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Housewives and the Sex Trade—A Desperate Strategy to Save the Household: A Study of Housewives of Industrial Workers

By Harasankar Adhikari¹

Abstract

The present paper examines the household economies of male industrial workers of India after their sudden retrenchment. They had been victims of a defective industrial policy, and they did not get compensation as per the recruitment policy of the Government of India. As they were ill-prepared for retrenchment, they have struggled over extended periods. In a desperate attempt at household survival, their wives chose the sex trade. These women used a brothel in Kolkata to ply the sex trade as floating sex workers. They operated in a clandestine manner as the brothel was restricted to daytime use. They used their earnings to manage their households while their husbands were still unemployed. Thus, in an era of women's empowerment, women appeared to have no employment alternatives during crisis periods. As a result, the relationship between women and household management during a household's economic crisis has emerged as a new theme in the discourse on future socio-economic relations and the status of women.

Key Words: Wives of Industrial Workers, Household Economy, Sex Trade, Floating Sex Workers

Introduction

Women play diverse roles in the household, and financial management is a key responsibility. But the impact of a money economy and the capitalist economic system has gravely affected the household economy. In many ways, it has increased the tasks considered to be within the expected roles and obligations of women, in the absence of male partners' contribution. In many cases, women are the breadwinners and work longer hours than men (UNDP 1995). This underestimation reflects women's lower status in the family and locality. They have very little or no say in household decision-making. Disparities in responsibilities and income share received ample attention in the Human Development Report 1995: "Men received the lion's share of income and recognition for their economic contribution while most women's work remains unpaid, unrecognized and undervalued" (UNDP 1995). This is the result of a narrow concept of women's participation in the labor force that does not include household or domestic work as economic activity, mainly because of the focus on use value rather than exchange value (Donahoe DA, 1999). This indicates a reason for the neglect of women's economic contributions to the household in particular and to society in general (Ironmonger, D. 1999). Gender bias in the intra-household allocation of resources, participation in decision-making, and time spent within and outside the house need to be studied further (Buvinic M., 1999). The most striking characteristic of household labor is that, whether employed or not, women continue to do most of the housework around the globe (Shelton BA, John D, 1996).

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“All women spend more time on housework, have more responsibility for child rearing, have less access to many social and material resources, and have less access to public spaces and public power” (Krishnaraj M. 2006) Basically the work performed by women falls under nonmarket economic activities (Choudhary N, Parthasarathy D, 2006). The activities performed by women are often not counted as economic activities or are undervalued and are typically excluded from analysis (Shelton BA, John D, 1996).

However, when their male counterparts fail to contribute, women make drastic decisions to manage their survival. Here, the study examines the household economy of male industrial workers who were the victims of sudden retrenchment and thereafter the role of their wives in household management. The industrial policy of India and overall business affairs were the cause of such a situation. Further, it led to disharmony among employers, the state and employees. The unrest in labour relations is a reminder that the Factories Acts did not end capitalism, but they changed the relations of the workers to their own lives (Rich, Adrienne, 1995). It is evident that the capitalist economic system works in such a way that it forces people to consume what they do not produce and produce what they do not consume. They were accustomed to their very own industrial culture. It was enough to reduce their networks of relation with their kin and others at their natal place. As a consequence of this, they were out of support from such networks during their emergent situation.

Ultimately, the women came forward to manage their survival. For this, they did not bother to choose the sex trade for alternative earning for their household's existence. Prostitution, the world's oldest profession (Varela, J, 1995), is present in some forms or other some forms in all stratified societies. It is a complex form of social relationship in morality, ethics, the pattern of economic inequality, gender relationship, etc. and interwoven farther to form a multidimensional, multi-layered institution (Waltman, M, 2011). In most or all cases, the women, especially from lower social strata, were driven off into the stigmatized profession due to extreme poverty (McGregor, S, 2011). There are about 25 types of sex work identified according to work site, principle mode of soliciting clients or sexual practices directly or indirect sexual practices (Harcourt, C & Donovan, B, 2005). In the present study, wives of industrial workers deliberately chose to work as floating sex workers to meet their basic needs.

The aim of this paper was to investigate how the wives of industrial workers used to manage their household economies through the sex industry.

Methods

Participants

There were about 2200 brothel-based female sex workers in the Bowbazar red-light area, a century-old brothel located in Central Kolkata (only metro city of Eastern India) under the jurisdiction of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation No. -48 and under the jurisdiction of Muchipara Police Station. About 44 houses on Premchand Boral Street and Nabin Chand Boral Street altogether were occupied by the sex trade. Female sex workers had to use this place for their dual purposes of the sex trade and shelter. Apart from this, about 1050 women from 24-40 years of age (identified through a census survey) used to operate the trade as floating sex workers. They used to ply only from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. They were housewives and college girls. Of them, 100 (about 10% of 1050) floating sex workers were randomly selected. In our sample, all of them were wives of industrial workers of industries located within 20 km of the [Northern]

northern part of Kolkata. Their husbands were the victims of lockout from their industries after at least five years of employment.

Apparatus Used

Unstructured, open-ended interview schedules were used to collect information regarding their demographic profile, involvement pattern in the sex industry, income from the trade, household management and their husbands' situations after their joining. The interview session lasted for 30-45 minutes, and overall time spent for data collection was about 12 months.

Results and Discussion

Demographic Profile of the Floating Sex Workers

The women of the study were from different religious backgrounds and varied age groups, and they had a level of education. Table 1 reveals that 74% of them were of Hindu religious background, and the rest of them from Muslim communities or from the Muslim community. The scenario tells that the industrial workers were mostly Hindu by faith. Among them, the women from 31-35 years of age were highest in percentage (56), and the second participating group was from 36-40 years of age. And, forty-eight percent of them completed their higher secondary (10+2) education and above.

Table 1: Floating Sex Workers–Their Religion, Age and Educational Background

Educational background	Age						Total
	25-30 yrs		31-35 yrs		36-40 yrs		
	Hindu	Muslim	Hindu	Muslim	Hindu	Muslim	
Primary level	-	-	2 (2%)	2 (2%)	4 (4%)	2 (2%)	10 (10%)
Class-V-VIII	2 (2%)	-	12 (12%)	2 (2%)	4 (4%)	2 (2%)	22 (22%)
Secondary (10+)	4 (4%)	2 (2%)	10 (10%)	2 (2%)	2 (2%)	-	20 (20%)
Higher Secondary (10+2) and above	8 (8%)	4 (4%)	18 (18%)	8 (8%)	8 (8%)	2 (2%)	48 (48%)
Total	14 (14%)	6 (6%)	42 (42%)	14 (14%)	18 (18%)	6 (6%)	100 (100%)

Source: Field Work

Family Status before Joining the Trade

The industrial workers settled their households in their workplaces. They enjoyed this facility as a service benefit. The workers usually adjusted themselves to industrial culture and its environment. Their husbands were semiskilled or skilled workers with secondary [or above] education or higher. The employment in the industry was their only source of income. There was not any other source of income.

The rephrase shows that women from 25-30 years of age each had only a single child, and other women were mothers of two children. They were admitted in English Medium private schools, which were partly supported by their employers as a children's education benefit scheme. Overall, their family status was satisfactory to what they desired in their service life

Family Status after Retrenchment from Employment

The industrial policy, unionism, etc. were the causes of lay off and lock out layoff and lockout. Gradually, it led to a crisis, reduced service benefits and, last of all, retrenchment. Continuous movement was not effective to rebuild their relations. Even promises from the government were in vain. There was no initiative taken to provide for any compensation. By that time, they were unable to maintain their basic needs. They were leading hectic lives in the crisis. Initially, they tried to manage their needs from their savings. But it did not last long. As a consequence of this, they started to borrow money with high interest rates. Lastly, they had to sell their gold ornaments and other valuable domestic assets.

Searching for an Alternative Earning

Initially, industrial workers had to engage in movements led by their trade unions. But the impact was worse. Simultaneously, they began to search for alternative incomes such as daily labour--low-paying hard labour. Then they tried the strategy of selling domestic products door-to-door through liaisons with local wholesalers. The women (wives) tried to search for various jobs in their locality. They even started to work as maidservants. But it was low paying and insufficient to manage their two square meals. Further, their children's education was merged into the threat because they were incapable of providing required supports (i.e. school fees and other).

Why the Sex Trade Is Preferred

These women moved to Kolkata in search of jobs, which they did not obtain due to a lack of references. Frustrated by rejection, their depression facilitated close contact with women who had connections to the sex trade. About 60% of these women worked in the sex industry for more than five years, and the remaining 40% spent less than five years working in the sex industry.

Earning and Household Management from the Sex Trade

The floating female sex workers used to hide their affiliation with the sex trade from their family and others. They told them that they were employees in nursing homes and other places in the city of Kolkata and that their work schedule was from 10 a.m.–5 p.m.

They used to operate the trade with an oral agreement with a space provider (known as *malkin*). They shared their income at a ratio of 50:50 with their space provider for soliciting clients and services to clients. They earned about Rs.1000-1500 daily. Thus, it was their prime source of income to manage their household (basic needs, children's education and others). They learnt to generate savings. So, last of all, it helped to restore their survival.

Their Husbands' Status after They Joined the Trade

They were without work, and their routine job was trade unionism. Gradually they became addicted to alcohol and other indulgences. They totally failed to support their families. On the other hand, they were dependent on their wives' income. Usually they were abused by

the political leaders. Until they returned to work, they may have received compensation in a lump sum. They used to assist their families with domestic chores.

Conclusion

In India, women are not merely “builders of the next generation” and housekeepers in their families. The household management and its economy depend on women. Men in the family are the key financial contributors in general, and as instrumental leaders, it is their prime responsibility. On the other side, women are the expressive leaders whose quality of care and attention bring family happiness. However, there is a relationship between women and household economy and its management. They act as crisis managers in their families. In the age of a high-tech, global world, women occupy a significant role in terms of their employment and economic independence. But there are a limited scope and opportunities.

In the present study, women had chosen a desperate strategy to earn their livelihood from the sex industry, despite the stigma that was attached to it. The industrial disputes and sudden retrenchment of their husbands from their employment had brought darkness in their survival. Initially, they had tried to manage it from their own assets. It was evident that there was no alternative to them because they failed to manage their minimal self.

The social and economic situation led women to choose the stigmatized profession of sex workers, and they adopted methods of secrecy. Eventually, the earnings from this trade brought happiness in their households. They did not bother to think of their own health and other negative effects. Thus, it is a fact that women can bring happiness in any circumstance to save their families while men are the spectators under bad industrial policy. This reminds us that women’s economic empowerment can be significant in its contributions to their societies.

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