the female sex workers in Chennai- they were not looking for support but they were looking for a source of income despite the social costs. Women are not usually encouraging one another to join this work to build a stronger network; they just share a mutual understanding of the financial bind that many women face in Chennai. Many women said, "If more people come to join me, it will not affect me".³ The women believe that the effect of having many more women join the sex work industry is not going to have any implications on availability of clientele for the current sex workers, nor is it going to help them improve their social status or support network.

Although it appeared as though current sex workers should have been affected if more women joined them at the bus stands where they pick up clients and that there should have been more competition and hostility when it came to picking up clients the women said this was never a problem, that there would always be enough clients to meet everyone's financial needs. The women do not compete for clients at cruising venues; in fact they attested that this is rarely a problem. It seems that this is due to the large market for sex workers, and because the women expressed that their clients are so disposable suggests that despite the number of sex workers present, there will always be a demand as long as they are in the business. Additionally, many women do not use the cruising venues

to find clients; they may find new clients through existing clients, friends, and word of mouth.

HIV/AIDS

All of the women in the sample had been tested for HIV and were currently HIV negative. In Chennai, government hospitals, YRG CARE and other NGOs give free tests, so HIV testing is both available and affordable. Most of the women I spoke with were regularly using condoms and were educated about the risks because of all the efforts of local NGOs targeting their population in Chennai. Most of the women stated a belief that they definitely were not at risk for contracting HIV because they are regularly using condoms and getting tested regularly. But it is important also to realize that there were a small number of women who still have a fear of contracting HIV, despite how many safety measures they take. A long time veteran of sex work said, "People have been talking about having sex with many people [and how it] will lead to HIV/AIDS and I am scared about that. Once I tested negative I left the job".³

Many of the women I spoke with were educated about HIV/AIDS since almost all of them were involved with a YRG Care program, and many claimed that they failed to compromise when it came to unprotected sex. This is a difficult subject because many of the clientele will not accept sex with a condom because the men prefer sex without. Many of the clients will tell the women that they will pay them much more money if they choose to have sex without a condom. Therefore, women must decide whether a risk of HIV/AIDS contraction is worth the extra money.

I talked with another woman who has been in the field of sex work before HIV/AIDS was a known concern in India. "In 1989 there is not much information about HIV/AIDS available".³ Now she has come to know about the HIV problem and about STDs and that they cause a problem in the body, but only because many NGO's have heavily targeted their community in the past few years. In fact, another woman told me that she has heard a lot about HIV/AIDS because of a media awareness program that they were doing three years ago. "There was a lot on TV about HIV/AIDS awareness".³

Overall, there has been much progress in the area of awareness specifically with female sex workers in India. In fact, "between 1992 and 1995, condom use among sex workers rose from 27% to 82% and by 2001, it was 86%".¹ The impact of this awareness on HIV transmission among this population has been substantial, but in the future it will be additionally important to reach the women who do not believe they are at any risk for HIV.

Only once did a woman tell me that she had been informed by a friend of the risks of HIV/AIDS in the sex industry, and that using a condom could curb these risks. For the most part the women learned about the risks about HIV/AIDS after entering the field, and learned about condom use through NGOs during their involvement in the profession. For this reason many of them now realize the

impacts of HIV/AIDS first hand, and fathom the importance of using a condom. Now, many of these women from the previous generations in sex work are informing future sex workers about the risks of HIV/AIDS contraction, the importance of protection and the importance of using a condom.

Conclusion

Through my interviews with sex workers, it is apparent that sex work in India is incredibly dynamic and complex. Since the motivation for entering sex work and modes for perpetuating it are so diverse, the alternatives are even more challenging to get across to the women most at risk. Poverty and social stratification are issues that make it difficult for women to explore many other options of economic support. For a woman growing up in India, it is not easy to explain that there are alternative pathways to support a family especially if one is uneducated and part of the large population that is considered lower class. Understanding the financial burdens that Indian women are facing in Chennai, the constant stigma around topics of gender issues and HIV/AIDS, the influence of peers- the highest influential factors on these women being friends, family members, and neighbors- in propagating the sex work industry can help us in the future to prevent and limit misconceptions about the industry that often mislead young women into less than desirable circumstances.

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