

The Impact of Sex Work on Psychological Wellbeing

Dr. Danesh Karunanayake, Ph.D. (Purdue)*, Nirmala Jayasundara, BA (Hons),
Psychology, N. D. U. Vimukthi, BA (Hons), Psychology
Department of Psychology, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka

ABSTRACT

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A controversial type of profession undertaken by women is sex work or prostitution, always subjected to regulation by law or convention. Sex workers are often stigmatized, marginalized, and criminalized by the societies in which they live. The profession of sex work may impact on the psychological wellbeing of the workers. This study aims to explore the impact of sex work on the psychological wellbeing of female sex workers. Qualitative design was used as the research design. The study used a purposive sample of five female sex workers and semi-structured interviews as the key method of data collection. The questions of the semi-structured interview were developed along the six dimensions of Ryff's Psychological wellbeing scales: Autonomy, Environmental mastery, Personal growth, Positive relations with others, Purpose in life, and Self-acceptance. The data were analyzed along these six dimensions using the thematic analysis method. The findings of the study show that there is considerable impact of sex work on the psychological wellbeing of female sex workers. The impact is mostly negative and were especially true for Ryff's dimensions of autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth and self-acceptance

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I. INTRODUCTION

Prostitution is a global phenomenon that is gendered: the majority of prostitutes are women, and the clients, men. It often involves exploitation, harassment, and violence, particularly in low-resource settings (Jordal, M., Öhman, A., & Wijewardene, K. 2019; Karunanayake, D. 2005). Sex work, in many different forms, has been practiced since ancient times. In Sri Lankan society sex work and prostitution were legal

and normal during the reign of Kings. But now it is a stigmatized, marginalized and a criminalized activity. Yet, there is a growing demand for sex work. Sex workers in Sri Lanka are estimated to involve 40,000 women operating from streets, brothels, massage parlors, lodges, or hotels (Miller and Carbone-Lopez 2013). There were multiple factors of why women are involved in sex work, some voluntary and others involuntary. Poverty, illness in the family, debt, sex

for enjoyment, peer association, family neglect, domestic clashes, drug addiction in husbands, rape, sexual assault, early marriages, trafficking, deceived by family, and deceived by a lover are some of them (Qayyum, Shahid, Iqbal, Ahmad et. al., 2013). Sex workers experience numerous stressors, some unique to their profession, and many common across occupations.

The mental health of sex workers is as important as physical health. The mental status of female sex workers differed due to work settings, nationalities as well as their propensity for ill mental health (Rössler et al., 2009). They further stated that female sex workers displayed high rates of mental disorders. Also, those mental disorders were related to violence encountered and the subjectively perceived burden of sex work. Although it has many faces, the mental health of sex workers is primarily related to different forms of violence. Farley, Baral, Kiremire, and Sezgin (1998), investigated the prevalence of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among sex workers in South Africa, Thailand, Turkey, the United States, and Zambia. The results of the study showed that two-thirds of the sample of prostitutes met the diagnostic criteria for PTSD, with no significant differences among countries.

Sanders' (2004) research on indoor sex markets, and the strategies they created to manage occupational hazards found that health risks were not considered the most destructive type of occupational hazard by the sex workers. Physical violence also was not considered as destructive because of the preponderance of complex strategies to prevent violence in the sex market and the awareness of sex workers about the threat of violence and their appropriate responses for those. Sex workers considered the emotional and psychological consequences of selling sex as a hazard equal to that of physical violence and health-related concerns.

Young, Boyd & Hubbell (2000) examined whether prostitutes use drugs as a means of coping with intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences commonly associated with their occupation. According to the findings, the women in the sample who were prostituting were addicted to a significantly greater number of drugs than those who were not prostituting. It also found that women prostitutes were significantly more likely to use drugs because they felt that the drugs increased their feelings of confidence, sense of control, and feelings of closeness to others and decreased their feelings of guilt and sexual distress.

A study by El Bassel et al. (1997) confirms that, after adjustment for differences in age, ethnicity, pregnancy, perceived AIDS risk, rape, and crack and alcohol use, sex workers are more likely than non-sex workers to exhibit psychological distress. Ratnapala (1999) in his book 'Sex workers of Sri Lanka' investigated sex work and sex workers in the Sri Lanka milieu. Ratnapala found that many females engaged in sex work in environments such as gardens, beaches, or low-cost guesthouses and named them "street sex workers". He also found a substantial number of sex workers who work in massage centers. Ratnapala considered both of these categories of sex workers as underclass sex workers. He further explained that there were middle class and upper-class sex workers. He identifies economic deprivation and lack of occupational opportunities as the main factors that motivate individuals for sex work.

Psychological well-being

Psychological well-being (PWB) refers to how people evaluate their lives. These evaluations may be in the form of cognition or the form of affect (Center for Bhutan Studies & GNH, 2017). At the most basic level, PWB is quite similar to other terms that refer to positive mental states, such as happiness or

satisfaction, and in many ways, it is not necessary, or helpful to worry about fine distinctions between such terms (Cooper, R. 2018). There are two types of Psychological well-being. The term “Hedonic” wellbeing is normally used to refer to the subjective feelings of happiness. It comprises of two components, an affective component (high positive affect and low negative affect) and a cognitive component (satisfaction with life). It is proposed that an individual experiences happiness when positive affect and satisfaction with life are both high (Carruthers & Hood, 2004). The less well-known term, “Eudemonic” wellbeing is used to refer to the purposeful aspect of PWB. The psychologist Carol Ryff has developed a very clear model that breaks down Eudaimonic wellbeing into six key types of psychological wellbeing (Cooper, R. 2018). Ryff’s multidimensional model of eudemonic psychological well-being (1989) consists of six elements: self-acceptance, personal growth, purpose in life, environmental mastery, autonomy, and positive relations with others as key for well-being.

Sex Workers

Sex work is the provision of sexual services for money or goods (Overs, C. 2002). Sex workers are women, men and transgendered people who receive money or goods in exchange for sexual services, and who consciously define those activities as income generating even if they do not consider sex work as their occupation (Overs, C. 2002).

In the profession of prostitution, female sex workers get far more attention than male sex workers. Therefore many researchers tend to investigate female sex workers than males. Involvement in prostitution for many participants began out of economic necessity or due to drug addiction. A study by Dalla (2000) revealed that entry into prostitution results from the accumulation of multiple

interdependent personal and contextual factors. Female sex workers are stigmatized and marginalized all around the world. They are generally not accepted in society and are regarded as criminals, immoral troublemakers, sexual deviants, and vectors or reservoirs of disease (Durisin, Van der Meulen & Bruckert. 2018; Poutanen. 2015.)

In the Sri Lankan context, there have not been enough studies about sex workers. Hence, there are many aspects of sex work that can be investigated and should be investigated. But, due to the legal status of sex work in Sri Lanka and the stigma associated with sex work, the population is difficult to access; thus there has been relatively little academic research done on the topic. Therefore, the present study aims to explore the psychological wellbeing of sex workers; specifically, the impact of sex work on the psychological wellbeing of female sex workers in Sri Lanka and will provide opportunities to fill the research gap on the field of sex work in the Sri Lankan context.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study used a qualitative research design and used semi-structured interviews including a list of open-ended questions based on the research topic. The questions of the semi-structured interview were developed along the six dimensions of Ryff’s Psychological wellbeing scales: Autonomy, Environmental mastery, Personal growth, Positive relations with others, Purpose in life, and Self-acceptance. It used 12 open-ended questions to grasp the situation of the psychological wellbeing of the sex workers. A purposive sample of five participants, who visited the STD clinic at a hospital in the Central province as well as some who participated in a project conducted by the Sri Lanka Red Cross society who engage in sex work were selected to gather information. All the five interviews were conducted

individually face to face by using the same set of questions. Although the same set of questions were given to each participant, they were given the freedom to express their feelings and ideas about themselves and their occupation freely. Thematic analysis was used for the analysis of data gathered from the interviews.

The results of the study were divided into six themes and under the themes, sub-themes were also identified. The findings show that the psychological wellbeing of female sex workers was considerably impacted by sex work. The following table summarizes the participants' responses to the questions of the semi-structured interviews.

III. RESULTS

	1		2		3		4		5		6	
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Q11	Q12
FSW 1	+	+		+/-	+	+/-	+/-	+/-	+/-		+/-	+
FSW 2	+/-	+/-	+	-	+/-	-	+	+	+	+/-	-	+/-
FSW 3	-	-	+/-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	-
FSW 4	-	-			-	-	-	+	+	-	-	-
FSW 5	-	-	-	-	-	-	+/-	-	-	-	-	-

Table 01: Participants' responses given in the semi-structured interviews.

- 1. Autonomy Q = Questions
- 2. Environmental Mastery FSW = Female Sex Workers
- 3. Personal growth + = Positive
- 4. Positive relations with others - = Negative
- 5. Purpose in life
- 6. Self- Acceptance

The results, as shown in the above table, indicated that sex work mostly negatively impacted the psychological wellbeing of female sex workers. The themes with the most negative impact were autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth,

and self-acceptance. The findings show that female sex workers have negative attitudes towards themselves as well as their profession. Also, it revealed that they are facing different types of difficulties because of their profession. They especially faced huge difficulties from customers, the

police, and brokers who are connected with the profession. The findings also revealed that female sex workers face many issues related to living and that such issues negatively affect their mental and physical wellbeing.

IV. DISCUSSION

Autonomy

This dimension aimed to identify whether female sex workers are self-determining, able to resist social pressures, able to think and act in certain ways, evaluate self by personal standards, whether they are concerned about the expectations and evaluations of others, relies on others to make important decisions and whether they conform to social pressures to think and act in certain ways. It aimed to identify female sex workers' attitudes towards their profession as well as their viewpoint on societal attitudes.

Attitudes of the profession

The findings showed that most sex workers have somewhat negative attitudes about their profession. Many of them have guilty, fearful, sinful, and immoral feelings towards their profession. There were many reasons for the participants to be sex workers. Many participants in the sample were introduced to the profession because of destitution. Though they have negative attitudes about their profession, they have had to engage with it. Many of them accomplish the needs of their children and other family members through this profession. They get a good income that is sufficient to fulfill their needs as well as the needs of their family members. Therefore they didn't try to engage with another profession.

They know that the profession of sex work is illegal and that it is an immoral and unconventional source of income. They have a connection to their religion and know the profession is considered sinful. Further,

they have a fear of sexually transmitted diseases. All of the participants have reported that they are attending the Sexually Transmitted Diseases clinic at the Kandy National Hospital to check their protection from diseases.

Although, at the beginning, they had negative feelings towards their profession it had become normalized with time. But it doesn't mean that they have no negative feelings about the profession now. Though it became normalized with time, they continuously experience feelings of regret. Many people believe that sex workers have a positive attitude towards themselves and that they continue their profession willingly. However, the study revealed that the ideas carried by the majority of the society is not correct.

Self – Viewpoint of Societal Attitudes

Sex work or prostitution is considered as low status and a physically, socially, and morally tainted occupation. Society identifies sex workers as a marginalized, stigmatized, and a criminalized group who are resistant to the social-cultural norms and values of the society. Sex workers are well aware of the stigmas attached to their profession and these stigmas are significant stressors for sex workers. These things affect the psychological wellbeing of sex workers. The findings of the study show that the societal attitudes of the profession negatively impact the psychological wellbeing of sex workers.

Further, findings show that some of the participants have resentful feelings towards societal attitudes. They have displeasure and anger with society; how society treats them. Some of them were trying to neglect the negative societal attitudes towards themselves by trying to justify their profession contrary to societal attitudes.

Environmental Mastery

This dimension aimed to understand how participants deal with their environment including people. It further aimed to identify whether the participants of the sample had a sense of mastery and competence in managing their environment, whether they are they able to control complex stressors that are emerging from their personal and professional environment and that how they manage their profession with their personal life.

The findings show that sex workers have faced many stressors in managing their professional life with their personal life. The workers have always tried to hide their profession from the whole society and that causes a major stress for them. They are willing to hide their profession and manage the negative conditions within the profession. Those negative conditions make stressors for them and it negatively impacts their psychological wellbeing.

Work/Life Conflicts

All of the participants in the sample kept the nature of their work secret from people in their private life. The majority of women in the profession of sex work had gained money through sex work for several years while at the same time preventing their parents, relatives, children, and friends from finding out about their illicit behavior. They have had to hide everything connected with their work (daily routine, money, connections, clothing, equipment, condoms, etc.) from their private sphere. This double life is a huge stress. They have difficulty finding child care and in fulfilling other responsibilities and duties. All of the participants in the sample have no husbands and hence male protection in their private life. They stated that they miss their husband's love and affection and the ability to get sexual desires fulfilled

from their husband. These issues causes them emotional and psychological distress.

Impact of Other People that are connecting with their Profession

Many people think sex work or prostitution is autonomous employment, but it is not. Many parties are connected with this profession including customers, managers, police, pimps, and brokers. Though sex workers are the main characters of this employment, these parties make a significant impact on the profession and sex workers. Sex workers face many difficulties from these parties and are bothered by them.

Customers: Sex workers face many difficulties due to their customer's desires, attitudes, requests, and demands. They stated that the main health risks related to their work were due to clients forcing them perform unprotected sex and condoms breaking, leaking, or coming off, all of which could cause sexually transmitted infections and HIV. The majority of participants reported that their customers have different desires and that they request workers to engage in different types of sexual positions. However, sex workers are not able to fulfill all the requests and desires of the customers. They said that they have to create strategies to minimize health risks for them while, at the same time, fulfilling customers' desires. Some sex workers said their work was emotionally risky because of the negative emotions generated by the customers in many circumstances. They reported that they felt disgusted with some dirty and unpleasant customers. Though they have feel disgusted or have other negative emotions towards a customer they are not able to back out of the deal. Also, Participants have been cheated by the customers. Sex workers reported that some customers try to evade giving money; therefore they always took

the payment from customers before performing any sexual act.

Such issues and annoyances faced by sex workers from customers affect their physical and mental wellbeing. Some past research also proves that there are many difficulties and irritations from the customers in the profession of sex work. A 10-month ethnographic study of the female sex industry found that violence from clients was considered to be a hazard that was less predictable, but more prevalent and therefore increasingly risky compared to health-related risks in sex working (Sanders, 2004).

Police and Law: Sex work or prostitution is legally prohibited in Sri Lanka. Sex workers continue their profession in such a risky and dangerous situation. Participants of the sample were punished by the law in many circumstances. As an illegal profession, police is a huge stressor for sex workers in continuing their profession and are always in fear of getting caught by the police. Also, some police officers try to obtain sexual bribes from the workers for not arresting them.

Pimps and Brokers: Pimps and brokers are shareholders of this profession. Though all sex workers don't deal with brokers or pimps, many of them do so. These people help sex workers to find customers and protect them from the customers and the police. Participants reported that pimps and brokers earn much more money than them from sex work. They also force sex workers to deal with every customer that they procure and if they refuse then they are physically assaulted by them. They also force sex workers to have sex with them for free. The findings of the study revealed that all of these parties that are connected with the profession negative impact sex workers both mentally and physically.

Personal Growth

This dimension aimed to identify female sex workers' self-development and whether it expands their growth from their employment. The findings of the study revealed that sex workers worry about their life and profession. They have feelings of guilt, worry, shame, and sadness about their life and employment.

Life and Employment

There are many reasons for the participants being sex workers. Many participants in the sample were introduced to the profession because of destitution and many of them have a lack of legitimate occupational opportunities. None of the participants in the sample have a husbands and they have been forced into this profession as a result of various economic and social factors such as poverty, lack of educational skills and opportunities. Sex work is not conducive for personal growth in workers' life. Instead of personal growth sex work leads to personal stagnation. The participants' satisfaction with the profession and their life was low.

Most of the sex workers are people who are divorces or abandoned by their spouse, widows, or women who have lost their virginity before marriage. Sri Lankan society places a high value for virginity and also have a negative perception of women who are divorced, separated or widowed. Hence, sex workers tend to have low self-esteem and value themselves negatively.

Effects on Mental Status

The profession of sex work or prostitution has a very negative impact on the mental status of sex workers. The workers incur stress due to health risks, physical violence, societal stigmas, hazards from other persons involved in the profession such as pimps and the police. Most of the past studies also indicate that sex work has a huge negative impact on the mental status

of sex workers. For example a study by Rössler et al., (2009) found that most of the female sex workers displayed high rates of mental disorders and those mental disorders were related to violence and the subjectively perceived burden of sex work.

Effects on Physical Status

All the participants have confirmed that they have negative impacts on their physical status because of their profession. Sex workers experienced physical violence from their clients. And they were harassed by drunks in many circumstances. Having sex with many males desensitize them from sexual pleasure and also makes the sex workers physically fatigued. Some participants reported that they use alcohol or other drugs when they engage in their profession. They have less willingness to engage with customers without alcohol or drugs. These findings confirmed that there are many negative physical consequences on sex workers from the profession. However, women who worked as sex workers were generally aware of the issues relating to the potential health risks of selling sex for money.

Positive Relations with Others

This dimension is trying to identify the sex worker's interpersonal relationships. They have few close relationships with others and, have a fear of establishing relationships with others. They reported that their profession causes them to be distant from their family members. Sex work is a profession that needs to be hidden because of the fear of legal repercussions and negative societal attitudes towards their profession. These circumstances affect their interpersonal relationships. Most of the time sex workers maintain few relationships with people. They have tenuous connections with the customers, pimps, brokers and sometimes police officers. They have strong trusting relationships with some of their

colleagues. Hence, the interpersonal relationships of the sex workers are very narrow and confined to a few of their own profession.

Purpose in Life

This dimension aims to understand the participant's goals in life and sense of direction, the meaning of their present and past life and identify their future dependence on the profession. The findings show that most of the participants have a lack of future goals and their existing goals are not clear and directed.

Future Hopes

Most of the participants did not have goal-directed hopes about themselves and their profession. They know the profession is not consistent with aging and physical wearing. Although they have an idea of leaving the profession they do not have well thought out plan. With their profession, they are prone to develop short term goals and plans.

Impairments of Engaging with another Employment

There are many reasons participants were unable to find another profession. They think sex work is the most familiar and possible employment for them. They have a fear of engaging with another employment by leaving sex work and think society will not accept them for another employment. Sometimes they may be trying to justify staying in their profession and they may not like to try another employment. Though they have penitence about their life and profession they don't try to leave from the profession. They state that if they have the opportunity to engage in a financially viable job most of them are willing to leave the profession. None of the workers are engaging in sex work for pleasure. The social and economic factors force them to engage and continue with the profession.

Self-Acceptance

Most of the sex workers have negative attitudes towards themselves and their profession. They don't feel positive about their past and present life. They feel dissatisfied with self and their employment, disappointed with what has occurred in the past, are not clear about their future. The stigmatized and marginalized attitudes of society towards them have a huge impact on sex worker's attitudes about themselves. Most of them have low self-esteem, self-confidence, and negative attitudes about themselves.

Sex work especially negatively impact the psychological wellbeing of sex workers. Many empirical studies have found that there are psychological effects of selling sex. Involvement in prostitution has been linked to post-traumatic stress disorder (Farley et al., 1998), depression (Bagley 1999, Chudakov et al. 2002), eating disorders (Cooney, 1990) and drug use (Sterk, 2000). Also, another study shows that, the emotional and psychological consequences of selling sex is a hazard equal to that of physical violence and health-related concerns (Sanders, 2004) According to the above six dimensions described above we can argue that being a sex worker negatively impacts on the psychological wellbeing of the female sex workers.

V. CONCLUSION

The study suggests there were negative impacts of sex working on the psychological wellbeing of female sex workers. Further, the study reveals that sex workers face many stressors, bothers, and annoyance because of their profession and, it negatively impacts their psychological wellbeing. The study illustrates it by using the six dimensions of Ryff's psychological wellbeing scales.

The study does not intend to justify sex work or sex workers and it doesn't intend to diminish or deny the

social stigmas and attitudes towards sex workers. Instead the study draws attention to how sex work impact the psychological wellbeing of the female sex workers. The study looks into female sex workers' service in a psychological perspective instead of through stigma. Although numerous research on sex work is conducted in other countries the topic is not well researched in Sri Lanka. Hence, this study attempted to explore the impact of sex work on the psychological wellbeing of female sex workers in the Sri Lankan context.

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