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An Analysis of Opposing Feminist Views of Sex Work: Is it the woman's choice? In Kolkata, West Bengal, India

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An Analysis of Opposing Feminist Views of Sex Work: Is it the woman's choice?

In Kolkata, West Bengal, India

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Abstract

Sex work is an ancient profession that throughout history has been both socially stigmatized and socially sanctioned. Presently, there is conflicting discourse within the feminist movement about whether to support or combat the sex work industry. This study analyzes the current perceptions of sex work in Kolkata, India which is home to South Asia's largest red-light district Sonagachi. It aims to answer the questions: Is sex work a respectable profession or forced labor? Are women sex workers as a result of choice or force? And are the answers to these questions determined by the sex workers themselves or by NGO ideology? The opposing feminist view points on this topic are called into question. The two main contrasting views are lived out through those working to rescue women from prostitution verses those working for the rights of sex workers. Through a critical analysis derived from the perspectives of NGO representatives and sex workers, this study explores the duality of these approaches. A series of interviews and a focus group has been conducted with the sex workers and feminist experts on the subject through the facilitation of the Kolkata based NGO Durbar that partners with sex workers. This study works to present a thoughtful examination of the effects feminist views of empowerment and agency have on women in the sex work industry and the NGOs working with them. By listening to the experiences and opinions of sex workers with a focus on answering the above questions, this study affirms the need for dialogue and informed advocacy for the true needs of sex workers in India.

I. Introduction

A. Context

Twenty-seven million people are enslaved in the world today. Trapped and powerless, they have been taken across borders and away from their homes. In quite a short period, I heard this preached multiple times, and my heart was captured. “I need to fight this injustice,” my young self proclaimed. And I still need to fight the injustice. But this campaign gave no context; it gave no space for deeper understanding. A passion was ignited to rescue girls who are modern day sex slaves with no concept of what these circumstances might look like or what these girls might want. This is the danger of a single story.

A story that narrows down the complex issues of the many situations we have placed beneath the umbrella of “trafficking” cannot bring true change (Agustin, 2015; Kempadoo, 2007). These issues are rooted within the deepest systems of inequality in our society: capitalism and patriarchy. The story being told cannot disengage these roots. It then becomes a story, has become a story, that erases the agency of women, that paints a picture of helplessness, weakness, and all encompassing pain. Is this what feminism is about? Feminism is about equalizing the power equation between all people in society. It is about overcoming the oppression and marginalization of certain groups of people due to the “othering” of those different than oneself. It is about everyone having the ability to choose without the limitations of patriarchal, capitalist systems. Therefore, when feminists take up the issues presented by the anti-trafficking movement, they must evaluate the place of choice within these women’s lives. They must recognize and affirm the wide array of experiences sex workers have without looking at them all through one lens of trafficking.

The global presence of sex trafficking and the deep moral roots of the anti-sex-trafficking movement must not be completely ignored, though. The conflicting view points on sex work find common ground and fundamental difference when sex trafficking is addressed. Trafficking has been popularly defined as “a practice that involves moving people within and across local or national boundaries for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Trafficking may be the result of force, coercion, manipulation, deception, abuse of authority, initial consent, family pressure, past and present family and community violence, economic deprivation, or other conditions of inequality for women and children” (Schober, 2007, p. 125). There is some debate over this definition in that it leaves men out of the definition, but it at least shows how overarching and broad the very definition is placing a wide variety of experiences into a single category and a single story (Agustin, 2015; Kempadoo, 2007, Schober, 2007).

The policies in most countries including India address sex work within trafficking policies, and understandings of sex work are often limited to anti-sex-trafficking campaigning (Shankar, 2015). Some people point out the flaws in this by pointing out, “To lump all this under a single term simply disappears the array of different situations, encourages reductionism and feeds into a moralistic agenda of Good and Evil” (Agustin). While still others would argue that people do not choose to involve themselves in the sex trade without force or coercion, and therefore, these policies underneath the umbrella of trafficking are necessary to protect many innocent people (Kempadoo, 2007; Sinha, 2015). This dispute is the context within which the entire question of women’s choices and the feminist view points on sex work take root in current society.

Choice is socially determined and vital to human flourishing. Therefore, it is necessary to look at the limits of choice for marginalized populations such as Female Sex Workers (FTW)

before formulating any judgments of their situations. The definition of “choice” given by Merriam-Webster forms a basis from which to build this discussion; choice is “the opportunity or power to choose between two or more possibilities: the opportunity or power to make a decision” (Merriam-Webster, 2016). The question of whether sex work is the woman’s choice comes from the ambiguity of what it means to have the “opportunity or power” in situations of desperation such as poverty. When poor, unskilled women in India have only two or three possible options and sex work comes with far greater economic benefits, do the women choose from a position of agency or a form of force and coercion? When sex work is recognized as a category that includes experiences other than trafficking, these deeper questions can be addressed, and the fundamental views shaping the common discourse about sex work can be analyzed, nuanced, and discussed (Vijayakumar, 2014; Felice 2001; Sahni, 2008). The goal of this study is to do just that – not to erase the stories of pain told by survivors of sex trafficking, but to acknowledge another category of empowered sex workers and thereby creating space for each experience to be addressed.

The purpose of this study is to engage the conversation between the opposing feminist views on sex work through analyzing the perspectives and experiences of sex workers, NGO workers, and feminist activists. It works to present a thoughtful examination of the effects feminist views of empowerment and agency have on women in the sex work industry and the NGOs working with them by viewing sex work with all its nuances. It aims to answer the questions: Is sex work a respectable profession or forced labor? Are women sex workers as a result of choice or force? And are the answers to these questions determined by the sex workers themselves or by NGO ideology? Though there is no direct conclusion for any of these questions, investigating their space in the current dialogue among sex workers, NGO workers, and feminist activists is a vital step towards understanding the lived realities of sex workers and

how one can best acknowledge their full humanity. It attempts to embrace the nuance between the opposing feminist approaches to sex work in order to reveal the multiplicity of experiences of choice among female sex workers in the Sonagachi red-light district of Kolkata.

B. Theoretical Approach

The sex work industry provides women an option to make an exponentially greater amount of income than the other undesirable jobs available to them. Because of its link to other manual labor jobs, sex work was first taken up as a labor issue not a feminist issue. Many also contribute this to a still lacking discourse around sexuality (Sahni, 2009). The feminist movement began addressing the issue before the turn of the century, and within the broader schools of thought, it is still a highly contested topic between differing points of view. There are two dominant perspectives that have emerged: pro-sex work and abolitionist. They are fundamentally opposed to one another, and tensions often arise between NGOs, activists, and advocates working from the differing positions (Sahni, 2009; Vijaykumar, 2014; Gangoli, 2000).

Sociologist Ronald Weitzer positioned the conflicting points of view within dominant sociological paradigms in order to understand the fundamental differences of the approaches. The oppression and empowerment paradigms are in direct opposition to one another while the polymorphous paradigm attempts to bring nuance and allow for complexities in not completely disregarding either one. Historically, the oppression paradigm has dominated thought on sex work. It says that sex work is a result of patriarchal gender relations which results in exploitation, subjugation and violence. By using this language, victimization becomes intrinsic to the sex worker and their agency is disregarded. It recognizes violence against women as inherent to sex work. It is also strongly based in moralism and affirms the social stigmatization of sexuality

while trying to answer to the health and safety needs of workers (Gangoli, 2000; Weitzer, 2009). This is the view held by the anti-sex trafficking movement within which all sex work is often categorized.

The oppression paradigm is supported through the anti-trafficking literature as well as studies such as Melissa Farley's which focuses on the overlooked violence of sex work. Farley cites important findings such as, "Of 854 people in prostitution in nine countries, eight-nine percent wanted to leave prostitution but did not have other options for survival" (Farley, 2006, p. 106). Along with revealing a seeming lack of choice for these women, she also explores the damage done by learning to see one's body as a commodity, and how the necessity of that in itself makes sex work violent. According to her study, "In nine countries, we found that sixty-eight percent of those in prostitution met the criteria for a diagnosis of PTSD" (Farley, 2006, p. 108). The apparent trauma faced by such a high percentage of sex workers affirms the view that sex work is inherently violent (Farley, 2006; Gangoli, 2000). This is the grounds for the abolitionist movement working to rescue women from sex work, whether they were trafficked or not, because all sex work is thus seen as the result of coercion (Agustin, 2015).

On the other extreme, the empowerment paradigm qualifies sex work as work that involves human agency. Sex work, therefore, is not inherently negative as it can benefit women in improving socioeconomic status and providing for more control over the conditions of their jobs. There is agreement that oppression happens when sex work manifests in a way that is criminalized. Rather than arguing that sex work is empowering, the view is that it has potential for empowerment (Vijayakumar, 2014; Weitzer, 2009). Recent literature on the place of sex work in society, such as Kempadoo's book *Trafficking and Prostitution Reconsidered: New*

Perspectives on Migration, Sex Work, and Human Rights, has been largely influenced by the empowerment paradigm, but it has not accounted for the whole picture.

One aspect of this paradigm that has been widely accepted in feminism is the significance of the language used to describe women who work in the sex industry. By using terms like “prostituted women”, the agency of workers is denied. A study found that workers will enter the sex trade “out of satisfaction with the control it gives them over their sexual interactions” (Weitzer, 2005, p. 213). This raises questions regarding women’s sexual freedoms as well as whether this actually leads to empowerment. The same study also revealed the desire of workers to be referred to in terms of “sex worker” or “working woman”. Defining themselves allows for multiple experiences to be recognized and agency to be restored (Weitzer, 2005; Kempadoo, 2007). One feminist suggested, “It is not sex work per se that promotes oppressive values of capitalist patriarchy but rather the particular culture and legal production of a marginalized, degraded prostitution that ensure its oppressive characteristics while acting to limit the subversive potential that might attend a decriminalized, culturally legitimized form of sex work” (Weitzer, 2005, p. 214). This challenges the assumed root of the problems faced by sex workers.

Weitzer suggests a third paradigm that he calls the polymorphous paradigm in order to recognize the reality that oppression and empowerment are not mutually exclusive positions. Sex work cannot be reduced to two extremes, but rather it is a combination of occupational arrangements, power relations, and work experiences that come in different forms (Sahni, 2008; Kempadoo, 2007). The paradigm, therefore, “is sensitive to complexities and to structural conditions shaping the uneven distribution of agency, subordination, and job satisfaction” (Weitzer, 2009, p. 215). Feminist scholar Meena Seshu affirms the need for a third paradigm in pointing out that choice and force cannot be seen as mutually exclusive positions because they

do not reflect the complex reality of sex workers' spectrum of experiences (Sahni, 2008). The more overarching understanding expressed through Weitzer's polymorphous paradigm proves helpful in informing the diversity of experience within sex work and the complexity of theories about sex work. It also provides space for productive dialogue between opposing positions, which is necessary for bringing true transformation to the society built upon inequality and injustice.

C. Background

Sex work is an ancient profession that throughout history has been both socially stigmatized and socially sanctioned. It has existed in human society from the first civilizations and within India from its birth. Unique from other societies, sex work has manifested in a wide variety of ways in India through connections with religious and cultural systems (Baksi, 2005; Sahni, 2008). The Hindu dedication of young girls and women to temples as dancers and prostitutes referred to as devadasis is one such system that has shaped the current status of sex work in Indian society. Temple prostitutes can still be observed in areas close to red-light districts such as the Kalighat district in Kolkata, West Bengal which is situated next to the famous Kali temple. These women are looked after by the temple priests and dedicated to the goddesses of the temples (Baksi, 2005). In pre-colonial India, they had an esteemed status in society because of their tie to the divine, but their position of respect has been repeatedly undermined by cultural shifts and legislation since the time of British rule (Shingal, 2015).

The traditional temple prostitution and the current sex work industry are inexplicitly bound to one another, and it is important to note the shift from focusing mainly on temple prostitution to a broadening dialogue that addresses the multiplicity of realities within sex work.

Part of this shift has been the rise of movements in recent years pushing society to rethink the derogatory terminology, such as “prostitute,” and refer to it instead as sex work (DMSC, 2013). Though the first interventions from the Indian government to address the presence of sex work in society were aimed at ridding the nation of temple prostitution, legislation passed in 1986—the Provisions of the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act 1956—started the modification of the understanding of prostitution in India. The conversation regarding the place of sex work in society thus took root in the early 1990s. This Act mainly addresses issues of trafficking without asserting a clear stance on sex work. All of the current legislation is ambiguous, and the topic is complex which creates a reality within which it is hard to grasp the place of sex work in the legal framework (Sahni, 2008). It also complicates analysis on the experience of choice because the profession still functions in the unorganized sector of society.

Part of the complexity is that there are many different types of female sex workers whose experiences of the money, risk, and public visibility vary greatly. Call girls and escorts work mainly in private premises and hotels where they charge high prices for their services. These have the lowest risk of violence or exploitation by a third party. Then there are brothel-based workers who charge moderate prices and have moderate risk. This is the largest employer among women in the red-light districts, and brothel based sex workers are the informants of this study. A little more visible to outside communities are massage parlor workers. They also charge moderate prices and face moderate risk as do bar or casino workers. Lastly, there are street walkers, or “flying sex workers”, who are a high risk community that are the most difficult population to study on any quantitative terms because they experience the widest variety of realities. They work through street contacts having sex in cars/alleys/parks etc. for very low prices, or sometimes they are hired by a customer to accompany him to a hotel. They are seen as

adversely impacting communities and face the most stigmatization (Weitzer, 2009; DMSC, 2015). Much of the work done by non-governmental organizations to provide better safety for sex workers heavily impacts brothel-based workers because they are the most centralized group. Their work has the least impact on flying sex workers although they remain at the highest risk.

In the early 1990s, the worldwide AIDS/HIV awareness campaigns led many people to recognize the lack of safety for sex workers due to their marginalization and exploitation within Indian society. Programs addressing these concerns began forming throughout India. One such program was the Sonagachi Project in South Asia's largest red-light district situated within the city of Kolkata. Started in 1992 to address the high rates of sexually transmitted diseases and infections in Sonagachi, the project soon became a sex worker's movement. The sex workers joined together in calling for recognition as workers with the same dignity and deserving of the same respect as people of all other professions. By 1995, a collective of sex workers under the name Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee was officially formed to advocate for the rights of sex workers in Sonagachi and across India (DMSC, 2016; DMSC 2015). Durbar has deeply influenced the history of sex work and the sex work debate within Kolkata, and this study has been much informed by this reality.

II. Methods

Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee in Kolkata welcomed me as an intern for the one-month duration of my study, and they provided the facilities, connections, contextual knowledge, and resources that guided my study. DMSC takes a grassroots approach which puts sex workers at the core of the work being done which creates the space that I needed to ask the big questions that are at the core of this study. By working with Durbar, I received a unique perspective into

the lives of sex workers and the realities of red-light districts because their work has made Kolkata the exception in many ways now, such as having lower HIV/STD rates and trafficking incidents than elsewhere in India. With programs and dialogue already being initiated within Sonagachi to give sex workers say over their own lives and safety in their work, I was able to dive deeply into the questions of agency and empowerment regarding the feminist discourse and the presence of choice for sex workers.

Durbar initiates an orientation program for any new employee, intern, or researcher in their first week that introduces the newcomer to the community and provides a contextual understanding. It is through this I was able to see the brothels and clinics within Sonagachi as well as meet many sex workers, both members and nonmembers of Durbar. By asking questions about the work of Durbar as well as the experiences of the sex workers, much of my study was informed through informal conversation during field visits. The formal presence of Durbar granted me the permission to use the scenes I saw and information I gathered within my final report. The trust and good rapport that DMSC has built within Sonagachi allowed me to interact naturally within the community without my presence causing any disturbances or discomfort. This was vital in allowing me to uphold ethical practices within a sensitive topic. It also helped me in setting up the formal methods of gathering information that I chose to use for this study.

I did a series of individual interviews with sex workers in order to hear their personal stories and opinions on my study questions. I was able to conduct, through the service of my translator, nine interviews coordinated by Durbar with sex workers that are members of the organization. The interviewees are all between the age of 35 and 50 representing the upper age range of sex workers. Voices from the average age range between 25 and 35 years old are not necessarily exemplified by the findings (Maity, personal communication, 2016). Each interview

was given within the DMSC office building in Sonagachi within one of the rooms used for counseling which was a comfortable, mutual space. The interviews began with each woman filling out the answers to a brief questionnaire through verbal responses. Then, I began asking interview questions to contextualize the answers given. The questionnaire was able to give a foundation to the rest of the responses, as well as provide the woman with a better understanding of my study. These interviews form the basis of my findings because I am looking at how sex workers themselves can be shaping the larger conversation about choice and empowerment within sex work.

The questionnaire was a series of seven statements regarding choosing the profession of sex work. The respondent was to mark strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, or strongly agree. In order to get responses from each sex worker interviewed regardless of her level of literacy, the statements and answers were given verbally and the responses were limited to agree or disagree. Due to limitations such as time and access, I was unable to give out the questionnaire to be answered anonymously as planned. The lack of variety among responses may be because of the small sample size and specific positions of respondents within DMSC. The responses are noted in the appendix and were used to inform my specific findings. I also conducted a small focus group of eight peer educators and one outreach worker. By getting more information regarding each of these roles, my aim was to gain a baseline knowledge of the support system available to the sex workers in Sonagachi. The group discussion format provided a space for open dialogue between the respondents that enabled deeper engagement with the content. The discussion was facilitated by my translator in order to allow for a free flowing conversation without constant translation. She took notes and was able to share the details with me once the focus group was concluded.

I spent time each day within the administrative office speaking with the staff, asking them questions and hearing insights, to shape my understanding of Durbar's views on sex work and give me an NGO perspective. I was also given a packet of material published by DMSC including pamphlets, books, and documentaries that served as methods of contextualizing my findings. The last method I had hoped to use—that of conducting interviews with local feminist activists who have engaged the topic of sex work—was confined by lack of time and busy schedules. The one interview I was able to organize was with local feminist activist Anchita Ghatak, which was an invaluable part of my field work. The insights she shared and questions she asked helped me to shape my study questions as well as conclusions.

Before completing each of the above methods, I took formal consent through a written consent form in the appropriate language, Bengali or English. The consent form explains the purpose of my study and the standards of confidentiality that I will uphold. Verbally, I asked whether the respondent wanted to be identified by name or remain anonymous. For the focus group, due to situations out of my control, only verbal consent was taken. In order to insure ethically sound practices, each question I asked and method I used was approved by my advisor and the other staff members of Durbar who were organizing my field visits. They set up my list of interviewees and spaces to interview in order to follow their protocol regarding outside projects.

III. Findings

A. Choice

“I chose to come here.”¹

Each woman reflected upon the statement, “I chose to become a sex worker,” in her own way, but each one agreed fully that this is her truth. She needed money. She wanted to earn to support her family, to pay for medical care, to have independence. Sex work was an option she found out about in a time of desperation, and she chose to enter into the profession because of what it has to offer. Restless and in need of money, Sefali came to Sonagachi with an acquaintance she had met at the railway station. At first she did not know what the work was that she had been offered, and she did not want to do it when she found out. Despite this, after being told how much the work would help with her finances and give her a place of belonging, she decided to stay (Roy, personal communication, 2016). For Rama, it was all about the money and the independence. At thirty years old with three children, she chose to come back to Sonagachi, the place of her childhood. Her mother was a sex worker, and she knew the perks as well as the hardships involved in the profession. Well-informed about the decision she was making, she entered into the profession herself and began advocating for society’s recognition of sex work as a good profession (Debnath, personal communication, 2016).

The stories of these women’s lives, of how they came to Sonagachi and the experiences they have had as sex workers, have roots in poverty, violence, and agency. Each woman interviewed was confident that her decision to become a sex worker was a choice she had made. But she also admitted to the difficult situations that led her to making the choice. Bisakha’s story is interlaced with the deep complexities of choosing within limited circumstances. At thirteen years old she was trafficked to Sonagachi to do housework. Through a thoughtful scheme, she managed to convince her owner to allow her to return to her village. The freedom she had regained did not last long because she discovered she was pregnant, and there was no possibility of safely giving birth or successfully supporting her child in her village. She knew that

Sonagachi was a place in which she could earn, and she decided to return. Sex work was not enjoyable; it was not what she wanted to be doing at fifteen years old. But she was able to provide for her son and make a good life for herself out of it. She had not been forced into the profession. It was simply the option she knew existed that would meet her needs in a time of desperation (Laskar, personal communication, 2016).

“Money is important,” Putul asserted. Being a sex worker gives her access to more money than she could earn elsewhere. Her friend who worked in Sonagachi told her the two options: housework or sex work. It is by doing sex work, her friend informed her, that she is able to run her family. Therefore, she chose sex work as her best option and demands that it must be respected as a profession. It is the way she provided for her siblings and children to become educated and get married. She is proud of what she has been able to do with the money she earns (Singh, personal communication, 2016). Sima affirmed the importance of money as she told her story, but she also had another concern. She critiques marriage and the pressure to marry off a daughter. When her father could not pay dowry for her to get married at sixteen years of age, he was angry and abusive. She knew that she was young and did not need to be married yet, but he would not listen. Angry at the whole situation, she decided to become a sex worker. “I have been denied marriage. I have left home. Why should I care what other’s think?” she reasoned with herself. It was a good option, one that brought independence and the ability to support herself (Fokla, personal communication, 2016).

B. Education

“If I had been educated I would not be in this profession, but since I wasn’t, it’s okay that I am here.”²

Because life circumstances required, Sefali explained, she wanted to work here and chose to come. Her dream, though, was for her daughter to not have to do the same. As with many parents, her goal was to provide the opportunity to her daughter to enter into a better profession. The bank (USHA) that was started through the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee made that possible for her and the many other women in Sonagachi and throughout West Bengal who have accounts with USHA. By saving money, she was able to educate and to see that her daughter got married (Roy, personal communication, 2016). Bisakha insisted that the prominent lack of education for girls in India means that many girls are not equipped for any other work besides sex work. This lack of education makes sex work a needed profession (Laskar, personal communication, 2016). Sumita affirmed this as she described why she thinks the government is hesitant to recognize sex work as work. They are afraid that everyone will come into the profession, but this claim is ludicrous. Profession is determined by education not law (Das, personal communication, 2016).

Rama was wary of putting too much emphasis on sex work being a last resort. She does not view sex work as negative in any way, and she is okay with her daughters entering the profession if one day they make that decision. As with other parents, she asserted, she wants her children to go into a better profession than she did, but it is completely their choice if they want to become sex workers. Having lived as a married woman outside of Sonagachi for many years before coming back to work, she knows how it is to live in another way. She is happier in her work than she was before, and it is from this perspective that she shares her views. She is okay with her life now, and she does not want any better, but this claim is still rooted in the fact that she does not think she could earn anymore than she does now elsewhere (Debnath, personal communication, 2016).

Coming to Sonagachi may have been a choice made for good reasons, but it was not usually made out of desire to become a sex worker. Bisakha shared about her deep pain and anger towards her trafficker and her initiation into Sonagachi and sex work. Although it was a decision for her to come back and become a sex worker after escaping her trafficker, she was initially uncomfortable and afraid of sex work. At fifteen, she would hide from customers. Everything that she did with customers during that first stage was against her will. After getting through this period, she began to work without force and find empowerment. She never felt like leaving, but she wishes circumstances had been different. She was asked about the rescue missions that anti-trafficking organizations do to save girls like her, and she became somber. If a rescue mission had come to rescue her when she had first been trafficked, her life would be completely different. “I never would have come back to this place,” she stressed. All this being said, she still affirmed the good she has found as a sex worker through the work of Durbar. The sex workers are empowered, she explains, and this is what benefits them the most (Laskar, personal communication, 2016).

C. Violence

“If I had gone to another profession, they would have used me anyways so why not earn for being used.”³

Again and again, the women revealed the drawbacks of finding employment as a poor woman in India. Sima put it this way, “If I worked anywhere else, I would have to sleep with them anyways. So why is this a bad profession?” (Fokla, personal communication, 2016).

Themes of this came through every story told by these women. For Rama, it was about wanting to earn her own money and work independently (Debnath, personal communication, 2016). For

Sumita, being under someone else's power and not earning as much are major deterrents from taking up other employment (Das, personal communication, 2016). For Kajol, it was a lack of options. If she had stayed in her village, she would have had to weave saris or do house help. She would have faced sexual harassment in either place of employment, and she felt like she might as well get paid for and have control over what she has to go through (Bose, personal communication, 2016). Putul experienced this as a child working as house help with her mother. The owner harassed her, and when she threatened to tell his wife, he said he would accuse her of theft. Her only options were to stay and face further harassment or leave and find other means of employment. She left. Sex work became the best option (Singh, personal communication, 2016).

Promila further explained this as she revealed why she believes sex work to be good work that is a necessary part of society. There is harassment found in the other work available to women, and women need to have the option of becoming sex workers who have control over their own bodies. In many places of work, women will have to sleep with the owner as well as often being cheated from their earnings. The dependence on another, who often treats them unjustly, is a bigger issue than any faced in sex work. In Sonagachi, they do not have to rely on others for their livelihood (Singh, personal communication, 2016). This reality has been made possible by the advocacy of Durbar and empowerment found in the community because female sex workers now have the option to rent a room in a brothel without having to be underneath a madam or split their earnings with an owner (Bose, personal communication, 2016). The safety found in having this control is a unique reality for women in India. Promila makes big claims about this. She asserts that Sonagachi is a safer place to live and raise daughters than other places in the city. Much of this is due to the availability of women for sex lessening the number of rapes and the presence of violence. They are empowered women, and men do not need to force them to

have sex because their services are available (Singh, personal communication, 2016). Also, the same dynamic plays out in marriage, and the control found being a sex worker positions women as much more powerful than in the other roles they fill in society (Laskar, personal communication, 2016).

“It is not about the sex worker but about violence against women in society.” Bisakha brings this up at the end of the interview when asked if there is anything else she thinks is important to note. In India’s patriarchal, hierarchal society, women have a strict role in society that limits their freedoms. There is danger in stepping out of the home. There is a constant threat, of facing sexual, physical, and verbal harassment. There is violence within the socially sanctioned structure of marriage. It is violence when a girl is married off early instead of receiving the education she desires. It is violence when she is required to serve the family and cannot aspire to anything more. It is violence when as a wife a woman cannot say no to sex. The restrictions on women’s choices because of the violence faced in all of society are not only the root to analyze and transform in the context of sex work but in each sphere of society (Laskar, personal communication, 2016; Ghatak, personal communication, 2016).

D. Necessary Service

“Sex workers are providing a needed service for money just like doctors do.”⁴

This sentiment is brought up again and again when anti-sex work ideology comes up in the conversation. “If we are not here, men’s needs would not be met,” Putul responds to sex work abolitionists. There is demand which makes supply necessary, and it is not anything negative (Singh, personal communication, 2016). In five out of the nine interviews conducted with sex workers, there was an emphasis on male need for sex and sex work’s vital place in

society. There is no power equation within sex work; that is not what it is about. “It is about need fulfillment. Men have the basic human needs of food and sex,” Rama insisted. Men need outlets for this fulfillment and cannot always find it elsewhere. For example, a man will not be able to have sex if he is not married or if he lives in a one room house with his family (Debnath, personal communication, 2016). Sex work provides for this need just like other jobs provide for a need, and Kajol brings up that sex work has been going on for three-hundred years to affirm this. People in society are the ones condemning it, she points out, but they are the ones coming to reap the benefits (Bose, personal communication, 2016).

Another point made by Bisakha is that a married man will pay more for his wife than he does to go to a female sex worker, and in this way, they also provide a needed service. The sex worker, according to her view, facilitates men getting ahead in life by providing easy access to need fulfillment both physically and emotionally (Laskar, personal communication, 2016). In this argument, too, the topic of rape was addressed. It is believed among these sex workers that rape becomes less prevalent in society because of sex work (Promila Singh, personal communication, 2016). In every way, sex work is based around male need for sex and pleasure. Female sexual satisfaction is not part of it, but if the sex worker gets pleasure, it is a bonus. Putul explained that the sex worker’s job is to guarantee customer satisfaction, but any work that they do has to be two-way. The sex workers decide the services they are willing to provide, and they are not dominated. Rather, they find empowerment in being able to make these decisions (Singh, personal communication, 2016).

Being able to determine the details of their work, including how much to charge and which customers to take, comes only in certain settings. Durbar has made it possible for FSW in Sonagachi to work independently, but if one is working under a brothel owner or madam, she

does not always have as much say. She has to split her money fifty-fifty as well as pay the “middlemen” who get her customers. In this situation, she may have less control over what she does because she has to meet the demands of the owner and madam (Bose, personal communication, 2016). Rita explained that when she was working for a brothel owner, he would often beat them up if they did not do what they were told. Durbar has given her the confidence to leave that house so this is not the case for her anymore. Also, many times the brothel owners would not give the sex worker her full earnings, but because of the presence of Durbar this problem has lessened (Roy, personal communication, 2016).

E. Stigma

“If we’re not seeing our work as good, how can we convince society it is?”⁵

At the core of all the interviewees experiences is the stigmatization of their work. Each one respects her work as a sex worker because it is the means by which she provides for her family and she gains independence. The stigma around sex work as immoral is a form of violence in itself. Rita believes that all forms of violence that they face would go down if they were recognized by the government as a legitimate profession. Whoever wants to work should be able to work, and sex work is a profession like all others that provides this opportunity to women (Roy, personal communication, 2016). They each reported having a better life now than they did before becoming sex workers, and it is because of this that they have learned to view their work as dignified. Also, each one attributed her feeling of empowerment and rightness to the community that Durbar has created and the ideologies that it upholds. Putul made sure to point out that the viewpoints came first, and Durbar simply legitimized them (Singh, personal communication, 2016). Durbar has been successful in curbing much of the violence in Sonagachi, and it is also indirectly impacting the violence of stigmatization from society. When

the stigma in a community goes down, the violence from society also goes down because people become more aware of what sex workers do rather than only holding stereotypes.

Rama explains the cycle of stigma, silence, and violence. The negative stigma pushes sex work to the parameters of society refusing to recognize the people within it as a part of mainstream society. This in turn creates silence around the issue within the mainstream society, and it perpetuates stereotypes, misunderstandings, and a single story of immorality. All of these translate into violence. The violence takes form as laws making it illegal for children to be supported by money earned in sex work despite the fact that this is the means by which many women earn to provide for their families. It takes form as police raids that disrupt the community, harm sex workers who are in the profession legally, and elicit fear of law enforcement rather than confidence in its protection. Violence takes the form of trafficking where girls are taken from their villages, brought to the city, and given no choice but to enter into sex work. On the other hand, it takes place in sending these girls back home to face excommunication from their families and villages, the lack of options to earn money, and a complete lack of agency (Debnath, personal communication, 2016).

Gaining recognition as legitimate work is the only way to rid sex work of the stigma that perpetuates such violence. Sumita fought this battle on her own when she returned to her village after they discovered she was a sex worker and began condemning her work. “Why should women not be able to go out and earn? Men do not get questioned when they leave for work, but women always do. If you do not want me to go out and work, then will you provide for my family?” She won the respect of her village by challenging them to recognize her job as a legitimate means by which to make money. Sumita, like the other women interviewed, credits Durbar with much of the progress she has made. The community and support system of sex

workers within Sonagachi has given her a confidence and respect for her work because she has seen the good within the profession and within herself (Das, personal communication, 2016). The presence of Durbar in their lives has shown them that they are worthy of dignity and respect as sex workers, and it has changed their reality.

Durbar has been instrumental in changing the lived reality of female sex workers in Kolkata, and the Sonagachi district in particular, since 1992. 97% of the 6,200 sex workers, 5,100 brothel-based and 1,100 flying sex workers, in Sonagachi are members of Durbar (Maity, personal communication, 2016). Much due to the enduring presence of Durbar with its focus on promoting and providing health checkups, condom use, and other safety practices, statistics such as “somewhere between 40 and 60% of sex workers in many metropolitan cities are HIV-positive” (Kole, 2007, p. 256) make note of the fact that Kolkata no longer presents the same numbers. Durbar is run “for the sex worker, of the sex worker, and by the sex worker” because no one can understand another’s experience better than someone who has gone through similar experiences (DMSC, 2015). The implementation of this model relies on a structured hierarchy of roles within each sub-district of the red-light areas.

In order to care for and support the 6,200 sex workers in Sonagachi, each peer educator is responsible for a sub-district of around sixty FSW. Outreach workers and counselors supervise them; there are about one counselor and two outreach workers for every ten peer educators. The outreach workers and counselors are people who are not necessarily from the community itself but instead are formally educated to work in the field. On the other hand, the peer educators are all former or current female sex workers from the community. This builds immediate rapport for Durbar among the FTW because they already know and trust the women who have been hired for the peer educator role. The peer educators are responsible for looking out for their FSW by

making sure they get a health check-up every three months, by giving support and timely response to any incidences of violence, and by screening any newcomer to make sure she is above eighteen and there by choice.

The peer educators facilitate a community feel among the sex workers by emphasizing the importance of looking out for one another. Within the districts where Durbar is present, the FSW find happiness and companionship by being together and sharing their experiences. The peer educators many times are retired sex workers who would have to find a menial job or stay in the house if they did not work for Durbar, and offering them another option is a major part of affirming the dignity and worth of sex workers. They have freedom and get to form relationships and do meaningful work as peer educators. As they explained in the focus group, they are the ones who are instrumental in the attitude of confidence, happiness, and independence vocalized by the sex workers in the individual interviews (personal communication, 2016).

Advocating for the rights of sex workers and recognition of sex work as work by the Indian government is one of Durbar's main missions. The sex workers believe that recognition would decrease the violence and other issues they face by bringing it out of the shadows. Rama asked, "Why shouldn't sex work be recognized? It would get rid of the hide and seek and all the issues that come out of that" (Debnath, personal communication, 2016). When asked about the presence of trafficking, Rita responded with confidence that it would be less likely to happen without stigma and criminalization. If it does not stop, she believes that the FSW would continue to commit to fight for the trafficking victims. Currently, the Self Regulatory Board is the way Durbar responds to the presence of trafficking, and she affirms the success of this model (Roy, personal communication, 2016).

The SRB questions each new woman who comes to the district to determine her age and if she is there by choice. If the woman cannot tell them what work she will be doing or why she is there or reports coming by force, coercion, or violent means, they can determine that she has been trafficked. The SRB will then decide the best course of action which could be sending her home, to a shelter, or providing her with the information she needs to make an informed decision to stay. One woman from Bangladesh ended up in Sonagachi by force and was wary of being in the profession. The SRB sent her away to do other work, but again and again, she came back saying that this was the only way for her to make money. They then laid out her options for her explaining that she could make money in other work including taking a job with Durbar. They checked with her over again to determine if she was making an educated decision to become a sex worker, and she eventually chose to enter the profession (Peer educators, personal communication, 2016).

Promoting sex work as a respectable profession is the foundation of what Durbar does, and the sex workers interviewed spoke of this as their greatest need. The peer educators explained that they do not want their children or others to have to enter the profession, but they need to affirm the goodness of it as a job in the current reality or else the FSW will be marginalized and oppressed. They believe firmly that sex workers deserve to be viewed with respect because sex work is the profession that they have chosen as their best opportunity to earn money and provide for themselves and their families (Peer educators, personal communication, 2016). The sex workers interviewed agreed with this sentiment affirming that this is where the conversation needs to begin and then the other issues will be taken care of as a result.

IV. Discussion

By listening to the stories, experiences, and opinions of nine female sex workers in Sonagachi, the complexities of their lives were revealed within five dominant themes. Clearly revealed is the falsity in creating a dichotomy of force and choice and the need for deeper understanding of the lived realities of women in India. Within common discourse, the two points of view on sex work are pitted against one another due to their fundamental stance on whether to support or abolish sex work (“Understanding,” 2014; Ghatak, personal communication, 2016). The differing ultimate goal of each cannot erase the common factors within each argument and the desire to better the life of women who find themselves choosing or being forced to enter sex work. The lines between trafficking and chosen sex work often times seem blurred within the stories of sex workers, and this has to be recognized by anyone focusing on either approach.

Through interviewing sex workers, it became clear that looking at force and choice as mutually exclusive bars one from truly understanding their reality. Rather it is necessary to recognize the limits around choice and the specific circumstances within which choices are made (Ghatak, personal communication, 2016; Sahni, 2008). Martha Nussbaum, esteemed feminist philosopher, commented on the situation of limited choice for sex workers stating, “If given the choice, women in India will shift their preferences to universal goods--rather than cling to those preferences that were mere reflections of women's restricted situations” (Felice, 2001, p. 1). Female sex workers most often come from situations where their basic needs cannot be met, and therefore, they must choose the best option in their restricted situation (Sinha, 2015). Nussbaum challenges feminists to recognize the human capacity of women that is not allowed nor embraced within the systems of oppression that shape their realities. Above ideological debates, feminists

must honor this when analyzing the particular situations within which sex workers exist (Felice, 2001).

The respondents emphasized the importance of their agency and independence when discussing why they became sex workers and why they stay in the profession. It not only is the best option for them financially, but it also has given them control over their lives that they would not get elsewhere, especially as uneducated poor women. As with many people in undesirable professions, sex work may not be their ideal profession, but it is harmful to them if it continues to be criticized as immoral, creating the stigma that effects every aspect of their lives (DMSC, 2013). These women need to be given more credit for the strength and empowerment they find within every situation they face. Laura Agustin points out, “When poor men leave home and get into trouble there is a general expectation that they will surmount obstacles and there is no such assumption about women, it is assumed that they will immediately be smashed and put in chains and have no ability to manipulate or negotiate their way out” (2012). To truly recognize the agency of each woman, the ability to make the most of the circumstances within which she finds herself should be honored rather than criticized.

This point can be made by both sides of the argument, and it cannot automatically lead to one conclusion. Gloria Steinam brought up the same resilience in her reflection after visiting Sonagachi through Apne Aap, a worldwide anti-trafficking organization based in India. She states, “The human spirit can be even stronger than everything designed to suppress it. Here are girls from a group, the Nutt community, that has been prostituted for generations, with every girl made to feel she has to sell her body to support her family, never be educated, and face beatings and physical danger if she doesn’t” (2012). She saw the realities of women who felt as if they had no choice but to be sex workers, and yet, she did not see them as victims but as survivors

(“Understanding,” 2014). Steinam, and the anti-trafficking movement, see sex work as objectifying and violent for the women involved, and therefore, they believe that the way to respect the dignity and worth in each woman is to give them other options and rescue them from the trade (Sinha, 2015; Sahni, 2008; Farley, 2006; Vijayakumar, 2014).

By working through Durbar I have seen a reality shaped by an approach that fundamentally conflicts with the anti-trafficking discourse. Although both stand firmly against trafficking—mutually recognizing its violence and injustice, they work to change it in two very different ways. The grassroots approach of Durbar heavily relies on sex workers as the ones capable of improving the situation, which includes the Self Regulatory Board set up to stop forced or underage sex work. Many women in the older generation would recognize, though, that being rescued could have changed their lives for the better. It seems the question here is whether the women should be given the tools to make the most out of their situation, or whether they should be given the opportunity to get out of the situation all together. Therefore, it would not be helpful to simply count out the anti-trafficking rescue mission.

The story of Bisakha's life brings up the struggle and need to find nuance between the two views. She is an empowered sex worker who overcame the many obstacles she faced. She also endured much pain and hardship as a young girl, being trafficked and then becoming a sex worker. She is okay now, even good, she insists. But if someone had rescued her, her whole life would be different and maybe some of the pain she endured would not exist. Respecting her and her work is important to her now, and she sees that derogatory terms referring to sex work (including ‘prostitution’) are harmful to everyone involved. Sex workers, she explained, have the potential of wanting good for society just like every other person (Laskar, personal communication, 2016). To disregard this is to disregard their humanity, and this is where much

of the anti-trafficking discourse could be seen as having negative effects. Even the johns, the pimps, the madams, and the brothel owners have the potential for good, and no one should be counted out. Many people would not come to this conclusion, and Durbar has been pivotal in creating the acknowledgement of this truth in Sonagachi, in the minds of the women interviewed for this study, and in the current conversation among Indian feminists (DMSC, 2013, 2015; Ghatak, personal communication, 2016).

Durbar's reliance on mobilizing the community of sex workers to safeguard one another from potential violence by raising a collective voice and standing up for one another is a perfect example of implementation of the empowerment paradigm (Sahni, 2008). The model of approach it takes is unique, and though like anything else it has its flaws, much good has and continues to come from the work being done and from the movement that has started due to their persistence and focus on the importance of the lives of sex workers. The mindset cultivated among the sex workers that are members of DMSC is one of empowerment, and this is what made it possible for me to hear a wide array of stories from the lives of the women within Sonagachi—due to their confidence and the space to share. The commitment of the organization to bettering the lives of the sex workers within their current situation shaped the responses of the sex workers interviewed. The confidence that they verbalized of having chosen to be here, of sex work as a good profession, and of recognition as work being the goal comes from Durbar's presence in their lives, and this cannot be ignored in the analysis of the findings.

Each of the sex workers interviewed as well as the peer educators who participated in the discussion group reported to have chosen to be sex workers, and many of them referenced the violence against women in society as a main factor in shaping their decision. They pointed to the sexual harassment and violence faced by women in other places of employment as a reason to

become a sex worker. “There is inherent violence against women in society no matter what they do; it just manifests in different ways,” boldly stated Anchita Ghatak in a personal interview (2016). This is what Bisakha brought up when she was interviewed, as well, emphasizing that the conversation should not be about sex work as violence but about the role of women in society as violence. When women do not have the chance to receive an education, are forced into marriage, or have to choose their profession based on where they will be harassed the least, it is a societal problem (Laskar, personal communication, 2016). The sex-trafficking that takes place is part of this bigger web of violence. Women need rights and recognition as humans who can make choices, even if they are within tight parameters, before any changes will take root to overcome this violence. This could mean reshaping the anti-trafficking movement to take out the victim language and moral judgments (Ghatak, personal communication, 2016; Schober, 2007; Kempadoo, 2007). It could also mean recognizing that some women do not want to be sex workers who have found themselves in the profession, and therefore, they need to be given good, dignified alternatives (Gangoli, 2000; Farley, 2006; Sinha, 2015).

Organizations that offer alternate employment such as one called Freeset in Sonagachi, therefore, may indeed be meeting the important need of safe employment for women within their community. Maybe it does not pay as well as sex work, but many women may be willing to get by on less money if it were offered in a place where their safety and dignity were being ensured (“Who We Are”, 2016). Not all female sex workers enjoy the work or want to remain in the profession, but some may. To provide an alternative to the women who want one can only be a positive mission, but it is when the women who choose to stay in the profession are written off as morally bad that more societal violence arises. We must recognize the external factors that have made sex work appealing and fulfilling work instead of stigmatizing it. Not only is there

workplace violence, but there is also violence within marriage, the family, and broader society. There is a lack of independence for women in India, and sex work provides them with space to have say over their own lives. It gives them an alternative way to interact with the social hierarchies of India and society in general, but that does not mean it is the ideal profession for many women within it.

The response that poses the greatest challenge to the nuanced perspective I am trying to hold is that sex work is a necessary profession in society to meet the needs of men. To hold this view, one must have a certain view of sex. This is where tensions arise. As Ghatak put it, “Sex makes us nervous. We’re okay with raising our children or doing our cooking either by love or for money but when sex is brought into this same conversation we get worked up” (personal communication, 2016). She is correct; it does make for an uncomfortable conversation that many are not willing to fully engage. Feminism has not always taken it up as part of the issue, which is why the labor movement took up sex workers’ rights long before feminism did (Sahni, 2008). Due to the intersection of patriarchal and capitalist values that are clearly visible within the sex work profession, “sex work presents challenge to society,” as Ghatak put it (personal communication, 2016). Agustin has many criticisms of how society has chosen to take up the issue of sex within the conversation of sex work. The dominant view on sex, according to Agustin, has come from a moralistic lens within which sex without love is bad and somehow violent. She contends, “Everyone does not feel the same way about sex” (2012).

The strong opinion of the sex workers is that sex is a basic human need that must be fulfilled in one way or another. They claim that men who are single or live in a one room home with their family do not have any sexual outlet apart from the sex workers to have their needs met. This gives the sex worker purpose in society and legitimizes her work. The general

consensus was problematic, though, because it disregarded the sex workers' and other women's right to sex as well. The sex worker's job is to satisfy her customer; if she gets pleasure, it is a bonus. Despite holding firmly to the belief that sex is a basic human need, female sexual satisfaction was left out of the conversation or outright denied (Fokla, personal communication, 2016). The points about rape brought up by many of the women are also challenging to any abolitionist perspective. If rape becomes less prevalent because of the presence of sex work, the root of rape is the demand for sex. The common understanding of rape is more based in the male need for control and power, and this cannot be lessened by providing a sexual outlet. Rape is a huge topic that this study cannot address, but it is a vivid example of the inherent violence towards women in the patriarchal society of India (Gangoli, 2000; Cornish, 2006; Sahni, 2008).

“At night we are good, but in the daytime we are stigmatized,” affirmed Promila when speaking of the need for women to fight for women to gain sex worker's rights (Singh, personal communication, 2016). This paradox is at the core of Durbar's fight for the recognition of sex work as a profession. “People from society are the one's condemning it, but they are also the one's reaping its benefits,” explained Kajol (Bose, personal communication, 2016). This is why many anti-trafficking organizations have started campaigns like Apne Aap's “Cool Men Don't Buy Sex” campaign saying that if there is no demand then women will not have to become sex workers or be trafficked into the trade. It is the needs of poor women who have found their livelihood in sex work that get erased when this kind of approach dominates the prominent discourse. When the goal is to end the profession, there is always stigma attached. This is what Rama pointed to as the big issue with the abolitionist stance: “Practically it is not possible for female sex workers to work elsewhere especially when their identity as a sex worker comes with negative stigma attached” (Debnath, personal communication, 2016).

Thus the debate comes full circle. Abolitionists perpetuate stigma. Stigma perpetuates violence. Pro-sex work works within the patriarchal structure. The patriarchal structure promotes inherent violence against women. Either way, women end up facing violence. Martha Nussbaum recognizes this cycle even within the essence of feminism. Especially in India there is a divide among feminists who see “feminism as a critique of sexual domination, while for others it is a critique of women’s economic dependency” (Felice, 2001). The abolitionist response to sex work looks at it through the former feminist lens, while the pro-sex work response views it through the latter. The women interviewed take the second approach as members of Durbar, with their main concern one of economic independence.

With this, Bisakha asserted that all work is good work as long as it is providing for one’s livelihood (Laskar, personal communication, 2016). Some respondents emphasized that India has always been a patriarchal society, and therefore, asking about sex work outside of this context is too idealistic. Ghatak also claimed that the tension between the two opposing view points is too fundamentally differing to be nuanced or held in tension (personal communication, 2016). The all-encompassing nature of the underlying issues within sex work and the conversation surrounding it calls for an interest in “specific injustices on their own terms” and an ability to view them outside of simplified dichotomies (Agustin, 2015; Schober, 2007; Sahni, 2008). Feminism needs to be willing to take on the challenge of finding the truth in each side of the argument and working toward the goal of overcoming the inequalities that form the foundation of society. Nussbaum suggests that the focus on sex workers should be that “it is each individual woman's capabilities that must be defended from cultural patriarchy, economic discrimination, and family (often a husband's) interference” (Felice, 2001).

Recognizing where women are within the current systems of society and the needs that female sex workers have while still striving for a fully just society is where conversation between the conflicting points of view can begin. Durbar's successes in decreasing violence and stigma within the community of Sonagachi must be affirmed by even those working to abolish sex work in order to honor the women whose lives have been changed for the better by the presence of Durbar (Ghatak, 2016; Sahni, 2008). The need that is being met by sex work as a means of employment for women must also not be erased. Laws must work to support the women rather than undermine their livelihoods with ambiguity and senseless legislation. Government must ensure the safety of women in sex work because it is a reality for many citizens of India (Debnath, personal communication, 2016; Sahni, 2008; Halley, 2006; Shankar, 2015). The ideological debaters over sex work must not forget the practical implications on the lives of real women within complex, limited, unjust realities. It is by investigating all that underlies the choice to become a sex worker that one can begin to view sex workers as human beings, and as workers, who have inherent dignity and worth and deserve respect.

V. Conclusions

The attempt to answer the questions of this study has revealed the deep complexities within the lives of female sex workers in India. Is sex work a respectable profession or forced labor? Are women sex workers as a result of choice or force? And are the answers to these questions determined by the sex workers themselves or by NGO ideology? These questions were investigated, analyzed, and posed to sex workers themselves, and I am not able to provide definite answers. What I do know is this: the tensions within feminist discourse and the opposing ideologies of NGOs are false dichotomies set up to simplify the wide array of experiences of sex

workers. Within each woman's story, I found situations of force, choice, stigma, and empowerment. It is unfair to suggest that any of these are mutually exclusive because they are experienced by sex workers in tandem throughout their lives.

Each sex worker will not experience empowerment in the same way, and she will not have only one desire, one view of what is right, or one goal for her life. Every story I heard revealed a unique set of experiences and opinions. Therefore, the views and interventions of NGOs and the ideology of feminists must recognize this. No one has come up with a perfect solution, and the systems forming the reality of sex workers are much bigger than any one NGO or activist can fully address. To move forward to a society where there is not inherent violence against women, marginalization of the poor, or tight parameters that limit the choices of each human, each of us must be open to productive dialogue. Rather than holding tightly to the fundamental disagreements around the morality of sex work, the anti-sex-trafficking movement must engage the complexities of sex work. On the other hand, the sex workers' rights movement must recognize the women who feel forced to be in the profession and their desire to be rescued.

It is a lofty goal to say the two should work in harmony, but each must acknowledge and evaluate where it falls short. Anti-sex-trafficking campaigners need to understand that negative propaganda about sex work only furthers the violence of the stigma against sex workers. They need to engage people within the communities where they work in order to inform their interventions and give each woman agency and choice. Either point of view is in danger of telling a single story, and this is the most important conclusion of this study. We all need to be better at listening, at hearing, and at believing each person as they share with us. Sex workers are human beings that deserve this same respect. Whether we agree or disagree with sex work as a profession, we must recognize that it is the source of livelihood while it is also the source of

violence for many women. It exists within our patriarchal, capitalist society, and it benefits as many women as it harms. Holding this in tension and willingly analyzing the complexities is where we must begin.

VI. Recommendations for further study

The most beneficial further study would be a multi-dimensional study working with various NGOs and feminists who take differing stances on the topic. Over a longer time period of six months to a year, one could gather findings on the ideological debate as well as stories of sex workers from various places. It would be beneficial to interact with sex workers who have been impacted by NGO work and also those who have not. Implementing an anonymous method of gathering findings would also be valuable.

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²Stated by Sima Fokla in a personal interview May 2, 2016.

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VIII. Appendix

A. Questionnaire Responses

Statements	AGREE	DISAGREE
It was my choice to become a sex worker.	*R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8, R9	
I was forced to become a sex worker.		R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8, R9
I can leave the profession if I want.	R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8, R9	
If doing a different job, I could earn the equivalent to or more than I am now, I would remain a sex worker.	R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8, R9	
If I could take a different job where I would earn less money than I am now, I would remain a sex worker.	R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8, R9	
I am happy with my work.	R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8, R9	
I am better in this occupation in comparison to what I used to do before joining sex work.	R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8, R9	

*R# – Respondent number corresponding with interview number

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