Resilience and Life Satisfaction among Single Women Commercial Sex Workers in Chennai City

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ABSTRACT

Background: Commercial sex work is considered one of the oldest professions in the world. It is an act of conceding sexual access for payment. **Objectives**: (i) To assess the level of resilience, life satisfaction and its correlates with background characteristics of the single women (refers to female widows/separated) who are engaged in sex work and (ii) to identify the significant predictors of life satisfaction among the respondents. (iii) to identify the significant predictors of life satisfaction among the sex workers. **Method:** The data were drawn from 63 widows/separated women engaged in commercial sex work in Chennai city in face-to-face interviews. As there is no official data of female sex workers (FSWs) due to its informal and illegal nature of workplace activity, the snowball sampling technique was adopted to identify the sample respondents. The data were collected using the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale and Satisfaction with Life Scale. **Results:** The findings indicate that a little more than half of the respondents scored 'high' on both resilience (57%) and life satisfaction (54%) scales. The correlation analysis shows that education, income and resilience score increases, the life satisfaction score of the sex workers also increases. As the current age and the age of entry into sex work increases, the life satisfaction score of the sex workers decreases. The regression analysis shows that resilience score and current age are significant predictors of life satisfaction of the FSWs. **Conclusion:** Findings indicate the need for providing counselling to the FSWs in order to further increase their resilience so that life satisfaction will be enhanced.

Keywords: Sex Workers, widows, separated, Women, resilience, life satisfaction

INTRODUCTION

There were 42 million prostitutes around the world (World Population Review, 2019) and in India, it was around 3 million. About 80 percent of the world population of prostitutes were female (ProCon.org, 2019) among the three million women, over 60% of those trafficked into sex work were adolescent girls in the age group of 12-16 years. More than 35% of girls in India enter commercial sex activities before 18 years of age (Gohain, 2013; India TV, 2013). There were nearly one lakh sex workers in Tamil Nadu and over 14,000 in Chennai alone (Ramasubramanian, 2014). The ILO estimates that sex workers supported between five and eight other people with their earnings (Network of Sex Work Projects, 2017). Sex work is regarded as the oldest profession in the world. However, in many nations around the world, it is still considered to be illegal and in other nations such as India where it is legal but is limited due to certain conditions, the situation of sex workers is rather saddening. As per customs and traditions, sex work is something to be looked down upon and sex workers to be shamed and isolated by society. Since human beings are social creatures, facing the onslaught of both the law enforcement authorities and society can have a terrible impact on the mental health of sex workers. This, in turn, can also affect their satisfaction with life and their ability to withstand troubling times (resilience). Hopelessness is a feeling that the future is dark and there is no escape from failure. Depression, anxiety, and stress are similar to mental health issues. All four can have a negative impact on mental health and satisfaction with the life of an individual. Sex workers have unique problems and they are one of the least studied

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groups, especially in the Indian context. All of these facts helped to raise a few important questions in the mind of the researchers: What is the demographic and socio-economic background of the widows/separated women involved in commercial sex activities? How resilient are sex workers? Are they truly satisfied with their lives? What are the factors predicting their life satisfaction? In order to find answers to these questions, the present research was undertaken.

Various studies have been conducted on sex workers. Baker et al. (2004) reported that the education of the FSWs was only middle school level and their feelings of stigmatization varied from low to high and all the FSWs were found to be dissatisfied with their lives. Eller and Mahat (2007) found that life satisfaction of FSWs was significantly associated with physical functioning, role-physical, bodily pain, mental health, anxiety, depression, social functioning, and health transition. Further, anxiety, health transition, role-physical, physical function, and mental health explained 60% of the variance in life satisfaction. Fang et al. (2007) reported that the proportion of female sex workers' life satisfaction and work satisfaction constitute 8% and 4 % respectively and the women in the township tended to be more satisfied with their work or life than other women. However, statistically, there is no significant difference between these variables. Munasinghe et al. (2007) reported that physical pleasure and emotional satisfaction with sex and overall life satisfaction among sex workers was similar to that of non-sex workers. Hong et al. (2007) indicated that those FSWs who were dissatisfied with life abused alcohol, were deceived or forced into commercial sex, and had stable sexual partners were more likely to report suicidal ideation. Suresh et al. (2009) analysed the social pathways to depression and suicidal ideations and found that workplace violence was the key variable that predicted higher depression score and concluded that marginalised women have major mental health needs. Liu et al. (2011) assessed the perceived stigma among150 female sex workers in Chennai. The findings reveal that income from both individual and non-sex work was correlated with decreased levels of perceived stigma from both the community and the family. Lakshmana and Pandian (2012) came with the findings that 50% of the female sex workers fall under the age group of 27 to 36, having studied up to high school, 90% of them being married and 73% of them were using one or other substance. Their perception of subjective well-being shows that 39% had good positive mental health, 36% had moderate mental health and 26% of the respondents had low positive mental health. Buttrem et al. (2013) found that higher odds of high school education and increased social support, in addition to lower odds of mental distress and HIV risk remained associated with high resilience. Yuen et al. (2014) indicated that female sex workers showed their resilience by rationalizing their role, believing in the ability to make a difference in life, and being confident. They adopted emotional regulation, acceptance of their responsibility and limits to cope with stressful life events. Yuen et al. (2015) indicated that the resilience-promoting intervention was effective in improving the mental health status among female sex workers. Sethuramalingam et al. (2017) reported that 70% of CSWs choose this field as a result of financial hardship in their family. Most (76%) of them approached their customers on an individual basis and 69% of them carry out their sex work on roadsides and roadside forest. About 24% of them reported that they were infected with HIV/AIDS. Onyangu et al. (2018) found that women were reluctant to quit sex work because they depended on it for income. Most respondents did not use condoms, citing trust, love, faithfulness and commitment. Both men and women described high levels of violence in their relationships. The context of sex work heightens vulnerability but also appears to facilitate resilience and creative coping strategies.

From the review of earlier literature, it is found that there were two studies conducted on sex workers in Chennai but these studies were related to stigma (Liu et al., 2011) and sexual

violence (Suresh, 2009). The study conducted by Sethuramalingam, et al. (2017) was on the socio-economic background and female sex work-related aspects. There were 4 studies on resilience (Buttrem et al., 2013; Yuen et al., 2014; 2015; Onyangu et al., 2018) and six studies on life satisfaction (Baker et al., 2004; Eller & Mahat, 2007; Fang et al., 2007; Hong et al., 2007; Munasinghe et al., 2007; Lakshmana & Pandian, 2012). All these 10 studies, (except Lakshmana & Pandian, 2012) on resilience and life satisfaction of FSWs were conducted in foreign countries. But, there are no recent and adequate studies among the widows/separated women commercial sex workers, with a special specific focus on resilience and life satisfaction comprehensively in Chennai as well as in India. In view of these research gaps, the researchers have proposed to conduct an in-depth study to examine the resilience and life satisfaction of widows/separated women who are in sex work.

Objectives: The objectives of the present research are (i) to find out the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the widows/separated women who are engaged in sex work, (ii) to assess the level of resilience, life satisfaction and its correlates with background characteristics of the respondents and (iii) to identify the significant predictors of life satisfaction among the sex workers.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

Research design: The researchers have adopted a descriptive research design to describe the significant predictors of life satisfaction of the sex workers. The present research is also cross-sectional in nature since data were collected at only one point in time to assess the socio-demographic characteristics and the subject dimensions.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria: The researchers selected Madras city purposively for the present research as they are familiar with the city, besides the availability of an adequate sample population. The study was restricted only to single women who were widows and separated, currently engaged in sex work for a minimum of one sexual service for money within a period of last 30 days, irrespective of their age and willingness to participate in the interview without any dithering and reticence. The unmarried and married women and transgenders who are involved in sex work were excluded from this study since their socio-demographic characteristics features and problems would differ from the widows and the separated women. Those who expressed their unwillingness and hesitant to participate in the interview were also excluded from the study.

Method and participants: There was no exact list of data for the population involved in commercial sex work. Moreover, it is a sensitive issue, difficult to locate sex workers due to secretiveness or illegality of occupation and unwilling to identify themselves as sex workers due to social stigma. Hence, the researchers decided to adopt a snowball sampling technique to collect relevant data. The researchers identified two sex workers with the help of an NGO. Using these particular sex workers, the researchers were able to identify and collect data from 63 commercial sex workers who were widows (41)/separated (22).

Methods of data collection: The researchers took about 60 days required for the collection of the data from the respondents during April - June 2019. The researchers collected the required data using interview schedules through a face-to-face interview with the respondents. The respondents were interviewed at public places like the park, railway stations, brothel homes and also in their place of residence itself. On average, two sex workers were interviewed per day by the researchers with a duration of about 2 hours per respondent.

Tools of data collection: In order to collect data related to the demographic and socio-economic background of the respondents, a self-prepared interview schedule was used. The

resilience of the respondents was measured using 25 items Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (2003). The score range is 0-100 and a high score lead to high resilience. The reliability value of the scale was found to be 0.893. The life satisfaction of the sex workers was measured by adopting the5 item satisfaction with life scale developed by Diener et al. (1985). The score range was from 5 to 35 with higher scores indicating greater life satisfaction. The reliability value for the satisfaction with life scale is Alpha 0.736. A pre-test was conducted among 5 respondents in the study area. Based on the responses of the interviewees, the interview schedule was suitably altered to eliminate some of the administering problems. The interview schedule was administered by the researchers to the respondents keeping track of colloquial language.

Analysis of data: After the completion of the data collection, all the interview schedules were checked for completeness of respondents and edited carefully. To analyse the data, SPSS software version-24 was used (IBM Corp., 2017). The analysis was carried out with the help of frequency distributions, correlation and stepwise regression analysis. Histogram, p-p plot and scatter plot were used to check the normality, homoscedasticity and linearity of residuals. The residuals were found to be normally distributed to a certain extent in multiple linear regression analysis.

Ethical considerations: The respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and researchers assured the respondents that data collected will be used only for the research purpose and will be kept confidential. Oral consent was obtained from the respondents before the interviews. To ensure confidentiality and identity, they were not asked to give their legal name. Participation in this study was voluntary and the respondents were given the opportunity to,' not to participate or to withdraw' from the interview at any time for any reason. Each respondent was offered a sum of Rs. 200 (2.62USD) by the researchers, as compensation for their time and willingness to share their problems and experience in commercial sex work.

Conceptual framework: It is proposed to treat the 'life satisfaction' score as a dependent variable, and the background characteristics and resilience score of the sample respondents will be treated as independent variables.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the sample: The findings reveal that the mean age of the respondents was 39.16 years with a minimum age of 19 years and a maximum of 55 years. Their average age at the time of entry into sex work was 27.41 years with a minimum of 15 years and a maximum of 44 years. Among the total respondents, 65% were widows and the remaining 35% were separated. Almost all the respondents belong to backward (54%) and scheduled castes (46%). Of the total respondents, 81% were literates and 19% were illiterates. Their average level of education was 7th standard with the minimum of 2nd standard to a maximum of post-graduation. Other than commercial sex work, most of the respondents were engaged as housemaid servants (49%) followed by wage labourers (32%) in small establishments and 19% of them were housewives. Most of the respondents' spouses were engaged as skilled (38%) and unskilled labourers (19%) before death/ separation. It is shocking to note that 43% of the respondents' spouses were unable to work due to their addiction to alcohol that leads to ill health/death. The respondents' average monthly income from sex work was Rs.31,135 with a minimum of Rs. 3000 and a maximum of Rs.84,000.Their average income from other sources was Rs.5143 with a minimum of Rs.4000 and a maximum of Rs.15,000. The average family income of the respondents per month was Rs.46,002 with a minimum of Rs.13,000 and a maximum of Rs.98,000. The average number of family members of the respondents was 3.1, ranging from 1 of 9

members. The majority (76%) of the respondents belong to the nuclear family and the rest (24%) of them belong to the joint family. Their average monthly family expenditure was Rs.5684 with a minimum of Rs.7000 and a maximum of Rs.30,000. The majority (76%) of the respondents live in the rented house. Almost all the respondents have access to drinking water supply, electricity and toilet facilities. The average number of mobile phones used for CSA by the respondents was 1.8 ranging from 1 to 4 mobile phones.

Sex work-related aspects: The average duration/years of involvement of the respondents in commercial sex work was 11.8 years with a minimum of one year to a maximum of 30 years. The majority of them, entered into this occupation due to their poverty (71%) and the rest (29%) of them were involved in this occupation for sexual gratification. Most of them reported that they have entered into this occupation due to the influence of co-workers/neighbours (78%), brokers (14%) and the remaining 8% were involved by themselves. It was found that 22% of the respondents' family members were also engaged in this occupation. More than half (57%) of the respondents reported that their family members were also aware of this occupation. Most of the approached their customers through brokers (41%), peer groups (40%) and direct contact (19%). The average number of customers met in a day was 5with a minimum of 1 customer to a maximum of 8 customers. The average amount received from a customer was Rs.448, ranging from Rs.300 to Rs.1500. The average number of customers engaged in a month for sex work was 15 persons with a minimum of 2 persons and a maximum of 30 persons. It was reported that the respondents used brothel house (67%), customer's house (16%), respondent's house itself (12%) and hotels/lodges (5%) for sex work. Sexual violence like physical abuse by the drunkards (37%), refusal to use a condom (14%) and exploitation (11%) from the customers were also reported. On the other hand, they have also encountered problems like physical violence/beaten, demanding money, blackmailing to get free sex by police personnel (32%) and being robbed by the rowdy elements (24%). It was reported that the majority of the respondents (75%) do not want to leave commercial sex work, as this occupation became a regular source of income for their livelihood. It was also reported that 22% of the respondents underwent abortions ranging from 1 to 6 times during the period of sex work. The vast majority (95%) of the respondents were undergoing regular medical check-up and 97% of them have awareness of HIV/AIDS. No HIV/AIDS or STD infection was reported from the respondents, thanks to the efforts taken by the NGOs for periodical/regular medical check-up. All the respondents reported that they were consuming liquor if forced by their customer during sex work.

Level of resilience and life satisfaction: The respondents have been classified into low and high categories based on the mean score of the subject dimensions. The mean score of resilience was 61.57 with a score range of 15-87, and the life satisfaction score was19.38, with a score range of 6-33. It was also found that a little more than half of the respondents scored 'high' on both resilience (57.1%) and life satisfaction (54%) scales.

Correlation between the background characteristics and life satisfaction: Table 1 shows that life satisfaction score is positively correlated with respondents' education (p<0.001), respondent income (p<0.05), family income (p<0.05), and the resilience score (p<0.001). Whereas, it is negatively correlated with current age (p<0.001) and age of entry in to sex work (p<0.001). That is, education, income and resilience score increases, the life satisfaction score of the sex workers also increases. On the other hand, as the current age and the age at entry into the sex work increases, the life satisfaction score of the sex workers decreases. It is noticed that the current age (p<0.001), and age at entry into the sex work (p<0.001) increases the resilience score decreases. Further, it is noticed that the education of sex workers increases, their monthly income from sex work also increases (p<0.001).

Table - 1: Zero-order correlation between life satisfaction score and the background characteristics of the CSWs

	Variables	Age (1)	Edu. (2)	AESW (3)	RI (4)	FI (5)	Res. (6)	LS (7)
1	Current Age	1						
2	Education	***-.633	1					
3	Age at Entry into Sex Work	***.592	*-.314	1				
4	Respondent Income	*-.315	**.362	0.168	1			
5	Family Income	*-.296	**.331	0.17	***.965	1		
6	Resilience	***-.498	0.236	***-.372	0.202	0.215	1	
7	Life Satisfaction	***-.609	***.344	***-.443	.297*	*.293	***.938	1

Regression analysis predicting life satisfaction: A stepwise multiple regression analysis was carried out to find the significant predictors of life satisfaction among the respondents. The model number can be seen in column 1 of Table 2. Column 2 represents the predictor variables: resilience and current age. The R^2 value, in column number 4 is a measure of how much of the variability in the outcome is accounted for by the predictors (Field, 2009). Model 1 (in column 2) refers to the first stage in the hierarchy when only resilience score is used as the predictor. For the first model (in column 4), its value is 0.879, which means that the resilience scores alone account for 87.9% of the variation in the life satisfaction of sex workers. In the second model, this value increases to 90.6% of the variance in life satisfaction score. Therefore, whichever variables are entered in the model in step 2 account for an extra 2.7 % of the variance in the life satisfaction score.

Table - 2: Step-wise regression analysis on life satisfaction score of the CSWs

Model	Predictors	R	R^2 x 100	ΔR^2 x 100	b	SE b	β	C.R/t	p
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
	Dependent Variable : Satisfaction with Life								
1	(Constant)		0.879 or 87.9%		-0.162	1.020	-	-0.159	.874
	Resilience	.938		87.9%	.317	.015	.938	21.061	.000
2	(Constant)		0.906 or 90.6%		9.824	2.576	-	3.814	.000
	Resilience	.952			.286	.015	.844	18.484	.000
	Current Age			2.7%	-.205	.049	-.189	-4.143	.000

The *unstandardised beta* (b) value (in column 6) explains the relationship between life satisfaction score and each predictor variables: resilience and current age. If the b value is positive, there is a positive relationship between the predictor and the outcome, whereas a negative coefficient represents a negative relationship (Field, 2009). For these data, the predictors: Resilience (0.286) has a positive relationship with life satisfaction. On the other hand, there is a negative relationship between current age (- 0.205) with life satisfaction score. That is, as the resilience score increases, the life satisfaction score also increases, whereas, with an increase in the current age, there is a decrease in the life satisfaction score. The *standardized beta* (β) values (in column 8) provide a better insight into the importance of the predictor in this model. The standardised beta value with regard to resilience is 0.844 and the current age is -0.189.

The *Critical Ratio / t* and p-value (in column 9 &10) indicate that resilience score (t= 18.484, p<0.001), and current age (t= -4.143, p<0.001) are significant predictors of life satisfaction. Moreover, from the magnitude of the t-statistics and the p-value, it can be inferred that the resilience score had the highest impact on the life satisfaction of the sex workers among all the predictors.

On the whole, the percentage variance explained by a single factor, that is, resilience score is about 0.879 in model 1 (which means that the resilience score alone accounts for 88% of the variation in the life satisfaction score of the sex workers), whereas, such a percentage has increased to 91% when additional variable -current age (model 2) is included.

Limitations of the study: There is no exact data/ list of the population involved in sex work particularly the widows and the separated women. Moreover, sex work is a sensitive issue, difficulty in locating sex workers due to secretiveness or illegality of occupation and unwilling to identify themselves as sex workers due to social stigma. Since the study was conducted using snowball sampling, the research findings cannot be generalised to the other commercial sex workers. To interview each respondent, the researchers paid a sum of Rs. 200 each, which resulted in heavy expenditure on the part of the researchers.

CONCLUSION

This study confirmed that about three fourth of the respondents entered into sex work due to the influence of their peer groups/co-workers and the major portion of the family income was from sex work. It was also reported that two-thirds of the sex workers faced problems from their customers, police and criminals. A little less than half of the sex workers scored a low level of life satisfaction and poor resilience. Moreover, the life satisfaction score is positively associated with the education, income, and resilience score and negatively with the current age of the sex workers. The regression analyses demonstrated that resilience score had the highest impact on the life satisfaction score of the sex workers among all the predictors like current age, education, years of widowhood or separation, personal and family income and other background characteristics of the sex workers. In order to prevent sex workers from physical violence and robbery, adequate legal protection must be provided to them. In order to increase life satisfaction and resilience scores, proper intervention strategies must be evolved.

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Ethical Clearance: Taken

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