

Understanding socio economic contexts of female sex workers in eastern Nepal.

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ABSTRACT

The present focus is mostly laid on high risk behavior of commercial sex workers without any consideration of their location, educational status and other socio-cultural norms. Thus, we designed a study to understand socio demographic characteristics, lifestyle of female sex workers and search for driving factors for prostitution in eastern Nepal. A descriptive study was conducted in three districts of Eastern Nepal in 2012 over the period of six months. The data regarding their socio demographic characteristics, income, reason for joining sex trade and future choice regarding the profession were recorded from 210 female sex workers through face-to-face interviews. Majority (53.3%) of respondents belonged to the productive age group of 20-29 years, more than one thirds (43.3%) had not received any form of formal education and were unmarried. More than half (53.80%) were presently living alone and about one thirds of the women (31.90%) were minors when they joined this profession. Major portion of the sample (94.80%) worked more than three days a week with median income of 15 thousand per month and 41 percent had sex with more than or equal to ten clients per week. Poor economic condition was the most frequent (47.6%) factor leading to joining of sex trade however, more than two thirds, (72.80%) wanted to quit the profession. Given low level of education, relatively low income, and young age among this population, empowerment and alternative employment/education opportunities should be created to develop this part of Nepalese society.

Keywords: female sex workers, poverty, socio economic contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Sex work is an important public health, political and social challenge. Sex workers come from wide range of socio-economic contexts but the focus is mostly laid on their high risk behavior without any consideration of their location, educational status and other socio-cultural norms. Large number of Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) prevention programs and policies emphasize on limiting transmission among the sex workers due to which social and work related behavioral issues are often neglected.¹ Studies have shown that workplace affects the vulnerability of female sex workers (FSWs) to violence or forced unprotected sex is magnified compared to streets and restaurants.² Venue of work also seems to be linked to socio economic status of FSWs. For example, in Uganda sex workers with higher socio-economic status earn money by working in established bars in the main street while the poorer contemporaries tend to work in back-street bars, rely fully on sex work income and are less able to negotiate safe sex.^{3,4} The studies in Asia also confer that HIV/STD related risk behaviors differ by workplace and there is a need for effective prevention intervention efforts targeting FSWs in rural areas.⁵ Sex workers, like other vulnerable people, experience a syndemic, where social problems, such as

poverty, violence and homelessness, combine to negatively impact on health in a way that is more severe than if they were afflicted by just a single social problem. Whilst there has been no comprehensive research into the impact of these conditions on sex worker's health, the poor socio-economic conditions of many sex workers, detailed in the literature, suggest that health and life expectancy among this group is likely to be extremely poor, even without consideration of the adverse health consequences of sex work.⁶ Poverty or low socioeconomic status (SES) has been linked to HIV and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) at a macro level because 90% of all new cases of HIV infection in the world have been reported in underdeveloped or developing countries.⁷ FSWs commonly have limited economic options, many dependents, marital disruption and low education. Along with it stigma and discrimination is frequently reported to be associated with prostitution in Nepal.⁸ Their vulnerability to HIV in linked to the occupational contexts of their work characterized most commonly by poverty, endemic violence, high mobility and hazardous alcohol use.¹ Nepal is a low income country with an agricultural economy. Poverty and unemployment are burning issues of this nation. A variety of reasons can push youth to indulge in dangerous lifestyles like intravenous drug abuse, alcoholism, crimes

and commercial sex work. The situation of FSWs in Nepal is worsened due to criminalized nature of the profession which makes it difficult for them to utilize the available health services, express their opinions and lead a socially productive life. With this background, we designed a study to understand socio-demographic characteristics and working lifestyle of female sex workers of eastern Nepal and search for factors which influence their professional decisions. This study would give a perspective about the driving factors of sex trade among females in eastern Nepal.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

A descriptive study was designed and conducted in five cities of three districts in Eastern Nepal in 2012 over the period of six months. These districts have the maximum concentration of FSWs in the Eastern region of Nepal as stated in the report Integrated Bio-behavioral survey (IBBS) on female sex workers in East-West highways covering 22 districts of Nepal-Round 3, 2006 submitted by Family Health International.⁹ Itahari, Biratnagar, Damak and Birtamore were the cities chosen for the respective districts because of their central location. According to a more recent report, the study area falls in one of the six endemic zones for Most at Risk Populations i.e. Highway District Region which is estimated to have 13,157 - 15,435 FSWs.¹⁰ We planned to take 10 per cent of this estimated size i.e. 131 - 154 FSWs in our study. By amplifying by 10% for possible non response the final sample size came out to be 143 - 165 i.e. at least 48 from each district. However, we were able to interview 210 FSWs - 70 from each district. For the purpose of this study, a FSW was defined as a "woman reporting to have had provided sexual services in return for payment in cash or in kind" in the last six months in above mentioned study area. Both full time and part time sex workers were included in the study. Due to criminalized status of prostitution in Nepal, we could not get representative samples and thus we used snowball sampling technique to contact the female sex workers. The first few respondents were traced with the help of NGO-Sahara Nepal which works for the cause of HIV prevention in the study area. The contacted FSWs then gave information regarding other FSWs in that locality. The sex workers were interviewed with the help of a questionnaire at their workplace which was either a hotel or on the streets. The questionnaires were prepared through literature review and translated in Nepali for the ease of understanding. During the face-to-face interviews at least one member of the research team and one member of the NGO-Sahara Nepal was always present to ensure proper collection of data. We could not trace any brothels during the course of the study. The information regarding their socio demographic characteristics, income, reason for joining sex trade and future choice regarding the profession were recorded. Completed questionnaires without any missing data were only included in the study as repeating of interviews would have been difficult due to high mobility of the study population. The data was analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version

20.0. The descriptive data was expressed in frequency and percentage and displayed with the help of frequency distribution tables and bar diagrams. Ethical approval was taken from the Institutional Ethical Review Board (IERB) of B.P. Koirala Institute of Health Sciences to conduct the study. Informed consent was taken from each respondent. In case of minors, assent was taken from the respondent and written consent was taken from the caretaker (hotel owner in our study). The information regarding FSWs were kept only by the principal investigator and during dissemination of results through scientific writing, their identity and locations were not exposed.

RESULTS

Table 1: Socio-demographic profile of Female Sex Workers of Eastern Nepal.

Socio-demographic characteristics	n = 210	Percent (%)
Age		
<20 years	59	28.10
20-30 years	112	53.30
30-40years	33	15.70
≥ 40years	06	02.90
Mean age ±sd = 23.7 ± 6.4 years; Maximum 46, Minimum = 14		
Ethnicity		
Hill caste origin hindu	55	26.20
Terai caste origin hindu	39	18.60
Newars	24	11.40
Hill janajati	60	28.60
Terai janajati	18	08.60
Musalman	04	01.90
Others (Marwari, Punjabi, bangali)	10	03.80
Religion		
Hindu	190	90.50
Muslim	04	01.90
Christian	04	01.90
Buddhist	12	05.70
Educational status		
No formal school	91	43.30
Primary school (up to 5)	37	17.60
Secondary school (up to 10)	80	37.20
College	02	0.80
Marital status		
Unmarried	77	36.70
In a relationship	12	05.70
Married	62	29.50
Divorced	08	03.80
Separated	45	21.40
Widow	06	02.90
Living status		
Alone	113	53.80
Friends	19	09.00
Husband	38	18.10
Male partner	28	13.30
Parents/family	12	05.70
Family contact		
Yes	151	71.90
Frequency of contact:	(n=151)	(100%)
< once per week	96	63.55
≥ once per week	55	36.45
No	59	28.10

As shown in Table 1, the majority (53.3%) of respondents belonged to the productive age group of 20-29 years, with average age being 23.71 ± 6.38 years. Majority of the respondents belonged to Caste Origin Hindu (44.80%) followed by Janajati (37.20%), Newars (11.40%), Others i.e. Marwari, Punjabi, bangali (3.80%) and Musalaman (1.90%). This classification was done according to the Nepal Census Report 2001.¹¹ More than one thirds (43.3%) had not received any form of formal education, more than one thirds of the respondents revealed that (36.70%) they were unmarried and more than half (53.80%) were presently living alone. Major proportion of the study sample, (71.90%) had some form of family contact on a monthly basis.

Table 2: Working conditions of female sex workers of eastern Nepal.

Work place variables	(n=210)	Percent (%)
Duration (in years) involved in sex trade		
< ½ (6 months)	23	11.00
½ - 1	24	11.40
1-5	127	60.50
5-10	24	11.40
≥ 10	12	05.70
Worked in any other city apart from the present city		
Yes	36	17.20
No	174	82.80
Age (in years) when got involved in the sex trade		
<18	67	31.90
18-24	96	45.70
≥ 25	47	22.40
Mean ± sd = 20.4 ± 4.9 years; Maximum = 34 years; Minimum = 11 years		
Working days per week		
≤ 3	11	05.20
>3	199	94.80
Mean ± sd = 5.3 ± 1.5 days		
Number of clients per week		
<10	123	58.60
≥10	87	41.40
Mean ± sd = 8.72 ± 6.5 clients; Maximum = 32 clients; Minimum = 1 client		
Income (NRS in thousands) per month		
< 20	130	61.90
20-40	67	31.90
40-60	07	03.30
≥ 60	06	02.90
Median income = 15 thousands; Maximum = 15 thousands; Minimum = 2 thousands		
Need to support anyone financially		
Yes	126	60.00
Number of dependents	(n=126)	(100%)
1-2	82	65.07
3-4	37	29.36
>4	7	05.55
No	84	40.00

Table 2 reveals that majority (60.50%) had been in this profession for less than 5 years. About one fifth (17.20%) had worked in other cities before coming to the present location highlighting migratory nature of the profession. About one thirds of the women (31.90%) were minors when they joined this profession with average age for joining being 20.4 ± 4.9 years. Major portion of the sample (94.80%) worked more than three days a week and 41 percent had sex with more than or equal to ten clients per week. The median income of FSWs in eastern Nepal was 15 thousand per month and more than half (60.00%) of FSWs had to provide financial support for others. Poor economic condition was the major (47.6%) factor due to which these females had joined sex trade. The other reasons being husband related issues i.e. either he left, remarried or did not provide any kind of support (20.0%), peer pressure (15.20%), raise family including children and other family members (10.0), in search of a enjoyable life i.e. tasty food, good clothes (5.20%), Lack of any qualification or skill (1.0%) while another (1.00%) were brought to the restaurant unknowingly.(Figure 1)

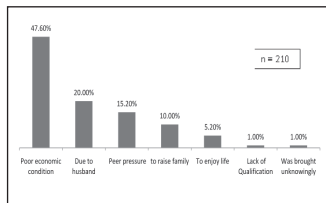


Fig 1: Primary reason for joining the sex trade among FSWs in eastern Nepal.

More than two thirds, (72.80%) wanted to quit the profession while 27.20% wanted to continue with their present job. The reasons for wanting to quit were fear of HIV/AIDS and STIs (27.00%), social stigma and disrespect (23.80%), no future/getting old (15.4%), not enough money (10.60%), wanting to get married or settled down (7.00%), fear that family might find out (5.80%), police raids (5.10%), wanting to stay with family or missing family members (2.50%) and the workplace and people not being nice (1.90%) . The major reasons for wanting to continue in spite of stigma and disrespect were current economical support (40.00%), lack of qualification or technical skill for other jobs (25.45%), enjoyment (12.72%), habituated to the lifestyle (12.72%), high income as compared to other jobs (7.27%) , exposed identity (3.63%) and no family (3.63%) as shown in table 3.

Table 3: Future choice regarding the profession among FSWs of eastern Nepal .

Reasons for wanting to quit	n	%	Reasons for wanting to continue	N	%
	155	100		55	100
Fear of HIV/AIDS	42	27.0	Economic support	22	40.0
Social stigma	37	23.8	No other qualification/skills	14	25.5
No future/getting old	24	15.4	Enjoyment (good food/clothes)	07	12.7
Not enough money	17	11.6	Habituated to the lifestyle	04	07.2
Want to settle down	11	07.0	High income compared to other jobs	04	07.2
Fear that family might know	09	05.8	No family/ living alone	02	03.7
Police raids	08	05.1	Exposed identity	02	03.7
Missing family members	04	02.5			
Workplace not being nice	03	01.8			

DISCUSSION

More than half of the respondents were in the age group 20 - 29 years with average age being 23.71 years. This figure is comparable to most of the studies where the mean age was reported to be 22.5 years, 23.7 years and 23 years.¹²⁻¹⁴ Majority of the respondents (43.3%) had not gone to any formal school. The various studies show better educational qualification than study settings. The average years of schooling among Chinese sex workers were 8.5 (SD = 2.7), with 23% having elementary school education or less, 48% completing middle school education and 30% completing high school education while in Vietnamese study, all sex workers had attended secondary school or more.^{12,15} Marital status of the respondents revealed that 36.7 per cent were unmarried and more than half (53.8%) of them were presently living alone. In this study more than 2/3 rd (71.9%) had some form of family contact on a monthly basis. Contrasting data was seen from a Chinese study where the majority (85%) of the women were single and more than one half (51%) of them lived with boyfriends or other family members; 32% lived alone and 17% lived with other FSWs.¹² Similarly, contrasting figures were seen in another study from China revealed that three quarters of women lived with other FSWs, 14% lived alone; and 12% lived with boyfriend, family members, or other relatives.¹³ More than half of the respondents had been in this profession since five years and 17.2% had worked in other cities before coming to the present location highlighting the migratory nature of this profession. Majority of the respondents belonged to age group 18-24 when they first joined this profession and more than one fourth were minors, with the mean age and SD of joining the sex trade is 20.4 ± 4.9 , which is higher among Chinese sex workers where women had their first sexual experience at a mean age of 18.6 years.¹³ A huge proportion of females, (94.86%) worked more than three days a week that is about 12 months approximately. Our findings were comparable with two

studies from China in which their time of working as a FSW ranged from 0.5 to 96 months, with a mean of 12 month and 12.2 months, respectively.^{12,13} A large proportion (41.4%) had sex with more than or equal to ten clients per week. This figure is very high compared to the study done of China where women on an average had two sexual clients per week, and a maximum of 1.2 clients per day.¹³ More than sixty percent of FSWs, 61.9% earned about twenty thousand per month (200 \$), 31.9% earned between 20 to 40 thousand per month (about 200-400\$), 3.30% earned 40-60 thousand per month (about 400-600\$) and remaining 3.3% earned more than that, (>600\$). The median income being fifteen thousand per month (150\$). This is contrary to a Chinese study wherein average monthly income was 1783.2 Yuan (about 222\$).¹² However, another study from rural China revealed the average monthly income to be 576 Yuan (70 USD) which is less than half of the income of FSWs of our settings.¹⁷ Both the findings stated above can be due to more number of restaurant based sex workers in our study, who had to serve more number of clients and thus, high average monthly income. Furthermore, in rural settings the income of sex workers can be expected to be low. Also, more than half of FSWs in our study had to provide economic support to other people similar to a Kenyan study.¹⁴ On asking the reason to join sex trade, poor economic condition of the family was the most common response in the current study followed by non supportive husband, peer pressure, raising family, search of a enjoyable life (tasty food, good clothes), lack of any qualification or skill while a small percent was brought to hotel without information. Similar reasons for joining sex trade were elicited by other studies as well. A study from New South Wales indicated child care, lack of supportive relationships, community intolerance and low self-esteem were important problems for the street workers. Four female street workers expressed concerns about child care (12 had dependent children). The issues raised

included finding appropriate careers while at work, regaining custody of children, and finding the money and time to access children being cared for by others.¹⁶ Another study gave financial reasons as their major work incentive. Being pressured by her partner, curiosity, boredom with a current occupation and enjoyment of sex were some of the primary reasons.¹⁴ Similarly, in another Chinese study, family financial hardship was endorsed by two-thirds of the women as a major reason for their involvement in commercial sex. The other leading reasons women selected included inability to find a better job (41%) and influence from their friends or fellow villagers (15%).¹⁷ Akinawo E.O reported financial handicap, death of parents or husband, divorce or separation from husband, unemployment, peer influence, desire for sex, and husband's uncooperative attitudes as major reasons for joining sex trade among Nigerian sex workers.¹⁸ Qualitative analyses from an Indian study also showed that FSWs frequently connected their economic hardship and initiation of sex work to the departure or abandonment of their husbands and subsequent economic insecurity.¹⁹ More than two thirds, (72.8%) wanted to quit the profession and (27.2%) were happy with their lifestyle and wanted to continue working. In China, the majority of the women (81%) thought that they would not be sex workers if they had other choice. Also about 62% of the participants said they had no plans at all at the moment regarding their future. About 30% would like to find other type of jobs immediately, with about 8% of participants planning to continue in this line of work for a few more years.²⁰ A study in the Netherlands explained that more than half of the variance in emotional exhaustion among indoor FSWs was explained by lack of management support, negative social reactions, not working by choice and negative working motivation.²¹ An Indian study concluded that most commercial sex workers (CSWs), who form the core/high-risk groups toward whom the prevention strategy is directed, are disempowered and socioeconomically marginalized. Thus, more extensive developmental work aimed at betterment of living conditions of CSWs is required for effective HIV/AIDS prevention.²² There are potential limitations in the current study. First, the sample was recruited through a non-probability sampling rather than random sampling, caution is needed in generalizing the findings from this study to other female sex worker populations. The findings in the current study have some important public health implications. Given low level of education, relatively low income, and young age among this population, empowerment and alternative employment/education opportunities should be part of the intervention efforts. There is a felt need for more employment opportunities especially for the growing youth of the nation which will promote overall health,

economic independency and prevent them in indulging commercial sex activity. The Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers is a network which connects sex worker projects from across the entire region while The Global Network of Sex Work Projects has representation from sex worker organizations across the world.²³ Similar networks needs to be created in Nepal as well which will empower the current sex workers and facilitate in merging them in the main stream where they are recognized as a part of society.

COMPETING INTERESTS: None declared

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