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Rohini Sahni and V. Kalyan Shankar

Summary

Based on the results of the First Pan India Survey of Female Sex Workers (n=3000), this paper positions sex work within the broader spectrum of informal labour markets that women engage with in India. It puts forth an important dimension missing so far in sex work studies in India – of sex workers with prior or simultaneous labour market work experience. Informal labour markets act as important sites/junctures linking poverty with sex work. For a substantial proportion of respondents, sex work was not their first experience of paid work. In the face of poverty and an early quest for livelihoods, they were pushed into informal labour activities, characterised by low, sticky wages and imminent possibilities of abuse. Placed in this context, their later entry into sex work emerges with a strong economic rationale and agency, as a deliberate, calculated choice offering higher incomes.

Keywords: Sex work, Informal labour, Incomes, Pan India Survey, India

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Introduction

Sex work and the research gaze

This report presents the results of the first pan-India survey on female sex workers. The survey pools together a large national-level sample of females divided by geographies, languages, sites of operation, migratory patterns, incomes, cultures, to mention just a few of the variables. Although the sample is drawn at a national level, it may not be nationally representative. Rather than reducing the women to clichéd stereotypes we seek to bring to the surface their non sex-work histories, either alongside or prior to engaging with sex work. In doing so, we address some of the realities surrounding sex work in the country and demystify some of the polarised and often simplistic narratives, which paint such work in opaquely value-laden terms.

From an investigator's perspective, what differentiates this endeavour is the larger scale of its administration, a sample of 3000 women drawn from 14 states and a coordinated effort of multiple organisations both on and off the field spanning over two years. From the perspective of the women though - who have been part of this exercise and other, more localised attempts of this nature before - it would perhaps be nothing more than yet another survey of which they have been a part. As a respondent, does it matter being part of a smaller or larger survey? With similar research tools or questionnaires, they would be providing the same information in either case. The scale of the survey shouldn't matter to the respondents for it would remain beyond their realms, falling into that of the researchers. To frame this issue in a more philosophical manner, on the part of the women, they have already parted with the truth at their own discrete individual level. It is now for the researchers to compile and project aggregate, more continuous versions of it. The onus on research therefore, even as it broadens its scope with the aid of larger scales, would be to translate the 'real' truths it has encountered at the grassroots into the 'reported' truths with as little a loss of information as possible. While this may seem an obvious objective for any survey, significantly, it has not always materialised that way in the context of women in prostitution.

What do we seek to report here that is not already known about the women or they themselves are not intuitively aware of? Or as one of the women in the survey put it more succinctly in a question on her work identity - 'You *know* then why do you still ask'. The rhetoric in the statement is not to be missed. More fundamentally, it gives a sense of an intermingling somewhere of the researcher's version of reality with that of the women involved. Is there a presumptive callousness on the part of researchers in approaching the women with a pre-formed set of answers, even while enquiring with an oft-repeated set of questions? What does that mean in terms of objectivity of assessment? As can be comprehended from existing literature, there exists a certain schism of opinions on prostitution ranging between sex trafficking and sex as work. The debates on trafficking have their own polarities too, particularly in migration contexts, leading to a chain of interpretations where all trafficking is in women and all women get trafficked for sex work.

Much has been written about this elsewhere, in terms of opinions as well as reviews (see Sutherland 2004), at times even with an imploration for more informed opinions built on empirical work. To cite from George, Vindhya and Ray (2010: 64), both sex trafficking and sex work are 'emotive issues about which much has been written with passion than objectivity because they touch the core of *our beliefs* about morality, justice, gender and human rights' (italics ours). Or as stated in Shah (2006: 270), 'the discourse on trafficking has become so polarized and politicized, it has become difficult to discern accurate

information about the incidence of trafficking in various regions'. Or as Bernstein (1999: 91) states aptly (though again in the context of American feminist theory debating over sexuality)

> …among feminists, prostitution has been abundantly theorized, yet insufficiently studied. Although a growing number of first-person accounts have been articulated by sex workers and prostitutes' rights activists, it is not entirely clear how representative their voices are, or if other prostitutes, particularly those in the low end of the industry, share their perspective or how they envision their work at all.

This working paper, even while concentrating on providing the empirical results emerging from the grassroots on a national scale, has objectivity of assessment as one of its primary underlying aims.

Further to the conflations mentioned above, it can be comprehended that the mode of entry has come to be the defining, dominant variable in determining the identities of women in prostitution, as either voluntary or involuntary, as forced or of free will. This runs the risk of reducing complex lives into simpler binaries, even as there are multiple identities getting sidelined and undermined in the process – family and social-economic backgrounds, caste and religious segregations, work identities other than in prostitution including child labour, sexual identities, marital statuses, abuse histories etc. The understanding of women as free or forced into sex work cannot remain isolated from these multiple layers of experiences that have gone into their making and are shaping the understanding of free or forced for the women involved. The genesis of this analysis stems from this need for exploring these complexities that go with women in prostitution, and using multiple variables for understanding how their lives get constructed prior to, and in sex work.

Before we commence this task, it would only be pertinent to briefly overview the nature of the information that has been constructed so far with women in prostitution as their focal point. There is an interesting example that can be of relevance here. In his lecture on 'The Rise and Fall of Development Economics', Paul Krugman fascinatingly cites the case of how European maps on Africa evolved from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. The initial wave of exploration gave rise to raw information that found its way into the maps, which eventually got subordinated and discarded with an improvement in both mapmaking and the information that went into their development. It is what happened in between these developments that demands greater cognisance:

> [T]he improvement in the art of map making raised the standard for what was considered *valid data*. Second-hand reports of the form 'six days south of the end of the desert you encounter a vast river flowing from east to west' were no longer something you would use to draw your map. Only features of the landscape that has been visited by reliable informants equipped with sextants and compasses now qualified. And so the crowded if confused continental interior of the old maps became 'darkest Africa', an empty space. (1997: 2, italics ours)

This example holds important lessons on how a space, hitherto less explored, gets unravelled over time by subsequent waves of researchers. More importantly, it serves as a reminder of what transpires when multiple trajectories of information get constructed, with evolving understandings of their validity over time and space. Taking the analogy further, dark spaces with little 'substantive' information in the public domain need not be merely geographic in nature; they could prevail equally in the social terrain. Women in prostitution would serve as a vital population segment for illustration.

In the wake of HIV, there has been a renewed engagement with them as a subject of research. But questions still remain on how much do we really know about them, about their living and functioning, about their wants and haves? How has the exploration of their

unknown terrain progressed over time, and what are the methodological equivalents of 'sextants' and 'compasses' used in knowing about them? From a social sciences perspective, what have been the underlying purposes involved in knowing more about them? The limited spheres of understanding surrounding them are not merely emerging from their categorisation as a 'hidden population', as being difficult to access and map. It also stems from the ways in which researchers have approached them and the limitations therein.

Here, attention should naturally turn to who have been the investigators traversing across the terrain, engaging with the women. Has there been a disciplinary consistency in them? Anecdotally, as well as from systematic observation, it can be safely mentioned that it has been a multi-disciplinary field (and less of an inter-disciplinary one). The women have been at the interface of historians, sociologists, anthropologists and economists, not to mention those coming from feminist theory and law, even before they got integrated into HIV research frameworks. The women on their part have enough aspects to evoke interest across this wide gamut, which could then be viewed from their own disciplinary (and methodological) lens. Emerging from this, we have the introspective question on how has information related to women in prostitution been constructed? What have been the motives involved? How has that changed over time? Is it so that in our quest for information that is valid by current standards within a certain field of research, we are undermining the importance of what has been created so far in similar or other disciplines on the same subject matter? Are disciplinary and methodological rigidities precluding us to rich information from other fields, inadvertently making us cases for how 'a way of seeing is also a way of not seeing' (Geertz and Geertz 1964: 105)? Do the complexities of reality make it essential to *contest* the available information rather than merely accepting or discarding it straightaway? These are some of the questions that demand closer scrutiny in the context of women in prostitution.

The diversity of fields and the multiplicity of research tracks have only exacerbated the creation of linear tracks of research; where certain specific aspects of the women do get addressed but not taken further to locate them in the larger complexities of the lives they lead. For a more specific example – in what could be termed a relatively recent phenomenon emerging in an HIV world - it is the medical-epidemiological perspective of research that has come to prevail (on a speculative note that may not sound too far-fetched, perhaps never in history has so much been written on her in so short a period of time). HIV related researches have shed some new light on certain aspects of women in prostitution, particularly related to their numbers. But to what extent has research on the women reciprocally impacted HIV studies? For instance, across a host of HIV based studies, there is scanty mention on the divide between the trafficked versus voluntary even as they go about researching or quantifying women in prostitution. Understandably, HIV motivated studies have little rationale in engaging with the politics of the space, since it does not form part of their immediate objectives. But this only serves to reiterate a certain linearity of research that we are emphasising.

We have tried to address the complexity of problems in the rather kaleidoscopic settings of prostitution where the reality changes even as you approach it (as a consequence of the investigator's intervention at times). In the actual specifics of the survey, we have sought to collate information that does justice to their diversity. Going further, it seeks to delve into less explored territories in the context of prostitution, enquiring of sexual preferences of the women even as we ask them about their histories of abuse. Rather than reducing the women to clichéd, oft-repeated answering on clients and incomes, we also seek to surface their non sex work histories, either alongside or prior to engaging with sex work. In doing so, we hope to establish some 'middle' grounds that address and demystify some of the realities surrounding prostitution in the country. The attempt has been to frame the survey as a multi-dimensional one, drawing inputs from several disciplines; considering that while some themes could be better explored from a certain academic lens, there are others that could be

equally hindered by it. In the following sections, we briefly discuss some of the disciplinary gazes that we have incorporated into the survey, or at least perused upon while framing it.

Of historians, archives and recreating the past

To start by delving into the historians' approach, as Gilfoyle (1999) states quite aptly in his work titled 'Prostitutes in History', before 1980, the prostitute was 'pornographic'. Few historians considered prostitution an important topic, and studies of the subject commonly played to the sensational and salacious. The small body of significant scholarship concentrated on ideas, social movements, and campaigns to control or abolish prostitution. While his reference is to Anglo-American literature on the subject, research in the Indian context remains equally conspicuous by its absence particularly in the post-independence period (with notable exceptions like that of Punekar and Rao 1967).

On the part of historians, there has been an attempt at rectifying some of the imagery revolving around the women and resurrecting an alternative identity. Delving in the archives again, they have been responsible for casting new light on them. At one level, these historical studies engaging with colonial India could be combined to provide an alternative reading into what transpired in cities of colonial and pre-colonial origins, using women in prostitution as a constitutive material in their narratives (see Oldenburg 2001, Banerjee 1998 for Calcutta, Sundara Raj 1993 for Madras, Tambe 2009 for Bombay, Legg 2009 for Delhi). Some of the common themes that emerge are those of colonial regulations of prostitution, and the apparatus of medical surveillance centred on it. Yet, the contribution of their historical re-reading has far deeper ramifications when considered as subverting the pre-established impressions labelling women in prostitution, aligning them to larger paradigms. For Oldenburg (1990: 263), her work on the courtesans in Lucknow constitutes departing from the conventional perspective on the profession and presenting the women as 'independent and consciously involved in the covert subversion of a male-dominated world… [celebrating] womanhood in the privacy of their apartment by resisting and inverting the rules of gender of the larger society of which they are part'. In Levine (2000: 7), the prostitute appears at the cusp of inter-racial sexual relations and the politics therein, as she argues for prostitution to be seen as a crucial artefact of colonial authority in India, as a 'central prop of masculinized colonial rule'; as indeed in the case of Ballhatchet (1980: 11) earlier, who wrote on the layers of sexual relations (and tensions) that existed between English men and Indian women, and how the prostitute figured prominently in the colonial scheme of things. The *devadasis* too, have emerged at the centre of multiple spheres of reasoning. There has been some effort that has gone into projecting the *devadasi* as a "ritual specialist" in the first place and only then as an artist or courtesan (Kersenboom 2002); as a figure integral to 'complicate the historiography of social reform related to women in colonial India' (Parker 1998: 560); as a clan of women who enjoyed considerable social and economic status and resisted colonial authority, till they fell on the wrong side of colonial legislations.

The purpose of this historical rumination at the outset is at least three-fold. Firstly, should a re-reading of women in prostitution be only of historical value, an exercise confined to/emerging from the archives? What of the contemporary women? Are we inadvertently being drawn into a vortex of comparisons between a more glorious past and lamenting of a denigrated present? The arguments that the historians have so eloquently put forth, of resistance, power and independence of the women, of recasting gender stereotypes, there is perhaps a case for examining their presence in contemporary settings as well. It could be scouted for in the myriad ways that women attempt at taking control of their lives even as they engage in prostitution today. The forms may have changed, and so have the skills required for being in the trade. But have a new set of skills supplanted them? While artistic or cultural signifiers from the past have waned off, a newer set of rather earthy attributes are demanded of the women; courage for instance, as pointed out by some of the interviewed

women in Kerala, or the capability to continuously adjust to the fluid circumstances in the trade. There is a need to probe deeper into this newer basket of skills, of acknowledging the changing dimensions between the past and present.

A second strand of historical relevance deals with compiling information on other older but long-standing, emotive debates centred on the women viz. their caste backgrounds. There is an understanding of prostitution as caste-based sexual exploitation (see Tambe 2009), as an upper-caste attempt at subjugating lower caste female sexuality. The survey for its part included questions on religious and caste identities; both as a general open-ended question to pool together the different caste responses as well as specifically on *dalit* identities. These answers could eventually be placed in a larger historical continuum (they are not part of the present working paper though considering the need for better anthropological understanding on the geographic specificities involved).

A third, rather fundamental introspection emerges from the very task of attempting a pan-India survey. There is a historical connotation to it that has to be constantly borne in mind. Going back to colonial history, it can be discerned that it is from a Western gaze, that the identity of an 'Indian' prostitute emerged. The colonial period oversaw the emergence of the *Indian prostitute*, a synthesis pooled together from multifarious regional ones. In the south, 'by the nineteenth century, Europeans in India had subsumed *devadasi* dance, whether in courtly, public venues or at the temple, under the generic category of 'nautch' (the Anglicisation of the Hindi 'nach', dance), a term that denoted dance as sexually suggestive entertainment, performed by women who were nothing more than prostitutes' (Viswanathan-Peterson and Soneji 2008: 18). Citing Gupta (2001: 111) for a comparative process in the north, in the face of declining court patronage resulting from curtailed power and depleting wealth of the old aristocracy in post-mutiny Lucknow; 'courtesans now found themselves mostly inhabiting the same public space and bazaar as regular prostitutes'. Such a conflation of different categories worked to condense the hierarchies, institutionalising a perceived homogenisation of the women at least from an outsider's gaze.

Coming to the present, as we call our survey a pan-Indian one, the question to be considered is whether we are unconsciously generalising about them again. Are there indeed pan-Indian commonalities that can get crystallised from the multitude of local or regional data? A century ago perhaps, a pan-India survey might have showcased the diversity of the profession; today, when we attempt something similar, we are aware of the risk of simplification while the women to the contrary, continue to be highly differentiated – in their lifestyles, their sites of operating, their skills involved, their working conditions, their clientele. For a newer reductionism, we would require a fresher comprehension of the parts and the whole. For this purpose, in the process of preparing and administering the questionnaire as well as tabulating it, we have been additionally vigilant of not losing the heterogeneity of information from the respondents.

Of feminism, politics and a present tense

To continue with the earlier quote from Gilfoyle – but moving beyond the disciplinary gaze of historians, and into the specifics of what they chose to highlight, the two versions of the 'sensational and salacious' and of 'ideas, movements and campaigns to control or abolish prostitution' are not distinctly different from each other. They could be termed as cognate fields, in fact with a mutually reinforcing set of arguments - since the women belong to the 'salacious', they ought to be 'controlled' (with an active or tacit involvement of the state). The constructs of control (either regulatory or abolitionist), have taken shape diversely. Emerging from the premise of the prostitute as part of the 'unhygienic', she has been at the interface of politics, law and 'public' health. Going further, when control meant the sanitisation of public spaces, her presence spilled over into the geographic realms, that of spatial displacements.

(This is just to be reminded again of the multiplicity of fields that converge and find common interest in the study of the women in the profession).

While the abolitionist language has been gradually phased out, it has come to be replaced by a distinction between voluntary and forced prostitution (see Doezema 1998) that which mires debates on prostitution today. To cite from George, Vindhya and Ray's (2010: 72) conclusions on their review of the literature, there exists a 'persistent presence of two polarized stands: that of neo-abolitionists for whom prostitution equals trafficking and should be eliminated: and that of neo-regulationists and other groups who argue that trafficking is forced prostitution while sex work is a legitimate and willing form of labour that should be decriminalized or legalized'. Gangoli (2008) points to the third viewpoint of silence (if not indifference) in feminist responses to prostitution, other than that of hurt and violence as against potential choice and liberation. There are at least two more frameworks that could get appended here. Firstly, it would be that of prostitution as a caste-based activity (as mentioned previously) – as in the case of say the *Kolhatis* in Maharashtra, for whom 'dancing and prostitution have been recorded as their caste based profession' (see Rege 1995). Secondly, and somewhat similar to the previous one, would be that of prostitution as a community-based activity as seen in the case of *Nat* or *Bedia* women or among *devadasis* (see Swarankar 2008; Agrawal 2008) with their own distinct caste consciousness (Agrawal 2004).

Here, except for the position of silence which could be termed an outsider's standpoint, the others again gravitate towards the mode of entry as the governing principle determining the identities of the women. While prostitution has grown into being a politicised space, emerging from these multiple frameworks of opinions and the rigidities therein, the phenomenon remains more visible in activism and advocacy but equally entrenched (and alarmingly so) in research. To what extent then, do the underlying methodologies of research remain immune to the political undercurrents of the very space they seek to investigate? In a context where a bi-polar precipitation of ideologies and approaches can be discerned into the binaries of coercion versus choice, of violence versus freedom; any investigation into any aspect of prostitution would remain vulnerable to getting (mis)construed through these lens. What kind of methodology then begets what kind of research? Is it so that the politicisation of the space has created definite *ends* and methodologies then get reduced to being *means* of arriving at them? Or is the divide more inferential, wherein the same instruments of research remain plagued with a certain fluidity of interpretations i.e. the same question of investigation or the same settings of observation remain prone to very diverse interpretations depending upon the researcher's (pre-determined) perspective? Where does that leave the present survey in terms of its positioning? These are some of the methodological questions that we have grappled with in the course of preparing this working paper.

> Most investigations of women in the context of prostitution have been designed by people who do not identify with prostitutes. They usually isolate the experiences of prostitutes from those of other women and focus upon exclusively negative causes and effects……such as abuse, poverty, maladjustment or coercion. (Pheterson 1990: 109)

In the spirit of identifying with the women on the ground, this survey as well as the report starts from a position of concern and empathy. This should in no way be deemed as a loss of objectivity.

Of HIV, surveys and the present continuous

The advent of HIV has added a new dimension to research on prostitution on several fronts. Firstly, it has given rise to a new set of researchers interacting with women in prostitution viz. those from medicine and demographics. Vanwesenbeeck (2001) provides an impressive literature review of scientific work in the area of sex work during the 1990s where HIV based studies feature prominently. Sex workers have figured prominently in public health and hygiene discourse even before (as manifesting in venereal disease prevention and control in colonial India) but in the HIV world, this research has been far more voluminous. Prior to this, the women were researched within social sciences as part of historical, socio-anthropological, feminist and subaltern frameworks described so far. Concomitant to this shift of gravities, there has also been greater use of quantitative methodologies while framing sex work research. The trend has been to apply the methods to larger scales of information. Taking the case of the Integrated Behavioural and Biological Assessment (IBBA), one of the three large-scale HIV related datasets created during 2006-7 in India, it constituted the first large-scale probability sample survey in India covering the high risk groups of HIV, including female sex workers (FSWs) and their clients; an exercise 'unique in India, and in the world, because of its size (over 25,000 respondents from populations most at risk of HIV), its diversity (in terms of sampling methods, questionnaires, languages and regions), and the network of institutions involved in completing it' (Saidel et al. 2008: S17). Before this attempt, there were a host of similar studies but more geographically confined with the objective of estimating the prevalence of HIV among female sex workers in India (see Sahasrabuddhe and Mehendale 2008). Comparatively, within the social sciences domain, the tools of research were more qualitative and resorting to ethnographic research – case studies, participant observation and elaborate use of snowball sampling for gaining access to them. Alongside this shift in methodologies, there has also been a change in the nature of questions in investigations.

In a recent conference on sex work and trafficking in India, a sex worker participant quipped (in a characteristic mistrust of researchers) that why do researchers *only* ask them about how many clients they take per day and how much money they make this way, further remarking on how they come and get questionnaires filled from them, but never come back to say what happened to that research. The set of questions mentioned, it can be suspected, are oriented towards a behavioural assessment of the women for HIV. By its very nature, such research is more prone to find its way upwards into policy before it reaches the grassroots again, often in forms and implications that may render it difficult to recognise. This sparingly dialogical process between the researcher and the respondents post conduction of the research is only one of the methodological difficulties to be contended with. To understand how HIV has impacted sex work research and sex workers themselves, there are two characteristics that we would like to focus on - estimation of numbers and the understanding of behaviour.

For greater reliability of the quantitative methodologies as well as for eventual HIV-targeting purposes, it is pertinent to know the numbers of sex workers. This prevalence of numbers estimation in HIV studies makes it somewhere aligned with trafficking reports, which also provide estimates of the women although for a very different purpose (see Sen and Nair 2004: 16). It needs to be emphasised however, that estimations in sex work remain highly variable and contested. To quote from Kempadoo (1998: 15):

> Figures for the city of Bombay in India range anywhere from 100,000 (Asia Watch 1993) to 600,000 (Barry 1995) – a difference of half a million. In the case of Thailand, figures for 'child prostitutes' range between 250,000 to 800,000, with the age range being equally as imprecise (Black 1995). To any conscientious social scientist, such discrepancies should be the cause for extreme suspicion of the reliability of the

> research, yet when it comes to sex work and prostitution, few eyebrows are raised and the figures are easily bandied about without question.

In national census as well, there has never been an attempt at a systematic quantification of women in prostitution; where they have been clubbed together with housewives, beggars and prisoners (see Times of India 2010), a strange categorisation considering that they are income generating and not criminal individuals. This is all the more enigmatic considering that intervention, as a distinctly numbers driven activity should have led to a backward response on the part of the state towards quantification of women in prostitution. It is in the HIV context that we have more pointed estimates of numbers (see Saidel et al. 2008), but they remain time specific and have the limitation of being restricted to only those states registered to have higher HIV prevalence. In this survey, we don't place a numerical estimation of sex workers as part of our objectives. Our purpose remains more on behavioural lines, to understand what sex work involves for them and how they have arrived at the juncture of getting into it. In the survey, there were only two cases where the women mentioned fear of HIV as a factor that deterred them from being in the activity for a while. There were other concerns that they deemed more important in their lives and there is a need to register them.

But even as we say our study is more on behaviour, we remain conscious of how the term has come to be a loaded one. In an HIV world, it has been reduced to implying 'safe' or 'risky' sexual practices. Since the 2000s, there has been an effort in improving the surveillance systems, as part of the 'second generational' approach of HIV surveillance (see WHO and UNAIDS 2000). To provide a gist of what this approach means, it:

> …considers biological surveillance - i.e. HIV sentinel surveillance, reporting of AIDS cases, and surveillance of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) - and behavioural surveillance to be integral and essential components of surveillance systems (1, 2). Second-generation systems focus on strengthening and improving existing surveillance methods and combining them in ways that have the greatest explanatory power' (Rehle, Lazzari et al. 2004: 121-22).

In the case of sex workers, the understanding of behavioural information has come to be restricted to only those aspects that are perceived to generate a better assessment of HIV spread through them. Behaviour in the context of this survey remains a much wider domain than that incorporated in HIV risk. Rather than involving sex workers as the means to study a different end motive, that of HIV, we would want the sex worker to be the end-point by herself.

> Qualitative data are critically important to good HIV prevention planning. Well-designed quantitative surveys can give a very good idea of what behaviors exist, of how common they are, and of whether they are changing over time. However they cannot determine why these behaviors exist, or why they are or are not changing. In depth studies using different anthropological methods are needed to answer the 'why' question. And effective interventions can only be planned if prevention workers understand what structural, cultural or other factors stand in the way of adopting safer behaviors. (Amon, Brown et al. 2000: 4-5)

We seek to provide this qualitative information but on larger scales than what have been endeavoured before. This independence of socio-economic and demographic variables in assessing sex workers would provide a much required multi-dimensionality of views, which could then offer a more realistic behavioural assessment of HIV as well.

1 Research methodology

At the outset, there are some methodological aspects of the survey that demand attention. Firstly, it is a pan-India survey rather than a regionally or locally confined one. Emerging from this objective, a common uniform research tool had to be constructed for the survey. This meant that there was a need for greater deliberation in terms of preparation of the questionnaire, such that it incorporated diverse regional realities. Even if some aspects of it were not to be relevant in some region, it still had to be framed in the survey for comparative purposes.

A caveat needs to be put in place regarding the extent of representation of sex workers in a survey of this nature. Determination of the sample frame is problematic, considering that there are no reliable national estimates of sex workers. The universe itself is highly contested let alone how and where they are distributed; their age; their family, religious and caste backgrounds; their place of origin and migratory patterns; their work identities within and out of sex work etc. As stated in the introduction, even at a city level as in Mumbai or Kolkata, the numbers of sex workers are extremely variable. Having compiled a sample of 3000 women, we would like to emphasise that the sample is large but may not be nationally representative. Also, the survey could not be administered in some populous states like Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and Kashmir.

Secondly, as discussed in the previous section, questions had to be framed from different disciplinary gazes. Keeping this in mind, the questionnaire was constructed into several sections that reflected different facets of sex workers' realities and would cater to different research perspectives. Some of the personal information and caste segregations could be of historical-anthropological-sociological interest, the questions on incomes and work would be more relevant for economists, while the section on sexuality and abuse would be feminists' concerns (though as mentioned previously, there is a need for cross-gazing across disciplines).

The purpose of a pan-India survey was to see if there existed common realities among sex workers in India today. Such an endeavour would be of interest to not just researchers but also for sex workers. It would be crucial in making them feel part of a pan-Indian identity rather than remaining isolated in pockets.

As part of the objectives, the following sets of information were identified as crucial in building and constructing a multi-faceted identity of a sex worker:

- Personal backgrounds: age, family backgrounds, religion and caste backgrounds, educational status, marital status, dependants
- Work histories: past and present experiences of work in sex work and out of it, incomes, mode of entry into sex work, sites of activity, perceptions of sex work
- Sexual experiences: sexual experiences in and out of sex work, age of sexual initiation and type of partners, perception of sexual pleasure within work and out of it, abuse histories of the women
- Stigma: avenues from where stigma could emanate, what the women perceive of it vis-à-vis family, children and the state agents-like police and health authorities

Preparing the research tool: The conceptualisation of an all-India survey of female sex workers, trans-genders and *kothis* first emerged in 2008. We began with a basic brainstorming workshop in November 2008, where the questionnaire was initially formulated and the possible sample size across India was discussed. The questionnaire was debated

and constructed with sex workers' participation to gauge whether they found the questions relevant. In the course of the next three months, a pilot survey was conducted and the questionnaire was refined and finalised. An ethics committee was convened to approve the questions included in the questionnaire, the sampling strategy and the plan for conducting of the survey. It was then translated into several regional languages such as Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati, Telugu, Kannada, Tamil and Bengali. The translated questionnaires were carefully assessed for accuracy and conveying the precise meaning intended.

Data Collection and Sampling Strategy: Local organisations with expertise in the field of HIV prevention, care and treatment and experience of working with marginalised and hard to reach populations, including sex workers, across the country were contacted in 2008-9 to collaborate in the process of data collection. A concept note was circulated across organisations and their response and cooperation was sought.

The next leg involved training sessions for those who would actually administer the questionnaire at the grassroots. Several such training workshops were conducted during the first half of 2009, and the process of actual collection of data began in mid-2009. These workshops were essential considering that the survey had to be administered in regional languages in diverse locations. Interviewers were trained in techniques of data collection and maintenance of records and field notes which were used for corroborating information at the time of data entry and analysis. While most of the data collection was done in regional languages, some of it – in places such as Kerala, Nagaland and Orissa – was conducted either in Hindi or English.

In deciding upon the sample and the administration of the survey, region specific approaches were considered more feasible rather than adopting a singular, national strategy. Such an orientation had its advantages in surfacing some of the local nuances/practices of sex work. In discussion with the various organisations involved in data collection, the universe of sites was mapped based on both the sites of soliciting by sex workers and sites of service delivery. Typologies of sex workers were identified in consultation with local key-informants and linked up with how they solicit and service clients. By doing so, respondents could be included beyond some of the clustered concentrations as in brothels or identified red light areas. The target sample for female sex workers was identified as 3000 with 1000 each for transgender and *kothis*. This working paper however, restricts itself to female sex workers.

Purposive and snowball sampling methods were used as the best possible means to ensure the broadest cross-section of respondents in the absence of reliable data from which to construct a random sample. Another aspect that needs to be noted regarding the difficulties of drawing a random sample deals with the freedom given to the respondents to participate in the survey.

The questionnaire was administered across fourteen states of India. Interviews were conducted in highly diverse locations including brothels, streets, beauty parlors, bus stands, railway stations, public toilets, residences of sex workers, bars, highways etc. The time taken for the interviews was up to two hours per person. Table 1.1 provides the number of respondents per state and the places where the questionnaire was administered.

Data cleaning and processing: The collected data was then computerised initially using the Microsoft Access programme, then transferring the data into Microsoft Excel for the purposes of data cleaning and finally into SPSS for tabulation and analysis. The preliminary findings of the survey were presented to a group of experts and sex workers on 7 January 2011 at the Department of Economics, University of Pune and consultations and inputs were considered to set up the organisation of the present analysis as well as further dissemination of the results.

Table 1.1 Distribution of the respondents across India

State	Number of respondents	Percentage	Sites of interview
Andhra Pradesh	151	5.0	Medchal, Nadikudi, Naidupet, Neelore, Nizamabad, Parvathipuram, Peddapuram, Podalakur, Puttur, Rajahmundry, Sullurpet, Tirupathi, Ulavapadu, Vijayawada, Vizianagaram, Warangal, Zaheerabad
Assam	303	10.1	Guwahati, Bongaigaon, Dispur
Bihar	194	6.5	Baliya, Bettiah, Saharsa, Motihari, Gumti, Khagdiya, Patna, Munger, Barauni, Begusaray, Lakhminia
Chandigarh	287	9.6	Chandigarh
Delhi	79	2.6	G. B. Road
Gujarat	286	9.5	Ahmedabad
Karnataka	149	5.0	Bangalore, Malegaon, Hubli, Dharwad, Belgaum, Bagalkot, Mahalingpur, Sanganatti, Chinchkand
Kerala	39	1.3	Cherthala, Ernakulum, Kozhikode, Kottayam, Mallapuram, Thiruvananthapuram
Madhya Pradesh	267	8.9	Bhopal, Chattarpur, Habibgunj, Naongaon, Bijawar
Maharashtra	296	9.9	Mumbai, Bhiwandi, Yavatmal, Kolhapur, Latur, Ahmednagar, Nasik, Pune, Bhusawal, Ichalkaranji, Jalgaon, Malegaon, Parbhani, Udgir
Nagaland	314	10.5	Dimapur
Orissa	57	1.9	Bolangir, Balasore, Bhadrak, Champa, Baripada, Bahuguda
Uttar Pradesh	282	9.4	Lucknow, Chitrakut, Kushinagar, Etawa, Fazilnagar, Allahabad, Gadhiya, Lalitpur, Jokwa Bazar, Varanasi
West Bengal	296	9.9	Kolkata, Howrah
Total	**3000**	**100%**	

1.1 Overview of the sample

The entire sample of female sex workers (FSW) comprises 3000 women. There was an attempt to choose respondents from varied age groups to understand the responses across different age groups. It had been intended to restrict the survey sample to sex workers who were 18 years of age or above. However a small number of adolescents of 15-17 years were included de facto, although at an almost negligible proportion of 0.53 per cent of the sample. Initially this came about because age can be hard to determine prior to the initiation of an interview. In a small number of cases, females between the ages of 15-17 years demanded to be included in the analysis. It was judged that since these adolescents had been self-supporting, and had an understanding of what was being asked of them and the consequences of participation, they had achieved sufficient maturity to justify inclusion. In addition because of the widespread participation of adolescents in a range of occupations and the right of adolescents to be heard on these matters – it was deemed appropriate to retain the responses offered by these adolescents in the analysis.

Table 1.2 Age ranges of the respondents

Age Range	Frequencies	Percentages
Under 20	241	08.00
21 – 25	662	22.06
26 - 30	881	29.36
31 - 35	630	21.00
36 - 40	380	12.66
41 - 45	140	04.66
46 - 50	42	01.40
51 and above	21	00.70
No Reply	03	00.10
Total	**3,000**	**100%**

Table 1.3 Family backgrounds according to location

Family Background			
Rural	**Urban**	**No Reply**	**Total**
1803	1026	171	3000
60.1%	34.2%	5.7%	100%

Table 1.4 Family backgrounds according to occupations

Family background	Frequencies	Percentages
Business	485	16.2
Service	645	21.5
Daily wage earners	466	15.5
Farmers	826	27.5
Working class	270	9.0
No Reply	308	10.3
Total	**3000**	**100%**

Table 1.5 Family backgrounds according to incomes

Family background	Frequencies	Percentages
Poor	1939	64.6
Middle Class	780	26.0
Upper class	32	1.1
No Reply	249	8.3
Total	**3000**	**100%**

Table 1.6 Educational backgrounds of the respondents

Education	Frequencies	Percentages
0-No schooling	1507	50.2
1-Primary (Upto Class 4)	208	6.9
2-Secondary (Upto Class 7)	401	13.4
3-Upto class X	196	6.5
4-Upto Class XII	340	11.3
5-College	91	3.0
6-Beyond College	24	0.8
No reply	233	7.8
Total	**3000**	**100%**

Table 1.7 Religious backgrounds of the respondents

Religion	Frequencies	Percentages
Hindu	2106	70.2
Muslim	592	19.8
Christian	182	6.0
Buddhist	11	0.4
Others	61	2.0
No Reply	48	1.6
Total	**3000**	**100%**

Table 1.8 Dalit backgrounds of the respondents

Dalit	Frequencies	Percentages
Yes	780	26.0
No	2220	74.0
Total	**3000**	**100%**

1.2 Sex and work: a tryst with labour markets

What do you do for a living? _____.
Any other words to describe what you do? _____.

For the women participating in the survey, these were the introductory queries in a section on incomes, livelihoods and work histories. They were oriented towards eliciting answers on work identities, and what the women perceived of their own endeavours for income generation. One of the more intriguing set of responses on alternative explanations to their activity, particularly in the northern belt where the survey was administered, was '*kaam par jaana*', implying *going to work*. While this response was frequent enough to draw attention, it has also triggered further questions on the purport of what the women actually meant by it. Were they implying *sex work*? In a large-scale survey of this nature, it would remain one of those inconclusive statements with little prospects of knowing anything further. To be rational on our part, the reference may not be to *sex work* per se and we would certainly not want to use this example as a justification of the term coming from the grassroots. But the symbolism of 'work' may be more than just some 'regular' activity that the women may be doing, forming

the veil for sex work. As she steps out in her quest for work (and incomes), this is what she may be stating at home – and rightly so. But then at what point of the day does sex work come into the picture?

There is a need to unravel how and where does sex work figure in the normal routine of work that these women do. Does it justify even addressing them as sex workers, while they continue to labour through their other work activities for the larger part of the day with only a fleeting engagement with the markets for sex? How to arrive at what constitutes their identity in the labour markets and what should be the variables for defining it? To further complicate matters, while describing their activities, the answers of the women in several cases move quite fluidly between more mainstream 'regular' occupations and sex work as if they remain inextricably linked. Consider the examples of a street vendor who also searches for customers while selling vegetables or a dancer at marriages also taking clients. In citing these examples, our purpose is only to highlight that it is not easy to demarcate women's work and lives into neatly segregated compartments. These activities end up blurring the understanding of sex work and 'regular' work, putting them in the mainstream and challenging the differentiation of sex work as being some peculiar, isolated activity.

This problem arising from a multiplicity of work identities may not be restricted to women in sex work alone, but sex work brings along its own complications in resolving what constitutes the *primary* work identity for them. To quote from Chatterjee:

> The two histories, one of women working and making their living, and the other of those earning money out of the sexual act date back to the antiquity… the first might have, in many cases, preceded the second history. Just as in a case, when a woman loses her way of earning for herself, she is required to take up prostitution; there is lurking here an entire history of working women, artisan and professional women, which is erased as this other history (that of prostitution) is constructed. (2008)

To slightly modify this statement, a woman may not actually lose her work avenue fully and it may continue to overlap with prostitution. But the argument of work histories getting inter-twined with that of prostitution does merit attention. There is a larger historical rumination that would perhaps be relevant here (see Apte and Sahni 2008). An older set of work identities from the Indian past are already stigmatised as those belonging to the coterie of prostitutes-dancing women, servants (*dasis*), *devadasis* etc. But this erasure may not be merely in historical terms, spanning over larger stretches of space and time – it runs the danger of replaying itself in the course of contemporary life spans of women at work across the newer range of occupations they engage with. There are several avenues and categories of women that come under the scanner of suspicion as feeders into prostitution - construction workers, daily wage earners, street vendors, those selling petty goods etc. Incidentally, they are all activities that are related with mobility and involve a measure of public interaction. As observed from the survey results, there are indeed some women from these backgrounds who are engaging with sex work. But even as we point this out, we run the risk of transferring these characteristics to the larger set of female populations engaging with these economic activities. Certainly not every woman in construction work may get into sex work, neither would every housemaid. But the conflations have already got formed, and they are perhaps at the roots of work histories getting clubbed with sex work before getting erased eventually.

Is sex-work to be considered a chapter in women's labour? In *Global Sex Workers*, Kempadoo (1998: 3) explains the rationale of using the term 'sex work' by arguing that it suggests we 'view prostitution not as an identity - a social or psychological characteristic of women, often indicated by 'whore' - but as an income-generating activity or form of labour for women and men', stressing those involved in it as working people. The term 'work' by itself is a layered one, signifying more than just an activity on the part of an individual. It is also an exchange, as implied in the extension 'work for' – either as a relational expression of working

for whom (for self, family, others) or for denoting time (in terms of years in work, the number of hours put in during a day) or as a signifier of motives, suggestive of what gets derived from it as returns. The returns could again be quite wide ranging in value and form - in pay or profit, in cash or kind, even more abstract values like respect and dignity. The question is how does sex work combine across these exchanges? The returns part of it would be more obvious. But from certain lens, it would be a compensatory activity that could be squeezed in alongside other work. As some women engage with other time or labour-intensive work forms that offer less money for more work, they could be tempted to combine it with sex work that brings more returns for a limited work. The other consideration would be that of sex work as a trade-off of sorts. As some women state, they found the work initially difficult but have grown more habituated and don't feel 'ashamed' of doing it any more. Here, there is a trade-off of an abstract value for a real one.

Subliminally, within economic consciousness, sexual labour is a less-explored area. It remains marginalised within the gamut of informal livelihoods, poorly understood as an economic alternative for many women. It remains a problem of contested identities. When a woman sells socks or handkerchiefs in a local train or works as a vegetable vendor, her identity as a worker participating in the informal economy is not disputed despite the fact that she may be 'working' for paltry incomes. She does however, get the recognition that she is working and earning as a part of the informal economy. But when she engages with sex work, her alternative work identities cease to matter. She gets christened as a sex worker for all purposes but without the recognition of work that goes with it.

One of the immediate frameworks for contextualising sex work would be that of women's informal labour, fitting into the more specific line of arguments related to underestimation of women's economic activities. It can be comprehended that the lack of recognition is not restricted to sex work alone but remains prevalent across the wider gamut of activities that women undertake. As Beneria (1981: 24) argues in her influential work on conceptualising women in the labour force, 'women's participation in economic activities tends to be grossly underestimated, particularly in areas with a relatively low degree of market penetration in economic life'. To provide a more practical illustration of how this underestimation comes into effect: 'a potter's wife who collects clay and processes it before it goes to the potter's wheel is most likely to be recorded as a non-worker' (Raju and Bagchi, 1993: 4). Across the spectrum of work and the supposed non-work undertaken by women, the extremes getting formed by how the markets perceive and value the outcomes of those activities, where does sex work stand? As an activity that leads to incomes, it would definitely have some market orientation. There is a string of customers with whom she bargains and negotiates for a price, the returns are in cash form and get exchanged prior to the activity (unlike other services) thereby having some claims to be a work or labour form. However, the recognition of work, particularly in the context of women, is not just economic but also social. This would be particularly true of sex work. The claims of *dhanda* or the work-for-profit mechanism of a woman in prostitution may have some recognition in the markets, as vouched by the transactions she may undertake with her clients. No client can get that service for free. But moving beyond clients, these claims get erased by social de-recognition.

To give a feel of the complexity of recognition in labour, consider the following case provided by one of the respondents in the survey. In response to an enquiry on how she got started with work prior to sex work, she told of a very early initiation into work that actually involved freeing up her mother to do work. Supposing there is little clarity on what the mother's activity comprised - she could be a house maid, a construction worker on some site, a petty vendor selling vegetables or engaged in some form of 'regular' work done by women fitting into the broader contours of the informal economy - we come across the differentiation of the mother's activity being work and that of the girl getting relegated to non-work by virtue of its non-monetisation. But what if the mother's activity involved sex work? To clarify matters, the woman belonged to the *bedia* community and her mother was a sex worker as well. In this

case, there would be economic de-recognition of her work at home and a social de-recognition of what the mother did outside.

Moving beyond the immediate referential frameworks of women's work, there has been an attempt to place sex work in the context of informal labour at large. To cite from the Sex Worker's Manifesto put forth by the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC), on the issue of why do women get into sex work:

> Women take up prostitution for the same reason as they may take up any other livelihood option available to them. Our stories are not fundamentally different from the labourer from Bihar who pulls a rickshaw in Calcutta, or the worker from Calcutta who works part time in a factory in Bombay. (DMSC 1997)

Here, the comparative frameworks are beyond the confines of gender, going on to address how women and men both tap into the informal sectors in their quest for livelihoods. But to what extent are the comparisons feasible, between a male rickshaw puller and the female sex worker? Our point of emphasis lies in the incomes generated across the two activities. To draw some references to incomes from the Report on Conditions of Work and Promotion of Livelihoods in the Unorganised Sector published by the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (2007: 69), the rickshaw puller in Kolkata earns no more than Rs. 20-50 per day. In comparison, to cite from Rao, Gupta et al. (2003: 596) about the sex workers operating from Sonagachi (Kolkata), the median of the average price charged per act was Rs. 40 but average prices ranged from Rs. 15 to Rs. 600. Their incomes fare better compared with their male counterparts.

Both these comparisons, of sex work with other forms of women's and men's labour would remain pertinent but more in an academic sense. Meaning to say, sex workers can be put on a common platform with them, compare the incomes and showcase that sex workers earn more. But this cannot be used to argue the reason for why women actually come into sex work. If entering sex work is an economic decision, the rationale for it should come from the sex workers' own trysts with the labour markets. Their understanding of money and incomes would get formed from those experiences. In this endeavour, they don't have the academic luxury of making broad comparisons across the vast range of informal activities that are existent. Her choices of work would be drawn from her own experience or from the sphere of activities that she is familiar with. Sex work would have to be comparatively the more pragmatic of choices for her from among them. In this paper, as we present the work histories of sex workers our endeavour is to place sex work in this larger continuum of labour that the women have engaged with.

1.3 Overlaps between sex work and labour markets

As emerging from the survey, within sex work, the universe of women with experience of alternative work is a substantial one compared with those with experience of sex work alone. For the women, sex work was not their first tryst with work at large. To the contrary, even for women who have started engaging in it as early as mid to late teens, it emerged as an activity much later in their working life. At the same time, for someone who became a sex worker directly, it is not as if it would remain her sole interface with work. There are cases of women getting into other labour markets as they have grown older, and started finding it difficult to generate clients for themselves. Emerging from this, there is a cryptic overlap of sex work with other forms of informal labour that makes a distinction between sex work and other work a rather simplistic observation. There are several tracks of labour and sex work that can get formed as shown in Table 1.9.

Table 1.9 Segregation of women based on sequence of entry into sex work

<table>
<tr><td rowspan="6">Women in sex work (n=3000)</td><td colspan="3">Overlaps between labour markets and sex work in the course of life spans</td><td>Work experience other than sex work</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="4">Women with experience of labour markets (n=1488)</td><td rowspan="2">Labour market entry before sex work (n=1395)</td><td>Labour form continued (n=315)</td><td rowspan="4">Yes</td></tr>
<tr><td>Labour form discontinued (n=1080)</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Labour market entity alongside sex work (n=93)</td><td>Labour form continued</td></tr>
<tr><td>Labour form discontinued</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Women with dual work identities presently but sequence of entry unknown (n=326)</td><td>Yes</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2" rowspan="2">Women entering directly into sex work (n=1158)</td><td>Working solely as sex workers (n=967)</td><td>No</td></tr>
<tr><td>Labour market entry after being in sex work (n=191)</td><td>Yes</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">No reply (n=28)</td><td></td><td></td></tr>
</table>

To briefly describe the above diagram, the survey sample of 3000 women was segregated into the categories of (a) those who have worked in the labour markets and (b) those who have entered directly into sex work. The two variables of age of entry into labour and age of entry into sex work were used to locate which activity preceded the other. From this exercise, we found 1488 women had worked before entering sex work while there were 1158 women who entered sex work directly. The 1488 women with work histories were first classified in terms of labour entry preceding sex work (n=1395) and those who entered the labour markets simultaneously to entering sex work (n=93). Further they were classified on the basis of whether they discarded the labour market activity and became a full-time sex worker (n=1080) or whether the activity continued to exist alongside (n=315).

2 Women with prior experience of work

For the women with work profiles, our endeavour was to locate them in the context of the informal labour markets where they engaged in myriad activities. Here, they were part of a fairly larger bracket of women who toiled in unskilled manufacturing or services for extremely poor wages. To put this in a national perspective by quoting from the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector's report on the informal economy in India (2009: 23), female participation in the informal sector (91.3 per cent) is on the higher side compared with male participation (84 per cent). In addition, the wage structures are also skewed against women, as they get only Rs 32.4 per day compared with Rs 51.3 for males. Taking this further with some more statistics from Ghose (2004), the urban daily wage rate for a female casual labourer in 2000 was as low as Rs 38.2 on average; in the case of a rural female casual labourer, it was even lower with an average of Rs 29.4. The casual female labourer finds work only for 4.3 days per week. As a casual labourer, a woman can hope to earn Rs 657 per month in urban areas and Rs 506 in rural areas, if she is fortunate to find any work at all. So even within the context of the informal markets, there is a certain laddering and girls/women remain particularly vulnerable to the vagaries of income fluctuations. Or as argued in National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector, 2007: 11, 'the situation becomes further debilitating when gender disadvantage is superimposed on other disadvantages such as low social status, low education and rural

location'. (As seen in Table 2.7, women start entering into these markets at an early age and the influence it has on shaping their later economic decisions cannot be undermined).

Over the years, there has been an increasing 'feminisation of labour', particularly linked with the increase in flexible labour options (see Standing 1989). But this has to be juxtaposed with the fact that in the gender segregation of occupations, certain occupations have always had a female bias and these remain integral parts of the informal economy. In the context of Asia-Pacific, it could be observed from Anker (2001: 284-85) that females have a large presence in the services sector, where the female dominated occupational groups comprise of – maids and related workers, building caretakers, launderers, hairdressers/barbers, cooks, waiters and caretaking. As a (happy) coincidence, most of these professions feature quite prominently as past experiences of work for the women in the survey as well. The skills required for entry into these work forms are minimal. In the national classification of occupations, the activities undertaken by the women fall into the category of 'elementary occupations' (Directorate General of Employment and Training 2004) – which consist of simple and routine tasks which mainly require the use of handheld tools, often some physical effort and require skill at the first skill level (or very primary in nature). For a better segregation of the activities undertaken by the women, we place them into the different columns of the following matrix that provides a conceptual framework for informal employment.

Table 2.1 Segregation of informal jobs of the women in the survey

Production units by type	**Jobs by status in employment**								
	Own account workers		Employers		Contributing family workers	Employees		Member's of producer co-operatives	
	Informal	Formal	Informal	Formal	Informal	Informal	Formal	Informal	Formal
Formal Sector Enterprises						Private jobs, Daily wage earners			
Informal Sector Enterprises	Street vendors, Home based/ small scale mfg, nursing, scrap Collection		Beauty parlours		Agriculture, Petty businesses	Private jobs, Daily wage earners, Cleaners and Helpers			
Households	Agricultural activities					Domestic Workers			

(Source: National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector 2008. The segregation has been done making use of descriptions of the categories in Hussmans 1993; Unni 2006; United Nations 2010)

The nature of jobs undertaken is intrinsically connected with their personal backgrounds which also manifest in poor educational qualifications. Tables 2.2, 2.3, 2.4 and 2.5 provide us with a glimpse into the personal backgrounds of the respondents, and also help us conjecture why they had to enter the labour markets. They also give us a hint on the nature of job opportunities open to them. Coupled with poor educational backgrounds and low skill sets, the work options available for them could only be those in the informal sector. Table 2.6 provides an overview of the jobs undertaken. The list is not exhaustive but serves to showcase the diversity of occupations.

Table 2.2 Family background by location

Rural	Urban	No Reply	Total
876	436	83	1395
62.8%	31.3%	5.9%	100%

Table 2.3 Family background by activity

Activity	Frequencies	Percentages
Business	180	12.9
Daily wage earners	436	31.3
Farmers	329	23.6
Service	98	7.0
Working class	183	13.1
No Reply	169	12.1
Total	**1395**	**100%**

Table 2.4 Family background by incomes

Family background	Frequencies	Percentages
Poor	952	68.2
Middle Class	291	20.8
Upper class	12	0.9
No Reply	140	10.0
Total	**1395**	**100%**

Table 2.5 Educational backgrounds of the women

Education	Frequencies	Percentages
0-No schooling	760	54.5
1-Primary (Upto Class 4)	117	8.4
2-Secondary (Upto Class 7)	177	12.7
3-Upto class X	122	8.7
4-Upto Class XII	97	7.0
5-College	22	1.6
6-Beyond College	9	.6
No reply	91	6.5
Total	**1395**	**100%**

Table 2.6 Diversity of informal labour occupations undertaken by sex workers formerly

Zones	Work profiles
Common avenues of work across all zones	House maid, cooks, daily wage labourer/ earner, construction labour, farming/agricultural labour, liquor selling/making, running petty shops (tea, pan, eggs, cloth, grocery), working in informal or at times in the formal sector (in dhabas, godowns, brothels, factories as cleaners, sweepers, helpers), selling a host of miscellaneous goods (salesgirls, door-to-door selling of bangles, candles, socks/hankies in trains, old clothes, traditional medicines, wood, pan/bidi, toys, fruits/vegetables), beauty parlour/beauticians, tailoring/stitching/ embroidery
Some region specific occupations	
Uttar Pradesh, Chandigarh	Marriage related activities (cooking, dancing)
Nagaland	Booze joints
Maharashtra	Bar Girls (from Mumbai), *tamasha*
Andhra Pradesh/Karnataka	Selling flowers, garment industry labour

These experiences could be put in the context of Sen's (2000) framework of capabilities and freedom, where capabilities are, Sen argues, in themselves the kind of freedom that permits people to pursue different kinds of options in their lives. For the women in the labour markets, their tryst with the labour markets are crucial in their exploration of different combinations of functioning that they can manage within their limited circumstances. The realisation of what they are capable of pursuing as labour and achieving in terms of incomes is deriving from these stints. They remain out of the folds of the educational structures from an early age, as seen in the large numbers of those with no schooling at all (Table 2.5) and that has a bearing on the kind of jobs they can get. So the initial understanding of freedom is a restricted one to begin with, on the lines of 'unfreedoms' that Sen mentions.

As seen from Table 2.7, there is a pattern to the sequential emergence of jobs over age. Agricultural labour and working as domestic servants start at a much earlier age, between 6-10 years of age. So do some activities like childminding and scrap collection, but on a smaller scale. These are either family based occupations or remain parental occupations into which the girls may get drawn for assistance. A second batch of girls gets in at the turn of the teens, some of them featuring in more labour intensive activities like daily wage earning or construction labour while others start fitting into a host of low-end jobs such as cleaners, sweepers, helpers, petty selling etc. The frequency of cases shows a steep surge in the phase already. While some activities like agricultural work or babysitting show an early peaking, some of the more niche activities like tailoring, working in beauty parlours or nursing/patient care start at a later age. In the sample, the largest category of prior work was that of domestic servants, followed by daily wage earners and those in petty services in formal/informal establishments.

Some of these activities involving them in households or as contributing family workers may not always hold the negative connotation of child labour (as rightly argued by Basu and Van Hoang Pham 1998). However, some of the girls do have a history of working in areas that are part of the 13 occupations and 65 processes banned under child labour regulations as per The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act 1986. There include occupations like domestic servants and working at *dhabas*, hotels etc and processes like the building and construction industry, textile related activities including weaving, *beedi* and *agarbatti* making etc. The purpose of illustrating this is only to highlight that before they became sex workers and fell on the wrong side of the law, they were the violated against.

Tables 2.8, 2.9, 2.10 and 2.11 provide a segregation of occupations according to the family and educational backgrounds of the respondents. Some of the important points that could be discerned are as follows:

- Close to 70 per cent of the respondents came from a poor background (Table 2.8). Here, we did not place any income ranges in the questionnaire but rather relied on the girls' own perceptions of their natal families. It is the experience of poverty that we wanted to capture rather than create any segregation within them.
- While 876 girls came from rural backgrounds, only 118 actually engage with agricultural activities while the majority were into non-agricultural economic activities. Agricultural wages being lower than the non-agricultural could be one factor. But the two categories of agricultural labour (on own land) and daily wage earner (which could also be in agriculture) are not very demarcated in the survey. If the latter is the case, there could be an element of migration involved, considering the seasonality and irregularity of farm labour leading to alternative sites of work. Most of the girls came from households that were into farming or daily wage earning.
- There is a high rate of illiteracy or very marginal schooling in the case of most of the girls involved. In an exercise on the mapping of illiterates, Govinda and Biswal (2005: 21) report of the link between poverty and illiteracy, going on to mention that illiteracy rates remain particularly high in agricultural and casual labour households. This medley of combinations can be spotted across the tables as well. As many as 760 girls (out of 1395) having no schooling. These are the ones which also engage in unskilled, labour-intensive jobs. Those who have attended school at least until secondary, find themselves in the services – jobs in the informal or formal sectors. Some of the categories where education levels were on the higher side included tailoring/stitching and teaching (the latter for obvious reasons).

Table 2.7: Emergence of labour forms over age

Work avenues	**Age ranges**							**Total**
	6 or less	**7-10**	**11-14**	**15-18**	**19-22**	**23-26**	**27 and above**	
Agricultural labour	2	55	42	40	20	3	2	164
Small scale/Home-based manufacturing	0	6	3	8	1	2	0	20
Small scale business	0	6	10	62	38	14	4	134
Daily wage earner	0	16	19	47	26	5	2	115
Construction labour	0	4	13	23	14	7	1	62
Domestic work/House maid	1	54	65	106	55	13	6	300
Child minding/Baby sitting	0	4	9	1	0	0	0	14
Scrap collection	1	4	2	0	2	0	0	9
Cleaner/Sweeper	0	0	9	11	7	2	0	29
Liquor selling/producing	0	0	7	23	7	5	0	42
Dancing/performing activities	0	8	3	8	2	0	0	21
Petty selling	0	11	10	28	22	11	2	84
Service jobs in formal/informal establishments	0	8	11	66	43	16	4	148
Tailoring	0	0	7	24	17	4	5	57
Teaching/Tuitions	0	0	1	8	7	2	1	19
Others-all	1	29	24	43	41	15	9	162
Beauty parlours	*0*	*0*	*1*	*9*	*7*	*0*	*2*	*19*
Hotel/Restaurant/Dhaba	*0*	*2*	*0*	*1*	*0*	*2*	*1*	*6*
Nursing/patient care (including aaya and dai)	*0*	*1*	*0*	*7*	*8*	*1*	*2*	*19*
No reply								15

Table 2.8 Present occupations segregated according to the area of natal family residence of respondents

	Natal Family background			
Occupations	**Rural**	**Urban**	**No reply**	**Total**
Agriculture/Farming	118	41	5	164
Small scale/Home based manufacturing	8	9	3	20
Small scale business	60	64	10	134
Daily wage earner	75	30	10	115
Labour-construction	43	18	1	62
Domestic work/House maid	217	71	12	300
Beauty parlour	12	7	0	19
Child minding	12	2	0	14
Cleaner/Sweeper	19	9	1	29
Hotel/restaurant related activities	3	3	0	6
Liquor related activities	33	9	0	42
Nursing/Patient care	13	6	0	19
Performance activities	7	13	1	21
Petty selling	52	24	8	84
Private jobs-formal/informal	69	65	14	148
Scrap collection	4	4	1	9
Tailoring/Stitching/Embroidery	25	22	10	57
Teaching	7	11	1	19
Others	90	23	5	118
No reply	9	5	1	15
Total	**876**	**436**	**83**	**1395**

Table 2.9 Present occupations segregated according to the background family occupations of respondents

	Natal family background						Total
Occupations	**Farmers**	**Daily wage earners**	**Working class**	**Service**	**Business**	**No reply**	
Agriculture/Farming	74	44	13	3	7	23	164
Small scale/Home based manufacturing	3	6	2	2	4	3	20
Small scale business	27	10	8	16	57	16	134
Daily wage earner	21	57	7	7	7	16	115
Labour-construction	12	31	8	1	3	7	62
Domestic work/House maid	70	128	46	13	22	21	300
Beauty parlour	4	2	4	2	5	2	19
Child minding	2	1	5	0	0	6	14
Cleaner/Sweeper	6	11	4	2	5	1	29
Hotel/restaurant related activities	2	0	0	0	0	4	6
Liquor related activities	23	4	1	2	11	1	42
Nursing/Patient care	2	5	5	2	4	1	19
Performance activities	4	6	0	1	5	5	21
Petty selling	16	13	10	7	11	27	84
Private jobs-formal/informal	21	49	19	24	15	20	148
Scrap collection	1	3	4	0	1	0	9
Tailoring/Stitching/Embroidery	11	9	13	9	7	8	57
Teaching	3	4	3	4	5	0	19
Other	22	47	29	2	11	7	118
No reply	5	6	2	1	0	1	15
Total	**329**	**436**	**183**	**98**	**180**	**167**	**1395**

Table 2.10 Present occupations segregated according to the perceived income levels of natal families of respondents

	Family background				Total
Occupations	**Poor**	**Middle Class**	**Upper Class**	**No reply**	
Agriculture/Farming	126	27	2	9	164
Small scale/Home based manufacturing	11	7	0	2	20
Small scale business	74	48	1	11	134
Daily wage earner	93	9	2	11	115
Labour-construction	50	2	0	10	62
Domestic work/House maid	242	30	2	26	300
Beauty parlour	6	12	1	0	19
Child minding	13	1	0	0	14
Cleaner/Sweeper	23	5	0	1	29
Hotel/restaurant related activities	3	0	0	3	6
Liquor related activities	19	19	0	4	42
Nursing/Patient care	12	6	1	0	19
Performance activities	16	5	0	0	21
Petty selling	46	14	0	24	84
Private jobs-formal/informal	79	50	2	17	148
Scrap collection	7	1	0	1	9
Tailoring/Stitching/Embroidery	28	22	-	7	57
Teaching	6	11	1	1	19
Other	86	20	0	12	118
No reply	12	2	0	1	15
Total	**952**	**285**	**12**	**140**	**1395**

Table 2.11 Present occupations segregated according to educational backgrounds

Occupations	Educational Backgrounds								Total
	No Schooling	Primary	Secondary	Up to-Class X	Up to Class XII	College	Beyond College	No reply	
Agriculture/Farming	104	15	15	5	9	2	0	14	**164**
Small scale/Home based Manufacturing	9	4	3	2	1	0	0	1	**20**
Small scale business	51	6	29	31	7	4	1	5	**134**
Daily wage earner	84	4	13	4	4	0	0	6	**115**
Labour-construction	42	5	6	1	2	0	0	6	**62**
Domestic work/House maid	200	23	31	15	7	1	2	21	**300**
Beauty Parlour	5	4	4	0	4	0	1	1	**19**
Child minding	12	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	**14**
Cleaner/Sweeper	20	1	3	0	2	0	0	3	**29**
Hotel/restaurant related Activities	2	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	**6**
Liquor related activities	9	2	10	8	10	0	0	3	**42**
Nursing/Patient care	10	3	3	1	0	1	0	1	**19**
Performance activities	15	2	2	0	1	0	0	1	**21**
Petty selling	48	13	7	10	2	0	0	4	**84**
Private jobs-formal/informal	49	12	26	20	19	7	1	14	**148**
Scrap collection	7	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	**9**
Tailoring/Stitching/Embroidery	14	7	11	9	9	1	0	6	**57**
Teaching	0	0	3	4	5	6	1	0	**19**
Others	67	12	9	12	11	0	3	4	**118**
No reply	12	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	**15**
Total	**760**	**117**	**177**	**122**	**97**	**22**	**9**	**91**	**1395**

2.1 Work in the informal labour markets, reasons for leaving and entry into sex work

Most of the women who enter sex work come with a history of very poor incomes in the labour markets. As can be seen from Table 2.12, the median values of incomes across most of the occupations hover in the range of Rs 500-1000 per month. In agriculture, the modal value is even less, falling below Rs 500. This is in line with the Deaton and Dreze (2002) argument that agricultural wages are an important indicator of poverty in their own right, firstly because they would show a strong correlation with standard poverty indices but also from the supply side perspective, where agricultural wages would form the 'reservation wages', the minimum at which the labourers would work.

The range of incomes obtained from the survey for a host of informal, low-end activities engaged in by the women can be corroborated using a host of external studies in this regard. Starting with the largest category of domestic workers, Chakravarty and Chakravarty (2008: 99) provide an illustrative example of domestic girl children in the urban centres of West Bengal. Citing from reports, they observe that

> …almost all of them are either illiterate or have gone to school cursorily. Most of them received monitory remuneration below Rs 200 and up to maximum of Rs 500 per month and they work approximately 12 to 18 hours a day attending to all sorts of chores such as caring for babies/infants, attending to the elderly, cleaning, washing and sometimes cooking as well. They work for long hours at a stretch with no rest.

On a similar note, with respect to the working conditions, Hamid (2006) speaks of how 'the same work, say, cleaning cooking and washing can fetch a woman Rs 2500 or Rs 250, depending on the locality she works in, not on the amount of work or whether the employing family consists of two people or twelve'.

Basu and Thomas (2009), in their study on women's daily lives in the informal markets in Mumbai (India), provide cases studies of four types of informal employment relations: domestic workers, street vendors, construction workers and home-based workers. The monthly incomes derived by the women are Rs 1500 for a domestic worker for 6-7 hours of work every day (the range of her peers being Rs 500 to Rs 5000), Rs 1000 for a street vendor for 8-9 hours of work every day (the range of her peers being Rs 500 to Rs 5000), Rs 1500 for a construction worker for typically 9 hours of work every day (the range of her peers being Rs 500 to Rs 3500) and Rs 500 for a home-based worker (the range of her peers being Rs 500 to Rs 2000). The National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (2007) provides a comparative assessment of incomes and conditions of work for street vendors across seven cities where daily incomes for women were Rs 33 (Patna), Rs 35 (Bhubaneshwar), Rs 40 (Bangalore), Rs 40 (Imphal), Rs 50 (Ahmedabad), Rs 40 (Mumbai) and Rs 35 (Kolkata). For construction work, one can also refer to a SEWA study from 2000, where incomes for women in Ahmedabad averaged Rs 1815, involved considerable physical strain and fatigue and also involved travelling long distances (see SEWA 2000a: 4-5).

Doane (2007: 7-8) provides an overview of the informal home-based workers as segregated into sub-contracted piece rate workers, self-employed workers or as a combination of the two. They provide some figures for the range of monthly incomes (in dollar terms) in India based on lean period and peak period incomes respectively – the income range for garments was 15.67-25.55; for weaving, 19.21-28.33 and for *agarbatti* rolling, 6.71-11.00 dollars. Incomes in *agarbatti* rolling can be further substantiated using SEWA (2000b), where the rates for rolling a thousand *agarbatti* were as low as Rs 4-5. Taking the case of scrap

collection or ragpicking, another large informal activity described as ‘at the bottom of the informal sector economy’ (Bremen 2010), the incomes are paltry coupled with appalling working conditions (see Gill 2010 for a detailed study of the chains involved in scavenging and waste collection).

In the face of strenuous labour, it is not surprising that there is a constant churning in the participants. Table 2.13 provides a summary of the reasons provided by the women for leaving the labour market jobs.

Table 2.12 Occupational avenues and monthly income ranges

Work avenues	**Income ranges (Rs)**								**Total**
	Less than 500	501-1000	1001-1500	1501-2000	2001-3000	3001-5000	5001 and above	No Reply	
Agricultural labour	63	50	13	14	3	2	3	16	164
Small scale/Home-based manufacturing	6	9	2	1	2	-	-	-	20
Small scale business	7	55	24	30	9	4	2	3	134
Daily wage earner	15	65	21	8	2	1	1	2	115
Construction labour	14	26	6	9	5	-	-	2	62
Domestic work/House maid	117	137	15	8	4	1	-	18	300
Child minding/Baby sitting	6	6	-	-	-	-	-	2	14
Scrap collection	4	5	-	-	-	-	-	-	9
Cleaner/Sweeper	7	15	3	-	-	1	-	3	29
Liquor selling/producing	7	9	1	6	1	7	9	2	42
Dancing/performing activities	1	4	1	2	2	3	5	3	21
Petty selling	8	26	18	9	14	1	-	8	84
Services-formal/informal establishments	32	47	17	19	16	10	1	6	148
Tailoring	8	17	12	5	6	5	3	1	57
Teaching/Tuitions	3	6	2	3	1	3	1	-	19
Others	32	59	21	20	7	4	1	18	162
- Beauty parlours	*2*	*5*	*1*	*3*	*5*	*3*	-	-	*19*
- Hotel/ Restaurant/ Dhaba	*2*	-	*1*	*1*	-	*1*	-	*1*	*6*
- Nursing/patient care (including aaya and dai)	*3*	*11*	*2*	*3*	-	-	-	-	*19*
No reply	6	6	-	1	-	-	1	1	15
Total	**336**	**542**	**156**	**135**	**72**	**42**	**27**	**85**	**1395**

Table 2.13 Reasons for leaving jobs in the labour market

Job status	Reasons for leaving	Frequencies
Continuing		315
Left the job		953
	Economic reasons	394
	Work related reasons/Working conditions	103
	Harassment/Abuse	110
	Marriage	116
	Fell in love	17
	Migration	27
	Natal family related problems	49
	Personal/ Marital problems	45
	Other reasons	92
No reply		127
Total		**1395**

As can be noted from Table 2.13, there is an overwhelming presence of economic reasons for women to have left their jobs in the informal markets – comprising of responses such as low pay, insufficient salary, no profit in business, no regular work, seasonal work, not getting money even after work, could not run home with that income, *is kaam se pet nahi bharta* etc. The other set of more positive responses, but also with economic underpinnings were those related to seeking better incomes - wanted more money and better living conditions for family, shifted to another job in search of better incomes etc. However, the categories in the table cannot be considered quite mutually exclusive. For instance, economic reasons for leaving a job could be combined with other reasons as could be gleaned from the responses. Following is a glimpse of how the reasons can get reinforced between themselves:

- Working conditions (hard physical work and low pay, hard work from morning to evening, had to spend a lot of time for earning money as in case of *beedi/agarbatti* rolling, had to travel long distances as in case of wood-cutting or water-fetching, poor income plus not good for health, less rate for crafts combined with eyes and body strain in making them)
- Personal or family based reasons (poor income combined with parents not sending to work after puberty, father/husband taking away all my money)
- Migration (shifted to dancing in UP and Bihar for more money, migrated along with parents/husband in search of better livelihoods)
- Harassment (poor income coupled with physical/sexual abuse, was asked to have sex to keep my job)

It is clear that poor economic returns, coupled with the fact that the incomes tend to be rather sticky in the informal markets, would form an important factor in leaving those jobs. But as stated above, there is also a greater vulnerability to abuse and harassment in these employment avenues. Except for home-based workers, or domestic workers who come in contact only with households, the other occupations fall in the public domain, exposing the girls to violence/ill treatment/harassment/exploitation. Even for domestic workers, cases of abuse are not uncommon (see Chakravarty and Chakravarty 2008). Some of the problems of women working as street vendors include lack of protection, lack of toilets, problems from police, harassment from police and municipal officers and insecure environment (National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector 2007). These problems have an uncanny resemblance to those faced by sex workers as well, particularly problems from police, harassment and insecure working environment (see Yadav 2008).

As can be seen from Figure 2.1, women start entering sex work significantly in the 15-18 years age group, peaking further at 19-22 years. But when placed in the context of work histories, this experience emerges later compared with that of other labour activities.

Figure 2.1 Frequencies of ages for entry into the labour markets and into sex work

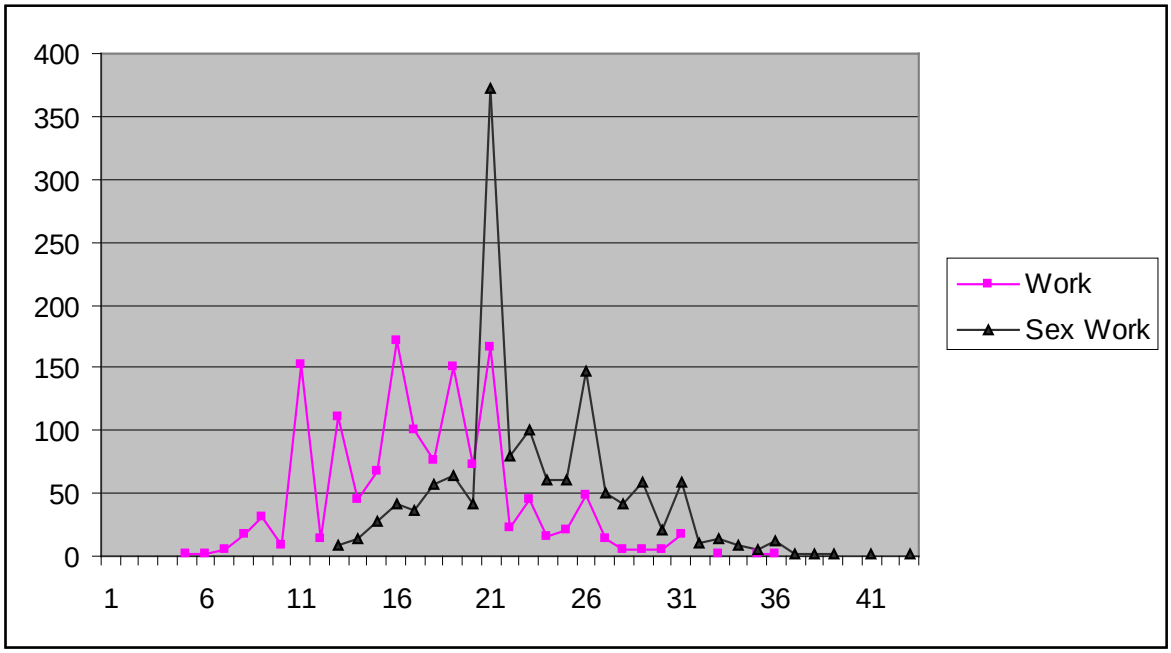

Table 2.14 provides a comparison between incomes in the labour markets and those derived from sex work. It can be inferred that the same economic reasons that push women out of the labour market are also the ones which make sex work an economically feasible option. The modal incomes in sex work are in a higher bracket of Rs. 1000-3000, with substantial numbers in the range of Rs. 3000-5000 (which also forms the median value). As can also be seen, the incomes continue to persist in the higher age groups as well.

Table 2.14 Monthly incomes in other labour markets versus sex work

Labour markets Incomes (Rs)	**Age Ranges (in years)**									**Total**
	6 or less	**7-10**	**11-14**	**15-18**	**19-22**	**23-26**	**27 -30**	**31 and above**		
Less than 500	3	83	85	92	50	18	4	1		336
501-1000	2	69	82	196	135	41	17	0		542
(up to 1000)	**5**	**152**	**167**	**288**	**185**	**59**	**21**	**1**		878
1001-1500	1	9	21	60	49	14	1	1		156
1501-2000	0	11	13	67	26	12	5	1		135
(1001- 2000)	**1**	**20**	**34**	**127**	**75**	**26**	**6**	**2**		291
2001-3000	**0**	**7**	**7**	**33**	**15**	**6**	**4**	**0**		**72**
3001-5000	**0**	**1**	**4**	**20**	**11**	**4**	**2**	**0**		**42**
5001 and above	**0**	**4**	**2**	**13**	**5**	**3**	**0**	**0**		**27**
No reply	**2**	**26**	**23**	**18**	**14**	**1**	**1**	**0**		**85**
Total	**8**	**210**	**237**	**499**	**305**	**599**	**34**	**3**		**1395**
Sex Work Incomes (Rs)	**Age Ranges (in years)**									
	6 or less	**7-10**	**11-14**	**15-18**	**19-22**	**23-26**	**27 -30**	**31-34**	**35 and above**	
Up to 1000	-	-	3	20	39	9	13	0	2	86
1001-3000	-	-	23	69	197	151	80	23	6	549
3001-5000	-	-	14	62	154	103	62	6	5	406
5001-7000	-	-	4	17	56	30	19	3	4	133
7001-10000	-	-	2	16	37	16	5	0	0	76
10001-15000	-	-	0	6	16	6	1	1	0	30
15001 and above	-	-	0	3	3	2	0	1	0	9
No reply	-	-	3	7	89	2	1	4	0	106
Total	**-**	**-**	**49**	**200**	**591**	**319**	**181**	**38**	**17**	**1395**

3 Women entering sex work directly

As shown in Table 1.9, there were 1158 women who had come into sex work directly without any channelling through the labour markets. In this section, we provide some of the analyses related to this chunk of women and go on to compare them with those coming from the labour markets. Tables 3.1, 3.2, 3.3 and 3.4 provide a snapshot of the family backgrounds of these women. Some of the important observations are as follows:

- The rural-urban compositions of the direct sex workers are more or less similar to those who have come via labour markets, although with a slightly lower share of those from rural backgrounds.
- The distribution of income backgrounds has a lower share of the poor class, getting adjusted in a higher share of those from middle class backgrounds.
- The number of respondents coming from primary occupations like agriculture/daily wage earning is lower, while correspondingly, the share of those coming from (petty) business backgrounds is significantly higher.
- The educational backgrounds show a contrast with the labour market entrants. Even while the group of those with no schooling is fairly large, there is a greater presence at the higher rungs of education particularly those completing Class XII.

In his classic work on theorising the allocation of time by individuals, Becker (1965) states in his introduction of how time spent at work has secularly declined, partly because young people have increasingly delayed entering the labour markets by being in school for a longer time. Putting this argument in the context of our respondents, it can be inferred that coinciding with the earlier chunk of women entering into the labour markets, the directly entering sex workers were attending school.

Table 3.1 Family background by location of those who entered into sex work directly

Rural	Urban	No Reply	Total
668	417	73	1158
57.68 %	36.01 %	6.3 %	100%

Table 3.2 Family background by activity

Family background	Frequencies	Percentages
Business	235	20.2
Daily wage earners	285	24.6
Farmers	222	19.7
Service	118	10.1
Working class	191	16.4
No Reply	103	8.8
Total	**1158**	**100%**

Table 3.3 Family background by incomes

Family background - 3	Frequencies	Percentages
Poor	694	59.9
Middle Class	360	31.0
Upper class	13	1.1
No Reply	88	7.5
Total	**1158**	**100%**

Table 3.4 Educational backgrounds of the women

Education	Frequencies	Percentages
0-No schooling	553	47.8
1-Primary (Up to Class 4)	71	6.1
2-Secondary (Up to Class 7)	168	14.5
3-Upto class X	61	5.3
4-Upto Class XII	156	13.5
5-College	35	3.0
6-Beyond College	8	.7
No reply	106	9.2
Total	**1158**	**100%**

3.1 Comparisons between the direct sex workers and the labour market routed ones

Mode of entry: In terms of the mode of entry, the majority of women irrespective of the channel of entry have mentioned coming into sex work by themselves (Table 3.5). In the qualitative responses to why they did so, economic reasons again come to the fore. This aspect of coming into sex work for money needs to be subtly differentiated across the two basic divisions we have made so far. In the case of those coming from the labour markets, economic reasons would constitute the 'search for better incomes'. They have experienced poverty of incomes in the labour markets and have an immediate referential framework which they can compare for themselves. On the other hand, when the direct entrants mention coming into it for the sake of money, they are basically looking at deriving some livelihood income out of it.

The categories of forced/sold/cheated are roughly similar across the two sets of women, involving an element of abuse; 22.1 per cent for direct entrants and 24.8 per cent for the labour market ones. The sold category of women is much higher in the case of the direct entrants. The agents involved in this abuse, as mentioned by the women were husbands, lovers, friends and acquaintances. The numbers of strangers is on the lower side. In this context, there is a need to clarify that some of the women even while sold, have registered themselves in the category of the cheated. So the possibility of internal variations of numbers between the forced, sold and cheated would exist depending upon the perception carried by the women of the event.

Distribution of ages of entry: The directly entering women show the highest frequency in the 19-22 age group (Table 3.5), comprising a large 60.27 per cent. Some of these go on to work in the labour markets later, where the highest frequencies are in the 23-26 years age group. On the other hand, women from the labour markets also enter sex work in the age group of 19-22 years though they continue to have high frequencies of entry at later ages as well (23-

26 years and 27-30 years). The age-group of 19-22 years constitutes only 42 per cent of entrants.

As seen from Table 3.6, those who have entered the labour market earlier continue to be in it for a longer time. The modal values of the number of years in the labour market keep shrinking with a delay in the entry into the labour markets. This would imply that those who get into the labour markets around the age of say 10-12 years would continue to work in them for 8-10 years before getting into sex work. On the other hand, those who entered later, around say 15-16 years of age also get into sex work sooner.

Income comparisons: While the modal incomes derived by the direct sex workers are in the Rs 1000-3000 category, the median values are in the Rs 3000-5000 range. This is similar to the labour market women. The direct entrants also feature prominently in the Rs 5000-7000 range.

Table 3.5 Comparisons of mode of entry into sex work

	Mode of entry into sex work						**Total**
	Myself	**Forced**	**Sold**	**Cheated**	**Devadasi**	**No reply**	
Women entering directly into sex work (n=1158)	805	83	104	68	31	67	1158
% of total	69.5	7.2	9.0	5.9	2.7		
Women with experience of labour markets before or alongside sex work (n=1488)	1086	132	64	172	45	29	1488
% of total	73.0	8.9	4.3	11.6	3.0		
Women with work identities but sequence of entry unknown (n=326)	259	23	9	30	2	3	326
% of total	79.4%	7.1%	2.8%	9.2%	0.6%		

Table 3.6 Distribution of ages for entry into labour markets and into sex work

	Age Ranges (in years)										**Total**
	6 or less	7-10	11-14	15-18	19-22	23-26	27 -30	31-34	35 and above	No reply	
Women entering after having worked before (n=1395)											
a. Entry into labour markets	8	210	237	499	305	599	34	3	-	-	1395
b. Entry into sex work	-	-	49	200	591	319	181	38	17	-	1395
Women entering sex work directly (n=1158)											
a. Entry into sex work	-	-	50	171	698	126	57	9	5	42	1158
b. Entry into labour markets later (subset, n=191)			-	8	47	81	41	5	9	**-**	191
Total	**8**	**210**	**336**	**878**	**1641**	**1125**	**313**	**55**	**31**	**42**	

Table 3.7 Years of participation for women with experience of labour markets and women entering directly

Years of work	**Age ranges for entry into labour markets/sex work (in years)**										**Total**
	6 or less	7-10	11-14	15-18	19-22	23-26	27 -30	31-34	35 and above	No reply	
1.a. For women with work histories, number of years in labour markets before entering sex work (n=1395)											
Up to 2	0	3	21	129	103	48	18	2	1	0	325
3-4	0	25	41	133	83	30	7	0	0	0	319
5-6	0	32	47	113	73	14	9	0	0	0	288
7-8	2	34	67	41	23	6	0	0	0	0	173
9-10	4	52	15	36	17	1	0	0	0	0	125
11-15	0	46	32	40	5	0	0	0	0	0	123
16 and above	2	18	14	7	1	0	0	0	0	0	42
Total	**8**	**210**	**237**	**499**	**305**	**99**	**34**	**2**	**1**	**0**	**1395**

1.b. For women with work histories, number of years post entry into sex work (n=1395)											
Up to 2	0	0	0	30	115	50	34	14	4	0	247
3-4	0	0	1	29	82	68	25	8	2	0	215
5-6	0	0	3	22	96	68	39	6	6	0	240
7-8	0	0	7	15	76	29	25	5	0	0	157
9-10	0	0	3	21	62	43	29	2	2	0	162
11-15	0	0	8	41	100	44	20	3	2	0	218
16 and above	0	0	27	42	60	16	9	0	1	0	155
No reply	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Total	**0**	**0**	**49**	**200**	**591**	**319**	**181**	**38**	**17**	**0**	**1395**
Years of work	**Age ranges for entry into sex work (in years)**										**Total**
	6 or less	7-10	11-14	15-18	19-22	23-26	27 -30	31-34	35 and above	No reply	
2. For women entering sex work directly, number of years in sex work (n=1158)											
Up to 2	0	0	4	32	130	21	4	2	0	0	**193**
3-4	0	0	3	27	79	24	10	2	1	0	**146**
5-6	0	0	11	17	79	24	12	2	1	0	**146**
7-8	0	0	3	10	69	17	6	3	0	0	**108**
9-10	0	0	5	17	73	17	8	0	0	0	**120**
11-15	0	0	10	28	127	13	14	0	1	0	**193**
16 and above	0	0	14	40	140	10	3	0	2	0	**209**
No reply	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	42	**43**
Total	**0**	**0**	**50**	**171**	**698**	**126**	**57**	**9**	**5**	**42**	**1158**

Table 3.8 Sex work income comparisons between those who came directly and those who came after working in alternative markets

Sex Work Incomes (Rs)	**Age Ranges (in years)**										Total
	6 or less	7-10	11-14	15-18	19-22	23-26	27 -30	31-34	35 and above	No reply	
Women with experience in labour markets:											
Up to 1000	-	-	3	20	39	9	13	0	2	0	86
1001-3000	-	-	23	69	**197**	**151**	80	23	6	0	549
3001-5000	-	-	14	62	**154**	**103**	62	6	5	0	406
5001-7000	-	-	4	17	56	30	19	3	4	0	133
7001-10000	-	-	2	16	37	16	5	0	0	0	76
10001-15000	-	-	0	6	16	6	1	1	0	0	30
15001 and above	-	-	0	3	3	2	0	1	0	0	9
No reply	-	-	3	7	89	2	1	4	0	0	106
Total	**-**	**-**	**49**	**200**	**591**	**319**	**181**	**38**	**17**	**0**	**1395**

Sex Work Incomes (Rs)	**Age Ranges (in years)**										**Total**
	6 or less	7-10	11-14	15-18	19-22	23-26	27 -30	31-34	35 and above	No reply	
Women coming directly into sex work:											
Up to 1000	-	-	1	8	41	3	3	0	0	1	57
1001-3000	-	-	19	52	**159**	54	24	6	0	4	318
3001-5000	-	-	15	41	**138**	46	21	2	2	1	266
5001-7000	-	-	3	28	**108**	15	7	0	2	1	164
7001-10000	-	-	4	31	44	1	2	0	0	1	83
10001-15000	-	-	2	5	11	1	0	0	0	0	19
15001 and above	-	-	1	3	4	1	0	1	0	0	10
Income No reply	-	-	5	3	193	5	0	0	1	34	241
Total	**-**	**-**	**50**	**171**	**698**	**126**	**57**	**9**	**5**	**42**	**1158**

Table 3.9 Site based variations in income of sex workers

Sex work incomes (Rs)	Site based distribution of incomes (n=3000)			
	Street based	**Brothel based**	**Lodge based**	**Home based**
Up to 1000	67	40	76	20
1001-3000	354	214	328	190
3001-5000	210	230	316	142
5001-7000	81	76	152	51
7001-10000	37	**98**	72	25
10001-15000	12	18	20	12
15001 and above	5	8	10	6
No reply	193	153	150	58
Total	**959**	**837**	**1124**	**504**

Site based variations: Table 3.9 provides a distribution of incomes across sites from where sex workers operate. In fact, a distinct feature of the survey has been to capture women from diverse sites. The categories however, are not mutually exclusive. Particularly, there are multiple answers ticked by women across street, lodge and home-based categories. The incomes across the categories do not differ significantly. The feature that has to be noted here is that brothel-based women (and even those who work from lodges as a permanent fixture there) have to part with a significant share of their incomes (50 per cent of earnings as mentioned in several cases) to the brothel owners, lodge owners etc. On the other hand, those operating from streets/lodges or from home don't have this sharing mechanism and retain their earnings. From this, it could be deduced that the brothel/lodge based ones actually earn in the higher ranges, they get neutralised by the income sharing and fall into the earnings bracket of the street/home-based ones.

4 Conclusions

This study reveals that in their working lives, a significant number of women currently working in sex work move quite fluidly between other occupations and sex work. A substantial proportion of women who are currently in sex work, almost half of the women surveyed, had experience in other occupations prior to embarking on sex work. Even those who came to sex work relatively early in their working lives experienced other forms of paid work prior to sex work. We found that it is not easy to demarcate women's work into neatly segregated compartments. For example, a street vendor may search for customers while selling vegetables and a dancer at marriages may also take clients. Sex work and other work come together in ways that challenge the differentiation of sex work as an unusual and isolated activity.

For many women, entering sex work is an economic decision: the rationale for it comes from the sex workers' own experiences in the labour market, and of low-paid jobs in appalling working conditions that offer them no job security, social protection or sufficient income to support their families. Sex work offers a significant premium of income compared to other activities in the labour market. For instance, 63 per cent of females

who began to work in extremely diverse occupations could earn only up to Rs 1,000 per month, but when they chose sex work as their work choice as many as 68 per cent could make up to Rs 5,000 per month. Poverty pushes girls/women into searching for livelihoods in informal labour markets at an age earlier than their engagement with sex work. Sex work therefore cannot be considered as singular or isolated in its links with poverty, for there are numerous other occupations that women undertake before sex work emerges as an option. For women choosing sex work over other labour forms, they have experienced equally harsh conditions of highly labour intensive work for very low incomes. It is from these background cases that the significance of sex work as a site of higher incomes or livelihoods emerges.

What we have found is that a significant number of women enter sex work having experienced work in a labour market that continues to offer sex workers opportunities for income-generation, but one from which they turn away for reasons that include exploitation, abuse, sexual harassment, poor pay and working conditions and employment-related hazards. In terms of the mode of entry, the majority of women (79.4 per cent), irrespective of the channel of entry, said they came into sex work by themselves. In the qualitative responses to why they did so, economic reasons again come to the fore. This aspect of coming into sex work for money needs to be subtly differentiated across the two basic divisions we have made in our analysis of the data – a) those who chose sex work after working in labour markets, b) those who entered sex work without prior labour market experience. In the case of those coming from the labour markets, economic reasons would constitute the 'search for better incomes'. They have experienced poverty of income in the labour markets and have an immediate referential framework which they can compare for themselves. On the other hand, when the direct entrants mentioned coming into it for the sake of money, they are basically looking at deriving some sustained livelihood income out of it.

A distinct feature of the survey has been to capture women operating from diverse sites such as brothel, street-based, lodge-based, home-based and other sites. The categories however, are not mutually exclusive. Particularly, there are multiple answers ticked by women across street, lodge and home-based categories. The incomes across the categories do not differ significantly. The feature that has to be noted here is that brothel-based women (and even those who work from lodges on a permanent basis) have to part with a significant share their incomes (50 per cent of earnings were mentioned in several cases) to the brothel owners, lodge owners etc. On the other hand, those operating from streets/lodges or from home don't have this sharing mechanism and retain their earnings. From this, it could be deduced that the brothel/lodge based ones actually earn in the higher ranges, but the higher incomes get neutralised by the income sharing and fall into the earnings bracket of the street/home-based ones.

This survey has incorporated questions and compiled information on the women's perceptions of what they do - whether they consider it as a form of work, as a business or as an avenue of employment. If it were to be a business, then what do they think they are selling as part of the transaction? Using the reflexivity that is endowed with sex work, there is a need to probe further into the constructs of work and this survey is a step in that direction. What we have found is that a significant number of women enter sex work having experienced work in a labour market that continues to offer sex workers opportunities for income-generation, but one from which they turn away for reasons that include exploitation, abuse, sexual harassment, poor pay and working conditions and employment-related hazards. When a woman sells socks or handkerchiefs in a local

train or works as a vegetable vendor, her identity as a worker participating in the informal economy is not disputed though she may be earning a paltry income. She does however, get the economic and social recognition that she is working and earning as part of the informal economy. But when she engages with sex work, her alternative work identities whether past or present cease to matter. She gets labelled as a sex worker for all purposes, but without the recognition of her participation in informal labour markets. As a result, sex workers experience barriers to access to services produced by societal stigma and the attitudes of service providers and vulnerabilities to abuse by agents of the state that threaten their safety, health and well-being as workers.

That over 70 per cent of women in sex work *choose* sex work having experienced other jobs attests to the fact that they do have other options. That they are in a position to evaluate these other options and opt for sex work for a range of reasons, principally economic, is a finding that would refute a narrative on sex work that failed to recognise it as a form of work in the way in which those who pursue it as livelihood see it. It is time that those involved in making policy and laws on sex work listened to what women themselves have to say about their involvement in sex work, and took account of the realities that this working paper reveals.

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