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Prostitution in Bangladesh: An Empirical Profile of Sex Workers

By AKM Ahsan Ullah¹

Abstract

The paper explores the profile of the Sex Workers (SW) in Bangladesh; and the ordeals faced by them. 221 randomly selected respondents from three categories of sex workers (Hotel, brothel and floating) were interviewed using both close and open-ended questionnaire. Data show that child prostitution is quite prevalent. A higher percentage of sex workers were married compared with the singles. HSWs (Homosexual Sex Workers), on an average, entertain seven clients and BSWs (Bisexual Sex Workers) 15 clients per day. The highest percentage of child prostitutes was prevalent among the FSWs (Female Sex Workers). Hotel sex working is an emerging direction of its category. The paper concludes that dynamics of sex working in Bangladesh is extended to hotel sex working from two of its historically known categories.

Keywords: Sex workers, prostitution, HIV/AIDS pandemic

Introduction

The sex market is expanding at an unprecedented pace and touching every strata of the society. To meet the ever growing and diverse sex demand in the recent years, more and more children and adult women have enrolled in the booming market. Commercial sex takes place in many kinds of ways and involves many different types of people, many of whom are in no way stereotypical. People from various backgrounds and classes sell sex and they do so for a broad range of reasons. In fact, between the educated and resourceful woman who chooses commercial sex from a broad range of possibilities and the poor, uneducated woman who is physically forced to do it, there is a whole continuum of situations.

Sex workers or prostitutes refer to that section of women population who are engaged, legally or illegally, part time or full-time, regular or irregular sexual acts for money or for any other material gain (Metzenrath, 1998). Poverty is certainly driving rural young women to cities. They take job in the garment factories or work as housemaids or in any other sectors. Their employers sexually abuse and harass them and finally drive them thus losing chastity to the profession of prostitution. Prostitution is not a new phenomenon in Bangladesh. Religion although does not permit prostitution, its law does not prevent a woman from becoming a prostitute if she likes to be. This oldest institution having enrooted deep in the society can not be abolished overnight. Ullah's study revealed that an overwhelming majority of the population in Dhaka city favored the existence of prostitution. Yet, the people engaged in the profession always encounter several dilemmas and vulnerabilities. Harassment by the clients, law enforcing agency under the pretext that this profession is not socially sanctioned has been a common phenomenon.

To the theoretical even more than to the applied sociologist, prostitution sets a profound problem: Why is it that a practice so thoroughly disapproved, so widely outlawed in Western civilization, can yet flourish so universally? Social theorists, in depicting the power of collective representations and the mores as determinants of human

conduct, have at times implied that only favorable attitudes and sentiments maintain institutions. But prostitution is a veritable institution, thriving even when its name is as low in public opinion as to be synonymous with the social evil (Davis, 2000; Sachs, 1994; and Khan, Arefeen, 1989). A genuine explanation must transcend the facile generalizations both of those who believe that prostitution can be immediately abolished, and of those who think vaguely that human nature and the lessons of history guarantee its immortality. In what follows I have tried to give a sociological analysis to describe the main features of the interrelational system binding prostitution to other institutions (particularly those involving sexual relations). Such an analysis seems to carry us a long way toward explaining not only the heedless vitality of commercial promiscuity, but also the extreme disrepute in which it and its personnel are held. None can, however, define human prostitution simply as the use of sexual responses for an ulterior purpose. This would include a great portion of all social behavior, especially that of women. It would include marriage, for example, wherein women trade their sexual favors for an economic and social status supplied by men.

It would include all the feminine arts that women use in pursuing ends that require men as intermediaries, arts that permeate daily life, and, while not generally involving actual intercourse, contain and utilize erotic stimulation. The institutional control of sex follows three correlative lines. First, it permits, encourages, or forces various degrees of sexual intimacy within specific customary relations, such as courtship, concubinage, and marriage. Second, to bolster this positive control, it discourages sexual intimacy in all other situations, e.g., when the persons are not potential mates or when they are already mated to other persons. Finally, in what is really a peculiar category of the negative rules, it absolutely prohibits sexual relations in certain specified situations. This last form of control refers almost exclusively to incest taboos, which reinforce the first-named (positive) control by banishing the disruptive forces of sexual competition from the family group (Davis, 2000, and Ullah, 1999). Of the numerous functions which sexual institutions serve, the most vital relate to the physical and social reproduction of the next generation. If we ask, then, which sexual institutions in a society receive the greatest support from law and mores, we must point to those which facilitate the task of procreating and socializing the young. It follows that sanctioned sexual relations are generally those within these (or auxiliary) institutions, while unsanctioned relations are those outside them (Ennew, Heran, Gopal and Montagmery, 1996).

This paper discusses the profile of the respondents, frequency of entertainment, length of profession and the dilemmas they encounter. Ordeals during police raids in their place of operation and place of stay, deprivation from the brokers they stay with, and consent of their guardians to run the profession have been documented.

Methodology

A total of 221 respondents from three categories of sex workers (SW) were selected randomly for interview. Fifty-one were floating, 76 were brothel workers and the rest, 94, were hotel sex workers. To determine the size of the sample a standard method was employed keeping the level of precision at \pm five per cent and 95 per cent confidence interval. Floating sex workers were selected from Dhaka city operating at different parks under open sky (Suhrawardi, Agargaon and Ramna parks); hotel sex workers were selected from the mediocre hotels in Dhaka city from Magh Bazar and Shanti Nagar Area

for the study. Sex workers from two brothels namely Gangina brothel located in Mymensingh district town and the other is Maruari Mandir brothel located in Jessore district town were selected.

Taking gender sensitivity into consideration, female interviewers were recruited for data collection, while for quality control the author supervised the work. Both close and open-ended questionnaire was used to collect data. Three qualitative sessions (focus group discussions-FGD) were conducted. For analyzing data both descriptive and analytical statistics have been applied. ANOVA was applied to see the difference in mean number of different groups of respondents, while χ^2 and t-test were applied to see the difference of means of two groups. However, this paper uses part of the data collected for a large project. This project started in 2001 and expected to continue until end of 2005.

Results and discussion

Marriage and its subsidiary patterns constitute the chief cultural arrangement through which erotic expression is held to reproduction. It is accordingly the most respectable sexual institution (DaGrassa, 1989), with the others diminishing in respectability as they stand further away from wedlock. Even the secondary forms of erotic behavior such as flirtation, coquetry and petting have their legitimate and their illegitimate settings (Davis, 2000). Their legitimate aspects may be subsumed under courtship, leading to marriage; but if indulged in for themselves, with no intention of matrimony, they are devoid of the primary function and tend to be disapproved. If practiced by persons married to others, they are inimical to reproductive relations already established and are more seriously condemned. If practiced by close relatives within the primary family, they represent a threat to the very structure of the reproductive institution itself, and are stringently tabooed. These attitudes are much more rigid with regard to actual intercourse, not only because coitus is the essence of the sexual but because it has come to symbolize an acceptable relationship present in the family (Davis, 2000, and Sachs, 1994.).

With this in mind we can add that when coitus is practiced for money its social function is indeterminate, secondary, and extrinsic. The buyer clearly has pleasure and not reproduction in mind. The seller may use the money for any purpose. Hence unless the money is earmarked for some legitimate end the sexual relation between the buyer and seller is illegitimate, ephemeral, and condemned (Ullah and Rahman, 1999). In commercial prostitution both parties use sex for an end not socially functional, the one for pleasure, the other for money. To tie intercourse to sheer physical pleasure is to divorce it both from reproduction and from the sentimental primary type of relation, which it symbolizes. To tie it to money, the most impersonal and atomistic type of reward possible, with no stipulation as to the use of this medium, does the same thing. Pure prostitution is promiscuous, impersonal. The sexual response of the prostitute does not hinge upon the personality of the other party, but upon the reward. The response of the customer likewise does not depend upon the particular identity of the prostitute, but upon the bodily gratification. On both sides the relationship is merely a means to a private end, a contractual rather than a personal association (Bruce, 1996). Since prostitution is a contractual relation in which services are traded and sex is placed in an economic context, modern writers have made so much of the fact that the social evil has economic causes. One might as well say, with equal perspicacity, that retail merchandising has

economic causes. Prostitution embraces an economic relation, and is naturally connected with the entire system of economic forces (Ali, 1998).

The causal ramifications of commercial coitus extend beyond the economic sphere. At least three separable but related problems must be recognized: (1) the causes of the existence of prostitution; (2) the causes of the rate or amount of prostitution; and (3) the causes of any particular individual's entrance into, or patronage of, prostitution. The existence of prostitution seems related both to the physiological nature of man and to the inherent character of society, both of which include more than the sheer economic element. These basic factors, constantly operative, account for the ubiquity of prostitution but not for the variations in its rate. This second problem must be dealt with in terms of the specific institutional configuration existing at the time, in which economic factors are highly but not exclusively important. Finally, any particular person's connection with prostitution is a result of his or her own unique life-history, into which an infinite variety of strands, some economic and some not economic, are woven. These issues are generally confused by those who believe that by removing alleged economic causes one can abolish prostitution. Let us follow their arguments further, considering first the removal of economic causes within the capitalist system, and second the removal of them in a non-capitalist system (Davis, 2000, Sachs, 1994, and Ullah, 1999).

Why should a girl enter prostitution only through economic necessity? Is the occupation so arduous? On the contrary, we often speak as if harlots would rather prostitute themselves than work. It is even true that some women enjoy the intercourse they sell. From a purely economic point of view prostitution comes perilously near the situation of getting something for nothing. The woman may suffer no loss at all, yet receive a generous reward, resembling the artist who, though paid for his work, loves it so well that he would paint anyway (Chirwa, 1997). Purely from the angle of economic return, the hard question is not why so many women become sex workers, but why so few of them do. The harlot's return is not primarily a reward for abstinence, labor, or rent. It is primarily a reward for loss of social standing. She loses social esteem because our moral system condemns the commercialization of intercourse. If, then, she refuses to enter the profession until forced by sheer want, the basic cause of her hesitation is not economic but moral. Only when the moral condition is assumed does wages or economic want take on any importance. Prostitution, therefore, is not purely a matter of economic factors alone (Davis, 2000). When outlawed, prostitution falls into one peculiar category of crime a type exceedingly hard to deal with in which one of the willful parties is the ordinary law-abiding citizen. This kind of crime, of which bootlegging is the archetype is supported by the money and behavior of a sizeable portion of the citizenry, because in it the citizen receives a service. Though the service is illegitimate, the citizen cannot be held guilty, for it is both impossible and inadvisable to punish half the populace for a crime (Girling, 1989).

The eagerness of otherwise decent citizens to receive the illicit service attests powerful forces behind the demand element. On the one hand, the demand is the result of a simple biological appetite. When all other sources of gratification fail, due to defects of person or circumstance, prostitution can be relied upon to furnish relief. None of the exacting requirements of sex attraction and courtship are necessary. All that is needed is the cash, and this can be obtained in a thousand ways. Prostitution is the most malleable, the most uninvolved form of physical release. But in addition to the sheer desire for

sexual satisfaction, there is the desire for satisfaction in a particular, often unsanctioned, way. But even if present trends continue, there is no likelihood that sex freedom will ever displace prostitution. Not only will there always be a set of reproductive institutions which place a check upon sexual liberty, a system of social dominance which gives a motive for selling sexual favors, and a scale of attractiveness which creates the need for buying these favors, but prostitution is, in the last analysis, economical (Davis, 2000). Enabling a small number of women to take care of the needs of a large number of men, it is the most convenient sexual outlet for an army, and for the legions of strangers, perverts, and physically repulsive in our midst. It performs a function, apparently, which no other institution fully performs (Caravano, 1991).

Empirical profiling

Theories endorse that only economic necessities don't force the women to run this profession or pave the way of prostitution rather sexual desire play role, while study revealed a broad range of reasons. Table 1 shows that all categories of women such as married, unmarried, abandoned or separated (refers to a situation that husband and wife live separately but they were not divorced formally) and divorced who have been initiated into this profession for varied reasons. Data show that the highest percentage (67 per cent) of unmarried sex workers serve in hotels, while the lowest percentage (18 per cent) of unmarried women operates as the floating sex workers. The percentage of married sex workers was the highest (42 per cent) in brothels, but it was the lowest (17 per cent) for hotel sex workers. The percentage of separated or abandoned women was almost the same among all groups. The percentage of divorced women was the highest (12 per cent) among the floating sex workers, while it was the lowest (six per cent) among hotel sex workers. Irrespective of the groups, unmarried girls operate prostitution were the highest (45 per cent) followed by married ones (28 per cent), while the divorced cases were the lowest 10 per cent (Table 1). The high demand for the unmarried and young girls in the sex market draws them more as compared to married and older and women with kids (Ullah, 1999). ANOVA shows that a significantly higher percentage of either separated or abandoned women become floating sex workers compared with hotel and floating sex workers ($P < 0.000$). Sudden break in family bondage put them into economic hardship; and initiating into floating sex working is easier than choosing other two options. Analysis further shows that a significantly higher percentage of unmarried women/girls become hotel sex workers than other categories ($P < 0.003$), while a significantly higher percentage of married women became brothel sex workers ($P < 0.04$). Another study shows that 64 per cent of the sex workers were previously married and of the married ones, about 84 per cent were deserted due to poverty, the rest being abandoned or separated, divorced, or widowed (Khan, 1988).

Table 1. Marital status of sex workers

Status	<i>f</i>	%
<u><i>FSWs</i></u>		
Unmarried	9	18
Married	14	27
Separated and abandoned	17	33*
Divorced	11	22
Total	51	100
<u><i>HSWs</i></u>		
Unmarried	63	67**
Married	16	17
Separated and abandoned	9	10
Divorced	6	6
Total	94	100
<u><i>BSWs</i></u>		
Unmarried	27	36
Married	32	42***
Separated and abandoned	11	14
Divorced	6	8
Total	76	100

Source: Survey, 2001-2005.

* $P < 0.001$ ** $P < 0.003$ *** $P < 0.04$

Age

Age range of the SWs have been one of the major concerns in the discourse of child prostitution (GoB, 1991). Girls/women can initiate themselves into this profession at or above 18 years of age. Data show that about 4 per cent of the HSWs were from the age group of 10-14, while 16 per cent were from the FSWs and 5 per cent of the BSWs from the same age group. From the age group of 15-19 of HSWs constituted 31 per cent, floating 20 per cent, and BSWs 34 per cent.

The highest percentage of sex workers of this age group belonged to hotels because of high demand for young girls. They were more expensive compared with the other two categories. Nearly 39 per cent of the hotel sex workers belonged to the 20-24 age group and brothel sex workers totaled 18 per cent. The lowest percentage of sex workers was in the 30-34 age group among all categories while it was highest among floating ones (18 per cent). About 10 per cent of the sex workers were from the age group of 35-39 among the floating, but no sex worker was found of this age group in other categories. Irrespective of the categories about seven percent of sex workers started their operation from the age of 10 to 14. With the age on increase the percentage of sex workers decreases due to the diminishing demand of the older age women. A significantly higher percentage of children operate as brothel sex workers as compared to floating ones ($P < 0.001$). Another study shows that 44 per cent of the sex workers are of 15-20 years of age and 12 per cent are in the age group of 10-15 (Khan, 1988).

Table 2. Age group of sex workers by category

Age group	<i>f</i>	%
<i>HSWs</i>		
10-14	4	4
15-19	29	31*
20-24	37	39
25-29	20	21
30-34	4	4
<i>FSWs</i>		
10-14	8	16
15-19	10	20
20-24	9	18
25-29	10	20
30-34	9	18
35-39	5	10
<i>BSWs</i>		
10-14	4	5
15-19	34	45**
20-24	23	30
25-29	13	17
30-34	2	3

Source: Survey, 2001-2005.

* $P < 0.001$ ** $P < 0.002$

Length of profession

Reintegration of the sex workers in the society is near impossible and it is truer for the brothel sex workers because most of them are sold out to the brothels (Ullah, 1999) thus they become the personal property of the *Sardarni* (The women who buy girls and introduce them into prostitution and keep the benefits of their trade). Blanchet mentioned that these women never use this title *sardarni* themselves since it connotes activities which are illegal. Cases of escaping from brothels are rare. They have to run this profession as long as the *Sardarni* wants them to. They don't enjoy any liberty. Evidently 64, 47, and 61 per cent respectively, of the hotel, floating and brothel sex workers started their profession from one to four years ago. Nearly 33 per cent of the hotel sex workers had been operating this profession from five to nine years ago. Some 18 per cent had been running this profession from 10 to 14 years ago. A higher percentage (35 per cent) of the floating sex workers has been running this profession from five to nine years and 18 per cent from 10 to 14 years. Hotel sex market boomed in the recent years and hence the highest percentage of them started in the lowest age-range (1- 4). Nearly 32 per cent of the brothel sex workers started this profession from five to nine years ago and eight per cent from 10 to 14 years. More than eight per cent of the workers irrespective of categories had been in the profession for more than 12 years.

Table 3. Length of profession

Years	<i>f</i>	%
<i>Hotel sex worker</i>		
1-4	60	64
5-9	31	33
10-14	3	3
<i>Floating sex worker</i>		
1-4	24	47
5-9	18	35
10-14	9	18
<i>Brothel sex worker</i>		
1-4	46	61
5-9	24	32
10-14	6	8

Source: Survey, 2001-2005.

Frequency of entertainment

Medically tested that the more frequent intercourse occurs the more it is likely to cause micro or macro injury to genitals (WHO, 1994) and it is also more likely to be infected with HIV/AIDS through intercourse with an injurious genital, because blood of each other can more easily transmit when comes in closer contact (Scambler, 1992). A man is able to have sexual intercourse only when he is sexually excited. Arousal in women produces vaginal secretion, which can act as a lubricant during penetrative sex. Women can have penetrative sex whether they are aroused or not. But if they are not equally excited they feel pain and dryness that is more likely to be injurious. Lubrication during vaginal sex reduces friction (Murshed, Ullah, 2000; Karim, 1995). Dry vaginal channel increases the chance of vaginal tearing associated with the risk of infection. Sex with sexually excitement and arousal causes secretion of lubrication but when it is done repeatedly without any excitement the genitals get dried up resulting in injury to them. Several studies report that each sex worker in Bangladesh has an average of four to six clients a day, it means that every day in Bangladesh over a half million men pay for sex as against 100,000 commercial sex workers (Arroba, 1998) indicating that every day 0.5 million of people are embracing the risk of infecting STD/HIV/AIDS. The data however, show that the hotel sex workers, on an average, entertain seven clients daily and brothel sex workers entertain 15 clients. The frequency of some cases for young and beautiful girls reaches up to 20 times. In the case of floating sex workers, the average frequency is 12. The highest frequency belonged to brothel sex workers and the lowest to hotels.

The frequency of entertainment in a month might vary from the mean frequency. If the hotel sex workers are unable to take any client, they could voice their denial to the hotel authority. They were not forced to take more clients. It depended mainly on the will of the hotel sex workers themselves. Brothel sex workers are normally forced to take as many clients as the *sardarni* did ask. A lot of brothel sex workers complained that some times they fainted due to an undue number of clients. If they tried to show up their inability to take more clients, the *sardarni* bit them up mercilessly. To escape the brutality of the *sardarni*, they bear inhuman torture on their bodies. Floating sex workers had also a higher number of clients daily because of their cheapest rate among all

categories of sex workers. The rates for them ranged from Tk 5.00 to 50.00 (US\$0.08-0.83) per client. They intend to earn their livelihood by entertaining the highest possible number of clients they receive a day. Their rate however has not increased for the last ten years complying with the inflation.

Table 4. Mean frequency of entertainment.

Categories	Mean Frequency
Hotel	7
Brothel	15
Floating	12

Source: Survey, 2001-2005.

Consent

Since this profession is not yet accepted as other professions in the society they operate keeping it secret to their relatives and guardians. Data show that nearly one-sixth (17 per cent) of the hotel sex workers ran this profession with the consent of their local guardians, most of whom included elder brothers, sisters, and fathers or even mothers. Very few however reported that their parents knew about their involvement in this profession and allowed them to run their business. Most of the hotel sex workers (61 per cent) ran it beyond the knowledge of their local guardians. They ran this profession under the pretension that they work either in a garment factory or in a clinic in the city. Twenty-two percent operated staying with brokers, friends, or staying alone renting out a place in the city. About a quarter (26 per cent) of the floating sex workers operate with the full consent of their local guardians. Husbands, sisters and wives of their brothers were their local guardians. About one-third (33 per cent) of the floating sex workers operate concealing their professional identities to their guardians and 41 per cent operated staying with brokers and friends. The question is why is the consent status important? What differences it makes if they operate with consent or without consent and if there is any difference of consent status between hotel and floating sex workers? To answer these questions chi-square test was employed. Consent status of brothel sex workers has not been considered since this matter is immaterial to this group as most cases they ran it under forced condition or got this profession as inheritance (Ullah, 1999; Trapasso, 1996). The data show that there is no significant difference between these two groups when judged the two status 'operate with consent and 'operate staying with brokers or friends' ($P < 0.061$ and $P < 0.079$ respectively) but a significantly higher percentage of hotel sex workers operate this profession without consent compared with those of floating ones ($P < 0.003$).

A few admitted about their professional identity to their local guardians such as elder brothers, sisters, wives of their brothers, sisters' husbands, and parents following an interrogation when their attitude showed evident symptoms of their profession. A very few of them said that their guardians at the outset pressurized to leave the profession, while the other said that their guardians had accepted it. Acceptance of this profession by the guardians is normally surprising but the causes might be more surprising for what they allow their daughters to run this profession. But this implies two notions that guardians might not have control over their daughters or they might find their daughter's profession as the best option to earn their bread.

Table 5. Hotel and FSWs operating with consent of guardians

Consent status	Hotel		Floating		Significance
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	
Operate with consent	16	17	13	26	P<0.061
Operate beyond consent	57	61	17	33	P<0.003
Operate staying with brokers, friends or staying alone	21	22	21	41	P<0.079
Total	94	100	51	100	

Source: Survey, 2001-2005.

Police Raid

Most sex workers rely on the support of third parties in their work. Many third parties are crucial to the protection and safety of sex workers and to the provision of sex work itself. However, some third parties can and do exploit sex workers. Sex workers' personal relationships with family, friends, lovers and husbands also vary greatly. Some sex workers are forced to enter or remain in the industry by people with whom they have personal relationships, and others enjoy supportive relationships that can have a crucial role in their well-being and safety. A portion of the hotel and floating sex workers cohabit in Dhaka City with their brokers (*dalal*). Therefore, they could not enjoy complete liberty. They stay together with the brokers under the pretext that they are family members so that neighbours could not guess their profession. They hand over half of the income to their *dalals*. They were either captured from rural areas or other spots such as launch and bus terminals, or were negotiated mutually to initiate into this profession. The members of the law enforcing agency are well aware of profession and the place of their stay. They more often visit them to collect money and demand sex for free. In some cases, police harass, abuse, and bribe sex workers. Police more often become the main source of violence towards sex workers. Some police officers extort money from sex workers in exchange for not arresting them. Police are also a major client group. These sex workers were usually taken to remote hotels from their stay as there is likelihood to encounter familiar faces.

A study indicates that the majorities (58 per cent) of the sex workers are victims of violence during their professional activities and torture inflicted by the police is the highest. Police torture includes extraction of money, demand for free sex, harassment, and arrest without any warrant issue. The study shows that business of over 30% of the sex workers is controlled by policemen, and consequently a major part of their income is taken away by them (Khan, 1988). Brothel sex workers asked with great grievances 'what sort of torture is this?' They cannot wear sandal or shoes when go out of the walls of brothels and have to wear yashmack. They are not allowed to wear *salwar* and *kamiz*. They have to pay more than usual to watch a film in cinema halls. The dead bodies of sex workers are not allowed to bury. They are either thrown in rivers or dumped in the sands. They asked whether the visitors received the same award from the society. They demanded the same award for the clients as well (Ullah, Rahman, 1999; Tahmina, 2000).

Conclusion

Being repressed under growing economic crises, women and minor girls are forced to engage in prostitution for survival. More and more children are joining this profession. While most of them initiate this profession under the repression of economic hardship they are exposed to several vulnerabilities. They are forced to share their hard-earned money with a third party. Guardian such as elder sisters, brothers, parents are accepting this profession. It is difficult to have the statistics of floating and hotel sex workers since they neither have any particular locations nor do they maintain any registration. It is important to ensure proper implementation of the laws regarding the rights of the sex workers and to ensure their total liberty so that they can take as many clients as their bodies permit. However, Hotel sex working is an emerging dynamics of sex working in Bangladesh in terms of the rate and volumes with the declining trend of brothel sex with the subsequent eviction of the oldest and biggest brothels in Bangladesh. The paper concludes that dynamics of sex working in Bangladesh is extended to hotel sex working from two of its historically known categories such as brothel sex and floating sex.

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