When the Sex Market Rejects

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By Harsankar Adhikari

Abstract

This study examines brothel-based Female Sex Workers (FSWs) after their retirement/withdrawal from the sex trade. 100 FSWs above 40 years of age from the Bowbazar red light area of Kolkata were selected through random sampling. A census survey methodology and participant observation was employed for the study. The study reveals that FSWs are further stigmatized and marginalized after retirement. Outside society does not allow them to re-enter. Support schemes from the government and non-profit sector do not exist. Family relations provide little to no support. And while the FSW community can be relied upon to provide some support, housing and medical assistance prove challenging; and, nearly 1/3 of those surveyed found themselves destitute.

Keywords: Female sex worker, retirement from the sex trade, paramour/husband

Introduction

FSWs enter the trade due to a variety of factors including poverty, broken homes, poor schooling or job training, predatory males and sexual abuse,(Adhikari,H,2007). FSWs generally form a community with other FSWs, clients/customers, brothel owner and pimps. A FSW will often set up her own household (considered as line bari (Adhikari, H, 2007)) with her paramour/husband and children. Sometimes her maternal kin will join the household.

There is a limited career span for FSWs. The market dictates that women in their late teens to early 30s are in their prime earning capacity. Beyond the age of 30, FSWs attract fewer customers and client demands often become more deviant (Irigaray, L, 1993). FSWs generally have no saving habits; rather, their focus is on daily expenses: the fulfillment of basic needs for themselves, and family members (which may include extended families), as well as the immediate expenses associated with their trade (rent etc.). Our survey found that one-fifth of FSWs saved a part of her earnings in her prime to become a malkin (brothel owner) in order to benefit indirectly from the trade in retirement.

A community census survey was done in the Bowbazar red light area, the oldest red light area of Kolkata located at the central part of the city and home to approximately 2,200 FSWs. 100 FSWs above 40 years of age who were retired or withdrawn from the trade were selected through random sampling to known their situation after retirement from the trade.

Engagement pattern of the FSWs just after retirement/withdrawal from the sex trade directly

From the table I we find that 65% continue to work indirectly in the sex trade. Nearly 40% continued to receive transactional income in their retirement: 18% of the

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FSWs were engaged as *malkin* with the percentage increasing with age. 20% of the FSWs were engaged as pimps with the percentage decreasing with age. Only 5% settled with her paramour/husband outside the community. Nearly one-third of retired FSWs 50+ were unable to engage in any income generation other than begging.

### Table I Occupational engagement pattern of retired FSWs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of engagement</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>40-50 yrs</td>
<td>&gt; 50 yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malkin (brothel owner)</td>
<td>8 (15%)</td>
<td>10 (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Settled with paramour/husband outside the community</td>
<td>2 (4%)</td>
<td>3 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pimp (agent of the client)</td>
<td>15 (27%)</td>
<td>5 (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assisting other FWSs including <em>malkin</em> for caring of children and other household works</td>
<td>15 (27%)</td>
<td>12 (27%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operating the business of alcohol &amp; ganja etc</td>
<td>15 (27%)</td>
<td>2 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing or begging</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>13 (29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>55 (100%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>45 (100%)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Possibilities of supports from paramour/husband, children, kins and community:**

The males are in different roles in the life of FSWs (Adhikari, H, 2009). The study reveals that only 5% of retired FSWs were settled outside of the FSW community and receiving social and financial support from their paramour/husband. The majority of retired FSWs seem to be in less stable relationships. In exchange for social support, FSWs provide paramours/husbands with financial support (which may include his extended family). We observed that many FSWs had up to five partners over the course of her active career. For most FSWs, retirement signaled the end of the partnership.

The social and cultural milieu of the FSW community has an adverse impact in the process of raising children with improper control and child-rearing strategies (Wolfe, 1999). In spite of the stigmatized life of sex work, FSWs often procreate deliberately. Following birth, FSWs will resume sex work when the baby is about 2-3 months. From that time onwards, the child is often alone or under care of others. Often there is no mother-child bonding. Education and skill training for the children are insufficient.

As a consequence of this environment, early sexual experience, involvement in sex work and early marriage are common among children of sex workers. We found that male children often become paramours to other FSWs. A small portion was involved in various semi skilled/unskilled low paying jobs. Female children often follow the path of their mothers and enter into the sex trade. We found that neither male nor female children provide much support to their mothers in retirement.

**Support from the Govts. and other development agencies**

The policies and programmes undertaken by the Government or other development agencies so far as FWSs are concerned have been concentrated on the
prevention and control of HIV/AIDS. But rehabilitation measures, specifically for retired FSWs do not exist. Moreover, we found that 60% of retired FSWs have no identity of their citizenship. So, they have lost their eligibility to avail the services of any Government relief or entitlement schemes.

**Living condition of retired FSWs**

The study indicated that after retirement, FSWs suffered from either low earnings or no earnings. 70% of them had no specific place to live. Medical assistance was also a challenge for them.

**Conclusion**

After entering the sex trade FSWs become outcasts in society. They belong to new world where all relationships exist for business purpose. After social and family rejection they suffer from further rejection when the market discards them due to their age and they find themselves living without any support. They were not getting support from their paramour/husband or children because the social and cultural milieu of the FSW community has not taught such an obligation. Many try to reestablish their livelihood by other work available within their community. Others are in crises and cannot manage their self needs. Retired FSWs are not accepted by the outside society and cannot return upon retirement.

Government and NGO support is thin or absent. To rehabilitate the retired FSWs concentration should be paid to alternative livelihoods through various skill training. The day care centre might give them an alternative way of living. There is also a need of old age pension beyond the norms in general.

The proper care of all citizens—regardless of profession strengthens the fabric of society.

**References**


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