

Migrating out of Poverty and Becoming a Sex Worker in big cities: a case study of G.B Road, New Delhi

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ABSTRACT

Migrating to big cities for better opportunities has been the trend of the world from time immemorial. However, it is uncommon for society specifically an Indian society to come to terms with the fact that women willingly migrate to big cities to engage in sex work. This paper examines the phenomenon of non-trafficked women who migrate to New Delhi to become a Sex Worker. In making such arguments, the paper traces the life of women who leave their villages and families behind and choose a life of sex worker. The paper focuses on how factors at the local, state and individual levels work together to shape women's ability to migrate to perform sex work. It is definitely not easy moving to a new city for people at large. Cultural differences can have a huge impact on immigrants. They might feel that they stand out uncomfortably because of the way they dress. The stress of the move and the adjustment to the new city can lead to anxiety and depression and other psychological problems amongst migrants. Apart from the said psychological problems, a sex worker has to face other challenges that come in the form of marginalization and Stigmatization. This paper seeks to examine how these women carry out their day to day activities negotiating with stigmatization and marginalization, building an identity of their own in their little world. Migration allows women to develop intercultural skills that help them to make these negotiations This paper examines the ways in which women working in these areas lead an empowered life despite being marginalized by the outside world and that migrant sex work can provide women with the means of earning income for families, for education, and even for their own businesses.

Key Words: Migrant, Non Trafficked Women, Marginalization, Stigmatization, Identity, intercultural skills

Introduction

As soon as you get off the New Delhi metro station towards the Ajmeri Gate exit and ask a rickshawalla about GB Road, he'll welcome you with a cunning smile on his face and direct you straight to the road after having checked you out from top to bottom and having whispered something on his fellow rickshawalla's ears. This kind of behaviour sure makes anyone a little uncomfortable but these rickshaw pullers are not to be blamed for their suspicious gestures as this is how visitors to a red light district are looked upon by society at large. Located stone throw away from New Delhi metro station, G B Road is the biggest Red Light district in Delhi.

Outside walls of the station premises give way to a chaotic landscape bustling with vehicular noises, jam packed dusty roads on either side of a narrow divider leading past a sprawling market to the right hand side of the road. For a visitor the market appears as good as any other congested Delhi market. Amidst the entire bustle, the visitor begins to notice scantily clad women wearing loud makeup peeping out of their window from their residence on the first and second floor and comes to realize that he/she has entered a red light district. However, on entering these residences one comes to realize that they are anything but the typical dingy, claustrophobic brothels portrayed in popular cinema. The delineation of a red light area involves a complex process of history intertwined with ethnography and there is a mark contrast between how a red light district actually is and how it is imagined. The way a visitor is looked upon on enquiring about a Red Light district speaks volume about a thin imaginary line that has been created by society to separate morally blighted area from the rest. Anybody trying to cross this line is seen with suspicion. It is appalling to know how marginalized community of women on the other side of this thin line negotiate with marginalization which is social as well as spatial, forcing them to lead a socially degenerated life. Even with all these struggles and hardships that these women go through in their day to day lives, all you see is smiling faces that patiently wait for their customers behind the grilled windows and in the narrow alley of their staircases leading up to the brothel that they call home, as shopkeepers go on to their normal business on the ground floor. Behind their pretentious smile is the sorrow and grief of separation from their loved ones they left behind while choosing to work thousand miles away from their homeland. It is only after one digs deeper into the lives of these women, one gets to know that majority of these women are migrants who have either ran away from their homes or were forced to leave in search for a better income to send back home. While, on one

hand they have to carry the burden of being a migrant that comes with the stress and anxiety of being marginalized, on the other hand they also face stigmatization owing up to their profession which adds up to their misery.

G.B. Road (full name Garstin Bastion Road) is a road from Ajmeri Gate to Lohri Gate in Delhi near Paharganj, India, parallel to the railway lines. It is the fifth largest red light district in India. It is an area with several hundred multi-storey brothels and estimate over 1000 sex workers. It is lined with two or three-storey buildings that have shops on ground floor. About twenty of these buildings have about 100 brothels on the first and the subsequent floors that come alive with the chirping of the morning birds. In my study I interviewed 20 women selected on random basis from age group 25 to 65 belonging to different regions as well as religions. The idea was to bring about a true representation of the women working there. A participant observation technique was employed to monitor their day to day activities and observe how they go about their daily chores of life that includes feeding their children if they have any and sending them off to school, while keeping a tab on customers coming in and going out and servicing them accordingly.

Non Trafficked Migration

Migration is a process of social change where an individual, alone or accompanied by others, because of one or more reasons of economic betterment, political upheaval, education or other purposes, leaves one geographical area for prolonged stay or permanent settlement in another geographical area. When people migrate from one nation or culture to another they carry their knowledge and expressions of distress with them. On settling down in the new culture, their cultural identity is likely to change and that encourages a degree of belonging; they also attempt to settle down by either assimilation or biculturalism. (Bhugra Dinesh, 2004)

The conflation of sex work and trafficking, migration and mobility is no accident. It is not a misunderstanding of terminology but is a conscious attempt to abolish prostitution and prevent people, in particular women, from migrating for sex work. (Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2010). Perhaps, it will take some time before Indian society acknowledges Trafficking and Prostitution as having a separate entity. In majority of times these terms are used interchangeably. Often people use trafficking as an excuse to abolish prostitution and prevent women from

becoming a sex worker and at times even deter women from migrating to big cities in the fear that they will end up being forced into prostitution. As a result of this popular perception many women who willingly migrate to become a sex worker are forcefully sent back in the name of rehabilitation and are forced to lead an unwanted life devoid of any source of income and livelihood. In the process of making their life better, government more often than not make their life more dependent and miserable. In my study all the women I interviewed were migrant sex workers who came from different regions of the country, speaking different languages and yet united by their common goal of upliftment and empowerment.

Bano, a frail looking, dark skinned 39-year-old woman who dresses up as modestly as any other Indian women belonging to a respectable family would dress up, carries herself with elegance and charm as she goes about her daily routine of soliciting men while sitting on a small stool kept beside a shop above which her *kotha* (brothel) lies. In G.B Road all shops and brothels have numbers as their unique addresses. Bano lives in *Kotha* No. 51 and is quite popular among shopkeepers for her sheer jovial and friendly nature. She has been working and living in G.B Road for past 22 years. She calls this place her home and is content with the way her life has shaped up. She migrated to Delhi at a very young age of 17 from one of the most backward states of India called Bihar. She smiles shyly on being asked about her life in Bihar where she lived with her parents and a brother. She has fond memories of her childhood which often brings tears to her eyes. Nevertheless, Bano narrates her story while trying to maintain her calm as she tells that her family lost everything to floods. Their cattle were drowned and her brother picked up diarrhoea. In the aftermath of this crisis she came across a girl from her village who told her about G.B Road. She was lured by the kind of money that girl was making from working in G.B Road. That's when she set off for Delhi and begin her journey as a sex worker. She has no regrets whatsoever of her decision. She sends money regularly to her family. Her brother is married with 2 kids and she visits them regularly. She has befriended a man whom she fondly calls her son and takes pride in the fact that she rose above her situation and took care of her family like a son. If it wasn't for her, her family wouldn't have survived.

Neelam is a 44-year-old woman who works in the *kotha* No. 44. She migrated to Delhi 20 years back from a South Indian city of Hyderabad. And like a typical South Indian woman she wears a *gajra* (flower garland) on her hair as a part of everyday traditional attire. Unlike Bano, she is shy

and likes to keep it to herself, it was only after five meetings she opened up about her personal life. She was a married woman whose husband died while she was young and had two children to take care of. She wanted to give them a good life but all she got was menial labourer jobs that did not provide enough to run the household. So she decided to migrate to Delhi on behest of one of her close friends who had been working in G.B Road. She left her children behind with her mother in law who thinks she is working as a domestic help in Delhi for some rich family. She visits her children regularly and sends them money every month. Both her children are now in high school and aspire to become doctor and engineer. Neelam came across as a positive woman who had dreams for her children and she is working hard to make her dreams become reality.

Kotha No. 54 and 55 houses women from Bedia community (Bedia is a tribe wherein prostitution is a family business). These women come from families that have been practising prostitution since ages. Women in the family engage in prostitution while men largely depend on their daughters and sisters financially. However, a clear distinction is made between sisters and wives. A wife cannot engage in sex work, it is only the duty of daughters and sisters. Around 50 Bedia women reside in these two *kothas*. Since, they are not new to the tradition of sex work, they are all very proud of what they do and willingly send their income to families in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh where these tribes are found. Question of trafficking sounds amusing for these women, who grew up dreaming to be a sex worker. No that they did not have a choice to be otherwise but they chose to be one, given the tradition they grew up in. G. B Road for these women is a better market as they earn better income than what they used to earn in their native village back home in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh.

It becomes quite clear from three different sets of examples that I quoted above that factors at the local, state and individual level work together to shape women's ability to migrate to perform sex work. And while, trafficking is prevalent in India, a distinction has to be made between women who migrate willingly to perform sex and those who have been forced into prostitution. For a lot of women sex work is a source of livelihood, Independence and sometimes the only way to give their children a better life.

Marginalization and Stigmatization of Women

Women who work as prostitutes are more often than not marginalized in the society they live in, but have lives outside of their work too. How do they cope with the marginalization? How are their lives lived?

Pooja, a 45-year-old woman living in *kotha* No. 56 recalls her first experience of coming to G. B Road with horror as she says “*sab log aise ghoor rahe the jaise ki maine koi apradh kar diya ho yahan aake, poori zindagi aise guzarne ka khayal man me aate hi rooh kamp uthi*” (the way people were staring when I first came here, made me feel like a criminal and the thought of spending rest of my life with this kind of glare made my soul stir with fear). Pooja came to Delhi with the hope of making money to raise her only child born out of wed lock. Life as a migrant was already tough given the cultural differences and language barriers, profession as a sex worker made it worse. Marginalization and stigmatization not only hit her morally but also gave a hard time to her only son who she brought along. So much so that he dropped out of school for being picked up by his peers on daily basis, pressure was unbearable for a boy of his age. That is when Pooja decided to send him back to her native place in Jaipur to live with her mother. He is a 20-year-old grown man now who is pursuing his BA(Pass) course from Rajasthan University. Pooja is grateful to the place for having provided her the source of income to raise her child. Marginalization and Stigmatization are the downside that she has learned to live with, although she wishes that her son hadn't gone through what he had as a child. Bringing her son to live with her in a Red Light District is the only regret she has in life.

30-year-old Salma found herself on crossroad when faced with the dilemma of choosing between her parents and her profession when her family came to know about her work. She chose her profession and migrated to Delhi to live with her friend in one of her *kothas*. Till date she hasn't contacted her parents. She lives here with her 4-year-old daughter. Her family although financially poor couldn't handle the stigma that comes with being associated with a prostitute and hence cut all ties with her. Salma comes from a poor family of peasants from a small village in Kerala. She grew tired of having to fight with her siblings for her share of food. Sex work seemed an easy way out, for she could eat as much as she wanted with the money she earned. A sense of freedom and financial independence was what she craved for. Although it came with a price of losing her family, she has no remorse whatsoever.

If only Radha was as strong headed as Salma was when she came to G.B Road. Being a 25-year-old pretty looking girl that she is, she had to go through a lot before finally coming to terms with the fact that this profession is bound to have stigma attached. She is perhaps too young to absorb mistreatments from society in general. She recalls one such incident where she was not allowed to enter a shop and was humiliated in public for being a sex worker. That incident pretty much formed the basis on which rest of her life is set. She has grown bitter towards people because of her experiences, she doesn't interact and go out like other women. She doesn't even have to solicit men to get their attention, for she is beautiful enough to attract customers. It will take a while for her to become used to the kind of treatment these women get from locals.

Violence is described not only in the practice of prostitution but as being fundamental to the very idea of 'buying sex', which is so inextricably linked to a system of heterosexuality and male power that it represents 'the absolute embodiment of patriarchal male privilege' (Kesler, 2002). Prostitution is not simply an example of women's oppression but is regarded as 'a foundational idea that pre determines it' (Scoular, 2004).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, prostitutes are often bracketed together with those social undesirables whose presence in the public realm is seen as antithetical to the celebration of Western consumer values. Indeed, while the transgression of sex work into 'respectable' neighborhoods continues to provoke extreme reactions from local residents, businesses and city governments, it is also apparent that many of the 'red-light' districts which have been long-characterized by sex work (in some cases dating back to the nineteenth century) are becoming subject to forms of moral cleansing and purification. However, even with these struggles and hardships these women have learned to carry out their day to day activities with much ease. They have developed a thick skin against these oppressions as they go about their daily chores and have successfully managed to build their own identity in the sense that their world revolves around G.B Road and they have nothing to do with the outside world. Being a migrant has added to their advantage as it has led to the development of inter cultural skills as they exchange their language, culture, tradition and eating habits with each other. G. B Road in itself has developed a cosmopolitan character with women coming in from different parts of the country, exhibiting their respective cultural identity and yet united by their common profession and by the common cause of upliftment and empowerment. It is the

beauty of their unity that prevent them from being exploited either from their brothel keepers or from their pimps.

Morality and Disgust

That the figure of female prostitute has always constituted a central figure in the social imagination, and has played an important symbolic role in the definition of moral and sexual standards is unequivocal. (Phil Hubbard, 1998) Many commentators have drawn attention to the way that the prostitutes have been constructed in the popular discourse as a motif of degeneracy, contagion and sexual lasciviousness, and hence depicted as a threat to male bourgeois values (Roberts, 1992).

Social and legal regulations of prostitutes have been used as a means of establishing wider criteria of what is acceptable behavior in the public and private realm. The suggestion that the representation of sex workers have been based around persistent stereotypes of the prostitute as other constitutes an important theme in writing on the regulation and containment of prostitution, albeit one that is fraught with contradictions. Prostitutes are, after all, a group that is eroticized and demonized simultaneously (Hubbard, 1998). The medicalisation of female prostitutes as an alleged source of sexually transmitted diseases was based solely on the assumption that prostitutes had high numbers of sexual contracts rather than any detailed knowledge of transmission vectors (Hubbard, 1998)

A consideration of how specific sites of sexual performance reflect and reproduce wider notions of moral order maybe important in appreciating how the spatiality of the city contributes to the construction of gender and sexual difference. By linking the social geographies of the cities to the wider frame of reference specifically the existence of moralizing discourses about the appropriateness of different types of behavior, research has generated new insights into how space contributes to social order. It is possible to see spaces of prostitution as spaces of confinement which serve to separate loveless, immoral sexual practices and subjects from the ordered spaces of heterosex. As such, the notion of social and spatial exclusion appears apposite in exploring the geographies of sexual immorality. According to Sibley (1988; 1995), the spatial exclusion of the disordered 'other', maintained through boundary erection, is a logical outcome of the deep-seated

urge to purify the self, and a fundamental means of controlling those who do not conform to dominant norms and practices.

If sexuality has always been crucial in the urbanization process, implicated in the construction of a range of urban spatial practices, the female prostitute, a sexual presence in the city, remains unquestionably the most potent symbol of urban life. On the one hand, the prostitute represents the sexual freedoms and opportunities possible in an urban realm characterized by heterogeneity, anonymity and the coming together of different moralities; on the other, she symbolizes the degeneracy, disorder and incipient collapse of urban life. The prostitute has been symbolically important in defining the nature of public and private spaces, and that the polarization of women into fallen and virtuous has been shaped by the portrayal of prostitutes as ‘public women’. (Phil Hubbard, 1999)

Disgust is of course a contested concept in the social sciences, sometimes thought of as an ‘innate’ defense mechanism against contamination, other times as the product of ‘magical thinking’ which establishes impossible ideals of bodily perfection (Douglas, 1966; Rozin and Fallon, 1987; Sibley, 1995; Nussbaum, 2010). We understand disgust to be an ‘urgent, guttural and aversive emotion’ which works, alongside other emotions, to create the ‘social distinctions of hierarchy and taste’ that infuse everyday life. (Phil Hubbard and Rachela Colosi, 2015).

Sex Workers have always been at the receiving end of the disgust based on their immoral act of prostitution by the common class. At the same time, they are also seen with pity because of the exploitative nature of their work wherein they are seen as an exploited working in a patriarchal industry. Workers are described as pressured by male managers into taking on submissive ‘feminine’ roles for the benefit of (male) customer fantasies, leaving these women insecure about their physical and psychological identities (Wesely, 2003).

The notion of prostitutes as a visual incursion on the ordered, modern city is crucial here, as prostitution only tended to become a target for social regulation because of the inherent visibility of ‘street-walkers’ and others who made their trade obvious through specific forms of dress and behavior. This desire to prevent such overt displays of female sexuality has in fact

been proposed as being one of the principle impetuses in the formation of the male-dominated planning profession, which attempted to order the city in an attempt to curb such dangerous

sexualities (Greed 1994; Wilson 1995). As a result, the prostitute came to represent an intolerable expression of female sexuality precisely because of her ability to transgress into the streets and shopping arcades of the emerging patriarchal city. In the modern era, with female sexuality regarded as a 'mystery and problem as never before' (Ellin, 1997), prostitution designated a pathologised and threatening expression of sexuality, one that needed regulation in the interests of progress and civilization. Hence, alongside masturbation, this expression of sexuality was deemed immoral because of its essential unproductiveness - it entailed the sexualized body's involvement in practices that had no reproductive potential and lacked connection to the moral and productive household economy (Swanson, 1995). As such, the prostitute was symbolic of waste, and if in the pre-modern era the authorities had taken the view that prostitution acted as a moral sewer that could discharge the wastes of masculine disorder, now the sex industry was re-imagined as a form of pollution that threatened all urban dwellers (Hubbard, 1999).

Prostitutes, although socially marginalized, were of major symbolic importance in eighteenth and nineteenth century society, with their representation as being at the immoral 'margin' crucial for defining the moral 'Centre'. In essence, the boundaries between domesticated femininity and the unfettered sexuality of the street prostitute were constructed and maintained through the discursive identification of prostitutes as a potent threat to a modern society defined around male bourgeois values. What was also significant here was the lives of many of the men who sought to condemn sex workers were personally and sexually dependent on prostitution; meaning that the geography of the margins and the Centre intertwined on a daily basis. (Hubbard, 1999).

Conclusion

For many years, prostitution has been conflated with trafficking in international agreements and by the media. This has influenced popular opinion. The concept of consent and understandings of exploitation in relation to sex work lie at the heart of this conflation. Anti-traffickers often ascribe victim status to immigrants despite the fact they have made conscious and rational decisions to cross borders with the knowledge that they will be selling sex. They are often misjudged and misinterpreted which eventually cause problems for them. We as a people have to accept women's choice of profession. As long as they are not being forced into anything, they should be able lead a healthy life with no fear and stigma. Non trafficked migration is not an uncommon phenomenon,

women have been migrating to big cities in search of work and better opportunities. Uprooting oneself from the place of belonging to an alien land is not an easy process. It is accompanied by the stress and anxiety of separation and often leads to depression in some cases. Adjusting to a new language, tradition and food not only gives a cultural shock to migrants but also alienate them and they often feel left out. Migration is governed by a lot of factors ranging from local, national and personal level. As we have seen in this paper how a flood situation in one state forced a woman to migrate to a city and become a sex worker. While a personal family problem forced another to join prostitution. Similarly, a local fear of stigmatization led a woman to migrate to continue doing sex work. Migration in itself is an emotional step; the profession of a sex work makes it even worse for women. Acceptance is what every migrant crave for when migrating to a totally new and different place and it is the last thing these women expect from society. However, they have made peace with their situation and all they ask for is freedom to profess their work without any fear of being harassed and humiliated in public. They deserve a peaceful life like rest of the society, after all, they are just women trying to make their ends meet. So what if their profession does not conform to the societal norm? at least they are better off than the beggars who beg to feed themselves. Popular perception of sex workers being trafficked and forced into flesh trade needs to be seen with different glasses. There is a vast contrast between how media portrays these women and how they are in reality. Women in G.B Road were not only independent and leading a content life but were also engaged in empowering each other and themselves by investing money earned from sex work into buying lands in their native town and by doing side business employing other women working in G.B Road and other areas. These women have built their own identity despite being marginalized and stigmatized. G.B Road is their own little world where they laugh, they share and lead a life which is beyond the understanding of the common people who only see them with either disgust or with pity.

With this paper I have tried to highlight these women as a successful working guardians of their children and their homes who have put their life and their own dreams at stake to raise their children and to take care of their family. It is important to note that in the absence of freedom of choice of this kind of work, most of these women would have ended up either begging on the streets or doing labourer job at some construction site which would have not been enough to provide for their family and raise their children well. There is a need to look at this profession from a different perspective. Not only it is making women self-sufficient but also ensuring bright future

for their children. Trafficking has to be dealt separately and need not be associated with sex work. Permission from these women need to be taken before rescuing them. Most of the times these women do not want to be rescued. In one incident a woman was forcefully rehabilitated to a newer place and was made to work in a factory where not only she had to work extra hours and paid a very low wage but was also exploited sexually by the factory manager. That is why most of these women prefer to stay in the business as it not only gives them a power over their sexuality but they also make good money out of it. Unlike what is shown in popular cinemas, these women have the right to reject their customer and no one can force them to establish sexual relationship. All these women are well connected and knitted and are united when need be. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the government and the people to understand that all sex workers are not trafficked. Their choice has to be taken under consideration before rehabilitating them. At the same time, it is important that sex work as a profession be recognized so that these women do not face exploitation at the hands of police and authorities.

It could be rightly concluded that although trafficking is a major problem that our country faces today, it should be dealt with a mechanism that does not become suicidal to women who have migrated out of choice to pursue sex work.

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