



## COMMERCIAL SEX WORK AS A STAGMATISED PROFESSION FOR WOMEN - EVIDENCES FROM THE TEMPLE CITY, MADURAI

### ABSTRACT

**C**ommercial sex is a world-wide phenomenon. It involves several actors apart from the sex worker and the client. Although this is one of the world's oldest and highest income generating industry, it is still the most unregulated trade. According to a study, there are 3 million CSW's of which more than 5 lakh are adolescents in India in 2014. There are approximately 3 lakh brothels in India. Women engaged in sex work are often forced into it. Trafficking of young girls and women has become very lucrative. CSW's face enormous personal, economic and social problems. There are three axes which traumatise them. 1. Criminality associated with their work. 2. Morality which keeps them ostracised and 3. Legality and informality which denies them the access to any kind of economic, social and any other benefits available in other occupations. As interventions are almost non-existent, they become vulnerable to violence, exploitative payments, poverty and health issues. It is prevalent in metro's in a more organised form but in tier 2 cities, this trade works in a more informal basis. This study is undertaken in Madurai city. The city known for its tradition and culture. Yet, commercial sex thrives here. For this study, using snowball method, 100 commercial sex workers were interviewed. The main aim of this paper is to understand the circumstance in which CSW enter in this trade. Furthermore, the study highlights the issues and risks of being involved in this trade and the social impact specifically social discrimination and exclusion experienced by the CSWs.

  
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### INTRODUCTION

Prostitution as a profession has a long history in India. Devadasi (hand maiden of god) system was an established custom in India way back in 300 A.D. From temple dedication, today it has become profession mainly for vulnerable women and some men and the transgender. Presently there are about three million CSAs' in India. In 1997, it was only 1.5 million. This shows an increase of 50 percent in 15 years. According to a report by Philanthropic FoundationDasra, on an average India are about three lakh brothels in 1,100 red light areas. These red light

areas house nearly five million children in addition to commercial sex workers.

Various studies have indicated that commercial sex workers are mostly women who are already subsumed by other forms of marginalisation. They are predominantly illiterate which limits their economic opportunities and of course have lower social status. They are already deep in poverty and have not much else to do. Many of them are either deserted, widowed or victims of violence at home. Having to maintain themselves and their children



or parents and not having any other option, a significant number of them enter into sex work.

### **ISSUES FACED BY CSWs**

Women enter this trade to get monetary remuneration by offering sexual pleasure to men mainly to sustain their families. This is a universal phenomenon. Men from different sections of the society and women (mostly marginalised and vulnerable) are involved. Yet, there is a whole lot of criminality associated with the women involved in this trade. The society ostracises them. The immorality associated with this work has an immense impact on their lives. It is not only considered a degraded occupation, it is also an occupation of dread and darkness. There is hardly any legal cordon to protect their rights. As a feminist economist, I would consider their work as an economic activity and a contribution to the entertainment/ leisure industry. If every other leisure industry has social acceptance regulation and legal support, why not CSW? The informal setting and the secrecy of their work keeps them excluded from the mainstream labour market and the benefits associated with formal labour market. In the addressing of immediate means of livelihood, the long-run economic and social costs get overlooked by them.

The cloud of criminality associated with their occupation makes them vulnerable to brutality by the various players involved in this trade. The pimps harass them routinely. They frequently suffer sexual violence by their clients. To top it all, because of their semi-underground status, the police who need to play the role of protectors seem to have unnatural powers over them and resort to brutality to extort money and sexual favours.

The horror of violence, exploitation, discrimination, negligible access to government interventions to these poor and marginalised women is still a reality. Remittances to their family are often unidirectional that is the family does not like to recognise their contribution. The same family cannot be relied upon for support post retirement. The cost of her stigmatization then manifests purely in economic terms, i.e. in terms of the loss of support structures. They are excluded from financial security despite being earning individuals or economic agents.

Health issues associated with their profession is another important concern which is not given attention. Physical and sexual brutality is a regular occurrence. Apart from that, they are wide-open to other communicable diseases related to

sexual activities which could be cured to severe disease like HIV AIDS.

As they have no legal or social recognition, social security measures are negligible. Right from financial exclusion which means not even having a bank account to ration card, Aadhar card, credit card, they are almost invisible. Their identity and citizenship are in question.

Furthermore the danger of intergenerational transfer of the profession is inevitable. The stigma associated with them gets perpetuated on their children. The inevitable result is that the children also enter into this stigmatised profession either as CSW or pimps.

### **METHODOLOGY, RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This study was undertaken in Madurai City. A total of 100 commercial sex workers were contacted using snowball method. Although a structured questionnaire was used, focussed group discussion and interview in camera was used to elicit information in greater detail.

This study found that women in sex trade are of the following category:

1. Full time 2. Part time 3. Occasional  
Also, they were found to be

1. Voluntary 2. Forced 3. Occupation adopted from parent/relative

### **A GLIMPSE OF LIFE OF A CSW Case 1:-**

In this part of my paper I would like to present some insights that was shared by the respondents. The interviews which I conducted created a deep sense of despair in my mind. I was quite surprised and taken aback to see the hope they had and their vision of life. Madurai is a traditional and a cultural city – a city of temples also known as the Athens of the East. It still retains its traditional form in spite of the invasion of modernisation and pop culture. I met a hundred women and found every woman's life history unique. I would like to narrate some of the interactions. I asked Ms. Latha (Name changed, age-32): Why did you choose to take up this profession? She replies; I was pushed at a very tender age of 14 by my uncle with the concurrence of my parents who feigned innocence and ignorance. They only understood that I will be earning money for the family. At that time I did not realise the implications of what I am doing. At times I enjoyed the entire episode. As I grew I groomed myself to being absolutely professional. I

used to dress in 'sexy' manner so as to attract my prospective clients and to be able to earn a relatively high income. Least did I realise I am reinforcing the stigma of the profession. But now I realise I need respectability in the society and now I dress as any respectable family woman does.

Are you married? I was married to a man by my uncle who turned out to be a Pimp. He used to arrange clients but used to take away all the money and leave me with nothing for my children. I have two children. Today I am still a full time CSW but only for my children. I do not want my children to know about my work. So they live with my parents. And I regularly meet them. I am sending them to a good school as I have a good number of clients who are regular i.e. a regular income.

How do your clients contact you? Earlier my uncle and later my husband used to bring me clients. But then they used to take away all the money. It was a big struggle. My husband used to beat me up and force me to be with number of clients daily so as to get high income. I was physically and psychologically exhausted. He used up all the money and treated me badly. After a point of time I could not withstand all this brutality and violence. Now I know better and have direct contact with my clients. They call me and fix up the time.... I do not have a secured life... (With remorse) But my children will not have this kind of life any more. They will take up government job.

Who are your clients? My clients are mostly older men. Their wives are either sick or away or not interested in physical relationship any more. Hence they come to me to satisfy their physical needs. They are very kind to me and pay me well. They are my well-wishers. I also get young college students. Now I know and I advise them to return even though it means I will lose money. Some return and some insist on physical gratification. I charge them very less and once again advise them not to indulge in such acts at this stage of life.

Where is your place of work? I rent a small house. I live there and that is also my workplace. I remain anonymous. After some time the neighbours start suspecting and then starts the process of social exclusion to the extent that I am forced to shift my house. And this goes on...

**Case 2:** Ms.Geetha (Name changed) age: 23 Interviewed in the reform home. She is a full time sex worker.

I have completed my 11<sup>th</sup> class. I was in love with a boy. My parents did not approve of it and we decided to run away to Madurai. We lived happily together but one day police came and brought me to this home. I do not know why I am brought here. We were a happy family. He has not come and seen me since my arrest but he will come one day. Will you go back to your parents? No they have disowned me and I have no connections with my parents. She is a full time CSW and the boy had pushed her into this trade. She was caught by the police. The boy escaped. You are young. What are your future plans? He will come....

**Case 3:** Ms. Mala (name changed) age: 45 (Occasional CSW)

I am married with three children. I work in a towel company. As my income is very meagre it is difficult to make ends meet. My husband is a drunkard and does not support the family financially. On the contrary, he demands money from me for liquor. I indulge in flesh trade only in times of need like payment of fees for my children, Christmas and medical emergency. Nobody knows about this: not even my husband.

### **SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHARACTERS OF THE RESPONDENTS**

Contrary to the general belief that women in this profession need to be and are young, 54 respondents were in the age group of 35 to 45 and 30 of them were in the age group of 25 to 35. More of middle aged women are engaged in this profession. As far as their marital status is concerned, only 8 respondents were unmarried, 37 of them were married, 23 were separated, 12 widowed and 16 were living with a partner.

Most of them were not well educated. 18 of them were illiterate, 57 had undergone primary education, 17 high school, 7 higher secondary school and 1 degree holder respectively. Having low levels of education deprives them of many opportunities for livelihood often forcing them into this occupation. Most of the economic opportunities are in the informal sector where there is a lot of exploitation. CS work is very lucrative as compared to other jobs in the informal sector. As most of them are middle aged, they are married and have familiar responsibilities. This profession enables them to sustain their families and their extended families. Some of them are full time workers but most of them take it as part time work in times of extreme need for money.

**Occupation Status**

For many CSW this is not the only profession. They also have a regular occupation which gives them some income and acceptance in the society. Commercial sex work is done as a part-time job which yields a one-time lump sum income, particularly to meet large and unexpected expenditure.

**Table -1 Occupation-wise distribution of Commercial Sex Workers**

Nature of activity	No. of Respondents
<b>Full time CSW</b>	25
<b>Working as a member in Russ Foundation (NGO)</b>	9
<b>Beautician</b>	2
<b>Towel Company</b>	5
<b>House maid</b>	16
<b>Sales person</b>	8
<b>Construction worker</b>	5
<b>Others</b>	30
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Primary Data

The table reveals that 75 of them are part time sex workers. Most of them have a so called respectable job but that which does not generate adequate income to sustain their lives. Hence as a supportive income, they go into flesh trade. This paper analysed the reasons for taking this job either full time or part time.

**Table: 2 Reasons for undertaking Commercial Sex Work**

Factors	Rank													Total	Rank
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13		
<b>Poverty</b>	624	396	77	70	27	32	21	0	0	4	0	0	0	1251	I
<b>Low income</b>	78	516	352	60	63	16	7	12	5	0	0	0	0	1109	II
<b>Broken family</b>	455	48	264	40	36	48	49	48	25	0	6	0	1	1020	III
<b>Sense of insecurity</b>	26	24	198	260	162	128	56	24	10	4	3	4	0	899	IV
<b>Mental Perversion</b>	0	12	55	250	279	104	56	60	25	4	0	0	1	846	V
<b>Bad Company</b>	78	72	33	80	81	64	98	168	66	8	6	0	2	750	VI
<b>Lack of parental care</b>	0	60	77	120	126	160	84	78	40	12	3	4	3	767	VII
<b>Cheated by others</b>	104	36	33	60	54	88	133	72	45	44	12	6	5	692	VIII
<b>Prior incest</b>	13	0	0	40	18	72	77	54	65	92	36	32	0	499	IX
<b>Exposure to sexual acts of parents / others</b>	0	0	11	10	9	8	63	18	125	80	21	26	19	390	X
<b>Spirit of adventure</b>	0	0	0	10	27	64	42	60	40	40	48	32	32	385	XI
<b>Dowry</b>	0	0	0	0	9	8	7	6	45	96	87	42	13	313	XII
<b>Rape</b>	0	36	0	0	9	8	7	0	15	16	78	54	34	257	XIII

Source: Primary Data

From table it is distressing to note that, poverty is ranked first among the various factors influencing the respondents to choose this occupation. Most of them enter this field due to the critical financial position. The second rank is given to low income. Low income is leads to poverty. Husband would not hold a proper job and does not earn enough to meet the necessities of the family. Broken homes have forced them to support the family financially. Insecurity and mental prevention has the fourth and fifth rank respectively. The insecurity of a women drives her to enter this field. Mental perversion is yet another reason for many of them enter into commercial sex work. There are sex brokers who drag such women into this field.

Some respondents expressed that they entered this field without realizing the consequences because of their friends. Women who feel unsecured depressed etc. become the focus of attention for brokers of pimps. The network of pimps and commercial sex workers is very strong in Madurai. The brokers identify such women and bring them into this occupation.

Bad company happens to be an influencing factor. Lack of parental care, cheated by others, prior incest, exposed to sexual acts of parents / others, spirit of adventure, dowry are the other few influencing factors to become in this field. Rape too found a place. Once she has been raped, she is then forced to continue in this as a profession.

Prostitution is a risky profession for women. They have to face a lot of problems especially sexual exploitation from their clients, sexual expectation of ruffians in the unexpected time etc. inspite of all these difficulties they do not earn their expected salary to make ends meet for them. The following table shows their earning from this job.

Women in this profession are earning as low as below Rs.1000 to as high as Rs. 30,000 per month. This depends on the commercial sex workers her contacts, her experience and her agent.

### Earnings per month:-

**Table: 3 Earnings per month**

Commercial Sex Workers Earnings	No. of respondents
<b>Below 1000</b>	12
<b>1000-5000</b>	74
<b>5000-10000</b>	8
<b>10000-15000</b>	1
<b>15000-20000</b>	2
<b>20000-25000</b>	1
<b>25000-30000</b>	1
<b>Repayment for their earlier financial loan</b>	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Primary Data

Earnings from this trade is generally considered to be high. But evidently 74 respondents are earning a meagre income ranging between Rs. 1000-5000. In Madurai, the average income earned from this occupation is very low which keeps them in the vicious circle of poverty. One of the respondents engaged in this trade because her husband had obtained loan from the financier. Hence the presumption that it is a lucrative profession is not true in most instances. Only where women go as escort girls and the like, the income is high.

### Experience with the age of the respondents:-

Each business has some asset to enhance their business activity. Similarly, sex worker's important asset is their body. Female commercial sex workers are selling their body to the men who have sexual wants. A shapely figure and an attractive face help them in this field. Hence age is an important factor. Every field needs experience for a good understanding of their specialization field. Similarly, in sex work experience helps them to identify the clients, it teaches them to tackle the clients, ruffians, police and other social problems in their life. In this field age is an important as experience.

**Table: 4 Experience with the Age of the respondents**

Age	Years of Experience								Total
	Below 1 year	1-5	5-10	10-15	15-20	20-25	25-30	30-35	
<b>15-25</b>	1	7	-	-	-	-	-	-	<b>8</b>
<b>25-35</b>	1	18	6	3	2	-	-	-	<b>30</b>
<b>35-45</b>	2	26	17	5	2	2	-	-	<b>54</b>
<b>45-55</b>	-	2	1	2	1	-	1	-	<b>7</b>
<b>55-65</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	<b>1</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Primary Data

From the table 4 it can be seen that 53 of them have an experience of 1 to 5 years and 24 of them have an experience of 5-10 years. It can be inferred that 25 - 45 years are the peak age for this profession. But it can also be inferred that it is in this age that women are burdened with family responsibility and are pushed into this profession to financially support the family. 10 of them have as long as 10-15 years. In fact some have experience even up to 30-35 years.

### Protection Method:-

One of the major occupational hazard in this occupation is contacting sexually transmitted diseases including HIV AIDS. The best way to avoid such disease is to use contraceptives. Contraceptive methods like condoms should be used by the commercial sex workers while having the sex with the partner to prevent themselves from the sexually transmitted diseases like AIDS. Yet often many clients do not prefer the use of condoms and insist on free sex.

**Table: 5 Relation between Clients in a week and Protection used**

No. of clients in a week	Use Protection Method		
	Yes	No	Total
<b>1-5</b>	72 (97 %)	2 (3)	74 (100)
<b>5-10</b>	13 (100)	0 (0)	13 (100)
<b>10-15</b>	5 (100)	0 (0)	5 (100)
<b>15-20</b>	3 (100)	0 (0)	3 (100)
<b>20-25</b>	4 (100)	0 (0)	4 (100)
<b>25-30</b>	1 (100)	0 (0)	1 (100)
<b>Total</b>	98	2	100

Source: Primary Data

From the analysis it can be seen that most of the respondents are using protection to keep away sexual transmitted diseases. When some clients refuse to use condoms they are advised by these women to use it for the benefit of all. Otherwise often many reject adamant customers. They expressed that they always carry condoms with them. Thus it is interesting to note that almost all of them are aware of the need to use condoms and in fact insist on using it.

**Health issues:-**

Health issues are associated with this profession are mainly sexually transmitted diseases. As most of them are still in poverty, they often are unable to attend to it. Also, as women live in a culture of silence, any disease of this nature related to women are not discussed in the open and neither are they treated in hospitals. Commercial sex workers enter this field only to earn their livelihood and they cannot afford to lose their hard-earned money on medical expenses on the one hand and on the other hand find it difficult to approach hospitals.

**Table: 6 Hospital preferences and Sexually Transmitted Diseases**

Problem with your health	Have any STDs		
	Yes	No	Total
<b>Private Doctor</b>	3(18)	14(82)	<b>17</b>
<b>Local clinics</b>	0(0)	2(100)	<b>2</b>
<b>Public hospitals</b>	3(25)	9(75)	<b>12</b>
<b>NGO's</b>	13(19)	56(81)	<b>69</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Primary Data

Access to health care is another major issue for them. The study found that the maximum number of women (69 percent) prefer to take treatment in from Non - Government organizations which are working in this field. Only 17 percent, 12 percent and 2 percent of the respondents take treatment in private hospitals, public hospitals and local clinics respectively. 19 percent of the respondents' have the sexually transmitted diseases. Thus NGO's are playing a vital role in providing not only counselling but also medical services. They believe that by going to an NGO they will be able to maintain secrecy about their profession.

**Discrimination faced:-**

Although this is a worldwide prevalent occupation it is also the most stigmatized profession. Human societies are characterized by patterns of relationships between individuals that share a distinctive culture or institutions. So, society plays a significant role in the lives of human beings. Especially, a prestigious and acceptable occupation is important to live in society. The morality issues associated with this profession makes them undesirable elements in the society. People involved in this profession are generally excluded from the fabric of the society. They are discriminated at various levels and in different forms.

To study the level of discrimination by the society the respondents were given few statements. A five point scale was devised to measure the level of discrimination.

**Table: 7 Discrimination faced by the Commercial Sex Workers**

Statements	Mean	Standard Deviation	Score Value	Total
<b>Society looks down upon you</b>	4.78	0.85	58	100
<b>We are treated as outcasts</b>	4.74	0.89	58	100
<b>Neighbours and relatives do not try to understand us</b>	4.20	0.79	74	100
<b>My husband and children also avoid me</b>	4.41	0.94	70	100
<b>I do not want to continue in this profession</b>	3.78	0.53	71	100
<b>If another job is offered to me I will take it up</b>	3.41	0.50	68	100

Source: Primary Data

The score values are extremely revealing. The fact that they are a source of ridicule among the neighbours creates a sense of shame in their minds. But to top it all even the family members shun them for whom they are striving is even painful. From the score value it can be interpreted that they are much affected by the activity of the neighbours. The second most prominent is they feel the need to get out of this profession. They are pained because their family members distance from them. Hence, this profession has secluded them their family relative and friends. Of they would like to move on and are willing if rehabilitation and a more respectable livelihood is offered to them. Man is a social being and being socially excluded is very painful.

### **What are the questions the society has to answer?**

The social apathy towards the area (arising from the stigmatized nature of the profession) results in sparse allocation of economic resources for provision and servicing of the public infrastructure in the area, like electricity, water, public toilets and garbage disposal.

- With an increasing vulnerability to sexually transmitted diseases and HIV, do the economic costs of the profession become too overbearing, wiping out all economic benefits derived from a lifetime of being a sex worker?
- Does a sex worker end up being poorer than from where she began? Here, the issue is of economic opportunities foregone on account of being a sex worker.
- Can a sex worker avail of alternative avenues of employment after she has retired from the profession?
- Can alternative support structures be provided so that she can sustain her living? That is can we mainstream them?

### **SUGGESTIONS**

1. Although this profession is age old one, it is not recognised and is in the informal sector. First and foremost, to stop the victimisation of sex workers, legal measures are required. At present law against trafficking exists but nothing for sex workers protection. The immediate need is to decriminalise this profession.
2. Protective homes or some temporary shelter should be offered for them when they are faced with difficult situation.
3. Skill training and programmes to develop their self-esteem should be provided to them so that they are able to live with pride and have an occupation in which they are able to earn sufficiently.
4. Appropriate medical facilities are not provided by the government. Some NGO's are working to help them by providing medical facility and improving their self-esteem. Medical facilities should be provided discretely so that they are able to approach such clinics without fear. Female doctors should be appointed in this department.
5. In order to avoid violence by clients, the brothel owners, managers or the care takers must take preventive measures to safe guard the women engaged in this work.
6. The children of CSW need to be provided an alternate environment so that they can be mainstreamed right from the beginning. Government and NGO's can work intensively in this area.
7. Alternate employment opportunities so as to enable them to get mainstreamed.

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