

THE IMPACT OF LIFE HISTORY ON STREET SEX WORKERS AND THEIR ENTRY INTO THE INDUSTRY

B. G. I. M. Samarasinghe and K. H. S. Lakmal
Department of Sociology, University of Colombo

Introduction

The lives of sex workers have attracted much research interest over the last few years. In Sri Lanka despite being illegal an organizational structure within which sex work still operates can be observed. While some are willing to accept this as a profession, others are not. Even among researchers there is no consensus whether to understand sex work as an individual issue or as a social issue. Therefore it's important to understand the interconnections in the life histories of sex workers and their profession.

A sex worker is a person who provides sexual services for monetary gain. The term does not only signify women (Coorey, 2009, p.18). In generally we talk about female sex workers. However Rathnapala (2000) identified seven types of sex workers in Sri Lanka; street sex workers, women who work in massage clinics, brothel sex workers, mobile sex workers (they provide their service to tourists), 'high class' sex workers, male sex workers and child sex workers (Rathnapala, 2000, p.23-33). This research focuses on female street sex workers. The organized sex industry can be categorized into five sectors; sex work that occurs in urban areas, selected rural communities, colonies, tourist resorts, and industrial zones (Silva, 1992, p.11). Pathirana (2004) identifies several push factors that make an individual enter the sex industry. These are economic problems, lack of education, having house mates who go to Middle East countries and face sexual harassment, limitations in opportunities for women to find jobs and disrupted family structures (p.13-15). The primary objective of this research is to study the life history of sex workers as a basis for understanding their involvement in the sex industry. More broadly this paper attempts to examine how the life history of sex workers impact their decision to enter the sex industry? Further the current study also examines what specific factors, attitudes and life history events impact a woman's entrance into the industry.

Methodology

This descriptive study, collected data from two police divisions within the Colombo area where a significant number of street sex workers were concentrated. In-depth interviews and non-participant observation were used to collect qualitative data. Due to the unavailability of a database and difficulties in infiltrating their networks, 25 street sex workers were selected using snow-ball sampling.

The findings were analyzed using the theoretical ideas of symbolic interactionism and social learning theory. Symbolic interactionism explains how people construct their lives through meaningful communication or symbols. According to social learning theory, the formation of one's identity is a learned response to social stimuli. "In social learning system, new patterns of behavior can be acquired through direct experience or by observing the behavior of others. The more rudimentary form of learning, rooted in direct experience is largely governed by the rewarding and punishing consequence that follow any given action" (Bandura, 1971, p.03).

Results and Discussion

The current study, isolated several factors that push women towards the sex industry. These were poverty, lack of education, increased family responsibilities, high sexual drives and personal interests, being sexually abused or raped and interpreting these sexual experiences positively, the interactions with other sex workers or having a member of one's family in the industry, socialization issues, disruptions in family background, the lack of viable job opportunities. Attitudes towards the sex industry also play a significant role. Being able to earn significantly more than other jobs in a short period of time, also attracts women to this industry.

Conclusion

It is clear that sex workers enter this profession propelled by incidents in their life history. It is usually seen as a solution to life's difficulties. Their attitudes towards this profession and their previous life events are important to understand in order to understand entry into the industry.

References

Bandura, A., 1971. *Social Learning Theory*. New York City: General Learning Press.

කුරේ, කේ.එන්. , 2009. *ශ්‍රී ලංකාවේ ගණිතා වෘත්තියේ ව්‍යාප්තිය (ශ්‍රී ලංකාවේ සමාජ ප්‍රශ්න)*. මිරිගම ආකර්ශා ප්‍රකාශකයෝ.

පතිරණ, එන්.පී., 2004. *ගණිතා වෘත්තිය තුළ කාන්තාවට එරෙහි ප්‍රචණ්ඩත්වය පිළිබඳ සමාජ විද්‍යාත්මක අධ්‍යයනයක්, නව විමර්ශන* කොළඹ: කාන්තා අධ්‍යාපන හා පර්යේෂණ කේන්ද්‍රය.

රත්නපාල, එන්., 2000. *ශ්‍රී ලංකාවේ ගණිතාවේ*. කොළඹ 10: සඳීපා ප්‍රකාශන.

සිල්වා, එම්., 1992. *ආසියාවේ ගෞරව චෙලදාම, නිවේදන*, චෙලදාම 01, කාණ්ඩය 02. පරිවර්තනය ගාමිණී හපුආරච්චි. කොළඹ: කාන්තා අධ්‍යාපන හා පර්යේෂණ කේන්ද්‍රය.