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A STUDY OF THE SOCIO DEMOGRAPHIC AND ECONOMIC PROFILE OF A CROSS SECTION OF COMMERCIAL SEX WORKERS IN URBAN INDIA

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ABSTRACT: Commercial sex work is one of the oldest trades known to mankind. Although present almost universally, it seldom comes to the forefront due to the stigma and the continued persecution of the legal system. Very few studies are done to evaluate the social and economic factors that drive people into this trade. Such studies are required to curb this growing menace in our society.

OBJECTIVES: The study was undertaken to evaluate the socio demographic and economic profile of a cross section of urban commercial sex workers in the city of Belgaum. **METHODS:** The study was done in the city of Belgaum. The study population consisted of all male (MSW) and female sex workers (FSW) between the age of 20 to 40 who are registered in the MSW's Sweekar – Community Based Organization (NGO) and BIRDS, a Non Governmental organization (NGO) which deal with MSW's and FSW's in Belgaum district. After a written informed consent the patients were interviewed using a pretested questionnaire, the responses were recorded. **RESULTS:** The present study was conducted in the city of Belgaum for a period of nine months. The final study population consisted of 388 commercial sex workers of whom 279 were males and 109 females. In our study, 71.9% were male and 28.1 were females, 25.0% of male were in 36-40 age group and 8.2% female were in 31-35 age group. Majority 29.8% males studied upto college and above whereas only 10.9% females completed primary school. 37.1% males were self employed, 17.0% female were daily wages workers and 35.3% earned between 5,000-10,000 every month. A majority 79.6% were Hindus, almost 60.1% were married, 36.3% were living in joint families and most of them 65.2% were non migrants. **CONCLUSIONS:** Commercial sex workers are growing in most urban areas of the country. Economic compulsions are the driving force leading the youth of this country into this lucrative source of income. Most individuals entering this trade today are educated displaying the lack of career opportunities. Most individuals are driven into this trade at a very small age most often against their will. There is a disturbing trend of married individuals also entering this trade. It will require a concentrated effort on part of the government and the society to rehabilitate these CSWs and prevent further entry of our citizens into this trade.

KEYWORDS: Commercial sex workers (CSW), Epidemiology.

INTRODUCTION: India is considered one of the most promising countries for the next century. The greatest asset that India today can claim is its young and energetic population, the world's largest workforce could herald us into a bright and developed future. The irony of the situation however is that this asset is also a cause for concern. The ever growing population has put extreme pressure on the available resources of the country. Poverty, inadequate education or even systems of education have driven our young to easier ways of earning and lured them into the oldest of all trades, which is the sex trade. Although it is a known fact, commercial sex trade is not legally permissible in India and this drives the commercial sex workers to commit the activities under a constant cloud of fear and

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prosecution. The trade is flourishing despite legal sanctions and this makes one wonder what drives these young men and women into this profession. This study attempts to explore the possible reasons behind this trend among commercial sex workers.

In India, sexual intercourse under the age of 18 for females is considered a rape as at this age the young minds do not have the free will to give consent. Similarly an act of sexual intercourse with a individual of the same sex is considered an offence. Commercial sex practice has been deemed illegal and a punishable offence.

METHODOLOGY: The study was done in the city of Belgaum. The study population consisted of all male (MSW) and female sex workers(FSW) between the age of 20 to 40 who are registered in the MSW's Sweekar – Community Based Organization (NGO) and BIRDS Non Governmental organization (NGO) which deal with MSW's and FSW's in Belgaum district. About 800 MSM and 280 FSW of different age groups are registered with these organizations. This was a cross sectional study which was conducted for a period of 9 months from January 2013 to October 2013.

We included all MSW's and FSW's aged between 20 to 40 years who had sex with men or women within past 12 months provide that they consented to part of the study. We excluded trans-genders from this study. We thus had a pool of around 800 participants for whom a sampling frame was prepared, using random number table, and 388 participants were selected from 800 sex workers. Every participant was informed of the study pattern and included into the study only after a written informed consent. Ethical clearance study was obtained from the Institutional Ethics Committee of the JNMC, KLE University.

A pilot study was first conducted among 10% of sex workers, before undertaking the study, to evaluate the feasibility of the questionnaire and to assess the subjects understanding of the questionnaire. Necessary changes were made in questionnaire based on pilot study.

This pretested questionnaire was used to collect information on the socio- demographic characteristics of the study participants. Data was collected regarding demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the study participants. The data was collected by interviewing the participants after obtaining informed consent from all the participants.

Data was entered into SPSS (IBM trial version20) and percentages were calculated for all variable. Chi-square test was used to find out the association between selected socio-demographic variables.

RESULTS: The present study was conducted in the city of Belgaum for a period of nine months. The final study population consisted of 388 commercial sex workers of whom 279 were males and 109 females.

In the present study comprising of 388 participants aged 20 to 40 years, 279 (71.9%) were male and 109 (28.1%) were female. With regards to age distribution it was observed that 55 (14.1%) were in the age group of 20 – 25 years, 119 (28.4%) were in the age group of 26 – 30 years, 102 (26.3%) were in the age group of 31 – 35 years and 121 (31.2%) were in the age group of 36 – 40 years.

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Age in years	Number of Participants				Total	Percentage
	Male	%	Female	%		
20-25	32	8.2	23	5.9	55	14.1
26-30	80	20.6	30	7.8	110	28.4
31-35	70	18.1	32	8.2	102	26.3
36-40	97	25.0	24	6.2	121	31.2
Total	279	71.9	109	28.1	388	100

Table 1: Age and sex distribution of participants

In our study most participants had their first sexual activity at the age of 15-20 years 198(51.0%). For 113 (29.1%) participants the first sexual activity was between the age of 10-15 years, 56 (14.4%) at the age of 20-25, 11 (2.8%) had their first sexual activity even before they were 10 years and 10(2.6%) participants had at an age above 25 years.

Age	Number of Participants	Percentage
Below 10	11	2.8
10 to 15	113	29.1
15 to 20	198	51.0
20 to 25	56	14.4
25 & above	10	2.6
Total	388	100.00

Table 2: Age of participants at first sexual act

The study noted that, only 22(5.7%) male participants were illiterates. Among the literate male participants, 47(12.0%) had studied up till primary level, 94(24.2%) had completed secondary school, and 116(29.8%) had studied college and above. The study also revealed that, 45(11.6%) female participants were illiterates. Similarly, 42(10.9%), 16(4.2%), and 6(1.6%) had studied up to primary school, secondary school, college and above respectively

Educational Status	Number of Participants				Total	Percentage
	Male	%	Female	%		
Illiterate	22	5.7	45	11.6	67	17.3
Primary school	47	12.0	42	10.9	89	22.9
Secondary school	94	24.2	16	4.2	110	28.4
College and above	116	29.8	6	1.6	122	31.4
Total	279	71.7	109	28.3	388	100.0

Table 3: Educational status of the participants

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In the present study it was observed that, 21(5.5%) male participants were farmers, 90(23.2%) were daily wages worker, 15 (3.9%) were involved in business, 9(2.3%) were government employee and 144(37.1%) were self employed. The study also revealed that, 13(3.3%) female participants were farmers, 66(17.0%) were daily wedges worker, 4(1.0%) were involved in business, 26(6.7%) and were self employed.

Other occupation	Number of Participants				Total	Percentage
	Male	%	Female	%		
Farmer	21	5.5	13	3.3	34	8.8
Daily wedges worker	90	23.2	66	17.0	156	40.2
Business	15	3.9	4	1.0	19	4.9
Government employee	9	2.3	0	0	9	2.3
Private employee	144	37.1	26	6.7	170	43.8
Total	279	72	109	28	388	100.0

Table 4: Occupation of participants

With regards to monthly family income, 120(30.9%) participants earned less than 5000, 137(35.3%) earned between 5, 000-10, 000, 74(19.1%) earned 10, 000-15, 000, 42(10.8%) earned 15, 000-20, 000, and 15(3.9%) more than 20, 000.

Monthly Family Income	Number of Participants	Percentage
<5000	120	30.9
5000 to 10000	137	35.3
10000 to 15000	74	19.1
15000 to 20000	42	10.8
>20000	15	3.9
Total	388	100.00

Table 5: Monthly family income of the participants

In the present study, majority of the participants had traded sex for drugs, foods, clothing, etc 276 (71.1%) and remaining 112 (28.9%) did it only for money.

Traded sex for drugs, foods, clothing, etc	Number of Participants	Percentage
Yes	276	71.1
No	112	28.9
Total	388	100.0

Table 6: Participants who traded sex for drugs, foods, clothing, etc

Out of 388 participants, 84 (21.6%) were SC, 53 (13.7%) were ST, 167 (43.0%) were OBC and 84 (21.6%) belonged to the General category. Out of 388 participants, 309 (79.6%) were Hindus, 66 (17.0%) were Muslims and 13 (3.4%) were Christians.

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Category	Number of Participants	Percentage
SC	84	21.6
ST	53	13.7
OBC	167	43.0
General	84	21.6
Total	388	100.0

Table 7: Distribution of participants according to their caste status

In the present study, 129 (33.2%) of participants belonged to nuclear family, 141 (36.3%) to joint family, 57 (14.7%) to extended family and 61 (15.7%) were not with family of the subjects 111 (28.6%) were single, 233 (60.1%) were married, 18 (4.6%) participants were widows and 26 (6.7%) were divorced. Of 388 participants 135 (34.8%) were migrants from village and 253 (65.2%) were indigenous city dwellers.

DISCUSSION: Commercial sexual activity is not new to Indian society but while we have become progressive in our approach in other aspects, this remains the most under discussed and un-attended issue. While most aspects of this trade are illegal the reality is often swept under the carpet and most governmental agencies remain in denial. The social compulsions of the individuals who enter this trade are never analyzed. Only if such studies are conducted and information sought, we can devise methods and Sweekar CBO and FSWs registered at BIRDS NGO.

In our present study, a majority of the sex workers 71.9% were male and 28.1% were female. Most studies focus on female sex workers which are quiet in contrast to our study. MSWs are fast becoming a reality in most cities with increasing sexual freedom in the urban women. The higher number of males in the study may also be because of the fact that the NGOs that we worked with during the study were having more registered male workers rather than female. 31.2% participants of our study were in the age group of 36 – 40 years. It appears that the age group of 36 – 40 years is the most common age for sex work as this age group is relatively more sexually active. The females were however relatively younger than males, which could indicate a preference for younger females. A study in Andhra Pradesh showed 26% respondents were in the age group of 35-39 years¹ which was nearly the same as our study.

Although we found more subjects in the thirties the first exposure in most was very early in life. In our study, almost 51.0% of the participants had their first sexual activity at the age of 15-20 years, 29.1% were between the age of 10-15 years and 2.8% had their first sexual activity even before they were 10 years old. The mean age of first sexual act was 17.47 ± 3.96 years. Many minors are lured into this profession which is socially unacceptable. Mass media especially television may be playing an important role for children less than 15 years to become curious regarding sexual activity.

Similar results found in a study conducted in Andhra Pradesh 76.2% had first sexual act less than 18 years of age.¹ In another study conducted in four state of south India 44.5% in Andhra Pradesh, 45.6% in Maharashtra, 40.4% in Tamil Nadu and 33.5% in Karnataka age at first sex was ≤ 15 years of age.² A study from Kerman, South-East Iran 70.2% had first sex less than 20 years age.³ A shocking truth about these figures is that most of these subjects are by legal definition raped before they enter this profession as they are not of the age to make a decision for consent.

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In the present study, 17.3% participants were illiterate and 82.7% were literate which marks the higher literacy rate amongst commercial sex workers. The proportion of literacy rate is high among male participants (66%). Our study revealed illiteracy is one of the vulnerable factors for choice to the sex trade as a profession in female. The proportion of male literates entering this field could be a potential outcome of the poor job opportunities available to even the educated subjects. For the females there seems to be no other alternatives especially in the absence of education. Similarly high literacy rates were found in a study conducted in four states of south India with literates being 77.9% in Andhra Pradesh, 90.9% in Maharashtra, 85.9% in Tamil Nadu and 78.2% in Karnataka.⁴

When it came to occupation we noticed that commercial sex was not the only profession in which these individuals were involved and almost all of them had alternative professions. In the present study, 43.8% participants were self employed, 40.2% were engaged in various kinds of work involving daily wages. Thus majority of people were from the category where every day brings out challenging situation with respect to income and other comforts of life forcing the individual to go for alternative modes of generating a living. Majority were involved for the lucrative income although some did it for mere pleasure. Government employees were also involved in this trade. A study from Pune, Maharashtra reported that, majority 85.9% of their subjects were alternatively employed.⁵ In Mumbai study 34% were skilled and 22% unskilled labourers.⁶ Another study in Kolkata reported that, 22.2% were drivers, 11.1% were businessmen and 15.7% were professionals.⁷ Even those employed choose this profession as an easy available option for making quick economic gains.

In the present study, 35.3% participants had 5, 000-10, 000 monthly family income, 30.9% had less than 5000. In our study major reason for choice of commercial sex trade was because of their poor socio-economic status in our study. A study conducted in Red light area of Mumbai reported that, 43.8% belonged to lower middle socioeconomic status.³ Another study from Kolkata showed that, 27.8% had per capita monthly income 501-1000.⁷ Economic compulsions is the main driving force for young individuals to be involved in this trade which focuses on the need for creation of better employment opportunities for the young. The economic compulsions are so severe that most of our subjects have traded sex even for food or clothes which shows the extent of compulsions of the subjects.

In our study, 43% participants belonged to OBC, 21.6% were SC, 13.7% were ST and 21.6% belonged to upper caste category. In the conditions of limited economic and social opportunities available to people belongs to OBC, SC and ST, it is not unexpected that these have a higher representation in sex work as compared with the others who belongs to the general castes. A study conducted in Karnataka 48.0% were belonged to SC, 5.0% were ST and 47.0% belonged to others.⁹ These results are similar to Andhra Pradesh study where a majority 43.0% of the participants belonged to OBCs.¹⁰

In the present study, out of 388 participants 79.6% were Hindus, 17.0% were Muslims and 3.4% were Christian. A study conducted in Red light area of Mumbai reported that, 54.4% were Hindus, 28.2% were Muslims, 11.6% were Christians and 5.8% were belonged to other religion.⁹

Another study from Pune, Maharashtra showed that majority 77.4% were Hindus, 7.8 were Muslims, 12.3% were Buddhist and 2.6% belonged to other religion.⁵ These results are similar to Northern Karnataka, India study, where majority 92.9% of the participants were belonged to Hindus

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religion.¹¹ The proportion Hindu religion was similar to these studies. This is probably due to predominance of Hindu people in our study area.

In our study, majority 60.1% of the CSWs were married, 28.6% were single, 4.6% were widow, and 6.7% were divorced. It appears that the sexual behaviour that was inculcated during teenage has continued after marriage. This sexual behaviour will expose the married partner to great risk of STIs/HIV. Due to increasing poverty and decreasing economic opportunities, married participants are increasingly seeking work outside their households to generate income. It is likely that the earning potential in sex work for the poor and illiterate is larger to what they could earn through other types of work. Similar results found in a study conducted in Andhra Pradesh, majority 40.6% were married, 16.8% were unmarried, 11.9 % were widower and 1.85 were divorced.¹⁰ As against this in Senegal study majority 90.1% were single, 7.8% were married, 1.9% divorced and 0.2% were widower.¹² In the present study, 33.2% of participants belonged to nuclear family, 36.3% to joint family, 14.7% to extended family and 15.7% were not with family. The social impact of such a situation is tremendous and is harmful to the fabric of the society.

In our study, 34.8% subjects migrated from village and 65.2% were city dwellers. This migration may be due to loss in agriculture and also because of the fact that urban areas are sources with better economic prospects. Similar findings were reported in a Mumbai study, 34.0% were migrants and 66% were non migrants.⁶ Another study in Kolkata, India showed that, 22.2% were migrated from different neighboring states.⁷ As against this in Surat, Gujarat study nearly 98% were migrated from different states of India and Nepal.¹³ These findings bring the focus on the requirement of bringing employment opportunities to the rural parts of our country. This migration has also resulted in loss of manpower required for agriculture thus bringing down the productivity.

CONCLUSION: We found that the trends of sex related profession was spread across educated status, employment and gender. Most CSWs lured into trade due to economic consideration. Most CSWs were introduced to sexual practices in minor age. Men having sex with men although illegal are quiet common in our society. Social inequalities and lack of career opportunities has contributed to the growing trend of more and more youngsters entering this profession. Unless commercial sex is legalized it will continue behind the curtains and will make us susceptible to the ills of the trade like sexually transmitted diseases. Much needs to be done to prevent the young work force of the country from going into this profession. The governments of future have to focus on creating career opportunities and reduce rural- urban inequalities to curb this growing menace.

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