

Online Visibility and Digital Privacy Practices of the Sex Workers in Bangladesh

by

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A thesis submitted to the Department of Computer Science and Engineering
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
M.Sc. in Computer Science

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

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2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through 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.
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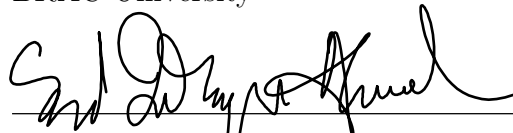
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Ethics Statement

This research has been conducted in accordance with ethical standards and guidelines to ensure the protection, respect, and dignity of all participants involved. Given the sensitive nature of the study, particularly its focus on online sex work and privacy concerns in Bangladesh, the following measures were implemented to uphold ethical integrity:

Participant Consent

All participants were informed about the objectives, scope, and potential risks of the research prior to their involvement. Verbal or written informed consent was obtained before conducting interviews, and participants were assured that their participation was voluntary, with the right to withdraw at any time without explanation or penalty.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

To protect participants' identities, pseudonyms were used in all documentation and publications. No personally identifiable information was recorded or disclosed. Data was securely stored in encrypted files, accessible only to the primary researcher. Measures were taken to ensure that shared quotes or insights could not be traced back to individual participants.

Sensitivity to Vulnerable Populations

Recognizing the vulnerability of the participant group, the study was designed to minimize risks of distress, exposure, or harm. Interview questions were framed sensitively to avoid retraumatization, and participants were provided with contact information for local support organizations, should they require assistance after the interviews.

Cultural and Legal Sensitivities

This research carefully navigated the cultural and legal complexities surrounding sex work in Bangladesh. The study did not involve the promotion or facilitation of sex

work. Instead, it aimed to highlight the lived experiences and challenges faced by participants to inform policy and academic discourse on digital privacy and security.

Institutional Approval

This study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of BRAC University.

Transparency and Reciprocity

Participants were informed about how their data would be used and how the findings might contribute to academic, social, or policy-level discussions. Efforts were made to ensure that participants felt respected and valued throughout the research process.

Participant Compensation

All participants were compensated for their time and effort as a gesture of appreciation for their invaluable contributions to this research. The compensation amount was determined to align with their average hourly earnings, ensuring fairness while avoiding any undue influence on their decision to participate. This approach reflects the ethical principle of reciprocity, and aims to respect and value the participants' time while maintaining the integrity of the research process.

By adhering to these ethical principles, this study strives to contribute meaningfully to the academic understanding of digital privacy and sex work while upholding the highest standards of integrity and respect for the individuals whose experiences are at its core.

Abstract

The sex workers in the Global South make up a significant portion of the global sex industry. Despite this, there is a noticeable gap in the relevant HCI literature that focuses on sex work and computing, particularly in understanding the experiences and circumstances of sex workers in this region. This study seeks to address this gap by conducting a three-month-long ethnographic study with 25 legal sex workers from the Daulatdia brothel in Bangladesh. In addition, we carried out semi-structured interviews with five urban sex workers to further enrich our understanding. The findings from this research shed light on the multifaceted challenges these workers face, including the pervasive stigma they encounter, their limited technological literacy, and the emerging threats posed by online security vulnerabilities. At the same time, the study also highlights the unique skills and creativity these workers employ to navigate and overcome these challenges. Building on existing literature in South Asian feminism, postcolonial computing, and critical urban studies, we show how these findings are deeply interwoven with the historical and cultural fabric of Bangladesh. Through our discussion, we contribute to advancing critical HCI's discourse on sexuality, privacy, and equity. Additionally, we propose implications for design practices and policy changes that could better address the needs and realities of these communities.

Keywords: Human-centered Computing; Empirical Studies in Collaborative and Social Computing; Social Aspects of Security and Privacy; Human-computer Interaction (HCI); ICT for Development; qualitative; stigma; women; gender; marginalized; surveillance, technology-facilitated abuse; Global South

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Motivation

Sex work has long been recognized as one of the world's oldest professions [44], deeply embedded within the social, cultural, and economic fabric of human societies. Despite its pervasive presence, sex work remains illegal in most countries globally [106]. However, the scale of this underground economy is vast; according to a 2012 report by Fondation Scelles, there are an estimated 40-42 million sex workers worldwide [65]. This profession, often operating at the margins of legality and morality, provides a lens to explore complex societal dynamics. While sex work has been the subject of extensive inquiry in feminist scholarship [3], [4], [10], [14], [16], [22], [24], [35], [42], [71], [73], [74], [102], public health research [60], [66], [84], [85], [121], and urban studies [6], [21], [26], [47], [153], it remains relatively neglected within the domain of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI).

Existing research in these fields highlights how sex work reflects and perpetuates cultural norms around gender and sexuality, often revealing the hidden dynamics within a society's underbelly. The persistence and proliferation of sex work over thousands of years, despite continual threats from legal, moral, and social policing [107], underscore its complex interplay with human emotions, societal structures, and economic imperatives. The profession thrives in informal and intimate spaces, challenging established norms and revealing profound contradictions in human behavior [58], [70], [94]. These contradictions include the willingness to risk severe diseases and infections [30], [40], [91], as well as the intricate politics surrounding the existence and regulation of red-light districts.

Red-light districts, often controversial for their presence, play a dual role in cities. On one hand, they serve as financial hubs and tourist attractions, supporting a wide range of businesses [11], [37], [41], [52], [67], [94]. On the other hand, their proximity can impact property values and urban politics, reflecting broader societal tensions about morality and space [94], [96]. The challenges and politics surrounding these areas offer critical insights into urban design and policy-making.

Despite its significance as a global industry, valued at 180 billion USD in the post-COVID period [79], research on sex work and technology has been notably sparse [81]. The rapid digitization of sex work, encompassing online platforms for pornography, sexting, escorting, camming, and subscription-based services like OnlyFans, has reshaped the landscape of this profession. Although precise data on the number of online sex workers remains elusive, media reports consistently highlight its exponential growth [135], [156]. This shift is not limited to the Western world, where access to technology is relatively straightforward [39], [122]; sex workers in the Global South are also increasingly leveraging digital platforms. For instance, in India, the teledensity of female sex workers is reported to be 97% [56], and client solicitation via mobile phones has become increasingly prevalent, especially during the pandemic [98], [154].

These developments underscore the need for deeper research into the historical, cultural, and socio-economic contexts of sex work, particularly in regions like the Indian subcontinent. This area has a rich and complex history with sex work, influenced by factors such as religion, colonialism, feminism, and, most recently, digitization [5], [7], [43], [86], [149]. The transition from offline to online sex work introduces new spatial politics, raising critical questions about the implications of this shift for urban HCI and digital privacy.

1.2 Objectives

While HCI scholarship has engaged with street-based and exclusively online sex workers [131], [136], [145], [152], there is a notable lack of research focusing on brothel-based sex workers in the Global South. These individuals, often living and

working within designated red-light areas, face unique challenges that intersect with issues of marginalization, privacy, and technology. Brothel-based sex work constitutes a significant proportion of the profession in South Asia, yet the experiences of these workers remain underexplored in HCI literature [81].

To address this gap, this study draws from a three-month ethnographic study with 25 female sex workers in Daulatdia, Bangladesh, one of the largest brothels in the world. In Bangladesh, sex work within brothels is not only legal but also organized under the Bangladesh Sex Workers Association, functioning as a unionized profession [32]. For consistency and to avoid the stigma often associated with terms like “prostitution,” we refer to our participants as “sex workers,” aligning with their own terminology and identity [87].

This research is situated at the intersection of Sexuality and HCI (SHCI)[55] and HCI for Development. Through over 100 hours of engagement with a marginalized community residing in a regulated environment, our study explores the interplay between societal and religious norms and the lived experiences of sex workers in both digital and physical spaces. The findings reveal the pervasive influence of patriarchal norms, exemplified by male clients who act as “pseudo-husbands” and impose significant constraints on these women’s agency, both offline and online [72], [105], [112], [140], [150].

1.3 Contributions

One of the key contributions of this study lies in uncovering the strategies employed by sex workers to navigate and subvert these constraints. Despite low levels of digital literacy, they exhibit remarkable resilience and creativity in adapting technology to align with their agency. However, the vulnerabilities associated with limited technological proficiency underscore the need for inclusive, equitable, and fair technological interventions for marginalized communities.

Thus this study makes a threefold contribution to the HCI literature:

1. It provides an ethnographic account of the technology encounters by one of

the most stigmatized and marginalized communities in the Global South.

2. It advances the HCI literature on the gendered use of computing, and documents how the usage of computing by Bangladeshi sex workers is shaped by developing trust and putting up with constant surveillance and societal stigma.
3. It contributes to the emerging HCI literature on the digitization of place-based events and reveals how the digitization of traditional sex work complicates the sacred/profane dichotomy of urban space.

1.4 Thesis Structure

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive review of the existing research and development in this domain.
- Chapter 3 details the background study relevant to the topic.
- Chapter 4 outlines the methodology employed in the research.
- Chapter 5 presents the findings of the study, while Chapter 6 discusses their implications, connects them with the existing body of knowledge, and identifies potential avenues for future research.
- Finally, Chapter 7 offers concluding remarks and addresses the limitations of the study.

Chapter 2

Related Work

To begin, we adopt Overs’ definition of “sex work,” which frames it as “*the exchange of sexual services for monetary compensation, products, or other advantages within a commercial framework, for adult individuals who identify as male, female, or transgenders*” [20]. This conceptualization underscores that the engagement in sex work can take a variety of forms across gender identities and recognizes sexual labor as a commercial activity. Within this framework, sex workers can operate independently—negotiating services directly with their clients—or rely on facilitators, such as brothel managers, agencies, or digital platforms that coordinate or mediate their interactions with clients.

More recently, the nature of sex work has undergone substantial shifts due to the proliferation of digital technologies. We follow Jones et al. [81] in defining “digital sex work” as the “*internet-mediated exchange of sexual commodities and/or services*.” This viewpoint encompasses a wide range of practices, from creating and distributing sexually explicit content online (e.g., camming, subscription-based platforms) to soliciting or arranging in-person encounters through digital channels (e.g., websites, social media, or messaging apps). These digital platforms not only transform how sexual services are marketed and delivered but also give rise to new challenges and vulnerabilities, including issues of privacy, digital security, and the evolving norms and regulations around online sexual content.

Taken together, these definitions foreground the complexity and diversity of sex work, including its expansion into online spheres. To situate the contribution of this paper within broader debates and ongoing research in Human-Computer Interaction

(HCI), the following subsections shed light on three key strands of literature. Each strand speaks to different aspects of the lived realities, technological engagements, and evolving social contexts of sex work—both on and offline—and collectively informs our understanding of how HCI can critically engage with these issues.

2.1 Computing and Sex Work

A growing body of work in HCI and related disciplines calls for reorienting design considerations from a narrow emphasis on “*necessity*” to broader themes of *pleasure* and *desire*[51], [63]. This shift highlights the importance of designing technologies that cater to a wider range of human experiences and emotional needs, including sexual expression. Early explorations in this area focused on creating improved interfaces for online erotic encounters[29], [33], examining, for instance, Virtual Reality pornography and its potential for immersive sexual experiences [103]. In tandem with these efforts, researchers have foregrounded the significance of “private space” as a cultural construct that shapes how individuals experience digital pleasure, recognizing that social norms and local contexts heavily influence attitudes toward sexuality and technology [28].

Parallel discussions have called for critical reflection on “generalized” design solutions for mediated intimacy. Scholars have argued that the complexities and sensitivities surrounding sexuality necessitate “*customized technology*” solutions [23], sparking broader conversations about how sexuality research might galvanize fresh directions in interface design and catalyze new lines of scholarly inquiry. These discussions underscore the possibility that inclusive and nuanced approaches to designing for sexuality can enrich HCI by accommodating underrepresented needs, validating a broader spectrum of user experiences, and challenging conventional technological assumptions.

Within this evolving context, interest in the intersections of sex work and technology has gained momentum more recently. For instance, Barwulor et al.[131] conducted interviews with sex workers in Germany and Switzerland (where sex work is legal and regulated), illuminating how sex workers employ digital tools for business operations while contending with systemic digital discrimination. Another study by McDonald et al.[136] explored the privacy and security risks faced by sex workers

online, delving into their strategies to safeguard digital safety and examining how virtual communities foster mutual aid and resilience [145]. Operating at the intersection of technology and social justice, Strohmayr et al. [100], [120] partnered with sex worker rights organizations to develop interventions, such as a Bad Client and Aggressor List, aimed at documenting violence and enhancing sex worker safety.

The digital landscape of sex work has continued to evolve in response to broader social and economic shifts, including the expansion of the commercial sex market [54] and the disruptive impact of COVID-19 [145], [152]. Researchers have investigated how the internet influences market growth, alters risk behaviors [48], [53], [54], and creates new opportunities for “sexual entrepreneurship”[117]. This body of work also illustrates how technological advances enable greater control and agency over client acquisition, advertising[53], [109], [146], and vetting processes [108], [132], [136]. Other research focuses on the risks associated with navigating multiple platforms (both those designed for and appropriated by sex workers)[90], [111], [146], [158], examining how sex workers mitigate threats in varying regulatory contexts such as the UK and the US[82], [108]. Additionally, scholars have studied the rise of online activism within sex worker communities in the Global North [75], [119].

While these inquiries greatly enrich our understanding of sex work’s digitization, significant gaps remain, particularly when it comes to recognizing how entrenched stigma, misogyny, and societal surveillance shape technological engagements in regions like the Indian subcontinent [25], [38], [144]. Even less attention has been paid to the ways in which sex work’s digital turn interacts with broader urban spatial politics. This lacuna limits our ability to contextualize the lived realities of sex workers who occupy multiple social margins, and underscores the need for further research into how localized norms, intersectional oppressions, and shifting socio-technological landscapes converge to affect sex workers’ digital, physical, and emotional well-being.

2.2 Sex Work in the Global South

The Global South scholarship remains nascent in its exploration of the multifaceted intersections between technology and sex work. Within this context, sex workers are frequently stereotyped as passive participants in broader political economies and

depicted as submissive to Western men [13]. However, emerging studies have begun to challenge these reductive portrayals by examining diverse dimensions of sex work in the Global South. For example, recent research has documented the increasing prevalence of online sex work in India, tracing how the availability of digital tools is reshaping the nature of the profession [149]. In Nepal, scholars have investigated the relationship between technology adoption and the changing commercial sex industry, illuminating how digital platforms can simultaneously offer expanded opportunities and introduce new uncertainties [133]. Another thread of inquiry has looked into the interplay between online client solicitation and safer sex practices in India, revealing how technology might influence workers' decisions to use condoms [83]. Similarly, studies have highlighted how digital channels, such as instant messaging apps, enable workers to transcend physical boundaries, thereby widening the scope of their voice and agency [126].

Beyond these developments in digital engagement, other scholarship has homed in on systemic issues like sex trafficking—particularly in the context of South Asia, where economic disparities, political unrest, and globalizing forces converge to perpetuate exploitative practices [36], [45]. Sanders et al. [68] contend that neoliberal ideologies underwrite this underground economy, keeping the trafficking infrastructure alive and resilient. In a participatory study with survivors of sex trafficking in Nepal[123], researchers challenged dominant assumptions about survivors' agency in envisioning collective futures, emphasizing the critical role of fostering incremental forms of agency before calling for more expansive political participation.

Design-focused research in the Global South context remains sparse, yet a few notable projects point the way forward. Sambasivan et al. [56] led an ethnographically informed design study with urban outdoor sex workers in India, developing a phone-based broadcasting system that an NGO could use to share vital announcements with workers. The work unveiled important nuances in how broadcasting tools might be adopted and appropriated, though it left broader questions around gender politics, cultural specificities, and digital security relatively unaddressed.

Sex work in Bangladesh, in particular, is rooted in a history of profound stigma, oppression, and human rights violations, shaped by a social, cultural, and religious environment that often vilifies sex workers [25], [32], [59], [62], [128], [148]. Le-

gal ambiguities compound these issues; although brothel-based sex work retains a quasi-legal status, inconsistencies within judicial stances frequently undermine workers’ rights and well-being [17]. A number of studies have examined topics ranging from trafficking and sexual exploitation [50], [78], [147], to identity formation [34], [139], and from socioeconomic vulnerabilities [80], [97], [101], [155] to the scope of worker autonomy and collective activism [87]. Yet much of this research has been framed through a Western-centric lens, often focused on pathologizing sex workers or uncovering “risks,” “infections,” and “fears,” at the expense of discussing their creativity, resistance, pleasure, and unique skill sets [19].

Challenging this one-dimensional portrayal, Sultana et al. [129] critique how the “Western gaze” can inadvertently reinforce local misogyny, reinforcing stereotypes instead of dismantling them. Her work highlights the importance of contextually grounded and culturally specific inquiry, emphasizing that Bangladeshi sex workers are not a monolith. Rather, they exist in diverse social, economic, and religious milieus, each of which differentially shapes their lived realities, self-conceptions, and avenues for exerting agency. By interrogating these complex intersections, such scholarship urges a shift away from universalizing portrayals of sex workers as perpetual victims. Instead, it calls attention to the need for pluralistic research frameworks that illuminate the stratified experiences and socio-technical engagements of sex workers in the Global South—thereby uncovering the full spectrum of resilience, innovation, and diverse forms of empowerment that characterize these communities.

2.3 Sex Work and Spatiality

Many previous studies in this domain offer either a “technological” or a purely “sociological” reading of sex work, which tends to reduce an inherently multi-dimensional phenomenon to a singular viewpoint. These readings, in focusing solely on either technological practices or on social processes, often neglect the complex spatial configurations that sex work entails. For instance, technological perspectives might foreground the role of digital tools in facilitating or mediating sex work, sidestepping the influence of physical boundaries, cultural norms, and local regulations that shape workers’ lived experiences. Conversely, sociological studies that privilege the on-the-ground realities of sex work seldom incorporate how contemporary digital engagements (e.g., online advertising, social media, and communication platforms)

reconfigure spatial and social interactions. Such topographic representations capture only part of the “space” in which sex work unfolds, producing partial or fragmented understandings of how technologies interact with social conditions and vice versa [15], [18].

These limitations become even more pronounced when examining the broader politics of urban space and the interplay of stigmatized locales—such as red-light districts—with the wider city. Drawing on Durkheim’s theoretical framework of the sacred and the profane [89], we see how societies demarcate certain areas or practices (often associated with religion, piety, and purity) as “sacred,” while relegating everyday or illicit activities to the “profane” realm. By way of repetitive rituals and enforcement of social norms, these divisions manifest both in symbolic imagery and in how physical spaces are arranged in cities, reinforcing existing power hierarchies and cultural conceptions of morality [64].

In the context of sex work, this demarcation often translates into the stigmatization—and sometimes purposeful isolation—of neighborhoods or districts where sex workers reside and conduct business. Such “profane” zones are physically and socially marked as separate from other urban spaces, reinforcing the notion that “respectable” and “legitimate” pursuits belong elsewhere. This separation is further complicated by class, religion, and gender norms that intersect to perpetuate inequalities and marginalize sex workers. Consequently, as Sassen has argued, the so-called “global” or “digital” dimensions of the city are not detached from these local, spatial realities; instead, digital practices are deeply shaped by their material contexts and cultural politics [12], [31].

Hence, while the internet and other digital platforms can provide sex workers with new channels for outreach, community building, or client solicitation, these opportunities remain closely entwined with the physical geographies in which workers live. The “digital space” available to sex workers is neither a neutral nor an entirely separate domain—rather, it is intimately linked to the everyday realities and spatial politics that surround them. Understanding how sex workers negotiate these entangled spaces demands a more holistic, integrative lens. That is, we must move beyond “topographic” approaches that see the digital in isolation from the physical and vice versa. Only by scrutinizing the full spatial tapestry—both online and

offline—can we hope to develop a comprehensive understanding of sex workers’ lived experiences, safety strategies, and potential avenues for empowerment.

There has been little scholarly attention devoted to capturing the full spatial tapestry of sex workers’ lives in the Global South or to examining how technological tools and practices shape—and are shaped by—the complex ecosystems in which they operate. While fragmented accounts do exist, they often overlook the intricate ways that physical geographies intersect with digital platforms to inform sex workers’ day-to-day realities. Our study addresses this gap by conducting a three-month-long ethnographic investigation in Daulatdia, Bangladesh—one of the world’s largest brothels.

By immersing ourselves in Daulatdia’s vibrant yet deeply stigmatized environment, we aim to shed light on the multilayered spatial practices of sex workers, uncovering how they navigate simultaneously in the “offline” built environment and the “online” realm of social media, messaging applications, and other digital platforms. Rather than treating the physical and digital as discrete spheres, our approach situates technology use squarely within the cultural, economic, and spatial dynamics of everyday life. This holistic perspective allows us to document not only how sex workers adopt and appropriate digital technologies, but also how constraints—such as gender norms, economic pressures, and legal uncertainties—intersect with these technologies to influence power relations and personal agency.

Through this ethnography, we seek a more comprehensive understanding of how sex workers in Daulatdia negotiate their identities, relationships, and safety across shifting spatial boundaries. Ultimately, our work aims to enrich current conversations on the interplay between sex work and technology in the Global South, offering a nuanced portrait of one of humanity’s oldest professions as it adapts to and co-creates today’s digitized world.

Chapter 3

Background Study

This section outlines the complex legal and socio-cultural landscape surrounding sex work in Bangladesh. While brothel-based sex work holds a unique legal status, officially recognized and regulated by the government, it remains socially stigmatized due to prevailing conservative religious and cultural norms. The following subsections detail the historical context, operational dynamics, and lived experiences within brothels—specifically Daulatdia, one of the largest brothels globally. Additionally, the discussion explores the precarious conditions of unregistered sex workers operating outside the formal legal framework, highlighting the blurred boundaries between legality and illegality, societal acceptance, and marginalization. Understanding this nuanced context is essential for examining the broader socio-technological interactions within this marginalized community.

3.1 The Legal Status of Sex Work in Bangladesh

3.1.1 Legal and Brothel-based Sex Work

Brothel-based sex work is legally recognized in Bangladesh, distinguishing the country from many other Muslim-majority nations where extramarital sexual activities are strictly prohibited. The legal framework allows any adult woman to register as a sex worker through a process managed by local authorities. This registration typically entails paying an administrative fee, proving she is over 18 years old, and submitting an affidavit that she is voluntarily choosing sex work as her profession [9], [116].

Upon completion of this registration process, a woman gains the official status necessary to work in legally sanctioned brothels, such as the expansive Daulatdia complex—one of the largest brothels globally. Despite the formal legality, economic hardships often compel women to enter this profession. Many originate from impoverished, marginalized, or vulnerable backgrounds, having endured severe adversities like abandonment, divorce, exploitation, or family tragedies [27]. Consequently, sex work may represent one of the few viable means of survival available to them.

However, the legal recognition of brothel-based sex work does not equate to widespread social acceptance. Bangladesh remains a conservative Muslim country where premarital and extramarital sex are considered grave sins. As a result, women engaged in sex work face significant social stigma. Locally, these women are derogatorily referred to as “*potita*” (literally “fallen woman”) [34]. This term embodies judgment and moral condemnation, reflecting cultural and religious sentiments that often lead to the ostracization of sex workers within their communities.

This dichotomy between legal recognition and socio-religious disapproval manifests in various ways. Registered sex workers may avoid immediate risks such as police raids or arrests related to their profession. However, they remain vulnerable to societal discrimination, harassment, and violence. Their children might be excluded from educational institutions, securing healthcare can be challenging, and hostility from neighbors and local businesses further complicates their daily lives. Additionally, law enforcement attitudes can fluctuate, with occasional crackdowns driven by public or political pressures to “clean up” brothel areas.

Thus, while brothel-based sex work possesses a veneer of legality, the pervasive cultural stigma creates a paradoxical environment. Sex workers are legally recognized yet socially condemned, leading to a precarious existence where economic vulnerability intersects with religious norms and social taboos. Grasping this nuanced legal and cultural backdrop is essential for examining the broader socio-technical landscapes—including the use of digital tools and survival strategies—that shape the lives and livelihoods of sex workers in Bangladesh.

3.1.1.1 The Daulatdia Brothel

Located approximately 137 kilometers west of Dhaka—the capital of Bangladesh—Daulatdia is strategically situated between a busy railway station and a major ferry port connecting the southwestern regions of the country. Although it may superficially resemble any other village along the Padma River, Daulatdia is uniquely defined by its brothel, which serves as the area’s economic cornerstone. Widely regarded as one of the largest brothels globally, Daulatdia accommodates around 2,000 registered sex workers, alongside hundreds of undocumented individuals. On an average day, the brothel caters to approximately 3,000 male clients, many of whom travel from nearby towns and villages seeking sexual services, entertainment, or both [114].

Historical Roots and Ownership Daulatdia’s emergence as a commercial sex hub dates back to the British colonial era when the government established regulated brothels along key transit routes to serve travelers, traders, and military personnel [124]. Over time, this settlement evolved into a largely self-contained enclave governed by a combination of private landlords, political patrons, and local power brokers. Presently, the land is effectively owned by the family of a prominent local politician, while local police and municipal officials oversee regulation on the ground. However, the consistency and extent of this oversight fluctuate with political changes and community pressures. At the main entrance stands a police box that ostensibly screens visitors; in practice, multiple side entrances allow people to enter and exit the brothel with minimal oversight.

A Self-Contained Urban Microcosm Spanning an area comparable to a small township, Daulatdia encompasses all essential amenities for its residents and transient populations. Beauty salons, gambling dens, bars with dance rooms, restaurants, and a bazaar selling everyday items line its narrow, winding streets. The brothel’s physical environment is stratified: some neighborhoods feature sturdier construction, better lighting, and relatively clean surroundings, while others—often near open drainage channels—are cramped, poorly ventilated, and unsanitary. Despite these disparities, the settlement thrives with economic activity, with numerous cottage industries emerging to serve both sex workers and their clientele.

The Tension Between Legality and Illegality Although Bangladesh’s legal framework permits brothel-based sex work, many women and girls in Daulatdia are coerced into the profession through trafficking or deceit [77], [114]. Chronic poverty, familial neglect, or abandonment may result in their sale to “madams” (also known as shordarni, bariwali, or malikni), who demand a purchase price. These newly arrived workers are expected to “pay off” this debt through sex work, effectively becoming indentured laborers until the sum is cleared. In some cases, brothel owners or pimps bribe local authorities to falsify legal registrations for underage girls, highlighting the troubling interplay of corruption, economic desperation, and inadequate oversight.

While the establishment is nominally legal, these illegal and exploitative practices flourish behind the scenes. Law enforcement activities are sporadic, ranging from targeted crackdowns to tacit acceptance of sex work. Local police, often under financial or political pressure, adopt an ambivalent stance, sometimes facilitating exploitation through inaction or bribery. Consequently, the discrepancy between de jure legality and de facto reality is stark, complicating the status of sex workers in Daulatdia.

Power Hierarchies and Living Conditions Within the brothel, power dynamics are unevenly distributed. A small number of entrenched madams own most of the housing units and control both living arrangements and rent structures. Accommodation varies from cramped tin-roofed shacks, costing around 200 BDT (approximately USD 2) per day, to larger, better-ventilated units priced at about 500 BDT per day. Utilities such as electricity are typically charged at flat rates, with additional fees for the use of fans, televisions, or other appliances. Most workers share basic kitchen facilities with others nearby, and some hire maids—local women from surrounding villages—to handle cooking, cleaning, and laundry. In this manner, Daulatdia functions as a miniature urban ecosystem, bound by intricate social and economic networks unique to the brothel context.

The Everyday Lives of Sex Workers Given the intense social stigma against extramarital sex in conservative Muslim Bangladesh, the women of Daulatdia live under constant moral scrutiny. They rarely venture beyond the brothel’s periphery except for essential needs, as the broader community often ostracizes or harasses

them. Many support families, with children residing within the brothel, and face entrenched financial obligations to their madams or local loan sharks. Physical safety remains a significant concern, as violence, intimidation, and sexual assault are pervasive threats exacerbated by the lack of robust legal or social support.

Child welfare is another critical issue. Children born and raised in Daulatdia often face significant educational barriers, leading many to drop out or be excluded from mainstream schools. Instead, they perform small tasks or run errands for brothel inhabitants, exposing them to various dangers, including potential involvement in illicit activities.

Security, NGOs, and Services Despite the precarious conditions, numerous NGOs and civil society organizations operate on the outskirts of the brothel, providing healthcare, legal advice, shelter services, and educational opportunities. Some collaborate with police or local politicians to rescue trafficked minors, yet limited funding and cultural barriers can impede the effectiveness of these interventions. Furthermore, workers themselves may be reluctant to engage with NGOs due to fears of police entrapment, mistrust of external entities, or the stigma associated with identifying as a sex worker.

From a Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) perspective, Daulatdia offers a revealing lens to understand how digital technology intersects with extreme marginalization. Many sex workers here own or have access to smartphones—albeit often in precarious or shared circumstances—and rely on these devices to communicate with clients, manage finances, maintain social ties, and seek support or advice. However, their digital behaviors are heavily constrained by local power hierarchies, socio-religious taboos, and personal vulnerabilities. Adopting an intersectional lens allows for the exploration of how economic, cultural, gendered, and religious factors converge, shaping workers’ digital practices in both liberating and restrictive ways.

To document the intricate ecosystems that frame these women’s digital and non-digital lives, we conducted an extensive ethnography in Daulatdia over three months. Understanding their lived experiences—from daily survival strategies to broader negotiations of power—lays the groundwork for more contextually informed and ethically grounded HCI interventions. Rather than viewing technology as a neutral

or universal solution, this site-specific perspective underscores the necessity for systems and tools that acknowledge the structural hardships and cultural sensitivities shaping sex workers’ realities.

3.1.2 Illegal Sex Work and Informal Markets

While the state recognizes brothel-based sex work through its registration system, a significant number of sex workers in Bangladesh remain unregistered. These unregistered (or “illegal”) workers include those who operate outside sanctioned brothels—such as street-based sex workers, hotel-based sex workers, and those who advertise and meet clients through unofficial or underground channels. Several factors contribute to their unregistered status, including logistical barriers to the registration process, fear of police harassment, lack of identity documents, and pervasive social stigma. Additionally, some individuals may have been coerced into sex work or trafficked, thereby circumventing any legal pathways altogether [147].

For these “illegal” or unregistered workers, risks and vulnerabilities are significantly heightened. Without the limited protections afforded by formal registration, they are more susceptible to exploitation by pimps, local gangs, or corrupt officials. They also face an increased risk of physical violence, sexually transmitted infections, and inadequate access to healthcare [148]. In many cases, these workers find it difficult to seek legal recourse in instances of abuse or injustice because their activities exist in a gray area of quasi-legality. Moreover, social services and NGOs that might offer medical or legal assistance often focus their efforts on registered brothel communities, leaving unregistered sex workers marginalized within support networks.

3.1.3 Coexistence of Legal and Illegal Sectors

In practice, the distinction between legal and illegal sex work in Bangladesh is blurred. Although the government officially sanctions brothel-based work, law enforcement agencies, religious authorities, and the broader public maintain deeply contradictory attitudes toward the profession. Many police officers and local power brokers tacitly permit the continuation of unregistered sex work, sometimes in exchange for bribes, or intermittently crack down on it to align with periodic moral or political campaigns. As a result, both registered and unregistered sex workers frequently experience discrimination and harassment, reflecting the pervasive belief

that their livelihood contradicts cultural and religious values.

These tensions between official legality and prevailing social stigma significantly shape sex workers' lived realities. Brothel-based workers may possess a semblance of official legitimacy but still encounter daily ostracism and moral policing. Conversely, unregistered workers struggle to survive at the precarious intersection of legal ambiguity and social exclusion, which often traps them in cycles of poverty, exploitation, and limited mobility.

The divide between registered (legal) and unregistered (illegal) sex workers also influences their digital lives. Registered workers, particularly those in large, well-known brothels like Daulatdia, may have more stable networks (e.g., unions, NGOs, or healthcare providers) that offer basic digital literacy programs or provide safer channels for communication and transactions. In contrast, unregistered sex workers often rely on personal smartphones and informal digital platforms without institutional support or safeguards against cyber-harassment, blackmail, or data exploitation. To better understand these unique challenges, we conducted semi-structured interviews with five informal sex workers operating outside the confines of registered brothels.

Against this backdrop, comprehending the nuanced legal context—and how it intersects with religious sentiments, cultural norms, and social pressures—is central to grasping the complexities of sex workers' everyday experiences in Bangladesh. It is also critical for recognizing the distinct ways in which technology may or may not serve as a buffer against the risks they face. Ultimately, these realities underscore the importance of holistic research and interventions that account for both the legal framework governing brothel-based work and the precarious existence of those operating outside it.

In the following chapters, we delve into how both legal and informal sex workers in Bangladesh navigate online spaces, manage privacy and safety, and form support networks despite overlapping stigmas. This exploration illustrates the complexities and potentials of digital engagement within one of the most marginalized communities of the Global South.

Chapter 4

Methodology

The following section presents the detailed methodology adopted for our study, aimed at deeply exploring the socio-technical ecosystems within which sex workers in Bangladesh operate. By employing a comprehensive ethnographic approach, we sought to document the nuanced interplay between cultural, social, and digital practices that shape sex workers' lives. We conducted fieldwork in the Daulatdia brothel, alongside engagements with informal sex workers operating outside formal brothel systems, to capture a holistic understanding of their lived experiences, challenges, and interactions with digital technologies. The subsequent subsections outline our research objectives, data collection methods, participant recruitment processes, ethical considerations, and analytical approaches.

4.1 Study Objectives and Methodology Overview

The primary objectives of our study were to explore and document the intricate social and digital ecosystems within which sex workers in Bangladesh operate. Our research specifically aimed to:

1. Understand the cultural values and societal challenges that influence the lives of sex workers, focusing on how these factors manifest in stigma, support, economic pressures, and legal constraints.
2. Examine the online presence and security practices of sex workers, exploring how societal challenges shape their digital behaviors and the risks associated with these activities.

3. Identify opportunities for technology design that cater specifically to the needs of sex workers, enhancing their safety, privacy, and access to services.

4.1.1 Field Study at Daulatdia

To achieve these objectives, we conducted a comprehensive three-month-long ethnography within the Daulatdia brothel, one of the largest legal brothels in Bangladesh. Our research methods included:

1. **In-Depth Interviews:** Conducting 25 detailed interviews with female sex workers within the brothel to gain insights into their personal histories, experiences with the legal and social systems, and interactions with digital technologies.
2. **Field Observations:** Extensive on-site observations to capture the daily life and interactions of sex workers, aimed at understanding the physical and social infrastructure of the brothel.
3. **Informal Discussions:** Engaging in informal discussions with local NGO representatives, paramedics, and digital service providers to familiarize our team with the local dynamics. These discussions helped in understanding the broader context but were not included in the data analysis.

4.1.2 Informal Sex Workers

Recognizing the limitations of the legal framework and the realities faced by unregistered or “illegal” sex workers, our study also extended to include those operating outside the formal brothel system:

1. **Engagement with Informal Sex Workers:** We reached out to five sex workers operating in non-brothel environments, such as streets, hotels, and online platforms. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with such workers to understand their unique challenges and digital practices.
2. **Comparative Analysis:** By comparing the experiences of sex workers within the legal confines of a brothel with those operating informally, we aimed to draw broader conclusions about the impact of legality, social stigma, and access to technology on their lives.

4.2 Recruitment

4.2.1 Fieldwork in Daulatdia

The geographical placement of brothels in Bangladesh, often located far from the bustling capital city of Dhaka, presents unique challenges and considerations for conducting field research. This distance from major urban centers means the brothels can operate with a degree of isolation, which impacts the daily lives and accessibility of the sex workers residing there.

Before initiating the fieldwork, it was imperative to gain institutional ethics approval to ensure that all research practices adhered to stringent ethical standards, especially given the vulnerable population involved. Following this approval, we established collaboration with two local NGOs that have longstanding relationships with the sex worker community at the Daulatdia brothel.

PIACT Bangladesh and Mukti Mohila Samity (MMS) were pivotal in our initial access and continued engagement with the community. PIACT Bangladesh focuses primarily on the prevention of HIV/AIDS among sex workers, providing crucial health education and resources. In contrast, MMS offers a broader range of services including general health care, nutrition, and childcare facilities, addressing the comprehensive needs of the sex workers and their families. The expertise and trust these organizations have developed with the sex worker community were instrumental in facilitating our research.

The fieldwork commenced with the first visit in May 2023. Gaining access to the brothel was facilitated by two representatives from these NGOs. One representative from PIACT Bangladesh, a former sex worker now dedicated to community development, and a community paramedic from MMS, provided not only entry but also credibility to our research team within the community. Their presence was a bridge connecting us to the lives of the sex workers, making our intentions clear and transparent.

Upon meeting with the sex workers, we explained the goals of this study. Recognizing the literacy challenges prevalent among the community, we did not rely on

written consent forms. Instead, oral consent was obtained, ensuring that each participant fully understood the purpose of the research and the use of the information collected. We engaged with 12 sex workers during this initial phase, ensuring that all interactions were consensual and informed.

Following the initial data collection facilitated by NGO representatives, we felt it was important to adopt an approach that would allow for more spontaneous and natural engagement. By mid-June, having become a familiar presence within the brothel, we began independently approaching sex workers for interviews. This shift to independent recruitment helped to mitigate any potential biases introduced by NGO facilitation and allowed for more candid discussions. We explored various corridors and parts of the brothel, approaching sex workers randomly to ensure a wide range of voices were heard. This method proved effective, with most of the workers being open and friendly, some even scheduling interviews during their free time.

A total of 13 additional interviews were conducted through this independent recruitment strategy. By intentionally visiting different parts of the brothel, we aimed to avoid over-representation of any single subcommunity or neighborhood, thereby enhancing the diversity and inclusiveness of our data. This approach helped to ensure that the voices of sex workers from varying backgrounds and experiences were included in our study.

Data saturation was achieved by the end of July 2023, and we concluded the ethnography. The richness of the data collected not only from the interviews but also from observational notes and informal interactions provides a comprehensive understanding of the complex social dynamics and the digital engagements of sex workers in Daulatdia. This detailed exploration sets the stage for further analysis and discussion on the impact of socio-technical systems on marginalized communities, informing both academic discourse and practical interventions designed to improve the lives of sex workers in Bangladesh.

4.2.2 Interview with Informal Sex Workers

To extend our research beyond the confines of Daulatdia, we also aimed to explore the experiences of informal sex workers who operate online, a rapidly growing segment of the sex work industry in Bangladesh. This group presents a distinct set of challenges and dynamics, primarily due to their reliance on digital platforms for client interaction and service delivery. Recognizing the different landscape these workers navigate, we devised a separate recruitment strategy to engage with them.

In October 2024, leveraging the digital platforms commonly used by these workers, we initiated contact through social media and various online forums that serve as unofficial marketplaces for sex work. We crafted outreach messages that clearly outlined the study’s purpose, ensuring transparency and building trust from the outset. We directly messaged potential participants, inviting them to participate in confidential interviews. The responses were monitored, and follow-ups were conducted respectfully, considering the sensitive nature of their work and the potential risks involved in participating in such studies.

Upon receiving expressions of interest, we scheduled initial virtual meetings to further explain the study and address any concerns potential participants might have. These initial contacts were crucial for establishing rapport and ensuring that the participants felt safe and understood the ethical measures in place to protect their anonymity and data. For those who agreed to participate, we conducted five semi-structured interviews via secure, encrypted video call platforms. These interviews were designed to be flexible, allowing participants to guide the conversation to areas they felt were important, while still covering a core set of topics related to their work practices, digital security measures, and personal experiences with stigma and discrimination.

This method of recruitment and data collection allowed us to reach a broader demographic of sex workers whose work modalities and challenges might differ significantly from those working in traditional brothel settings. By engaging with online informal sex workers, our study could capture the nuances of how digital environments influence the safety, privacy, and operational strategies of sex workers in Bangladesh. The insights gained from these interviews are intended to complement

the data collected from brothel-based workers, providing a comprehensive overview of the sex work landscape across different environments.

4.3 Interviews and Observations

4.3.1 Field Study at Daulatdia

The primary investigator of this study, the first author, who was born and brought up in Bangladesh, leveraged her fluency in Bengali and deep familiarity with the local culture and customs to conduct the interviews and ethnography. Her background not only facilitated communication but also helped build trust with the participants, ensuring a more open and honest dialogue during the interviews.

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and to ensure fairness and to acknowledge the time the participants devoted to the study, each was compensated with 500 BDT (\$5 USD)¹. This amount was intentionally set to match the earnings they typically receive for an hour-long session. For context, during a typical daytime session lasting 30-60 minutes, workers receive between 200-500 BDT; rates for a full-night session start at 2,000 BDT and can increase based on the worker's demand and the client's assessment.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 25 female sex workers, with each interview lasting approximately 50 minutes. The interviews were conducted within the privacy and relative comfort of the workers' own rooms, a setting chosen to make the participants feel safe and comfortable. The interviews began with questions about their backgrounds and life stories to initiate conversation in a non-threatening manner. This approach helped ease into more sensitive topics, including their daily lives, interactions with clients, families, friends, and their experiences with mobile phones and other digital technologies.

Following these initial discussions, we delved deeper into the challenges and risks they face both in their physical and virtual environments and the strategies they employ to mitigate these issues. Specific questions were also posed about the online tools and platforms they use for seeking new clients and maintaining communication

¹1 USD is 125 Bangladeshi Taka

with existing ones, which provided insights into their digital engagement and literacy. For further reference, the complete interview guideline is included in Appendix A.

Additionally, the first author conducted extensive observations beyond the structured interview sessions, spending about 12 hours each day in the field, which allowed for a rich collection of contextual data. These observations were carried out in various locations around the brothel, including corridors, tea stalls, dance rooms, alcohol shops, and digital service centers within the village. During these observations, the investigator engaged informally with the workers, posing relevant questions as they interacted with clients or navigated through apps and social platforms. Such interactions also included observing their use of local digital services like bKash (a popular mobile financial service in Bangladesh), mobile top-ups, or assistance with mobile phone repairs.

Detailed notes were taken during these observations, capturing not only the actions and interactions of the sex workers but also the ambiance and dynamics of the environment. These notes provide a comprehensive picture of how technology is integrated into their daily lives and work, highlighting both the benefits and the vulnerabilities associated with their digital practices. The insights gained from both the interviews and observations are instrumental in understanding the intersection of technology, work, and social life in the context of sex work in Bangladesh, informing both the analysis and the conclusions drawn in this study.

4.3.2 Interview with Informal Sex Workers

We conducted semi-structured interviews with five informal sex workers, carefully scheduling each session to accommodate their availability and preference for communication, which was predominantly through secure online channels like Telegram and Signal. These interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes each and were conducted using encrypted audio calls to ensure privacy and security.

The interview structure for the informal sex workers mirrored that used with brothel-based workers but was adapted to address specific aspects of online and independent work. We explored topics such as their methods for client acquisition, the role of

digital platforms in their work, their strategies for privacy and safety online, and how they navigate the stigma and legal ambiguities of their work environment. The questions also delved into the impacts of digital technology on their personal and professional lives, including any support networks they accessed through online communities.

4.4 Data Collection and Ethical Consideration

Our research protocol was examined and approved by the research ethics boards of BRAC University.

All interviews conducted during our study were audio-recorded, and it was done strictly with the proper consent of the participants. In cases where participants were not comfortable with being recorded, we took detailed field notes. This approach allowed us to respect the preferences of each participant while still capturing the richness of the information shared during the interviews.

It is crucial to emphasize that the concept of consent is particularly complex in the context of sex workers in Daulatdia. Many of these individuals did not enter the profession by choice, having been coerced or deceived into joining. This background makes the notion of consent particularly sensitive and multi-dimensional. Despite the initial lack of agency many faced in entering the profession, as active sex workers, they have since garnered a significant degree of autonomy over their interactions. The participants explained that any new client must receive their explicit consent before entering their private spaces. This established practice of negotiating consent within their professional boundaries provided a useful framework for understanding and respecting their perspectives on consent in the context of our research.

Throughout the study, we were highly attuned to the nuances of consent, ensuring that all participants fully understood the nature of the research, the use of the data collected, and their rights within the study, including the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. By aligning the consent process with the existing practices familiar to the sex workers, we aimed to reinforce the legitimacy and respectfulness of any research interactions.

Moreover, the native language skills and cultural familiarity played a crucial role in effectively communicating these aspects of the study. Our ability to converse fluently in Bengali and deep understanding of the local customs and norms helped in making the consent process clear and culturally sensitive. This alignment not only facilitated a more accurate and thorough collection of data but also reinforced a respectful and ethical approach to engaging with a vulnerable population whose trust is essential to the integrity of the research.

It is important to note that the comfort and well-being of our participants were paramount throughout the duration of our study. Before we even began conducting interviews, a significant amount of time and effort was dedicated to cultivating personal relationships with the participants. This involved not only understanding their values and expectations but also adapting our communication styles to respect and align with those values. Our preparatory work included familiarizing ourselves with the jargon commonly used within their community, as outlined in section 3.5 of our study. This linguistic alignment helped in building a rapport and ensuring that our interactions were respectful and culturally sensitive.

We were meticulous in avoiding any language or expressions that could potentially be deemed offensive or judgmental by the community. Transparency was a cornerstone of our approach; we consistently communicated the purpose of the research, our accountability as researchers, and provided clear information on how their data would be used and who might have access to it. This open communication was vital in establishing trust and ensuring participants felt secure in their involvement.

Photography in the field, which can be particularly sensitive, was approached with the utmost care. We sought explicit consent before capturing any images, explaining their use in the research and ensuring that participants were comfortable with their distribution and publication. This practice was part of our broader commitment to respecting the participants' privacy and dignity, affirming that we held no social stigma against their work and genuinely respected their profession.

To further bridge any educational or financial divides, we strove to interact as equals, recognizing the importance of not exacerbating existing power imbalances. This effort extended beyond formal interviews; as we spent hours in their environment,

we occasionally assisted with household chores or other tasks when such help was welcomed. These actions were not just gestures of goodwill but integral to our methodology, helping to break down barriers and foster a collaborative, rather than hierarchical, relationship.

While we acknowledge that it is challenging to completely eliminate inherent power dynamics between researchers and participants, especially in a setting fraught with socio-economic disparities, we made a concerted effort to minimize these dynamics wherever possible. By engaging with the community on their terms and demonstrating genuine interest and respect for their lives and stories, we aimed to ensure that the research process was as inclusive and non-disruptive as possible. This approach not only enriched the quality of the data collected but also contributed to a more ethical and empathetic engagement with the sex worker community.

4.5 Participant Attributes

4.5.1 Daulatdia Brothel

The ages of our 25 participants ranged from 19 to 41. These age differences often influenced their perspectives and coping strategies in the face of the challenges posed by their work.

Economically, the participants reported a monthly income that ranged from 400 to 800 (approximately 40,000 to 80,000 BDT). This income variation underscores the economic disparities that exist within the sex work community, often influenced by factors such as age, level of experience, client base, and the particular services they offer. This wide income range also highlights the unpredictable nature of their earnings, which can fluctuate based on local economic conditions, personal circumstances, and shifts in client demand.

Education levels among the participants were notably low, reflecting the limited access to formal schooling that is a common issue in the backgrounds of many sex workers. Of the 25 participants, only ten had received some level of formal education. Among these, one participant had managed to complete schooling up to the twelfth grade, which is quite rare in this context. Two others had studied until the

tenth grade, and seven had education up to the fifth grade. The relatively higher educational attainment of these participants sometimes provided them with better opportunities for managing their finances and navigating the digital aspects of their work more effectively.

Conversely, the remaining 15 participants had minimal to no formal education, with most being barely able to read and write. This lack of education presents significant challenges, not only in their work but also in their daily lives, limiting their access to information, ability to manage health care, and capacity to engage with support services or legal protection.

All participants were native Bengali speakers, but they came from various parts of the country, bringing with them distinct dialects and cultural backgrounds. This diversity added a rich layer of cultural nuances to our study, as each participant brought unique views and experiences based on their regional heritage. Understanding these diverse backgrounds was crucial in comprehensively addressing the needs and challenges faced by the participants, allowing us to tailor our interview techniques and questions to suit their specific circumstances and comfort levels. This diversity not only enriched the data collected but also provided deeper insights into the broader socio-cultural dynamics affecting sex workers across Bangladesh.

4.5.2 Informal Workers

The demographic details of the five informal sex workers who participated in our semi-structured interviews reflected a younger cohort, with ages ranging from 19 to 28 years. This age range is indicative of a demographic that is perhaps more attuned to and comfortable with digital technologies, which plays a crucial role in the way they navigate the sex work industry online.

These participants reported significantly higher monthly incomes compared to their brothel-based counterparts, with earnings ranging from approximately 1,000 to 3,000 (100,000 to 300,000 BDT). This substantial income highlights the potential financial benefits that can be associated with the autonomous and flexible nature of online sex work. The higher earnings may also reflect the broader reach and greater discre-

Attributes		No. of Participants
Age	18-24	4
	25-34	18
	35-44	3
Education	No formal education	15
	Less than 5th grade	7
	Less than 10th grade	2
	Completed 12th grade	1
Monthly Income (in USD)	Less than 600	4
	Less than 700	10
	Less than 800	6
	Less than 900	5

Table 4.1: Demographic Information of 25 workers of Daulatdia.

tion offered by online platforms, which can attract a more diverse and potentially wealthier client base.

In terms of education, these informal workers exhibited a range of educational backgrounds, with all participants having completed at least some form of high school education. This educational attainment is critical for their ability to leverage digital platforms effectively, manage their online presence, and navigate the complexities of digital communication and marketing.

All five participants were native Bengali speakers, and they operated from Dhaka. The digital proficiency of these participants was notably high, enabling them to utilize a variety of sophisticated online tools for advertising services, communicating with clients, and managing financial transactions securely.

4.6 Data Analysis

Our data collection efforts yielded approximately 35 hours of audio recordings and hundreds of pages of observational notes. The transcribing and translating of these audio recordings into English were performed by two external transcribers, both

Attributes		No. of Participants
Age	18-24	3
	25-34	2
Education	University Students	5
Monthly Income (in USD)	1000-1500	2
	1501-2500	2
	2501-3000	1

Table 4.2: Demographic Information of the Five Urban Workers.

native Bengali speakers. Their linguistic proficiency was crucial in ensuring that the transcriptions accurately reflected the colloquial and nuanced spoken language of the participants.

Once the audio recordings were transcribed, we embarked on a detailed examination of the transcripts. This process involved an iterative review of each transcript to segregate and eliminate any irrelevant segments that did not align with our research goals while carefully retaining and highlighting those segments that were pertinent. This critical preliminary sorting helped in managing the overwhelming volume of data and focusing the analysis on the most relevant information.

To maintain rigorous standards and safeguard against potential oversight, we conducted regular virtual meetings with my supervisor. These sessions were dedicated to reviewing decisions about data removal to ensure comprehensive coverage and retention of significant insights. This step was essential to verify that no valuable information was inadvertently excluded from the analysis.

Following this, we proceeded to analyze the refined data, which involved anonymizing the data to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants, adhering to ethical research practices. The analysis employed open coding and thematic analysis, as described by Strauss and Corbin [2] and Boyatzis [8]. This approach involved identifying initial codes directly from the data, such as “trust,” “online sex work,” “safety,” “security”, etc. The absence of predetermined themes allowed for the natural emergence of relevant themes directly from the interviews and observations.

I then organized these initial codes into patterns based on their similarities and differences, a process that facilitated the grouping of related data into coherent categories. This step was iterative, involving multiple rounds of coding to refine the patterns and ensure their relevance and robustness. These patterns were subsequently integrated into broader themes that encapsulated the core findings of our research.

This extensive thematic analysis involved several rigorous rounds of review, ensuring that the final themes were well-developed and representative of the data collected. The themes developed through this process are detailed in Appendix B of this paper.

4.7 Positionality Statement

Throughout the fieldwork and ethnography, our interaction with participants was conducted with the highest degree of respect and sensitivity, given that they belong to a highly marginalized community with distinct cultural and normative practices. Recognizing the importance of cultural competence in such sensitive research, we dedicated significant effort before starting the fieldwork to understand the unique lexicon and communicative norms of the sex worker community.

This preparatory phase involved extensive discussions with former sex workers who are now working with local NGOs. These conversations were invaluable in familiarizing ourselves with the community's jargons and vernaculars, enabling us to communicate more effectively and respectfully with current sex workers. We learned specific colloquial expressions and terms that are commonly used within their community². This linguistic preparation was not merely about understanding words but also about gaining insight into the social contexts in which these terms are used, which further aided in building trust and rapport.

In addition to linguistic preparation, we ensured that our research instruments, such as questionnaires, were culturally appropriate and sensitive to the experiences of the

²The workers' colloquial expressions include a variety of jargon, such as, babu/dewor (clients), husband (the most special client), gate (the main brothel corridor where most of the workers stand to get clients), gate kora (doing gate aka sex work), lok boshano (making men sit for an intercourse), lokjon kora (doing men), dhanda kora (doing business), etc. [129]

participants. The questionnaires were reviewed by representatives from the NGOs to ensure they were free of bias and respectful of the participants' perspectives and realities. This review process helped refine our tools to be both respectful and relevant to the participants' life experiences.

I also aligned our research with broader movements that advocate for the rights and dignity of sex workers. Standing in solidarity with the Bangladeshi sex workers' identity reconstruction movement "My Body, My Right" from the 90s [127], we recognized sex work as legitimate "work" and respected the professionalism of our participants. This recognition is not just a theoretical position but a practical stance that influenced how we interacted with each participant, ensuring that the conversations and overall engagement acknowledged and validated their profession.

Through these careful preparations and our ongoing commitment to respecting the participants' profession, we aimed to conduct the research in a manner that not only gathers valuable data but also contributes positively to the participants' sense of dignity and self-worth. This approach underlines the commitment to ethical research practices that respect and uplift marginalized communities.

Chapter 5

Findings

The following section presents the key findings derived from our comprehensive analysis of data collected through ethnographic observations, interviews, and informal discussions. We explore the intricate interplay of socio-cultural dynamics, digital behaviors, and the challenges faced by both formal and informal sex workers in Bangladesh. These findings are structured to highlight the distinct experiences within brothel-based contexts and informal, digitally-mediated environments, providing insights into the critical issues of stigma, safety, privacy, and technological engagement within this marginalized community.

5.1 Ethnography in Daulatdia Brothel

In this section, we have used pseudonyms to represent all the participants. The description of key terms, domain-specific jargon, and technologies used by our participants have been introduced and defined in Table 5.1 and 5.2.

We first present two vignettes to portray the lives of the sex workers in the Daulatdia brothel, one backdropped against the prevalent patriarchal control system, and the other centered around the use of technology. These vignettes illustrate individual stories from two different participants.

Vignette 1: The pseudo-husband

Rahima is a 30-year-old sex worker in Daulatdia. Four years ago, her husband brought her here with their son and sold her to a “madam” for money. Rahima now

lives in the brothel with her five-year old son. When she attends her clients, she drops him off at the daycare, or home of a coworker who has a spare room. She does not get much time to go to the brothel gate for new clients, instead she only works with referrals from her existing customers. This enables her to form a prior impression of their background and then build trust with them. Her husband routinely abducts their son to blackmail her into giving him her earnings and threatens that she will never see her son again if she does not give him the required amount. To further complicate matters, her mobile financial account, which she uses to receive customer payments, is registered with her husband's NID and phone number. He has the password for that account, so she has to find different ways to keep her money safe from him. She lacks digital literacy and regularly experiences issues finding her way around technology use. A wealthy and powerful city client – whom she refers to as “my husband from here” – helps her get through these troubles by providing assistance with using her smartphone and mobile banking needs. Moreover, when her legal husband threatens to beat her or take the child away, this pseudo-husband's men (local goons) are there to protect her. Indeed, this favor comes with the price of her freedom of choice and action. Amidst these, Rahima hopes one day she can save enough money for herself and her son to run away from the brothel. However, she first has to pay off the price she was sold at, to the “bariwaali” (madam).

Vignette 2: Leveraging the Digital Platform

Lily, 21, was sold in the brothel eight years ago by a “dalal” after she went missing from her family during a trip. It took her four years of hard work to get out from the enslavement of the “madam” before she could buy her freedom. She is now on her own, renting a room in a different part of the brothel. She works both online and offline. In the evenings, she picks up customers at the gate of the brothel. During the day, when business is slower, she can be found streaming on Bigo Live. She subtly tries to draw clients via her livestream while avoiding overt sexual content, not even mentioning she's offering “sex/intimacy”. On the live stream, she engages in some mild sensual expressions (though never without clothes), and offers her contact information. She chooses clients from the audience who contact her by phone or text messages, and she convinces them to schedule an in-person session. She hides her professional information from her family. A couple of years ago, she came to know about one of her relatives, and she visited them in the disguise of a garment worker.

This means she must take every precaution to be visible online to avoid exposing her actual identity. She never shows her face online, and maintains separate contact numbers, social profiles, and phones for her work and home.

These two vignettes provide a glimpse into the lives of many sex workers in the brothel. These two stories resonate with almost all of our participants as they navigate the complexities of negotiating with a pseudo-husband and maintaining a dual life.

Term	Definition
Dalal	The brokers and middlemen involved in facilitating the commercial sexual trading of women and girls, known colloquially as “Dalals”, often play a significant role in introducing new workers into the brothel ecosystem. These individuals can sometimes be relatives who promise jobs in the city or partners who betray trust, selling the women to Madams for a profit [147]. They negotiate the terms and prices for these transactions, effectively determining the initial conditions under which the sex workers operate [148].
Madam	These are senior female figures within the brothel, often referred to as “Shordarnis”, “Bariwaalis”, or “Madams”. They manage the daily operations within their sections of the brothel, including the allocation of rooms, setting of prices, and enforcement of rules. They also act as intermediaries for the landlords who own the property, managing relationships with the Dalals to ensure a steady supply of new workers. Workers sold to Madams must typically repay their “sale price” — a form of debt incurred upon their entry into the brothel — before they can keep their earnings [25].
Pseudo-husband	A “pseudo-husband” refers to a special client with whom a sex worker forms a long-term, exclusive relationship. Despite not being legally married, the worker often refers to this client as her “husband”. This client provides financial and emotional support and can also offer protection against abuses within the brothel environment. This term encapsulates the complex personal and economic relationships that can develop between sex workers and their clients.

Table 5.1: Definition of key terms used throughout the paper (Part 1).

In the following section, we underscore the key findings from our study.

5.1.1 Trust

To gain a comprehensive insight into the contexts in which our participants operate, it is crucial to delve into the trust mechanisms employed by them in both digital and physical realms. In the subsequent sections, we explore the intricate process through which sex workers establish and maintain trust with their clients, as well as how they select their “pseudo-husbands”.

5.1.1.1 Establishment of Trust

The cultivation of trust and fostering of collaborative relationships are fundamental aspects of the livelihood of individuals engaged in sex work. They refrain from engaging in interactions with people else that they lack trust in. Therefore, it is imperative to understand the trust mechanism utilized by individuals in order to acquire a deeper understanding of their experiences, situations, and the broader framework within which they operate. The primary stakeholders in whom their trust is vested are the clients and husbands. In this subsection, we’ll discuss about how the sex workers develop their trust with their clients and to choose their husbands, how they maintain their trust and what it costs them for the maintenance. We’ll also explore where the values between maintaining the trust of the clients and the husbands clash, and what strategies the workers employ to mitigate this clash.

The initial trust is established through in-person encounters between the workers and the clients. Without exception, all participants expressed their reluctance to trust anyone online, citing concerns of potential “*fraud*” and “*deception*”. Therefore, they consistently prioritize “*observing the clients in real life,*” even if the initial interaction takes place online.

The common practice among our participants inside the brothel is to appear well-groomed, put on good makeup, dress nicely, and approach the brothel’s narrow walkway (known as the “*gate*” to the locals) to draw in potential clients. At the first encounter, they refrain from engaging with the clients who show disrespect or dehumanize them, regardless of the amount of money being offered. The potential red flags in their initial screening are being “*pushy*”, “*touchy*”, displaying an “*ill-*

Term	Definition
Sexting	This involves the exchange of sexually explicit text messages between sex workers and their clients via messaging platforms such as imo, Messenger, and WhatsApp. While these exchanges typically exclude photographic content, they play a crucial role in maintaining client relationships and can sometimes be a source of additional income for the workers.
Camming	Camming involves engaging in live sexually explicit performances via video calls. This activity is typically conducted through platforms like imo, Messenger, or WhatsApp. During these sessions, sex workers may reveal their identities and perform sexual acts in exchange for payment. This practice is becoming increasingly common as a form of digital sex work that allows for physical distance while providing income.
Bigo Live	Bigo Live is a global live streaming platform where users can broadcast live videos, watch shows, and interact with broadcasters. It has gained popularity among sex workers for its potential to reach a wide audience and generate income through virtual performances and interactions [151].

Table 5.2: Definition of key terms used throughout the paper (Part 2).

tempered” demeanor, or excessive haggling. After the first screening, once the worker permits a specific client into their private space for the sexual encounter, the process of establishing trust commences as the worker needs to make a conscious decision now whether she would like to share her phone number for future contacts. At this point, our participants check three criteria before making an informed choice:

- Good behavior,
- Referral from an existing customer, and
- Decent payment.

Good Behavior According to our participants, “*good behavior*” spans across several factors such as, “*not using slang*”, “*not being verbally or physically abusive*”,

and “*respecting their work and their values as a person*”. The workers are highly selective in this regard, as emphasized by one of our participants *Shanta*,

“Not all of my clients have access to my phone number. They’re not all decent people, though. I only give someone my contact information if I genuinely like them. I like men who treat me with respect, pay me fairly, don’t hurt me during sexual encounters, and don’t don’t force me into anything. I like sweet-talkers. I give my phone number only when they meet all these requirements.”

Referral. We found our participants experience a sense of security when dealing with the clients who come through a known contact. *Ratna* describes engaging with a referred client as a “*safe bet*”, believing that, more often than not, “*good clients bring good fortune*” to her. When asked about the significance of referrals in building trust, *Promila* explained,

“Trusting a referred client is straightforward. If I already know a client who is well-behaved and decent, they are unlikely to refer someone who is troublesome.”

Decent Payment. The initial trust of our participants is largely influenced based on receiving fair and prompt payment from the clients. Our participants recounted instances where clients promised to send money via bKash later but never did, or engaged in disputes over the pre-negotiated amount after receiving the service. As *Meena* recounted,

“There were many times the clients got the service and left the place promising that they would send the payment via bKash later. I noted down their phone number for further contact to get the payment, but found them unreachable.”

Such actions led to a sense of “*mistrust*” and deterred them from working with these clients in the future. *Meena* further elaborated on how dealing with a “*trusted*” client looks like in terms of pay,

“They settle the payment immediately after the service, occasionally even in advance. Sometimes they ask for the option to pay later via bKash, and promptly send the amount when they can.”

All the participants stressed that receiving fair pay contribute to their trust development as they feel “valued” and “respected”. As *Shanta* said,

“Paying better means valuing my work and respecting me. I’ll automatically think high of a client if he’s decent about his payments.”

5.1.1.2 Sustenance and Maintenance of Trust

Although the foundation of initial trust is laid during face-to-face encounters, the further sustenance and maintenance of trust play a vital role in enhancing the interaction between our participants and their clients. We have identified three key themes that substantially contribute to the sustainability of a trustworthy relationship between them, all of which are closely related to the digital space.

Support to Use Digital Technology. Our participants strengthen their trust on the clients based on the assistance and support they receive to use digital technology from them. To elucidate the understanding of how this trust is further sustained on the clients, we progressively connect our relevant findings in the following paragraphs.

We found that our participants “*instinctively*” placed more trust in tech-savvy customers, believing that their knowledge can enhance their technological literacy. When asked why she trusts a particular client, *Rina* stated,

“There are many reasons(...) He helped me create my Facebook account. He’s very impressive with technologies, you know! I always forget my password, he helps me get the account back every time. I couldn’t use my account if it was not for him. That’s why (I trust him more).”

We observed sex workers sharing personal digital information with clients to acquire assistance in various online tasks, such as, learning about the internet, creating social media accounts, earning and redeeming rewards on platforms like TikTok, Bigo Live, and Likee, or even delving into cryptocurrency trading to save money (Fig. 5.1).

This practice of seeking technical support can be attributed to the lower level of technical literacy among our participants. Almost all of our participants (22 out of

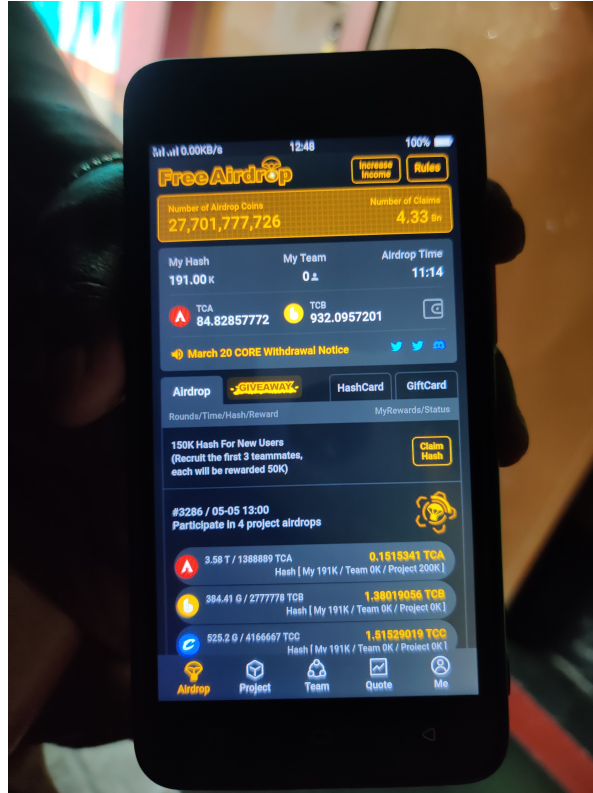


Figure 5.1: FreeAirdrop feed of a sex worker unknowingly involved in illegal crypto trading with one of her clients' help.

25) mentioned that a client had assisted them in setting up social media accounts that they were often unfamiliar with operating. As highlighted by *Shefali*,

“What is a password? I know nothing about it. He has opened those accounts for me, I just scroll over the feed to watch videos and photos.”

Another participant (*Rumki*) learned about online security measures from a client who assisted her in creating separate Facebook accounts for work and family purposes. This client also took steps to safeguard her privacy by locking her profiles and blocking her family members for added safety. Her rationale for trusting him was straightforward, *“He’s done all these for my safety, why shouldn’t I put more trust on him?”*.

Ruma’s trust in one of her clients grew when he informed her about the income potential from TikTok. Recognizing the client’s valuable technical expertise for her financial benefits, she decided to grant him access to her bKash account, allowing him to monetize her TikTok activities. This trust deepened significantly when she got the monetization payment of 60,000 BDT with his help.

While our participants are aware of the recent trend of “*making money online*” [157], their limited tech literacy has hindered their ability to tap into this potential. They perceive technology as an enabler for increased earnings. Consequently, the practice of entrusting clients with their confidential digital credentials arises from the perceived opportunity for financial gain, which can be realized with the assistance of the clients who possess technological expertise. Driven by the aspirations of earning more, *Swapna* uses a crypto trading app called “*FreeAirdrop*”, which was installed by a client on her phone. Despite being totally unaware of what crypto is, she engages in routine activities like collecting coins and trading by tapping on “*unknown symbols*” on the app as instructed by her client. She believes, as he introduced her to a new income source, it’s a sign of his “*good intentions*”, and that’s why she put her trust on the client,

“He installed this software on my phone. He said, if I click on this button everyday I will earn a chunk of money. He wants the best for me, right? Otherwise he wouldn’t have told me about this money-making opportunity. That’s why I trust him.”

Here we can see how their trust in the clients along with the aspirations for more income led our participants to not only bad security practices such as sharing passwords or digital account credentials, but also get involved in illegal activities [138].

Regular Communication. The participants regularly call their clients during their free time, engaging in friendly conversations like “*asking if they had lunch*”, “*inquiring about their health*”, etc. to nurture their mutual connection. This simple gesture shows their “*care*” and “*concern*” for their clients’ well-being, which in turn fosters trust. As *Rumki* mentioned,

“*I talk to some of my clients when I feel bad. Sometimes I take a break from work, and talk to them for all day long. They try to make me feel good. If someone tries to make you feel good, you cannot just ‘not trust’ them, you’ll know that he’s there for you emotionally.*”

Likewise, clients also provide “*emotional support*” to the workers. These clients lend a sympathetic ear and offer solace when needed, deepening the emotional connection and reinforcing the workers’ trust in them.

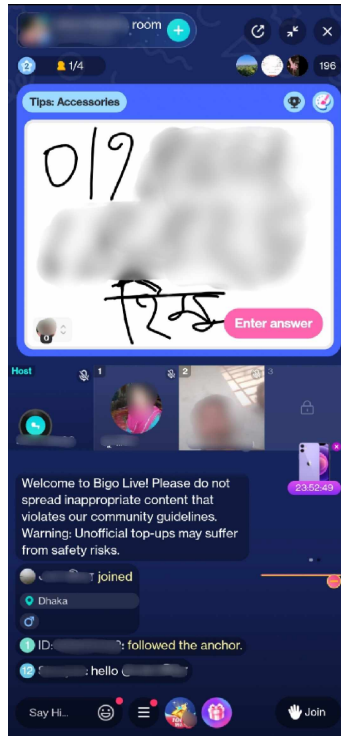


Figure 5.2: A participant’s Bigo Live streaming session showing a static screen, doodled their number on it.

Providing Casual Online Service. Overall, six of our participants reported that they make efforts to please their *“trusted clients”* (whom they have physically met and screened before) online, especially in times when they are unable to meet in real life. This involves engaging in sexual activities via audio calls with specific clients. Some of them take it further by telling those clients how special they are. For instance, *Kakon* approaches such clients by saying, *“I’m doing this only with you, because I know you’ll not break my trust. I would never have done the same if it were anyone else,”* as she thinks that it makes her client feel more *“valued”*, which leads to *“increased engagement”*, fostering a *“mutual sense of trust”* between them.

When questioned about their motivation for sustaining trust with specific clients, the workers revealed a clear expectation of *“financial support”* from clients with whom they maintain regular communication, offer emotional support, and provide services upon request. This emotional investment pays off when these clients are more likely to offer financial assistance during the workers’ difficult times. *Roza* elaborates on this, highlighting that her support to clients in their times of need

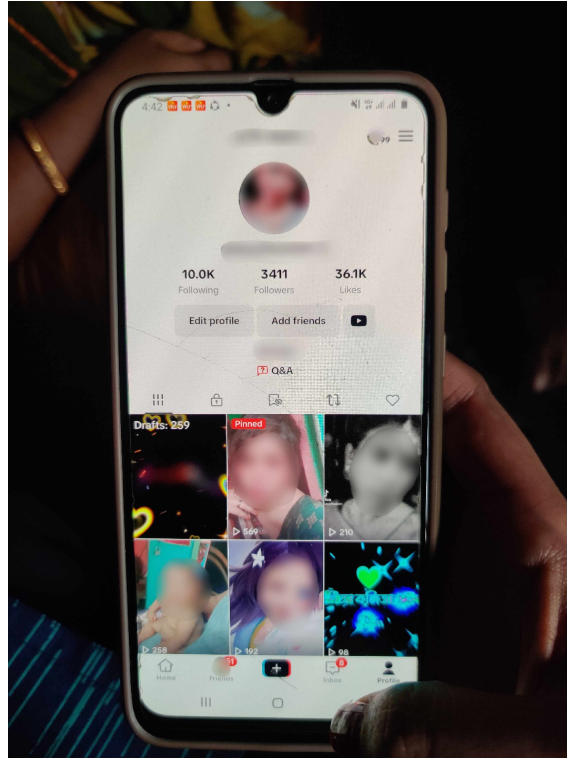


Figure 5.3: A participant’s Tiktok profile, source of her content generated earnings.

allows her to “request favors” when she requires “financial support”.

5.1.1.3 Trust on Digital Platforms

The participants who are technologically more literate – having a formal education of at least third grade – reported that they use apps like Bigo Live, Likee, Tiktok, and imo for promoting themselves online and acquire new clients. Six workers reported that they use Bigo Live and Likee for getting new clients, and four of them use Tiktok for making moderately sensual videos. The reason for choosing these platforms was because they like the “flashy”, “animated”, and “vibrant” look and feel of these platforms, which resonates more with their personality.

However, they do not trust any prospective client before meeting them in person. They consistently prioritize face-to-face meetings before engaging in any form of intimacy. Our participants unanimously agreed that the establishment of trust is a process that “cannot be achieved online” unless they have the opportunity to “see and observe” the client in real life. *Sabera* explains this perspective,

“How can I trust anyone from online? I haven’t seen him, haven’t got to observe if he’s good or bad in real life. People turn out to be fraud in real life even, it’s worse online. If they have the courage to pay me

a visit, I already start trusting him. If he likes me, I offer several real sessions, only after that I can offer any virtual ones.”

This lack of trust, coupled with the moral dilemma associated with religion (discussed in section 4.4), prohibit the participants from advertising their bodies or engaging in explicit online activities such as camming or nude streaming. In fact, they do not even show their face on these platforms. Instead, they employ three strategic approaches to attract the prospective clients: 1) displaying a static screen with their phone number and a message (Fig. 5.2), 2) verbally sharing their contact number during live video streaming, and 3) posting their contact number as a comment during a live session. When they are online, they refrain from openly disclosing their involvement in sex work and present themselves as regular content creators. They craft their presence as “*online work provider*” and pretend to share their number for those who are looking for passive online income. They also delete any abusive or vulgar comments and block that user. *Roza* explains this practice,

“Check my Bigo Live profile. No one can say I’m doing sex work there. Even my live videos don’t give a hint. I just share my imo number for people who want to work with me. It can be any work!”

After sharing their phone numbers on platforms like Bigo Live, Likee, or Tiktok, our participants receive a large volume of calls. When they take those calls, they look for the same red flags as they do for the first time in-person clients (Section 5.1.1.1) before persuading them to visit her in person at the brothel. They “*never*” get engaged in any form of “*phone sex*” with this group of prospective clients.

All these findings suggest that the participants who use virtual platforms to acquire new clients also undergo a transition between online and offline spaces to negotiate their trust.

5.1.2 Surveillance

We described above how the workers meet new clients and determine the ones who are “*trustworthy*” and sustain a regular professional relationship with them. Among these clients, they ultimately choose the most suitable candidate to form an intimate, committed, and enduring relationship, metaphorically referred to as their “*pseudo-husband*”. In most cases, this pseudo-husband is a powerful person with

significant political, administrative, and financial clouts. Having a pseudo-husband is not a luxury, rather a “*necessity*” for their own “*survival*”. Any sex worker without a pseudo-husband is vulnerable of being subjected to rape, sex trafficking, or even murder.

However, getting a pseudo-husband to back her up comes with the high price of sacrificing their freedom. The pseudo-husband gradually starts exerting power and control on the workers over their use of digital media. Avoiding the surveillance imposed by the pseudo-husband is one of the most critical components for the survival of our participants.

Almost all of our participants (23 out of 25) described how they are constantly monitored by their pseudo-husband regarding whom they send messages or talk to via online platforms like imo, Messenger and Whatsapp. In some cases, they are forced to share their passwords for all the digital platforms. This monitoring takes an extreme turn if the pseudo-husband is from the law enforcement agency. As *Promila* described,

“He installed a software on my phone to track all my calls and online activities. I used to talk with my friends and clients on that smartphone; I often found it scary when he could tell whom I’ve talked to, exactly what I’ve said to them over the phone. I thought he had some superpower, but later he told me about this software on my phone. He also used to beat me up, tie my hands, and even choke me if I had talked to any clients over the phone. I cannot even delete this software because if I do, he would suspect me more and I would lose all his support.”

Such instances often lead to our participants’ non-use of technology, resulting in their exclusion from the sex market or lagging behind from other workers who use technology to manage and regularly communicate with their clients. As *Maria* said,

“I don’t use TikTok anymore. I used to have 10,000 followers and I loved making music videos there – I got lots of comments and reactions from my followers, it felt so good. But he doesn’t like me doing this. He deleted my account.”

This is where the workers face a clash of values regarding maintaining a balance between her regular clients and the pseudo-husband. The workers employ different

strategies to avoid this clash, by “*hiding information*”, and sometimes “*deleting*” data. *Kakon* mentioned deleting all her chat history and data regularly to remain safe from the surveillance of her pseudo-husband,

“My (pseudo) husband always checks my phone. If he finds out I talk to my other clients over the phone, he’ll be furious. So whenever I chat with a client, or talk to them on imo/messenger, I delete all the data.”

All these responses reveal that in exchange for protection and support, sex workers need to subject themselves to constant surveillance and compromise their digital privacy. The physical presence and surveillance of these so-called pseudo-husbands inside the brothel shape the digital lives of many of our participants.

5.1.3 Social Stigma

The stigma associated with sex work poses many challenges to our participants to navigate both their online and offline spaces. Almost all (23 out of 25) of our participants maintain a dual life, concealing their profession when interacting with their friends and family members. Outside the brothel, they portray themselves as individuals employed in various roles such as garment factory workers, domestic helpers, salespersons, etc.

5.1.3.1 Different Outfits for Different Settings

To avoid being recognized by anyone, our participants wear burqas when they leave the brothel and go outside. They are seen as “*a good, religious woman*” by their family when they wear the burqa, and they are not suspected of any wrongdoings. *Moni* shared her “*fear*” of being labeled as a “*spoiled woman*” based on her attire,

“You see, here I can wear t-shirts, pants, skirts, and I don’t even have to wear a headscarf. But when I’m in my hometown, I always wear traditional salwar kameez when I’m at home and wear a burqa when I go outside. If I dress up the way I do here, everyone would label me as a ‘kharap meye’ (spoiled/bad woman).”

Even when going to outside places like parks, restaurants, shopping malls, or the mosque, our participants “*opt to wear a burqa*”. As *Rabeya* noted, it not only gives her a sense of feeling like a “*normal woman*” but also ensures that she is treated as

one in public spaces. The burqa serves as a protective measure that affords them a degree of anonymity and helps mitigate potential stigma or discrimination they may face based on their profession.

5.1.3.2 Separate Digital Space for Work and Family

Overall, 10 of our participants reported that they maintain a separate handset for work. Those who cannot afford two mobile phones (13 of our participants) keep two different SIM cards: one for communicating with their pseudo-husband, and another for their clients. Only two of our participants said that their secondary phone had got stolen along with the SIM card, and now they're using a single phone with a single SIM card.

Similarly, all the participants maintain separate Facebook accounts for interacting with family members and communicating with their existing trustworthy clients. They never use Facebook to stream live video contents as they do in Bigo Live and Likee. In their work profile, they use “a fake name”, keep the profile “locked”, and “never add anyone from the family”. Sometimes they proactively “block family members” from the work account. *Kakon* provided a concise illustration of this practice,

“My work profile does not have any post. I just add my existing clients there for audio/video chat. My real profile has photos with my son, my village photos, and I’ve put my son’s photo as my profile picture. I never add my clients there. Both the profiles are locked.”

When visiting their families, the workers take precautions such as deleting all data (call history, images, messages, etc.) from their work phones. In some cases, they even uninstall messaging apps like imo and keep the phone switched off. Those who use the same phone with different SIM cards are especially diligent about erasing sensitive data, as their phones are often used by other members in the family. As *Roza* quoted,

“I delete all the messages and photos from my phone before going to my village. My little cousins often watch Youtube on my phone. If they find out any vulgar images/messages there, that would be a shame.”

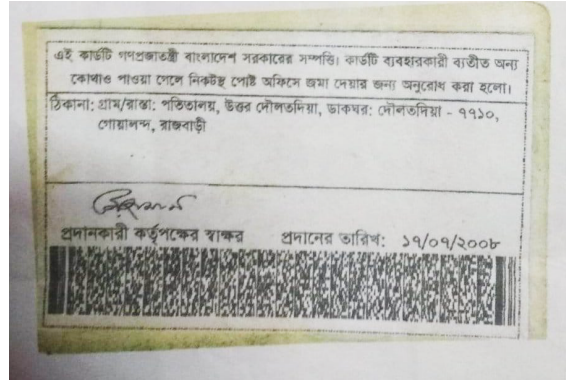


Figure 5.4: Back side of an NID card of a legal sex worker in Daulatdia, Bangladesh. The address section mentions “Village/Street: ‘Potitaloy’ (Bengali term for brothel), North Daulatdia, P/O - 7710, Goalanda, Rajbari.”

Our participants employ additional precautions, such as storing their clients’ contact details under pseudonyms. This practice ensures that when they receive calls from the clients, their true identity would remain concealed. As described by *Neela*,

“If I receive 4-5 calls a day, my mother becomes suspicious. Then I have to show her who called me. That’s why I’ve saved some of my clients’ information under female names, and I tell my mother that my colleagues have called me.”

In summary, sex worker’s daily life is an unceasing effort to shield herself from societal stigma, a challenge that permeates both the digital and physical realms.

5.1.3.3 Limited Exercise of Citizen Rights

Since our participants are registered sex workers in the brothel in Daulatdia, the voter ID cards they obtain are registered within this locality and explicitly state “Potitapolli” (the Bengali term for brothel) as their address. Our findings drew that from the “*fear of getting exposed*”, none of our participants seeks for any government aids, support or allowances that would require their ID card. For the same reason, they also do not open any bank accounts or file any complaints about work-related violence or abuse. Most importantly, they also do not want to vote in the national elections due to this fear, which limits their ability to practice their fundamental political rights as a citizen. One of them gave us the permission for taking a photo of the back side of her NID, which shows the address of the brothel (Fig. 5.4).

5.1.4 Spatial Politics

Stigmatization mediated through various forms of spatial separations is a common and timeless phenomenon for brothels like Daulatdia. Historically, separations of areas like Daulatdia brothel from the *regular* portion of the urban areas oftentimes kept such areas outside many modernization and urbanization processes. Hence, these areas came up with their own strategies to design and develop spaces within the physical boundary shaped by the outside world. In many cases, such physical spaces within the boundaries try to *match* with the *regular* urban spaces outside. For instance, the market areas, tea stalls, grocery stores, beauty saloons, Mazar (Muslim shrines), etc., inside Daulatdia brothel try to replicate the stigma-free essence of the cities. However, the presence of function-derived spatial components, such as the long corridors flanked by the sex workers' rooms, gambling hubs, alcohol shops, dance rooms, and bars, hardly let the Daulatdia brothel disassociate itself from the spatial stigma it already holds. Such spatial tension gets intensified when the brothel meets the city at its boundary. The surveilled gates, absence of religious buildings near the boundary area, surrounding NGOs, safe homes, and health centers dedicated to sex workers, among other spatial components, make the brothel forcefully detached from the rest of the city. From our interviews, we came to know how sex workers attempt to overcome such spatial tensions and associate them with the *regular* city wherever they can. With the emergence of the digital world and the ever-increasing involvement of sex workers in various digital activities, their attempts to skip the above-mentioned spatial tensions travel from their physical to digital lives. While these sex workers cannot overcome their separations from the *regular* cities in the physical world, their *modified* spatial representations in the digital help them do so. The following paragraphs exemplify such scenarios.

5.1.4.1 Private Spaces

Some of our participants actively creates content and participate in online streaming via Tiktok and Likee (Fig. 5.3), which are becoming popular among them as an additional income source. In many of these sessions, they expose portions of their private rooms to their virtual audiences. In our interviews, they mentioned how they deliberately "*organize*" their rooms mimicking the spatial aesthetics of a room occupied by a "*regular household woman*" from a limited-income family background in the surrounding neighborhoods. One of our participants said,



Figure 5.5: Inside the room of a sex worker, resembling the setting of a typical Bangladeshi household.

“If people see lights and flashy decorations, they might suspect the place where I am, or what my profession is. Any ordinary woman would not likely have access to these expensive decoration props. You see the cooking utensils behind me, this stays in my background when I record video. This is more likely for a housewife to have cooking utensils (Fig. 5b) around her, and so people will not suspect me. I don’t ever remove those.”

5.1.4.2 Public Spaces

Our fieldwork traces similar masking attempts by the sex workers where the digital activities meet the physical public spaces. Unlike private spaces, sex workers have less control over public spaces to mask their spatial identity as a brothel. Hence, the workers look for alternative locations/ contexts that hardly express any spatial resemblance to a brothel’s public spaces. One of our participants mentioned,

“I go outside in the field when recording videos. If I do it near the brothel corridors/gate, people will easily identify the place. The green landscape



Figure 5.6: Cooking corner adjacent to room, used as backdrop for livestreaming.

is quite common in villages, and similar everywhere, so people cannot identify the place only seeing the fields and trees.”

Oftentimes, the sex workers hide their physical locations/addresses and use “regular” public locations for online transactions and offline deliveries. For instance, one of our participants shared,

“When we order online, we put the address of the railway station, not this place. The delivery people will give me a stare if they know I’m from this place. Or who knows? They might not deliver in this brothel even!”

Such actions of our participants explain their urges to avoid the stigmas associated with the private spaces they live in. They *borrow* a particular spatial configuration from the *regular* physical world, recreate it within a contested space, and use it as a mask in the digital world to overcome the spatial barriers they experience in the physical world.

5.1.5 Moral Tension

Sex workers are labeled in the *immoral level* of the society which is devoid of *loyalty, purity, and sanctity* [32], [61]. However, we found our participants in the brothel *moral* in their own values and understanding. We found different layers of morality prevailing among the intrinsic values of these sex workers. This section delves into their layers of self-defined morality within which our participants reside.

5.1.5.1 Morality around Sex Work Online

As mentioned before, our participants reported that they do not use any conventional online platforms that are designed for sex workers. In fact, some participants draw a clear line between performing sexually explicit acts online and doing it with their customers indoor. Again, we observe that the notion of space plays an important role in the lives of sex workers – this time in shaping their morality. This perspective is further elucidated by the account provided by *Moni*,

“Doing sex work on online video platforms (showing bodily parts, and performing explicit acts online for the sexual pleasure of clients in exchange of money), is the greatest sin. We can do it inside these four walls, that’s acceptable to us, but doing it in public platform - oh no! - totally a shame. I cannot even think about this!”

Nonetheless, we observed that the practice of sexting and engaging in sexual conversations through audio calls with their long-term clients is widespread among the majority (21 out of 25) of our participants. Crucially, this does not entail performing sexual acts in front of a camera for unknown people and is not regarded by the workers as a form of “*sex work*.” As *Ratna* explained:

“We often engage in sensational conversations with our (trustworthy) clients, but that isn’t actually sex work, right? Anyone can do this, even the school-going girls in the city are doing it with their boyfriends!”

When making videos for the platforms like Tiktok and Likee, the subtle use of sensuality has also been depicted as “*normal*” by some participants,

“I make Tiktok and Likee just like another girl. It’s nothing special. People knock me seeing my videos, they comment good things... It might be sensual, we’re girls, everything involving us is sensual! (laugh)” (Meena)

5.1.5.2 Negotiating with Religious Values

Any sexual intimacy outside of marriage is strictly prohibited in all major religions practiced in Bangladesh (Islam, and Hinduism) [95]. Violating this religious principle is regarded as a significant departure from the religious path [1]. Nevertheless, our participants hold unique perspectives around their religious practices, asserting that they follow their faith “*by heart.*” For instance, despite sex work being considered *haraam* (forbidden) in Islam, Muslim sex workers were observed covering their wall with Kaaba Sharif posters (Fig. 5.5), and keeping the Holy Quran in a corner of their rooms, designating it as the “*holy corner.*” In this sacred space, they also placed items like *Zamzam Water*, Tasbeeh (prayer beads), and a *Jaynamaz* (prayer mat). Engaging in daily prayers five times a day, reciting the Holy Quran, and educating their children in the Quranic verses were common practices among these workers. *Sumi* was candid about her commitment to keeping her “*work*” separate from her religious beliefs,

“I do this work for my living, to make money. That doesn’t mean that I don’t believe in God or don’t practice any religion. That would be a terrible sin. I pray every day, I have the Quran in my room, and I do not let anyone touch it. As a Muslim, it’s obligatory to have my faith in Allah, none other than He can save us.”

Religious events like Ramadan, Eid, and Puja are widely celebrated inside the brothel. Although Ramadan is noted as the month of *Siam* (abstinence from food, drinks, and sexual acts) in Islam [143], sex work does not go on a hiatus in that month. The workers celebrate the Eid festival with loud music, alcohol, and sensual dance, along with an increasing work schedule as more number of customers visit their brothel during these national period.

However, it should be noted that when a Muslim sex worker passes away, the community does not permit the performance of a funeral or *Janaza* for her, nor do they conduct the burial according to the religious rituals. Instead, there is a communal grave site for the sex workers, with a single tomb for everyone. This scenario highlights the complex relationship these workers have with their faith. While they maintain their personal connection to their religion, the society does not approve of this association or acknowledge under any circumstances.

5.2 Informal Sex Work

In this section, we explore the strategies and challenges faced by informal online sex workers in establishing visibility, acquiring and maintaining clients, and navigating privacy concerns on digital platforms. Drawing from five semi-structured interviews, this analysis provides an in-depth understanding of the nuances of digital sex work, particularly focusing on online visibility and digital privacy and security issues in the Bangladeshi context.

5.2.1 Client Acquisition

5.2.1.1 Visibility and Platform Selection

Our participants reported advertising on a multitude of platforms to recruit clients, ranging from mainstream social media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram) to messaging apps (e.g., Telegram, WhatsApp) and local adult forums. All five participants relied on three main heuristics when choosing where to advertise: i) platform popularity, ii) safety, and iii) cost.

Platform Popularity and Accessibility The workers prioritize platforms with extensive user bases and user-friendly interfaces to maximize visibility. Popular choices include Facebook, Instagram, and Telegram, as these applications are widely adopted and serve as key channels for promoting services and maintaining a professional presence. Amara, a participant in her mid-twenties, elaborated:

“I use Instagram and OnlyFans because they already have a massive audience. On Instagram, I join trending hashtags or follow accounts that align with my niche, and that automatically attracts clients. The more active I am, the better my chances of getting noticed. But staying visible means putting in a lot of effort every single day.”

OnlyFans, while popular internationally, is not easily accessible in Bangladesh. It requires a VPN to circumvent regional restrictions, which adds an extra layer of cost and complexity. Thus, many workers ultimately rely on Instagram, Facebook, Telegram, or Snapchat. Tia explained:

“OnlyFans is great but it’s hard to use here. I have to use a VPN to access it as it’s banned in Bangladesh. Facebook, Instagram, and Telegram are easier—no extra steps.”

While these platforms offer familiarity and broad reach, workers must carefully navigate cultural and legal sensitivities. Many use coded language to advertise discreetly, avoiding platform algorithms or vigilant community members who might flag their content.

Safety In addition to platform popularity, safety is a central concern. Telegram’s secret chat feature, for instance, alerts users when someone takes a screenshot, making it appealing for more private conversations. Rhea pointed out a similar benefit in Snapchat’s notification system:

“Snapchat is another option. It sends you a notification if someone tries to save or screenshot your content. I like that. It’s a relief to know I can see if someone is being sneaky.”

Cost Cost is the third major consideration. While some sex workers experiment with paid ads on specialized websites, they often find these platforms either too expensive or ill-suited to a primarily local audience. Most cannot afford monthly VPN subscriptions or targeted advertising campaigns.

Rhea noted:

“I cannot afford expensive VPN services to seamlessly use OnlyFans. Most of the time, I stick to Facebook or Telegram groups. I’m not willing to pay to try fancier apps; Facebook and Instagram are already widely popular.”

Salma shared a similar experience:

“Maybe if I had an international audience, it’d be worthwhile. But local guys stick to free apps, so I’d rather advertise on Facebook or Instagram for free rather than paying dollars.”

5.2.1.2 Content Customization and Creative Engagement

Content quality is crucial for attracting potential clients in a crowded digital space. Many participants cited the importance of constant innovation to stand out from competitors.

Zara, who transitioned from traditional to digital sex work, explained:

“It’s not just about showing your body. It’s about selling a fantasy. I rotate between glamorous outfits, playful captions, and even intellectual quotes to appear more approachable. Each post has to be thought through because one bad post can drive clients away.”

In Bangladesh, however, creating and posting such content involves navigating societal constraints. Workers rely on euphemisms, coded language, and culturally resonant themes.

Amara shared:

“We can’t be too direct. We use phrases like ‘private consultation’ or ‘special service’—it’s a code everyone in the scene understands.”

Platforms with diverse content options—such as reels, live streams, or ephemeral stories—are particularly valued. Tia highlighted:

“I post photos with costumes, props, or lighting that match a certain theme—like fantasy or glamour. It’s like storytelling; people connect better when the content looks professional.”

Some workers opt for simpler, text-based formats or mix Bangla and English to engage local clients more effectively:

“Here, not everyone reads English well, so I mix Bangla and English, and I keep things straightforward. If I get too flashy, it might scare off local clients.” — Rhea

5.2.1.3 Subscription Methods

To capitalize on Facebook’s massive user base, certain workers employ a “friend list” or “follower subscription” model. Clients pay to access private profiles, which feature exclusive images, direct messaging privileges, or personalized updates.

Salma described her approach:

“I have a private Facebook profile where only paying clients can see my photos. If they don’t renew their payment each month—say around 2,000 BDT—I unfriend them. That’s my way of making sure I get consistent income and control over who sees what.”

Amara also stated:

“It might sound silly—charging just for a friend request—but it works. People pay because I offer new pictures, updates, and sometimes direct chats. Once they stop paying, I remove them.”

Participants also harness Telegram or Messenger groups for client acquisition, dropping their handles in specialized adult or “friendship” channels. Rhea explained:

“I joined a Telegram channel where people post introductions. If someone seems interested, I invite them to a private chat.”

5.2.2 Client Vetting

Before committing to in-person meetings or extended online sessions, online sex workers in Bangladesh follow rigorous vetting processes to ensure their safety and filter out potentially problematic clients. This often involves examining social media profiles, conducting preliminary calls, and verifying payment reliability. The goal is to identify trustworthy clients while avoiding scams, harassment, or violence.

5.2.2.1 Preliminary Calls and Social Media Checks

Short voice or video calls—typically one to five minutes—enable workers to confirm a client’s identity and gauge their demeanor. Salma shared her experience:

“I ask them basic questions like their job or where they live. If they get defensive or start cursing, it’s over.”

Rhea added:

“I always ask them a few questions—what they do, where they’re from, or what they’re looking for. It’s not just about the answers but how they respond. If they’re impatient, overly pushy, or refuse to answer basic questions, I know they’ll be trouble.”

Alongside brief calls, workers scrutinize a client’s Facebook or Instagram profile, looking for red flags such as empty accounts or stolen photos. Zara recounted:

“I found a client using a stolen photo of a Bangladeshi celebrity as his profile picture. I didn’t even care to reply because I don’t have time for fakes.”

5.2.2.2 Peer Verification and Community Support

Many rely on colleague referrals or peer networks to validate a client’s legitimacy. Amara explained how a trusted recommendation can expedite the vetting process:

“If someone I trust vouches for them, I feel safer moving forward. But I still do my checks.”

Workers also use private Telegram groups to share photos, usernames, and chat excerpts to collectively decide whether a prospective client is reliable or poses a threat. Zara described this community-driven tactic:

“When I’m not sure about someone, I’ll post his picture in our Telegram group and ask, ‘Does anyone recognize him?’ If someone responds and says, ‘Yes, he’s trouble,’ I block him immediately. But if a trusted colleague says, ‘He’s fine, I’ve worked with him,’ I proceed.”

Within these tight-knit digital circles, information about violent or manipulative clients spreads quickly. Rhea emphasized the value of such referrals:

“A friend introduced me to a regular client of hers who she said was kind and pays quickly. That was all I needed. If a colleague I trust vouches for someone, I rarely have issues.”

Salma added:

“If a man had hurt someone I know, the rumor would spread like wildfire in our group chats. We warn each other. We have to do that because there’s no official protection for us.”

5.2.2.3 Test Engagements

To confirm a client’s seriousness, many workers ask for a small deposit via bKash—often 500 to 1000 BDT—before proceeding. Others rely on a brief text or voice chat to gauge the client’s overall reliability. These test interactions act as safeguards, filtering out unserious or malicious individuals and preserving workers’ time and emotional energy.

5.2.3 Payment Management

5.2.3.1 Partial Prepayments and Micro-Payment Strategies

All five participants reported requiring partial deposits via bKash, typically 10% to 50% of the total fee, before offering camming or sexting sessions. Although not foolproof, this approach filters out many non-paying or exploitative individuals.

Rhea shared:

“I say ‘Send me 1000 Taka first if you want to see me on camera.’ That way, if he’s a scammer, at least I only lose my time, not a free show. He can’t blackmail me with recorded content without paying something.”

5.2.3.2 Tiered Pricing

Workers commonly adopt tiered pricing to differentiate between text-based services, voice calls, partial-face camming, and fully revealing sessions. This flexibility allows them to maintain agency over how much they disclose.

Salma highlighted:

“A short chat is 2000 Taka. If they want voice, I charge 5000. For a video call without face, it’s 10,000 or more. If it’s with face, then I charge 15,000 minimum. I make this very clear to avoid bargaining arguments.”

Returning clients who demonstrate respect and consistent payment sometimes receive “all-in” package rates or special discounts, reflecting the fluid nature of digital sex work transactions.

5.2.4 Online Vulnerabilities

5.2.4.1 Harassment and Threats

All participants described experiencing online harassment, including obscene messages, bullying, and threats of extortion from individuals claiming to be influential or connected to law enforcement.

Tia recalled:

“A man said he was a police officer and threatened me with jail if I didn’t do as he asked. I wasn’t sure if he was real. I blocked him, but it shook me badly.”

Amara added:

“Some men call from unknown numbers, cursing and calling me a ‘dirty woman.’ They say they’ll tell my parents. It’s horrifying. My biggest nightmare is having my family find out.”

Although workers typically block such callers, the possibility of offline retaliation cultivates a persistent sense of fear.

5.2.4.2 Fake Profiles and Identity Theft

Three participants reported incidents in which their photos or videos were stolen to create fake profiles on other adult websites, often accompanied by false or malicious contact information. These unauthorized accounts not only undermine potential earnings but also compromise workers’ sense of control over their own images.

Tia lamented:

“I found my pictures on a random site with a different phone number. Imagine how many men contacted that fake profile thinking it was me!”

Zara tried watermarking her images to mitigate these risks:

“I tried watermarking everything, but people can crop out the watermark. It’s never truly safe.”

5.2.4.3 Payment Scams

Payment fraud also emerged as a frequent concern. Clients sometimes forge transaction receipts or send doctored screenshots to feign payment.

Rhea explained:

“I once had a client send me a screenshot, but the money wasn’t there. He said it’s just delayed. When he disappeared, I realized it was all staged.”

In response, some workers conduct small “test transactions” to confirm authenticity before moving on to full payment.

5.2.5 Privacy and Security Strategies

5.2.5.1 Managing Multiple Accounts and Identities

All participants maintained at least two distinct online identities: one for personal or family interactions and another for professional use under a partial alias. This division is crucial for mitigating social stigma and avoiding accidental disclosure.

Zara shared:

“I have a personal Instagram full of pictures with my cousins, but I never post about my job. Then I have a separate work Insta with a stylish nickname where I post selfies that hint at my figure.”

Amara added:

“My boyfriend doesn’t know I do this, so I keep one phone hidden. Only when I’m out or alone do I use two phones. It’s stressful, but that’s how I maintain secrecy.”

Three participants even kept two separate devices to further compartmentalize their personal lives from their work identities.

5.2.5.2 Personal Data Privacy and Security

All five participants consistently deleted chat logs, call histories, and explicit images after each session. Many employed ephemeral messaging or self-destruct timers in Telegram and WhatsApp to minimize their digital footprint.

Zara explained:

“Every few days, I go through my phone and delete everything. It’s become a habit—like cleaning my inbox so no one can find evidence of what I do.”

Additionally, workers remained vigilant about location tracking via social media or smartphone apps. They disabled GPS, used VPNs to conceal their IP addresses, or provided false location details to deter stalkers.

Amara shared:

“I never let apps access my location. Once, I forgot to turn off location tagging, and a client figured out I was in a specific area. I never want to reveal my location to the clients.”

Such precautions are essential in a context where inadvertent disclosure can result in targeted harassment or police raids. By treating every aspect of their digital presence as a potential liability, workers navigate a complex environment that offers economic opportunity yet demands continuous vigilance.

5.3 Comparison between Legal and Informal Sex Workers

Our comparative analysis highlights several critical differences and noteworthy similarities between legal (brothel-based) and informal (digitally-mediated) sex workers.

Legal sex workers in Daulatdia operate within clearly defined physical and socioeconomic boundaries, heavily influenced by the brothel's established power dynamics. Their day-to-day lives and digital practices are frequently constrained by constant surveillance from pseudo-husbands, madams, and local power brokers, limiting their autonomy. Although they leverage digital tools such as mobile financial services and social media, their online activities are largely limited by lower digital literacy and the necessity of managing significant offline risks. Trust building predominantly occurs through physical interactions, referrals, and face-to-face meetings, while their digital spaces are utilized primarily for maintaining existing client relationships rather than actively acquiring new clients.

In contrast, informal sex workers demonstrate greater autonomy and flexibility, attributed primarily to their reliance on digital platforms to independently acquire clients and conduct business. Their higher levels of digital literacy facilitate sophisticated practices in digital marketing, client vetting through peer networks, and financial management through tiered payment systems and subscription models. Nevertheless, this autonomy comes with increased exposure to digital vulnerabilities, such as harassment, threats of blackmail, identity theft, and payment scams. Consequently, informal workers must engage in rigorous privacy and security practices, such as maintaining multiple online identities, employing ephemeral messaging services, and strictly compartmentalizing their personal and professional lives.

Despite these differences, both groups experience substantial social stigma and ac-

tively employ similar strategies to manage their dual identities. Both brothel-based and informal workers maintain strict boundaries between their work and family lives, using different mobile phones, separate social media accounts, and carefully managing their appearances both online and offline. They also share the challenge of navigating complex moral tensions between societal expectations and their professional identities. For instance, both groups refrain from explicit digital sexual acts that they perceive as morally unacceptable or riskier, often engaging instead in subtle forms of digital intimacy or sensual self-presentation.

Understanding these complex intersections of legality, digital literacy, autonomy, surveillance, and stigma underscores the importance of developing targeted technological interventions and policy measures. Such interventions must acknowledge the unique challenges and strategies of each group, supporting their needs for security, privacy, and economic empowerment while carefully navigating the sensitive socio-cultural landscapes within which both legal and informal sex workers operate.

Chapter 6

Discussion

In the above chapters, we have presented an ethnographic account of the lives and technology usage of both legal sex workers in the Daulatdia brothel and informal online sex workers operating in urban Bangladesh. Our findings reveal insights into how sex workers across these distinct contexts negotiate trust, combat stigma, evade surveillance, and manage moral tensions while employing digital technologies to sustain their livelihoods. Legal, brothel-based sex workers at Daulatdia navigate a hybrid space that merges physical interactions and digital engagements constrained by a rigid system of social and patriarchal surveillance. Conversely, informal online sex workers, who primarily operate digitally, contend with distinct challenges and opportunities related to platform visibility, digital privacy, client vetting, and security management. Yet, despite differences, both groups face common threats rooted in stigma, gendered surveillance, and privacy risks, suggesting broader implications for technology design and policy interventions within marginalized and stigmatized communities.

6.1 Design Implications

Our findings illustrate how computing practices of both formal and informal sex workers are closely intertwined with their offline lives and sociocultural contexts. Both groups rely heavily on client interactions and trust-building for their professional survival, although their strategies differ due to the contexts they operate in. While brothel-based workers depend largely on clients' offline behaviors and technical proficiency for trust formation, informal online sex workers leverage platform-specific strategies, rigorous client vetting methods, and platform-mediated

interactions. This distinction indicates that technology design should account for context-sensitive trust mechanisms, acknowledging the hybrid interactions occurring between digital and physical realms [49], [69], [76].

Our research also highlights the importance of considering the contrasting digital literacy levels between these two groups. Informal online sex workers typically possess higher digital proficiency, enabling them to adopt complex privacy strategies such as tiered payments, content customization, and strategic platform use (e.g., Telegram, Instagram). Conversely, brothel-based sex workers heavily depend on trusted clients to navigate their technological challenges, exposing themselves to significant risks, such as involvement in illegal cryptocurrency transactions [138]. Design efforts must account for this literacy gap by offering inclusive, simplified, yet secure digital tools that facilitate independence for workers with lower digital proficiency.

Additionally, our findings indicate that sex workers across contexts resort to clandestine or camouflaged interactions to counter stigma and surveillance, employing multiple online identities, pseudonyms, and regularly deleting digital footprints. HCI scholarship focused on clandestine interactions and camouflaged interventions among vulnerable populations can be leveraged to guide the creation of technologies that help stigmatized users safely compartmentalize digital identities and manage transitions between them [104], [110], [130], [141], [142]. Future design interventions could explore mechanisms such as automated data deletion, identity management tools, or intelligent contextual switching systems, enabling sex workers to fluidly and safely manage their multiple online identities.

6.2 Security and Privacy Issues

Both formal and informal sex workers adopt proactive digital privacy practices, such as maintaining multiple online profiles, using pseudonyms, and regularly deleting sensitive information (e.g., chats, images, call logs). These behaviors align closely with established best practices in HCI literature for minimizing digital footprints and preventing negative consequences [57]. However, significant differences exist in how these groups manage and experience privacy threats. Formal sex workers in Daulatdia predominantly face privacy risks arising from their physical environment,

notably surveillance from their "pseudo-husbands," who enforce patriarchal control by monitoring their digital activities, restricting technological engagement, or even physically confiscating or tracking their devices [88], [92], [99], [112], [113], [115].

In contrast, informal online sex workers face threats primarily from digital interactions, such as online harassment, blackmail, identity theft, and payment fraud, highlighting vulnerabilities specific to digital spaces. Their strategies to counteract these threats involve using privacy-focused features such as ephemeral messaging or encrypted communication channels (e.g., Telegram, Snapchat). Future privacy designs must therefore integrate both physical and digital privacy management strategies and consider the varying degrees and sources of threats sex workers face across different work environments.

Our findings further extend existing scholarship on feminist HCI, illustrating how patriarchy shapes digital privacy practices in marginalized communities [105], [113], [118]. Informal workers, while relatively independent, still confront patriarchal norms in society, compelling them to practice extreme caution and secrecy online, mirroring the experience of brothel-based workers under the direct surveillance of pseudo-husbands. This commonality underscores the pervasive influence of patriarchal values, necessitating designs that specifically empower female users to retain agency and autonomy in technology use, particularly within societies that reinforce male dominance through surveillance and stigma [92], [105], [118], [134].

6.3 Digitization of Sex Work

Finally, our study illuminates the complexities introduced by digitization and globalization within sex work in Bangladesh. Informal online sex workers explicitly capitalize on digital platforms' global reach, adopting sophisticated branding and content strategies to engage diverse client bases beyond local constraints. This transition represents both economic opportunity and exposure to intensified competition and risks, such as identity theft, harassment, and payment scams. Conversely, the brothel-based sex workers of Daulatdia, traditionally confined within geographical boundaries, increasingly navigate globalized digital spaces (e.g., Bigo Live, Likee, TikTok) to expand their clientele, despite significant barriers such as stigma, surveillance, and limited digital skills.

These shifts highlight tensions between localized, place-bound sex work and emerging global digital marketplaces. As local markets face disruption from digitization [93], [125], [137], sex workers' traditional practices adapt or risk marginalization. Thus, HCI and urban studies scholars must critically assess how global digital economies transform local dynamics of labor, stigma, and economic survival. Design interventions should seek to bridge the gap between global digital opportunities and the specific cultural, linguistic, and technological constraints experienced by sex workers in Bangladesh.

Overall, our findings suggest that digitization, while potentially empowering, requires nuanced design interventions and policy considerations tailored to specific local contexts. For informal sex workers who already possess higher digital literacy, advanced privacy and financial security solutions are necessary. Conversely, for brothel-based workers with limited digital skills, simpler yet secure technologies that protect their privacy, reduce dependency on intermediaries, and resist patriarchal surveillance are urgently needed. This dual perspective enriches HCI's understanding of how marginalized communities in the Global South navigate emerging digital landscapes, enabling more contextually informed, empathetic, and effective technology interventions.

Chapter 7

Limitation and Conclusion

7.1 Summary of the Study

In this study, we conducted a detailed ethnographic investigation into the technological practices and lived experiences of both legal sex workers in the Daulatdia brothel and informal online sex workers operating in urban Bangladesh. Our analysis revealed complex socio-technical interactions where sex workers strategically navigate trust, surveillance, stigma, and morality in both online and offline spaces. Despite differences in digital literacy, environment, and methods of operation, sex workers across these contexts share common strategies, such as maintaining separate digital identities, employing sophisticated vetting mechanisms for clients, and creatively managing their online visibility. Our findings foreground the role of spatial configurations in shaping digital behavior and emphasize the need for context-sensitive and culturally nuanced technological design interventions.

7.2 Limitations

While our study provides deep insights into the digital practices of marginalized sex workers in Bangladesh, we acknowledge several limitations. Ethnographic work inherently reflects the positionality of the researcher. The primary ethnographer and investigator came from a relatively privileged socioeconomic and educational background compared to the participants, which may have introduced elements of bias or unintentional "othering" during data collection and interpretation [46]. Although we attempted to mitigate these effects through linguistic and cultural sensitivity training and by establishing genuine rapport, certain subtleties might

have been missed due to our "outsider" perspectives. Additionally, the high stigma and sensitivity surrounding sex work in Bangladesh posed constraints on our data collection process. To maintain participant safety and researcher confidentiality, we intentionally limited certain lines of inquiry, particularly those directly involving powerful local actors such as "pseudo-husbands". As a result, our knowledge regarding their motivations, surveillance strategies, and interactions with technology is incomplete. Furthermore, our data on informal sex workers was limited to five interviews, limiting generalizability; further work with larger samples is necessary to validate and expand these findings. Finally, ethnographic research is inherently contextual and localized, meaning our findings may not generalize beyond Bangladesh or even beyond the specific communities studied. However, we believe the insights derived from our analysis remain valuable for broader HCI and ICTD contexts by highlighting fundamental issues around trust, stigma, privacy, and surveillance.

7.3 Future Work

Building upon the findings presented, future research can explore several compelling directions. First, expanding the ethnographic approach to additional brothels or diverse informal sex work settings across Bangladesh could help validate and enrich our initial observations. Such studies would reveal more nuanced insights into regional variations and potentially discover novel coping strategies, digital practices, and design needs.

Second, deeper exploration of the roles and behaviors of "pseudo-husbands" and other powerful intermediaries could further illuminate technology-mediated forms of surveillance and control in patriarchal contexts. Investigating how such power dynamics can be counteracted or mitigated through targeted technological interventions remains a valuable area of inquiry.

Finally, the intersection of global digital sex marketplaces (such as OnlyFans) with local sex work economies deserves closer examination. Future work could investigate how local sex workers perceive, adapt to, or resist competition from global platforms, including their impacts on traditional business practices, local client behavior, and community structures within brothel-based sex work settings.

By pursuing these research trajectories, the HCI community can gain richer, contextually grounded insights to design inclusive, empowering, and safe digital technologies for stigmatized and marginalized populations globally.

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Appendix A

Interview Guideline

In addition to gathering demographic information such as age, gender, monthly income, and education, we covered the following questions during interview with our research participants.

Questions about Work

1. Could you tell me a bit about yourself?
2. What do you do for living?
 - (a) (prompt) Do you find it comfortable identifying with the term “sex worker” or “prostitute,” or perhaps another description for your profession?
 - (b) Could you share your insights on why you resonate with a particular term and not others?
4. Could you share your journey into this profession?
 - (a) How long have you been working here?
 - (b) How did you come to this brothel?
5. Could you walk me through a typical working day for you?
 - (a) (prompt) Could you tell me about the places you go to?
 - (b) (prompt) Could you tell me about the people you interact with?
6. Do you use a mobile phone?

- (a) (prompt if relevant) Is it a smartphone, or a feature phone (no touch screen)?
- (b) (prompt if relevant) For how long have you been using it?
- (c) (prompt if relevant) How did you learn to use the phone? Could you share the story?
- (d) (prompt if relevant) How many mobile phones and SIM cards do you have?
 - i. (prompt if they use more than one mobile phone and SIM card)
Could you tell me why you have more than one of these?
- (e) Is this your personal mobile phone, or do you share this with someone else/others?
 - i. (prompt if relevant) Who do you share it with?
 - ii. (prompt if relevant) Could you please explain why do you share it with specific person/s?
 - iii. (prompt if relevant) How do you feel about this sharing?
- (f) How did you register the SIM card?
 - i. Could you tell me from where?
 - ii. Did you complete the registration process by yourself, or did you seek assistance from someone else?
 - A. (prompt if they say they did it themselves) How did you do it yourself? Could you walk me through the process?
 - B. (prompt if they say someone else assisted them) Who provided assistance to you? How did they help?
 - C. What kind of information did the process require you to share?
 - D. (prompt if relevant) How did you feel about this information sharing? Why?
- (g) Do you use the internet?
 - i. (prompt if they do) For how long you've been using internet?
 - ii. How do you access it? For example, do you use mobile data, or wifi/broadband etc.?
 - iii. How do you buy data packs? From where do you buy it?

- (h) What do you usually do with your phone?
 - i. Could you tell me about the apps you use in your phone?
 - A. (prompt if relevant) Could you share with me why you use this particular app? (mobile financial service apps, social media apps, etc.)
 - B. (prompt if relevant) How did you install it?
 - C. (prompt if relevant) How did you learn to use the app?
 - D. Did you complete the account registration process by yourself, or did you seek assistance from someone else?
 - E. (prompt if they say they did it themselves) How did you do it yourself? Could you walk me through the process?
 - F. (prompt if they say someone else assisted them) Who provided assistance to you? How did they help?
 - G. (prompt if relevant) What kind of information did the process require you to share?
 - H. How did you feel about information sharing?
 - I. (prompt if relevant) Do you run into any challenges while using it?
 - J. (prompt if relevant) How do you address the challenges?
 - K. (prompt if relevant) Do you have any specific concerns about using these apps? For example, any privacy, security, or safety concerns, or risks? Could you please elaborate?
7. Could you please elaborate on the nature of your work? For instance, do you use mobile phones or the internet for your work, or is your work primarily offline, or do you prefer a combination of both?

For offline work:

- (a) How do you get clients? Could you elaborate if you have to follow any strategies to find clients?
- (b) Could you elaborate if you have to follow any strategies to maintain clients?

- i. (prompt if relevant) Do you contact your clients after work?
 - ii. (prompt if relevant) How do you do that?
- (c) How do you feel about your work?
- (d) Do you face any challenges in your work? If yes, could you please elaborate on that?
- (e) (prompt if relevant) How do you address the challenges?
- (f) Would you be comfortable to share details about the payment structure of your work?
 - i. How do you feel about it?
 - ii. (prompt if relevant) Could you explain the reasons behind your satisfaction/dissatisfaction?
- (g) Could you please explain if your life or work changing anyhow due to technology?
- (h) How do you feel about the government protection and security you have in this brothel? Could you please explain?

For online work:

- (i) How do you use the internet for your work?
 - i. Could you tell me how do you get clients?
 - ii. (prompt) Could you elaborate if you have to follow any strategies to find work?
 - iii. (prompt if relevant) Do you use any social platforms/apps to get clients? (Like Tiktok, Likee, Bigo Live, YouTube, OnlyFans, or any other platforms.)
 - iv. (prompt if relevant) How do you use those apps?
 - v. (prompt if relevant) Why do use this specific app and not the others to get clients?
 - vi. Could you tell me how do you maintain clients?
 - vii. (prompt) Could you elaborate if you follow any strategies to maintain clients, or keep in touch with them?

- viii. (prompt if relevant) Do you use any social platforms/apps to keep in touch?
 - ix. (prompt if relevant) How do you use those apps?
 - x. (prompt if relevant) Why do use this specific app and not the others for maintaining clients?
- (j) Did you have to learn anything new to work online?
- i. (prompt if relevant) Why did you have to learn it?
 - ii. (prompt if relevant) How did you learn that?
- (k) Do you feel any challenges about online work?
- i. (prompt if relevant) Could you share how the challenges look like?
 - ii. (prompt if relevant) Could you please explain if you feel any privacy/security/safety concerns, or risks?
 - iii. (prompt if relevant) What do you do to address the challenges? Could you please elaborate?
 - iv. (prompt if relevant) Are there any challenges or issues regarding your online work that you find difficult to address or resolve?
 - v. (prompt if relevant) Do you think any online services/tools/features could solve it?
 - vi. (prompt if relevant) What features should these services have to address the problem?
 - vii. (prompt if relevant) Did you ever face any negative experiences (harassment/abuse/threat) online?
 - viii. (prompt if relevant) Could you please share the whole story?
 - ix. (prompt if relevant) How did you respond to the incident?
 - x. (prompt if relevant) Did you take any measure to prevent it further?
 - xi. (prompt if relevant) What did you do?
 - xii. (prompt if relevant) Did you have to learn anything new for this?
 - xiii. (prompt if relevant) How did you learn that? Could you please explain?
- (l) When you are providing online services, how does your room and background look like?

- i. (prompt if relevant) Is it different from your regular room environment?
 - ii. (prompt if they say it's different) Why do you set it up differently?
- (m) Would you be comfortable to share details about the payment structure of your work?
 - i. How do you feel about the pay?
 - ii. (prompt if relevant) What aspects contribute to your satisfaction/dissatisfaction?
- (n) Is there anything else you want to mention about how you use the internet for your work?

If they work both online and offline, add the following question(s) with the relevant section(s):

- (o) How would you compare your online and offline work?
 - i. (prompt if relevant) Could you explain in terms of security, safety, privacy, risks, legal support, work opportunity, payment, etc.?
- 8. Could you tell me about your life outside this place?
 - (a) How do you feel about that life?
 - (b) Do you face any challenges? If yes, could you please elaborate on that?
 - (c) (prompt if relevant) How do you address the challenges?
- 9. Do you have any online presence other than work?
 - (a) (prompt if they say yes) How does the presence look like? (Tiktok, Likee, Bigo Live, YouTube, or others)
 - (b) (prompt) How many social accounts do you have?
 - (c) (prompt if relevant) How do you maintain/manage them?
 - i. (prompt) Do you follow any specific strategies? If yes, could you please explain the strategies?
 - (d) Do you face any challenges maintaining this presence? For example, any risks, or privacy/security concerns?

- i. (prompt if relevant) What are the risks and concerns?
- ii. (prompt if relevant) How do you mitigate them?
- iii. (prompt if relevant) How do you take care of the privacy and security issues?

Questions about the Brothel and the Surrounding Environment

1. Could you explain how the surrounding areas maintain separation from the brothel village? What happens in the transitional spaces, like shopping malls, parks, mosques, temples, etc.?
2. How is the expense of living in the brothel compared to the outside areas? Could you elaborate?
3. What are the big social events that take place inside the brothel?
4. How does the brothel look like during social events? Could you describe the brothel environment and setting during these programs?
 - (a) (prompt) For instance, during religious events, national holidays, and similar occasions, do workers offer additional entertainment services?
5. How does the administrative body of the brothel look like?
 - (a) (prompt if relevant) Does technology play a role in any stage of management/operation? If yes, how?
6. How does the security inside the brothel look like?
 - (a) (prompt if relevant) How do you feel about it?
 - (b) Is there any other surveillance? If yes, how does it look like?
7. Is there any formal/informal policy for room share/time share among the workers? If yes, could you please explain that?
8. How does the room allocation system work?
 - (a) (prompt) What do the workers have to do to get better living conditions (bigger room, AC, refrigerator, attached bath/generator, TV etc.)?
9. Do you have access to WiFi inside the brothel?

- (a) (prompt if relevant) How did you get access? What is the process?
- (b) (prompt if relevant) Can everyone get access to WiFi here? Is the process similar for everyone?
- (c) (prompt if the process is different) Why is that?

10. Could you tell me what happens when a worker gets sick or pregnant here?

Following a thorough discussion of relevant questions, we expressed gratitude to our participants for their time, invited any questions they might have had, addressed their inquiries, and concluded the interview session.

Appendix B

Thematic Coding Examples

Theme	Code	Quotation
Trust	Trust in Online Platforms	How can I <u>trust</u> anyone from online? I haven't seen him, haven't got to observe if he's good or bad in real life. People turn out to be fraud in real life even, it's worse online. If they have the courage to pay me a visit, I already start <u>trusting</u> him. If he likes me, I offer several real sessions, only after that I can offer any virtual ones.
	Trust from Referral	<u>Trusting</u> a referred client is straightforward. If I already know a client who is well-behaved and decent, they are unlikely to refer someone who is troublesome.
	Trusting with Personal Information	Not all of my clients have access to my phone number. They're not all decent people, though. <u>I only give someone my contact information if I genuinely like them.</u> I like men who treat me with respect, pay me fairly, don't hurt me during sexual encounters, and don't force me into anything. I like sweet-talkers. I give my phone number only when they meet all these requirements.

Theme	Code	Quotation
Surveillance	Track	<u>He installed a software on my phone to track all my calls and online activities.</u> I used to talk with my friends and clients on that smartphone; I often found it scary when he could tell whom I've talked to, exactly what I've said to them over the phone. I thought he had some superpower, but later he told me about this software on my phone. He also used to beat me up, tie my hands, and even choke me if I had talked to any clients over the phone. I cannot even delete this software because if I do, he would suspect me more and I would lose all his support.
	Checking Phones	<u>My (pseudo) husband always checks my phone.</u> If he finds out I talk to my other clients over the phone, he'll be furious. So whenever I chat with a client, or talk to them on imo/messenger, I delete all the data.