

Mother to Daughter: Unpacking the Intergenerational Dynamics of Sex Work

Pavita R¹, Dr. Kamalaveni²

¹PhD Research Scholar, Department of Women's Studies, Bharathiar University, Coimbatore. Tamil Nadu

²Associate Professor, Centre for Women's Studies, Pondicherry University, Pondicherry.

Abstract

Intergenerational sex work refers to the phenomenon where the profession of sex work and its associated challenges are transmitted across generations. Sex work in brothels, where most often the family of the sex worker witnesses their lifestyle, leaves a lasting impact on the lives of the children growing up in these environments. The cumulative effects and trauma of these experiences push the children into the very profession that had traumatized them. Systemic pressures of poverty, lack of educational opportunities, physical and mental health challenges, substance abuse, social exclusion and familial expectation are pivotal reasons why these individuals are driven to the profession. Narratives of Female sex workers as well as their children, from a brothel village in Andhra Pradesh, offered poignant insights into these complexities. While there are a few individuals who can break this cycle and live a near-normal life, most often the children of the sex workers are forced or drawn back into the same profession.

Keywords: Intergenerational sex work, trauma, familial expectation, social exclusion, resilience, substance abuse

Introduction

The sex workers' industry is fraught with issues of social, legal, financial and cultural nature, where the violations are compounded by the stigma and taboos surrounding the profession. Indian Sex workers are often relegated to the margins of society, subject to abuse, discrimination and violence at various levels in their daily lives, forcing them to keep their work hidden. Over the years, their lives have undergone myriad socio-cultural changes, with their social construction being intertwined with cultural, historical and religious narratives and further made complex with issues of caste, class and gender.

Historically, it is seen that while many women are trafficked into the sex trade, many others enter into it due to financial constraints and generational trauma (Naik, Abdul.2018). Research has shown that most women are drawn into and ultimately remain in the profession due to the economic precarity they face.

Sex workers can be of a diverse population including Male, female, Transgender, gender-diverse or migrants. Sex work takes place at different environments or venues (eg: brothels, online, street-based, entertainment venues like clubs and massage parlours, indoors, outdoors), which demarcate the workers into types, location of work and amount of money charged (Goldberg et al., 2018). Among different categories of sex workers, street-based female sex workers face unique challenges, earn comparatively less than those working in the brothel or indoors, while also having a higher risk of physical harm,

violence, and unsafe working conditions (Deering et al., 2014; Platt et al., 2018). In India, sex work is fraught with complexities owing to the interplay of gender roles, religion, caste and societal attitudes. The complex web of economic, social and cultural dynamics, forces sex workers to continue in the industry, leading to cumulative vulnerabilities experienced by second-generation sex workers. Gender inequality, class, caste, cultural factors, poverty, and societal shame have a profound impact on Indian sex workers. All of these factors in cumulative vulnerability have forced many women to stay in the sex industry and continue generational sex work. (Sahni & Shankar, 2011; Orchard, 2007).

Intergenerational sex work is a phenomenon where the profession of sex work is passed down within families or communities. This involves the children of sex workers entering the industry either because they belong to a community practising sex work (eg: Devdasis, Nat, Bedia, Kanjar Communities in various parts of India) or because they are brought up in a household where sex work is practised. While the social fabric of tradition often leads women into the profession practised by other women of their community, intergenerational transmission of sex work is also seen among women who are led to the industry owing to a range of pre-existing vulnerabilities and socio-economic factors presented around the sex worker's life (Dalla et al., 2020). The socio-economic, systemic and other associated factors lead most of the women to enter and remain in the industry. Female sex workers experience intersecting vulnerabilities and are disproportionately disadvantaged, which elevate the negative developmental outcomes for their children.

Review of Literature

A significant amount of research has been conducted on the various circumstances of the life of a sex worker, with ample studies related to their physical health. Statistics have been continuously drawn regarding the sexual health systems, practices and outcomes connected largely to AIDS, HIV and other STDs to help curb these negative health effects associated with the profession.

1. **Swarna Weerasinghe, et al (2019):** A Study conducted by the researchers reflected in their article titled **Vulnerable exposure and outcomes for children of female sex workers in low-and middle-income countries: application of the bioecological vulnerability framework**, that the children of female sex workers, being exposed to the unique influences and bioecological vulnerabilities, negatively affect their developmental outcomes and milestones. It was noted in their extensive study that while their children were exposed to physical harm early in life, daughters entered sex work at an early age as a survival strategy.
2. **Jannatun Tasmim Joya, et al (2026):** The socio-psychological conditions of the sex workers, the complexities of the dual roles as mothers and sex workers, as well as the impact of their work on their children, were researched upon by the researchers, in their article titled **Conflicting identities Between Sex Work and Motherhood: Challenges for Sex Workers and Their Children**. They concluded that the mother's work not only negatively affected the children's developmental stages but also had negative impacts on the parent-child relationship.
3. **Neha Sehgal and Chandra Bhushan Patni (2023):** In their article **Covid-19 and Female sex workers in India: a journey of brutal reality**, the authors have brought forward the gap between policymaking and implementation, as well as the efficacy of judicial endeavours, especially in the case of marginalised populations like sex workers. They recommended that there is an urgent need for all stakeholders like the Government, NGOs and sex worker groups to work in collaboration to

reduce exploitation, increase awareness, create structural reforms and ensure rehabilitation of displaced individuals.

4. **Dalla, Karandikar & Chavan (2025):** The study shows that mothers and children living in the red-light area of Mumbai face social and economic problems. They face social discrimination based on caste, gender, and the attached sex work, which has led many mothers working in this area to hide their occupation from their family members to save themselves and their children from rejection and discrimination. This negative aspect of society has presented hurdles to the children in terms of restricted opportunities and a proper education. However, despite these hardships and challenges, these mothers and children think that education is the only way to transcend poverty and prejudice
5. **Duff et al. (2014):** This study demonstrates the challenges faced by women sex workers in Vancouver, Canada. According to the researchers, many of the sex workers who work on the street are from Aboriginal indigenous communities and are more likely to have their children taken away by child welfare, as these mothers were also separated from their mothers or their own parents and placed in child welfare care when they were children. This recognises the same difficulties and problems that are handed on from one generation to the next generation. The study reveals that this is a problem of poverty, prejudice, social exclusion, and uneven institutional treatment, rather than individual decisions.
6. **Jha & Sharma (2016):** Through interviews with the Bedia caste, the investigators found that the tradition of sex work is carried forward by poverty, caste bias and social discrimination. These factors play a major role in the continuation of this practice among the Bedia women. Sex work has become more accepted and has been passed down for generations as a normal way for women to make money for their families. A lack of education, jobs and discrimination in society means that many women have to resort to sex work as a means of earning money to feed their families. The researcher argues that the reasons for sex work in these communities are more complex than policy frameworks, and different from cases of trafficking and brothel regulations. The government's policies to prevent women from being trafficked into brothels did not adequately consider the cultural traditions and economic realities of the Bedai community. The investigator calls upon the policymaker to consider caste discrimination, poverty, quality education and other alternative livelihood options that can break the cycle of intergenerational sex work.

These studies are extensive and point towards the treatment of sex workers as 'second-class citizens', where their issues are treated with a lukewarm approach. Even when there are extensive studies conducted reflecting the necessities of immediate support, the actions taken are late or not entirely appropriate to the sex workers in the Indian context.

Research Methodology

Owing to the sensitive nature and content of the topic, an explorative and qualitative methodology was used, using semi-structured interviews where the participants were free to express their views, experiences and narratives. The Participants were between the ages of 16 and 35 from Guntur District of Andhra Pradesh and were either sex workers or the child of a sex worker.

One-to-one conversations in the Telugu language about intimate details as well as group discussions regarding general topics were held. The interviews were recorded on audio with the permission of the participants. The interviews were transcribed into English for further structuring. Pseudonyms have been used here to further protect the privacy of the interviewees.

Objectives

It is noted that there are not many studies that have made an in-depth analysis of the familial circumstances and specifically, the mother- child relationships in this largely targeted and marginalised population and their specific reactions during emergencies like the COVID-19 lockdown.

This study is aimed at filling the gap in the present understanding of the sex worker's peculiar life situations, addressing the

1. Developmental trajectories and circumstances that led to the sex worker taking up the profession.
2. Aspirations for their children, Actions taken, setbacks faced.

The conversations with the children of the sex workers largely focused on

1. Effect of the negative circumstances of Mother's profession on their early life.
2. Effect on academics, Job Opportunities and career options in their growing years.
3. Hurdles faced in their social lives with relatives, friends and peers.

Key aspects of Intergenerational sex work:

The profession of sex work and its associated socio-economic challenges and emotional traumas are transmitted across generations within families or communities. Intergenerational sex work involves children of sex workers adopting the same profession as their parent/guardians, due to systemic, cultural and socio-economic factors influencing their lives. A complex interplay of Generational components added to these pre-existing factors leads to perpetuation of sex work across generations. In some communities which practice sex work as a tradition, children born here are either coerced into the profession or often choose it due to lack of other options. (Kotiswaran, 2011). Even among groups that do not follow sex work as a tradition, children often follow the profession of their parent/guardian due to being exposed to the lifestyle since a young age and not being able to find alternative sources of livelihood owing to the societal attitudes towards their familial background.

Often, the normalisation of the physical, mental, emotional and financial trauma faced by the children of sex workers drives them to choose the profession almost as a normal outcome of their lived realities. The resignation with which the sex workers and families, perceive the trauma faced by themselves and their children, acts as a factor pushing them toward the same profession.

Nalini (23 years): *"I was born in this village and I studied in the village school till the 10th standard. When I was 11 years old, one of my mother's customers raped me. My mother was too drunk to help me and afterwards told me that it is the fate of women here and to go on with life. I am working in a tailoring shop now and working hard so that I don't have to depend on her or go to this line of work to survive."*

SOCIO-ECONOMIC VULNERABILITIES

Economic necessities and depravity play a key role in the dynamics of intergenerational sex work. Sex workers in India are usually bound by the vicious cycle of loans and crises. Lack of proper identification cards/papers makes it difficult for sex workers to avail loans or any subsidies offered by the government or seek support from other organisations, especially during emergencies. Many sex workers could not avail even the meagre support offered by some NGOs during COVID, either due to lack of access or fear of disclosure. (Sehgal, N., & Patni, C.B. 2023). Borrowing money from local moneylenders at exorbitant rates of interest, to meet emergencies, place these women in a never-ending cycle of debt.

Janaki (35 years): *“I was brought to this village when I was a kid. Somebody had bought me for a few rupees from a poor family who were in debt, and sold me to a madam here. I have not been educated and don’t have any other skills. I have been in sex work for most of my life. The first few years at the village itself; now that I am older, I go to the highway to get customers. I cannot escape easily since i have a lot of debt to pay off.”*

Children of sex workers grow up in families and homes witnessing the socio-economic vulnerabilities faced by their mothers, experiencing the depravations and side effects of belonging to these families, often choosing sex work as the only viable source of income. (Weerasinghe, S. D. S et al. 2025)

Divya (20 years): *“My mother was doing sex work from the front portion of our house and my father never used to interfere. He used to take whatever money he felt like and would beat up my mother after drinking. After school, my mother sent me to another town to stay in a hostel and study in college. I was happy till the covid-19. Due to the lockdown, I had to come back and after that my mother could not afford to send me to college. We were in debt and had taken huge loans during the lockdown. Now, I have also started working as a sex worker, but I try to study various topics online and you tube. I hope that someday I can get out of here and live a decent life.”*

CUMULATIVE TRAUMA

Children of sex workers grow up in an environment of Childhood maltreatment, abuse, neglect, lack of emotional support and negative peer influence. Many of them grow up in families where prostitution is normalised due to familial involvement and deep-rooted generational practices. Trauma experienced by one generation is often inherited, internalised and normalised by the next generation, making the process of recovery and rehabilitation challenging. Children often replicate the negative coping mechanisms portrayed by the parents involving substance abuse and aggressive behaviour, leading to increased vulnerability.

Sashi (19 years): *“In the house where I lived with my mother, we used to live in one portion, while she used to entertain customers in one of the other rooms. Even when I was very young, this was a normal thing and it is like that for many children who are born here. Customers, sex work, bad language, and violence- everything is normal because we see it every day. Till I joined college and from the hostel, visited one of my friends’ homes, I didn’t realise that this did not happen in every house. Now, I don’t like coming back here at all. I am forced to visit once in a while since my mother is not too well; otherwise, I will never look at this place again”.*

Vaidehi (25 years): *“The initial school she (daughter) went to is also in the village itself and the other students are from the same background. I realised that even if I tried to educate her here, the friends, teachers and even the workers in the school would all speak the same language and not teach my child to live a normal life. The sex work, language and violence was not even embarrassing my child, which was not good. So, after 4th standard, I sent her away to a friend’s house in Guntur city”.*

IMPACT OF STIGMA AND BULLYING

The internalized trauma of living in these families is further reinforced when the children try to step into challenging environments where they are met with barriers formed due to negative societal attitudes,

preconceived notions and taboos, often in the form of constant reminders of their background, neglect, alienation, marginalization and abuse. Lack of acceptance into the mainstream systems affects the self-esteem of the children, leaving a lifelong negative impression. This ostracization affects the way they build social relationships and seek emotional support.

Sujatha (17 years): *“My brother and I are staying with our aunt in another village. My mother sent us there to study so that we don’t get affected by the life here and become good people. Mother sends enough money for our education and maintenance, but she is not permitted to visit us. Our aunty is very strict, makes me do all the household work and scolds us in front of others, saying that our mother has bad character, is a prostitute and that I will also become like her soon.”*

Prema (16 years): *“.. when my mother saw that some of her customers were showing interest in me, she sent me to a relative’s house to stay there and study. I joined another school, but the children and teachers there soon came to know about my mother’s profession. I was bullied badly for this and the parents of some of the students demanded that I could not study in the school where children from decent families studied. I had to change 2 schools in the same way.”*

Many sex workers are forced to admit their children in educational institutions, often under hidden or false identities or with the help of friends and relatives based in other parts of the country. Though this offers a fair chance of education, it also brings with it the fear of disclosure, societal labelling, and chances of further abuse. The negative reinforcement and treatment from society often forces children to drop out of schools/colleges and return to their homes, taking up sex work as the only option.

RESILIENCE AND ASPIRATIONS

Despite the negative and pervasive influences of the lived realities of the sex workers, many of them aspire to step out of this environment or at least ensure that their children do not return to the same profession as themselves. Although faced by extreme adversities, the sex workers try to support their children’s education to escape the confines of their inherited legacies, in the hope of a better future.

Janaki (35 years): *“When my daughter was born, I made up my mind that she would have nothing to do with this world. I wanted her to have a good life. But I didn’t have much money and no support outside. I used to lock her inside a room in the evening when the customers came, just to ensure her safety”.*

This task is marginally eased if the women have an option of sending their children to safe spaces of kin/non-kin like homes of parents, relatives, friends or hostels. Although a few children hailing from sex worker families have managed to break the cycle, many others remain unsuccessful due to the pervasive societal attitudes, including economic hardship, stigma and lack of equal opportunities.

Nayana (35 years): *“After 4th standard, I sent her away to a friend’s house in Guntur city. They knew my background but agreed to help. I sent them money so that they would not feel her as a burden. I am happy that she is now educated and is working in some small company which she found online, but earning an honest salary. I wish I also had options like this when I came here. My life would have been so much different.”*

Sujatha (17 years): *“My brother and I are staying with our aunt in another village. My mother sent us there to study so that we don’t get affected by the life here and become good people. “*

ROLE OF INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

Breaking free from the cycle of intergenerational sex work cannot be completed without support from family, community and government. Presently, owing to education, support programs from the Government and NGOs, as well as increased exposure to media, there is increasing awareness among the sex workers to encourage their children to seek education and try for gainful employment to break this chain.

Support systems play a crucial role in alleviating the impact of intergenerational sex work. It is noted that with proper support, children can overcome the negative influence of their childhood, but when faced with further stigma and marginalisation, the cumulative trauma inherited from parents only deepens, leading to maladaptive behaviour.

Many sex workers are fighting hard to encourage their children's education by means of financial support or by just ensuring their own anonymity to reduce the abuse caused to their children on being connected to a sex worker.

GROUP: *"All of us want a better life. We are stuck here but hope that at least our children get out of this. But the government hasn't done anything for us. If they help us by giving loans on relaxed interest rates, keeping in mind our earning capacity, we would also like to set up small businesses or at least have a secure home. Even during the pandemic, some NGOs helped to give supplies and groceries but not much was given by the government. NGOs have limited resources, how much can they do? If the government helps us, at least our children will have a chance to see a better future."*

Conclusion

Over the years, while studies regarding HIV/AIDS vulnerabilities and other health issues surrounding commercial sex workers are prominent, it is seen that studies that scrutinise the mother-child relationships, familial ties, supports and challenges that their specific circumstances offer them are limited. The challenges faced by the children belonging to the sex workers are multifold and require targeted interventions at various levels. More in-depth analyses of these factors can go a long way in structuring a rehabilitative course for the children of the sex workers and in structuring their empowerment as incorporating the voices of the sex workers into programme designs can be decisive in ensuring positive outcomes. There are various Directives passed by the Indian Constitution to ensure that children are ensured a life of freedom, dignity, education, equality and a life without discrimination. Article 39 (f), Article 219A, Article 14, Article 15, Article 15 (3), Article 24, Article 39 (e) and Article 45, go a long way in guaranteeing a secure childhood and future for women and children of India but fail to reach their mark when faced with the specific circumstances surrounding the sex workers and their children. The intersecting factors of structural inequalities, persistent poverty, inadequate access to education and absence of economic alternatives, play a crucial role in creating conditions that perpetuate vulnerabilities such that the cycle of intergenerational sex work is continued. Improved access to education, healthcare, social security, legal identity documents, skill development and psychosocial support has been identified as crucial.

A hand-holding and structured approach by all the stakeholders will provide positive and enduring changes in the psychosocial milieu of the sex workers' lives and enhance rehabilitative measures for their children. Policy-making for the sex workers should be based on their local contexts, as specificities change the circumstances of their lives. A policy for sex workers, borrowed from a model used in a Western context, may not be applicable to a street-based worker in rural Andhra Pradesh. Specific needs

of the children of the sex workers and their unique circumstances need to be considered to make a complete program to help them build a positive life like any other child in the country. Breaking this cycle requires sustained commitment to inclusive development, social justice and participation of sex workers to frame a better future for the children.

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