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**Disrupting the ‘life-cycle’ of violence in social relations: recommendations for anti-trafficking interventions from an analysis of pathways out of sex work for women in Eastern India**

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*This article argues for the need to change the ways in which anti-human trafficking (AT) NGOs and their interventions in India frame and address violence in sex work. The article asserts that AT NGOs need to move beyond their ideological allegiances, and infuse their interventions with a better understanding of the lived realities of women who are coerced into sex work. This argument is based on an analysis of women’s pathways out of sex work in Eastern India, which include both independent routes and reliance on anti-trafficking interventions. The research suggests that AT interventions need to acknowledge the centrality of social relations within the life-cycle of violence experienced by women. These relations influence women’s entry into sex work, affect their experiences within it, and shape their pathways out of sex work.*

Keywords: Sex work, anti-trafficking, violence, social relations, exit pathways, India

**Introduction**

As subjects of research and targets of development interventions, female sex workers in India are often perceived and represented as either ‘empowered agents’ or ‘passive victims’. Scholarship, activism, and development practices that focus on the lives of female sex workers in India are often ideologically polarised. Differences in opinion usually arise over the nature of entry into, and engagement of, women with sex work – seeing this as either ‘free’ or ‘forced’ (Sahni and Shankar 2011). This ‘either/or’ binary-led approach emphasises, on the one hand, women’s agency and choice regarding their livelihood and, on the other, the existence of structural inequalities which render ‘free’ participation in sex work impossible.

Over the past decade, these opposing perspectives have come to be associated with the HIV/AIDS and anti-human trafficking (AT) discourses and interventions in India. The former champions economic, social, and sexual agency, and the latter emphasises the patriarchal and structurally unequal foundations of sex work with regard to women. Non-government organisations (NGOs) working with sex workers are informed by particular ideological views. Some identify strongly with either the HIV/AIDS or the AT discourses, and their interventions reflect these discursive positions. Others adopt elements of both discourses in varying ways. NGOs working within the context of HIV/AIDS interventions tend to seek to reduce harm in sex work. This involves calling for the legalisation of sex work to reduce violence by state actors, such as the police, and to challenge the social stigma that limits sex workers’ access to various services such as health care. Such interventions also strongly advocate women’s agency to sell sex. On the other hand, AT interventions frame engagement with sex work as primarily coercive and as ‘commercial sexual exploitation’, and claim ‘rescue’ from sex work as the only ideological and material solution to stop violence within it.

**AT interventions and their approach to violence in sex work**

In India, the National Commission for Women (a statutory body for protection of rights of women at a national level) has recently called for the legalisation of sex work (Ramachandran 2014). Despite this, the AT approach to sex work has had a stronger influence on Indian state-led policies and legislation which affect women in sex work. This is reflected in tendencies within policies and legislation to conflate human trafficking and sex work. This also finds expression in the programmes of AT NGOs that target violence within sex work.

When AT interventions primarily understand and frame (coercive) entries into sex work as a form of human trafficking, violence within sex work is also ideologically and materially imagined as an outcome of trafficking alone. In this scenario, exit or ‘rescue’ from sex work becomes essential, not only to combat trafficking, but also as the sole solution to end the violence in the lives of women who are forced into sex work. However, this approach ignores how external factors that are indirectly connected to the processes of human trafficking can affect the violence experienced in pathways into, lives within, and pathways out of sex work. Not considering these factors affects the sustainability and efficacy of AT rehabilitation programmes. However well intentioned, an ideological focus on ‘human trafficking’ alone, without comprehensively engaging with why or how women from particularly disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds enter (and re-enter) sex work, renders preventative and rehabilitative AT programmes unsustainable. This unsustainability means the life-cycle of gender-based violence (Ellsberg and Heise 2005) within the lives of women who are coerced into sex work is not disrupted effectively. In some instances, it may even be aggravated by lack of understanding of the circumstances that paved the initial coercive entry.

**Methodology, research locations, and sample**

The data and analysis presented in this article are drawn from a larger study undertaken as PhD research, which I carried out between 2013 and 2017. Overall, the research explored female sex workers’ experiences of – and negotiations with – everyday violence in Eastern India. Despite its specific regional focus, the findings may resonate with development practitioners working with women who were formerly or are currently engaged in sex work in other parts of the country. Although the overall research also critiqued the approach taken by HIV/AIDS interventions to violence in sex work, in this article I focus primarily on AT interventions and the ways in which they address the subject. This is not a critique of a particular organisation or intervention, but is rather an exploration of the limitations of a largely ideological-based approach to addressing violence against women in sex work.

Accounts of pathways presented and analysed in this article were collected during a period of eight months in 2014 and 2015. These accounts formed part of a series of life histories collected from 42 (1) women from peri-urban and rural backgrounds, and from lower-middle and lower-class Hindu and Muslim households. Geographically, the majority of the women were from West Bengal with a minority from outside the state and country. This included five women from Bangladesh, one from Nepal, and another from the state of Agra, in Northern India. The women who had voluntarily moved to the state from outside West Bengal had done so to look for work, or to follow their spouses (who had since abandoned them), and the women from Bangladesh had crossed the international border illegally. Four out of the five women from Bangladesh had experienced initial coercive entries into sex work, which would be considered as forms of cross-border human trafficking.

The research sample of women included both full-time brothel-based and part-time street-based ‘flying’, or informal, sex workers from Sonagachi and Kalighat, two prominent red-light areas in Kolkata. The sample also included women rescued from sex work (voluntarily and forcibly) through AT interventions, and women living in a shelter home for women and girls vulnerable to, or survivors of, sexual violence. Furthermore, women who had formerly engaged in sex work in various parts of India and had since returned to their homes in villages in the South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, either independently or through full or partial use of AT interventions, were added to the sample.

This last sub-group of women were all associated with AT community-based NGOs. When asked about caste affiliations, most Hindu Bengali women were reluctant to discuss this explicitly, hinting at the shame and social stigma associated with being from lower-caste backgrounds. An explicit mention of caste was made only once during the process of the whole research, when a former sex worker in Kalighat, who had become a brothel owner, talked about how her marriage to a former customer had changed her life. She referred to him as ‘Banerjee-*bari’r chele’*, which implied that he was a son of a Brahmin Bengali household, i.e. he belonged to an upper-caste. The marriage resulted in upward social and economic mobility for the brothel owner, who now owned and rented out rooms for female sex workers to hire.

Overall, the names used by the women, especially in red-light areas and the shelter home, were often names they had adopted or had been assigned when they had entered the trade, to ensure anonymity. This made it impossible to identify caste affiliations from the names themselves, as original surnames were rarely disclosed. Additionally, many Muslim women adopted Hindu-sounding names since customers of all religious backgrounds preferred to buy sex from women who appeared to be Hindu.

The age range of respondents was between 18 and 60 years; however, all ages were self-reported and could not be verified through official documentation, as the women did not have any formal documents. This became a source of conflict in the shelter home, as those who had been forcibly rescued by AT interventions argued that they were older than they looked. The state and NGO that had rescued them had deemed them minors, and therefore in need of removal from sex work. In Kalighat, the average age of the sample of active female sex workers was between late 20s and early 30s, whereas in Sonagachi, the average age was lower, as several respondents were 18 or 19 years old. Similar to the shelter home, the ages of these younger women had become a point of contention, as these women did not want to be regarded as victims. During police raids women who could not show proof of age documents would be taken to the police stations.

Overall, the sample consisted of both voluntary and coercive entries into sex work, the latter outnumbering the former. However, these categories were not fixed, as several in the sample who had been initially forced into sex work had re-entered sex work voluntarily after a period of time. None of the women I spoke to who were active sex workers were in bonded labour at the time of the research (a situation where they would have to engage in sexual labour to pay back the brothel owner the costs incurred by traffickers), but many narrated experiences of being in such situations in the past.

**Violence, social relations, and sex work**

From the sample above, I have chosen to present and analyse three accounts of pathways out of sex work in this article. These accounts emerge from the life stories of three women who had been initially forced into sex work through processes that would generally be considered to be forms of human trafficking. I met these women at different sites and stages of fieldwork between 2014 and 2015. The first was Jasmine, a 27-year-old from a red-light area, Kalighat; the second was Mamata, a 22-year-old from an AT shelter home in south Kolkata; and the third was Rahima, a 22-year-old from a village in the South 24 Parganas district. All three women requested that their names be changed to ensure anonymity.

Born into lower-class Muslim households in rural parts of West Bengal (Mamata and Rahima) and Jessore, Bangladesh (Jasmine), the three women’s life stories represent different forms of pathways out of sex work. These consisted of an individual escape through peer and customer support, a forced rescue by AT interventions and a subsequent stay in the shelter home, and a voluntary exit from sex work through AT interventions.

Despite differences in the women’s pathways out of (and into) sex work, their life stories draw attention to how their experiences and negotiations with violence were located within social relations. Specifically, these experiences (and relations) created vulnerabilities that led the women into being coerced into sex work, and affected their experiences within sex work. Even when the women exited sex work these experiences continued within their relations and lives outside the trade, often driving them back into the trade. Despite voluntary entry or re-entry into sex work, violence persisted within social relations in sex work, which the women accepted as an inevitable aspect of the trade. The social relationships in these women’s lives stretched across their lives and framed their identities as women from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. These included their relationships with members of their households, communities, market, and the state, all of which intertwined with each other to reinforce and maintain gender and power inequalities (Kabeer 1994). Experiences of violence within sex work, therefore, were not exceptional. Instead, these lay on a spectrum of experiences of everyday struggles with power inequalities and violence, which preceded and persisted beyond sites of sex work.

Violence within sex work was affected and shaped by women’s positionalities in their social relations within and beyond sites of sex work. These positionalities, in turn, were shaped by wider cultural and social norms regarding their mobility, sexuality, well-being, and autonomy, which also affected their participation in the informal labour force in Eastern India.

**Pathways into sex work**

*Violence and power inequalities in households and communities*

Jasmine, Mamata, and Rahima’s initial entries into sex work were coercive: they had been forced into it by members of their households and communities. This was a common experience shared by other respondents in the wider sample. The circumstances that led to these coercive entries stemmed from expressions of a common patriarchal phenomenon – daughter disfavour. This phenomenon accompanies son preference, a key rationale of which is the perception that daughters are a poor investment (Munro and McIntyre 2014).

Scholars such as Barbara D. Miller (1997) and Jenny Munro and Lynn McIntyre (2014) contest the assumed causal link between poverty in South Asia and daughter disfavour. They indicate expressions of daughter disfavour among land-owning classes in North India and the absence of it within food practices amongst poor households in Bangladesh. Pranab Kumar Bardhan (1985, 1) argues that ‘it is quite unlikely that anyone can provide a fully convincing and comprehensive explanation [of daughter disfavour]’. However, the three life stories, as well as others in the research, make it evident that daughter disfavour is connected less to poverty and more to shifting power dynamics between members of the three women’s natal and marital households and communities, and to their positionalities and relations with household and community members.

In Jasmine, Mamata, and Rahima’s cases, daughter disfavour took on different forms and had varying effects on their forced entries into sex work. Their experiences (of daughter disfavour) also encompassed different forms of violence: Jasmine had food withheld from her and was discriminated against as a young child by her step-mother; Mamata experienced psychological and physical violence at the hands of her mother and sister-in- law; and Rahima was sexually assaulted at a young age by a community member. All these experiences created vulnerabilities at a very early stage in their lives, which made these women’s positions within their households and communities, and their claims to resources, fragile.

In these situations, the women were treated like a *bhaar* (burden) on the family and the household. Statements like *‘Ke bhaar nebe?’* (‘Who will bear her burden/assume her responsibility?’) were the common refrain within disagreements and arguments amongst members of the household. These, and the accompanying violence and power inequalities, led Jasmine (through her mother) and Mamata to seek *kono kaaj* (any work) outside the community which would fulfil certain needs. These needs included the symbolic need for independence from the dysfunctional social relations, an accompanying economic independence, and the material need for a residence and life separate from natal and marital attachments.

Due to low levels of literacy and technical skills, the women depended on members of their communities and families to help them look for *kono kaaj,* often relinquishing control in the process. In the research, forced entries into sex work often resulted from members of households and communities taking advantage of women’s vulnerabilities. This happened in both Jasmine and Mamata’s cases.

When I met Jasmine, she was a full-time brothel-based residential female sex worker in Kalighat. During the interview, she explained that her initial entry into sex work had been coercive. Jasmine had been sold into sex work by her brother-in-law. When Jasmine was about four years old, and her older sister Sabina was about six, their father remarried (as a Muslim man, polygamy was permitted). This led to a shift in power between the women in the household. Their step-mother began to control food allocation in the household and withheld food from the girls and their mother, despite it being relatively plentiful. This prompted the girls’ mother to move out of the house and look for a form of livelihood to support herself and her daughters. After working for a year in a local restaurant in a town nearby, their mother decided to migrate to West Bengal to work in a brick-kiln. Through this she hoped that the family of three would be able to live together, without depending on anyone else for food.

The family returned to Bangladesh after Sabina married a boy from their village, who also lived and worked with members of his family in the brick-kiln. With her income from the brick-kiln, Jasmine’s mother was able to renegotiate re-entry into her marital household. When the money ran out her mother migrated again, but Jasmine decided to stay on. Within six months of Sabina’s marriage, Sabina’s husband started engaging in extra-marital affairs and subsequently abandoned her. He also tricked Jasmine into accompanying him to Kolkata on the pretext of visiting her mother. In Kolkata, he sold her into a brothel on Park Street, a hub of nightlife in the city.

He could do this to me because I had no emotional roof [protection] over my head. I lived in my father’s house but he did not care much for me, only for the children from his second marriage. My *dula bhai* [brother-on-law] knew this, and took advantage of it. My mother was also away, and he knew if he told me she was unwell I would definitely go with him. I trusted him and he betrayed me. (Interview, Kalighat red-light area, Jasmine, 10 September 2014)

Unlike Jasmine, Mamata directly sought *kono kaaj* to negotiate the violence she faced in her natal household, which paved the way for her coercive entry into sex work. Also born into a Muslim household in the Howrah district, from a young age Mamata experienced strong daughter disfavour by her mother. Mamata attributed this to the ill health she experienced since childhood (which resulted in a pronounced limp at the age of four), her dark skin tone, her outspoken nature, and her older ‘more beautiful and obedient’ sister’s death from a snakebite when Mamata was three.

Due to her father’s ailing health and inability to earn an income, her older brother, whom she described as her mother’s *priyo* (favourite), was the head of the family. When he married and Mamata did not get along with her new sister-in-law, it became difficult for Mamata to stay in the house. After a particularly fierce argument during Eid one year, when her sister-in-law beat her while her mother and brother watched, Mamata ran away from home. She took a bus to the nearest town junction and, while in a distressed state, bumped into a male acquaintance from her village. She confided in him and asked him to help her find work. He promised to help, but eventually sold her into sex work at a brothel in the Howrah district.

Both Jasmine and Mamata were vulnerable due to the breakdown of social relations within their natal households. These vulnerabilities were exploited by family and community members, which led to their forced entry into sex work.

These experiences were similar to that of Rahima, although her forced entry into sex work was influenced by a very different set of circumstances. Rahima was born into a Muslim household in a village in the South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal. At the age of 11, a boy from an influential family in her village raped her. When her family decided to file police charges against him, his family agreed to have them marry and accepted her as a daughter-in-law. This was approved by the panchayat, the local self-governing council consisting of village elders.

The decision was accepted by her family, who were keen to avoid scandal. However, soon after the marriage, her marital family began to harass and intimidate her and perpetrate physical violence against her, hoping this would force her to return to her natal family. When she resisted this and her family decided to approach the police again, her mother-in-law and husband tricked her into travelling with them to New Delhi, where they sold her into sex work.

**Pathways out of sex work**

*Violence after coercive entry into sex work*

After their coercive entries into sex work, all three women recalled a phase of recurrent and horrific violence by madams and brothel owners. This violence occurred when the women refused to sell sex and was intended to subdue them into submission. The types of violence included physical violence in the form of repeated *maar* (beatings) by madams and male brothel owners, psychological violence in the form of intimidation, threats, and enforced isolation, and sexual violence by customers. The women could subsequently exit sex work in two ways: either entirely through individual escape, or through partial or complete reliance on AT interventions.

*Exhibiting compliance*

All three women were able to exit sex work by adopting a strategy I term ‘exhibiting compliance’, which was learned from their peers. This entailed a phase of ‘willingly’ doing sex work to win the trust of brothel owners and madams and to improve their material work conditions. This was also done to gain more mobility within the site of sex work, enable them to have unsupervised relations with customers and, in some instances, be allowed access to a mobile phone. Eventually this resulted in not only improving their work conditions, but also in enabling their escape from the specific site of sex work.

While sharing her experiences in sex work, Jasmine explained how she decided to ‘exhibit compliance’ and find a way to escape the brothel she was sold into:

After a year of this [violence], I couldn’t live like this anymore. I could see no way out. Since I had already become ‘bad’, I decided ‘Let me just do this kind of work willingly’; the other girls suggested this. So, I told the madam I was willing to stay and work, and overnight my life improved. I could move around more now, still inside the brothel, but wasn’t kept locked up all the time. I could speak to more women, and have time alone with customers and talk to them. All of this gave me great mental relief – I started to settle into life in the brothel. (Interview, Kalighat red-light area, Jasmine, 10 September 2014)

Jasmine used this increased independence to start an unsupervised relationship with a customer and to eventually escape. Like Jasmine, Mamata underwent a period of prolonged violence inflicted by her male brothel owner and customers when she resisted selling sex. After trying unsuccessfully to kill herself, a peer who nursed her back to health advised her to ‘exhibit compliance’. By doing this she was able to build a relationship with a customer who facilitated her escape. He suggested she should manipulate the brothel owner and gain his trust:

Once my customer told me he would help me escape, he advised me to get the brothel owner to trust me. This way he would allow me greater freedom to move around, perhaps even leave with the customer for an evening out, and that would be my escape. I decided to start willingly selling sex – once I had a steady base of customers, the brothel owner started to treat me better. He gave me access to a phone, would allow me to interact with the other girls freely, and let me refuse customers too, sometimes, if I wasn’t feeling well. One time, I heard that a girl was planning to escape, and I went and told the brothel owner before she could execute her plan. After that day, the brothel owner started to trust me a lot and I knew I had him in the palm of my hand. (Interview, AT shelter home, 16 October 2014)

Mamata did not regret spoiling her peer’s escape plan to gain her brothel owner’s trust:

Sometimes in this life you have to look out for yourself. Everyone pretends to be your friend, but ultimately everyone is selfish. I had to get out of there, so I did what I had to. (Interview, AT shelter home, Mamata, 16 October 2014)

**Escape through the support of customers in sex work**

The process of planning an escape would begin when women were asked, ‘How did you get here?’ by their customers. Such conversations could only take place at a stage where women had gained greater freedom in the site of sex work as the result of exhibiting compliance. Any previous encounters with customers were strictly supervised by madams and brothel owners. Jasmine and Mamata took these opportunities to share their accounts of coercive entry into sex work, to evoke sympathy, and to ask for help to escape the site.

In these accounts, experiences of deprivation and violence within natal (and/or marital) households, and physical violence by brothel owners and madams were emphasised. However, the women did not mention sexual violence within the site of sex work, as this was perceived to have the potential to alienate the men. Additionally, as Purna Sen (1997, 165) has argued, sexual violence, unlike physical violence, is much harder for women to articulate.

This was especially so in Jasmine’s case, who escaped with the help of a customer to whom she had been first forced to sell sex after her coercive entry into sex work. When he returned to the brothel towards the end of her first year, she had gained mobility and a certain degree of freedom and chose to try and gain his sympathy, which worked.

Mamata’s customer suggested ‘police-raids’ at the brothel as an opportunity to escape, since these situations involve a lot of chaos. Similarly, after learning to exhibit compliance in similar ways, Rahima would often go up to the roof of her brothel in Delhi. This would allow her some time alone, as well as the opportunity to converse with a former customer who worked in the adjacent apartment complex. Like Mamata and Jasmine, Rahima talked about the violence she experienced within her marriage, but chose not to share her experience of sexual violence, as she felt this would result in a loss of sympathy.

The customers of all three women helped them to escape by creating a situation where they could take the women outside the brothel to watch a film, visit a park, or go to a restaurant, with the brothel owner or madam’s permission. During these ‘outings’, the women were able to escape. The customers provided women with financial and material assistance, e.g. mobile phones, money, valuables, etc., which was meant to help them return to their homes.

At the time of the fieldwork, however, Jasmine had re-entered and resettled into life in sex work at a different site. Mamata, who had been forcibly rescued after re-entering sex work and was living in the shelter home against her wishes, expressed a strong desire to return to sex work. Rahima, whom I met about three years after her return to her natal household, expressed similar sentiments. Their return to sex work is contextualised in the next section.

**Re-entry into sex work**

Jasmine’s re-entry into sex work took place on the same night she escaped. Her customer put her into a taxi and gave her money and valuables to either try to return to Bangladesh or start a new life. Unsure of how to return or what to do, Jasmine, who was dressed scantily, asked the taxi driver to take her to another red-light area. When I asked her why she did this after escaping a site of sex work, she explained:

Fate brought me here [Kalighat] that night. I told the taxi driver to take me to a lain-bari [brothel] because I felt unsafe. I was wearing *chotto jama-kapor* [skimpy clothes] and was afraid that men on the streets would rape me, or that I would get arrested. He dropped me off here [Kalighat] and I saw other women and girls on the street and felt safe. But I was worried about where I would go, what I would do next. I sat down in front of a lane and started crying loudly. An old woman came out of her house and asked me what was wrong. When I told her what I had been through and how I had nowhere to go, she said, ‘*Beti* [daughter], do you want to work here? You can rent your own room here, and pay rent from what you earn.’ I was surprised to hear her say that – I was used to always being controlled by a madam in the previous brothel. I thought – if I can live alone, do this kind of work in my own way…then why not? I would go home once I had enough money saved and a place here of my own. (Interview, Kalighat red-light area, Jasmine, 12 September 2014)

Jasmine’s account of re-entry into sex work highlights a significant finding from these life stories and my overall research: experiences in sex work are not uniform across different sites of sex work. In her analysis of the nature of violence in sex work in the UK, Teela Sanders (2016, 100) argues that the ‘environment and spaces in which sex work happen have an intrinsic bearing on the safety of those who work there’. In this research, the experiences of violence in sex work depended on the women’s positionalities within social and labour relations at the specific site of sex work. This determined the material conditions of their work, which was also influenced by modes of entry into sex work and the ways in which the sale of sex was organised. The absence of madams and brothel owners at Kalighat appealed to Jasmine, and when I met her she had been living and working independently as a full-time residential sex worker in that red-light area for almost ten years. During this time, she had returned to her village several times, had facilitated her sister Sabina’s entry into sex work in the same area, and had twins through a relationship with a customer. Despite the breakdown of that relationship which was a cause of emotional distress, Jasmine had no intention of leaving sex work.

In Mamata’s case, after her escape she returned to her natal household with her customer, but was rejected outright by her family:

I had taken my customer along with me because I didn’t feel brave going back alone. I also wanted him to tell my family that I had not gone into this kind of work alone, that I was forced into it. I thought ‘If I take him with me, they’ll believe me’. But I was wrong. My mother and sister-in-law screamed at me, said I was a bad girl, I had shamed them in front of the whole village by running off. I don’t even want to think about some of the things they said…I don’t want to say them. The customer, he felt so bad hearing my own family insult me like this. A huge crowd had gathered in front of our house and I felt so small. Finally, I decided to leave as I realised they would never take me back. (Interview, AT shelter home, Mamata, 18 October 2014)

Mamata’s re-entry into sex work was connected directly to her family’s rejection. After living with her customer, in what she described as a platonic arrangement, a marriage was arranged for him with someone else and they had to part. She decided to re-enter sex work on her own terms at a different brothel in the town of Haldia in the Purba Mednipur district, which she had heard about from her customer.

Over the course of the next year, Mamata would leave and re-enter sex work again. She returned to her household after being told that her father was on his deathbed. When she went home, she was pregnant as a result of a long-term relationship with a customer who had ended their relationship after finding out about her pregnancy. After her father’s death, she took up *jorir-kaaj* (embroidery work) to support herself and built a small shelter for herself next to the main house in which the rest of the family, including her mother, older brother, and sister-in-law, lived.

At her daughter’s birth, which caused further tension with her natal family members, Mamata received no support for her child and found it difficult to work along with caring for her newborn while living alone. On witnessing her mother’s negligence towards her granddaughter, Mamata left home for the final time, and re-entered sex work, resolving never to return home. I met her in the shelter home, where she ended up though a forced AT rescue intervention.

Mamata’s experience highlights the life-cycle of violence within female sex workers’ social relations, which affects entry and re-entry into sex work. In similar ways, Rahima, despite being able to return to her household and community, continued to negotiate with the community-based stigma and familial control that had started after her initial experience of sexual violence. The continuity of different forms of violence and power inequalities within Mamata and Rahima’s lives, which had paved their entry into sex work and persisted after they left, rendered ideologically centred AT interventions inefficient and unsustainable.

**Exit through AT interventions and effects on social relations**

Unlike independent pathways out of sex work, which make use of social relations within sites of sex work, AT ‘rescue’ interventions experienced by women in this research were not centred on any understanding of social relations within the site of the brothel, or the positions that women held within them. Jyoti Sanghera (2005, 17) argues that ‘in police-facilitated [AT] raids, “seemingly minor-looking girls” are picked up and consigned either to government remand homes or to shelters run by NGOs’.

This mirrors Mamata’s experience of forced rescue and rehabilitation. While the NGO that rescued her put down her age as 17, Mamata insisted she was 22. When we met at the shelter home, she was waiting to do a bone-test to determine her age. However, this was expensive and results would take some time to be delivered, leading Mamata to describe her rehabilitation as being ‘stuck inside a prison’.

Before she was rescued during a police raid, Mamata had re-settled into life at the Haldia brothel, had five steady customers, and would keep her daughter for fortnights at a stretch in the care of an informal day care centre run by older and retired sex workers in the brothel. In short, she was deeply and favourably embedded in the social relations at the site of sex work.

When news of the police raid broke one morning in the brothel, Mamata and her peers decided to leave the premises. They packed some precious belongings and headed to a nearby field. There, the brothel staff had set up provisions to cook for everyone while they waited for the raid to end. However, when the police and female staff of a local chapter of an international Christian abolitionist AT NGO arrived, they were tipped off by the *para-r chele* (local boys) that the brothel residents were hiding in the field nearby. When the police arrived Mamata and her peers were caught off-guard:

We were sitting and eating lunch. Suddenly someone yelled, ‘The police are coming! Run, run!’ Everyone started running in different directions…leaving plates and food behind. I couldn’t keep up because of my leg. I tried running, but the *didi* [term for older sister, used here to refer to a social worker] from the NGO and a policewoman caught up with me. I didn’t want to go, I kept telling them to let me go. But they were using force, and kept saying, ‘We’ll only take you to the police station for a few minutes, you can leave after that’. But I knew they were trying to trap me. I had a mobile phone with me; they confiscated that and pushed me into the van. At the police station I kept saying ‘Please let me go, I’m here by choice. I don’t have a family, this place is my home’. But they refused to listen. They put me in a police van and brought me here. And now I have been here four months and don’t have any idea when they will let me go. (Interview, AT shelter home, Mamata, 18 October 2014)

Mamata described her stay at the shelter home as violent and as something that caused her *koshto* (pain). She had not informed the shelter home staff or the social worker who rescued her (who was from a different AT NGO from the one that ran the shelter home) about her daughter as she did not want to endanger the women who were caring for her. Further, if her daughter was brought over, Mamata worried that it would lead to a longer stay in the shelter home.

The AT NGO’s attempts to reintegrate her with her family, who had not been directly involved in her initial coercive entry, had proved unsuccessful as her mother refused to take her back. Without any family member or guardian to vouch for her or take her back, Mamata’s future was uncertain. She voiced her repeated desire to re-enter sex work, but given the abolitionist stance of AT NGOs she was made to stay on at the shelter home.

Mamata’s experiences highlight how AT interventions’ attempts to deal with violence within sex work can be problematic in two distinct ways:

1. AT rescue interventions’ lack of engagement with an understanding of female sex workers’ changing positionalities within social relations at the sites of sex work leads to a very narrow and static understanding of victimhood. This affects women who might have improved their material conditions of sex work and are voluntarily selling sex, despite initial coercive entries. Both Mamata and Jasmine’s experiences highlight this.

2. AT re-integration interventions’ incomplete understandings of women’s positionalities within social relations in households and communities are problematic. Since these interventions only focus on violence within the immediate process of trafficking, violence within natal households and communities that are indirectly connected to entries into sex work are overlooked. When families refuse to take the women back, and the women themselves express a desire to re-enter sex work, their agency is ignored and re-entry into sex work is rendered impossible. Even when families might be willing to take the women back, pre-existing tensions and violence within households and communities, which facilitated the initial entry into sex work, might create further situations of danger and violence.

The latter point is illuminated in Rahima’s example. After escaping with the help of a customer, Rahima contacted her family. Her family then travelled with members of a local AT NGO to Delhi to return her to her home.

I first met Rahima in 2011, when I was working with AT NGOs in India.(2) At that point, she had been living at home again for almost two years and was part of a micro-finance project that enabled ‘victims of trafficking’ to start their own businesses in their villages. At some point during that year, however, Rahima went missing. Her family and the AT community- based NGO, who were engaged in an attempt to have her mother-in-law and husband convicted for trafficking her, suspected she had been re-trafficked. However, she returned after a month, and revealed that she had been in a secret relationship with a man from the village for the last two years and had travelled to Delhi to elope. On arriving in Delhi, the man had tried to place her in a domestic labour agency, although her family and the NGO were convinced that he had tried to sell her into sex work. She was able to return after telling the owner of the agency her predicament. The owner, in turn, ordered the man to marry Rahima and take her back. After their return, Rahima’s in-laws refused to accept her into their family and household.

When I met her again in 2015, she was living in her natal household, was a mother to a two-month-old child, and was estranged from her second husband. She had fallen out with the initial AT NGO and had approached another NGO, started by a former member of the first and who was familiar with her case history. During our interviews, Rahima shared that she had tried to re-enter sex work in a town in a neighbouring state without anyone’s knowledge, but had returned because she could not find anyone to help her care for her young son there. Furthermore, she expressed the desire to re-migrate and re-enter sex work after weaning her child. Her attempt to start a business had failed, and her attempt to gain social normalcy and acceptability through a relationship with a man had also been unsuccessful.

As a single mother with another failed marriage, Rahima was the target of community stigma, since she was clearly deviating strongly from the expected norms:

People in this village always look at me like me like there is something bad or *noshto* [rotten] about me. People talk about me behind my back, but I hear the gossip. They say it’s my bad character that has led me to have such negative experiences. I don’t want to live here anymore, it’s suffocating. I want to leave after my baby is weaned, and move to a city and start sex work again. Then I can be no one [anonymous] and start my life over and be independent. (Interview, village in South 24 Parganas, Rahima, 15 March 2015)

Rahima did not convey her desire to re-enter sex work to the AT NGOs working with her because of the fear that they would withdraw their support. During our interaction, it was clear that Rahima was struggling. Attempts to rehabilitate her through ‘economic empowerment’ initiatives had not been successful and had not improved her position socially within her community. Instead, she attempted to gain social normalcy through a relationship with a man, an arrangement that carried the promise of marriage and domesticity, and a strategy also used by other returned women encountered through this research. However, her failed second marriage only sharpened her social deviance within the community.

When I finished the fieldwork and returned to the UK, I kept in touch with Rahima and the social worker who was helping her. Within two months, the social worker informed me that Rahima was pregnant again by her second husband, whom she had been meeting secretively at night. Frustrated by her ‘inability to help herself’, the social worker and second AT NGO decided to stop working with her.

In short, interventions and attempts towards Rahima’s ‘rehabilitation and reintegration’ had failed. Instead, through her return to the community and the insistence that she stay within the village to start her own business, without working directly on the social relations that affected her vulnerability, the AT interventions and NGOs had played an inadvertent role in perpetuating the life-cycle of violence and power inequalities in her life.

**Conclusion**

*Implications for AT interventions to address violence in the lives of women*

Within the Indian context, the role of social relations in women’s participation in sex work is usually acknowledged by scholars and practitioners when sex is sold as part of community and family-based ‘traditional’ sex work systems that have historical and cultural roots (McClarty et al. 2014; O’Neil et al. 2004). However, the women’s life stories in this article highlight the need to acknowledge the importance of social relations even when women enter non-traditional and commercially organised forms of sex work.

This analysis of pathways out of sex work highlights that women who find independent routes of escape from sex work rely wholly on their ability to manipulate and form social relationships at sites of sex work. If returning to households and communities is not possible, due to pre-existing forms of violence, then a voluntary re-entry into sex work is negotiated.(3)

On the other hand, when AT interventions ignore the importance of social relations within the lives of women in sex work, they end up homogenising victimhood across sex work and forcibly rescuing women who are voluntarily engaging with sex work, despite their initial coercive entries (as Mamata’s experiences show). Additionally, such interventions ignore women’s agency to re-enter sex work at the rehabilitative phase if household members do not take them back. They also inadvertently endanger the women’s well-being by sending them back to communities and households where the social relations are sites of violence and power inequalities (as illustrated by Rahima’s life story).

All these points highlight the crucial and immediate need for AT rescue–rehabilitation– reintegration interventions to infuse their practices with an understanding of the social relations in the lives of women coerced into sex work. This would entail mapping specific sites, causes, and relations of violence, and using this analysis in the design and implementation of preventative and rehabilitative interventions.

If the women’s households and communities are primary sites of violence, alternate resettlement sites need to be considered. Otherwise, as Rahima’s life story shows, if AT NGOs insist on reintegrating victims of trafficking into their residential communities, they will need to intervene directly within identified ‘relations of violence’ and also improve the women’s social positionalities within the community and household. While intervening directly in household relations can be seen as intrusive by the local community, and can cause the NGO to lose goodwill, it is imperative for the well-being of the women who are being resettled into these communities.

To develop alternatives that go beyond the existing ideological foundations of AT interventions, organisations also need to listen and honour the ways in which the women wish to shape their own pathways out of sex work. If return to sex work is expressed by women above the age of 18 years, organisations need to respect this instead of holding women like Mamata captive in shelter homes and adding to their experiences of power inequalities and violence.

Furthermore, the focus and scope of preventive and rehabilitative interventions need to be broadened. Rahima’s example shows that instead of sole economic empowerment, a situation of dependent domesticity as a way to regain social normalcy might be what women from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds desire when they return to their residential communities. Designing and delivering sensitisation workshops to the community that effectively address and challenge gender inequalities within natal and marital households would enable organisations to disrupt the cycle of violence in these women’s lives when they return. Both Mamata and Rahima’s examples show that this is necessary to prevent re-entry into sex work as a way to escape violence within natal and marital relations.

Additionally, AT interventions need to recognise that violence within sex work is not homogenous across different sites. As seen in Jasmine and Mamata’s experiences of sex work across different sites, violence at a specific site of sex work is dependent on social relations and women’s social positionalities within those relations. Moving beyond the ideology that all sex work is violence and recognising that violence in sex work manifests differently will allow for rescue initiatives to concentrate their interventions on the sites and situations where they are most needed. This will also prevent AT interventions from forcibly rescuing women like Mamata, and adding further to their existing life-cycle of violence and power inequalities.

Overall, the life stories discussed in this article highlight that these interventions need to include women’s voices, fears, and aspirations in their programming in much more significant and profound ways. Only then can these interventions, programmes, and organisations succeed in disrupting the life-cycle of gender-based violence in these women’s lives in meaningful and sustainable ways.

*Notes*

1. The sample size within the PhD research was 52. The remaining ten respondents included two pimps, four peer workers affiliated with an HIV/AIDS NGO in Kolkata which identifies as a‘sex workers’ organisation’, and four adolescents categorised as ‘child marriage victims’ who were living in a shelter home alongside women rescued from sex work in Kolkata.

2. I met Rahima and other ‘survivors’ of human trafficking through a micro-finance rehabilitation programme in 2011. My role in this intervention was of research and documentation, and to map the impact of the programme on these women’s immediate lives. Preceding this, I had worked on programme co-ordination and communication strategies with grassroots AT organisations in South Asia, through a Kolkata-based technical resource organisation.

3. Even when other forms of employment, such as domestic labour, are entered into, lower levels of income compared to sex work, the inability to keep children in the workplace, and prevalence of sexual harassment drive re-entry into sex work. Sex work also provides women opportunities to meet and initiate romantic relations with men without scrutiny. These relations are perceived as symbols of economic and social security in a patriarchal society.

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