

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Harsh realities: Reasons for women's involvement in sex work in India

Niranjan Saggurti<sup>1\*</sup>, Shagun Sabarwal<sup>1</sup>, Ravi K. Verma<sup>2</sup>, Shiva S. Halli<sup>3</sup> and Anrudh K. Jain<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Population Council, New Delhi, India.

<sup>2</sup>International Center for Research on Women, New Delhi, India.

<sup>3</sup>University of Manitoba, Canada.

<sup>4</sup>Population Council, USA.

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**This study documents the reasons and processes for involvement of women into sex work in India. The study is based on in-depth interviews with a cross-section of commercial sex workers in four Indian states – Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. It shows that most women enter sex work due to a complex set of reasons as opposed to any one single over-riding reason. While abject poverty was cited as the main cause by almost three-fourths of the women interviewed, lack of education, financial freedom, domestic violence, family responsibility, lack of support by family members and harassment and abuse in society and in the workplace, were other inter-linked factors facilitating involvement into sex work. Some women reported that they were pushed into sex work by deception or force by known or unknown persons. Many women who initiate sex work are not forced physically, but do so because of reasons over which they had little or no control. In this sense, initiation into sex work is far more complicated than a simple distinction of ‘voluntary’ and ‘involuntary’ as explained by other studies in India and around the world.**

**Key words:** Female sex workers, India, involvement in sex work, HIV risk.

## INTRODUCTION

Sex work in India is clandestine (Dandona et al., 2006). Studies in India show that women either involve in sex work involuntarily, often due to economic reasons (Blanchard et al., 2005) or they are forced into sex work (Dandona et al., 2006; Silverman et al., 2007). Women who join sex work for economic reasons belong to particular social, caste and class groups. Studies that have profiled the socio-demographic characteristics of sex workers (Somaiya et al., 1990; Salunke et al., 1998; Dandona et al., 2006; Ramesh et al., 2008; Reza-Paul et al., 2008) document that the majority of women in sex work are illiterates, belong to lower castes, are destitute and/or are from poor economic backgrounds. A study of economically poor sex workers (Chattopadhyay et al.,

1994) suggests that illiteracy, failure of family support and lack of ability to fulfill their basic needs, were key factors for adopting prostitution. The sale of women and children into the sex trade or sex trafficking or immigration from Nepal and Bangladesh are other reasons for the increasing numbers of girls and women entering the sex trade in India (Chattopadhyay and McKaig, 2004; Silverman et al., 2007).

Research on initiation into sex work usually makes a distinction between voluntary and involuntary prostitution (UNESCO, 2002). The former includes women who enter sex work ‘willingly’ because of poverty or family pressure, while the latter includes those who are forced into sex work through trafficking, coercion or traditional practices. Studies from across the world also place sex workers in these two categories. For example in Thailand, broad contextual factors such as the responsibility of women in the household economy, lack of economic development (Wawer et al., 1996) and

\*Corresponding author. E-mail: [nsaggurti@popcouncil.org](mailto:nsaggurti@popcouncil.org). Tel: +91-11-24651314.

migration from less developed areas to cities (Day, 1988; de Zaluondo, 1991) are the major reasons for involvement in sex work. Research in Russia shows that lack of employment opportunities within the country is a major reason for women entering sex work (Aral et al., 2003). Specific individual level factors such as lack of money, economic necessity and “survival sex” are reported as reasons for involvement in sex work in China (Hong and Li, 2008), Mexico and the US (Bucardo et al., 2004; Whelehan, 2001). Other reasons are domestic violence in the US (Dalla, 2001; Sharpe, 1998) and coercion and deception in Vietnam (Busza, 2004). Some studies attribute childhood sexual abuse as having a significant correlation with prostitution (Earls, 1990; Nandon, Koverola and Schludermann, 1998). Simons and Whitbeck (1991) confirm that exposure to early sexual abuse and destructive parenting result in women running away from home which in turn leads to increased participation in deviant activities, including prostitution. In adults, interpersonal network influences also play a critical role in a culmination of events that result in a woman’s first experience with prostitution (Dalla, 2001).

It is difficult to artificially group these reasons as ‘voluntary’ or ‘involuntary’. Most research studies from India in the literature have failed to capture the complex antecedents that draw women into sex work (Busza, 2004). Some studies suggest that sex workers’ experiences fall along a continuum, with women who go through widely varying degrees of choice and coercion working alongside each other in the same sites (Busza, 2004). In India, it has been documented that sex work is largely involuntary (Nag, 2006). Some women choose it knowingly but find the conditions unacceptable, while others are coerced in the beginning and then decide to stay on (Nag, 2006).

The decision to engage in sex work may either be a rational choice or an involuntary one. It is worth noting that most studies in India which explored women’s involvement in sex work have employed survey methods that document the reasons for involvement in sex work more objectively but lack sufficient contextual clarity. The objective of this paper is to examine the context and the mechanisms that result in women involving in sex work.

## METHODS

This paper is based on data from a cross-sectional behavioral study conducted among FSWs from September 2007 to July 2008 in 22 districts from four states in southern (Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu) India, identified as high epidemic states by the National AIDS Control Organization (NACO) prior to start of the study in the year 2005. These districts were identified using unpublished mapping and enumeration data on FSWs collected independently by the State AIDS Control Societies and Avahan (the India AIDS Initiative of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation). The first step was to undertake field research to identify sex solicitation sites in each selected district. This district-level research helped to identify several small and large sex worker sites that included brothel areas and open solicitation sites such as

roads, highways, bus stands, railway stations and market areas. These lists of solicitation sites were used to define and select site clusters, which were formed by combining small areas or by segmenting the large areas such that each cluster included approximately 500 FSWs. Three such clusters from each district were randomly selected, and FSWs were systematically sampled from the brothel areas and from open solicitation points. The overall study was conducted in two phases: qualitative research and survey. In this paper, the results of the qualitative research study are presented. The quantitative research findings on this subject are published elsewhere (Saggurti et al., 2011). Eligibility criteria of FSWs for the qualitative research included those who have been practicing sex work for at least a year and had moved to at least two places, in the past 2 years for sex work. Female sex workers who were in very poor health or cognitively impaired were excluded from the study. Data was collected using an in-depth interview guideline with additional probing questions based on responses of the FSWs. During these interviews information was collected on reasons for involvement in sex work, age at involvement in sex work, factors that facilitated the process and the contexts back home. In all, a total of 367 eligible FSWs were interviewed by selecting 15-20 female sex workers per district.

In-depth interviews were conducted immediately after obtaining informed consent from the study participants. These face-to-face interviews were conducted in private locations and in locations convenient to the respondents. The interviews were conducted in the local language of the respondent in all the three states except in Maharashtra, where the interviews were conducted in Hindi, as many of the respondents were migrants from states of north and south India. Because the respondents were highly mobile, all of them were interviewed at the same time; the interview session lasted for about 60 to 90 min.

All the research investigators were women. They were multilingual in Hindi, English and the local language of the states where the study was implemented. Notes were taken in the language of the interviewee by the research investigators during the interview. Within 2 h of the interview, the investigator detailed these notes fully; she then translated and typed them into English and saved them in a Word file. The translated typed Word files were reviewed for data quality and for developing the codes. The codes were developed a priori by the lead investigators as well as two coders from each partner agency who reviewed all the qualitative data files and created an agreed upon list of mutually exclusive but possibly linked codes. Data were coded using Atlas.ti, v5.0, a computer-based text-search program that allows multiple codes to be searched at the same time. It has the capability of qualitative “testing” of hypotheses and searching for answers to the research questions. Coded qualitative data were used to answer the key research questions in this paper. The results were then exported into the SPSS package to locate the proportion of women quoting single reason and also for those reporting a combination of reasons for entering sex work.

## RESULTS

### Demographic characteristics of the sample

The female sex workers who participated in the study were between 15 to 60 years of age (mean age=28.9 years, SD=6.7 years), and entered the sex industry when they were in the age range of 12 to 35 years (mean age=20.6 years, SD=4.7 years). Almost two-fifths of these women (39.5%) had no formal education (Table 1). About 60% were married before they indulge in sex work. They were married between the ages of seven and 27

**Table 1.** Socio-demographic characteristics for the total sample of female sex workers interviewed in four high HIV prevalence states of India (N=367).

Variable	Total	Andhra Pradesh	Karnataka	Maharashtra	Tamil Nadu	p-value*
Age						
Mean	28.9	27.6	26.3	29.6	33.9	<0.001
Standard deviation	6.7	5.8	6.1	6.7	6.0	
N	367	60	115	138	54	
Age at entry						0.018
Mean	20.7	20.3	21.0	19.1	23.5	
Standard deviation	4.7	4.8	4.5	4.6	5.1	
N	367	60	115	138	54	
**Age at marriage						<0.001
Mean	15.8	15.4	15.8	15.1	17.8	
Standard deviation	3.2	2.3	3.9	2.6	2.7	
N	220	39	76	65	40	
**Number of children born						0.413
Mean	1.8	1.6	1.8	1.8	1.9	
Standard deviation	0.8	0.6	0.7	0.9	0.8	
N	220	39	76	65	40	
% Illiterates	39.5	30.0	30.4	63.0	9.3	<0.001
N	367	60	115	138	54	
% widowed/divorced at the time of involvement in sex work	55.0	50.0	61.7	48.6	63.0	<0.001
N	367	60	115	138	54	
Number of reasons for involvement in sex work						0.002
1	40.6	40.0	33.9	46.4	40.7	
2	28.9	25.0	30.4	27.5	33.3	
3	20.2	25.0	21.7	18.1	16.7	
4	8.7	1.7	13.0	8.0	9.3	
5	1.6	8.3	0.9	--	--	
Total Percent	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	

\*p-values from ANOVA One-way for difference between averages and chi-square test for association between variables.

\*\* - Values for ever married women.

years (mean=15.8 years, SD=3.2 years). On average, these women reported two most important reasons for involvement in sex work (range=1 to 5 reasons). However, the number of reasons reported varied significantly between FSWs from one state to another ( $p=0.002$ ).

### Reasons for involvement in sex work

Of the 367 women interviewed, 218 women reported more than one reason for involvement in sex work. The reasons they gave were complex, overlapping and not

necessarily mutually exclusive (Table 2). Reasons varied by state that they are currently doing sex work. Details on underlying mechanisms to the reasons mentioned are described as follows:

### *Economic reasons including poverty and debt*

The statement "*poverty is an evil*" was echoed by almost three-fifths of the women who were interviewed (367 women). They stated that poverty was the reason why they opted for sex work. A third (110) of the women

**Table 2.** Reasons for involvement in sex work by state.

Reasons*	Andhra Pradesh	Karnataka	Maharashtra	Tamil Nadu	Total
Running away from house	6.7	4.3	13.0	1.9	7.6
Husbands' alcohol use	18.3	13.0	23.9	18.5	18.8
Husbands' extramarital relationship	18.3	15.7	5.8	16.7	12.5
Domestic violence	20.0	27.0	31.2	5.6	24.3
Lack of support from family members	15.0	24.3	20.3	25.9	21.5
Debt in native place	10.0	5.2	4.3	7.4	6.0
Want to earn more money	60.0	39.1	23.2	51.9	38.4
Provide money to support others in the family	53.3	56.5	28.3	44.4	43.6
Family tradition /caste	--	2.6	6.5	--	3.3
Force /Deception /trapped	6.7	17.4	26.1	9.3	17.7
Raped by others before entry	--	5.2	2.2	--	2.5
Illness in the family	5.0	3.5	1.4	5.6	3.3
Enjoy sex	--	2.6	1.4	7.4	2.5

\*Percentages will not add to 100, as three-fifths of the sex workers mentioned more than one reason.

reported that they had borrowed money from several people for emergencies – to pay for the treatment of a child or parents, for buying a house, or for their daughter's marriage –which had led to an increasing pressure on them to repay the loans. One woman stated, "My bhabhi (brother's wife) was chronically sick. Our family had to spend around a lakh of rupees (Rs 100,000) on her treatment. I had to sell even my mangalsutra (ritualistic jewellery to symbolize currently married). I used to work as an agriculture laborer and was paid very little. The money was not enough and I had to choose this option" Abject poverty was often the result of women being left to fend for themselves because of the death of their parents or husband, divorce/separation, or spouse's ill-health. Most of the women who attributed their poor financial situation as the reason for engaging in sex work mentioned that their involvement in sex work was facilitated by a known person who was well aware of their poor financial condition.

Other economic reasons included "need for more money", with 141 women stating it as one of the reasons. Those who worked as labourers or were on daily wages, earned little. Their earnings were not enough to sustain their families and their children and they wanted a quick and easy way of earning money. Some of them knew other women from their village who worked as prostitutes in nearby towns, and were attracted by this lucrative option. One woman said: "I was working at an STD booth for a monthly salary of Rs 500 (approximately US\$12). I used to work for 12 h from 9 am to 9 pm. One day a lady posing as a customer came to me and asked me about my work and how much I earned ... She told me that if I liked I could earn 10 times of that amount. She asked me to come with her and do sex for money... I was encouraged by her words and joined into this." Some women reported that they heard of earning huge money

from sex work than by doing other menial work such as domestic servants or laborer. One woman reported, "I had to pay an installment of Rs 10,000 per month for my newly purchased house...At that time, in the job I used to get payment of only Rs 3,000 to Rs 3,500. In addition to paying installment, I had to also take care of my family's expenditure and my children's school fees. Since it became difficult to manage everything in the small amount I was earning, I decided to take up this work."

Further analyses of the In-depth interviews suggests that some women wanted to work in other occupations but did not seem to find those options economically attractive and hence they chose sex work as a profession and remained. One woman said, "I worked as a domestic servant, washing clothes and utensils and cooking in other people's houses so that I could take care of my children's needs. But the money was not sufficient. I knew that people who go outside for sex earn a lot of money and chose this option through one of my friends."

### **Lack of education and low socioeconomic status**

About two-fifths of all women interviewed reported a lack of basic education as a major constraint to job opportunities. Several women said that the desire for freedom from family restrictions and wanting of economic independence as reasons for entering into sex work. Some women said they were totally dependent on their families for different day-to-day needs which made them disappointed as they were never fulfilled. Inability to fulfill their needs as well as their children's needs pushed them to choose sex work. One sex worker said, "I got married when I was 16. I gave birth to two children within three years of marriage. My husband did not do any work and instead sent me to work. I did not get any good work. He

*used to drink alcohol and beat me and never cared for our children. Finally, I left my husband and came to another city with children. There I needed money to take care of my children and had no contacts to get into some job... I went into a house where this happens and talked to that lady and since then I have been doing this."*

Twenty-eight out of the total women interviewed reported running away from home at a very young age often because of the fear of being sent to school or because they would have to contribute to their family's financial needs. Some of these 28 women got in touch with pimps or brokers either accidentally or through contacts and then joined sex work. One woman said, *"We were very poor. In spite of that my parents had enrolled me in the school but I used to run away from school... Madam (the class teacher) used to beat us. I was never interested in going to school then. When I was in sixth class, I ran away from home."*

### **Early marriage, domestic violence and alcohol abuse**

Of all the married respondents, 89 stated domestic violence followed by early marriage (before the age of 18) as major reasons for entering sex work. According to these women who were mostly from rural areas, their parents thought of them as a burden and married them off within two to three years from their puberty date. Harassment and violence perpetrated by their spouses, who were often involved in extramarital relationships, created other problems. One woman narrated how she had been subjected to violence due to her spouse's extramarital relationship: *"My husband used to fight with me. After a few years, he got married to another woman without my knowledge. When I learned about his marriage, I asked him to leave the house. I had no money and started looking for work. In my village, a lady who came to visit the temple told me about sex work. She took me to Pune city where I started this work and began earning a lot of money."*

Another woman explained: *"At the age of 14 my maternal uncle got me married. I had three children by the age of 18 years.....At that young age, it was difficult for me to manage the home, the children and my in-laws. My in-laws and my husband always found fault with me and used to beat me. They would complain that I was not doing the household work properly. One day my husband beat me severely and threw me out of the house. I had no other option..."*

Some women reported husband's addiction to alcohol and associated consequences as reasons for entering sex work. As many as 69 married women who were interviewed attributed their husbands' addiction to alcohol. Alcohol use, they said resulted in their husbands' unemployment, and sometimes even abandonment. One woman said, *"When I was 13 years old, my father married me to an old man to whom he owed money. The man was a drunkard. One day he brought home his*

*friend; they were both drunk. The friend tried to force me into having sex with him, but I ran away to my parent's home. They in turn, told me 'your husband is everything to you now', and tried to persuade me to go back. I refused and stayed back... My parents scolded me and beat me for having left my husband's house. One day they too threw me out of their house. ..I came out of the village and met a man from my village. I told him my story. He listened patiently and then told me about this work. He told me that if I wanted he could take me there. I consented and followed him."*

### **Family reasons and lack of social support**

Of the 367 women interviewed, 79 reported lack of support from their parents and family members were reasons for rationalizing their decision to enter sex work. Abject poverty associated with large number of family members, absence of a male earning member, aged parents, inability to meet the needs of siblings and children (including the cost of their education), aspiration to own a house, daughter's marriage, and taking care of a sick husband or ailing parents were cited as 'family reasons and lack of social support'.

Some of the women interviewed said that they played a major role in supporting their families economically until they got married. When they started undergoing marital problems, they could not return to their poverty stricken parents. One woman said: *"I took my daughter with me and went to my mother's place. There also I was unhappy. My parents used to taunt me saying I had left my husband and came to their house, where I was not welcome."*

### **Societal conditions**

Confronted with dysfunctional families, disrupted marital lives and exploitive circumstances, women adopted sex work as a means to live independently and avoid social ill-treatment. Among the women interviewed, thirty two percent reported of having worked in other occupations as wage labourers in construction sites, rice mills, garment factories and agricultural fields etc.. *"I started working in a rice mill when I was 15 years old. The wage I was getting (Rs 40 a day) was not enough to meet the expenses of my family"*. They reported that not only was the pay low but they were often coerced by their supervisors and co-workers to have sex in return for which they were able to keep their jobs or give promise of getting extra money. One woman described how a co-worker made sexual overtures in exchange for money. *"I used to work in the agricultural field for the sake of my children. The mukadam (supervisor) used to look at me lustfully. One day, he called me into a hut located in the corner of the field, offered me four times my wages and asked me to have sex with him. Initially I refused but later I agreed as I was in dire need of money at the time. After*

*that this continued every day.”*

Some of the women reported that they were sexually assaulted by many individuals and even by the police. As a consequence, consistent exposure to an exploitative society and working environment made many decide to enter sex work. One woman explained how she was forced to join sex work: *“...A lady offered me a job of a cook with a meagre salary in her dhabha (roadside restaurant) and I started working there. After some days, one person forcefully had sex with me. After that incident I thought of ending my life but thinking of my children I didn't. Then I thought one person had already spoiled my life, what was the use of crying over it? Therefore, I decided to engage in sex work to earn more money.”*

### **Family tradition**

A total of 12 women reported tradition that included belonging to particular caste groups where sex work was defined as a profession and a service, as a reason for entry. *“We are from the dancer khandan (family); we don't get married. My mother was a dancer in the tamasha (a group that performs on occasions) and that paid for our food – there were many children in my family. This is a good and suitable profession for us as well.”* There are many such groups of caste-based traditional sex workers in India. Because of the nature of this traditional custom, girls born into these families are pre-ordained to becoming sex workers. They lack individual freedom. Even though there is an explicit cultural reason for involvement in sex work, the underlying determinant continues to be socio-economic in nature. *“After my father's death due to poverty, my family members left me to become a Devadasi. This system still exists in our caste (Harijan)... I didn't even know what they were doing to me as I was very young. I didn't start doing this on my own will; it was my family members who made me this way. At present, I am doing this, to feed my mother and to educate my son and make him an officer.”*

### **Process of entry**

Although the reasons for involvement in sex work pertain to a range of negative life circumstances, the modes of involvement can be encapsulated by three key mechanisms described below. The themes highlighted in this section shed light on the myriad ways in which women enter sex work and underscore the free-versus-forced distinction.

### **Own choice related to victimization**

Approximately, 300 of the 367 female sex workers who were interviewed stated that they searched for opportunities to join sex work when they were faced with the conditions discussed above. When they became victims

of such situations, they chose to enter sex work instead of any other profession. Many women felt that sex work was the only work they could do efficiently. Such women also complained about the low wages in other work. They felt that sex work was a profession where they could negotiate with their clients. While they were making a decision to enter sex work, women encountered members of the sex work networks such as agents, brothel owners, and women who were already practicing sex work who facilitated their entry.

### **Forcible entry: Deception by known people**

Of the 367 women interviewed, 65 mentioned being deceived and/or forced into sex work. The in-depth interviews revealed how they were trapped through deception by known persons including relatives and friends, as well as by unknown persons and strangers, through promise of marriage by a lover/boyfriend. In some of the narratives, women used terms such as ‘cheated’, ‘forced’ or ‘lured’, but in some cases these terms did not match their descriptions of involvement in sex work.

As discussed earlier, a majority of the women who were deceived by known people were mostly illiterates and were from poor families with little or no social support. Most were given false promises. They ended up in brothels from where escape was impossible. In a few cases, parents were involved in selling them to brothels. One woman stated: *“My mother took me to one lady and told me from today you will stay here and work here. She took money from that lady in my presence and left. Since then, I have been forced to have sex with many people.”* Another woman narrated that deception by a lover landed her into sex work: *“I eloped with the man I loved. We lived together for a year and enjoyed our lives without any problems. Later we faced some financial difficulties. One day he left me suddenly and did not return. One of my friends used to work as a sex worker in the area and through her I started this work. I must have been around 19 years old then.”*

Another woman explained how an elderly woman from the same village ‘duped’ her: *“Everything was good in my house. After finishing my tenth class, I started looking for a job. At that time our neighbourhood aunt had come back to the village from Bhivandi..... She promised me to get me a good job. In Bhivandi, my aunt took me to a house and made me sit outside. There were five or six women and girls there. They were very friendly and I stayed with them for three to four days. But when I saw everybody engaging in sex work, I also wished I could do it. My house owner understood my feelings and sent a man to me. I had sex with him and enjoyed it. I then started doing it on a regular basis. Later I came to know that the aunt had sold me to the brothel-keeper for Rs 55,000. She told me that when the debt was over I could go wherever I wanted.”*

### **Deception by unknown people**

Many young girls decided to leave their homes because of unfortunate family circumstances such as violence perpetrated by the husband and parents. These girls became easy prey for traffickers who lured them with promises of good jobs, accommodation and so on. They were then sold to brothels from where they could not escape. An 18 year old girl said, *"...As I sat at the S.T. bus stand, I noticed a lady moving about for quite some time. She soon came to me and asked me what my story was. I told her everything and explained that I did not have a place to stay and had no money for food. She told me not to worry and promised me that she would arrange some work. I followed her to Pune. She introduced me to a lady there and sold me for Rs 10,000."*

Once the girls/women entered a brothel, they were told about being bought against huge amounts of money, and they have to pay off their debts by working there for some years. Women who initiated sex work in this manner were unable to earn very much in the beginning since a major portion of their earnings were taken by the brothel owner. Several reasons made it almost impossible for these girls to escape this life: young age, lack of knowledge about the local place (since they were in most cases brought to urban centers from their villages), security men, lack of social support and finally fear of the police who frequently harassed these girls. This mode of initiation represents an extreme form of coercion as the girl has absolutely no choice.

The role of the police as perpetrators of violence rather than as protectors of the people was also stated as a reason for involvement in sex work by many women. One woman said, *"Due to family problems, I went to the police chowki (station) to lodge a complaint. The constables asked me to come inside the police station, where I saw a police officer drinking alcohol. He enquired about me. I told him everything. After a while, he took me to a room and raped me. I cried. Then another constable raped me. They warned me not to reveal this to anybody and threatened to shoot me if I opened my mouth. Later, they took me back to my house and scolded my parents and left me with them. My parents were angry with me because I went to a police station. After three to four days my mother took me to a place for domestic work and sold me to a lady."*

### **Conclusion**

Research on initiation into sex work has made a distinction between voluntary and involuntary prostitution (UNESCO, 2002). The former includes women who enter sex work willingly because of poverty or family pressure. The latter includes those who are forced into sex work through trafficking, violence or tradition. This study, however, shows that the dynamics of initiation into sex work is far more complex. Many women who enter sex work

are not forced physically but do so due to compelling reasons that are beyond their control. Thus this simple dichotomy of 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' may undermine the complex antecedents that lead women to the sex trade.

Another perspective is that sex workers' experiences falls along a continuum. Women experience coercion and choice simultaneously before they came to the decision (Busza, 2004). This argument makes more sense than the dichotomous classification of sex work. Our study showed that women experienced a complete lack of power, freedom and control because of their low status in society.

Previous research about this topic in India documented that the decision to enter into sex work is largely involuntary (Nag, 2006). Some women choose it knowingly but find the conditions unacceptable. Others are coerced in the beginning and then decide to continue with it (Nag, 2006). Rather than only focusing on reasons this study looks at the *mechanisms* of involvement in sex work. The term 'mechanism' includes a combination of social, cultural and economic processes which combine to lead women into sex work.

This study shows that the social, economic, and cultural factors combine to effect women's decision to enter sex work. There are several different pathways. One common pathway is the desire to escape from marital life which represents freedom from violence, humiliation and dominance from the husband. This escape is accompanied by a desperate desire to earn for self-survival and/or to provide for the family. Women experience a number of threatening situations both within society and in the workplace. Their vulnerability is further heightened by individual level factors such as lack of education, low socioeconomic conditions and dependent children. Another pathway for involvement in sex work is when girls are lured into sex work either by offer of large sums of money or a promise to earn easy and quick money. These girls are then sold into brothels by a network of sex traffickers.

In India, a social development perspective has been applied to reduce the risk of HIV by empowering sex workers and changing their health behavior in the long-term (Chattopadhyay, 2004). The proponents of this approach argue that efforts to improve health seeking behavior of female sex workers, particularly for condom negotiation, will not be successful until the larger economic, social and political underpinnings that affect their decision-making powers are addressed (Chattopadhyay, 2004). Findings from this study confirm that individuals decide to enter into sex work because their lives are affected in early ages by incidents at the household and societal levels.

This study also suggests that multiple underlying determinants resulted in women's decision to enter sex work. The typical view held is that women who lack alternative viable options enter sex work to find a quick, short-term source of income (Whelehan, 2001). Perhaps women

enter sex work to escape from situations that bring about instability and insecurity in their lives. There is evidence to support this point of view from other countries where victims of domestic violence in a quest for economic independence choose sex work (Dalla, 2001; Sharpe, 1998; Phoenix, 1999). As best described by Whelehan (2001), a typology that is based on the differential financial motivations of women entering the sex trade is more useful in understanding the difference between sex work as a means of “survival” versus Prostitution as a “career”.

In summary, our qualitative data suggest that women enter sex work for variety of reasons and mostly related to lack of economic and social resources. This does not mean that all women who lack economic and social resources enter in to sex work. This simply means that those who are already engaged in sex work entered this profession because of reasons related to lack of social and economic resources. Further research is also needed to quantitatively assess the mechanisms and pathways for involvement in sex work highlighted by our study. Our findings also point out an urgent need to develop programs on empowerment and social support services for young rural women from low socio-economic strata to enable them to make informed choices on their future. Strategies could include providing scholarships to young women for education and income generating opportunities (UNAIDS, 2002), life skills education for young women in both rural and urban areas, forming women's groups and collectives that can protect them from abuse and violence within the household. These forums can be used effectively for advocating messages to choose alternative and viable occupations other than sex work.

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