

EXPLORING THE HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITIONS OF FEMALE SEX-WORKERS IN BROTHELS: DAULATDIA, A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The paper looks into the household composition of female sex-workers in Daulatdia Brothel, Bangladesh to understand the concept of 'power' within these households. Based on a limited number semi-structured interviews of sex-workers, the attempt is to trace power through the three stages of sex-workers professional life: apprentice, tenant, and house-owner, and to examine how class and gender plays roles in this brothel power structure. The research questions conventional 'victimhood' of sex-workers in broader Bangladeshi context, and attempts to seek for 'power', assuming that within the oppressive patriarchal brothel framework, they exercise power and agency at the level of household in terms of economic independence, motherhood, social mobility, household organization and the struggle for respectability.

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Key words: Female sex workers, Daulatdia Brothel, power, victimhood.

INTRODUCTION

Why women become sex-workers is one area that has been investigated extensively: the causes and effects on society, economy, and morality. Whatever might be the causes, the fact remains that they are ordinary people with desires, dreams and aspirations of living a liveable life. These basic human qualities enable them to create a space for themselves within the four walls of the brothel, with loved ones. This personal space not only helps these women to survive the worst possible conditions, but also contributes the most important human element in an otherwise oppressive commercial social system of brothels, making space for gradual *power and resistance*. Bangladesh is a Third-world Muslim country with a deadly combination of dire poverty and a conservative society that holds many double standards. Here religion plays a pivotal role in shaping not only the socio-sexual morality, but also determining politics. The religious backdrop makes issues like prostitution, child abuse and sexuality a highly sensitive agenda. The country has more than 100,000 women in the sex trade (ATSEC: Bangladesh chapter, 2000). Sex is the cheapest commodity here, and sex-workers are considered as the worst form of human beings.

The objective of this research is not to scrutinize or analyze sex-workers' lives as something 'exotic' or pitiable, but to understand the power relations operating in their private space from sex-workers' point of view. I adopt a feminist perspective in this matter, which understands sex-work as embedded in and produced by gendered power relations and a patriarchal society, that forces a division between women into 'respectable' women whose sexuality is confined to and privately owned by one man within the institution of marriage; and the 'disrespectful' woman whose sexuality is publicly available to many men within the institution of prostitution.

But doing research from a feminist perspective runs into the risk of depicting women as passive 'victims' of male violence. Such 'victimologies' tend to create the false impression that women have only been victims, that they have never successfully fought back, that women cannot be effective social agents on behalf of themselves or others (Harding, 1987:5). The risk is even higher when such perspective is applied to sex-work. This paper aims to avoid such risk though it does not turn a blind-eye to the victimisation of sex-workers; at the same time it tries not to let conditioning and 'morality' prevent it from seeing the 'power' these 'victims'

can find for themselves to survive such oppression. It also questions the conventional understanding of 'morality' in order to expose it a deeply 'immoral'.

The paper is divided into four main chapters. Chapter 1 is the 'Literature Review', Chapter 2 is on 'Methodology', Chapter 3 explores 'Power Relations in Daulatdia Brothel', Chapter 4 is 'Voices from the Brothel' including field report and analysis. The paper ends with a Conclusion and a Bibliography.

CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW *SEX-WORK*

'Sex-work' is typically defined by both academics and lay persons as the exchange of sexual services for cash and/or other material benefits. For some, like me, the terms 'sex-work' and 'sex worker' are preferable because they acknowledge the exchange of money for sex and are less stigmatizing than the term 'prostitute'. O'Connell Davidson, in her book 'Prostitution, Power and Freedom' (1998) explores the concept of power and freedom within the different modes of sex-work. She suggests that the social relations of prostitution vary, as there is a distinction between independent, self-employed prostitutes and those who are controlled by third parties. Her research shows that in cases of confined organized brothels, a sense of loyalty and obligation towards the family that is benefiting from the earnings leads them to accept, rather than resist, the brothel keepers' authority. This argument is particularly useful to see whether the Bangladeshi brothel inmates demonstrate such loyalty, and obligation towards their families, or if they attempt to resist, and if so how the concept of 'resistance' is translated for Bangladeshi sex-workers.

In 'Rethinking Prostitution: Purchasing Sex in the 1990s' (1997), Maggie O'Neill discusses the two major feminist approaches towards prostitution. The first views 'prostitutes' as victims of male sexuality, while the second 'subjectivist' position places the experiences and needs of the women concerned center stage and views 'prostitution' as a legitimate form of labor chosen by many women. O'Neill sees the need of placing sex-work in the social context of structural sexual relations between men and women, and recognizes that the feminist analysis of sex-work inevitably challenges the ways in which sexual and social inequalities serve to reproduce ideology, patriarchy and the

structuration of gender relations, but also points out the fact that there is an ideological problem with feminism in that the exchange of money for sex is taken to be exchange of equivalents. This, according to her is a socially constructed illusion (1997:24-27). This particular argument is vital to the understanding of power, or the paradox of power especially within the brothel household in Bangladesh where many sex-workers work within the framework of male domination, but their way of renegotiation of power challenges the accepted ideologies, gender relations of the mainstream society.

Joanna Phoenix in 'Making Sense of Prostitution' (1999) studies how the experiences of women within and outside their intimate relationships are shaped and structured by more fundamental economic relations between men and women. Phoenix's argument is that involvement in prostitution is made possible for some women because such involvement comes to 'make sense' because of the social and material conditions in which they live (1999:3). This is done via the construction of a specific 'prostitute identity' composed of three contingent and contradictory pairs of identifications: prostitutes as workers and as co modified bodies; prostitutes as businesswomen and as loving partners; and prostitutes as victims and survivors. She concludes that women remain within 'prostitution' because the paradoxes of their involvement (that is, being both like and unlike other women). Phoenix's idea is useful in understanding the sex workers and their responses towards this profession, as it is common to justify the choice that these women have made in life, and there is an attempt to create an identity which further explains their interpretation of 'power' within the structure.

I will now examine some of the literature looking at sexwork within Bangladeshi context.

SEX-WORK IN BANGLADESH

Although sex-work in Bangladesh has always existed and taken many changing forms, it remained ignored, avoided and rather un-researched by social scientists till recently. So far there has been a handful of rather good studies on this issue. One of the most extensive and widely acclaimed is by Khan and Arefeen, entitled 'Prostitution in Bangladesh' (1993). This study looked at the issue from a *feminist perspective*

trying to understand the complexities of the institution of 'prostitution' and more significantly, its relationship with the general situation of women in the country. The findings show that the institution of 'prostitution' is created, sponsored and perpetuated by society and the state. But the researchers seem to accept the predominant view that prostitution '...is basically for the gratification of men's sexual demands, ... that the society and state is sanctioning extra marital sexuality for men' (1993:242). Therefore, it is the ideology of sexuality for men and women which is one of the central factors that pushes women into sex-work on the one hand, and allows men to avail themselves of the sexual services of sex-workers on the other. I disagree with such easy explanation of prostitution because I view it primarily as an economic oppression, which is given the guise of men's 'natural' demand for excess sex, an idea that has no scientific basis. Though the study apparently claims to take a 'feminist perspective' but its conclusion appears to recognize as well as in a way to accept the patriarchal ideology, which the study criticizes so greatly, sees sexworkers as 'victims' by missing out any sense of resistance or 'power'.

Save the Children (Australia) conducted an in-depth study in 2001 on the Daulatdia-Kandapara brothels. The study entitled '*Growing Up in the Brothel: Children in Daulatdia and Kandapara Brothel Communities of Bangladesh*', as its name indicates, is mainly focused on children and their experiences within the brothel communities. The study gives the reader an insight into the households and sub-culture of the families, but it leaves out the power element in the households in particular. The reason might be that showing independence/power or even preference for sex work on the part of the sex-workers would appear to be something contrary to what the organizations are trying to work for, i.e. justifying alternate lives for children in brothels. Therefore, the 'victim framework' works well in a study like this.

Therese Blanchet's well-acclaimed book 'Lost Innocence, Stolen Childhood' (Blanchet a, 1996), helps the reader to come to an understanding of what is regarded as 'normal' and what is regarded as deviating from 'normality' in the different strata of Bengali society (1996:v-xiii). The book devotes one chapter to 'child prostitution', taking Daulatdia brothel as its focus area. This chapter is particularly valuable for my research as Blanchet

examines concepts like parenthood, childhood, rights of parents, responsibilities of being a child, the social interpretation and the underlying meanings of such notions across the different class and cultural of Bengali society; and how the same ideas come into play in brothel culture (1996:143).

Even though Blanchet's study focuses on the aspect of 'child prostitution' and the paradoxical nature of motherdaughter relations, nevertheless, it provides the maximum insight into the private lives of sex workers, touching the key concept of my research, i.e. power in brothel households. Therefore, her study is the platform from which my study on 'How can sex workers' power and powerlessness be understood in a Bangladeshi context?' can be taken forward.

My hypothesis, at this point is, that although sex workers are 'victims' of patriarchy, poverty, feudalistic (in the villages) and capitalistic (in the cities) social relations, religion, culture and the state, nevertheless within the framework of the brothel they exercise power and agency at the level of the household in terms of economic independence, household organization, motherhood, social mobility and the struggle for respectability.

Next I will examine literature on the organization of the household in the majority of non-brothel families in the South-Asian context, in order to make comparisons with brothel households.

HOUSEHOLD:

Thanks to feminism, the household has become a productive focus of research in recent years. While mainstream studies treat households as simple units ignoring internal differences, gender-focused studies tend to stress the divisions between members treating men and women as individuals with distinct interests. Ursula Sharma, in her book 'Women's work, class and the urban household: a study of Shimla, North India' (1986) raises both the advantages and problems with 'household' as a concept: *does it have any reality as a social group, as opposed to a group of individuals who happen to share a common hearth, budget or other resources?* In feminist discourses, as Sharma points out, the household is no longer an irreducible unit- it has an inner politics of its own in which it is embedded (1986:25).

Sarah White's book 'Arguing with the Crocodile: Gender and Class in Bangladesh' (1992), based on a study of a Bangladeshi village, examines the rural household set up. She shows that in rural Bangladesh, the 'household' is mainly founded on the family links between members, and this is central to the distribution of different roles and responsibilities within it (1992:121). In Bangladeshi society, women are defined by their family relationships, especially through marriage. White remarks that marriage is essentially contradictory as it is both a prime means of female subordination and also the basis of woman's fulfillment and advancement. Within the institution of marriage women may enjoy considerable 'de facto' power, particularly in alliance with their sons, but this rarely translates to formal authority and is rarely sustained in longer terms (1992:134-135).

Most studies on the household ignore sex-workers, probably because they are not included in the main categories of citizens in the first place. It is perhaps understandable, although I would argue unjustified, that researchers do not include sex-workers, whose lives are in fact a part of the public sphere, within the concepts of 'family' and 'household', concepts that we so closely connect with ideas of morality and similar ideologies.

POWER:

Households, like any other arena of society are built on power relations and determines their members' specific roles and places in the hierarchy. Very often 'power' is termed as 'zero-sum' meaning that the more power one person or group has, the less another has. According to this calculation, power is 'distributional', and therefore, it is concentrated on key social structures like the state, economy, class hierarchy etc. But if power was only distributional, with some groups completely lacking in power and some with all of it, then there is a problem with the question of 'resistance', because without the possession of some kind of countervailing power, it is almost impossible to resist. Here Foucault and his concept of 'power' can be useful. According to him, power is not located in agencies. Foucault saw power as something that is 'exercised' rather than possessed'. For him, power is co-extensive with the social body, and we are all already regulated, and already participants in networks of power (Barrett, 1991:134-137).

If that is the case, then it is worth looking into the households of sex-workers, in brothels, in a country like Bangladesh where poverty, religion, and patriarchal ideology play the dominant roles in shaping the fabric of the society. The system paves the path towards this profession for vulnerable women nevertheless. There is no denial of the fact that they are the 'victims', the 'oppressed', and our rather 'safe' distance from their situation perhaps blurs our vision to see what life means to them and what it has offered to many women. They are ostracized by the mainstream, but I will argue that they have created a sub-culture of their own where acceptance and economic security gives a relative sense of power. This sub-culture challenges the 'patriarchal family structure' prevalent in mainstream society, and its household operates within its own dynamics. This study, therefore, aims to find out the answer to a vital question: *how can sex workers' power and powerlessness be understood in a Bangladeshi context?*

CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

Bangladesh has 16 major brothels spread all over the country, and each of them is unique (BNWLA, 1996:5). 'Daulatdia' was chosen mainly because it is at present the largest brothel in the country, nearer to the capital, and information was available. The focus has been on the three categories of sex-workers representing three stages of the professional life of a sex-worker in brothels: *Chukris* (apprentice/ bonded), *Bharatia* (free sex worker/ tenant), *Bariwali* (madam/house owner), as well as exsex workers.

The choice of research method was influenced, and to a great extent restricted, by the fact that I was studying in the UK, and there was a constraint on time, and resources, both in terms of materials and funding. Time restriction was not only about the absolute lack of time, but the fact that gaining access to and the confidence of the sex-workers would be a time consuming task as they were understandably suspicious of any stranger in their territory, especially if it was for the purpose of 'studying' them.

This alienation also stems from the class difference. One cannot deny the importance of participatory, accurate, and informant friendly research skills, and knowledge of 'others' resulting from such encounter and dialogue. But it also

requires a common language and a familiarity with local contexts and their life experiences. A communication problem does not only arise for researchers who are foreign to a particular land, it is equally applicable to those who believe that they speak the same language as their informant or subjects. Occupying a different socio-economic stratum and often subscribing to different world views can prove to be fatal for a research project as the researcher will be incapable of listening to the other. It is naive to expect that any 'ready-made perfect method' and the good will of the researcher can eliminate the difficulties of fieldwork.

I cannot deny that field-work conducted by myself would have been more interesting and could have added more dimensions to my research. Fieldwork, especially interviews and personal observations, can contribute tremendously to an original analysis. Therefore, I decided to have a 'limited' version of field research, conducted by a third party. I chose a male research assistant, for who it was easier to gain access to the brothel area compared to me, and he had mastery over the common language in a better way than I did.

Determined to overcome as much limitations as possible, I decided to go ahead with a field study conducted with 26 sex workers. Out of 26 respondents, there are 3 bonded, (chukri) 14 tenants (bharatia), 7 madams (bariwali) and 2 ex-sex-workers. The aim was to cover all types of sex-workers including ex-sex workers to find out a more balanced picture.

A schedule of questions was developed, somewhere between a questionnaire and an interview, with a limited number of questions that could mostly be answered quite simply. This research is a combination of various methods. It is primarily a library and archival project analyzing different texts, documents, newspaper articles, cover stories, research papers, with a very important but small field research based on semi-structured interviews and observations.

I recognize that 'facts' cannot be always and 'objectively' collected, reported and interpreted because even the personal is political. I acknowledge that, this research bears my personal interpretation of facts, information and texts, and I attempt to give a 'voice' to my respondents as much as possible by referring to their narratives as evidence.

CHAPTER 3: POWER RELATIONS IN DAULATDIA BROTHEL

In this chapter, I focus on Daulatdia brothel's social organization, paying special attention to power relations inside and outside the brothel, and identifying the extent and form of regulation by state agents and by those involved in the industry.

The total population of the brothel, according to Save the Children is around 3000, of whom roughly 1000 are sexworkersl (estimated in 1999), but Blanchet recorded approximately 3000 sex-workers working in the brothel in 1996. The large cluster of bamboo huts where these thousands of sex-workers live and work are built like most rural villages in Bangladesh. Dwellers and visitors eat, speak and in many ways live in the same Bengali ways as in the mainstream society. But the atmosphere that allows the free-mixing of both sexes, different classes and castes of people, and the acceptance of the birth of children out of wedlock makes the brothel a community that breeches rules and norms that are otherwise considered 'sacred' to society.

The brothels all over the country are organised in more or less similar ways, organised under a well-knit power structure with the role of the state entering it. This brothel is authorised by the state and has been so since the British colonial days. It is located in close proximity to the police station, which is officially responsible for the maintenance of law and order in the area. The municipality also has a responsibility to look after the sanitation in the brothel, and the courts are connected with the sex business directly as sex-workers need to acquire affidavits in order to work (Khan and Arefeen 1993, Blanchet a,1996, BNWLA 1996). Within the brothel, police is at the top of hierarchy.

A sex-worker enters the profession under a 'bariwali', who pays for her 'entrance' to the person (can be man or woman) who brings her to the brothel. This new entrant is commonly known as 'chukri': a girl or woman who has been sold to a bariwali or sardarni, is in her control and thus effectively bonded to her. Her earning for the next few years will go to the bariwali who pays for the upkeep of the woman, providing room, food, clothes etc. The chukri can 'buy' her independence when she has worked long enough to pay off the bariwali's investment in her. This independence will be bought through a negotiation done in a local 'shalish' or meeting. Often other bariwalis

help a *chukri* to buy her freedom, and eventually she becomes a 'bharatia' or tenant sex-worker working independently but paying a rent to the *bariwali*. Once a girl becomes a 'bharatia' and has gained her independence, she may seek a regular client who will act as her lover. This makes her a 'kept-woman'. The role and importance of a regular client or a lover is an 'Save the children, 2001, the study does not specify the rest of the population, but it can be understood that the rest of the population comprised of children, shopkeepers, people indirectly related to the brothel, partners etc. important aspect in the understanding of 'power' in brothel household. After operating independently for a few years, the *bharatia* can become a 'bariwali', if she has enough savings to start her own sex-trade (Blanchet, 1996, Save the children 2001).

Within the brothel's internal power structure, controls are exercised by male actors in the sex industry, including pimps, musclemen, landowners etc. based on economic and physical power. Internal structural controls are exercised by female actors in the industry, particularly *bariwalis'* control of *chukris'* work and earnings through a form of bonded labor and their relationship of tenant/landlady with the *bharatias*. These power relations between women are based partly on age and partly on economic relations. Whereas, external structural controls by agents of the state, including police, local government, politicians, the courts etc. are 'exercised through extortion and physical violence. On a more broader scale, there is cultural control in the form of social stigma from outside world which exercises power over sex-workers' lives within brothel, but also determines the non-welcoming life beyond the brothel boundaries.

Having shown the vulnerability of women who enter sex-work in Bangladesh in general, and Daulatdia in particular, and the relations of power under which they operate, in the next chapter I will attempt to show how women from the brothel find the power to survive and resist their oppression within the framework of the household.

CHAPTER 4: VOICES FROM THE BROTHEL

The relationships and their power dynamics determine the nature of the various households. It should be mentioned that the information given in

the chapter are gathered from interviews and observations.

In Bangladesh a *house* does not necessarily mean an independent unit with basic facilities, rather it can mean only rooms for living with common facilities like sanitation and courtyard, and at times cooking arrangements. This can be termed 'joint family', but in the brothel context, the inhabitants are not related to each other, and their relationship is primarily economic. 'House' has different meanings for sex-workers depending on their status. When a *bariwali* mentions 'her house', she means the unit where she and her family lives, and the units or rooms which are part of her extended house that are rented out to *bharatia* or *chukris*. The household facilities like sanitation and water supply remain in her ownership and control. For a *chukri* 'house' would mean the household of her *bariwali* because she lives directly under *bariwali's* control, eats with her and all the expenses are provided by the *bariwali*.

When a *bharatia* mentions 'her house', it means the room or the unit of the *bariwali's* extended house that she has rented. Even though she has to share sanitation and water supply (at a price), she would consider it as her own space over which she has some degree of control.

The difference in the size of each one's house determines who uses which Bengali synonym for the word 'house': *bari*, implying a more spacious establishment with a sense of power and attachment, or *ghor*, which literally means room, and can also be used as home, but lacks the structural completeness of a 'bari'. So, the house owner is known as 'bari-wali', and the tenants are 'bharatia' or tenants. But this does not deny any of them the right to use the concept of 'household' as both are independent within the same compound.

A *bariwali* owns a long-shaped tin-shaded establishment, which she further divides into smaller units. The standard size of a room would be 5 feet X 7 feet, but there can be bigger rooms as well. Interestingly enough, windows are features that can be seen in the units where *bariwalis* live, but it is very rare to find them in a sex-worker's room. One wonders why? The physical logic behind it is that most of the tenants stay busy with clients and the rooms are too close to each other for any kind of privacy. My own explanation however, is a social one, in that privacy might not

be a major issue in brothel culture, because in many brothels sex workers literally carry out their business on the same bed with only a scarf or saree as a partition (BNWLA, 1997:29). My interpretation is that *windows express the completeness of a house, which has the connotations of family, respectability and stability attached to it*. Most bariwalis do not do commercial sex-work once they have a steady partner, children and enough income coming from their business. Such a person steps into the realm of what can be termed a ‘regular household’, which requires a more ‘normal’ set up. There is a marked progress in her life- both financially and emotionally. On the other hand, the bharatias are yet to cross the intermediate phase of paying all their loans, perhaps to get into a relatively long term relationship and to earn enough money to start their own businesses. Owning one’s own house in the brothel marks progress in the ‘class’ structure of brothel culture.

Having set out the general context of brothel operation, it is time to take a look into the lives of sex-workers that were interviewed and observed for this research purpose. Total number of respondents was a 26, and 2 bharatia respondent left the interview sessions half way for reasons that they did not specify. For the convenience of discussion, I have divided the questions from interview schedule under broader headings like, personal details, work and livelihood, household relations, and view of sex-work.

SECTION 1: Personal Details *Table 1: Age of respondents* Note: ages are based on guesses on part of sex-workers.

Age	Professional status				Total
	Chukri	Bharatia	Bariwali	Ex worker	
12-19	3	3			6
20-29		10			10
30-39		1	3		4
40-49			4	1	5
50 +				1	1
Total	3	14	7	2	26

The table indicates that sex-workers can reach the bharatia status by the age of 18-19, if they start their career early.

The Bharatia stage is the most prolonged one, and not too many can make it to the bariwali status,

because otherwise the brothel would be full of bariwalis. Out of the 7 bariwalis shown in the table above, only 2 are bariwalis with commendable power and high economic status. The table also reveals that the profession is very short-spanned, on average ending at the mid 30s.

Table 2: Education

Education level	Professional status				Total
	Chukri	Bharatia	Bariwali	Ex worker	
Illiterate	2	8	5	2	15
Basic literacy	1	4			5
Primary education +	1	2	2		5
Total	3	14	7	2	26

Most of the respondents were illiterate. But one bharatia, aged 14 went to a local NGO run school for brothel children, and another bharatia (22) acquired basic literacy by attending a local adult education program. One bharatia aged 25 studied (she came into this profession at 20, a comparatively late age) till high school, but refuses to admit that in public in fear of being ridiculed as an ‘educated whore’. The bariwali who attended high school was the most successful and had commendable power and high economic status amongst all respondents.

SECTION 2. Household Organization and Motherhood

Table 3: Marital Status

Marital status	Professional status				Total
	Chukri	Bharatia	Bariwali	Ex worker	
Single (pre-brothel)					0
Married (pre-brothel)			1		1
Divorced (pre-brothel)		1			1
Single in brothel	3	6	1	2	12
Bandha lok (in brothel)		4			4
Long term partner (in brothel)			1		1
No response		1			1

Here the term ‘married’ implies marriage before entering this profession. ‘Bandha lok’ means a regular client/lover who maintains the sex-worker as his ‘kept’. On the other hand ‘long term’ relationship with a man is considered the same as marriage, and in this relationship the lover maintains a more regular household relationship with the sex-worker. Often ‘bandha lok’ becomes a ‘long term lover’ with time. The two categories of ‘bandha lok’ and ‘long term lover’ is blurred at times for the respondents as many used both the terms for the same man in their lives.

Children and children at school

It was observed that most bariwalis have children, and there is an interest on part of women to adopt even though one might have her biological ones. Out of the three bharatias who send their children to school, 2 have their daughter living at the ‘Safe Home’². One woman has her son staying with her ‘pre-brothel’ husband and in-laws back in her native village. Out of 12 women without children, only the bariwali is 40 years old, but the rest of the women fall into 12-25 age category. This might mean that these women are not considering having children as they are in the prime of career: Whereas women with children are from the age ‘group of 25-55, and many have both biological and adopted children.

Table 4: Number of people in House

Out of the 11 respondents who live by themselves, 2 (both bharatias) had lovers who lived with them from time to time, but not on a regular basis. One respondent did not consider her brothel abode as a ‘household’ as she had a ‘proper’ household back in the village with husband and children. Bariwalis had lovers/husbands staying with them on a more regular basis than those of the bharatias. But both groups claimed their relationships were like those of couples, even though partners might be away for short periods of time.

² Safe home: residence for brothel girl children, run by Save the Children (Australia).

Exploring the Household Compositions of Female Sex-workers The last two categories are overlapping as one respondent (chukri) lived with her mother who also happened to be her bariwali from the professional side. The other two chukris had their own rooms, but they eat at the bariwalis’ kitchen.

Household members	Professional status				
	Chukri	Bharatia	Bariwali	Ex worker	
Respondent herself		8	1	2	11
Respondent + lover/husband/partner		4	3		7
Respondent and child(ren)		1	1		2
Respondent + lover/husband/partner		4	3		7
Respondent partner, and children		1	2		3
Respondent and mother	1				1
Respondent and bariwali	2				2

The pattern suggested by this table is that most of the bariwalis had established their own family households, with partner, children or both, while most of the bharatias had not and were living alone. But the interviews indicate that many of these single bharatias plan to establish households similar to those of bariwalis. For example: Shiuli (bharatia, 25) said,

‘It takes time to ‘tie’ a man, to have a ‘bandha lok’. You have to check out who stays with you for a longer time, because some might just leave you after a couple of months. so you got to be careful about the man you choose, because ultimately you would like to make him your long term lover, to have a nice ‘shongsar’ or household, right?’

Table 5: Role of Partner

Role of partner	Professional status				
	Chukri	Bharatia	Bariwali	Ex worker	
Financial contribution		3	3		6
Emotional <u>support</u>		5	4		9
Other roles		6	4		10

³ Financial contribution, except for two cases (both bharatias), means occasional contribution,

especially in times of emergency. Emotional support, according to respondents meant ‘love’, and ‘being there for the woman’, to ‘take the role of a man in a relationship’- a category that was most important for respondents. ‘Other roles’ implied helping in investment, repairing houses, giving the children a ‘father’s name, or helping in times of need.

The questions asked regarding the ‘role of partner’ were: 1)what role does your partner (husband/long term lover/bandha lok) play in the household ? 2) what role does your partner play in the maintenance and finance of your household? The table above sums up the responses for both the questions, and therefore, many numbers overlap three categories.

The main pattern in this table is that only 3 out of 14 bharatias’ partners and only 3 out of 7 bariwalis’ partners make a financial contribution, and that is also occasionally or in emergency.

Table 6: *Decisions regarding children*

Regarding children’s future	Professional status				
	Chukri	Bharatia	Bariwali	Ex worker	
Respondent herself:	N/A	3	5	2	10
Parents-in-laws		1			1
Partner/lover:		0	0	0	0

husband-wife. Motherhood provides normality and respectability, and it is understood that a child makes it easier to hide the dishonorable past

Whatever might be the economic aspect of the motherhood concept; sex-workers’ love for their children can never be doubted. The nature of the mother’s profession does not allow her to spend a lot of time with the child, but there is always an attempt to compensate for that loss by showering them with all possible material blessings: good food, best possible dresses, fancy toys, pocket money and many more. Mothers try to keep children under the supervision of neighbors, Bariwalis, aunts or maids. Some keep babies with older women living near the brothel and pay for

day care. Of course, one does not expect ‘day care’ to be something extraordinary, but nevertheless, the interesting thing out here is that women find ways of dealing with their child care problems within their own capacities. The main problem starts when children grow up and start moving on their own. It is during this period of time they gradually get involved with the brothel’s sex culture which eventually shapes their predictable future, and thus the life comes to a full circle within brothel society.

The dominant view in brothel culture is that a child is brought up with the mother’s identity. Moreover, it appeared as if women didn’t want to and didn’t have to share children’s responsibility with men. Only one bharatia, whose son lived in the native village with her in-laws, left major decisions to them in her absence.

Like mainstream motherhood, here also the concept of parenting has a practical calculative side to it as well. There is always some sense of expectation and responsibilities that constitutes the parent-child relationship. Motherhood is a complex issue for sexworkers. Bringing up a child is costly for sex workers and entails many more problems and difficulties than for married women of the society. They claim and defend their right to motherhood. Jorina (bharatia, 28) who was 7 months pregnant at the time of interview explained her urge to become a mother,

‘I got pregnant twice before this, but both the times I chose to abort because none of the pregnancies was with a person I would have liked to be my child’s father, and I didn’t want my children to be known as ‘bastards’. Now I am pregnant with my bandha lok who is ready to give his name to my child. I knew that pregnancy would cause financial loss, but I still wanted to be a mother.’

A child, son or daughter may allow a sex-worker to reintegrate into respectable society upon retirement should she wish to do so. This is also possible with a husband, but most women believe that the mother-child link is much more enduring and stable one than that of a

SECTION 3: Economic Independence

This section looks into the income, expenditure, and savings of the respondents.

Table 7: Monthly Income

It is interesting to observe that out of 7 bariwalis only 2 had more than 50,000/-per month income. The reasons for most of the bariwalis belonging to the low income belt are various, like older age, faulty business strategy etc. On the other hand, there are two bharatias who earn around 15,000/- to 20,000/-, they are mainly in their early 20s, and plan to be bariwalis in a few years time.

Monthly income in TK.	Professional status				
	Chukri	Bharatia	Bari-wali	Ex worker	
2000 and less		1	1	2	4
3000-6000		8	2		10
7000-10,000	3	2	1		6
11,000-20,000		2	1		3
20,000-30,000	0	0	0		0
50,000 and above			2		2
No response	0	1	0	0	1

In 2003, the annual income of a Bangladeshi was \$444,³ i.e. TK. 26, 640/-, i.e. TK.2220/- per month. Women's average income is lower than that in Bangladesh, so we can take TK.1700/- as a figure for comparison. If that is the case, then all but four of the respondents are earning more than the average monthly income of TK. 1700/-. Despite , or because of, being young, chukris are earning³ GDP \$444 for 2003-2004, \$1= tk 60 approximately Exploring the Household Compositions of Female Sex-workers

TK. 7000-10,000/- per month, which is even more than most bharatias who are earning TK.3000-6,000/-. Therefore, it can be said that the success of one's career or business entirely depends on one's position in the brothel hierarchy.

Table 8: Monthly Expenditure

Monthly expenditure in TK.	Professional status				Total
	Chukri	Bharatia	Bari-wali	Ex-worker	
Food : 500/- less: 1,5001 3,000/-				2	2
	3	12	7		22

Accommo-					
Nothing - 300/-	3		7	2	12
900/- 1s00/		12			
Clothing, cosmetics & entertainment:				2	2
Nothing: 500/-to 15001	3	12	7		22
Husband/partner/lover:					
Nothing: 1,000/- to s,000/-	3	9	2	2	16
Extended family	-	3	-	-	3
Extortion fee: did not specify amount	3	12	7	-	22
No response	0	2	0	0	2

Accommodation cost differs from status to status: chukris do not pay any rent as they give all their earnings to the bariwali or mother who is a bariwali; tenants pay according to the size of their rooms, while bariwalis pay a monthly fixed amount to the landlord.

Food is a major expense for sex-workers, and so is clothing/cosmetics, and entertainment. A big amount of money is spent on cigarettes, alcohol and drugs. Most sex workers stated that they preferred to buy meals from shops and vendor, and the diet included rich food like red meat, big fish, chicken, egg, milk, butter, vegetables and any other delicacies that one can fancy. The tendency to have such a rich diet stems from the typical Bengali belief that it makes one healthier. And also what you eat reflects on purse-power. So, it is a pleasure to be able to afford good food, especially for women who have experienced dire poverty in the past. For women who were born here, good food has always been their way of life.

Cosmetics and clothing come next in the expenditure list. Consumerism is the culture of this brothel. The brothel is an ideal market. Good cosmetics and beautiful clothes are needed for the profession, but it is also an entertainment for these women. A restricted life within the boundaries of the brothel makes everything that comes from

outside most alluring. For example, Lipi, a 15 year old bharatia commented:

'I buy everything I need, I buy everything new I see. I spend like TX SO to 80 everyday on food. I can't live without eating well. If I don't have money, I borrow or withdraw from my savings, but I must eat well.'

Pinky, a 23 year old bharatia expressed the same view, *'I spend around TX 1000/ 1,500 or even more every month on clothing. I buy anything that catches my eyes. I have to spend, especially whenever I have some savings!'*

The compulsion to buy does not only come from its entertainment value, but also from peer pressure and competitiveness among the sex workers to demonstrate one's success in business. The habit of spending money on personal grooming does not stop even when one cannot afford it anymore.

Another major expense is extortion fees paid to the police, local musclemen etc, but no one understandably wanted to mention any specific amount. Expenses for children is another area that the women could not specify because it varies depending on the age of the children. There is very little education cost as most go to the NGO run schools.

Savings:

Most respondents saved on a daily basis with the local NGO saving scheme, in bank accounts, while some had investment in the form of gold, lands and/or local business. The ex-sex-workers didn't earn enough to have savings. The chukris did not receive enough pocket money for savings. The purpose of saving varied: for the rainy season when business was lean; old age; for major expenditure like luxury items (furniture, gold ornaments); for children, especially for sons who would need capital to establish themselves in life unlike their sisters who could take up sex-work; for lovers/partners with whom some planned to eventually get married and live outside; and for some women it was to achieve the ultimate career goal, that is, to be a bariwali.

Table 9: Housework

The categories are overlapping to some extent because respondents like bariwalis preferred to do

personal household work like cooking while supervising the paid domestic helps. Children helped only occasionally in works like going to the shops, or to fetch water.

Household members	Professional status				L7
	Chu-kri	Bha-ratia	Bari-wali	Ex worker	
Respondent herself		3	2	2	
By paid domestic help (maid servant)	3	9	5		17
Helped by Children		2			2
	3	14	7	2	26

Out of 7 respondents who claimed to do major household work, 3 were bharatias belonging to lower income group, while the 2 ex-sex-workers were too poor to afford any paid help. But the majority of sex-workers (17 out of 26) had their own servants to do household work. Maid servant is not wide spread in Bangladesh, or for that matter in South Asia (Blanchet, 1996, Sharma, 1986), and is primarily a middle class phenomenon which can be translated to class power. The same pattern can be observed in the brothel as class hierarchy is a dominant feature here.

For sex-workers, of course it is a necessity to have paid help because the nature of their profession does not allow them a continuous period of time to carry out all household works. Their private space is frequently invaded by public, leaving very little scope to maintain what otherwise would be called as a 'normal household'. But there is more to this than the lack of time. From the interviews it was evident that sex workers preferred not to do any housework if they could afford it. For example, Shiuly (bharatia, 20), *'Housework depends on mood and the flow of cash. Everyone loves to get their work done by maids. If there is money to spend, then no one will even lift a glass of water by themselves.'*

Responses from women also revealed that the reluctance to perform housework is seen more in younger sexworkers, but as one reaches the downhill of the professional life, attitudes start changing with reality. The higher income of

younger sex-workers allows them to spend money on luxury like hiring servants and getting every bit of work done. There is perhaps a sense of arrogance that comes with youth and money. But as they approach, say the 30s, priorities and attitudes change gradually. By that age, most women have steady partners, children, and savings. Some would manage to become bariwalis. So there is a tendency to settle down, to run a more family oriented household where childcare and house keeping occupies their free time. Even though it doesn't stop women from getting paid help, nevertheless, she would now like to participating in the housework as well as supervising it.

The class difference determines the contents of each household, and it influences the attitudes of the occupant towards her household activities. In a standard room, there was a bed, mostly with double mattresses, pillow and side pillows. The essential pieces of furniture in the brothel were show case or 'almeera', and a trunk. Now, what do these pieces of furniture state? They are simply class statements, display of 'purse-power', each featuring a step forward to solvency. Double mattresses and side pillows are luxuries that a major part of Bangladeshi population cannot even think of, and most of these women had the similar economic background. Show cases and cabinet-two important features of a Bengali middle class households. Show case is a constant feature to Bangladeshi houses, starting from lowermiddle class to the rich. The contents and their values speak for the families or owner's taste, class and culture. On the other hand tin-trunks speaks of the rural cultural background of the owners, which in fact, is an essential asset for a rural woman.

Approximately 40% rooms and houses had television, (mostly black & white sets), and cassette players. Size and quality of the gadgets varied according to the status of the sex-worker.

It was observed that every household was tidy with clean linen. Even though the roofs were made of tin, most rooms had a decorative false ceiling to cover it, the same went with walls that were covered with beautiful printed papers, and there were always curtains on the doors. This might give the impression that women here take a lot of interest in house keeping. But it was found that not all brothel women considered 'womanly household duties' as part of their lives and how little women

actually contributed to the physical work of their households. Almost every sex-worker had domestic help. Every little work got done by paid help- sweeping, moing, cooking, washing, house maintenance etc. for a s'tpndard rate applicable to brothel only.

Taking all these into consideration, one cannot fail to notice that the households, at least by their assets or contents demonstrate a unique class representation of its own that cross over the boundaries of the different economic classes seen in mainstream society.

Table 10: Financial Decision Making

All bariwalis had full control over their finances, few of them responded that even though they took advises from their partners at times, but it was the women's money, men could not object to the decisions made by women. One bariwali mentioned that she also made decisions for her partner and his finances.

Exploring the Household Compositions of Female Sex-workers

Areas	Professional status				
	Chu-kri	Bha-ratia	Bari-wali	Ex-wor-ker	
Major investment (house/land/business):					
Respondent herself:		12	7	2	21
By mother/bariwali:	1				1
Partner/lover:	0	0	0	0	0
Major expenditure (buying gold, furniture, children's expense):					
Respondent herself:		12	7	2	21
By mother/bariwali:	2				2
Partner/lover:	1				1
Savings (how much/where/why):					
Respondent herself:		12	7	2	21
By mother/bariwali:	1				1
Partner/lover:	0	0	0	0	0

Most bharatias preferred not to involve their partners in matters of finance as there is a clear lack of trust on men. Bharatias would rather seek for advise from either bariwalis or female friends.

In the case of chukris, one preferred to leave everything to her bariwali mother, the other two mentioned the fact that being chukris did not leave them with enough money to invest, or save.

SECTION 4: Discussion

In this section, I will look at the sex-worker's position, in which they are controlled by external forces of all kinds, but also exercise power within their own private space; and at the contradictions in the way they do this.

I will argue that one of the ways of exercising power and agency is by challenging the norms of so-called morality and respectability in the outside world; and another way is to construct norms of respectability within the brothel, some of which are specific to the brothel and others of which mirror the norms in mainstream society. Many respondent questioned the standard of life and respectability she might get from a 'mainstream' life in opposition to that of the brothel one. For example,

'Living outside will mean near starvation. It is much better here- I have my own business, which I have established through years of hard work I earn well, I spend as much as I want to, don't need to answer to anyone for anything, I don't even depend on a man! I can make my lover dance around my little finger! This is power. I have my lover, my family, children everything here. So, why would I want to live outside? It is better to stay here, at least I am the Queen of my life'. Ranu, (40, bariwali)

It was not as if they did not appreciate or longed for a life, which had ideas like dignity and honor attached to it, but most preferred living in brothel, a place where they have at least some control and power over life that offered relative freedom, and financial security. Their argument is that, the society cannot and will not change. If society cannot provide security, food, comfort and honor for a woman, than its better not to go out and live there. At least within the brothel they have acceptance as human beings, they have set up homes with people they love, have children, and many can dream of bringing up their children in comfort.

Hasna Banu (35, bariwali) echoed this argument, *'Look at me! I am a woman, even then I have been*

able to maintain my big household (with three children, partner), and my business. It is not easy for a woman to do so , but how did I do it? It's because I live here and I earn very well. This place has given me money and freedom. And that is important in life.'

While sex-workers might defy some 'social norms' and challenge aspects of mainstream life, but the brothel subculture often mirror the norms of larger society. The prime examples of such conformation are personal identities constructed through a heterosexual partnership and motherhood.

A romantic heterosexual relationship, for many sex workers is the most important thing in life, and once she falls in love, as one respondent commented, *'... you go blind. You stop seeing reasons, and are ready to sacrifice everything for that lover. The society makes you feel that you are not worth much. There is a lot of pressure on women to have relationships'.*

The Bengali culture gives motherhood the utmost importance in a woman's life. Brothel women are no different from their mainstream counterparts. The children might not get any social recognition, but nevertheless, pregnancy is welcomed here. Sex-workers very often plan their pregnancies-with whom, and at what time of the year to have babies. But motherhood doesn't come cheap for sex workers- pregnancy means less or no work for a long period of time. It means childcare and additional expense is often met with extra work as maids at other people's houses, and drying-up savings of years.

The narratives of my respondents reveal the resistance women engage in, in order to maintain stable self-identities whilst labeled and treated as 'other', as marginal and criminal through 'whore stigma' (Pheterson in O'Neill, 1996). But it is important to understand that many sex-workers reject the convention that they have no power at all, and rather prefer to count in forms of power (such as personal influence in household matters, finance, motherhood etc) that are excluded in more formal models of power. Therefore, the motif of sex-workers as 'victims' and submissive to the male dominated social system expresses only a part of the story. While these women Shuchi Karim may have to bow to the dominant culture, they also pursue strategies of resistance.

'Power' is constructed and operated through relationships at various levels. Women sex-workers negotiate the relationship between psychic processes and social processes, between self-and the wider social world (Phoenix, 1999). It seems that women in the brothel negotiates their power, at least within their private space by controlling her personal relationships, the lives of her children and other household issues where she contributes financially. Responses from the sex-workers reveal that the woman makes major family and personal decisions. Sometimes she might consult with her longterm partner, but the final power to decide on the matter lies with her. The household runs with her money, though partners rarely contribute financially, but otherwise, household expenses are the sex-worker's responsibility and there are cases where she not only bears the expense of her own household, but also her partner's mainstream household.

There is no doubt that sex-workers face extreme oppression from external forces like society, state, police, pimps and every agent related to the sex-trade. But the sex-workers' position in this 'power' game is contradictory. At one level they are almost fully dominated, and seem to be 'powerless', but sex-workers do exercise power within their private space where they are much in control of household organization, motherhood, and economic independence, and they demonstrate agency and resistance through the struggle for social mobility in the household and the career as well as the struggle for respectability.

Therefore, one is almost tempted to conclude that there is autonomy and reciprocity on the part of these women. Such conclusion would be partially false, because there is another contradiction in this 'power' concept that stems from the 'ways' they exercise it. One of the ways of exercising power and agency is by challenging the norms of so-called morality and respectability in the outside world, for example, self-indulgence in luxury, children born out of wedlock, challenging stereotyping motherhood, not conforming to the 'selfless -sacrificing' image of women, living off daughter's earning as a sexworker etc. Such defiance is contrasted by the reestablishment of another set of norms within the brothel, some of which are specific to the brothel. For example, the professional hierarchy based on economic power, the pressure for high expenditure to establish one's economic status, prestige that comes from being a

'kept' of a man with money and power; while others mirror the norms used in mainstream society: for example, motherhood, to have a male partner, to have a child from a rather stable relationship etc. Therefore, there is a paradox in this concept of 'power' within the brothel households.

CONCLUSION

The popular images and stereotyping of sex-workers are concentrated largely on the lost and hopeless 'victims' of abusers and manipulators, but women who are nevertheless amoral, conspicuously vulgar and indiscriminate. There is also a commonplace assumption that women sex-workers' lifestyles are determined or decisively marked by their method of earning a livelihood. While this may be partially true for some women, the fact is that, many of them spend much of their time preoccupied with the day-to-day business of living and supporting and maintaining a household. This aspect of their lives and 'projects' for future remain largely un-investigated and unreported (Scambler, 1997:117).

I started the study with a research question that 'How can sex-workers' power and powerlessness be understood in a Bangladeshi context?' My hypothesis was that although sex-workers are 'victims' of patriarchy, poverty, feudalistic and capitalistic social relations, religion, culture and the state; nevertheless, within the framework of the brothel they exercise power and agency at the level of the household. I have demonstrated that they exercise agency and resistance in terms of economic independence, household organization, motherhood, social mobility and the struggle for respectability. At the same time, the study has also identified some of the contradictions or paradoxes of this theme of 'power'. I agree that 'powerlessness' at times out-weighs the 'power' of sex-workers, but I refuse to characterize them as passive victims of circumstances that are beyond their immediate control. I do not doubt, even for a second, that it is a unequal trade between two equal people. It is, as Pateman said, '...the public recognition of men as sexual masters, it puts submission on sale as a commodity in the market' (Pateman in Scambler, & Scambler, 1997:184). Placing sex-work in Bangladeshi context, and learning from my responde4s, it appears to me that for ideological reasons it is not possible for most Bangladeshi women to freely choose sex-work as a

profession if there are alternative choices placed in front of her. But once a woman enters the sex-trade, mostly as a 'victim' of patriarchal sexuality, it gradually becomes difficult for her to see life in a 'black and white' way, as on one hand she finds it difficult to integrate with mainstream society, on the other hand she gets used to the power and freedom that money brings. This is applicable to women, who enter sex-trade from the 'mainstream', but for women born in brothel, the profession is their way of life, hence, it is a legitimate choice of profession.

Therefore, it is not easy to universalize either of the two feminist approaches of sex-work in the context of Bangladesh because both theories overlap each other at different stages of a sex-worker's life in the brothel. 'Victimhood' can be resisted and turned into a relatively 'powerful' position, though it is difficult to tear down the broader patriarchal structure. For most of the respondents, entry to sex-trade was as 'prostitutes', an identity which they did not choose out of free will, but it gradually took the form of 'labor', the identity of 'sex-worker' as the profession brought elements of self-respect, relative acceptability, and selfworth despite the profession's demeaning image and rejection from mainstream society.

Daulatdia sex-workers are not as weak as they used to be, or as they seem to us. With time they have managed to break many barriers that society had put in front of them, like negotiating with the Government to have their rights to wear shoes outside, about their rights to have a decent civil burial. They protest when police torture them beyond tolerance, or when zealous people come to evict them. If they were not strong women with some power in them, they would have been invisible for us. But we tend to see their life from the 'mainstream society's looking glass which tells us that a woman is happiest when she has a home, a husband, children- a perfect scene to fit in patriarchy many people still believe that a woman is helpless, and incomplete without a provider-protector man. We are too conditioned to think from an objective standpoint and, that prevents us from interpreting 'power' from the sex-worker's point of view.

This study is done on a very small scale, and I do understand the risk of generalizing on the basis of a research with many limitations. But, I do stand by my argument. I believe that there is more to

work on, more to learn about sex-workers, not because they pose as 'other', but because they are ordinary women with extraordinary power to survive extreme oppression. Whether we call them sex-worker, prostitute, *beshya*, 'fallen angels' (as Frederick and Kelly chose to call them in 'Fallen Angel, 2000), the diversions don't eliminate the truth that they are 'humans'. There is helplessness, hunger for affection, unspoken fear of reaching mid-30s when flow of clients end, and uncertainty begins. But there is also strength, confidence, dignity, power and struggle for self-respect, which none of us can ever imagine. Their understanding of our 'clean' world shows how little our insight and compassion is for 'their' world and its reality. Sex-workers are real people, and if any of us were born into a different family, into poverty, into misfortune, then any of us could be a profile of this research.

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4 *beshya* : prostitute
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