



**“Unveiling the Reality: The Toll of Labor Rights Exclusion on Banishanta’s Sex Workers”**

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A Thesis Submitted By

Kongka Sarbomangala

Student ID: 19317001

Submitted to the Department of Economics and Social Sciences in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Social Sciences in Anthropology

Department of Economics and Social Sciences School of Humanities and Social Sciences,  
BRAC University

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## **Declaration**

I hereby declare that:

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing my degree at BRAC University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where it is appropriately cited through with full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

Student's Full Name & Signature:

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Student Full Name: Kongka Sarbomangala

Student ID: 19317001

## Approval

The thesis titled “Unveiling the reality: the Hidden Toll of Labor Rights Exclusion on Banishanta’s Sex Workers” submitted by Kongka Sarbomangala of Summer 2023, has been accepted as satisfactory in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelors of Social Sciences in Anthropology on 24<sup>th</sup> September 2023.

### Examining Committee:

Supervisor: (Member)

---

Dr. Shahidur Rahman

Professor, Department of ESS, BRAC University

Program Coordinator: (Member)

---

Dr. Shahidur Rahman

Professor, Department of ESS, BRAC University

Departmental Head: (Chair)

---

Dr. Wasiqur Rahman Khan Professor and

Chairperson, Department of ESS, BRAC University

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## Abbreviations and Acronyms

AIDS	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
BIDS	Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies
BLA	Bangladesh Labor Act
BMJ	British Medical Journal
BNWLA	Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
CGIAR	Consortium of International Agriculture Research Centers
COYOTE	Call of Your Old Tired Ethics
CSS	Christian Service Society
DMSC	Durbar Mahila Samanwaya
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
ILO	International Labor Organization
KII	Key informant Interview
LDC	Least Developed Nation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
STD	Sexual Transmitted Diseases
UMCS	Usha Multipurpose Cooperative Society
UN	United Nation

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## **Abstract:**

Bangladesh has a long history of prostitution. While religion forbids prostitution, its laws do not prevent a woman from becoming a prostitute if she so chooses. This oldest institution cannot be eliminated immediately since it is deeply ingrained in society. In addition to the issue of eradicating prostitution and dragging the workers out of the occupation, there is another pressing issue surrounding the "Labor rights" of these workers. In this context, this dissertation seeks to investigate the labor rights situation of sex workers in Banishanta village, Mongla, and gain insights into the daily challenges they face. Since "prostitution" is considered an informal occupation lacking legal protections and specific labor rights, this study also aims to assess how the absence of such rights affects the lives of sex workers. This dissertation also concentrates on identifying the factors that contribute to improving the well-being of sex workers. Simultaneously, it will analyze the factors that hinder the progress and development of these workers. This research centers on the marginalized sex workers of Banishanta, who not only face socio-economic challenges but are also grappling with the consequences of climate change. The rising water levels in the vicinity of Banishanta's brothels exacerbate their already difficult living and working conditions. There is a huge lack of data regarding the rights of sex workers in Banishanta. Existing data primarily emphasize climate change impacts and the hardships faced by the local population. This dissertation employs a qualitative research approach, involving the collection of primary data through interviews with sex workers who experience daily challenges stemming from both climate change effects and the absence of labor rights which lead them to disempowerment. The findings of the research reveal that the sex workers face challenges like,

impoverished living and working condition lead to poor hygiene access, inadequate health and medical facilities, improper education system for the worker's children, disorganized wage system, lack of security and one of the major challenge is facing the 'social stigmatization'. The concept of work hours, sick leave and holidays are completely new to some new workers and are myth to some of the older workers. Furthermore, significant factors such as social stigmatization hinder the progress of these workers. Nevertheless, a few actors, NGO and certain government organization are making efforts to offer assistance to help improve their lives. Another intriguing fact came out in my research that the primary emphasis of the stakeholders tend to be on providing aid rather than ensuring the protection of their labor rights and ensuring their overall well-being in long-term. The findings mentioned have been examined through the framework of 'Intersectionality' by Kimberle Crenshaw and 'Empowerment' by Naila Kabeer. This analysis has helped to comprehend how the lack of labor rights contributes to distinct experiences in the lives of sex workers considering their age, background, race/ beauty standard and status in the brothel and further explores their encounters with disempowerment and empowerment. This dissertation makes a contribution to the current body of research by placing a central focus on labor rights. It comprehensively considers multiple facets, including the legal and societal consequences, as well as the pervasive issue of social stigma. Furthermore, this research illuminates the challenges experienced by sex workers in the midst of and following the COVID-19 pandemic, offering valuable insights into the pandemic's far-reaching effects on their means of earning a livelihood.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction:

### 1.1 Statement of the problem:

Bangladesh is a magnificent example of progress and poverty eradication. Bangladesh, which was one of the poorest countries when it was founded in 1971, attained lower-middle income classification in 2015. It is expected to leave the UN's list of least developed nations (LDC) in 2026 (World Bank, 2023). The development and the aim to develop more never would have been possible without the contribution of the workers (from all sectors) of Bangladesh. However, informal workers have been suffering a lot lately. Workplace disasters, ignorant owners, ignoring worker's rights and extreme inequality are few problems responsible for them to suffer which is slowing down the development process of the country (Ahmed & Al-Mamun, 2017). Particularly, women from informal working sectors struggle for their rights. Women from poor backgrounds—married or single—are often seen to struggle greatly in situations like these. In both urban and rural areas, women are frequently observed battling for a living and taking up undesirable jobs. Rural young women are undoubtedly being drawn to cities by poverty. They take jobs in the textile industry, as housemaids, or in other fields. Sometimes, they are forced into prostitution after being subjected to sexual abuse and harassment in the work field, losing their chastity by their superiors (Ullah, 2005). Bangladesh has a long history of prostitution. While religion forbids prostitution, its laws do not prevent a woman from becoming a prostitute if she so chooses. This oldest institution cannot be eliminated immediately since it is deeply ingrained in society (Ullah, 2005). According to Metzarnath (1998), Sex workers/Prostitutes refer to that section of women population who are engaged, legally or illegally, part time or full

time, regular or irregular sexual acts for money or other material gain (Ullah,2005). Well, women who have been engaged in sex works around the world often undergo severe oppression, violation and domination by the society due to cultural stigma which led them to disempowerment and marginalization. Therefore, in order to resist such persecution and in order to ensure their rights they started engaging in different movements. Since the late 1960's and early 1970's marginalized people of United States and Europe have been engaged in several movements on sex worker's rights. The rights included- freedom from discrimination and violence and rights to association, movement, work, health, privacy and access to justice (Mgbako, 2015). This thesis paper mainly investigate the labor rights of the sex workers particularly of Banishanta and the journey of their struggle to ensure a better living and working place.

Furthermore, there is a whole spectrum of situations between the wealthy, educated woman who chooses commercial sex from a wide range of options and the ignorant, impoverished woman who is physically coerced into it. So, a group of women are self-driven into this occupation and another group end up in this occupation due to poverty (Ullah, 2005). In my work, I would focus on the sex workers who turned to this line of employment due to poverty or other miserable reasons in the outlying regions of Khulna division. This dissertation focuses on the challenges the sex workers go through due to the absence of their labor rights. Furthermore, the dissertation also aims to explore certain factors that resist the workers to ensure their rights. The sex workers in Bangladesh's outlying regions have always faced terrible tragedies. Focusing on the Southern part of Bangladesh, the lives of sex workers in Banishanta are the example of such tragic lives. Banishanta is one of the 14 official brothels in Bangladesh. Like Bangladesh's other twenty-eight coastal districts, Banishanta is battling the effects of climate change. And the brothel that is

located in Banishanta is always under water in the rainy seasons. Around 105 female sex workers live in Banishanta, which is primarily populated by women. Moreover, according to a research on Banishanta sex workers in 2017, there are no legal documents of identity or birth certificates of the women (Bremner, 2018). Besides, the river erosion is the biggest struggle that the workers go through almost every day. There are limited works on the labor's rights of the sex workers of Bangladesh but no specific writings on the workers of Banishanta. This study explores the current condition of worker's rights among sex workers in Bangladesh through investigating the methods used by sex worker communities to advance their rights and improve working conditions, by studying the profound impact of empowerment and disempowerment on their lives, and by attempting to identify the factors that have been either influencing or resisting to ensure their rights.

## **1.2 Research Question:**

- 1) What are the challenges that the sex workers face while working due to the absence of labor rights?
- 2) How much agency do the sex workers have on their resources and achievements?
- 3) What are the factors that have been either helping or discouraging the workers to learn and ensure their rights?

## **1.3 Research Objective:**

- 1) To identify the struggles they face due to the lack of worker's right and methods taken by communities of sex workers to enhance their working conditions and advance their rights.

2) To analyze the impact of empowerment and disempowerment on the sex workers in absence of labor rights.

3) To understand the factors that can either assist or resist the sex workers to achieve their labor rights.

#### **1.4 Theoretical Framework:**

To grasp the significance of labor rights for sex workers in Bangladesh, delving into the challenges they confront while working is essential. These challenges can differ from person to person, making it crucial to comprehend their varying struggles with both privilege and discrimination within society. To achieve this understanding, this dissertation employs the theoretical framework of intersectionality. By utilizing this framework, the aim is to uncover the intricate power dynamics within brothels and their impact on experiences of privilege and discrimination. Moreover, the dissertation embraces the theoretical framework of 'empowerment' to illuminate the empowerment or disempowerment of women in Banishanta. This approach facilitates the measurement of their empowerment, taking into account factors like race, age, and economic status within the context of the brothel. Through these frameworks, the dissertation seeks to shed light on the multifaceted experiences and challenges faced by sex workers in Bangladesh, ultimately advocating for their labor rights.

Intersectionality theory by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) describes the power dynamics by considering individual's experiences and access to resources. The concept of intersectionality describes how built-up, interconnected, and intersecting traits including gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, nationality, economic position, and faith collaborate on complex and varied experiences of privilege and oppression. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) initially developed



the term 'intersectionality' in order to comprehend how black women's legal experiences and results in the United States are concurrently impacted by their sex and ethnicity (Hughes & Dubrow, 2018). Cole (2009) stated that the concept of intersectionality theory have given an entire understanding on the experiences of inequality and discrimination (Remedios & Akhtar, 2019). Furthermore, Naila Kabeer (1999) argues that the concept of empowerment refers to the processes by which persons who have been denied the power to make choices come to possess such a capacity and is inseparably associated with the state of disempowerment. Kabeer's (1999) theory of empowerment highlights, in contrast to the traditional definition of power as "power over" others, the shift to a deeper and profound understanding of "power to" succeed agency, autonomy, and good change in one's life. The approach she takes opposes the established power structures and promotes the empowerment of oppressed people, particularly women, to take charge of their own lives and decision-making (Kabeer, 1999). In the context of Bangladesh, this thesis work has focused on Kabeer's theory of empowerment and Crenshaw's theory on 'Intersectionality'.

In her early writing on intersectionality, Crenshaw (1989, 1991) makes it clear that her first discourse was inspired by and focused on the experiences of women of colors, the theory is a flexible too for the investigation of subjectivity and power relations throughout the spectrum of social categories (Pocock, 2015). Scholars like Hughes and Dubrow (2018) argued that an intersectional approach is important in order to measure the political empowerment of women. According to Bergman & Magnusson (1997), recent studies on the concept of intersectionality have adopted person-centered approach to take into account combinations or crossovers of various advantages and disadvantages to look at how socioeconomic status and ethnicity/race interact (Chion & Yip, 2019). Furthermore, the intersectionality approach was used by Landale

et al. (2017) to analyze discrimination experiences among Latino individuals and they discovered various degrees of bias at various intersections of legal and socioeconomic status (Chion & Yip, 2019). Hannah R. Pockock (2015) used the theory of intersectionality to argue that women of colors got little attention from social movements, including prostitution (Pockock, 2015).

Therefore, Crenshaw's work has had an impact not just on anthropology but also on a number of other disciplines, including sociology, feminist studies, and legal study. Moreover, According to Dhamoon and Hankivsky (2011), intersectionality framework by Crenshaw (1989) takes into account the potential for many identities to emerge across several spheres of status, including ethnicity/race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, and religion (Chion & Yip, 2019). Moreover, Intersectionality is a way of thinking that asks us to consider the way power and inequality work together. Scholars like Glenn 1999 & Weber 2000 who studied intersectionality talked about how things like being a man or a woman, belonging to a certain racial group, or having a particular social status all come together to create different levels of power in society or social hierarchies. Collins (2000); Hooks (1984) claimed that these combinations of characteristics are like a puzzle that forms a bigger picture of how people are treated. This mix of factors can lead to some people having advantages while others face disadvantages (Hughes & Dubrow, 2018). This idea helps us understand that society is not just about one type of privilege or oppression, but a complex web of them. According to this viewpoint, a sex worker may encounter different mixes of advantages and oppressions across individual spheres. To be more specific, for people who are at various intersections of several identities, the experience and meaning of benefits and disadvantages may be substantially different for them. Through the lens of intersectionality, the struggle of the sex workers to ensure their labor rights may be diverse.

'Empowerment' is a term that is frequently used but rarely defined. In development theory and practice, the phrase "empowerment" is frequently used carelessly, which hides a problematic idea (Global Journal Inc. US, 2013). However, Naila Kabeer through her works gave a vivid notion on empowerment. According to Kabeer (1989), empowerment represents a new shift in the power dynamics between men and women, where "women have greater control over their own lives and men have less control over women's lives." A more engaging description of empowerment was offered by Kabeer (1994). She views empowerment as a notion that deserves to be more than merely a slogan and has theoretical and practical value (Global Journal Inc. Us, 2013). Kabeer (1999) emphasized on specific elements of empowerment. Kabeer (1999) furthermore argued that three interrelated elements can be used to construct the ability to exercise choice; i) resources, ii) agency and iii) achievements. According to Naila Kabeer, all of one's existing social, economic, political, and cultural possessions are included in one's resources. One's resources are determined by factors including one's education, money, social standing, cultural views, physical appearance, amount of violence, etc. agency is the ability to make decisions or control resources, bargain, negotiate, lie, manipulate, rebel, and resist. The terms "outcome" or "accomplishment" relate to variations or changes in choices as well as disparities in decision-making capacity. The word "outcome" connotes one's relative acquisition of resources and/or loss of agency during the course of one's life (Das & Kundu, 2009). She asserts that empowerment should be understood within the unique cultural, social, and economic settings of the individuals or groups involved rather than being broadly defined or reviewed. This environmental distinctiveness helps in avoiding fundamentalist notions and enables a deeper understanding of the multitude of empowering processes. Her research's theoretical foundation is mostly drawn on the works of Sen (1985) and Batliwala (1993, 1994).

Dr. Kathryn Yount (2017) moreover elaborated the concept of Kabeer's empowerment in her work. According to Yount (2017) a woman's capacity to accomplish individual empowerment is influenced by her living environment. It will be challenging for her to gain the means needed to develop voice and agency if she lives in a community that is severely underdeveloped (CGIAR, 2017). Therefore, it becomes essential for communities to change in terms of women's opportunities, gender norms, and the collective voice and agency of women. However, when it comes to developing, assessing, and evaluating the impact of multidimensional empowerment initiatives, researchers are still struggling to do a satisfactory job. To scholar like Yount, measuring women's empowerment is very necessary in development works since it acts as an ongoing reminder of workers and programs of its significance. Furthermore, Yount asserts, addressing workers about current injustices, gender and other socioeconomic inequities, and how empowering practices might improve equality (CGIAR, 2017)

Researchers have looked at the connection between empowerment and intersectionality in a variety of contexts, notably those related to social movements, community building, and social justice work. Moreover a thorough approach to comprehending the complex dynamics of worker's rights among sex workers in Bangladesh may be achievable using the perspective of intersectionality and empowerment. It could provide an in-depth understanding of the difficulties faced by sex workers and the methods they use to improve their working conditions and rights, while also taking into account how institutional limitations and the resources at hand affect whether they are empowered or disempowered.

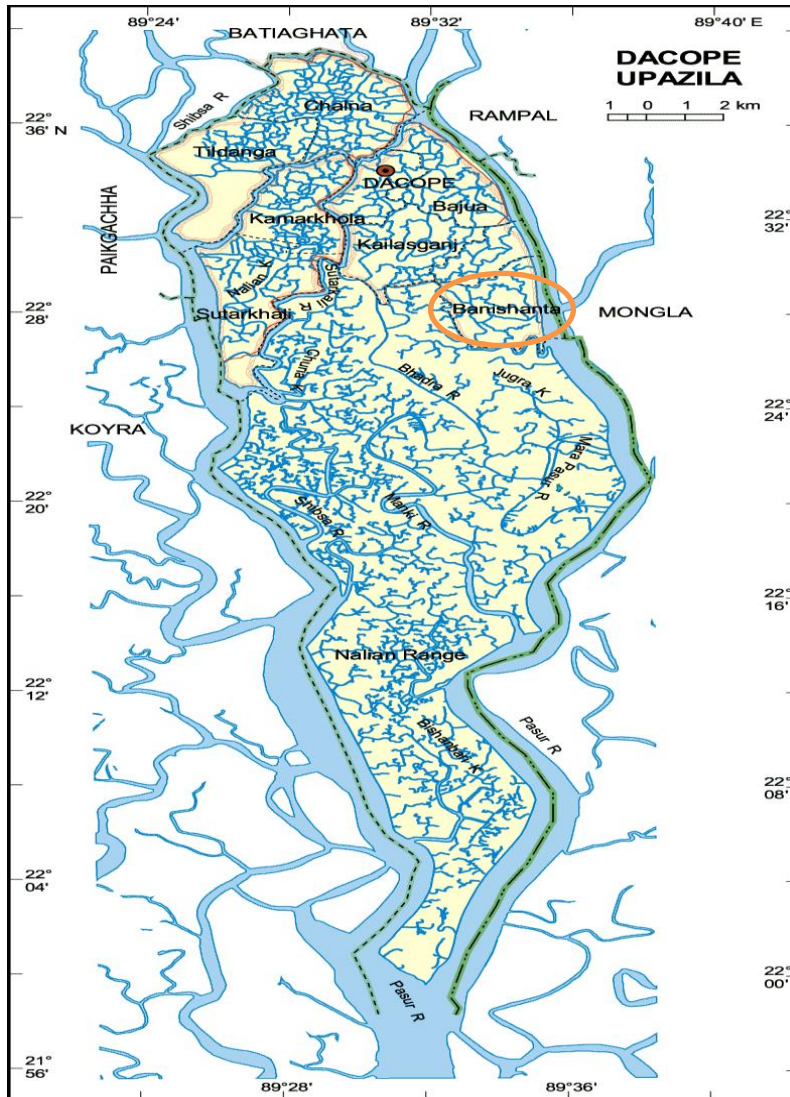
## **1.5 Methodology:**

This dissertation is a qualitative study on the condition of sex worker's rights in Banishanta and for data collection I have conducted Interviews. The main goal of this study is to understand the experiences and difficulties that sex workers encounter throughout the span of their work due to the absence of labor rights as well as how they perceive and fight for their labor rights. This essay's specific goal is to determine whether or not workers' difficulties impair their ability to exercise their rights. Moreover, this writing has the aim to investigate the work environment, wage system and living standard of the workers and to identify the factors that help the workers to ensure and fight for their rights.

### **1.5.1 Research Location:**

The study was carried out in Banishanta village, which is situated in the Dacope sub-division inside Khulna division. Specifically, the research focused on the Banishanta bazar area. Banishanta is a small island that constantly faces the threat of rising water levels. The Banishanta ghat, also known as 'Banishanta *para*' or Banishanta brothel, is located near the Mongla Seaport, approximately 50 kilometers away from Khulna city. In this area, all the sex workers live in unity and carry out their work. Their houses are lined up in a row right next to the river. A map of Dacope *Upazila* has been included, pinpointing the location of 'Banishanta' village, which serves as the focal point of my research.

**Figure 1: Map of Dacope *Upazila***



### **1.5.2 Data Collection:**

Data from both primary and secondary sources have been gathered for the study's goal. The research has been conducted using a qualitative analysis for the primary data collection. Furthermore, this study has conducted two types of researches for primary data collection.

#### *Interviews:*

In order to explore the access of the sex workers toward their rights and their struggle due to the absence of their labor rights, this study has conducted 13 in-person interviews. An interview is a way of gathering information by having a conversation by asking question to a person. It is a method used to learn more about a topic, and it involves two or more people, with one person asking the questions, and the other person providing the answers (George, 2022). For this dissertation, the questionnaire has focused on issues like; discrimination and violence, freedom of movement, work, health and reproduction, privacy and access to justice.

This study is a qualitative research and the goal of the paper seeks an in-depth understanding of social phenomena of the sex workers in order to investigate the experiences and challenges they face for the absence of labor rights and while establishing their rights. The belief, experience, and meaning systems of individuals are of interest to qualitative researchers. Statistical analysis and empirical computation are not a part of qualitative research (Brink, 1993). Due to the qualitative nature of the research, the selected questionnaire was semi-structured and open-ended in order to focus on the participants' personal experiences, challenges, and overall experience of their work.



For this work, interviews of female sex workers between the ages of 20 to 50 were conducted. I had focused on female sex workers particularly working in Banishanta area, Mongla. The women of different ages were selected to analyze the condition of their workplace, their struggle, their challenges and their achievements from different timeframe. This selection helped the dissertation to compare the condition of the sex workers and their perception on labor's rights from different timelines. The interviews have been conducted with the assistance of two representatives of the NGO that currently runs a contract based project in Banishanta brothel.

### *Key Informant Interview:*

Key informant interviews are an in-depth, semi-structured qualitative research technique that entails speaking with people who are highly knowledgeable and experienced about a certain subject or group of people (Bernard, 2018).

To understand the mere situation of the working condition of the sex workers and to analyze their achievements and struggle to ensure labor's rights key informant interview (KII) have been conducted. Since I have chosen my respondents specifically from Banishanta brothel, therefore I had taken KII of the workers of the NGO that currently runs a project in Banishanta brothel. I have chosen the area manager of the organization working in Banishanta for KII. KII helped me to learn about the perspective of the educated and aware individuals on the concept of 'prostitution'.

The discourse includes questions about the perspectives on sex worker's struggle, empowerment, disempowerment, legal and social factors and role of the two representatives. It included questions about the area manager's and teacher's own experience while working with the sex workers. Furthermore, the questions focused particularly on how the representatives of

organization respond to the scenario of sex worker’s receiving their health care service, education, safety, accommodation and social services. It also asked the representatives questions regarding the working strategies of the organization during the wave of COVID-19 and their idea about how the sex workers survived such a pandemic. The KII actually helped me gain an entire knowledge about the factors that assist the sex workers to learn and fight for their rights. Moreover, it assisted to learn more about the supports from various stakeholders and the strategies how they execute different programs.

**Table 1: Profile of KIIs**

<b>KIIs</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Nature of interview</b>	<b>Justification for selection</b>	<b>Information sought</b>
Area Project Manager of ‘Dalit’ NGO	1	In person and Over phone	Have been working with Dalit as the area project manager of Banishanta brothel since 2019. Takes a thorough care of the contract based project of Dalit running in Banishanta.	Main goal of the stakeholders, areas of emphasis, challenges of the workers through the stakeholder’s lens, legal factors and role of NGOs in ensuring rights of the workers.
Teacher of local schooling facility provided Dalit.	1	In Person and over phone	Have been working as a teacher with Dalit for more than 2 years and education the children of the sex workers with primary	Empowerment and disempowerment factors, social factors

			education	
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*Secondary Research:*

This research also includes secondary data for gathering information. Books, journals, articles, newspaper, Governmental/NGO reports, and internet have been utilized for collecting authentic information for this paper. I have coordinated the information from the secondary and primary research in order to meet the research challenges. However, since this is an undergraduate research, the interviews were conducted on a limited extent. Furthermore, to establish the significance of the primary data secondary resources was very helpful. The secondary data are retrieved from World Bank, BLA (Bangladesh Labor Act) 2006, ethnographic papers and articles on the labor’s rights of Bangladesh, ethnographic works and articles based on the rights of the sex worker’s from all around the world including Bangladesh.

**1.5.3 Data Analysis:**

The interviews were conducted in-person and recorded. The duration of each recorded interview ranged from 18 to 30 minutes. In addition, there were follow-up phone interviews or in-person interviews that took place later. They agreed to let me record and take notes throughout the interviews. Each respondent gave their consent willingly and was given the freedom to stop at any time. To more accurately assess the conditions of the respondents and ask additional crucial questions, the interview questionnaire was semi-structured. Throughout the interviews, I made an effort to assess their comforts and discomforts through participant observation.

Following the interviews, the audio recordings were first transcribed, and then where needed, they were translated into English. Second, each participant (sex worker) had the chance to select their own case study created from the interviews. Since the questionnaire was open-ended and semi-structured, it was easier to learn more about individuals and consider their life experiences. Thus, it helped me to look outside of the intended framework and comprehend the similarities and differences among numerous elements. It also allowed the respondents to describe and frame their challenges from their viewpoints.

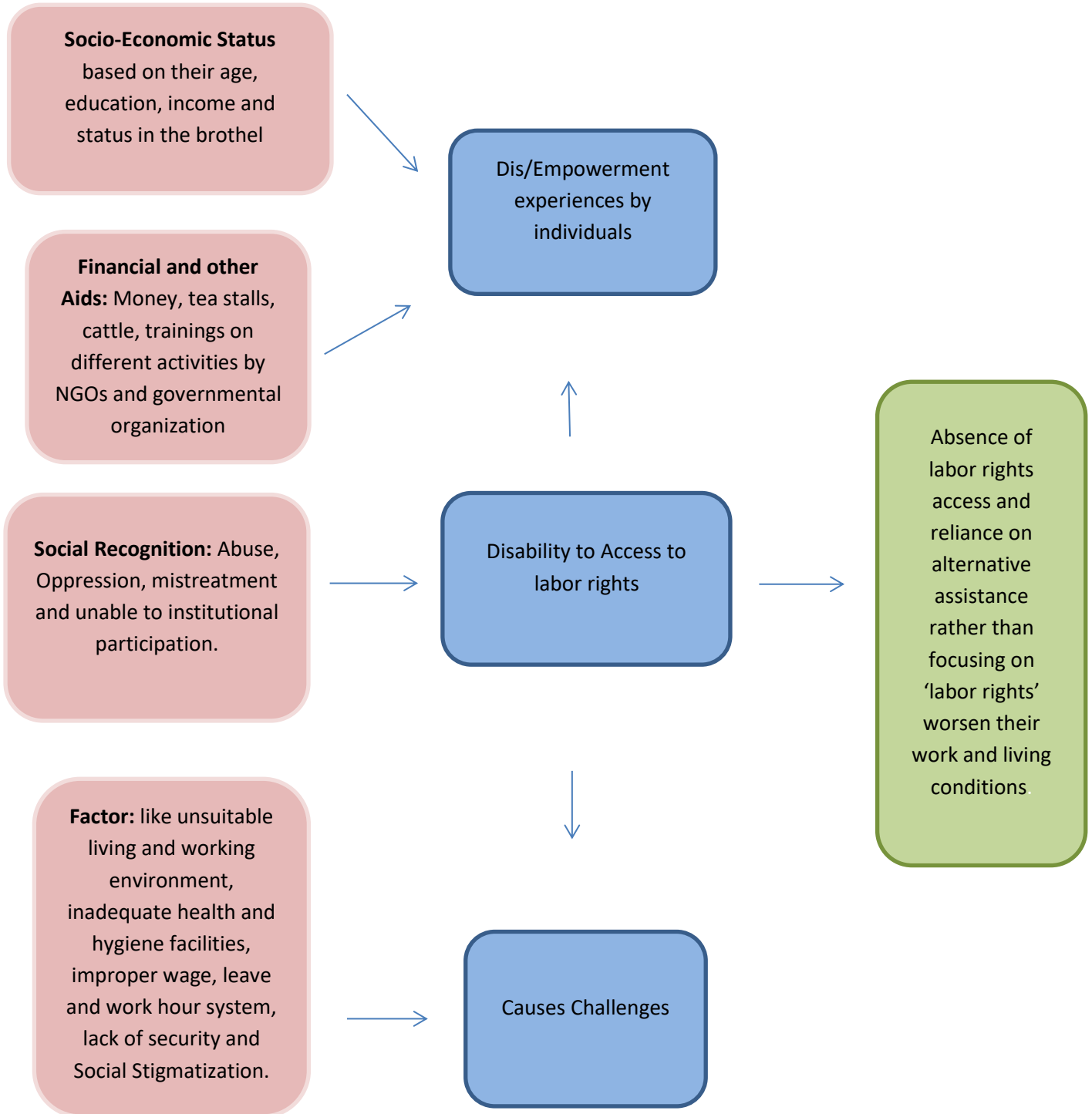
To analyze my results, I followed three steps. First, I categorized the data to understand the socio-economic status of the workers inside the brothel. I additionally categorized the aids that they are provided with, their social recognition and few factors from the findings. Then, I identified secondary themes regarding their disability to access labor rights and how that causes the challenges they encounter that affect their livelihoods and working conditions, ultimately influencing their empowerment or disempowerment. Finally, in the third stage, I established the main overarching themes for my study. Furthermore, this dissertation uses the intersectionality framework by Kimberle Crenshaw to explore power dynamics in brothels and their effects on privilege and discrimination. Additionally, it employs the empowerment framework by Naila Kabeer to assess women's empowerment in Banishanta, considering factors like race, age, and economic status within the brothel context. These frameworks aim to reveal the complex experiences of sex workers in Bangladesh and advocate for their labor rights.

**Figure 2: Thematic arrangement**

1<sup>st</sup> Step Coding:

2<sup>nd</sup> Step Themes:

Overall Aspect:



## 1.6. Significance of the Research:

Although the constitution's Article 18(2) mandates that the "state shall take effective preventive measures against prostitution and gambling," an adult is nonetheless free to disclose their involvement into the industry. According to Tawhida Khandaker, director of the Bangladesh National Woman Lawyers Association (BNWLA), "the profession is not directly declared illegal in the constitution" (The daily star, 2014). However, there has been a dilemma about whether or not prostitution is legal in Bangladesh. As a result, relatively few studies on the labor rights of Bangladeshi sex workers are carried out. To be more precise, nothing much is said on the condition of labor rights and struggles of Banishanta sex workers in recent research works. Therefore, this thesis will assist in further research by providing data focusing on the sex workers living in Banishanta village. This thesis will shed light on the daily struggles and lifestyles of sex workers since it seeks to undertake qualitative research through in-person interviews. However, there has been a limited focus on understanding the challenges they face in the absence of labor rights, particularly in comparison to their experiences of empowerment or disempowerment. This dissertation will try to focus on these matters.

According to a survey of Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), few sex workers in Bangladesh engage in other forms of employment like handicrafts and tailoring, and the majority of them only work as sex workers. 71.2 percent of respondents to the BIDS poll said that sex work was their only source of income (Islam & Smyth, 2016). Therefore, prostitution industry indeed contributes a huge economic return to a significant numbers of women working in this sector. Therefore, since 'prostitution' is a significant part of the informal labor sector; the result of the study may have an important contribution to organize the labor conditions in the

informal sector of the state. Moreover, since the dissertation focus on the labor rights it may contribute to structure the worker's rights by considering factors, for instance, legal and social impact, social stigma, and others. Because sex work is often looked down upon and sex workers are pushed to the edges of society, having a legal policy that supports their well-being and work rights can eventually help change the negative view of their job. When there are clear and fair rules in place, it can help reduce the stigma around sex work. It shows that society recognizes their rights and values their safety. So, such policies can gradually lead to a more positive perception of sex work and the people involved in it. Furthermore, it may help to understand the situation of the workers during and after the wave of COVID-19 and how their business has been affected by the pandemic.

### **1.7 Organization of the Study:**

This dissertation explores the current condition of worker's rights among sex workers in Bangladesh and explores the factors that have been responsible for their empowerment and disempowerment. The following is how this thesis is structured: The background circumstances are introduced in Chapter 1 together with research questions and objectives, the methodology, the theoretical framework, and the significance of the thesis and structure of the thesis. In Chapter 2, the review of prior research and the identification of knowledge gaps are the main topics. The information in Chapter 3 about the working condition of the sex workers and their knowledge and awareness about labor rights comes from case studies and key informant interviews (KII). I evaluate the findings and relate them to the existing research as well as KII in chapter 4. Since the findings are based on in-depth interviews, they will enhance the data and offer evidence for existing research in this field. The general review is concluded in Chapter 5, which also includes a section on recommendations, limitations, and future study.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

This chapter compiles relevant studies by different scholars who have addressed the concerns of this research. The initial section centers on worker's rights in Bangladesh. Here, the focus lies on examining the existing rights of workers and the circumstances of those employed in informal sectors, along with their corresponding rights in the country. In the subsequent section, the spotlight is on the rights of sex workers in the global context, particularly in relation to labor rights. This section aims to highlight instances where these workers face discrimination. Lastly, the third section delves into the present conditions faced by sex workers in Bangladesh.

#### **2.1. Worker's Right and Informal sector realities:**

Given the significant size of the workforce in Bangladesh, it became essential to establish a comprehensive law to safeguard the rights and advantages of all workers. In response, the country introduced a labor law in 2006 known as the Bangladesh Labor Act (BLA). This law aims to ensure fair treatment and protection for workers across various sectors.



The act establishes specific criteria, within which various rights of workers are outlined to be adhered to within workplaces. In this section, I will spotlight a few pertinent chapters of the Bangladesh Labor Act (BLA). Chapter 3 addresses the 'employment of adolescents', while chapter 4 encompasses 'maternity benefits'. Chapter 5 encompasses 'health and hygiene', chapter 6 deals with 'safety', and chapter 8 introduces 'welfare'. Other chapters cover aspects such as 'working hours and leave' and 'wages and payment', among others (BLA, 2006). For example, let's consider the maternity provision mentioned in chapter IV:

In section 45 of the act, it is stated that women workers are not allowed to work in any establishment during the eight weeks immediately following the day of their delivery (Bangladesh Labor Act, 2006).

Moreover, the National Labor Policy of 2012 aimed to establish the rights of workers and promote the dignity of labor, striving for efficient, fair, safe, and healthy workplaces that uphold the well-being of the engaged citizens. In addition, the Bangladesh Labor Rules were introduced in 2015. These policy measures were implemented with the goal of safeguarding the rights of workers in Bangladesh (Ahmed & Al-Mamun, 2017). Nevertheless, a significant concern arises regarding the existence of policies advocating for the rights of sex workers as they belong from 'informal sector' occupation. This concern is amplified due to the criminalization of sex work in our nation, categorizing it as an occupation lacking proper protection and falling within the realm of informal or semi-protected jobs (Wijers & Doornick, 2009).

The 2006 Bangladesh Worker Welfare Foundation Act defines the informal sector as private entities where worker employment terms, conditions, and related matters are not regulated by existing Labor Act, Rules, or associated policies. Additionally, such sectors offer limited

opportunities for worker unionization (Anam, 2020). ILO's 2015 Recommendation (No. 204) aims to shift the informal economy towards formal economy. Bangladesh, as a party to this recommendation, is urged by ILO Director General Guy Ryder to establish protective laws for informal laborers. In Bangladesh, informal workers constitute around 90% of the labor force, including categories like farmers, domestic workers, self-employed individuals, and piece-rate workers. Despite contributing about 45% of the GDP, these workers lack recognition under the Labor Act-2006, leaving them unregulated and vulnerable. The Labor and Employment Ministry initiated a savings scheme for informal workers, but its implementation was hindered by policy gaps (Sejan, 2019). As a result, their pay, time off, retirement plans, sick leave, and other advantages are not set in a consistent way. Many workers follow a rule of 'No work, no pay,' as explained by Anam (2020).

Sex workers and their children may suffer horrendous health effects since this occupation is under informal sector of work. According to non-governmental organizations, 40% of Bangladesh's sex workers have had abortions, and a third of them have at least one sexually transmitted infection symptom (Clark, 2015). Young girls who work as sex workers, in particular, are given injections of steroids like dexamethasone, which serves for fattening cows and enhances the risk of renal and bone damage, in order to make them gain weight and appear older. Violence, with local gang members and police as the major offenders, poses the greatest threat to the wellbeing of sex workers, UNAIDS has reported. Unsafe and unclean working conditions inflict physical and mental suffering. Around six instances of sexual violence are experienced by street-based sex workers each month. Besides, thousands of men daily visit almost 200000 sex workers - mostly teenagers (Clark, 2015). Therefore, the concept of safety, hygiene, health, maternity care and the lessening adolescent labor is quite vague among the

brothels of Bangladesh. In addition to the mistreatment within the field, sex workers frequently encounter government-related injustices like police exploitation and unjustified confinement. These challenges parallel those encountered by individuals engaged in vulnerable, unguarded, or semi-secured roles within the informal job sector. Yet, a key distinction lies in the societal stigma linked to prostitution, isolating them and obstructing their ability to advocate for their rights openly (Wijers & Doornick, 2009).

## **2.2. Sex Worker's fighting for their labor rights:**

To gain a true understanding of the rights of sex workers and their role in society, it's vital to acknowledge that beyond any stigmatizing labels, they are essentially individuals who are engaged in work. Therefore, they deserve the same rights and benefits as any other workers. In Bangladesh, where thousands of female sex workers operate in red light districts, sex work is legally permitted (Population Council, 2015). Given its legality in certain areas, the licensed status of brothels underscores the necessity of ensuring these workers are granted their rightful entitlements. On a global scale, there has been a longstanding advocacy effort for sex workers' rights. However, human trafficking remains a grave issue, with millions of individuals trafficked annually for various purposes. Particularly concerning sex trafficking, estimates range from 5,000 to 60,000 victims (Sharp, 2015). The Dominican Republic stands out as a compelling case study due to its involvement as an origin, transit, and destination country for trafficking victims, spanning regions such as the Caribbean, the United States, and various parts of the world (Sharp, 2015). The scenario of the sex workers from Latin America and the Caribbean reveals their history of uniting for labor rights and recognition since the late 19th century, notably in places like Havana, Cuba. The movement for social and labor rights among sex workers has been traced back to events such as the prostitutes' occupation of Saint-Nizier Church in Lyon, France, in

1975, the formation of the English Collective of Prostitutes in London, and the establishment of Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics (COYOTE) in San Francisco in 1973 (Cabezas, 2019). These efforts, often traced back to the Global North, have played a significant role in shaping the discourse around sex workers' rights.

In addition, as highlighted by Sharp (2015), women engaged in sex work or exotic dancing, both of which are legally permitted in the Dominican Republic, are particularly susceptible to sex trafficking. The connection between movements advocating for sex workers' rights and those championing workers' rights often stems from the shared experiences of individual women, suggesting that these two movements should not be viewed in isolation. Globally, sex workers frequently find themselves disregarded and, more troublingly, deprived of their rightful rights. The reasons behind this neglect vary from country to country. One reason for this disregard can be traced back to the historical power dynamics between the more industrialized North and the less developed South, which have led to the exploitation of Dominican women's labor, particularly in the context of sex work. Notably, only a few places, like Argentina, offer formal opportunities for sex workers to join organizations. Surprisingly, campaigns for the unionization of sex workers have often encountered limited backing from established labor movements in developed countries such as Australia, Britain, Canada, Germany, and the Netherlands (Sharp, 2015). In the United States, it was a group of Caribbean prostitutes who first conceptualized prostitution as a form of labor, challenging the prevailing notions of sin and vice. This redefinition marked a significant turning point, suggesting that Latin American sex workers have a rich history of defiance against unjust laws and practices, actively organizing to demand their rights (Cabezas, 2019).

Dolinsek (2014) presents instances of successful advocacy efforts by sex workers. In Canada, for example, the Supreme Court invalidated elements of prostitution laws in 2013 after sex workers challenged them. These laws were deemed unconstitutional and a violation of their human right to secure employment. The subsequent "Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act," introduced in 2014, marked a significant legislative change in response to sex worker rights (Dolinsek, 2014). Similar instances of protecting sex workers' human rights are observed globally. In New Zealand, where sex work is legal, a sex worker successfully sued a brothel owner for sexual harassment (Dolinsek, 2014). Furthermore, In Uruguay, women in the sex trade organized in 1986, securing social benefits and health security. In Brazil, the first national convention for sex workers was organized in 1987 by Gabriela Leite and Lourdes Barreto, leading to transformative endeavors such as the fashion brand Daspu. The Brazilian organizations Federa o Nacional das Trabalhadoras do Sexo and Rede Brasileira de Prostitutas continue to advocate for sex worker rights (Cabezas, 2019). Moreover, Dolinsek (2014) notes that court decisions in Germany and Austria dismantled the notion of prostitution as "unethical," paving the way for legal reform and recognition of sex work as legitimate employment. The European Court of Justice reinforced this perspective by classifying "prostitution" as an "economic activity" and upholding the "freedom of movement" for sex workers within European Union member states (Dolinsek, 2014). Further insights from Wijers & Doornick (2009) highlight the challenges posed by laws rooted in moral judgments against sex work. Society often views sex workers either as a threat requiring control or as individuals in need of rescue. In both cases, their rights and participation in discussions about their circumstances are marginalized. To truly safeguard the rights of sex workers, a reevaluation of these perceptions is

essential. While some regions label prostitution as criminal or unethical, sex workers worldwide perceive it as a form of labor, a means of livelihood, or a profession.

### **2.3. Condition of Sex Workers in Bangladesh and West Bengal:**

From the writing of Shyamol Kumar Das and Indrajit Kundu (2009) about the empowerment and disempowerment of Bangladeshi sex workers, the conditions of the sex workers in many areas of Bangladesh are quite vivid. From their writing it is understood that, Naila Kabeer has defined empowerment of women as a continuum based on three components. Given that having access to resources does not guarantee having control over them; empowerment must be understood as an increase in options made possible by a combination of a person's abilities and access to resources and previously denied power. Empowerment is defined as a continuum with three components: (i) resources or preconditions, like income, education, property, and status; (ii) agency, like having the ability to make decisions about one's own income, body, various life issues, etc.; and (iii) achievement or result, like acquiring new resources and/or agency. (Kabeer 1999, 2001, 2005).

Furthermore, Moni Nag's (2003) writing on the sex workers of Sonagchi depicts on how the Sonagachi project served as an encouragement for the creation of the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC), an association of sex workers that has since grown to be a potent tool for the project's epidemiological success as well as a way for the poor and helpless sex workers in West Bengal to regain some control over their own lives and those of their children. Well, in India and particularly in West Bengal the rate of HIV among sex workers was rising up in the late 20s. In 1992, the government with the funding of WHO started the Sonagchi program and that helped a lot to reduce the percentage of HIV spreading among the workers. For instance, the

prevalence of syphilis dropped from 17% in 1992 to 1% in 2001, while less than 4% of sex workers used condoms always or frequently in 1992 compared to over 80% in 2001. While the present-day prevalence of HIV/AIDS is over 60% among sex workers in Mumbai's Kamathipura red-light district and over 30% among those in a few other Indian cities, it is only about 10% among those in Sonagachi (UNAIDS 2000:13; Nag 2001). Therefore, Nag (2003) particularly focused on HIV reduction inside the brothel of Shonagachi. However, Bangladesh's public healthcare system is generally inadequate, particularly for sex workers who have limited and seldom utilized choices. The negative perceptions surrounding sex work translate into biased and detrimental treatment from formal health facilities. This mistreatment involves denial of care, subpar medical attention, and dehumanizing experiences. The available services, mainly offered by non-governmental organizations, tend to concentrate on HIV prevention and are often the only free healthcare options for these individuals (Clark, 2015). This proves that the medical treatment of sex workers initially and mostly focus on Aids or STDs. On the other hand, Swati Ghosh's writing in 2006 about the empowerment of sex workers in Kolkata is a response to Moni Nag's article on 'Sex Workers in Sonagachi' from December 3, 2005. Ghosh (2006) focuses on how sex workers strive to be recognized as workers, both practically and symbolically. She also points out that there is a unique aspect to viewing "sex as work" compared to other kinds of jobs. This distinction arises from the tension between considering sex as work and seeing work as involving sex. This tension leads to debates about the rights of sex workers and their expected liberation within the labor movement. The DMSC (Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee), an organization, aimed to remove the negative image associated with being taboo and to officially classify sex workers as regular employees. Sex workers aimed to have the same legal rights as other workers, emphasizing their identity as laborers rather than focusing on their sexuality.

Their demand for the right to work went beyond just the job itself; they also wanted to overcome the moral judgment connected to their profession and be treated as respected female workers in society (Ghosh, 2006).

Furthermore, Das and Kundu (2009) adopt a perspective where they measure a person's situation in three aspects: resources, capability to act, and accomplishments, across different points in time. They see empowerment as a continuous process. For example, a woman who was initially in poverty might be compelled by her financial circumstances (which link to her resources) to enter sex work. Despite the connection between poverty and disempowerment, as discussed by Kabeer (2001, 2005), she might find that her income from this new profession helps her sustain her well-being. This stems from the fact that she gains new financial resources. What's interesting is that this new income could lead to more changes. With these additional resources, she might gain more control over decisions in the next phase of her life. This demonstrates how empowerment can be progressive and ongoing, building upon the acquisition of new resources and opportunities (Das & Kundu, 2009). In the writing of Nag (2003), the cases of women of Sonagachi getting control/agency over their lives can be noticed. One of the main factors in the Sonagachi project's exceptional epidemiological success is that from the beginning, certain sex workers were chosen and educated as peer educators to spread awareness of STDs, HIV/AIDS, and other sexually transmitted diseases among their peers and encourage them to use condoms for safer sex. Peer educators are chosen from the neighborhood based on their enthusiasm for the project, aptitude for understanding, and leadership qualities. Now, the DMSC has helped the workers to achieve their rights for safety and protection by forming other small organizations for the workers. For Instance, the formation of Usha Multipurpose Cooperative Society (UMCS) has helped the sex workers of Sonagachi to come out of the exploitations of the moneylenders and



brothel keepers (Nag, 2003). Therefore, the shift of power dynamics can be noticed from Nag's (2003) work. The writing of Clark (2015) on Bangladeshi Sex workers depicts that following an "empowerment model," non-governmental organizations both national and international, often collaborating with sex worker groups, aim to equip women with the essential information regarding health risks, services, and human rights. This approach encourages knowledge and behavioral shifts that empower women to care for themselves (Clark, 2015). However she argues that the approach of empowering sex workers has its shortcomings. She claimed that, Habiba Sultana, who studies Bangladeshi sex workers, highlights that expecting sex workers to solely change their behavior does not hold much significance for many of them. This is because they possess the least influence within the sex trade (Clark, 2015).

Applying Kabeer's approach, Das and Kundu (2009) argue that what someone achieves in one phase of life can transform into resources and opportunities for the next. This method not only evaluates individual empowerment within a specific context but also looks at how groups as a whole become empowered. For example, when sex workers can't exercise their labor rights, the entire community of sex workers might face challenges. By using their collective strength through social movements, they might secure certain rights, like having their profession recognized legally. When sex workers as a group stand against the government's refusal to recognize sex work as a legitimate occupation, their actions show their agency. Achieving the recognition of their profession becomes a significant accomplishment for them. Das and Kundu (2009) examined the situations of 14 sex workers using Kabeer's model. Clark (2015) discussed significant information regarding the unity of the sex workers of Bangladesh and compared it with India. In response to harsh police raids on brothels, sex workers in Bangladesh have come together to demand recognition of sex work as a legitimate occupation and to secure better

working conditions. However, their efforts have been less successful compared to the sex workers' rights movement in India, where there are strong connections to women's rights and labor unions. Clark (2015) furthermore claimed that Natasha Ahmad from the Sex Workers' Alliance of South Asia, who is active in both countries (India and Bangladesh), mentioned to The BMJ (British Medical Journal) that progress has been slow. This is partly due to the strict gender norms in this Muslim society that emphasize women's honor and purity, making it harder to advocate for change (Clark, 2015). On the other hand, West Bengal has received more success on establishing their better opportunities. Nag (2003) illustrates the efforts of sex workers who joined together as an association to challenge the government and achieve significant milestones. The DMSC (Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee) faced a prolonged struggle against initial government opposition that cited moral reasons to deny sex workers the right to form an association (Banerjee, 2001). Nevertheless, these sex workers, supported by DMSC, worked together to secure their fundamental human rights by resisting various forms of exploitation, including physical and economic abuse. Moreover, DMSC initiated educational initiatives that fall into three categories: first, programs to teach adult sex workers to read and write; second, educational initiatives for the children of sex workers; and third, vocational training for both the children and the workers (Bandyopadhyay, 1998). According to Nag, sex workers are often conscious that due to their lack of education, they are vulnerable to being taken advantage of by local moneylenders, vendors, brothel owners, customers, police officers, pimps, and shopkeepers, who exploit them financially and in other ways. In response, the Sonagachi project introduced adult literacy programs in 1993, setting up learning centers in the red-light districts of Kolkata. This initiative received positive responses, leading to the establishment of 20

similar centers in Kolkata and a few other districts in West Bengal by the end of 2004 (Nag, 2003).

Das and Kundu (2009) at one point found out the sex worker's conditions on empowerment continuum based on their background and causes of joining sex work. The authors found out in most of the cases the worker's choose this profession came from broken families, or were victims of domestic violence and lack of power bases. Other factors like, early marriage, spouse abandonment, domestic abuse, and disparity in decision-making and resource access caused few workers to end up in this profession. In some cases, it has been found that women who often get involved in such profession (belonging from a good background) cannot find a 'way out' even if they want to due to social stigma, religious dogma and other lack of agency (Das & Kundu, 2009). Clark (2015) clarifies the other prevalent empowerment approach of NGOs involves "rescuing" sex workers from their current circumstances, often involving brothels or trafficking situations. While this might provide some immediate care and help, it also has limitations. Rescue efforts address immediate needs but lack long-term solutions and can even put other women in danger. Neither of these approaches addresses the root causes of sex work, such as poverty, or the necessary political changes to safeguard women from violence (Clark, 2015)

From the work of Ghosh (2006) few demonstration of disempowered women are found who were also suffering for societal stigma and lack of agency. Ghosh (2006) states that since sex work is associated with sickness, immorality, and criminality as early as the HIV intervention, it was challenging to normalize the activity within the rules of employment. This made the need for worker status crucial. The push for health awareness sparked a response from the sex industry, who sought to be a part of organized labor with the ability to work, choose their employers, and engage in collective bargaining. They used contemporary arguments for worker independence

and the right to negotiate collectively inside organized labor as part of their negotiation approach with the government. In the colonial ages, sex workers were treated as a passive object of investigation. Later on, the workers came out of such a position by claiming other rights like-licensing brothels, police raids and other legal aids besides healthcare. In fact they made a slogan called, 'Sex work is real work, we demand worker's right' (Ghosh, 2006).

In addition, even though sex workers from Sonagachi fought very bravely for their rights the state did not give them the power to declare their claim as a worker or a citizen. However, they were included in the agenda of welfare and they were permitted to participate in movements of rights. Well, they had the autonomy of movement but that was only applicable in the 'red light zone' which is only in their territory. They also had the permission to vote but they did not have any legal documents, i.e. a voter identity card. Most pathetically, children of the workers were not granted admission to any schools. However, since they were a part of the welfare agenda, the state eventually granted them equality with other workers yet they were considered as marginalized group (Ghosh, 2006). Since their conditions are so comparable, I believe that sex workers from Shonagachi are a good representation of sex workers throughout West Bengal and Bangladesh. Their battles for labor rights and day-to-day survival are surprisingly comparable. In case of Bangladesh, another prevalent 'empowering' approach involves "rescuing" or dragging out the sex workers from their circumstances, typically involving brothels or trafficking situations. While this may provide short-term rehabilitation and healthcare, it has limitations. The rescue approach addresses immediate needs without providing a long-term solution and can even endanger other women (Clark, 2015). Ishita Gupta claimed that the government relies on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to deliver healthcare, counseling, and education to girls living in brothels. Ishita Dhutta, a legal researcher at Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust in

Dhaka, an organization offering legal assistance and support to sex workers and abused women, points out that depending solely on service provision can actually perpetuate the issue. This can keep women entrenched in the sex trade and allow the government and law enforcement to remain inactive (Clark, 2015). The majority of existing literature tends to focus on showcasing the achievements of sex workers and the efforts of movements that explore the reasons behind their exclusion from labor rights. A considerable amount of literature emphasizes that sex workers frequently face vulnerability due to societal norms and economic realities. This vulnerability largely arises from their restricted access to legal safeguards. Nevertheless, there has been limited emphasis on comprehending the difficulties they encounter without labor rights, especially when juxtaposed with their encounters of empowerment or disempowerment.

#### **2.4 Unexplored Research:**

Numerous studies are conducted based on the rights of the sex workers of Bangladesh. However, just a small percentage of them demonstrate how they are provided with worker's rights and the struggles they face in absence of it. Most of the literatures talk about how the sex worker's human rights could be ensured. Furthermore, it is necessary to find out the challenges that the sex workers face while working and how those challenges hinder their labor rights. In addition, it is important to know if the government or any other organizations support the sex workers to ensure their labor rights since sex works in some areas are legal and the workers therefore should be provided with their rights. From the start sex work has been recognized as an unethical profession by the society and that is why the workers are being exploited, neglected and disrespected in the society. The writings regarding the sex worker's condition around the world portray that not only in South Asia (Especially Bangladesh) but prostitutions are not taken easily

as an occupation in many other states. As a result, the sex workers had to come down the streets to establish their basic human rights and most importantly to establish their rights as workers.

For instance, in the section 2.2, the writing of Corena Sharp talks about the sex workers fighting for their rights. She mainly focused on the workers of Dominican Republic. Moreover, she argued that the commercialization and exploitation of Dominican women's labor, notably in sex work, is a direct outcome of the racist colonial and neocolonial dynamics of power between the globalized north and south. Furthermore, the writing of Amelia L. Cabezas portrays the history of women fighting for their labor rights in Latin America and Caribbean. She discusses about some of the successful movements of the sex workers from global North. Especially focused on their participation in governmental activities, their networks (via organizations and media), and their strategies to ensure labor and social rights. She furthermore argues that the availing issues for Caribbean and Latin American sex workers are violence from the state, full access to their labor rights and social stigma. In the writing of Dolinsek (2014), the instances of few legal framework changes or reform has been depicted in countries of Europe and North America to legalize sex as a 'work'. Now, what lack in this section of my literature review is the condition and perception of 'prostitution' in the context of South Asia; particularly Bangladesh. Countries of Europe and America are quite supportive in terms of making policies and bringing justice toward marginalized groups like sex workers. In terms of Bangladesh and India things are quite different. Therefore, the impact of extreme 'stigmatization' is lacking in their writings. Additionally, in section 2.3, it is quite surprising that Nag's work provides minimal discussion on the topic of labor and the sex workers' quest for rights within the context of Sonagachi. This is particularly surprising considering that Nag refers to these individuals as "trailblazers of a movement" and credits them with spearheading an empowerment struggle against the influential

forces within the sex trade. Moreover, she mainly focused on the success of ‘Shonagachi’ program. In the same section, Das & Kundu (2009) depict the condition of sex workers in different areas of Bangladesh based on their level of dis/empowerment using Naila Kabeer’s framework. It lacks the concern of worker’s rights and their struggle establishing it.

In Bangladesh, there are many groups and people who are working to support sex workers in getting their basic rights and fair treatment. However, most of the activists do not particularly focused on their ‘worker’s rights’. It is not easy because the state here follows strict Islamic rules, which can make it tough for sex workers to speak up. Therefore, it has been hard for them to come forward and advocate for their labor rights and claiming that 'Sex Work' at the end of the day is a 'Work'. Therefore, based on the lack of the literature, this dissertation focuses to find the challenges of sex workers while working caused particularly by exclusion from their labor rights along with the factors that either assure or resist them to establish their rights and measure their dis/empowerment to understand it’s effect on them in the context of Bangladesh, particularly Banishanta.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Findings**

This chapter focuses on the findings of the thesis, which I have organized thematically based on my research objectives. I have divided the content into four sections aligned with my three main objectives. The initial two segments specifically tackle the first objective. These sections delve into comprehending the obstacles encountered by sex workers in their work and the factors

contributing to their exclusion from labor rights considering their varying socioeconomic backgrounds (RQ1) by highlighting their day-to-day challenges as they strive to fight for their rights. In order to understand the sex worker's agency on their resources and achievements (RQ2), the discussion proceeds to the third section. This segment delves into the analysis of their dis/empowerment, considering three key aspects (agency, resources, and accomplishments). To gain insight into the factors that either support or undermine sex workers in securing their labor rights (RQ3), sections two and five offer valuable information regarding various influencing factors.

### **3.1 Socio-Economic Status of Respondents:**

I took interviews of 13 sex workers living in Banishanta village, in Mongla area. They live by the Pashur river in poverty and misery. There were 13 respondents of different age levels; starting from 20 years to 50 years. There are currently 36 houses and 96 sex workers living in Banishanta *para* or brothel. Few of the workers have their houses and tea stalls attached with their houses. While some young and new girls live as tenants in those houses by paying monthly rents. However they can work independently and also run side businesses. Respondents were chosen by considering the power dynamics inside the brothel. For instance, there was a leader, an assistant, few bariwalis (house owners) and few Chukris (tenants). Additionally, in order to validate the findings I have taken interviews of two NGO workers (one male and one female) who have been working on a project with the sex workers of Banishanta. The interviews of the two NGO workers were taken to understand their perspective on sex worker's labor rights.



**Table 2: Socio-economic Status of the Workers**

<b>Serial No.</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Income</b>
1.	Sharmin	26	-	Tenant	3000-4000 daily (tentative)
2	Moni Begum	40	Do not remember	Bariwali (house owner)	15000 or less monthly (tentative)
3.	Shirin	36	Up to class 3	Bariwali (house owner)	500 in a day from her profession. (tentative)
4.	Rupali	35	-	Tenant	1000-2000 weekly (tentative)
5.	Urmi	28	Up to class 2	Tenant	10000 monthly (tentative)
6.	Shapla Moni	26	-	Tenant	2000-3000 daily (tentative)
<b>Serial No.</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Income</b>

7.	Jasmine	25	-	Tenant	5000 or less weekly
8.	Razia Begum	50	-	Bariwali (house owner) and Leader	12000-15000 monthly (fixed)
9.	Lovely Begum	38	-	Tenant	1000-2000 daily (tentative)
10.	Tania	35	Do not remember	Tenant	1000-2000 weekly (tentative)
11.	Chumki	28	Up to class 5	Tenant	Not fixed
12.	Shathi	40	-	Bariwali (house owner)	10000 per month (tentative)
13	Rupali	35	-	Bariwali (house owner)	6000-8000 per month

From the table, it can be seen that the Bariwalis (house owners) earn a greater amount than the tenants. One of the Bariwalis named Razia Begum claimed that she earned 6000-7000 per month (fixed) from the tenant girls and other 4000-5000 from her clients outside the area. She is old and sick thus she is not active in sex work in Banishanta area. She is the most powerful among the women in Banishanta and acts as a representative of all other women outside their

area. Bariwalis have a fixed monthly income that they earn from the tenants. On the contrary, there are few young women like Chumki who do side businesses like; tailoring, fishing, farming, etc. to earn some extra money besides participating in sex work.

### **3.2 Challenges of the Sex Workers:**

Sex workers in Banishanta consistently face significant challenges in their work, rendering them highly vulnerable. These difficulties, primarily their living and working conditions, are the most critical issues reported by the respondents. Additionally, they encounter other obstacles that impede their labor rights.

#### **3.2.1 Accommodation and Work Environment:**

Situated along the banks of the Pashur River, the village of Banishanta has long grappled with the challenges posed by its geographical location. The villagers, particularly the women residing within the Banishanta brothel, face a relentless daily struggle. Their houses and the brothel sheds line up in a row by the river's edge, lacking any protective boundaries or enclosures. Consequently, with each instance of climate change-induced impact on Banishanta, a lamentable narrative unfolds. This village stands as one of the coastal districts of Bangladesh, and thus becomes susceptible to the unrelenting forces of nature. Residents have to relocate their hut backward in the wake of the river erosions.

I visited the place in the beginning of July, 2023 and it was raining quite heavily that day. I got to see firsthand the struggle that they go through. The only way to visit the village is by boat and it takes a long time. I arrived there after the rain had stopped. However, people are unable to walk in the mud and lose grip. The residents walk bare foot to hold their grip in the muddy roads

and the NGO workers use sea boots. The NGO workers often visit the brothel for providing aids and support. Project area manager of an NGO named 'Dalit' was quite concerned about their living and working environment. The manager being one of the participants of key informant interview said,

*'When I joined Dalit in 2019, I saw that they had quite spacious lands in front of their houses by the river. But with time and with river flow the lands started to break. They had to repair and shift their houses backward 3 times since I joined. Now they have made a 'tong' behind their houses to take shelter in times of danger.'*

Furthermore, I saw that the houses of the sex workers were covered in mud and damp from the rain. Just the day before I got there, one of the houses had been damaged by the river's strong current. Some locals were busy rebuilding the shelter. Talking to the women there, I learned that fixing their huts was a big financial burden for them. It costs a lot of money, and they find it really difficult to arrange the money each time. Adding to their difficulties, the roads become very slippery due to the rain, and accidents can happen easily. This situation highlights the multiple struggles they go through on a daily basis. Yet, perhaps due to my outsider perspective, the situation seemed very difficult to me. The residents probably had managed to adapt to these conditions, but it was apparent that they aspired for improved living arrangements with each passing day.

Given the history of Banishanta and the impact of climate change upon it, many natural disasters have even caused death of the locals. The brothel has a sad past where it was severely damaged by cyclones like Sidr and Aila. These storms caused the deaths of many sex workers. Those who survived had to go to nearby villages to find help. In recent times, Cyclone Bulbul

struck the island, making things even worse for the residents. A big part of the island was washed away into the Pashur River. When I was talking to the women of the brothel about their labor rights and what changes can make their lives better, most of them were talking about their houses and living environment. However, most of the young workers were ignorant towards the labors rights yet they urged to have a better living condition. On the other hand, the elderlies holding more power in the brothel were aware of their rights and they knew that 'sex work' is stigmatized and the workers performing it are extremely discriminated. Yet they are still fighting for a better accommodation system for them and their children. As Razia Begum, the leader of the brothel said,

*'Working together with another organization, our organization (Nari Jagoroni Songothon) has worked tirelessly to create a better environment for our children. The "Jagroto Jubo Songhothon" group has been a big help in forming "Nari Jagoroni Songostha" and that helped us to fight for and ask for a separate and safe accommodation system for our children'*

Furthermore, the women are also concerned about their drinking water and hygiene issue. These two are often demolished by the river erosion and water uprising. So this is another alarming issue caused by the river uprising and that makes the environment even worse for the workers in Banishanta. One of the workers named Chumki said,

*'We keep moving our huts backwards because of rive erosion every year. We have to build houses almost every year because of erosion. We don't have proper drainage system. We face problems for drinking water as we don't have enough deep tube well. We only have one from where we get to have 3 bucket of water every 2 day which is not enough. Every year we have to*

*spend tons of money just to build our houses again from the erosion damage. So, if anyone helps us build a block to stop the river erosion it would help us save some money.'*

### **3.2.2 Healthcare and Hygiene:**

Healthcare and cleanliness are significant concerns often neglected in Banishanta. From conversations with the women, I learned that they received hygiene training and counseling sessions from various organizations. Some groups even set up sanitary facilities for them. Despite this, I observed that maintaining cleanliness was tough due to water issues and the muddy surroundings. Moreover, unfortunately, healthcare is quite inadequate in the village. The locals, including sex workers, seek basic medical help at small pharmacies in the local market called 'Banishanta bazar'. There are no doctors in the entire village. For serious illnesses, they must travel to Mongla sadar (town) or Khulna city. Maternity and reproductive healthcare are also lacking. Nevertheless, women in this community are now receiving education about Sexual Transmitted Diseases (STDs) through efforts by the government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which offer counseling and seminars. Nowadays, most workers are well-informed about their reproductive health and take precautions when engaging in intimate activities with clients. According to these women, this awareness has led to improved reproductive health. Despite this progress, there is a significant concern since there are no qualified medical doctors (MBBS) available nearby. As a result, pregnant women, the elderly and vulnerable individuals often encounter significant challenges and must undergo lengthy journeys to seek medical attention. The project area manager of Dalit NGO stated,

*"When it comes to healthcare services, they frequently encounter difficulties due to the absence of proper healthcare centers in Banishanta. When they fall ill, many of them suffer from*

*sexually transmitted infections. Consequently, I have observed that they need to travel to Khulna or Mongla cities to address their healthcare needs."*

However, many of the younger workers are highly conscientious about their personal hygiene. They have been trained by their more experienced colleagues, who have received instruction from various NGOs or healthcare experts. Women often utilize fabric and disinfectants to maintain their personal hygiene. The workers mentioned that the situation used to be different in the past. Many women experienced severe pain and even lost their lives due to STDs and other serious illnesses. An older sex worker named Lovely Begum, who previously worked as a volunteer in the brothel and was trained by an NGO, recounted,

*"I used to volunteer here under the guidance of The Lighthouse NGO. There were few other women with me and we used to provide guidance to other sex workers and younger girls, educating them about STDs, HIV, their labor rights, and how to maintain good health through protection. However, this was around 2013-14. But now only Dalit is actively working with us and it is not enough to ensure our healthcare service. Things have changed and become more challenging now."*

During the wave of Covid-19, the women were registered for vaccination by the NGO workers. On a whole, healthcare services in Banishanta village are consequently quite inadequate, posing a significant obstacle not only for the sex workers but also for the entire community.

### **3.2.3 Wages, Work hours and Holidays:**

Workers in the informal sectors of Bangladesh encounter significant challenges regarding fixed wages and the issue of minimum payment. Furthermore, sex workers face

substantial discrimination and neglect from policymakers and others. Despite being part of one of Bangladesh's licensed brothels, sex workers in Banishanta are currently grappling with extreme poverty. The challenges have been exacerbated during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

When speaking with sex workers from Banishanta, it became evident that they lack a fixed minimum wage and regular working hours. Among the 13 workers I interviewed, all operate independently, yet most are unfamiliar with the labor rights outlined in Bangladesh's regulations. Many expressed concerns about their inadequate earnings, attributing this to a reduced number of clients due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Their income structure is tied to the volume of clients they serve. The women shared that during peak seasons, such as winter when numerous clients arrive from ship cruises and other areas, business flourishes. Conversely, during the monsoon season, there are fewer clients, leading to economic difficulties for the workers. According to the women, some young girls are employed under a leader they refer to as 'madam' and are unable to work independently. Unfortunately, I was unable to conduct interviews with these girls, as their leaders prohibit them from communicating with outsiders. These girls are required to hand over their earnings to their 'madams'. Additionally, according to the women of the brothel 'better girls earn more'. Young and better looking women get more clients than the others. Sharmin aged 26 regarding this stated,

*'I am one of the few highest earning girls here still my income is getting low day by day. I have been working here for six months now. I used to earn almost 300000-400000 monthly once, during season. However, now I earn very few.'*



This sometimes create clash among them. In fact, while taking an interview, a woman named Rupali expressed her grief to me saying ‘women inside the brothel do not have unity’.

Furthermore, a small number of sex workers have diversified their income sources. They engage in activities such as cattle farming, fishing, tailoring, and other means to supplement their earnings, especially since their primary work no longer provides sufficient income. In the past, around 2019, they were involved in crafting handmade products and received training from various NGOs. However, this practice has dwindled in recent times. Nupur (KII respondent), an NGO worker who also teaches at the local school for the children of these sex workers, mentioned,

*"They don't consistently pursue alternative forms of work to transition out of this profession. They tend to stick with their current work because it offers easy money."*

Furthermore, these sex workers are often unaware about weekly holidays, religious observances, and other significant holidays. Many of them mentioned that since they operate independently, they don't feel the need for regular weekly breaks. They decide when to work based on their own preferences. Nevertheless, because this is their primary livelihood, there are instances when they have to work even if they aren't inclined to do so. During occasions like Eid, Puja, or Christmas, they have the opportunity to attract more clients, especially from ships, which can lead to higher earnings. However, due to strained relationships with their families, most of them do not spend holidays with their relatives, resulting in limited personal time.

#### **3.2.4 Security:**

Addressing the needs of informal laborers in Bangladesh highlights the lack of secure workplaces and accommodations. The security situation for Banishanta sex workers is

precarious, as evidenced by the accounts of 13 women. Although some expressed satisfaction with regular evening police raids, this inadvertently attracts threats from outsiders like muggers and hooligans. Tragically, instances of rape and abduction persist in the Banishanta brothel, with young women and children being particularly vulnerable. This underscores the urgency of implementing more effective measures to enhance the safety and protection of these sex workers. Talking about security the leader of the brothel Razia Begum said,

*'I was brought here by a broker when I was only 10 years old. I did not participate in any sexual act then and the leader lady was so nice to me and wanted to send me home. However, some drunken hooligans from the village one day came inside the brothel and raped me. I was immediately taken to the pharmacy for treatment. It has happened to me twice. Back in 80's the environment were very scary for young girls. Even at present young and beautiful children are assaulted here often by some powerful locals. One of the children aged 12 of my co-worker was sexually assaulted few days ago'*

As mentioned in chapter 2, in different parts of the world, there have been cases where courts have protected the rights of individuals involved in sex work. These instances have involved legal challenges to laws related to prostitution and have led to resolutions of various legal matters. For example, in New Zealand, where sex work is permitted by law, there was a notable case where a sex worker took legal action against a brothel owner for sexual harassment. The court ruled in favor of the sex worker, highlighting the importance of safeguarding their rights and well-being within the legal framework that governs their profession (Dolinsik, 2014).

This case serves as an illustration of how legal systems can play a role in upholding the dignity and rights of security of individuals engaged in sex work. According to the women from

Banishanta, there have been occasions when they encountered difficulties while dealing with disrespectful and abusive customers. Some of the women felt powerless and explained that these clients insisted on inappropriate behavior as a condition for payment. They believed they had no alternative choices available to them. Sharmin expressed her thoughts on this matter, saying,

*"Even if the client's requests make me uncomfortable or I'm not willing to agree, I am still obligated to proceed because they have paid for the service. I occasionally try to resist, but it usually doesn't make a difference."*

Moreover, in Banishanta, the government has provided them with a secure accommodation system for the children of the sex workers so that they do not face any trouble staying inside the brothel. Yet, a number of young children do not want to leave their mother and stay there all by themselves. The locals also create obstacles regarding the issue. Furthermore, I met a worker who had a child of 13 years old and had mental disability. She was quite concerned about the child and all the other children who lived with their mother in the brothel.

### **3.2.5 Social Stigma:**

Sex workers confront obstacles in gaining social recognition and institutional assistance due to the stigma attached to their profession. This stigma stems from the illegality of sex work in numerous locations, resulting in a global lack of regard and esteem for those involved. Consequently, sex workers often struggle to access vital social, educational, and medical services. In Banishanta, women have faced similar challenges, as shared by Nupur, a KII respondent.

Sex workers regularly experience verbal abuse, taunting, and mistreatment because of their profession. Despite these hardships, they find strength and unity within the confines of the

brothel. However, when they venture outside without wearing a 'Burkha' (a full-body covering garment), and veil, they are often met with further disrespect and mistreatment. These circumstances underline the broader challenge of addressing societal bias and discrimination against sex workers, which hinders their ability to access basic rights and services. Because sex work is often viewed as morally wrong by society, the workers are aware of this perception and therefore make efforts to keep a low profile and maintain a hidden identity. This strategy boosts their self-assurance when navigating their surroundings. Discussing the impact of social stigma and the resulting unfair treatment, numerous women expressed that they did not choose their current situation willingly, nor do they have straightforward means to escape it. They found it puzzling and somewhat amusing how society looks down upon their occupation. Nupur, who serves as a teacher for the children in Banishanta, shared that the primary school treats the kids of sex workers just like any other children. However, occasionally, when these children do not focus on their studies or engage in mischievous behavior, some of the local residents and even their fellow classmates mock them due to their parents' profession. Sadly, the female children are sometimes subjected to hurtful comments, suggesting that they might end up following the same line of work as their mothers. Moreover she stated,

‘Many 'Bariwali' (brothel house owners) sell their belongings and leave with loved ones, seeking a life outside. Yet, within 1.5 to 2 months, they often return due to discrimination and social biases. This back-and-forth cycle leaves them with little choice but to start over, becoming tenants in others' homes without their previous resources. This illustrates the ongoing struggle they face against societal stigma.’

### **3.3 Diverse Empowerment and Disempowerment Experiences Based on Socio-economic Status among Sex Workers:**

Chapter 2 has depicted the concept of empowerment driven by Naila Kabeer. It's important to realize that merely having access to resources doesn't automatically translate to having control over them. Empowerment should be seen as an expansion of choices, which comes from a combination of a person's capabilities and the availability of resources, along with the regaining of previously withheld influence. Empowerment can be thought of as a gradual progression, encompassing three key elements: i) Resources, ii) Agency and iii) Achievements (Kabeer 1999, 2001, 2005). Resources include essential assets like; income, education, property and social status. The individuals I conversed with from Banishanta mostly earned their income independently. As a result, they weren't required to share their earnings with fellow workers or seniors. Their financial stability depended entirely on the number of clients they received and the busier seasons. However, many of them faced challenges such as limited education and living in poverty, which led them to choose this profession as a means of survival.

For instance, Sharmin, who I spoke to, began working here six months ago due to her husband's influence. Her family was grappling with financial hardship, and she saw this occupation as a way to earn money. Her lack of formal education and specialized skills left her with few alternatives for employment. Among the older women, individuals like Razia Begum had managed to accumulate sufficient earnings. She was able to cover her mother's medical expenses in India and even possess property in her village. She used her earnings to fund her daughter's wedding and secure her future. The children of these workers have the opportunity to attend the Banishanta primary school, as well as a local school managed by an NGO called Dalit. Nupur,

who I spoke with, shared that many workers have used their earnings to construct homes along the river within the brothel area and even purchase land in their villages. Interestingly, despite their financial success, the older women choose to remain in this environment, which Nupur believes is due to their familiarity and comfort with the surroundings.

Furthermore, in Chapter 2, agency refers to the power to make choices about income, body, and life matters. (Kabeer 1999). In Banishanta, their control over resources depends on their status in the brothel. Sharmin, a newcomer, initially had trouble keeping her earnings. She shared,

*'In the beginning they used to take all the money from me and never gave anything, making excuses such as bribing the police and journalist.'*

Later, she gained full access to her wages and the ability to decide how to use them. Others had similar experiences in the start. According to Nupur, a key informant interviewee, around 20 to 30 years ago, young girls who worked as tenants (known as *Chukri*) under a "*bariwali*" were compelled to surrender their earnings to the landladies, lest they faced torment. However, the situation has evolved significantly, and today, nearly everyone possesses awareness and autonomy over their resources. Leader Razia Begum takes the initiative to inform and empower all newcomers upon their arrival in the brothel. Yet, some workers under individual leaders lack full income access and decision-making power.

When it comes to the decision making on their own bodies, they feel helpless. They sometimes are physically tortured by their clients and asked for participating in different acts against their will. Urmi stated,

*'I have been working here for 4-5 years. There have been times when I worked even when I was sick. I worked with high fever and even when I was sick with other problems because I have to earn money.'*

In the brothel, many workers have managed to attain power and wealth. Additionally, they have secured a few basic rights, which have further empowered them. Child labor is now non-existent in Banishanta. The workers are unwavering in their commitment to this cause and prevent any children from entering the area. Remarkable women like Razia Begum and other experienced workers who have close ties with their families contribute money for their relatives' medical care, education, and other needs. Nowadays, most of them own smartphones and can access the internet. This has increased their influence by allowing them to connect with fellow sex workers through various online platforms. In the past, proper Islamic burial rites were not afforded to the women. However, their strength grew as they united under the banner of 'Nari Jagoroni Shongnsta' (Women's Awakening Organization). This organization, founded by sex workers themselves, stands as a significant achievement for many of these workers. Furthermore, a majority of the brothel workers now possess their own identity cards. These cards enable them to engage in legal or governmental activities as needed.

The main reason many workers initially came here was due to poverty and misery. The older women were often brought here by brokers when they were quite young. However, in recent times, women are usually brought to Banishanta by their partners, spouses, or friends. Some even choose to come here on their own, deciding to distance themselves from loved ones in order to earn money. Their lack of power and the challenges they face lead them to the Banishanta brothel as a way to make a living. Furthermore, when they come here, they find it hard to adjust to the new environment and the people they encounter, especially the clients and those from

outside. Sometimes, they are not able to establish clear limits or boundaries, which makes them feel less empowered even in their own space. Rupali has been working in Banishanta for 18 years and from her experience on clients she said,

‘We usually don't encounter clients who behave badly, but occasionally there are a few who are drunk or under the influence of drugs. They can become very demanding and treat us poorly. This can be really painful, and sometimes they even resort to physical violence.’

In addition, the wealthy and powerful men who live there control them in numerous ways. They enter the brothel and frequently misuse their position of authority by underpaying them or even kidnapping their kids. A local man recently abused one of the workers' girls. Therefore, sex workers frequently lack control not just in the outside world but also within the walls of the brothels.

### **3.4 Support from Stakeholders:**

Numerous governmental and non-governmental organizations have stepped up to support individuals engaged in sex work, aiming to uphold their rights. These efforts span from fundamental healthcare provisions to educational opportunities. Addressing the lack of adequate medical services in Banishanta, the Dalit organization has taken the lead in furnishing sex workers with herbal remedies. As per feedback from those affected, these herbal remedies have proven beneficial in alleviating common ailments like fever and cold. Additionally, Dalit has established a basic educational facility within the brothel premises, catering to the educational needs of the sex workers' children. Besides, organizations like ‘Jagroto Jubo Songhothon’ helped the sex workers to form an organization named ‘Nari Jagoroni Shongstha’. The organization



consists with many sex workers who fight for their basic and legal rights. As a result, they have not only established a cemetery for themselves but also succeeded in integrating their children seamlessly into mainstream education, where the children can now attend school alongside their peers without facing the prior hardships imposed by our work.

Furthermore, organizations such as 'Lighthouse' have played a crucial role in assisting sex workers by imparting vital knowledge about sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and HIV. Skilled trainers from the NGO handpicked a select group of volunteers from within the sex worker community and equipped them with comprehensive information. Subsequently, these trained individuals took it upon themselves to educate their colleagues, raising awareness about these significant health concerns. In addition, various organizations have extended their support by offering training programs in diverse fields such as handicrafts, tailoring, livestock management, and other vocations. These initiatives aim to provide alternative avenues for the workers to transition away from their primary occupation.

Currently, Dalit is an active organization working with the sex workers to focus on providing aids to the workers through offering training. Besides, the workers have few tea stalls attached to their houses. Dalit try to support them and help them with money and other goods for their stalls when necessary. Besides, they are provided with poultry (chickens, duck) also goats. Therefore, Dalit mainly focus on providing them with basic elements that will help them to come out of their profession. Other organizations like- CSS (Christian Service Society), Rupantor, BRAC and others work with the sex workers to enhance their rights. They provide important counseling, trainings and take other initiatives that help the workers to ensure their rights. The COVID-19 period posed significant challenges for sex workers, confining them to their area and prohibiting outside visits due to administration-imposed restrictions. Dalit, alongside other organizations,

stepped in to offer vital support in the form of financial aid and food. Government agencies also contributed financial aid during this time. While the overall impact was manageable, the pandemic led to decreased business due to heightened client awareness. During the pandemic, sex workers adapted by fishing and selling their catch for income, a significant livelihood strategy. This practice continues to sustain many even as the pandemic wanes.

Moreover, according to the NGO workers that I have interviewed, the legal administrations also are aware now. Organizations like union parishad, Village parishad, police station are now very strict about any sort of harrasement or injustice happening inside the brothel. There were times when extortion took place inside the brothel. But at present days, the level of extortion has lessened since their income has also decreased. Besides, now all the workers have access to legal framework since Union Parishad and NGOs have worked hard on establishing their legal documents like, voter identity card and others. Now all of the women, apart from 2 or 3, have their legal documentation as Nupur said.

Therefore, the findings suggest that while several factors make it harder for sex workers to access their labor rights, there are also certain factors that help them survive in tough circumstances. Challenges like poor living and working conditions, inadequate wages, healthcare and hygiene issues, lack of security, and social stigma make their lives more difficult. However, unionization, forming organizations, and support from stakeholders do provide some assistance. The question now is whether these forms of aid genuinely prioritize securing their labor rights or merely offer temporary relief from their challenging situation. This will be explored in the upcoming chapter.

## Chapter 4

### Discussion & Analysis

This chapter tried to further explore the challenges and factors for the sex workers due to the absence of labor rights by measuring their dis/empowerment. The research conducted thus far highlights a significant issue: given that sex work falls within the informal sector, there are no dedicated legal policies safeguarding the rights of sex workers. As a result, they continue to struggle for their fundamental human and labor rights. The section begins by exploring how sex workers face marginalization in society, largely stemming from their exclusion from labor protections. This exclusion perpetuates their vulnerability and lack of access to basic and civil rights. Furthermore, the chapter examines the roles of various stakeholders and how these roles have influenced the quest for sex workers' rights. The section then concludes by acknowledging certain limitations in the findings. The end the chapter considers the impact of intersectionality and dis/empowerment on the findings, providing insight into why sex workers continue to face challenges in securing their labor rights. This comprehensive discussion sheds light on the overarching scenario where sex workers' labor rights are not being adequately addressed.

#### **4.1 Marginalization Arising from the Exclusion of Sex Workers from Labor Rights:**

The findings reveal that several factors contribute to the vulnerability of sex workers. These factors include issues such as where they live, their work environment, unreliable payment methods, feeling of insecurity, social stigmatization and criminalization of the occupation. Additionally, there's a lack of consistent lack of follow-up on training sessions and other activities from the NGOs, inadequate access to proper healthcare, and a lack of knowledge about hygiene practices. When we measure and examine these factors, it becomes clear that sex

workers are placed in a precarious situation and face challenges in their day to day lives. These challenges lead them to the exclusion from labor and basic human rights. As a result, they face marginalization and are often pushed to the fringes of society for social norms, existing legal framework and their economic situation. The findings here align with other studies on sex workers across the world where significant difference is found in the way society views and judges prostitution. This judgment puts sex workers in a position of isolation and makes it difficult for them to openly fight for their rights (Wijers & Doornick, 2009). Besides, studies about sex workers specifically from Bangladesh in the literature review shows sex workers and even their children can face serious health problems (Clark, 2015) and mainly caused by lack of access to proper treatment. Clark (2015) states, according to non-government organization, about 40% of sex workers in Bangladesh have had abortions, and about one-third of them have signs of infections that spread through sex. Moreover, in India, especially in West Bengal, the number of sex workers getting HIV was increasing in the late 20s (Nag, 2003) due to the lack of hygiene and knowledge on healthcare. Due to the connections made between sex work and notions of illness, immorality, and criminal behavior, it became difficult to establish sex work as a regular employment practice, especially during the initial stages of HIV intervention efforts (Ghosh, 2006). By analyzing the work of Clark (2015) on the ignored sex workers of Bangladesh it is understood that the healthcare system in Bangladesh is generally insufficient, especially for sex workers who have limited access to care. Prejudices against sex work lead to unfair and harmful treatment in formal health settings, including neglect and substandard care that devalues their dignity. Non-governmental organizations primarily offer services, mainly focusing on HIV prevention, which are often the sole free healthcare choices available to sex workers. When I visited the brothel for interview, I noticed that maintaining hygiene was a challenge due to

problems with water rise and the muddy environment. Regrettably, the healthcare facilities in the village are quite insufficient as well. The residents, including sex workers, rely on basic medical assistance from small pharmacies in the local marketplace known as 'Banishanta bazar'. Unfortunately, there are no doctors present in the entire village. For severe illnesses, they have to make the journey to either Mongla sadar (town) or Khulna city. Furthermore, there's a notable absence of adequate maternity and reproductive healthcare services.

Furthermore, according to Clark (2015), violence is a big danger for sex workers, and most of it comes from local gangs and the police, as told by UNAIDS. The conditions they work in are also not safe or clean, which hurts them physically and mentally. Sex workers on the streets experience about six cases of sexual violence every month. Additionally, there are nearly 200,000 sex workers, most of them teenagers, being visited by thousands of men every day (Clark, 2015). These are the depiction of unhygienic and insecure workplaces. Based on accounts from the women in Banishanta from my findings, there have been instances where they faced challenges while interacting with clients who were disrespectful and abusive. Certain women expressed feelings of helplessness and shared that these customers demanded inappropriate actions as a prerequisite for payment. They believed they were left with no other viable options in those situations. Furthermore, similar to what Clark (2015) discussed about workers being negatively impacted by unhealthy work environments, women from Banishanta are consistently advocating for improved living and working conditions to access better opportunities. As the research indicates, the living and working conditions in Banishanta are highly susceptible to natural disasters and rising water levels. These factors not only weaken the mental state of the workers but also contribute to physical illnesses. These workers find it challenging to fix their homes and end up using a significant portion of their earnings for repairs. Consequently, they

face financial difficulties, which eventually push them to the margins of society. Moreover, the women of Banishanta sometimes face violence from the locals. Wealthy and influential men in the area exert control over the sex workers in various ways. They exploit their authority by paying them less than they deserve and sometimes even abducting their children. I heard a recent incident involved a local man mistreating a worker's daughter. As a result, these sex workers have little control over their lives, both outside and within the brothel premises. Therefore just as Clark (2015) mentioned that the violence from the locals and police also lead them to such marginalized position. By further analyzing Clark's works it has been understood that the 'empowerment' program offered by the NGOs in Bangladesh mostly focus on rescuing the sex workers and providing aid for a short period of time. The approaches do not ever address the causes of violence on the workers.

In countries like Germany and Austria Court decisions abolished the view of prostitution as "unethical." This led to legislative changes recognizing sex work as a legitimate profession. The European Court of Justice consistently upheld that "prostitution" is an "economic activity," asserting that EU member states cannot hinder the "freedom of movement," especially for sex workers (Dolinsik, 2014). However in terms of countries like Bangladesh legal approaches to prostitution often assume it is morally unacceptable. Social stigma causes the society to view sex workers as either a threat to be controlled or victims to be saved. These perspectives deny their rights and a subject of discussions regarding their rights (Wijers & Doornick, 2009). This relates with my findings about the woman of Banishanta. Women in Banishanta expressed that they often hide their identities due to the societal belief that their work is morally wrong. This strategy boosts their confidence in navigating their surroundings. Despite this stigma, many women emphasized that they didn't choose their situation willingly and lack easy options to escape it.

Well, Nupur, a teacher for children in Banishanta (KII respondent), mentioned that the primary school treats kids of sex workers like any other students. Yet, at times, if these children do not concentrate on studies or behave mischievously, local residents and classmates mock them due to their parents' occupation. Regrettably, female children may face hurtful comments implying they could follow their mothers' path. Therefore, this proves that the children along with their mother are marginalized for social stigmatization and criminalization of the occupation. Furthermore, certain instances reveal that women who come from respectable backgrounds and become engaged in such professions sometimes encounter difficulty extricating themselves. Factors such as social stigma, religious beliefs, and a sense of limited control contribute to this challenge (Das & Kundu, 2009). This case corresponds with one of my findings. A key informant interview respondent highlighted that certain sex workers opt to leave their profession by forming new relationships and starting families. However, they often face challenges as societal discrimination stemming from stigma leads to mistreatment and taunting by their new families. This mistreatment prompts them to return to their previous occupation. And all these marginalization happen because of the lack of proper legal policies that cause the exclusion of the sex workers from labor rights.

Furthermore, given that that the informal sector workers in Bangladesh, including sex workers in Banishanta, face challenges like uncertain wages and discrimination they find themselves among the marginalized group of the society. Although they contribute significantly to the country's economy, informal workers, making up around 45% of the GDP, are unfortunately not covered by the Labor Act-2006 (Sejan, 2019). As a result this absence of recognition leaves them without proper regulations and vulnerable to uncertainties. In an attempt to address this issue, the Labor and Employment Ministry introduced a savings scheme for these workers. However, the

scheme's implementation faced obstacles due to gaps in policies and practices. Consequently, matters such as their pay, time off, retirement plans, sick leave, and other benefits remain inconsistently determined as Sejan (2019) mentioned in his article and I found the same circumstances from the interviews. Interviews of the women of Banishanta revealed that there are no fixed wages or working hours for sex workers. Business varies with seasons and clients, causing income disparities. Appearance affects earnings, creating conflicts. Few diversify income with activities like farming, fishing, and tailoring. In Banishanta, control over resources or wages depends on the brothel status. Newcomer Sharmin faced issues with earnings initially. Later, she gained control. Similar experiences were common. In the past, young tenants had to surrender earnings, but now most have awareness and autonomy. Leader Razia Begum empowers newcomers. Even though, some under individual leaders lack full income access to their wages. One's income and control over it actually helps to measure one's empowerment as Das & Kundu (2009) view empowerment as an ongoing process, evaluating resources, capability, and achievements over time (Das & Kundu, 2009). For the women in Banishanta, the uncertain pay system pushes them into financial difficulties, ultimately causing them to become part of the marginalized section of society and disempowered if measured by the method of Das & Kundu (2009) according to my findings.

#### **4.2 Stakeholder Emphasis: 'Rescuing' sex workers vs. 'Securing' Labor Rights:**

In Banishanta, numerous governmental and non-governmental organizations are actively supporting individuals engaged in sex work to safeguard their rights, encompassing healthcare, education, and vocational training. Dalit, among other groups, provides herbal remedies for health issues and basic education for children. Organizations like 'Jagrotto Jubo Songhothon' have aided sex workers in forming groups to advocate for their rights and even created a cemetery for



them. 'Lighthouse' imparts STD and HIV knowledge through trained volunteers. Training programs in diverse fields are offered to help workers transition away from sex work. During COVID-19, organizations like Dalit and government agencies offered financial aid and food support to sex workers. Despite challenges, some adapted by fishing and selling catches for income. Legal awareness has increased, leading to decreased harassment. Efforts by Union Parishad and NGOs helped workers obtain legal documentation. By looking at the cases of other countries like Latin America and Brazil from the work of Cabezas (2019) similar scenarios are found. In the 1980s, sex worker community groups emerged in Latin America. In Uruguay, women started to unite in 1986, gaining social benefits such as security and health support from different organization. Brazilian sex workers Gabriela Leite and Lourdes Barreto held the country's inaugural national convention in 1987. In 2007, Rio de Janeiro saw the creation of the fashion brand Daspu by sex workers from the organization Davida, becoming the first fashion business entirely operated by sex workers (Cabezas, 2019). Well, aid from the organization named Davida has helped the sex workers from Brazil to form a fashion house. Similarly, in the case of the women of Banishanta in my findings, an organization named 'Jagroto Jubo Songhothon' has helped the sex workers to form their own organization 'Nari Jagoroni Shongnsta' (Women's Awakening Organization) which helps them to remain under an umbrella to fight for better living condition. The aid provided by the stakeholders in Banishanta also relates with workers of Shonagachi brothel in Moni Nag's (2003) work. Scenario of Sonagachi's sex workers highlights the significant role of the Sonagachi project in inspiring the formation of the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC), an organization of sex workers. DMSC has become influential in the project's epidemiological achievements and has empowered impoverished and vulnerable sex workers in West Bengal. Through DMSC, the sex workers

have gained a measure of control over their lives and the lives of their children (Nag, 2003). Similarly, In Banishanta, younger workers prioritize personal hygiene, trained by experienced co-workers through NGOs. Fabric and body disinfectants are used. According to the interviews of few women, previously hygiene was poor, resulting in severe illnesses and even deaths. Older workers like Lovely Begum, once a volunteer trained by 'The Lighthouse NGO', educated others on STDs, HIV, labor rights, and health. Dalit now provides healthcare, however lack of proper follow-up have increased the challenges as Lovely Begum stated. Similarly, as Nag (2003) mentioned, Sonagachi project's success stems from selecting and training sex workers as peer educators. They raise awareness about STDs, HIV/AIDS, and safer sex with condoms. Chosen from the area, they exhibit enthusiasm, understanding, and leadership. Well, this approach of raising awareness among the workers is effective, but it relies on having adequate resources. As per Lovely Begum from Banishanta, only Dalit NGO currently offers such assistance of training and awareness among them which unfortunately is not sufficient for the workers.

However, talking to the KII respondents, I found that the main goal of the NGOs is to drag the sex workers away from this occupation as it is criminalized in our country. Nonetheless, as Clark (2015) mentioned that another common method of empowering sex workers is to "rescue" sex workers from their situations, such as brothels or trafficking. This can provide short-term aid but lacks long-lasting solutions and can put other women at risk. According to her no existing empowerment approaches genuinely tackles the underlying causes of sex work, like poverty, or the needed political changes to protect women from violence. So, the primary issue revolves around whether the stakeholders are offering materialistic aids or aiding them in standing up for their labor rights in Bangladesh as well. Well, Bangladesh being an Islamic country do not support 'prostitution' and criminalize the occupation. Clark (2015) regarding this matter

furthermore claimed that Natasha Ahmad from the Sex Workers' Alliance of South Asia, who is active in both India and Bangladesh, mentioned progress of fighting for the rights of sex workers has been slow particularly in Bangladesh. This is partly due to the strict gender norms in this Muslim society that emphasize women's honor and purity, making it harder to advocate for change (Clark, 2015). Thus no proper policies are being made. As a result, the NGOs and other government organization cannot take proper initiative to ensure their labor rights. Moreover, sex work being a part of informal sector is another reason for such misery.

#### **4.3 Empowerment through an Intersectional Lens:**

In concluding my dissertation, the discussions I had with 13 respondents about their socio-economic backgrounds provided me with a deep understanding of the remarkable diversity in their roots and life stories. This diversity has bestowed them with unique individual identities, which intersect and interact through the lens of 'intersectionality'. This perspective has allowed me to gain valuable insights into the struggles each worker faces in shaping their fundamental rights, both in terms of their basic needs and labor rights. However, many of the newer and younger workers expressed reluctance and fear in sharing any negative perceptions regarding the NGOs that are assisting them. On the other hand, the older individuals provided comprehensive and candid insights into every question I posed. This dichotomy shed light on the power dynamics among them, viewed through the prism of intersectionality, which directly influences their 'dis/empowerment'.

Interestingly, the older workers, who wield more power and hold higher status within the brothel, are more open in expressing their opinions and have greater access to resources compared to their younger counterparts. Moreover, the findings revealed a trend: those sex workers who are considered more attractive have a higher status within the brothel community,

consequently leading to a greater sense of 'empowerment' among them. Delving deeper into the findings, it was evident that most sex workers who are new to the profession along with others holding less power often struggle to access social and legal services due to the deep-rooted social stigma and discrimination they face. This observation, when viewed through an intersectional perspective, sheds light on the challenges these individuals encounter. These factors underscore the significance of adopting an intersectional lens to comprehend the complexities faced by sex workers. Such an approach not only provides a holistic understanding of their struggles and strengths but also serves as a tool to measure the degree of 'dis/empowerment' they experience.

Most existing literatures tend to highlight the successes of sex workers and movements investigating the factors causing their exclusion from labor rights. In my fieldwork, I took a different approach by concentrating on their varying levels of 'dis/empowerment' to grasp why their labor rights remain inaccessible along with certain factors. A significant portion of the literatures underscore that sex workers often find themselves in a precarious position due to societal norms and economic circumstances, largely stemming from their limited access to legal protections. In Bangladesh, a society that leans conservative Islamic tradition, there is a complex question about whether "prostitution" is deemed legal or not since. Within this context, research and policies often focus on the "rescue" of sex workers from their profession instead of ensuring their proper labor rights. This emphasis on "rescue" rather than "securing" their rights can unintentionally make their situation even worse, leaving some workers feeling more disempowered.

In the dissertation, recognizing that the challenges vary individually, understanding their diverse experiences of privilege and discrimination was vital. To achieve this, the research employed the intersectionality framework, delving into the complex power dynamics within

brothels and their impact. Additionally, the study employs the 'empowerment' framework to assess the empowerment of women in Banishanta to find my second objective. This approach considers factors such as race, age, and economic status, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of their empowerment within the brothel's context and through an intersectional lens. The 'intersectionality' approach has been particularly valuable in helping me comprehend and connect with my research findings compared to 'empowerment' theory. It has provided insights into the viewpoints, obstacles, levels of empowerment or disempowerment, and the dynamics of power that sex workers experience, considering factors like their age, appearance, economic status, and roles within the brothel. On the other hand, the 'empowerment' theory has facilitated the measurement of their degree of empowerment or lack thereof.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusion**

Due to cultural stigma, sex workers experience significant oppression, violation, and dominance around the world, which results in their marginalization and disempowerment. Along with suffering high inequality, sex workers in Bangladesh who operate in the informal sector are also denied access to their labor rights. Thus, the goal of this dissertation has been to examine the condition of labor rights for Bangladeshi sex workers, with a focus on the Banishanta sex workers. Worldwide, sex workers have been fighting for their basic and civil rights as well as an identity. They are also concerned about their work rights in addition to that. However, in a

conservative nation like Bangladesh, it is challenging for them to protect their work rights. Initially, societal stigmatization of these people is one of the primary obstacles to the protection of their rights. The state has criminalized this occupation even though most of the women are coerced in this sex industry. Because of the stigmatization and criminalization of the occupation, adequate legal laws for sex workers have not been implemented. Due to the fact that "prostitution" is classified as an "informal occupation," those who work in it do not have any special labor or civil rights because of how they are perceived—either with ignorance or sympathy. Secondly, the precarious status of sex workers due to the lack of labor rights places them in a disempowered position. Finally, due to these two main factors sex workers are facing challenges to assure better living and working environment, proper wage system, leave and work hour system, healthcare, education for their children, and security of life. Considering the difficulties sex workers encounter in their pursuit of labor rights, this paper has taken a step further to assess and comprehend these challenges. It seeks to do so from both the viewpoints of the workers themselves and that of others involved or working with them.

Existing academic literature sheds light on the global labor rights challenges faced by sex workers, highlighting their movements and progress. However, when it comes to Bangladesh, the focus is primarily on their civil rights, with scarce attention given to their labor rights. Additionally, comprehensive insights into the labor rights of sex workers in Banishanta are notably lacking. In my literature review, I primarily concentrated on examining the historical context, progression, and accomplishments of the sex worker's movement in securing their labor rights both globally and within Bangladesh. I also explored the dynamics of their empowerment or lack thereof, as well as the various factors that contribute to their exclusion from the formal labor framework. In my dissertation, I opted to utilize the historical context and achievements of

the sex worker's movement as a basis for comparison with the current state of labor rights. I examined how sex workers navigate their efforts to secure these rights, comparing insights from existing literature. The literature on sex workers' labor rights in Europe, America, and India diverged from my findings due to variations in their legal systems. Yet, I identified parallels with certain Bangladeshi literatures, highlighting shared challenges. Specifically, the absence of proper legal policies, attributed to social stigma and criminalization of the occupation, emerged as a common factor hindering sex workers' progress in asserting their labor rights. This situation stems from the fact that Bangladesh follows an Islamic tradition, influencing the approach of organizations working with sex workers. Many of the organizations working for the wellbeing of the sex workers prioritize either helping sex workers leave the profession or providing sexual healthcare, important trainings, and education. Many of the trainings are not followed-up by the organization representatives as a result workers are not benefitted by those trainings. However, there are women who choose to remain in this occupation or would face significant challenges if they were to leave due to the absence of stable job alternatives. Both governmental and non-governmental bodies in the country seem to be disregarding the reality that these workers, similar to other informal laborers, lack proper labor rights. All these factors are gradually pushing sex workers to the margins of society.

Moreover, few of the data from my findings contradict with the previous literature provided on the misery of Banishanta sex workers. Previously, the sex workers had no voter identity cards. Through my finding I got to discover that the Union Parishad along with some NGOs took initiative to make legal documentations for the sex workers in order to participate in different national activities. Previously many NGOs used to work for empowering or to specific to 'rescue' them. But now, most of the programs are inactive. My dissertation also showed how

different stakeholders have helped the sex workers to form their own organization and fight for basic rights for better living opportunities. However, I have also highlighted on their poor accommodation and working environment that leads them to mental and physical degradation.

Therefore, in this following ways I have tried to address the research problems of my dissertation and understand how the sex workers from Banishanta deal with their daily struggles due to the absence of labor rights and on the way to ensure their labor rights. To get a better grasp of their situation, I also tried to measure how empowered or disempowered they are. Additionally, I provided a glimpse into what educated members of society think about 'prostitution'. Finally, I linked all my findings together and took a closer look at the many aspects of the sex workers' identities using Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) 'intersectionality' framework. This really helped me see and figure out the power dynamics that exist among workers of different ages, skin colors, financial situations, and roles within the brothel. I found that these power dynamics also play a part in how involved they are in different organizations. Furthermore, I incorporated Naila Kabeer's (1999) 'empowerment' theory. This theory helped me assess the extent to which sex workers could utilize their personal resources and achieve their goals. I accomplished this by taking into account their various aspects of identity in diverse factors, like; age, race/ beauty standard and status inside the brothel which I have analyzed through the concept of 'intersectionality'. It enabled me to understand a key focus of my study: the struggles that sex workers face and their efforts to improve their working conditions and rights, which, sadly, are on the rise every day.



## 5.1 Summary of Findings and Discussion:

The findings of the dissertation highlight the dire living conditions and unfavorable work environment for the workers in the Banishanta brothel. These individuals face challenges such as unstable payment methods, inadequate access to healthcare services, and hygiene concerns due to water issues. These are evident crises they confront. Another significant hurdle they encounter is the burden of 'social stigmatization'. This stigma not only portrays the occupation as criminal in the eyes of society but also within the legal framework. Given Bangladesh's status as a conservative Islamic-majority state, this perspective leads to the exclusion of 'prostitution' from being recognized as legitimate work. Consequently, sex workers are denied their labor rights.

The dissertation also reveals that the way sex workers look and how much money they have; sets them apart from one another within the brothel. This leads to a kind of power difference among them. The ones who are considered attractive tend to earn more money, which gives them a stronger position. Additionally, whether a worker feels empowered or not is linked to their financial situation and their role within the brothel. However, their situation beyond the brothel is influenced by how people from outside treat them. The findings indicate that many people view these workers either as 'criminals' or as individuals worthy of sympathy. These perceptions, along with how the country treats them, gradually push them into a marginalized position within society.

Moreover, my dissertation emphasizes the impact of government organizations (GOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on the lives of sex workers through various forms of assistance. However, I aim to illustrate that their support often addresses secondary issues

without tackling the core challenges. This analysis also allows me to understand the viewpoint of stakeholders regarding 'prostitution', which they often regarded as a 'heinous' activity.

## **5.2 Recommendation:**

After looking closely at the research data, here are some suggestions based on what I found:

- A primary step should involve establishing legal policies specifically addressing the 'informal sectors' of the workforce to safeguard their labor rights. By doing so, not only will a significant portion of informal workers benefit, but it will also extend that security to 'sex workers'.
- Presently, it is crucial to guarantee improved living conditions and a better work environment and a proper medical facility for the sex workers of Banishanta. This will enhance both their daily lives and their work atmosphere, providing protection against natural disasters and averting potential damage due to rising water levels.
- It is important to raise public awareness about the rights of sex workers by sharing information about their present situations.
- A concept of differentiating sexual and other activities that are consensual and those that are coerced for individuals engaged in sex work is a must. This approach will contribute to reducing violence and sexual exploitation, thereby enhancing their safety.
- Government organizations (GOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should focus on helping sex workers by improving their situation rather than forcibly removing

them. If a person chooses to leave the profession, these organizations should offer sustainable solutions, including employment opportunities.

### **5.3 Limitations:**

While this study has provided valuable insights into the challenges and experiences of sex workers in Banishanta, it is important to acknowledge its limitations that have influenced the scope and depth of our findings. The limitations of this dissertation are stated below:

- Right from the beginning of the research, there has been a lack of existing studies, especially concerning the labor rights of sex workers in Bangladesh. Additionally, there is a shortage of secondary research regarding the lives and experiences of sex workers in Banishanta.
- Secondly, because I conducted my study in a single brothel in Bangladesh and concentrated solely on respondents from that location, it was not feasible to include participants from various areas to gather their perspectives and experiences. And I think it has limited the scope to differentiate or connect the experiences of sex workers from all over Bangladesh.
- Thirdly, because I visited the brothel with the assistance of an NGO, and there was consistently an NGO representative accompanying me during the interviews, the respondents felt somewhat uncomfortable sharing all their experiences, particularly the younger workers. Furthermore, the other workers initially hesitated to talk to me and even made jokes. However, the presence of the NGO representatives eventually facilitated the continuation of the interviews.

- Fourthly, because certain workers, who cannot work independently and overseen by a leader referred to as 'madam', are restricted from conversing with anyone outside of clients, I faced difficulty in understanding their viewpoint regarding labor rights and their day-to-day challenges that I gathered from other workers.
- Lastly, the Key informant interview could not be conducted on time due to the busy schedule of one of the participants. Later it was conducted virtually which took a long time.

#### **5.4 Further Research:**

These limitations suggest several avenues for further research that could enrich our understanding of the complexities surrounding the lives and rights of sex workers in Bangladesh. To address the limitation of conducting the study within a single brothel, future research could encompass a broader geographical area, involving various regions of Bangladesh. This approach would provide an opportunity to compare the experiences and challenges of sex workers from different locations, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of their diverse circumstances. Furthermore, the challenge of restricted access to certain workers, overseen by a local leader, highlights the need for a focused exploration of leadership structures within the sex work industry. Investigating the dynamics between leaders and workers could uncover nuanced power dynamics and their influence on labor rights and working conditions. Given the limited extent to which empowerment dynamics were explored due to the presence of NGO representatives during interviews, future research could employ longitudinal studies to examine how the presence of intermediaries impacts the empowerment and willingness of sex workers to share their experiences over time. While this dissertation has uncovered significant insights into

the lives and labor rights of sex workers in Banishanta, the limitations encountered suggest pathways for future research that can broaden our perspective, enhance our understanding, and contribute to better policies and practices aimed at improving the lives of this marginalized community.

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## **Appendix1:**

### **Questionnaire (Interview)**

#### **Demographic information:**

1. What is your name?
2. How old are you?
3. Your Educational background?
4. Do you have children?
5. Contact Details: (Optional)

#### **Experiences and background:**

6. How did you end up working here?
7. How long have you been involved in this work?
8. How many hours do you work daily?
9. How do you think your society's social views on sex work are?
10. Have you ever been the victim of discrimination or social stigma because of your engagement in sex work? If so, please explain the circumstances.
11. Do you face any challenges on your daily lives for the social stigma?

12. Have the clients or coworkers ever forced you to labor against your will or exploited you in any way?
13. Have you ever faced challenges while reporting acts of abuse or exploitation or pursuing legal remedies?
14. Are you working independently or under the management of someone else?

#### **Awareness about Rights:**

15. Do you have a safe and secure working environment?
16. Are you able to negotiate or set boundaries and working hours?
17. Do you have access to clean and hygienic working facilities?
18. Are you conscious about your minimum wage and working hours?
19. What is the system of payment distribution among you people here?
20. What is the range of your income? (daily/weekly/monthly)
21. Do you get paid in a fair way?
22. Do you have full access to your wages?
23. Do you know about labor rights? if yes then are you aware of your labor rights?
24. How many hours do you work daily?
25. Are there enough resources in your community (such as counseling, accommodation, and economic aid) to help sex workers?
26. Do/Does your children/child go to school?
27. Do you get sick leave?
28. Do you get weekly holidays? If yes then how many days?
29. Do you get religious holidays?
30. Do you receive holiday bonuses from your workplace?

31. Do you have to work extra hours? If yes then do you get fairly paid for the working hours?
32. Do you get treated when you are sick by the local healthcare center?
33. Do you have access to complete medical care, including treatments for sexual and reproductive health?
34. Do you feel secure and backed up when performing sex work? Tell us more, please.
35. Are you provided with adequate protection and information to prevent Sexually transmitted infections (STI)?
36. Are you a part of any networks or groups that support the rights of sex workers? If so, be specific.
37. What steps do you think need to be taken, in your opinion, to end sex workers' discrimination and societal stigma?
38. What more assistance or tools might help sex workers improve their general well-being?
39. What do you do when you face conflict?
40. Is there any union to solve the problems?
41. If there are any union/group how much benefit do you get from there in the time of crises?
42. Does any NGOs make you aware about all the access to your benefits and social services as a 'labor'.?
43. Do you have access to legal aids or counseling services?

## **Appendix2:**

### **Questionnaire (KII)**

#### **General Information:**

1. How long has Dalit been working with the sex workers in Bangladesh?
2. What main goals does the NGO's work with sex workers have?
3. What are the areas of emphasis of the NGO's work with sex workers?

#### **Challenges faced by the workers:**

4. From your perspective, what are the most significant challenges that the sex workers face while working in Bangladesh, especially in Banishanta?
5. How do these challenges affect the workers' ability to exercise their rights, both as workers and as human beings?
6. How do you think the workers deal with their accommodation condition due to the river erosion?
7. Since their income is very low in the past few years after the rise of COVID-19 (according to the respondents), how do you think they manage to earn for their livelihood?
8. Do sex workers experience any obstacles while trying to receive social services, healthcare, or education? How does this impact their rights and well-being?

#### **Empowerment and disempowerment factors:**

9. Are there any empowerment programs/ initiatives that your organization has implemented for the sex workers? Could you describe?

10. How do these initiatives seek to enhance the rights, wellbeing, and agency of the workers?

11. In your opinion, what are the factors that play roles for the empowerment and disempowerment of the sex workers?

12. How do these factors prevent workers from standing out for their rights or enhancing their working conditions?

13. Are there any counseling or awareness program run by your/any organization for the sex workers?

14. If yes, then in those programs are they made aware of their labor's right?

**Legal and social factors:**

15. Being one of the 14 official brothels of Bangladesh, how does the legal framework put impact on the worker's rights and working condition?

16. According to you, what are some of the important social and cultural beliefs that influence how sex workers are treated and perceived?

**Role of NGO/Agent in advocacy:**

17. How does your organization assist sex workers in preserving their worker's rights and enhancing working conditions?

18. What are some notable successes or results of the NGO's advocacy work?

19. Does your organization work with government organizations, other NGOs, or international groups to advance the rights and welfare of sex workers? If yes what effects does this partnership have on their work?

20. What was your experience working with/for the sex worker's welfare during the wave of COVID-19?

21. What are the most important areas that still require development in order to safeguard and advance the rights of sex workers in Bangladesh?

### **Appendix 3:**

#### **Photos from the Fieldwork**





**Houses and stalls of the sex workers by the river side.**

**Blocks to make the houses safe from water rise**



**Area Manager of Banishanta brothel from Dalit NGO**



**Banishanta Bazar ghat**



**KII informant Nupur didi assisting me**