

# CAGED UNTIL BROKEN: Research on the life of Sex Workers in India

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to highlight the life of sex workers. Increasingly, prostitution and other activities in the sex industries have been conceptualised as forms of labour, or at least as income-generating activities and looked down by the society we live in. The main focus of this study is to brief the reality to the society and make them understand the situations what sex workers go through and give them a helping hand as a responsible citizen and not judge them on their work but as a community help them to possess a much better, safe and healthy life. This research has been conducted as a survey study with the help of questionnaire to get the insights of the research topic. The study included both secondary as well as Primary Data. Primary Data was collected through a Questionnaire included 7 questions. There were 42 respondents from an age group of 18-40. The data was collected from states of Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Kerala, Haryana, Odisha, Chattisgarh. Chi square test was used in the analysis of data. The rights given to them and laws made for them should be heard and understood by the NGO's and also as a responsible citizen we should not have a negative outlook. The authors couldn't get in touch with the sex workers going through these situations to understand their issues due to the pandemic situation.

**Key Words :** *Sex Workers, Human Rights, Prostitution, Women, Family*

## INTRODUCTION

A sex worker is someone who provides sexual services. The term sex worker reflects the intention of creating an environment where sex workers can work healthier and safer by acquiring their rights as "workers". For example, business employees can't be blamed for being depressed because of their work, because they have human rights as workers. On the other hand, when sex workers consult about their health problems, they are often accused of being ill "because they are doing that kind of work". That is why the sex workers rights movement states that "sex work itself is not a violation of human rights, but the insecurity of the workplace and the violation of sexual health and rights as workers are violations of human rights. As the same as other industries, we should end the exploitation and sexual violence. Sex Work is not treated as work, but as a dirty and immoral lifestyle threatening to taint the "innocent" public. The result of this stigma is the denial of basic rights for both sex workers and their families, women cannot access good healthcare and are often subject to abuse, violence and exploitation by police and government officials, while their children face harassment in schools and the workplace. Traditionalists cannot divorce sex from its sacred and religious implications. Indian laws and policies regarding sex work are crafted from a moralistic standpoint and people involved in sex work are defined by—and treated as—their "immoral" profession. Approaching sex work from a business point of view allows women and men involved in the

trade to demand their business rights, human rights and occupational health and safety regulations. There are over 800,000 sex workers in India. However unofficial figures place these numbers far higher. Organisations of sex workers, United Nations (UN) agencies and Commissions have understood and articulated sex work as a contractual arrangement where sexual services are negotiated between consenting adults. Implicit in this consent is the act of agency; wherein sex work can be a realistic choice to sell sex. Decriminalisation of sex work is a pre-requisite to ensure the physical and emotional inviolability of sex workers, their right to life, right to freedom of labour, health and reproductive and sexual rights. Recent research with 3000 sex workers in 14 Indian states also finds a substantial segment of women had prior experience of alternative work and opted for sex work, for better income and livelihood opportunities. The uncertain legal status attached to their work and identity further "invisibilises" them as citizens with associate rights and entitlements.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

A lot of people consider sex work to be one of the oldest professions, and, according to anthropologists, it did exist in many primitive societies. But despite thousands of years to grapple with and understand the practice, sex work is still viewed in incredibly black and white terms and uneducated assumptions guide modern discourse. People assume the women are abused or forced into it, morally corrupt, and in need of saving, and those buying the services are equally depraved or deserving of our contempt. Sex Work can be defined as performing or engaging in sexual intercourse or sexual acts for hire. It includes activities of direct physical contact between buyers and sellers as well as indirect sexual stimulation. Sex work only refers to voluntary sexual transactions; thus, the term does not refer to human trafficking and other coerced or non-consensual sexual transactions such as child prostitution. Some of the papers reviewed entails a lot about sex workers:

- **SHREYAS GUPTA(2013) - "HUMAN RIGHTS OF SEX WORKERS IN INDIA THE WAY FORWARD"**

Non-governmental organizations play a vital role in bridging the gap between mainstream society and sex workers. Their non-judgmental and unbiased approach and the credibility they enjoy enables them to aid sex workers with better access to healthcare and education, and provide them information and other technical support. Awareness and sensitization about the human rights would go a long way in ensuring better treatment for sex workers. Sonagachi has set a self-regulatory body that comprises of members of the district and officials from the National Human Rights Commission and the Bar Council of India. Such establishments must be set up in other parts of India as well.

- **Geetanjali Misra, Ajay Mahal, and Rima Shah(2014) - "PROTECTING THE RIGHTS OF SEX WORKERS: The Indian Experience"**

NGOs are likely to play a key role in initiating and supporting incipient sex worker collectives, as suggested by the experience of both DMSC and SANGRAM. They are particularly effective as builders of bridges between mainstream society and women in sex work. Moreover, to the extent that their approach is non-judgmental, they are better able to access sex worker groups and provide them with information and other technical support. At the same time, they enjoy credibility in mainstream social institutions such as the police, the judiciary, academia, and political classes. It is important to keep in mind that in an

Indian setting, evidence suggests that legislation alone is unlikely to help secure the human rights of sex workers. Rather, a change in society's perceptions towards women in sex work is necessary for any remedy to be effective.

- **Joint Stakeholders Submission(2017)- "Joint Stakeholders Submission"**

The Supreme Court of India has observed that sex workers are entitled to the right to life and must be accorded the protection guaranteed to every citizen. It instructed the State to provide recommendations on the “rehabilitation of sex workers who wish to leave sex work of their own volition and to provide conducive conditions for sex workers who wish to continue working as sex workers” in accordance with Article 21 of the Constitution. 21 In 2015, a Supreme Court panel recommended that several provisions of Immoral Traffic Prevention Act, (ITPA) be read down in the context of consenting adult sex workers and their families.<sup>22</sup> The panel also recommended that court orders closing brothels and evicting “offenders” could be appealed against in higher courts.

- **Kathleen N. Deering, Avni Amin, Jean Shoveller, Ariel Nesbitt, Claudia Garcia-Moreno, Putu Duff, Elena Argento, and Kate Shannon(2014) - A Systematic Review of the Correlates of Violence Against Sex Workers**

Systematic review reveals a high burden of violence against sex workers globally, and documents existing evidence of the social, physical, policy, economic, and interpersonal correlates of violence against sex workers. The review supports increasing evidence-based calls to make violence against sex workers a public health and human rights priority on national and international policy agendas, and the urgent need for structural research and interventions to better document and respond to the contextual factors shaping violence against sex workers. These include structural changes to legal and policy environments (e.g., decriminalization, policing practices), work environments, gender and economic inequities, population movement, and stigma. In this regard, measurement and methodological innovation (e.g., longitudinal, multilevel, and mixed-methods research) and rigor, in partnership with sex-work communities, are critical.

- **Reuben Balfour with Jessica Allen (2014)-" A Review of the Literature on Sex Workers and Social Exclusion"**

The lack of support in areas such as housing, finance (benefits system), mental health and drug addiction, and the abrupt withdrawal of formal care systems can lead those in positions of vulnerability down various pathways of chronic exclusion, such as sex work, as well as homelessness. Thus for many, entrance into sex work is a means to survival; funding severe addictions, a place to sleep for the night or to top-up benefit payments. Additionally, the lack of adequate support systems fails to address the needs of current sex workers attempting stabilise their lives and cease selling sex. In particular, the literature states that sex workers would benefit most from a holistic approach to addressing their needs. However, indications suggest that the majority of ordinary support services are disjointed and tend to address needs in isolation from one another. This does not adequately meet the needs of sex workers. Furthermore, the driving factors of chronic exclusion can have a detrimental effect on health. Although research into the impact of sex work on general health (not sexual health) is lacking, the literature (including a few studies with health as a specific focus) suggests that the processes of exclusion experienced by many sex workers negatively impacts on health. Higher rates of chronic illness – particularly symptoms

relating to intravenous drug use and preventable respiratory diseases – and child mortality, combined with lower rates of GP registration and attendance of secondary care services, such as antenatal care, are just some of the negative health related issues identified in the sex work literature.

- **S.LIDIA SUSAN Dr. RM. SAM DEVA ASIR (2014)- "A Study On Life Satisfaction Among Female Sex Workers"**

Sex workers are legally marginalized by a system which has in essence criminalized prostitution. Those who engage in sex work often and themselves entangled in a debt trap. Although we need more research on street sex workers, the studies reviewed here provide strong evidence that they face physical and psychological harassment. Livelihood programmes and savings would break their need to seek sex work as the only alternate means of sustenance. This may break the low self-esteem among sex Workers. It is also identified that most of the commercial sex workers have children and were concerned about their future. There was an urgent need to have more homes, which could take care of educational and nutritional needs for their children. The study also recommended deaddiction centers as majority of them either depend on alcohol or drugs to overcome stress and relieve pain. There is little attention for their specific health needs, especially regarding their sexual health, and physical and mental traumas due to violence.

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Sex Work and other activities in the sex industries have been conceptualised as forms of labour, or at least as income-generating activities and looked down by the society we live in.

## **OBJECTIVE**

- Showcasing the reality and the problems faced by them.
- To understand what they go through while they're working as sex workers and after their retirement.
- To spread awareness about them as the topic itself is considered as a taboo in our society.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This research included both secondary as well as Primary Data. Primary Data was collected through a Questionnaire included 7 questions which was sent online, platform of google forms There were 42 respondents from an age group of 18-40. The data was collected from states of Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Kerala, Haryana, Odisha, Chattisgarh.

## **Hypothesis**

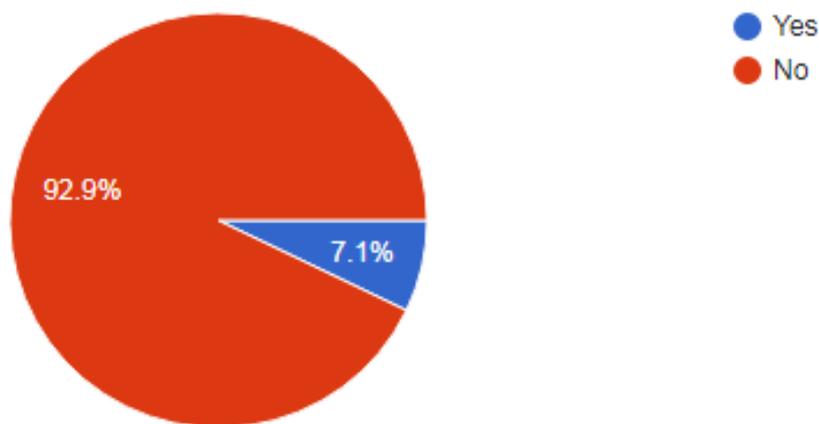
**Ho:** Sex Workers face the problems of discrimination and stigmatization within the society

**Ha:** Sex Workers do not face the problems of discrimination and stigmatization within the society

**Data Analysis and Interpretation**

Are Sex workers accepted by the society

42 responses



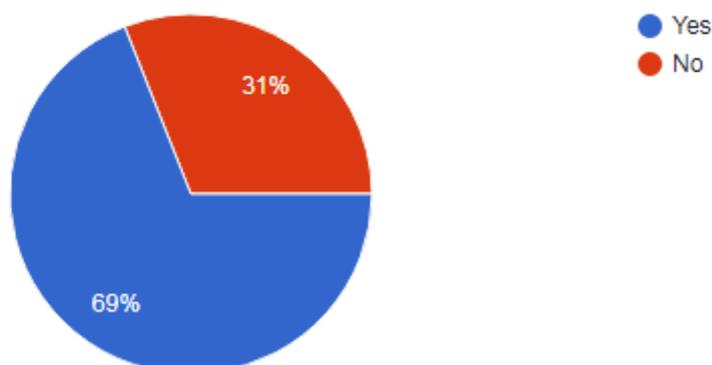
**TABLE 1**

Are Sex workers accepted by the society?	Yes	No	Total
	3	39	42

This question is the hypothesis of the study. The questionnaire proves that 39 out of 42 people with the age range of 18-40 believe that sex workers are not accepted by the society that proves our hypothesis.

Do you think Sex work is work ?

42 responses



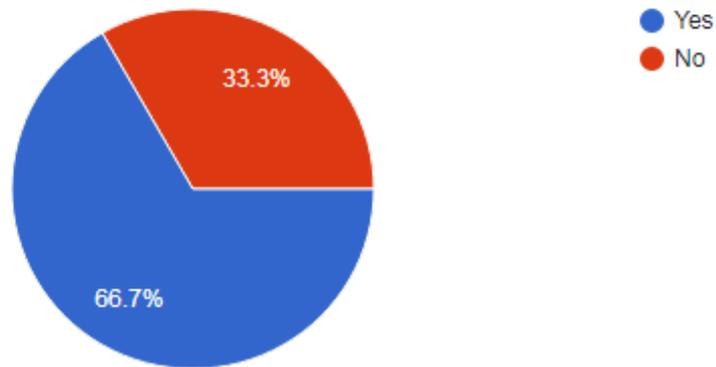
**TABLE 2**

Do you think Sex work is work?	Yes	No	Total
	29	13	42

Out of 42 people 29 people believe that Sex work is also work like any other way or earning Income.

Do you think there is a difference between Sex work and Prostitution

42 responses



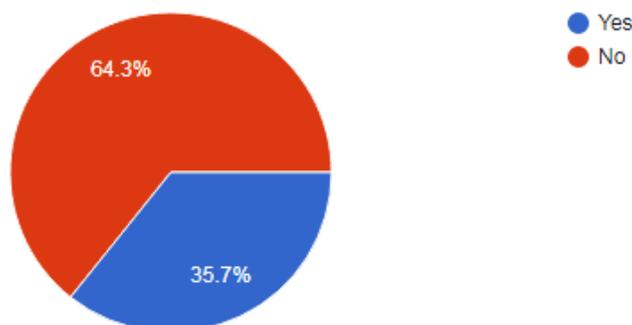
**TABLE 3**

Do you think there is a difference between Sex work and Prostitution?	Yes	No	Total
	28	14	42

Is there is a difference between Sex work Prostitution, 28 out of 42 believe that there is while 14 out of 42 believe that it's the same.

Is there Economic influence and Intention to behave unethically related to each other ? Is there any science ?

42 responses



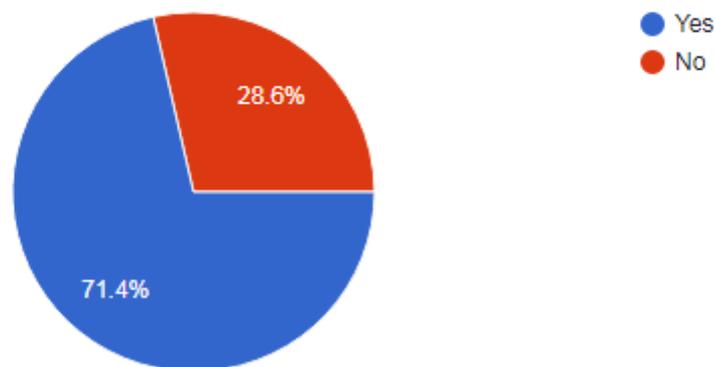
**TABLE 4**

Is there Economic influence and Intention to behave unethically related to each other? Is there any science?	Yes	No	Total
	15	27	42

Majority of people do not think that economic influence and intention to behave unethically are related to each other.

Lonely and Repressed men go to Sex worker for happiness and satisfaction.

42 responses

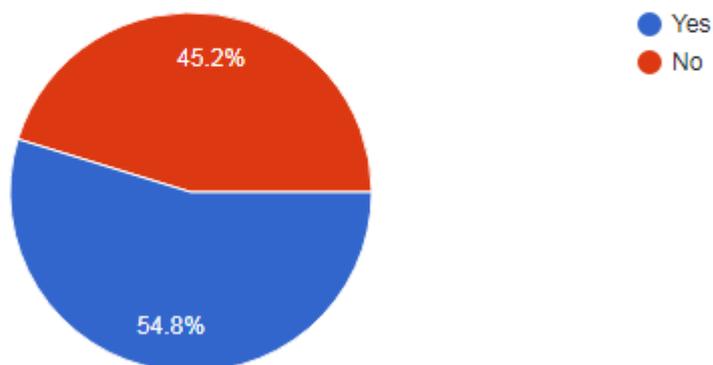
**TABLE 5**

Does the legalization of sex working secure the welfare of those engaged in?	Yes	No	Total
	23	19	42

23 out of 42 people believe that legalization of sex work helps the sex workers giving them equal rights and legislation just like other workers.

Such Females no longer remain human beings but are reduced to Objects.

42 responses



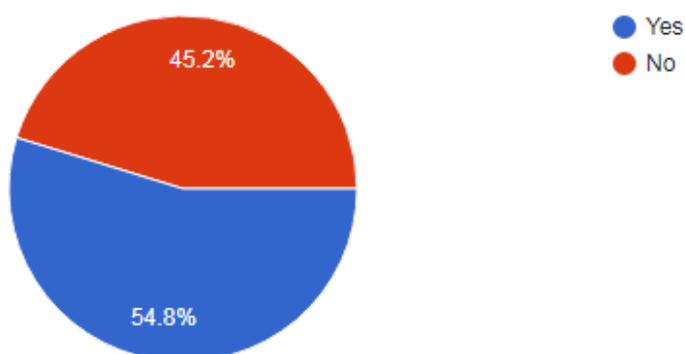
**TABLE 6**

Do you think such Females no longer remain human beings but are reduced to Objects?	Yes	No	Total
	23	19	42

23 people out of 42 people think that such women who are sex workers are no longer treated as human beings but just treated like objects.

Does the legalization of sex working secure the welfare of those engaged in

42 responses



**TABLE 7**

Do you think Lonely and Repressed men go to Sex worker for happiness and satisfaction?	Yes	No	Total
	30	12	42

It is believed by the majority that Lonely and repressed men seek happiness and satisfaction in these sex workers.

### Hypothesis Testing

#### Chisquare

If p value is < than alpha level we reject the null hypothesis

**H<sub>0</sub>** Sex workers are not accepted by the society

**H<sub>a</sub>** Sex workers are accepted by the society

Observed	Male	Female	Total
Are Accepted	2	1	3
Are not Accepted	18	21	39
Total	20	22	42

Expected	Male	Female
Are Accepted	1.428571429	1.571428571
Are not Accepted	18.57142857	20.42857143

(O-e) <sup>2</sup> /e	Male	Female
Are Accepted	0.228571429	0.207792208
Are not Accepted	0.017582418	0.015984016

Significance level 0.05

Summation 0.46993

**Degree of Freedom** 2

**P value** 0.790598

Alpha Value 0.05

Hence proved that null hypothesis is correct

Chi-square test was conducted to assess the significance level at 0.05%. Pearson Chi Square Significance value is 0.46993 ( $p > .05$ ) therefore we will accept the Null Hypothesis. So, we can conclude that Sex workers are not accepted by the society.

## DISCUSSIONS

From the research we learnt that sex workers have a different image in the society due to their work. For majority of the people their work is not referred to as work but a sin, shameful practise, etc. We asked some questions to the society regarding sex workers to get to know what they think about them and got some mixed opinions for the community. There were quite some myths regarding sex workers on which we did some more research and found the reality behind it. They are as follows,

- **Myth:** Sex Workers Do Not Have Families and are mostly Single Women  
**Reality:** Sex Workers Often Live in Families and Have Multiple Identities as Mothers, Fathers, Sisters, and Brothers
- **Myth:** There is no good reason for anyone to go into or remain in sex work.  
**Reality:** For many people, sex work is their best or even their only opportunity to earn enough to support their families. Like all people, sex workers need empowerment through access to health care, job training, education, an end to discrimination, and opportunities to make a living wage in more than one way. They also face social stigma that can prohibit their movement into other forms of labor.
- **Myth:** Most sex workers are coerced or forced into doing it.  
**Reality:** No evidence supports this claim. Millions of people are involved in sex work worldwide. Sex workers are individuals whose reasons for engaging in sex work – and leaving it – are personal, economic and social – as complex as anyone’s reasons for involvement in any type of work.
- **Myth:** Allowing sex work to happen without criminalizing it will encourage human trafficking and coercion into the sex industry.  
**Reality:** Giving sex workers more rights would likely discourage trafficking into sex work. For example, in Thailand, many people support extending labor and social security rights to sex workers on grounds that such policies would promote health and safety protections, allow labor unionization to improve working conditions, and expose and reduce the number of both coerced and underage sex workers. In India, organized sex workers work to identify minors and trafficked persons in their brothels and seek help for them.
- **Myth:** Demand for sex work drives human trafficking.

**Reality:** People are susceptible to the lies and tricks of human traffickers because they are seeking better lives, a way out of poverty, joblessness and discrimination

- **Myth:** The Most Pressing, Self-reported Health Concern Facing Sex Workers is HIV Infection  
**Reality:** HIV is Often Not the Most Pressing, Self-reported Health Concern for Sex Workers
- **Myth:** Sex Work and Prostitution are same  
**Reality:** Prostitution is a gendered, sexualized, and racialized labor system, one that typically involves the exchange of sexual services for money, goods, or other benefits whereas Sex work encompasses different types of intimate arrangements that blur the boundaries between erotic, emotional, and economic labor
- **Myth:** Focusing law enforcement efforts on the customers of sex workers will stop the commercial sex trade  
**Reality:** It is not the number of customers but economic trends and social conditions such as unemployment and a shortage of living wage opportunities that determine the number of sex workers at any given time
- **Myth:** Sex workers are dangerous to the general population because most have diseases – they transmit HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections  
**Reality:** Sex workers are often more knowledgeable about sexual health – and practice safe sex more often – than the general population. They often act as sexual health educators for their clients and should be mobilized, not demonized, in the struggle to control HIV/AIDS
- **Myth:** Raids of brothels are the best way to help trafficked sex workers  
**Reality:** Raids of brothels typically lead to the arrest, detention, incarceration and deportation of people caught there. In many places, those caught in a brothel raid are more likely to be abused by the authorities than helped. Most “rescue” efforts assume that all sex workers are trafficked. Empowering sex workers to identify and assist people who have been coerced is the most effective way to combat trafficking into sex work. Solutions to trafficking are complex. Pulling people out of brothels neither “saves” nor “rescues” them. Civil society needs to address the factors that allow people to be lured into trafficking situations

## LIMITATIONS

- Due to the current pandemic situations, we couldn't gather ground level data and had to rely on most of the secondary data.
- The authors could not connect in-person with the sex workers going through these situations to understand their issues, what all they go through, etc.

## CONCLUSION

The discussions surrounding sex work are complicated and often well-intentioned, but ultimately have proven harmful to communities of sex workers. This may include forced labor, sexual exploitation, slavery, and more.

With little source of support upon retirement from sex work or in old age, many devadasis ended up either as beggars or as middle persons in trafficking.

Sex workers make a lot of compromise to extent a financial support to the children and family. Given a choice between being destitute on the streets and lulling hungry children to sleep every night or working as a sex worker and expanding the opportunities for their children, these women choose the latter.

Government should arrange livelihood programmes and savings would break their need to seek sex work as the only alternate means of sustenance

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