




2019

Sex Work and Empowerment: Migrant Women Looking for Love

Breanna A. Harkins

Georgia College and State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://kb.gcsu.edu/thecorinthian>

 Part of the [Feminist Philosophy Commons](#), [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Commons](#), [Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#), [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Harkins, Breanna A. (2019) "Sex Work and Empowerment: Migrant Women Looking for Love," *The Corinthian*: Vol. 19 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://kb.gcsu.edu/thecorinthian/vol19/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Research at Knowledge Box. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Corinthian by an authorized editor of Knowledge Box.

Sex Work and Empowerment: Migrant Women Looking for Love

Breanna A. Harkins

Dr. Sunita Manian & Dr. Juli Gittinger

Faculty Mentors

Introduction

Sexual labor for women is not only empowering, but has the potential to give women many opportunities that might not normally be present for them. In many countries, women do not have the same educational and/or workplace opportunities and rights that men hold. Because of this gap in equality, women are generally overlooked for jobs and are left with little autonomy over their livelihood. Many women are left with only marriage, motherhood, or domestic labor (such as housekeeping or childcare) as the only socially acceptable options (Zhang, 2015). While these positions are no less valuable than work that is remunerated, it neglects to recognize diversity in the female potential and almost belittles the female existence down to just biological capabilities. The research compiled from various scholars such as: Sascha Finger, Sunita Manian, Sunny Sinha, and Xiaohu Zhang helps to breakdown the demographics of female sex workers and offers greater explanations and insight into the female experience and why women turn to sexual labor. The greatest benefit found by recognizing sexual labor as a legitimate form of work for women is that we open many more potentials for women to have autonomy over their lives, and we create a market that is regulated and beneficial for all parties involved. We also allow women the chance to reclaim their place within society and give women the right to provide for themselves and their families independently from a spouse or partner.

Since many of the women interviewed (with exceptions) are widows and/or single mothers, turning to sex work is a way to create their own wages and hours of operation, which is a right that most women even in the traditional workplace do not often experience. Within the research gathered, we see racially, culturally, ethnically, socially diverse females who, regardless of their experience or background, have all ended up in the field of sexual labor.

Sex work, at various points in history and throughout various parts of the world, has often been a coveted position for women in a number of societies. It was an honor to be affiliated with sex or to be viewed as an element of sexual pleasure, because you were associated with being prosperous, passionate, nurturing, and most prominently, fertile. These virtues have been held in high regard in many societies because women, their bodies, and their abilities held a greater value within society. Throughout the course of pre-modern history, one could argue that women had more control and autonomy over their bodies and abilities in parts of the world. While the positions that women with such virtues could achieve might seem oppressive or coercive, women have consistently utilized the gift of their body for self-advancement, much like courtesans to rulers and leaders.

Feminist Perspectives for Sex Work

Many global feminists and women's activists want to understand why we have such an extreme bifurcation when it comes to women's rights in the workplace, and more specifically, women as sex laborers. Within feminist discourse, there are two main perspectives on females engaging in sex work: dominance feminism and liberal feminism. Dominance feminism emerges from an understanding and argument that anything that is

sexual, objectifying, and/or explicit towards women is immediately deemed as “rape.” The main proponent of this argument is Kathleen Barry, author of “The Prostitution of Sexuality.” Within this school of feminism, any aspect of a woman’s sexuality, whether consensual or not, is considered “rape” and argues that all social/political advances made by women are revoked when women participate, even consensually, in sexual content. However, since rape can be defined as the non-consensual, coerced and/or forced sexual acts perpetrated from one party onto another, the idea that when a woman consensual participates in a sexual act, by definition, cannot be considered rape; opposing the rape paradigm brought about in many of dominance feminism’s arguments and works. In other words, dominance feminism argues that where there is the sexuality of a woman, there is naturally an understood coerciveness derived from a male-dominated system that leads to the social oppression of women, and until there is no more sexual content and/or actions involving women in their entirety, we will never be a society of equals. This argument fails to recognize the importance and relevance of consent, as well as the importance and relevance of individual agency and choice. So, essentially, the argument for dominance feminism is that the most wholesome and fair way to reach equality amongst the sexes is to do so in a way that does not allow women to exploit themselves or be manipulated by the sexuality derived from the patriarchy. This form of feminism also argues that there is little to no individuality amongst women, that what happens to one woman happens to all. When one woman is involved in pornography, or when one woman is sexually harassed, we have all just taken a step back and are all being held back by male coercion and patriarchal standards. This lack of recognition of consent and individual freedom within sexuality is

very dangerous and can lead to political and judicial corruption, further dividing males and females and their rights within society.

Conversely, the other main perspective within female discourse on sex work is liberal feminism. This side argues that women have full and equal autonomy over their body, and through this, women have equal opportunity to make choices and to express their rights, which leads to the achievement of equality between the sexes. The one prevalent voice in this perspective is Martha Nussbaum, author of “Whether from Reason or Prejudice: Taking Money for Bodily Services,” who states that there is no difference between sexual labor and any of form of labor when one is using their abilities for work. In her argument, Nussbaum distinguishes that professions such as an athlete, a masseuse, or even a college professor does nothing differently than a sex worker when it comes to working for money, social advances, or reputation.

Why Do Women Enter Sex Work?

One of the most important questions that arises when having a conversation on women and sexuality is trying to figure out why a woman would enter into such a line of work. Since sex work is not considered a legitimate form of income or work for a woman, women associated with the industry are assumed to have some sort of social, economic, and/or mental-emotional trauma or hardship that has lead them to fall into such an occupation, rather than considering that a perfectly healthy woman would consensually turn to such a line of work. While interviewing three various sex workers in Kolkata, India, Sunny Sinha found that women in the sex industry mainly faced poverty, emotional and/or mental strains (i.e., workplace harassment, power-and-control relations in a workplace

setting, gender and racial prejudices) while working in the traditional nine-to-five-based working environments. It is not uncommon for the female children of a family to be put second to the male children of the family, leaving the bigger opportunities for education and advancement to the boys and the domestic, menial jobs for the girls. (Sinha, 231). One participant, Shristi, began to work to help support her family as a maid at the age of 8, and while she enjoyed the work and enjoyed earning money for her family, she was often approached by her male supervisors and sometimes by her female supervisors and harassed because of her age and gender. By the age of thirteen, Shristi was introduced to sexual labor and brothels by a girlfriend who offered her guidance and support. Another participant, Geetanjali attempted to hold many traditional jobs, but was always either let down by her supervisors or her co-workers. Geetanjali is well-educated and has worked as a pharmaceutical representative, a factory worker, and as a maid, but after experiencing so much workplace harassment, sexual harassment, and realizing that her working hours greatly cut into her quality time with her children, Geetanjali decided to try sexual labor, where she has now been working since 2004. The base story of such women is very common: because of societal inequalities, women are assumed to be less valuable than men and are left with little to no independent prospects or job opportunities. Women, while not always left broken and without options, are capable of choosing sexual labor instead of enduring such harassment, coercion, mistreatment, and prejudices brought about from the hierarchy in the workplace. Realizing that not every woman involved in sex work is somehow damaged, dirty, or hurt can help begin a change in the preconceptions of sex workers and help break prejudices and misunderstandings of these women and how they are choosing to live their lives.

Benefits of Sexual Labor

There are several reasons that women may voluntarily choose sex work, which have been discussed in depth by scholars in the field. The first justification is financial.

Financial

Sunita Manian has interviewed sex workers in South Asia. In her research, she discusses two cases- Ruksana and Sarala- that illustrate the financial arguments for sex work. Ruksana came from a middle-class family whose family attempted to marry her off to a well-off family, but she found love on her own and married a man of her choosing. However, Ruksana's husband soon became very controlling, physically and mentally abusing her. Eventually, her female neighbor told her she would help her leave her abuser before he could kill her. This neighbor introduced Ruksana to sex work through the channels of a brothel in a neighboring city, where Ruksana would finally live a life of luxury. Her brothel had fresh linens, hot water, and catered to men who had class and manners. This opportunity to provide for herself and live independently not only saved Ruksana from a life of dependency and abuse, but also gave her the strength to tell her abuser "no." In her own words, "after eating biryani all the time, how can you go back to eating boiled rice?" A second informant of Manian's is Sarala, a woman with two daughters who worked in a garment factory for minimal pay while dealing with extreme sexual harassment, and eventually, Sarala was led to sex work after she was repeatedly pursued for sexual favors by local men. Sarala is currently putting one of her daughters through college and another daughter through a private school that specializes in English-language.

Health Education

Following suit in the benefits of sex work, women are not only able to put themselves or their children through school and university, but are also able to take their experiences and educate their peers and fellow sex workers in HIV/AIDS prevention, safe and consensual sex, and general lessons in personal hygiene. In one example, Sinha's interview participant previously mentioned, Shristi, found herself working as an HIV/AIDS peer counselor, helping to educate other sex workers on the importance of safe and smart sexual encounters. She also facilitates programs to educate communities on women's health (period rights advocacy), sexual health, and other forms of education. In many small cities, sexual health education is usually not offered in schools or within the communities and is left for either the parents to teach or for people to teach themselves. By combining her own experiences with education, Shristi is able to give better and well-informed lessons to those she is working with. "I understand that, by working in the project, I am getting educated about things I don't know." (227).

Motherhood and being a Woman

Unfortunately, since money is the driving force in our world, financial security reflects back on being a "good" mother. Many women who attempt more traditional workplace environments cannot provide well for their children; available food on such a budget is generally less nutritious; options for grade schooling become fewer and less competitive, and the children experience less opportunity for future advancements (i.e. college and employment). Geetanjali chose her path of sexual labor around being a mother

and wanting to have better pay and hours for her family. Geetanjali is a single mother of two, and in a traditional job she found herself missing many mornings and nights from her children. But, by choosing an occupation that allows her to create her own hours and fees, Geetanjali is not only able to both make time for her children and be the ideal mother who cooks and cares, but is also able to make much more money than in a traditional workplace setting where she would be making a few U.S. dollars an hour. Manian's participant, Kamala, enrolled her children in boarding school with the money she earned as a sex worker. One of Kamala's daughter is married to a doctor, another daughter married to an engineer, and her son is in the military and married to a local woman. In any other situation that would have Kamala doing non-sexual labor as a means of income, she would not have been able to provide for her children and give them a chance to be successful in life.

Hungarian Roma women informants who participated in Sascha Finger's interviews reported having created a communal daycare system for the children of local sex workers. Many of the women who engage in sex work in Hungary have to be mobile and must cycle through the bigger cities in order to find consistent and higher paying clientele. By having this communal daycare, the women are able to cope better with having to leave their children, but are also comforted by knowing their children are in capable hands, surrounded by other mothers/sex workers who go through the same circumstances. The women have created a system where they rotate through caring for the children, so they may all have a turn traveling for work.

Sexuality and Empowerment

It is not uncommon for women who engage in sex work to be shunned or abandoned by their biological families or to be left or abandoned by their spouses. In such cases, sex workers are left to support each other and themselves, financially, mentally, physically, and emotionally. In an interview by Winnie Wing-Yan Yuen, et al., many of their participants overcame the social stigmas of their work and began creating a neutral narrative around sexual labor. Participants explained that what they did for income was no different than any other form of earning income and that both means are worthy of respect and social equality. The women participating also talked about how the respect they have for themselves acted as a motivator for them to manage their emotions, to own up to and face their problems, and to continue fighting against negative stigmas in order to provide for themselves and their loved ones. "I have learned to comfort myself and love myself. Don't be anxious on things and let go. Because there are many things in life: many difficulties, many problems. You need to learn how to face them, that is to overcome them. Only if you face them, you could survive as a person." (24(9)). Overall, all of the female participants mentioned throughout this paper demonstrate strength, resilience, prowess, and power and understand their capabilities as women, by being lovers, mothers, backbones, shoulders for tears, feet for mobility, brains and hands for fighting for understanding and equality.

Conclusion

Through these strong women, we can see many positive outcomes that come about from their time as sex workers. The women who have chosen this path are a force for good

and create a wave of change, from destigmatizing periods to fighting against the social structures of the workforce.

Works Cited

- Cavalieri, Shelley. "Between Victim and Agent: A Third-Way Feminist Account of Trafficking for Sex Work." *Indiana Law Journal*, vol. 86, no. 4, Fall 2011, pp. 1409-1458.
- Finger, Sascha. "Sex-work and Mobility as a Coping Strategy for Marginalized Hungarian Roma Women." *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies*, vol. 15, no. 1, Jan 2016, pp. 104-128.
- Lorraine van, Blerk. "Poverty, Migration, and Sex Work: Youth Transitions in Ethiopia." *Area*, no. 2, 2008, p. 245.
- Manian, Sunita. *HIV/AIDS in India: Voices in the Margins*. London, New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group., 2017. Routledge research on gender in Asia series: 20.
- Nussbaum, Martha C., author. "'Whether from Reason or Prejudice': Taking Money for Bodily Services." *The Journal of Legal Studies*, no. S2, 1998, p. 693.
- Rekart, Michael L. "Sex-work Harm Reduction." *Lancet* (London, England), vol. 366, no. 9503, 17 Dec. 2005, pp. 2123-2143.
- Sardana, Srishti, et al. "Narratives of Violence, Pathology, and Empowerment: Mental Health Needs Assessment of Home-based Female Sex Workers in Rural India." *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, vol. 72, no. 8, Aug. 2016, pp. 827-838.
- Sinha, Sunny. "Reasons for Women's Entry into Sex Work: A Case Study of Kolkata, India." *Sexuality & Culture*, vol. 19, no. 1, Mar. 2015, pp. 216-235.
- Yuen, Winnie Wing-Yan, et al. "Resilience in Work-Related Stress among Female Sex Workers in Hong Kong." *Qualitative Research*, vol. 24, no. 9, Sept. 2014, pp. 1232-1241.