

Information Sharing and Expression of Ideas Among Street-Based Female Prostitutes (SBFPs) in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

In this study, two main objectives have been investigated. The first was to find out the techniques of information sharing between women involved in street prostitution in Sri Lanka, while the second was to discover the practices they use to express their feelings. Understanding the socio-demographic characteristics such as age, civil status, education and family background of the SBFPs were the sub-objectives of the study. Survey and case study methods were adopted for the study. Dehiwala-Mount Lavinia and Ratmalana were selected as the research area, and the data was collected using simple questionnaires and in-depth interviews. The snowball sampling method was used to select the sample of 20 SBFPs who were engaged in prostitution in the streets. The data for this study was analyzed by using qualitative methods. Descriptive statistics was used for the demographic characteristics of the subjects. The results of this study revealed that there is a subculture among street prostitutes. They engage in competitiveness in their profession and this subculture has introduced certain dictions. Such street prostitutes adapt their way of communication through signals. Results indicate that there are literate women with aesthetic skills found among the prostitutes in the community.

Keywords: Information sharing, Female Prostitution, Female sex workers (FSWs), Sri Lanka, Expressing ideas, Street prostitution

INTRODUCTION

The origin of prostitution goes back to the inception of human civilization. With the advancement of human civilization, certain males have attempted to deviate from social norms to enjoy sex. It could be concluded that as a result of this trend, prostitution has evolved as a profession.

According to many social scientists' point of view, prostitution is the oldest profession in the world, but it still needs a clear definition. According to Mado, prostitution is a profession that brings financial benefits or other offerings to those who indulge in homosexual and bisexual behavior.

Prostitution takes on many definitions as it relates to sex for hire. Operationally defined, prostitution is a behavior that involves the exchange of sexual services for economic compensation in the form of drugs, money, or needed resources, for example, housing or food (Murphy, 2007; Williamson & Baker, 2009). The Oxford Dictionary of Sociology defines a prostitute as "the provision of sexual favors for financial reward has probably been institutionalized in the form of prostitution in every society that has had a coinage. It has nearly always involved the prostitution of women to men, though male prostitution, especially to male clients, is not uncommon" (Scott, John 2014).

The majority of prostitutes is women. Female prostitutes were defined as women who sold sex to men in exchange for money or goods. When considering female prostitution, the categorization is different with place, price, and its impact on the community. "The most consequential division in this stratification model is that between street and indoor prostitution. There are call girls, escorts, brothel workers, bar or casino workers and street walker (Weitzer, Ronald 2009).

In Sri Lanka, prostitution including other related activities such as soliciting, advertising and using premises

for sexual activities is illegal. Geographical mapping carried out in Sri Lanka in 2013 estimated a total of 14,132 female sex workers (FSWs) (ranging from a minimum of 12,329 to a maximum of 15,935) (National STD/AIDS Control Programme; 2013). In 2019 it has grown to 30,000, with a plausible range of 20,000–35,000, which implies a prevalence of FSWs of 0.56% (0.37–0.65%) among adult females (Bozicevic, Ivana et al. 2020). In addition, Bozicevic et al, described their finding as follows: street (39.5%), spa (20.8%), lodge/hotel (13.8%), shanti (small houses, usually made from pieces of wood, metal, or cardboard, in which poor people live, especially on the edge of a city; 9.6%), home (9.2%), other (1.9%), brothel (1.8%), karaoke/night club(1.1%), beach (0.9%), park (0.9%), massage parlor (0.4%). The peak days of activity for FSWs were reported to be Friday and Saturday.

Research Problem

According to social norms, prostitution is against social ethics and standards; the majority of society despises it. Hence prostitutes become victims of social denunciation and repudiation. It is justifiable to mention that these women become carriers of sexually transmitted diseases often. Under these circumstances, prostitutes have become the subject of many unique, broad extended medical researchers. However, there has been a very limited number of in-depth studies done on this subject in the field of social sciences in Sri Lanka. There aren't any research publications available on this subject in the subfields of social science. Library science is also a similar field that lacks publications. The difficulty in gathering data and other related issues, in the field of library science too has low interest and tendency towards the study of prostitutes by researchers. Therefore, this research is expected to fill the gap in such a neglected area of research and the main problem of this research was to examine how street prostitutes share information among themselves and what techniques they use to express their feelings

Objectives

1. The main objective of this study was to examine the techniques of information sharing between women involved in street prostitution in Sri Lanka and discover the practices they use to express their feelings.
2. Understanding the socio-demographic characteristics such as age, civil status, education and family background of the SBFs were the sub-objectives of the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Women engaged in street prostitution have been studied from several points of view and no known studies have focused on their behavior in information-sharing styles. The study was conducted to better understand the information behavior of women involved in street prostitution in Sri Lanka.

Prostitution and other forms of “sex work” are widespread in Sri Lanka and around the world, and some argue that it has been widespread since ancient times. It is not known how many women and girls are prostituted annually in Sri Lanka. Prostitution is difficult to define and therefore it is difficult to determine the number. It is a worldwide phenomenon that is intricately tied to human trafficking and the global sex trade (Farley et al., 2003). In this study, prostitution is defined as offering, agreeing, or sexually engaging in sexual conduct for a fee.

Much recent literature on street prostitution attempts to identify the factors that lead women and girls into this life. Early physical and sexual abuse, home expulsion, drug abuse, and racial ethnic, and economic influences were all identified as factors influencing prostitution. (Kramer & Berg, 2003; McClanahan, McClelland, Abram, & Teplin, 1999; Potterat, Rothenberg, Muth, Darrow, & Phillips-Plummer, 1998; Silbert & Pines, 1983). Many studies have also documented the inherent risks of street prostitution, particularly drug abuse and addiction, exposure to HIV and STDs, as well as violence in the form of attacks, kidnappings, and rapes. (Dalla, 2002; Raphael & Shapiro, 2002). The effects of street prostitution on mental health are severe, including depression and anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorders, dissociative disorders, and suicide. (Farley et al., 2003; Herman, 2003; Rabinovitch, 2003; Ross, Farley & Schwartz, 2003). Furthermore, women who

engage in street prostitution are subject to great shame and are likely to be stigmatized for their activities (Masson & Hedin, 1999; Weiner, 1996). One study found that 89% of 785 individuals in prostitution in nine countries wanted to escape (Farley et al., 2003).

James (1972: 107) asked 32 female prostitutes to describe various kinds of prostitutes and developed a taxonomy, based on work area, of three multi-dimensional and five unique categories. A few researchers have been sensitive to the continued phenomenon of pimp-prostitute relationships in street work (Barry, 1995; Hunter, 1993). Norton-Hawk (2004: 192–3) compared the differences between pimp-controlled women and non-pimp-controlled women in the northeastern USA. Although researchers have looked across the spectrum of sex work from street-based to call girl work (Benjamin and Masters, 1964; Flowers, 1998; Goldstein, 1979; James, 1972), few recent studies have examined, in-depth, one segment of prostitution and the work styles within it. Farley (2003) discusses how the language around prostitution makes the violence and harm perpetrated upon women who prostitute socially invisible. Therefore, this study addresses the gap in the literature by focusing on the information behavior of street-based prostitute women.

METHODOLOGY

Based on the study’s purposes survey and case study methods were adopted. Dehiwala-Mount Lavinia and Ratmalana were selected as the research areas. Considering women involved in street prostitution in these three areas as the study population, the snowball sampling method was used to select a sample of 20 SBFPs. Data were generated from interviews with women engaged in prostitution over six months using a simple questionnaire. The data for this study was analyzed by using qualitative methods. During the analysis, the women’s oral descriptions were read by the researcher to gain a general understanding of the text. A line-by-line analysis allowed the researcher to identify significant statements and phrases that related to the study’s objectives. Descriptive statistics was used for the demographic characteristics of the subjects.

Findings

A sample of 20 women involved in street prostitution in Ratmalana, Mount Lavinia, Dehiwela was selected for the study, and interviews and informal discussions were conducted to gather information. The information is summarized in the table below.

Table 01: A summary of the demographic data

Age	<20	20-40	40-50	>50
	4	14	0	2
Language	Sinhala		Tamil	
	18		2	
Civil Status	Single	Married (With husband)	Divorce	Married (But living alone)
	5	4	1	10
Education	Never go to School	Up to Grade 6	Up to O/L	Up to A/L
	6	13	1	0
Income Per Day	<500	500-1500	1500-3000	>4000
	4	13		3

A Succinct Summary of the Demographic Data

Based on the results, the street sex providers can be classified into four categories:

1. Those who seek customers to be entertained at hotels or the residence of the prostitute.
2. Those who seek the assistance of a dealer and arrange a vehicle and have intercourse while inside the vehicle.
3. Prostitutes are those who accompany the customers to their room or place of lodging.
4. Prostitutes those who prefer the beach, parks, and the shade of a tree.

Out of these twenty voluntary participants, 70% of them belonged to the age group of 20-40 years. 10% were over 50 years and the rest were below 20 years. 18 of the prostitutes in the sample were Sinhala Buddhists and the remaining two were Tamils. None of the participants were born in Colombo or the western province. Most of them are in Colombo seeking employment due to poverty and are faced with many difficulties. None of them owned any permanent residence in Colombo and have been dwelling in temporary places in Colombo.

Among the participants of the sample, 14 prostitutes had been married and 10 of them were living alone without being divorced. The other 4 are engaged in prostitution with the assistance of their husbands. Five unmarried prostitutes were involved in this research and one prostitute was a divorcee. One married prostitute was without any children.

When the family status of these prostitutes was taken into the study, it was clear that none of them hailed from stable families or with acceptable family backgrounds. The majority of them were living without their mothers. Either the mother had passed away or had abandoned the family or the father had left the house. Certain fathers have been addicted to alcohol or scandals. These women are subject to heavy pressure and are not guided towards the right living.

Most of these prostitutes have been to school up to grade six or seven. There were five who had never been to school out of whom three were able to read and write well. There was one prostitute who had gone up to the G.C.E. O/L. Some of them were even good singers. 60% of them have commenced their employment in the garment industry. Subsequently, through different contacts, they joined prostitution when they were 25-35. One prostitute has been engaged in the work for more than 20 years. Now she is 46 years old.

The study shows that their income is Rs.500- 1500 per day. Some prostitutes had a lower income of Rs.400/= and some with a maximum income of Rs.4000, but there had been many occasions where they went home empty-handed.

Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication and Interrelationship

Street prostitutes have developed their way of communicating through signs. If a man looks at such a woman, she will respond with a smile and go to the man and ask the question “Would you like something to eat” or “Do you want something”. It has the meaning of indirectly questioning whether the man wants to have sex with her.

On most occasions, the street prostitutes decorate their foreheads with a “Pottu” a colored dot, and carry an umbrella and a bag. She would apply lipstick and keep certain places of her body uncovered. All these are signals to attract men. They prefer to be attired in dark-colored clothes wear a ring on their fingers and roam in populated areas to attract men.

They are seen in the same place and at the same time regularly; that is her “area” and will not allow any other prostitute to be seen in their territory. In case if they find another prostitute in the wrong place, they end up in a violent brawl. They stand at bus stops as if they were waiting for a bus but will not get into any. Her entire effort is to attract a man. Old women are dressed in a saree, and it is a remarkable feature.

Street prostitutes use drugs and build up a relationship with men who are drug addicts. In the case of a police raid, one of these men would bring a child and place it in the hands of the prostitute and pretend to be a family.

When inquired about their communication, it was evident that the prostitutes should be aware of health conditions and the legality of certain matters. In the sample, three women have never got pregnant and 17 of them have got pregnant and 8 of them experienced abortion. Among the abortion methods, they were aware of homemade methods to avoid sudden pregnancy.

To be knowledgeable to escape from the police in case they get caught is also important. All in the sample in this study have at least been arrested once in their life. Three prostitutes have been rehabilitated but over time they have once again got into the same profession.

The mobile phone has become a tool that directly connects the prostitute with her customers without the mediation of a dealer. A telephone conversation is confined to a place and the time, and the women never miss her business. They do not listen to the Radio or television or enjoy a song. Their only hope is to earn an extra amount on the following day. This is the pathetic plight of the life of a street prostitute.

It is clear to discover that there is a subculture among street prostitutes. This subculture has introduced certain words: the money spent by a man is called “mortar tax”, and when a prostitute goes to a hotel, the money paid by a man is called “a body tax”. The word “pot”, and “joint” refers to the places where they are found. Short tours include a short action in a cinema or three-wheeler. "Disc rotation" means the use of drugs.

Using a condom for intercourse is called using a “Raincoat” Apart from that “full park” and “short park” means spending the night together for a couple of hours. “a deal” means two hours. Those who go for a deal attempt to make the man satisfied quickly and the payment is obtained before the action. If the customer is aggressive the woman signals this to others. Further, some make others shout “Police” to chase away the man instantly.

They do not possess any idea about the future of their life. This is illegal in Sri Lanka and the results show that the prostitutes do not realize that they are committing something wrong. The women who do not care about social norms and acceptance, only aim to earn an amount without doing any hard work and wish to continue with their profession.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Whether the society is financially stable or not, prostitution cannot be whipped out totally from any society, but steps could be taken to raise awareness of this menace to minimize its furtherance and impact it. The most appropriate step could be to investigate the situation and find solutions to alleviate the issue.

The explanation given by the majority of the prostitutes was that they have got into this profession as they do not have any other option to find a living. They think that they will not indulge in this profession if there is an alternative. Even though they prefer to join other professions and jobs, the demand for qualifications and other requirements does not encourage them to apply for employment positions. Laborer positions, Security positions, and watchman jobs are a few employment opportunities that can be suggested through this research, but it is learned there is no one to find them employment or guide them towards any employment opportunity.

Especially the increasing number of mobile phones enhances the level of crime and violence. Among them, child abuse is also on the rise. Social media is used for nefarious activities that are more harmful to society than using it productively. The mobile phone is very popular among street prostitutes and leads them to crimes of different nature. It is the responsibility of all concerned to focus on these trends that bring disaster to society.

It can be concluded that mere punishment for the offense cannot change the life of a prostitute. A prostitute too should have the enthusiasm and disposition to be rehabilitated and change her life. Aspirations should be inculcated in the minds of these women. The milieu of the woman should be changed to reform their lives.

Therefore, the initial step is to show them affection.

Another important requirement is to foster discipline and order in them. The most important requirement is to provide them with education to lead a righteous life. Their spiritual life should be trained to follow religious teachings. They should be directed toward religious programs. Exposing them to religious learning and activities is important.

In all these aspects, their literacy level should be uplifted to bring them up in life. People who have missed the reading skill in their childhood should be re-directed to read, and it will certainly revive their lives. It was evident in this research that there are prostitutes with perception for literature.

Even the researchers should not ignore this sector of people. The researchers too should utilize their knowledge, skills, and ability to find ways to rehabilitate these women who are considered prostitutes.

The researchers should take an interest in their research to change the lives of these people. The requirement and reality of these victims should be exposed to the world to bring about a change.

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