

SEX AS “WORK”: THE BANGLADESHI CONTEXT

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Abstract

Feminist theorists have debated sex work. Some argue that the sale of sexual services should be regarded as work. Others argue that sex work is the ultimate form of human degradation. In the sex worker activism of Bangladesh which cropped up after the eviction of occupants of several brothels in the 1990s, sex workers demanded protection from the state. Sex worker’s rights groups in Bangladesh demand recognition of sex work as legitimate employment. Based on first-hand data from a Bangladeshi brothel, this article shows how sex workers conceptualize their work as part of everyday lived experiences. I argue that the culturally specific context of Bangladesh that locates the female body within a framework of purity and pollution influences the sex workers’ construction of sex work. A better understanding the sex worker perspective will contribute to the feminist literature from a South Asian perspective.

Introduction

Feminist theorists have debated whether the sale of sexual services¹ should be regarded as work. Disagreement is also evident in activism surrounding the issue. Most activists, during the first wave of feminism, said that the state should stop sex work (Outshoorn

1 The term sex work involves a wide range of services. Here I have used it as synonymous with “prostitution”, i.e., selling sex in exchange of money or other benefits. I have used the term sex work instead of the term “prostitution” because I do not want to sound judgemental to these women by using a term which connotes “fallen” in Bengali.

2005, 145).² During the second wave of feminism in the 1970s, a new discourse proposing “prostitution as work” emerged alongside the abolitionist³ discourses promoted by some radical feminists⁴ and religious conservatives (Outshoorn 2005, 145). Sex workers’ advocacy groups, such as the Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics (COYOTE) compared sex work to wage labour in terms of social status. COYOTE claims that “prostitution” is a “legitimate and voluntarily chosen work” (Jenness 1990, 406). COYOTE argues that legal restrictions on sex work violate civil rights and freedoms to choose one’s employment (E. Jeffreys 2004, 72).⁵ Grounding their argument in the liberal framework⁶ both COYOTE and the Canadian Organization for

- 2 Contemporary feminist historians claim that the mobilization against the Contagious Diseases Acts paved the ways for the 19th century feminist engagement with “prostitutes and prostitution” (Carpenter 2000, 35). Josephine Butler, who led the Ladies National Association (LNA), challenged the Contagious Diseases Acts. A coalition of feminists, middle-class non-conformists, and radical working-class men challenged the acts in 1870 and called for their repeal (Walkowitz 1980, 124–125). Grounding their position on the Victorian-gendered moral framework, and the evoking rhetoric and ideology of Christian evangelism, they demanded an equal standard of sexual morality (Attwood 2010, 71, 73). Butler and her followers also wanted to direct male sexuality to procreation, so that a state of moral order based on Christian social purity could be achieved, in which sex work had no place (Attwood 2010, 83–84, 95). They argued that the Contagious Diseases Acts validated men’s sexual access to a class of “fallen women”, by suggesting penal actions against women and not against men for the same vice (Walkowitz 1982, 80).
- 3 The term abolitionism which was originated in the 19th – century feminism, has a specific ideological and legal approach to “prostitution” (Doezema 2006, 4). As a movement, abolitionism was led by Josephine Butler and was advanced against the state regulation of “prostitution” (5). It is still a powerful philosophy among contemporary feminists of both the West and the developing world (6). The “neo-abolitionist” feminists do not consider “prostitution” as a true choice. Instead, they regard it as violence against women (6).
- 4 Radical feminists highlight the experiences of harms of the “prostitutes” (Scouler 2004, 344). They contextualize “prostitution” within a framework of gendered analysis of the state and sexuality (Scouler 2004, 344) and consider it as a form of violence against women (Kesler, 2002 quoted in Scouler 2004, 344).
- 5 COYOTE regards most of the “prostitution” to be voluntary (Jenness 1990, 406). For COYOTE, most “prostitutes”, after having looked at several work alternatives, make a conscious decision to join sex work (COYOTE 1988 quoted in Jenness 1990, 406). COYOTE, however, distinguishes between those who are forced into “prostitution” for survival and those who choose it as work (Delacoste and Alexander 1987 quoted in Jenness 1990, 406). It also does not deny the occurrence of exploitation and abuse in “prostitution”. In spite of such acknowledgement of exploitation and abuse in “prostitution”, COYOTE argues that such problems result from negative social attitudes and prohibitory laws toward sex work (Jenness 1990 quoted in Jeffreys 2004, 72).
- 6 Jaggar (1994, 103) notes that the liberals believe that “prostitution” belongs to the “private” sphere and therefore, they are in favour of minimizing government interference in individual’s lives. The liberals recommend that “prostitution” should be treated as an ordinary business transaction (103). Taking a contractarian view of prostitution, liberal feminists argue that women should have the legal right to choose “prostitution” as a legitimate occupation (Beran 2012, 30). “Prostitution”, by the liberals is seen as a contract which is similar to other kind of contracts in which individuals become part of for their own benefits, striking the best possible bargain they are able to gain (Jaggar 1994, 103).

Rights of Prostitutes (CORP) put forward the argument that expression of sexuality and use of bodies as one sees fit should be permissible for both men and women (Freeman 1997, 217, 224). In a similar fashion, the International Committee for Prostitutes' Rights (ICPR) construct "prostitutes" not only as "legitimate workers" and but also as "an oppressed sexual identity" (E. Jeffreys 2004, 74-75). Such propositions received criticism from abolitionist advocacy organizations such as the Women Hurt in Systems of Prostitution Engaged in Revolt (WHISPER) (Hobson 1990, 221-222). WHISPER considers "prostitution" as "commercialization of sexual abuse (Giobbe 1990 quoted in E. Jeffreys 2004, 75) and calls for its abolishment (Bell 1994, 99). This debate gained international attention again when Amnesty International called for the decriminalization⁷ of prostitution worldwide in 2015 (Murphy 2015).

While scholars and advocacy groups on both sides of the debate over the criminalisation of sex work assert that they are advocating for women's interests, there is an ongoing need for research on sex workers' diverse perspectives on their experiences. In the wake of the eviction of occupants of several brothels in the 1990s, sex worker activists in Bangladesh demanded recognition of sexual labor as legitimate employment. So far, the literature on sex work in Bangladesh has documented sex worker activism and the demands for recognition of sex work by the evicted sex workers (see Azim, Mahmud, and Shely 2002; Azim 2005, 2011, 2012; Huq 2003, 2006, 2008, 2012). However, the everyday activities and experiences of Bangladeshi sex workers and their understanding of "work" have not received much scholarly attention. In this article an attempt has been made to understand how the brothel-based sex workers construct their understanding of "work" from their lived experiences and how such constructions relate to the cultural norms associated with the female body in Bangladesh. Such an understanding can contribute to the diversity of feminist thought on sexual labor. The first part of this paper looks at feminist debates associated with sex work. The second part describes sex worker activism and shows how the issue of work emerged within activism. The final section looks at sex workers' response to the issue of work.

The feminist debate over sex as work

Whether sex work can be considered a legitimate form of work is a matter of debate in the feminist discourse. Recognition of sex workers as legitimate service workers, and not as sex slaves or social deviants, emerged in the 1970s (Chapkis 1997, 70). Terms such as "sex work" and "sex workers" were introduced by sex workers to move away from definitions which ascribe social or psychological features to a class of women and to instead recognize commercial sex as generating incomes; a form of employment (Bindman and Doezema 1997 quoted in Sullivan 2003, 71). Nussbaum (1998, 700-707) argues that "prostitution" has many features of other forms of bodily

7 Amnesty International advocates for adult consensual sex, i.e., sex works not involving abuse, coercion, and exploitation. Amnesty International supports criminalization of trafficking and persons involved in abuse of sex workers such as pimps. But it calls for decriminalization of adult consensual sex (Murphy 2015).

services, such as a female wage worker in a meat processing plant, a nightclub singer, a domestic helper, a philosophy professor, a skilled masseuse, and a “colonoscopy artist”.⁸ Contrary to such an argument, Overall (1992, 716–717) argues that “sex work” is an asymmetrical relationship of exchange and differs from other types of women’s labor. For Overall (1992, 722) other work such as nursing and cooking can exist without being characterized as commercialized. But sex work cannot exist outside the relations of commoditization. When sex is offered as a non-monetary and non-commoditized basis, it is done within a relationship and not as an exchange in sex work (Overall 1992, 717). To Overall (1992, 717), the buying and selling of the act is inherent in sex work. But buying and selling of acts are not intrinsic in other works such as cooking and nursing (Overall 1992, 717). Critiquing Overall, Shrager (1994, a. 93) shows that in colonial Nairobi it is not uncommon for clients of the sex workers to become boyfriends or husbands. Other work such as cooking, when not commoditized, may also culturally cease to be qualified as work (Shrager 1994 b, 567). Such non-commoditized cooking can be done as recreation, as an interest or as a form of entertainment and not as work (Shrager 1994.b, 568).

The debate over whether sex work should be considered as work also focuses on the emotional aspect of sexual services. Chapkis (1997 quoted in Kole 2009, 261) considers sex work to be a discrete kind of emotional labor, arguing that the sexual-emotional labor in sex work is similar to the emotional labor in acting and psychotherapy. Critiquing this argument, S. Jeffreys (1997, 173) notes that “prostitution” is “dangerous” for women. For Hochschild (1983, 90, emphasis in the original) jobs that require emotional labor create “emotive dissonance”, a particular form of alienation. Hochschild (1983, x) argues that any news or “occurrence” is greeted with emotions, which signals secret hopes, fears, and expectations. For Hochschild (1983, x), “It is this signal function that is impaired when the private management of feeling is socially engineered and transformed into emotional labor for wage”. For Pateman (1988, 206) the relationship between the body and the self is integral, making the selves inseparable from the bodies. The involvement of women in sex work is different from involvement in other occupations (Pateman 1988, 207). Workers of all other kinds might be closely connected to their work. But it is the integral linkage between the sexuality and the sense of self that requires the sex worker to distance herself from the sexual use of her [body] for self-protection (Pateman 1988, 207). Alienation, however, is not something unique to sex work because Marxists would argue that alienation⁹ occurs to all laborers in capitalist conditions. Furthermore, sex workers such as Jo Doezema argue that they do not wish to share parts of themselves with their clients. They draw boundaries. Such

8 Nussbaum (1998, 701) claims that she did not address non-consensual “prostitution” or child “prostitution” in her comparison. She only addresses the choice of “prostitution” of an adult woman.

9 Jaggar argues that contrary to men, women of all kinds are alienated like the wage labourers (Tong 2009, 113). Such alienation is experienced by women because they shave their underarms, slim their thighs, and augment their breasts to please men. Like the wage workers who compete with each other to get admiration from their neighbours, many women compete with each other for appreciation from men (113).

boundaries do not necessarily destroy them, because there is a difference between dealing with clients and dealing with friends and sweethearts (Doezema 1993 quoted in Chapkis 1997, 75). To Nussbaum (1998, 714-715) similar to the domestic servants who may clean their own house or cook for their family, the sex worker still retains her sexuality and can use it outside of transactions with her clients.

Another theme that emerges from the debate is whether sex work involves skills. For Nussbaum (1998, 704) the performance of “prostitution”, like the performance of a professor, involves skills. Using *Kama Sutra*¹⁰ as an example (for its depiction of the detailed instructions on skilled performances), Nussbaum (1998, 704) argues: “Our culture is all too ready to think that sex involves no skill and is simply ‘natural,’ a view that is surely false and is not even seriously entertained by many cultures.” For Califia (2000, 264–265) skilled sex workers provide benefits to people such as the disabled, the ill, the elderly, and the sexually dysfunctional. Such arguments about skills have received criticism from others, such as S. Jeffreys (1997, 167), who point out that what the average clients want to do with the body of the “prostituted women” is the basic act [of sex] which can be performed without any skills (S. Jeffreys 1997, 167). For S. Jeffreys such “skills” are held by those heterosexual women who provide such services to their partners and are not paid for it (S. Jeffreys 1997, 167).

The debate around sex work highlights the importance of the body in the politics of sex work. Bodily experiences and their interpretations are culturally specific. While the sale of sex has been variously regulated cross culturally and historically, the practices of social control have been highly culturally specific as have been frameworks for legitimating regulating, often drawing on gendered understandings of the body. A global account of sex work needs to appreciate the diverse experiences of sex workers in a wide-range of cultural settings with influence on the organization of and structure of sex work and everyday experience of sex workers.

Methodology

The research was carried out at Daulatdia brothel. The brothel, which is referred to as Pros Quarter (Potitaloy Para) in the data of 2001 of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS 2010), is located in Goalanda Upazila of Rajbari District. I interviewed 41 sex workers residing in the brothel as tenants. Informed consent was taken prior to the interviews. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the informants. The informants ranged from 18 to late 50s in age. Most of the informants were low skilled. Some of the informants had children. I also talked with activists who were involved with sex worker activism. The interviews were transcribed, translated into English, and coded. Thematic analysis was carried out to analyze the data.

10 Written by Mallanaga between the first and fourth centuries AD, the *Kama Sutra* included many topics including sexual positions and sexual union (Astbury-Ward 2002, 368).

Sex worker activism in Bangladesh and the issue of work

The sex workers' campaigns in Bangladesh took place between 1991 and 1999, following a series of threats of eviction against brothels (Azim 2012, 275). Through their activism, sex worker activists invoked the discourse of rights to demand recognition of sex workers as legitimate citizens of the state, and highlighted their positions as workers (Azim 2012, 27, 276). Their demands were based on "a legal language of right to work and right to abode" (Azim 2012, 276). They claimed that sex work is nothing but work for them because they do it in exchange for money (Azim, Mahmud and Shely 2002, 13–14). They differentiated between "sex for work" and "sex for pleasure", thereby separating work from pleasure and desire (Azim, Mahmud, and Shely 2002, 14). In order to fight for the sex workers' rights, Shonghati, which was a loose platform comprising of women's groups, human rights groups, and some developmental NGOs, was formed (Azim 2012, 277). Naripokkho¹¹ provided support in organizing press conferences, seminars, and public forums, as well as invited intellectuals, policymakers, and the media to convey the sex workers' demands (Chowdhury 2006, 345). Shireen Huq (2012, 17), a founding member of Naripokkho, and an activist in the women's movement in Bangladesh, argues that their campaign questioned the rehabilitation efforts that were grounded on the premise that sex work is a result of poverty and that women in sex work need to be saved and rehabilitated into respectable occupations and marriages.¹² Rather, they brought forward the issue of "social acceptance"; that is, recognizing sex work as a legitimate occupation and accepting sex workers in their movements, workplaces, and homes (Huq 2012, 17).¹³

Different sex workers' groups, such as Ulka, were formed to fight for their members' rights and to demand health, social services, and schooling for their children (Azim 2012, 277), which sex workers, in general, do not find easy to avail due to stigma. The sex workers' groups that were formed acquired some recognition and a voice in the social movements' arena (Azim 2012, 279). The Sex Workers' Network of Bangladesh was formed in 2002 with the support of Shonghati (Chowdhury 2006, 341).¹⁴ The Sex Workers Network has been persistent in their demand for rights that other laborers enjoy. In their rally on May Day 2013, their slogan was "(We) fill appetite with diligence, (we) want our rights as labourer". They demanded that, like other professions which have institutional and governmental recognition, sex work should be recognized as a profession (Sex Workers Network 2013, 4). The issue of work has also been brought forward by the Sex Workers Network of Bangladesh in different forums.

11 Naripokkho is a feminist organization based on voluntary membership (Mahmud 2002 quoted in Chowdhury 2006, 341).

12 Marriage is a way of rehabilitation because it places women under the guardianship of a private male; that is, the husband.

13 Naripokkho offered "impromptu shelter" both in its office and in members' homes to sex workers after they had been evicted from Tanbazaar brothel (Huq 2012, 16).

14 The Sex Workers Network, which in 2011 registered at the Department of Social Welfare, works to protect sex workers' human rights (Sex Workers' Network of Bangladesh 2013, 4).

For example, at the 20th International AIDS Conference (AIDS 2014) in Melbourne, Joya Sikder, president of the Sex Workers Network of Bangladesh pointed out: “Sex Work is work. Please support our movement” (Scarlet Alliance, Australian Sex Workers Association 2014, 40). By participating in the sex workers’ movement, the sex workers reconstructed their identity from “bad girls” to sex workers and transformed from being the fallen (*potita*) to activists (Chowdhury 2006, 344). A shift in terminology became visible in print media, because the term sex worker (*jouna kormi*) replaced the term “*potita*” (Huq 2008, 184). On March 14, 2000, a petition was filed by 267 sex workers and 86 human and women’s rights organizations (Azim 2012, 276). In response to this petition, the High Court of Bangladesh declared that “sex work is not illegal under any existing law in Bangladesh” (Azim 2012, 276).¹⁵ However, neither sex workers nor the issue of sex work got recognition in the national discourse on labor (Azim 2012, 272); nor were sex workers acknowledged as female workers in the campaigns that dealt with female labour in Bangladesh (Azim 2012, 272). This is not surprising considering that Bangladesh shrouds sexuality (especially non-normative female sexuality) in silence (Karim 2012, 77). Therefore, the events surrounding the demand of recognition of sale of sex as work are nuanced. It is important to look at how the mundane sex workers respond to the issue of work. The following section looks at how the sex workers of Daulatdia conceptualize the issue of work.¹⁶

Brothel Structure and Modes of operation

There are two modes of operation in the brothel: bonded mode and tenancy mode. In the bonded mode, brothel madams make bonded girls and women sell sex to clients and appropriate their income in exchange for food and shelter. In the tenancy mode of sex work, tenants rent rooms in the brothel and ply their business independently. Unlike the bonded sex workers, tenants are in control of their working conditions and are able to retain their income. The status, power, and standing of a sex worker depend on her mode of operation and connection with powerful people, such as political patrons and the police.

Is “prostitution” work to the tenants of Daulatdia brothel?

The informants articulated their understanding of “work” around notions of survival, pollution, and loss of honor. While some regard ‘prostitution as work’, others refer to it as “abject work” (*kharap kaj*). Those who see sex work as work argue that it is work because it is done repeatedly and provides basic resources for survival, such as food. Such arguments are based on the premise that since sex work generates income, it should be regarded as work. Other informants compared living in the brothel with

15 Azim (2012, 276) finds the ruling on sex worker’s right to work and abode to be ineffective.

16 Instead of using a particular definition of work, I have tried to understand how the sex workers construct their position over work and how their construction of work derives meanings from the cultural framework of Bangladeshi society.

living in hell. Such comparisons are made based on the desire for *shongshar*¹⁷, which is idealized by women in Bangladeshi society. In the following section, I will discuss how sex worker's understandings of work are generated from their lived experiences and rooted in the cultural norms of purity, pollution, and valorization of the *shongshar*.

Survival “work”

Some sex workers argue that sex work generates income and allows them to feed their stomach. Rumi, who was brought into the brothel by a pimp at the age of 17, had stayed in the brothel for 10 to 12 years. She points out:

This is work. It's work because I earn a living from it. If I don't do it, I won't be able to have rice on my plate to feed my stomach. Sometimes I don't feel like taking customers inside my room. But I do have to.

For Rumi, sex work is work because it allows her to earn money and to purchase basic resources. Others such as Sabina mention that sex work involves hardship. In other words, sex workers need to work hard to earn money: “[This is work]...because [we do it for] feeding [our] stomach... I endure hardship to earn money to feed my stomach”. The issue of feeding stomach and generation of income are central to these narratives. By referring to stomach sex workers also relate their “work” to their body. It is for their stomach, i.e., body that they do sex work.

Some sex workers refer to sex work as a profession (*pesha*) and mention that they go through anxiety when they can't do “work”, because lack of “work” means an inability to pay for expenses such as house rent. Chobi, a 35 year old sex worker who had lived in the brothel for last 18 years explains:

We live in this world [the brothel]. Even if I don't think of it as work, not doing work always makes me anxious. I won't be able to pay house rent [if I don't do it]. I always have this anxiety. This is like a profession.

In a similar vein, Reshma, who was sold into the brothel by her husband, terms sex work both as a profession and a business because it allows her to feed herself:

Work means profession; profession means business. Why won't I think of it as work? Even if I feel bad, what else can be done? I am forced [by circumstances] to stay here ... If I work as a maid I will get 1 KG of rice or 100 taka. I have done all kinds of work. I have even tilled a [agricultural] field. I have worked as a maid ... [Only] this work [sex work] was left [to be taken] at last...I came here because I was deceived by someone...I am not happy [doing it]. But I have to do it... This is work because it feeds [my] stomach.

17 *Shongshar* literally means household and refers to the “home-based conjugal or married life” (Karim 2012, 53).

Reshma articulates her position on work from the point of view of survival. She mentions feeling bad about what she does. But she also refers to what she does as work. Her narratives reveal that she does not want to portray herself as someone who has willingly decided to do sex work. Rather she mentions being compelled by circumstances.

Sex workers also use the term business (*dhanda*) to refer to sex work. Saju, daughter of a sex worker mother, had lived in the brothel from her childhood. She registered her name as a sex worker at the age of 13 or 14 and points out:

This is a business. Each day we have to earn to pay for rent, food, and providing for our children. Earning in this business is huge. Like people [in other jobs/businesses] we also do *niyot*.¹⁸ Sometimes I feel good [when I earn money]. Not all customers are alike. Some customers tell me to do bad things ... Sometimes I am forced to do such things because he is paying and I need money.

Saju points out that sex work involves huge monetary transactions. It allows her to provide for children and meet her daily expenses. For Saju, sex work involves “*niyot*” which makes it similar to other kinds of jobs or businesses. Saju mentions how sex work allows her to provide for her children. For informants who were unskilled such as Saju, sex work offered financial security compared to other low skilled jobs.

Sex workers often define sex work as work because they have been doing it repeatedly every day and thus it has become a “habit”. Johra narrates:

Yes, I think it is work. I have been doing it repeatedly. It’s a habit now. Isn’t it like work? See, if I can’t find a man [to ply sex work], I get anxious. If I get, then [I think]...Ok this work was good.

The narratives above suggest that sex workers who think the sale of sexual services as work, ground their argument on the following logic: it allows them to earn a living and thereby allows them to feed their stomach, provide for family and children, and pay for rent. For these sex workers sex work is work because it allows them to survive. They articulate their position on work from the point of view of survival. Others regard it as a business because it involves –“intention” (*niyot*). Some refer to doing it repeatedly, and becoming habituated to it. In some narratives informants mentioned not being happy doing it. By mentioning survival sex they also detach themselves from being seen as “sexually liberated” or “unruly” women who sell their bodies for pleasure and enjoyment. Survival sex somewhat acts as a mechanism to minimize the stigma because they are doing it to save their lives and raise their families.

18 The intention of doing an action before doing it.

Abjection

Some sex workers refer to sex work as abject work (*kharap kaj*), and bad work (*o-kam*). Nazma, who had lived in the brothel for three months, shares that:

Sometimes I think of it as work, other times I think of it as [something] bad. I would not have come here if I had somebody to provide for me. I was a burden to my family and relatives...If it [sex work] is not [a kind of] work, people will not be doing it. Nobody gives you money when you ask for it ... This is work...this is work and at the same time bad.

To Nazma sex work is both work and something bad at the same time. She is doing this “bad work” because she had no one to take care of her. By saying that she was compelled by her circumstances she also distances herself from this bad work by finding consolation in the fact that the reason for doing it is not her “free” choice.

The informants also mentioned feeling disgusted at the time of selling sex. Some sex workers don’t want to establish sex work as work. They describe their experience of sex work as “living in hell”, doing “the dirtiest thing in the world”, “torture”, or not living the life of a “human being”. Rani was kidnapped when she was in grade one. Then she was trafficked into the brothel. Rani is now in her 30s. Rani does not regard sex work as work; rather she terms it as “torture”.

This is not work. This is torture. Isn’t living in a brothel torture?...We work [sell sex] to feed our stomach. I have to do it even if the guy [client] is elderly and says, “I will give you 500 taka lets go to your room”. I have recorded my name in this brothel. I have to do this.

Rani mentions that she entertains elderly customers due to the compulsion arising from the need for money to feed her stomach. Such compulsions point to the fact that sex workers do not often have the luxury to decide on the age of their customers.

Mila, another sex worker in her 30s, describes the money that is earned through sex work as “bad money”. She believes such money does not have any inherent blessing (*borkot*) in it.

Even if I earn fifty thousand per day and eat polao, meat, biriyani, the money from this place will not last¹⁹... [Because it is] money earned through bad path ... Even if you [the researcher] earn as little as 1000 taka per month, you will have blessing (*borkot*) in your income. Even if I earn as much as 50 thousand taka, I will not have blessings in my money ... If I were [living] in outside world [outside of the brothel] and earn 1500 taka, and even if I were working as a maid... I could have had more money coming to my house [because of *borkot*].

19 It is difficult to find an equivalent expression in English. What Rekha means is that money earned through immoral means comes quickly and disappears quickly. Wealth which is gained through sinful means will dwindle away.

Mila refers to the spiritual aspect associated with earning a living through the right path. Since earnings generated by sex work do not have an inherent blessing in it, Mila believes that such an earning cannot bring prosperity and wellbeing because it will not “last”.

Sex workers also point out that they have lost their honor by engaging in sex work. As Mila continues:

Once honor (*izzat*) is gone, it is difficult to get it back. People like you can’t do what I do... People come to my room. [They] give me 200, or 500 [taka] to see my private parts (*izzat*). People like you won’t take your clothes off even if you are paid as much as lakh taka²⁰... But we would take our clothes off if we are paid as little as 200 or 500 [taka]. Our life is degraded. What is the value of our life? Honor (*izzat*) is the most valuable thing for a woman... We are showing that *izzat* to people. We have become worthless.

Mila uses the term *izzat* interchangeably to refer to both honor and private parts. Mila thinks that her life is wasted because she has lost her most valuable virtue—that is, her honor—because she is a sex worker. Honor is invaluable and not having honor turns a woman into a valueless person. Mookherjee (2006, 439) notes, “*man ijot*” is the most important thing for a woman, and needs to be covered and clothed.²¹ The notion of honor relates with the gender norms of Bangladeshi society which valorise purity of the female body. Mookherjee (2006, 439-440) based on her work in Enayetpur village in Bangladesh, reports that when the rape victims of the war²² made the incidences of rape public, they acknowledged the fact that their “genitalia have been transgressed”. As a result, they lost their honour and status (*man ijot*) in society (Mookherjee 2006, 440).²³ The narratives of the sex workers reveal that their feeling of becoming “object” is related to the underlying gender ideals of Bangladeshi society.

Idealization of *Shongshar*

The informants talked about *shongshar* as the ideal place for a woman. *Shongshar* offers women a conjugal life and is associated with home (*ghor*) formed by marriage between a man and a woman (Karim 2012, 53-54). Marriage signifies completeness and adulthood in Bangladesh (Mookherjee 2006, 439).

Some equated not having a *shongshar* with living in “hell”. Rohima had lived in the brothel for 15 years. She left home at the age of 10 after a fight at home. She took a

20 1,00,000 equals one lakh.

21 *Manijot* and *izzat/ijot/tjjat* can be used synonymously in Bengali. Mookherjee (2006, 439-440) used the word to refer to both female genitals and honor.

22 War of independence of Bangladesh took place in 1971.

23 The rape victims were not easily accepted by their families (Mookherjee 2008, 40). The kinship norms of purity and honour based on which the public discourses are articulated made these women concerns for their family, community and the new nation [Bangladesh] (40).

train to Tangail without knowing much about that place. She was then brought into the brothel by a man who promised her food and work. Rohima describes the brothel as the lowest place and mentions her desire to have a *shongshar*:

I live in hell now...This is the lowest place. This is not my place. We also want to live in society and have our own household (*shongshar*). I don't want to live here. I will leave after a year or a year and a half...I do not have a man in my life. I have to provide for my son.

Some sex workers use terms such as "ill-fated" to describe their condition of not being able to have a *shongshar*. Jhuma shares a similar desire for a *shongshar*, as she explains:

Some customers tell [me to do] bad things, want to do different kinds of work [sex], sometimes I am forced to do these because they are paying money. Then I think, I am so ill-fated that I am residing in this place. A person like me should be in a *shongshar*. Now the situation is such that nor can I live, neither can I die.

Jhuma uses the term "ill-fated" to describe her condition which requires her to stay in the brothel, depriving her of having her own *shongshar*.

Sex workers such as Fahmida relate pleasure to *shongshar*. She shares that she is tired of doing sex work, but she continues to sell sex because of being compelled by her needs:

It's [sex with customers] disgusting. I could have gotten pleasure if I were living with one particular person. I would have had happiness, if could have my own *shongshar*. I am fed up of this. But I am compelled to take [clients] ... I can only say that I feel disgusted when I do it. But I have to do this only to feed by stomach [meet my hunger]. If I did not have a stomach, this [sex work] wouldn't be necessary.

For Fahmida, sex work is disgusting and deprives her of the happiness of having her own *shongshar*.²⁴

Suchi Karim (2012, 53-54) argues that the term *shongshar* has an enormous presence in the daily discourses of the Bengali middle class of Bangladesh. I would, however, argue that valorization of *shongshar* is not unique to the middle class only. Rather it is part of the culture of Bengali women of all classes. In their reference to *shongshar* sex workers aspire for an idealized household that other women have. In other words, sex work deprives them of having a respectful family and a conjugal life. Even though sex workers mentioned having intimate partners whom they often refer to as husbands or pseudo husbands, this relationship is more about having the support of a man than having a *shongshar* which gives women completeness.

24 This answer might have been influenced by my presence as a researcher. The fact that I am a Bangladeshi, an outsider, and that I was raised within the same values that stigmatize sex work and valorize *shongshar* might have an impact upon the informant's responses.

Discussion: Locating the body in the sex worker's narratives

In their narratives, the informants repeatedly mentioned hunger and their anxiety about feeding their stomach. For some, sex work involves the loss of honour because their private parts are revealed to customers in exchange for money. Their narratives, therefore, revolve around the discourse of the body. While some sex workers recognize sex work as work, others regard it as "abject". They mentioned feeling disgust, termed the brothel as the lowest place and compared living in the brothel to living in hell. They also pointed out that sex work is similar to torture. Not only is sex work referred to as "bad work", the money coming from it is also seen as "bad money" which is devoid of any inherent blessings. Sex workers also idealize *shongshar* and relate pleasure with having a *shongshar* of their own. The idealization of *shongshar* and the abjection of sex work points to how the Bangladeshi society symbolically repels sex work by assigning the notion of "pollution" to the sex worker's body because they have lost their honor.

Douglas argues that bodies can be seen as symbols which represent society (Douglas 2003, 116). Alcorn (1988 quoted in Howson 2004, 84) argues that pollution beliefs reinforce a certain version of moral order. Douglas (2001, 116) argues that bodies can be seen as symbols which represent society:

The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious. The body is a complex structure. The functions of its different parts and their relation afford a source of symbols for other complex structures. We cannot possibly interpret rituals concerning excreta, breast milk, saliva and the rest unless we are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society, and to see the powers and dangers credited to social structure reproduced in small on the human body.

For Douglas, danger resides at the margins. Substances that are generated at the orifices are marginal (Douglas 2003, 122). Bodily orifices represent the doors of entry or exit to the social units (Douglas 2003, 4). Similarly, the order of society is also in danger at its margins. Certain contacts are thought of as dangerous in the symbolic system of pollution beliefs (Douglas 2003, 3). To Kristeva (1982, 4) abjection is something which is "the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite". It is something which not only disturbs order, system, and identity but also disrespects borders, positions, rules (Kristeva 1982, 4). Douglas and Kristeva's arguments can be applied to the analysis of sexuality of women in Bangladesh. Notions of honor, shame, purity, pollution, and veil (*parda*) have a part to play in controlling women and regulating their sexuality in Mediterranean, African, Middle Eastern, Bangladeshi, and Indian societies (Rozario 1992, 79)²⁵ Women's honor is related to having shame or preserving their purity voluntarily (Rozario 1992, 86).²⁶ A shameless woman, by losing her sexual purity, is

25 In theory, codes of honour and shame are applicable to both men and women (Rozario 1992, 86). Men retain honour by performing their roles as protectors. Women on the other hand, are responsible for shame. Shame restrains the behaviour of women (Rozario 1992, 86).

26 Based on her study in Doria, Bangladesh, Rozario (1992, 86) points out that it is generally believed that virginity can only be ensured for girls, and not for boys.

likely to bring dishonor to her family (Rozario 1992, 86). Women's sexuality threatens the male order (Gardner 1998, 210). Therefore it needs to be controlled (Gardner 1998, 210). But at the same time, women are seen as weak and vulnerable people who need protection from men through seclusion (Gardner 1998, 210). The framework of honor and shame illustrates why sex workers use the term "bad" or abject. By trespassing the realm of modesty and honor, they became "polluted" or feel "abject". For Kristeva, the abject is never completely expelled altogether (McAfee 2004, 46). The abject does not entirely disappear from the consciousness. It threatens one's "clean and proper self" by acting both as an unconscious and a conscious threat (McAfee 2004, 46). The sex workers, by rationalizing sex work as survival work, distance their labor from their "self". But the fact that society considers sex work as abject does not disappear from their consciousness. Therefore they also label it as "bad work" or abject work. Such an understanding of abjection contributes to the feminist literature on sex work from a South Asian perspective. Connell (2014, 558) argues that gender analysis from the global south asks the question of "diversity", and "multiplicity of gender forms" at the level of gender order and the societal scale.²⁷ An understanding of the lived experience of abjection is important because it documents the multiplicities and diversities of gender norms from the perspective of the global south (see Connell 2014, 558) and contributes to the feminist literature on sex work by demonstrating that sex work varies depending on context, culture and norms surrounding the female body in different cultures.

Conclusion

Like some feminists, some sex workers define sex work as work because it generates income. They articulate their role from the point of view of survival. Such constructions emerge from their lived experiences. Sex workers however also describe their work as abject. The gender norms of Bangladeshi society that valorize the purity of the female body explain why sex work is regarded as abject. Such understandings of the notions of pollution of the female body and survival sex can contribute to feminist literature from a South Asian perspective. Certainly, this research indicates that brothels have a unique structure in parts of Bangladesh that distinguishes them from brothels in Western contexts, especially with regard to understanding over the female body. The way in which gender norms are embodied and articulated through public/work and private/space while having parallels with western contexts is also unique to the Bangladeshi context and influences the way in which sex work is experienced and organized.

27 Relations between the intellectuals and the institutions in the metropole and the periphery can be characterized as relations of authority, exclusion, inclusion, hegemony, sponsorship, and appropriation (Connell 2007, viii-ix). The north theorizes data which Southern societies and colonies provide (Connell 2014, 554). Within this hegemony of the metropolitan knowledge, alternative ways of thinking are marginalized (Connell 2007, xi).

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