WESTERN RESEARCH, EASTERN CONTEXT: A PRELIMINARY OVERVIEW OF SEX WORK RESEARCH IN INDIA

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BIOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACTION

This paper provides an overview of theories and concepts that guide qualitative research on the daily experiences and interpretive processes of brothel-based Bengali sex workers. This study seeks to veer away from the "enslaved or empowered" dichotomy often put forth in literature on sex work. By investigating the participants' life histories, daily interactions and concepts of self, the researcher is able to better identify the way sex workers understand their experiences and position in society. Multiple theories from communication and sociological disciplines were used to guide this investigation. In depth interviews were conducted with sixteen participants.

Keywords: Feminism, India, Transnational Research,

INTRODUCTION

Western feminists need to reconsider what they are out to learn from the distant places they visit. Instead of developing ever more theoretically sophisticated twists on the cross-cultural construction of gender, why not attend also to feminist voices from elsewhere. (John, 1996)

The concerns of Indian feminists regarding orientalism from Western feminists and the misuse of their cultural contexts for academic production are legitimate. Thus, the question of how a Nigerian American student comes to embark on research in Kolkata is understandable as well. The researcher's past scholarly focuses deal with understanding how immigrants of African descent experience and negotiate racial socialization, and understanding

how women of African descent negotiate interpersonal relationships. It was through exposure to international feminist literature, specifically highlighting gender disparities in global employment, that sex work became a topic of deep interest. Howard University provided an exceptional opportunity to explore resistance narratives on organizational and personal levels through the examination of the lives of Kolkata's much maligned sex workers and their social and political movement. It was the researcher's opportunity to talk with women at the forefront of a social movement. The researcher sought to understand how these women make sense of who they are, how this is enacted in daily interactions, and the delicate management of their political and the personal identities. Identity negotiation and oppression resistance are longstanding subjects of interest for the researcher, and the exploration of the participants' narratives through intercultural lenses can produce meaningful research without "developing ever more theoretically sophisticated twists on the cross-cultural construction of gender".

Finally, it is from interaction with diverse interpretations and discourse that sustainable ideas are negotiated and strengthened. Chaudhuri (2005) states that, "Western theories' are part of our intellectual capital…." The relationship, however sensitive, between Indian and global feminism has already been established and is unlikely to waver. It is the role of the individual researcher to approach intercultural theorizing fastidiously. While John's call for the refocusing of efforts towards "feminist voices from elsewhere" is noble indeed, it does not address the true problems within intercultural research, namely the lack of cultural context (Gudykunst, 2002), and the transparency needed when applying theory in intercultural research. It is important to note that merely being an Indian feminist, or a woman of Indian nationality, does not guarantee one's ability or competency in overcoming these obstacles, nor does imply that one's engagement in women-centered research can proceed without contention. This much was acknowledged by Madhu Kishwar in her 1990 essay, "A Horror of 'Isms': Why I Do Not Call Myself a Feminist." She states: I am using the term, "feminist establishment" to refer to an all-India coterie based mainly in the metropolitan cities which, while maintaining a variety of differences among themselves, acquired the power and the clout to interpret feminism and draw up agendas on behalf of all India's women, that are more congruent with their hopes, self interest, fears and aspirations than with those of most women. Their main support bases are international agencies. (Chaudhuri, 2005, p.27, emphasis mine)

In this passage Kishwar confronts several critical issues in Indian feminism that influence research. The shared gender and national identity can not override the power imbalance; Indian feminist intellectuals and activists still have access to hegemonic power through class, language, and educational attainment and thus are allowed to represent all Indian women in the political sphere. Also, transnational organizations are already significantly involved in Indian feminist politics. This involvement has been exacerbated by economic globalization since the publication of Kishwar's essay twenty years ago. So the question should not focus merely on engagement, but on transparency in motivation, method, and intended outcome.

This research is representative of a transnational feminist philosophy; it is not of theoretical or cultural imposition or extraction, but of global connectivity with consideration to cultural context. Therefore, it is in the spirit of transnational feminism that the researcher embarks on this study. It is with the knowledge that this work does not attempt to be comprehensive or representative of Indian women in the sex industry, but with the hope that it will serve as a useful addition to the existing body of work, that the researcher moves forward. The researcher also notes the plurality of Women-centered activism and scholarship in India, and uses the word "feminism" throughout this document as a strategic essential identity. This strategic feminist identity is meant to identify those who operate under a variety of nomenclatures, but share a concern for women's issues, albeit through diverse ideological approaches.

Overview and Problem Statement

The classification of sex work remains a contentious area in global feminist discourse. Often, the discussion of sex work in feminist literature is constructed around the ideological values held by the scholarly author. Since the concept of voice is a cornerstone of feminist ideology and research, the positioning of the researcher or scholar as author rather than facilitator displaces the true author-the narrator-from the center of such discourse. The intellectualizing of sex work is not the problem, as this research provides examples of such efforts by the sex workers themselves. It is the motivation and outcome of such efforts that the researcher questions. The insistence that a particular theoretical orientation fully accounts for the lived experiences of millions of women globally and throughout the South Asian subcontinent, simplifies the complex stories of women who may live a complex and paradoxical existence. Ultimately, a rigid interpretation of sex work transforms the subject into a rhetorical device that serves to strengthen the ideological identity of any particular feminist group's agenda, and silences the voices of those most marginalized in their societies.

There is a paucity of literature that refrains from theoretically dichotomizing sex work and the sex industry. The two most widely recognized positions on sex and sex work come from radical feminist and sex-radical feminist paradigms. Though radical feminism has evolved and fragmented from its initial composition, it posits that male hegemony is the root of the oppression of women, and the model after which all other forms of oppression have formed (Tong, 1989). Radical feminists believe male hegemony is deeply entrenched in social structures as well as the public's psyche. Therefore, it is impossible to frame prostitution and other forms of sex work without acknowledging that the prevalence (some would argue its existence) is a consequence of the anti-female exploitative and degrading nature of global absolute patriarchy (Miriam, 2005). Radical feminists also believe reformation must first occur through changes in the behaviors and attitudes of men, which will in turn affect structural change. Holding an oppositional perspective, sex-radical feminists (often referred to as sex-positive feminists) believe that sex is not essentially value-laden, therefore, coercion, degradation, and exploitation are not essential characteristics of sex or sex work. According to Nagle (2001), essentializing the experiences of sex workers perpetuates the "good girl" "bad girl" binary, thus perpetuating patriarchal constructions of women's identity.

While the simplifying and dichotomizing of sex work renders the subject easier to digest for public and academic discussion, neither fully encompasses the experiences of sex workers globally. In an article published in the New Internationalist (Datta, 2007), sex workers who live and work in close proximity often have diverse backgrounds and circumstances. Some women are trafficked into the line of work, while others are working by choice. Policies preferred by some feminist that enforce anti-trafficking laws may initially sound progressive; however they are likely to result in police raids-where ethically ambiguous figures that represent law enforcement have free range over the workers. These raids often place financial strains on the women who are working by choice. Money, jewelry and other valuables are stolen, and some women are accidentally injured amidst the chaos. Because there is no prototypical experience for a sex worker, there can be no prototypical solution. The intricacies represented by a diverse body of theory can be present in the lived experience of a single sex worker. This study seeks to elucidate the complexities that Bengali brothel-based sex workers negotiate in their daily occupational, private, and intrapersonal interactions.

Sex Work in India

Although accurate figures are difficult to obtain, the Ministry of Women and Child Development in India states there approximately 2.8 million women in the sex industry in India alone, with an estimated 25% of participants in the industry who are below the legal age of adulthood-18 years ("CATW-AP", 2010). Other sources such as Human Rights Watch estimate the number of women in the sex industry at a figure closer to 15 million women and children. These figures account for a very diverse populations working under several circumstances. Prostitution in India

consists of brothel-based work, streetwalking or "flying" sex work, temple marriage (devadasis) and call girls. This research focuses specifically on urban brothel-based workers.

Domestic policies towards sex work in India have been ineffective historically and rife with ambiguity. There are no laws that directly prohibit or legalize prostitution, but many of the laws prohibit activities that allow sex work to take place with ease. The enforcement of policy on a local level is inconsistent and at times ineffective, with the lines between those who enforce the law and those who participate and profit from the industry being obfuscated. For example in Kolkata, some sex workers have aided the anti-criminal efforts of police officers by servings as informants. In exchange for help, they are allowed to carry on their work and given an additional stipend by the police department (Dutta, 2006). Police officers have also been known to raid brothels for the
purpose of personal financial gain. In 2005 the wife of a Kolkata based police officer was arrested for her alleged participation in prostitution racketeering (Rediff, 2005). The aforementioned examples illustrate the conflict of interests often complicates the enforcement of governmental policies on the local level.

The Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act (SITA) of 1956 is the foundational law under which prostitution in postcolonial India is regulated (the Indian Penal Code, which is sometimes enforced, predates India as an independent nation). Under this law sex work was not illegal, but could only be practiced within private confines and under an individual's volition (Chatterjee, 2008). A later amendment to this law, known as the Prevention of Immoral Traffic Act (PITA) of 1986, more directly delineated aspects of sex work that were to be deemed illegal. The confines under which sex workers could operate were further narrowed by the law's focus on criminalizing clients, male partners, and virtually anyone a sex worker might interact with on an occupational level (Chatterjee, 2008).

Concern for the means by which millions of women enter the sex industry (at an increasing rate despite international efforts), the positioning of local law enforcement in both the oppression and security of women in the sex industry, the ongoing health and human rights crisis presented by the abuse and stigma directed towards trafficked and exploited women, and the higher susceptibility to communicable diseases by such women speaks to the urgency of this research and similar studies. Creating enforceable policies that do not criminalize the women but simultaneously deters sex slavers is an extremely difficult and thus far unachieved task. The South Asian region remains a hot bed for the importation and trading of Nepalese, Sri Lankan and Bhutanese minors for sexual slavery. The U.S Department of State recognizes this area as the second most active area in the illegal trade of human beings (Miko, 2005).

Feminism in India: A Historical Overview

Like much of the postcolonial world, Indian feminists struggle for identity recognition that is not implicitly linked to Western feminism. Contemporary feminism in India is shaped and defined by its history, a history that includes a long and transformative relationship with European power. Thus, Indian feminism must reconcile its relationship with the West, though the means by which Indian feminists pursue this task varies. Nonetheless, a number of Indian feminists scholars offer compelling perspectives on conceptualizing feminism in India, its history, and its goals in modern Indian society.

Comprehensively locating the pre-colonial origins of a movement in a postcolonial nation, particularly one with such vast heterogeneity, is difficult. While many scholars discount pre-modern Indian history when attempting to trace the feminist activity (late19th century marks the generally agreed upon beginning of the "first phase" of feminism in India), it is easy to conceptualize a woman in pre-colonial India challenging or resisting patriarchy on an interpersonal level, perhaps even within the context of a small group. But adherence to Western scholarship standards and Western ways of knowing makes the exploration of these possibilities difficult to present in the

contemporary international scholastic community. Although explicit and self-conscious theorizing was not documented, activities that suggest concern for the welfare of women or resistance to patriarchy are not impossible to find. Chaudhuri (2005) refers to this as the "academic- activist" dichotomy, and like the purpose of this research, she presents several points in rejection of that type of structural argumentation. She asserts that, "it is almost impossible to separate the history of action from the history of ideas."(pp. xii) Knowing that India's history is one of political fragmentation and localized principalities, Indian scholars who have, for generations, engaged in critical examinations of women in ancient history have also engaged in feminist theorizing, albeit without consideration for Eurocentric academic rigor (Chaudhuri, 2005). It is also important to note that historically literacy was not practiced in every culture, therefore access to the stories of illiterate communities from their own perspectives are that much more difficult attain and interpret for the purpose of modern scholarly discourse. Although Chaudhuri does not explore pre-colonial feminism in detail, scholars like Susie Tharu and Ke Lalita offer a synthesis of such feminist writings in the first volume of their Women Writing in India series (1993).

Assuming one takes the historically modernist approach to conceptualizing feminism in India and attributes the beginning of feminist activity to colonial influences; most recognize the emergence of feminism in India to be markedly different from its emergence in the West. Some scholars argue that the introduction of democratic ideologies and the emerging concept of nationhood led to the advocacy of social reformation largely brought forth by the efforts of men. While women may have appeared in the public sphere as symbols of morality and tradition, women were also writing arguments in objection to patriarchy. Chadhuri relies on the writings of three late 19th century women writers of diverse extraction to challenge this argument. For example, Bengali writer Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain criticizes patriarchy with satire as literary technique in her 1905 short story, "Sultana's Dream": "Now that they are accustomed to the purdah system and have ceased to grumble at their seclusion, we call the system mardana instead of zenana." "But how do you manage," I asked Sister Sara, "to do without the police or magistrates in case of theft or murder?" "Since the mardana system has been established, there has been no more crime or sin; therefore we do not require a policeman to find a culprit, nor do we want a magistrate to try a criminal case." (pp. 111)

Hossain uses fictional role-reversal to explore gendered inequality in Muslim Bengali society while humorously commenting on the benefits of a society free of patriarchal rule. The works of the other feminist writers are differently styled but of the similar premise. Chaudhuri's selection of writings places emphasis on the inherent difference in experience and orientation evident in the early modern women's movement in India, and accounts the historical position of Indian men in relation to women in the struggle for women's rights.

Feminist writing in the early 20th century reflects the growth of the movement in the context of an emerging national identity and agenda. Using several historical documents, Chaudhuri reiterates the diverse approaches to addressing the needs of women in the midst of dramatic political and social change. The All India Women's Conference founded in 1927 was at the center of much of the feminist debate. Chaudhuri uses Sarojini Naidu's 1930 presidential address to illustrate one of major currents in feminist rhetoric at the time. She specifically emphasizes the phrase, "We must transcend differences. We must rise above nationalism, above religion, above sex." Saronjini's address was a mitigation of feminism in favor of an overarching national identity.

For a period after independence, it Chaudhuri believes that "the women's question" disappeared for a time from public debate, to resurge in the 1970s. This period in postcolonial India brought attention to issues previously overlooked. Issues of caste, class, workers' rights, and land reform shed light on the intersection of gender and other marginalized identities. This strengthened the acknowledgment of multiple feminisms within one nation, just as critiques of nationalist politics emerged through localized social programs and policies such as Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA). Conservative rightwing movements like Hindutva also resurged with the interest of centering Hindu culture and spirituality as the standard for all Indians. Finally, Chaudhuri explores the role of

globalization (including the increasing number of international non- governmental organizations) in challenging feminism in India. She states: With globalization we have witnessed an aggressive and competitive atomisideology of liberal individualism privileging the self-propelling individual, whether in the form of a new upwardly mobile spendthrift woman, the delight of consumer capitalism (Ipshita Chanda's and my pieces) or its newfound embodiment in the enormously resilient poor third world woman, a standing example that the poor do not need state support. (Chaudhuri, 2005, p.226)

Ultimately, Chaudhuri (2005) uses the compilation of writings in Feminism in India to illustrate the complex, dynamic, and evolutionary changes evident in India's history, and the multiple feminisms that represent the plurality that characterizes the experiences and orientations of women in that nation. She describes the relationship women in India have with the term "feminist" as one of "clarifications, qualifications and occasional disavowals (Chaudhuri, 2005, p.xi)." Kishwar's rejection of the term "feminist" is an example of counter-modern feminist discourse that has emerged within the postmodern context. In summation, feminism in India has long been "in discussion" with itself, and with growing support for conservative politics, the presence of corporate- funded NGOs, and a growing acceptance of capitalist/consumerist culture among the middle and upper classes, feminists in India find that now as much as ever their voices are critical in shaping the nation's future.

Indian Feminists and Sex Work

Gangoli (2007) found that Indian feminists frame sex work in several ways, particularly "as silence, as hurt and violence, and as potential choice and liberation". This is similar to Western sex positive and radical feminist positions, which is also discussed
in her research. Gangoli provides several examples to support her analysis, one being the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC), which several of the participants in this study have established ties with. An excerpt from DMSC's manifesto states:

We believe that like any other occupation, sex-work too is an occupation and not a moral condition. If it is one of the 'oldest' professions in the world, that is because it must have continued to meet an important and consistent social demand. But the word 'prostitute' is rarely used to refer to an occupational group of women who earn their livelihood through providing sexual services, rather it is deployed as a descriptive term denoting a homogenized category, usually of women, which poses threats to public health, social stability and public order…If and when we figure in political or developmental agenda, we are enmeshed in discursive practices and practical projects which aim to rescue, rehabilitate, improve, discipline, control or police us.(DMSC 1997: 2, as cited in Gangoli, 1997)

Gangoli argued that DMSC's position mitigates the role of patriarchy in influencing the circumstantial and ongoing participation of women in the industry. Kolkata-based NGO Sanlaap takes the opposite position by declaring that prostitution be excluded from labor discourse. The organization put forth a statement asking:

a. When it starts with violence and sexual abuse how can we call it 'work'?
b. When power relations are unequal and exploitative how can we call it work?
c. When men and some women earn from selling a child's body, a human being, how can we call it work?
d. An action that violates human rights, how can we call it work?
e. If female genital mutilation has been rejected by women's groups, why wouldn't we reject rape of a girl child, which is the basis and beginning
of prostitution? How can we call this work?
f. Purchase and sale of girls, through threats, trickery, deceit and false promises are the ways through which girls and young women are trafficked and forced into prostitution. Do we call it work?
(Sanlaap, 1999: 2, as cited in Gangoli, 2007)

Gangoli took issue with several themes in Sanlaap's statement, most of what comes down to meaning ambiguity. She states that violence and degradation are given interchangeable meanings in this statement, and "Even if one agrees with Sanlaap that prostitution is synonymous with degradation of the most extreme form, it can still be seen as work." (Gangoli, 2007 p.8). Also, Sanlaap makes no distinction between women and children in their statement, which implies equal loci of control. Lastly, Sanlaap locates violence outside of heteronormative structures, when in fact violence is quite common within traditional marriages and family structures. Finally, Forum Against Oppression of Women acknowledges the absence of sex work from much of the existing feminist discourse:

It is true that sexuality has a very important place in our lives and so far, we have been taught to only think of heterosexual, preferably monogamous relationships…Lesbian relationships are perceived by some as an alternative to the destructive violence and power play in heterosexual relationships. (FAOW
1989: 14, as cited in Gangoli, 2007)

Gangoli notes that sex work and lesbianism hold the same attitudinal space for FAOW. In the case of FAOW, silence on the question of sex work denies women in the sex industry some semblance of space in the public sphere, which is theoretically what anti-patriarchal groups advocate for women; though Gangoli notes that many mainstream feminists often exclude sex worker organizations from their understanding of feminism and feminist work.

Many Indian feminists have also addressed the issue of sex work in ways that reach outside of the boundaries of traditional Western academic inquiry. For example, filmmaker Shoihini Ghosh uses film to engage audiences in critical inquiry and discourse regarding the lives of women in the sex industry in West Bengal. Tales of the Night Fairies (Ghosh, 2002) follows the women of the Kolkata-based sex industry as they organize for political and social rights. The film is an ethnographic examination of the lives and life histories of five sex workers, as well as an ongoing reflexive narration provided by the director.

Voice & Subalternity

The tensions arising from the efforts of Indian women to negotiate and engage others with a culturally specific feminist identity are becoming evermore present in scholarly literature. Beyond the postcolonial circumstance under which this effort can be understood is a more complicated struggle for voice and representation. When discussing the concept of voice, sex work, and feminist research, subalternity is a dimension of postcolonial thought that must be addressed. According to Spivak (1992), the subaltern is, "In postcolonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern - a space of difference." Many sex workers in West Bengal operate furthest from hegemonic power. Often female, illiterate or minimally educated, of the lowest economic stratification, with little or no knowledge of colonial languages (English or Hindi), and operating outside of heteronormativity, sex workers are the sexual subaltern. Much of the access to power they have are through relationships with activist organizations that grant such access. It is through this relationship that they are able to engage in the political and academic spheres. This fact suggests that feminist researchers have a critical responsibility to such group, a responsibility that can be easily overlooked, even with the best of intentions. Offering further insight into the position of the subaltern, Black feminist scholar bell hooks (1990) describes the dialectical crisis that emerges through the academy's interaction with those furthest on the margins:

No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still colonizer the speaking subject and you are now at the center of my talk.

A feminist approach to researching the subaltern is a means by which women are able to tell their own stories, in their own voice, within a space respected but not authored by the researcher.

Purpose & Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to elucidate the complex daily experiences and interpretive processes of brothel-based Bengali sex workers. This study seeks to veer away from the "enslaved or empowered" dichotomy often put forth in literature on sex work. By investigating the participants' life histories, daily interactions and concepts of self, the researcher is able to better identify the way sex workers understand their experiences and position in society. This project seeks to uncover the boundary negotiation and strategies at told by the sex workers. According to Brewis and Linstead (2000), "sex-as-labor" places sex workers in a unique cognitive and social position that is distinct from most people who engage in commercial trade. This is due to the fact that the human body rather than an inanimate object or non-human entity is available for consumption. Also, the act of sex, particularly for women, in many Indian cultures is situated solely within an institutionalized interpersonal relationship such as marriage. Those sexual acts that take place outside of the socially sanctioned institutions operate outside of heteronormative values, and subsequently stigmatized. Therefore, the sex worker has to find ways to reconcile her humanity with the commoditization and objectification of her conscious body. Since the body is a tool for "work", this study will uncover the ways in which boundaries are established, negotiated, and balanced.

The following research questions assists in uncovering the aforementioned objective: RQ1: What historical life experiences do Bengali brothel-based sex workers share?

RQ2: How do Bengali brothel-based sex workers construct and negotiate boundaries in their daily occupational interactions?

RQ3: How does the sex worker identity affect the Bengali brothel-based sex workers' self-concept?

Nature of the Study

This study operates under a social constructivist paradigm. However, because sex work also involves the market exchange of sex for profit, structural theories that deal with rationalization such as social exchange theory are also used.

The production of research that represents the complex narratives of women in the sex industry could have a significant influence on the direction of future policies on the subject. Although framing social issues like sex work without the appearance of ambiguity makes political and social engagement in discourse easier, policy objectives rooted in false dichotomies will ultimately fail to effectively serve a significant portion of the population such policies were meant to address. Studies such as this will urge policy
makers to more closely examine the complex systemic and socio-cultural phenomena that negatively impact women in the sex industry, their families, and the least enfranchised women in societies throughout the globe.

Definition of Terms

Sex Worker

The term sex work is relatively new. Emerging in the 1980's during a period of global activism and mobilization of women in the sex industry, the application of the word "sex work" is usually credited to activist Carol Leigh (Nagle, 1997). By the late 1980's the term was adopted by academics, nongovernmental organizations, and other sex-

positive feminists. Opposition to the term exists amongst radical feminists and social conservatives. The oppositional position views the term sex work as a euphemism rather than as the transformative symbol women in the sex industry intend to make it. They believe that the term legitimizes the criminal and morally apprehensible aspects of the sex industry, and leaves these issues unaccounted for.

While the term sex worker has gained global popularity, the word prostitution still has its place in sexual discourse. Prostitution is used most frequently as a verb instead of a noun. It is a description of the type of work done by a sex worker, rather than a description of the person. This line of reasoning is also a point of contention for some radical feminist. Those who want to ensure the element of victimization and disenfranchisement is not removed or disassociated from the concept prefer the term "prostituted woman" (Jeffreys, 1997).

Sex work can involve a myriad of acts that do not include actual intercourse or even sexual contact. Providing sexual stimulation without contact, such as phone-sex or Internet mediated sexual stimulation (adult themed "web-cam" websites), are also forms of sex work. For the purposes of this research, the participants in this study are women who engage in intercourse and other forms of sexual contact for profit.

Culture

Ting-Toomey (2005) defines culture as "a learned system of meaning that fosters a shared identity among group members". This system of meaning includes a shared understanding of traditions, beliefs, norms, symbols, values and behaviors. Culture largely affects communication; hence, contextual information provided in demographical information as well as participant background descriptions is significant elements in effective communication research. Culture not only affects communication, the communication process aids in the transmission of culture to individuals. These messages create and reinforce personal and group identities. Communication channels are verbal and nonverbal, and can include inanimate objects that hold a shared meaning among group members.

Identity

Definitions of identity vary across disciplines. From birth, humans engage interpersonal relationships that lay the foundation for social identities. Identities such as culture, age, and sex are introduced early in our lives and reinforced throughout. The terms culture and identity are commonly used interchangeably. However, for the purpose of this research, identity refers to the ascribed and avowed cultural memberships acquired by individuals through everyday interactions (Gudykunst, 2004).

Persona

For the purpose of this research, persona is refers to the verbal and nonverbal symbols one strategically chooses to manipulate and amplify within a certain context in order to achieve desired communication outcomes.

Stigma

Goffman (1986) states that stigmatization is inflicted upon individuals who exhibit qualities deemed apprehensible by their society. These attributes "contaminate" the identity, giving it a connotatively negative meaning. This results in various forms of social ostracism. More current research defines stigma as "a devaluing social identity" (Crocker, Major, Steele, 1998). Throughout India, human rights organizations have acknowledged the widespread discrimination and violence faced by sexual minorities (People's Union for Civil Liberties, Karnataka, 2003).

Scope & limitations

The experiences of the sixteen women presented by the researcher in this study represent a very small fraction of women in the sex industry in India, and significantly less so globally. General conclusions about other forms of sex work, other types of sex work, or the nature of sex work in other geographical areas can not be drawn from this study. The researcher gained access to participants through convenience sampling, restricting the demographic diversity represented in this study. Also, data was gathered from participants in one lane and in one city.

CONCLUSION

In the interest of transparency, I position myself as a student and transnational feminist embarking on research in India. She acknowledges reoccurring issues with intercultural research and discusses her desire to understand oppression resistance in a non-familiar context as the motive for embarking on this study. In keeping with transnational feminist scholarship, the researcher situates her study in Indian feminist history and sociology, while still claiming her subjectivity by representing her theoretical and social knowledge base throughout the study. From reviewing feminist literature by Indian scholars, the researcher develops and understanding of complex history of feminism in India. The researcher finds parallels between the ideological construction of feminisms by Indian feminist scholars and the objectives of this research. A closer look at India's history complicates and challenges conventional narrow views regarding what constitutes as feminist activity. Similarly, this study questions conventional views regarding the categorization of sex work. Indian feminist have theorized sex work in several ways, and continue to do so. The purpose of this study is to elucidate the "grey area" under-examined in feminist theorizing on sex work using literature from Indian feminist scholars, and communication and sociological theory.

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