

Children of Female Sex Workers: A Study of Situation and Vulnerability in Karnataka

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Abstract: The major objective of this paper is to give a picture of the plight of children of female sex workers in Karnataka state, south India. The children of female sex workers are in a very risky situation today and their current condition is a big question for society. Children of female sex workers are a weak agency, may go against social cohesion, are deprived of their child rights, and have more chances of becoming a part of the sex industry in the future. This study has been conducted in selected districts of Karnataka using a mixed-methods technique with the help of certain local NGOs. It has been found that Children of female sex workers are at a 'high rate of risk' and are maltreated in different ways. They are suffering from social exclusion, anxiety and depression, deprivation, rejected-felt needs, dissatisfaction, unfulfilled wants, poor aspirations, abandonment, etc. It is concluded that it is tremendously imperative to strengthen the availability and accessibility of obligatory and compulsory services for these children and the need for geographical and cultural-specific rehabilitation programmes on an urgent basis. Moreover, along with HIV prevention, the National Aids Control Organisation must also focus on these children.

Keywords: Sex workers, Women, HIV, Children, Violence, Policy

Introduction

Sex work or prostitution, is one of the oldest occupations in the world. The sex trade has a very strong lineage and history dating back a few centuries. This profession has interesting myths and stories (Sircar & Dutta, 2011). Sex work has its place in the world's various cultures, literature, and the arts. "Vedic texts give an account of a mythic empire builder, the Bharata, and prove that people were acquainted with prostitution through references to "loose women", female "vagabonds," and sexually active unmarried girls" (Ringdals, 2004). Indian mythology often described high-class sex workers who were

serving in the various 'Indian Dynasties at a various period of time' and were treated with great honour and respect. Also, there are certain 'plays' in various languages written by well-known sex workers (Sagtani, 2013; Siddharth et al., 2019).

It is known that those who sell their bodies for sexual service for various reasons are known as sex workers. Since sex work has become a kind of profession today, the word prostitute is no longer used as it leaves 'stigma and humiliation' in society. Studies have shown that women are opting for sex work as an occupation because of poverty, livelihood, unemployment, early marriage and desertion, widowhood, social exclusion, etc. (Adhikari, 2014). It is also found that 'some of them have opted for sex work to explore and articulate their sexuality' (Open Society Foundation, 2007). There are some feminist arguments that do not fall either in favour of anti-prostitution or in favour of supporting sex work for women. Some of the feminists say this kind of argument will lead to a great dilemma between the domains of 'occupation and motherhood'. Anthropologists say this kind of debasement further escalates their 'marginalization and exclusion' from their children. Sexual and physical violence against sex workers, from brothel owners, clients, intimate partners, police, and pimps, is very common (Sircar & Dutta, 2011; Yerpude 2011; Yerpude & Jogdand, 2012). Studies have also proved that there is an increased risk of sexually transmitted infections and HIV among sex workers. The problems and sufferings faced by them are beyond explanation. Merciless treatment in the brothels is very common for these women. They will be kept under house arrest for a few months so that women cannot escape. The key issue is human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation and prostitution (NHRC, 2008). Also, it is noted that sex workers are at a potential risk for maternal mortality and morbidity because of HIV, stillbirth, and unsafe abortions. In India, sex work is legal but other related issues like pimping and running brothel houses are illegal (Tanuja, 2014; Gupta, 2009).

Statistics

Different global agencies estimate that around 4.3 million women have been involved in the sex trade in India (Agrwal, 2013). As per some Indian-based NGOs, there are around 800,000 sex workers in India. US-AID estimates around 657829 sex workers in India, of whom 43% are reported to be HIV-infected (Nanjunda, 2019). All India Network of Sex Workers (AINSW) claims around 5 million sex workers in India. The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare says there are around 68,851 sex workers in the country. The National Child Rights Protection Commission says there are over 30 lakh sex workers in India (2017). The Ministry of Home Affairs estimates that over five lakh women are in the sex trade. The highest numbers of sex workers are in Maharashtra, West Bengal, and Andhra Pradesh states. There are around 1,00,000 sex workers in Karnataka, as per the Karnataka Health Promotion Trust estimation.

Children of Sex Workers

India's National Policy for Children (2013) clearly says that 'every state in India should ensure to secure the rights and entitlements of children.' Children of sex workers are a major concern today because of their vulnerability.' It is believed that when children stay with their mothers, they are often exploited and become part of the sex industry. In brothel centres, young children are usually forced to help their mothers and learn about prostitution at a very young age. Studies found that normally here, girls will be forced to follow their mothers by the brothel owners. (Mishra, 2016; Adhikari, 2007). The majority of girls growing up in brothels will become sex workers themselves and most of them will have their first sexual experience at the age of 9–10 years old (Mishra, 2016). It is also found that soon after menstruation, the girls will be forced to become sex workers by the brothel owners. In other words, these young girls are being misused by customers, pimps, local politicians, sometimes policemen, etc., and they will be absorbed by the trade over time, knowingly or unknowingly (Das, 1991). It has been found that female sex workers are facing various problems when bringing up their children. Female sex workers face violence from brothel owners who keep children away from mothers in order to augment these women's output. Even with these challenges, female sex workers still wish to have their own children for various social and economic reasons and as a form of support during old age (Das, 1991; Siddharth et al., 2019).

Bhargava (2019) writes

“Due to the nature of trade, girl children are particularly vulnerable. In a study conducted, the focus group discussions revealed that mothers felt helpless when a client touched, molested, or teased their daughters verbally”.

Children growing up in brothels will have a very different atmosphere. It is also noticed that these children will be in touch with the regular customers of their mothers, who exploit these children more easily. Studies have found that the children of sex workers in major cities face a range of HIV. Also, these children are dropping out of school. Moreover, parental desertion, psychological depression, ill health, marginalization, and unemployment problems are also hunting these children (Siddharth et al., 2019; Mishra, 2016). They are the more easy and soft targets for the anti-social elements and for the police too. The majority of children have become juveniles at the age of 9–11 years. Girl children of sex workers are also forced into organ trading (Singh, 1995).

Experts opine that the social exclusion of these children may lead to poor educational levels, poor school achievements, unacceptable social behaviour, homelessness, drug use, unemployment, teenage pregnancy, crime, etc. They are deprived of their child's rights and all these affect their brain functions as well (Chohan & Khan, 2010). Various new programmes have been introduced for the welfare of these children. Nowadays,

3Rs, i.e., raid, rescue, and rehabilitation with 3 Rs (countermeasures), resilience, reworking, and resistance, are the main approaches taken by the local NGOs working for them. NGOs are providing proper rehabilitation for these children so that they should not plunge into a similar profession in the forthcoming days (Agrwal, 2013). With this background, this article will shed light on the plight of the children of female sex workers in Karnataka.

Literature Review

The literature regarding the children of sex workers is limited. Tanuja (2014) has found several vulnerabilities and issues affecting these children, including social stigma, separation from parents, abuse, and introduction to sex work at an early age, low school enrollment, psychosocial issues, and social exclusion. Further, she writes that children of traditional sex workers are often abused and discriminated against even at school by other students and neighbours because of their mothers' sex work profession. Hence, children may be deprived of education and health rights. Because of this issue, children feel social isolation and may not mingle with other communities. She opines that research must focus on how mothers are influencing their young daughters to opt for the same profession in the future.

Chohan & Khan (2010) argue that children's' attitudes towards education are dependent on factors such as the socio-economic status of the family, the attitude of family members towards education, community behaviour, school environment, etc. Children of the sex workers coming from lower socio-economic status and the stigma are most likely to be dropouts at the primary level. These deprived children may often be battered, discriminated against, and excluded by other children in schools. Hence, they lack educational and high-esteem aspirations. Further, factors such as early sexual abuse, humiliation, homelessness, violence, and social stigma will leave a negative attitude towards society, and they will become juveniles at an early age.

Jayasree (2004) opines that the basic problems in social structures are attributed to the emergence of sex work. Since society is predominantly male-dominated, females are viewed as sexual objects from the beginning. This aspect has not changed, though society is more developed today. Also, most research to date has shed light only on brothel prostitution and street prostitution. Nonetheless, there is not much research on indoor prostitution. The research findings never talk about the law or the system of government regulations regarding prostitution. One more major problem is that policies talk about the rehabilitation of sex workers but they never talk about their children or their future.

Children of sex workers bear the worst brunt today. Adhikari (2014) found that these children grew up without proper parental care and lived solely on their mother's

earnings. He writes that only about 36 percent of the children of sex workers are attending school in India, and it depends on factors such as the mother's education, financial status, and mother's relationship with her male partner. Also, children who finished little education have ended up with only some menial jobs. He further observed that school dropouts are rampant among these children and these children are found to be playing on the streets, running errands for the local gangs, addicts to drugs, involved in crimes, helping as pimps, as drug peddlers (knowingly or unknowingly), helping criminals, etc.

A report by KHPT (a Bangalore-based NGO) found that “sex workers have opined that their work carries a stigma and many of them have found it problematic to get their daughters married off. There are some instances of the daughters of sex workers being abandoned by their in-law families after getting married upon discovering the mother's sex work job” (KHPT, 2017). Experts opine that such incidents will further push these daughters into the sex trade with their mothers, like a vicious cycle. As per the study done by the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights—India (NCPCR), the biggest risk is that girl children are joining the profession of their mothers, which is very common in the case of brothel centers. The report further asserted that sex workers' children need regular psychological counselling. Moreover, they need quality rehabilitation to avoid getting into the traditional job (NCPCR, 2012 report).

Bhargava (2019) writes that, as per the experience of these children “teachers take them aside and inquire about their mothers' “rate”. This harassment, social ostracization, and lack of resources are the main causes of the high drop-out rate. Because of their early exposure to sex, children often use their own sexuality to gain attention from others, which increases their vulnerability to sexual exploitation”.

Guptha (2009) opines that we need the development of culturally appropriate strategies and interventions, both from the NGOs and the government, so that these marginalised children can properly cope with the current context and challenges. Moreover, it is very significant to explore perspectives within the various government schemes for improving the availability and accessibility of the required and essential services for these children in the future. Hence, vulnerability to various health issues, including HIV, and crime can be timely avoided. From the literature survey, it was found that new studies are required to uncover the socio-economic status of these children and the structural attributes of the current traditional social system, where the sex work profession is highly unacceptable. Also, there is a gap in research on the perceptions of the dissimilar stakeholders regarding the different challenges they face in providing different services to both sex workers and their children (Beard et al., 2010).

Objectives and Methodology

- To reveal the socio-economic status of the studied female sex workers and their adult children,
- To identify and profile the vulnerability and barriers to rights among the children of sex workers;

This study is conducted in three selected districts of Karnataka (Bangalore, Belgaum, and Raichur District). As per the Karnataka Health Promotion Trust (NGO) and the Study Committee on Sex Workers in Karnataka, around 1 lakh sex workers spread across the state. But there is no proper survey of the children of sex workers in Karnataka. Data was collected using a purposive sampling technique through a snowball sampling tool with the help of local NGOs. We used mixed-method techniques. First, we contacted the sex workers who had at least one child to get their socioeconomic details. Finally, as per the sampling equation (infinity sampling), we have selected 384 children of the same sex workers. We contacted their children, who were only 10 years old. Out of 384, around 186 were girls and the remaining were boys. We collected the required details from these children through a survey questioner. We also did a limited number of focus groups and case studies. The data has been analysed using SPSS software. The study was done from early January to mid-March 2020. Ethical clearance was also obtained. Ethical consent taken from the local IEC.

Sampling Frame

Table 1

<i>Name of the Districts</i>	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>
Bangalore	77	63
Belgaum	63	53
Raichuru	59	70
Total	199	186

Result and Discussion

Table 2: Details of the Children of the Sex workers

<i>N= 384</i>	<i>Number and Percentage</i>
Age (in years)	
Less than 5 years	-----
10-15	36(9.3)
15-20	112(29.1)
20-25	98(25.5)
Above 25	138(36.0)
Level of Education	
Primary	112(29.1)

Upper Primary	45(11.7)
High school	26(6.7)
Drop out	178(46.3)
Illiterate	23(6.8)
Reason for drop out	
Not interested	76(19.7)
Poverty /no money for fee	78(20.3)
Need to go for job	65(17.0)
Humiliation	98(25.5)
Household work	55(14.3)
Other	12(3.1)
Residing place	
Orphanage	56(14.5)
Child care institutions	32(8.3)
With parents	186(48.4)
With grand parents	98(25.5)
Single	12(3.1)
Occupation	
Skilled	56(14.5)
Unskilled	236(61.4)
No job	92(24.0)
Facing humiliation in the society	
Yes	198(51.5)
No	95(24.7)
Often	91(23.6)
HIV status of the Children	
Positive	57(14.8)
Negative	327(85.1)
Opinion about mothers occupation	
Not liking	78(20.3)
Angry and Frustrate	63(16.4)
No big issue	86(22.3)
No idea what she is doing	100(26.0)
Don't Know	57(14.8)
Societal Treatment	
Sympathy	68(17.7)
Not friendly	78(20.3)
Excluded	46(12.0)
No idea	192(50.0)
Any Police Cases	
Yes	83(21.6)
No	301(78.3)

Tab 2 *primary data

The socio-economic details of the sex workers (mothers) have been given in Table 2. As per the primary data, the majority of sex workers belong to the age group of 25–30. Next, 43% of them have entered the profession at a young age (average age 15–16). Sex workers will continue in the job as long as beauty prevails. After that, sex workers will work as pimps. Regarding education, 43% of them have studied up to the primary level and 15% of them are illiterate. A low level of education is also a key reason for women entering this job. Income level is an important social-economic determinant. The declared income shows their pathetic economic condition. The majority of them (46%) are earning a monthly income between Rs. 5000 and Rs. 7000. Earnings will infiltrate at various stages for pimps, owner of the brothel house, local anti-social elements, police, etc., and hence, finally, only a few rupees will remain with sex workers. Around 43% of them belong to other backward castes (OBC), whereas 22% of them belong to schedule castes (SC). It shows SC and OBC-like excluded groups still facing poor socio-economic status at the counter. An interesting feature of this study is that around 20% of workers are married but not disclosed to take care of the family. Regarding the reason for choosing this job, around 37% of them said it was because of poverty and 22% of them wanted to earn extra income. Unemployment is also a key factor here. Regarding the typology of work, we found 46% are home-based and 31% are brothel-based. Single women (34%) and widows (22%), are also significantly present in this occupation.

The study has collected basic data about the children of sex workers. We found that around 9% of their children belong to the group of 10–15. The most worrying factor is that around 46% of children are dropouts, whereas 6% have not seen the school at all. The majority of children are being dropped out after completing the primary level. Around 25% of children were not attending school because of humiliation by their friends and classmates. Sometimes, school teachers are also treating these children differently. Some of the children (34%) are not going to school because they need to take care of household work and around 20% of them said they don't have enough money to attend school. It has been found that the elder daughter (17%) of the family is not attending school because she needs to take care of her siblings. Around 14% of them tested positive for HIV. Due to various socio-economic reasons, more than 33% of the children of sex workers are staying at orphanages and state child care institutions. Around 61% of children are engaged in the unskilled sector because of a lack of education and jobs. Around 16% of the children are angry and frustrated about their mother's occupation and 21% of them are facing police cases.

Discussion

The aim of the current study is to find out the situation and vulnerability of the children of female sex workers in Karnataka. The sex work profession has a long lineage in

India. Today, the urban market, including sex work, has become a big channel to attain self-sufficiency or financial independence for a few women (Kumar, 1998). During the interview, female sex workers were given key information about their previous occupation and the reason for choosing sex work over other jobs because of flexibility, high earnings, non-rigidity, etc. Hence, there is an imperative requirement for a watertight compartment among concepts like trafficking, voluntary sex work, and forced work. Studies done in various parts of the country have found some vital findings, like that significant numbers of sex workers are in the sex trade to support their grown children and the family (Gupta, 2009; Rao, Gupta Lokshin et al., 2003). Next, sex workers who lose the safekeeping of their children as a consequence often report becoming involved in anti-social activities like drug supply, pornography, pimping, stripping, rape and kidnapping, theft, etc. (Das, 1991).

Moreover, we found that children of sex workers are victimised in different ways, including social neglect, rejected felt needs, unfulfilled wants, failed aspirations, exclusion, deprivation, abandonment, risk of entering the sex trade, indulging in criminal activities, malnutrition, etc. This is the reason why these children will not show any interest in interacting or mingling with other community members (Scambler, 2007; Jogdand, 2012). Along with this, if the child is dropped out, she or he will soon be aware of the mother's real occupation. This study has shown that children of sex workers are having undesirable environments surrounding their homes marked by attacks, abuse, unparliamentary words, violence, etc. Also, some of them are dreaming of rescuing their mothers from prostitution and leading a decent life with modern facilitation. Our study has also shown that there are continuous fights and violence from their intimate partners, clients, and husbands. Keeping children in a safe and fear-free environment is a big challenge for mothers (Kumar, 1998; Nanjunda, 2019). This current study corroborates all these similar findings.

During the study, it is found that the majority of these children need immediate counselling as they are facing different mental traumas, including depression, anxiety, tc. We also found that those children who are addicted to drugs need immediate attention and treatment. It has also been learned from the local NGOs that some of these children are already suffering from sexually transmitted diseases. Some of the children are already in 'conflict with the law' for various crimes like theft, eve-teasing, and robbery, including some heinous crimes. Sometimes local police officers target these children without capturing the real culprits in connection with the crime that happened in their jurisdictions (Kumar, 1998). We also noticed some of the children, especially girl children, were begging on the road and at road traffic signals. There is no big difference regarding the opinions expressed by both boys and girls. However, it seems girls are facing more vulnerability for sexual exploitation, while boys are being

vulnerable to physical abuse both indoors and outdoors. It is also found that girls are being threatened or eve-teasing by strangers' passersby and from neighbors. Girl children are of the opinion that they are deprived of safety and dignity in life (Agrwal, 2013).

Female sex workers are also mothers. During the interview, it has been found that these women go beyond their capacity to complete the role of motherhood. However, it seems these mothers are not getting good social or family support. They face the toughest challenges in providing social needs for their siblings, fulfilling their dreams, and hoping for a better future. Also, they are not getting good support to improve prospects for themselves as well as their children (Sircar and Dutta, 2011). It is observed that the home atmosphere, family, social life, and peers, aspirations also played a vital role in determining the vulnerability of these children. During the focus group study, we found their unique socio-economic background and stigma are a kind of very big hurdle in getting good social status, dignity, self-concept, esteem, and attitude-building processes in their lives. Hence, some of these young children are choosing the sex work profession. These children are facing various issues both at the individual as well as the family level, which needs further study (Shohel et al., 2012).

Sex work is associated with high levels of social stigma, which is said to arise from the attribution of shame, particularly to women and their children (Scambler, 2007). From this viewpoint, the mother's occupation is indirectly responsible for the violation of children's rights, which undermines the social ecology. Stigmatisation occurs in all aspects of children's lives, from the general public to healthcare officials, clients, police, and other service providers in their day-to-day lives (Gupta et al., 2008). We found this can result in isolation, social exclusion, agony, mental stress, etc. among these children (Cusick and Berney, 2005). We opine that the culture of fear associated with their mother's work, popular belief, deprived resources, and opportunities also make life more vulnerable for these children. Studies have proved that sex work background is the real causative factor for the differential utilisation of the health and educational facilities provided as a part of child rights (Ward and Day, 2006; Putnis and Burr, 2020). In a focus group study, we found the absence of a regular income to be the biggest hurdle to providing a good childhood, education, etc. for the children.

It is widely believed that documentation and good evidence regarding the plight of the children of sex workers are very limited in academic settings. Moreover, the extended family members and neighborhood community are not sensitive towards these children. Furthermore, different stakeholders in this issue are not properly responding to the needs of these children. The media's role is also needed in exposing the problems of these disadvantaged children. The social worker's role in understanding their immediate needs and barriers to getting their childhood rights and bringing them back to the mainstream

of society is grossly absent (Fisk, 2013; Chattopadhyay, and Rosemary, 2004). We found that there are NGOs that are providing some types of services to the children of sex workers. These programmes included quality education for children, health care, HIV testing, vocation training, short-term shelter, and housing so that children had a safe place to stay when their mothers were working. These NGOs need more professionalism, commitment, and funding. Because of stigma, uniqueness, and the drifting nature of work, children are not accessing any type of government benefit. We found the voices of the children who are living in slums and rural areas are going unheard and being the soft target for abuse and exploitation. Children are dreaming of a fear-free and secure future and have a desire to live like other normal members of society.

Understanding micro- and mesosystems to look at the immediate lives and plight of female sex workers and how it affects their mothering is the need of the hour. The micro studies will help us look at the motherhood experience of female sex workers and its effects on their day-to-day lives and the lives of their children (Maggie and others, 2008). Moreover, we need fresh data to get a societal perception of these children and the role of civil society in their rehabilitation process. The new studies must be understood profoundly about the impact of exclusion from child rights resulting from mothers' occupation on the future lives and wellbeing of the children (Putnis and Burr, 2020). This understanding will help us develop and determine geographically and culturally specific needy interventions. The major limitation of the study is that it had only a small number of samples and the result cannot be generalized. The hidden nature of the job was also a challenge while framing study samples. The study has covered the children in the age group 6–18 only and the study was largely done in urban and semi-urban areas and in only 3 districts of the state. The major limitation of this study is that it is based on NGOs interventions and has no direct access to the researchers. A future study needs to be done on the socio-psychological status of children of sex workers.

Policy Suggestion

Based on the study, good policy interventions may include 1. Gradual and feasible rehabilitation for the sex workers (mothers) 2. Special facilities for at least two generations of the children of sex workers 3. Targeted intervention from early childhood 4. Life skills and vocational training till they get a job 5. Moreover, a concrete and new approach is required for the decriminalization, substantiation, and re-socialisation of these children on an urgent basis.

Conclusion

The findings of this study will help to reveal a realistic picture of the lives and experiences of the children of sex workers in Karnataka State. The major objective of this paper was

to summarise the susceptibility of the children of female sex workers. The children of female sex workers are a highly disadvantaged and socially marginalised group today. The majority of children belongs to the adolescent age group and is involved in various anti-social activities. Children are being dropped out of school just at the primary level. These children are deprived of their child rights. Also, they have been deprived of their parents' love, care, and affection. These children are more likely to face violence, abuse, harassment, and exploitation due to their vulnerability. Children are living with several forms of social disruption, which further compounds their vulnerabilities, affecting their physical, social, and emotional status (Agrwal, 2013). Sex workers and their children have limited awareness regarding their rights and entitlements, and they are almost away from accessing different services and benefits. Various stakeholders, including the government and NGOs, should have a sensitive mechanism for their inclusiveness and mainstreaming. There is a greater chance of girl children of sex workers being observed by the sex trade and boys being observed by the darker side of society. Hence, different agencies should create more opportunities and exits to come out of the vulnerability for these children as soon as possible.

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