

Sexegesis: Logical Indeterminations

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Abstract

Sexegesis: the exegesis of the sex trade, or the lack of it. Logical: reasonable; explainable in terms of lived-in realities and comprehensible to the average human rationality (if there is such a phenomenon).² Indeterminations: what cannot be definitely predicted or described, as also the factors that make a phenomenon so. The main purport of this article is, therefore, to offer an explanation for the factors that determine the presence of girls and women in the sex trade,³ even as it elucidates how varied and numerous those factors are, making it rather difficult, if not impossible, to develop a blueprint so exhaustive that it would contain all such factors.

Keywords

Sex trade, trafficking, girls and women

The Conceptual Framework

There is a reasonable explanation of the factors that would determine the journey of a girl or woman into the sex trade, but the factors are so diverse in different cases that an element of indetermination is always there, making generalization questionable. In other words, the same factors would not necessarily lead to the same result for all girls and women in similar situations. Equally, the same result may well ensue from the same factors for girls and women whose situations are different. This understanding of logical indetermination draws heavily from W. V. Quine's theory of the 'indeterminacy of translation'. The American analytic philosopher first propounded this theory in his 1960 book *Word and Object* (Quine, 2013, pp. 23–72), and further discussed it in 'Ontological relativity' (Quine, 1969, pp. 26–28). One of the ideas elucidated by Quine in this context is the 'inscrutability of reference', by which he implies that no unique interpretation of any word is possible, since the meaning varies with the context. Quine has used the rather famous example of the supposed word *gavagai* in a hitherto unknown language called 'Arunta'. If a native speaker of the language utters the word pointing

at a rabbit, it might seem simple enough to interpret that s/he means, 'Look, a rabbit.' But it is somewhat more complicated than it strikes at first, for s/he could very well mean, 'Look, there's food,' or 'Let's go hunting.' If the Arunta-speaking natives believe that spotting a rabbit is the sign of an impending storm, s/he might even mean, 'There will be a storm later in the day.' It is these possibilities that make any unique interpretation impossible.

This position of Quine is remarkably similar to what Wittgenstein has propounded in his *Philosophical Investigations* about the meaning of a word being rooted in forms of life, which allows the same word to have different meanings in varied contexts. The word 'pressure', for example, would readily remind a chef of a pressure cooker, but a doctor would probably think of blood pressure and an overworked employee of work pressure.

The reason behind drawing upon these linguistic theories in the context of something as concrete as the sex trade is twofold: one, language being rooted in forms of life, that is, in socio-cultural realities, logically justifies the existence of myriad realities, rather than just one reality. It is the existence of multiple realities that results in the inscrutability of reference, and thus to the indeterminacy of translation. The

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examples discussed make this theory appeal to common sense, so that accepting Quine's argument appears justifiable. Two, if there are multiple socio-cultural realities, then the strict division between the 'subjective' and the 'objective' becomes questionable, for objectivity itself would be defined by the subjectivity of experiences. As indicated in the example of 'pressure' used earlier, each of the meanings assigned is because of the experiences of the person concerned: the context in which the word 'pressure' is most used in her/his trade. The doctor considers it 'objective' to interpret the sentence 'The pressure is too much' to mean that the speaker is referring to high blood pressure. A chef would consider it equally 'objective' to believe that the sentence means a pressure cooker is unusually good/cooks really fast. With equal 'objectivity', an overworked employee would empathize with the speaker.

There are, of course, those who would argue that the same word having different context-specific meanings does not obliterate the distinction between the subjective and the objective. Rather than getting into a philosophical discourse about that, it would suffice for now to merely point out that such context specificity indicates diverse states of affairs experienced differently. It is this disparity of experiences that is important for now, as it leads to the other aspect of the theoretical framework this article is located within: the feminist standpoint theory, initiated by Nancy Hartsock in 1983 and variously developed and enriched by feminist scholars like Dorothy Smith, Donna Haraway, Sandra Harding, Alison Wylie and Patricia Hill Collins (Wallace & Wolf, 1995).

Drawing from Hegel's explanation of a slave experiencing the world differently from her/his master, developed further (and with reference to the material world) by Karl Marx as consciousness being defined by one's social being, these feminist scholars argue that the standpoint of the marginalized is considerably different from those with power and privileges. If that be so, the objectivity defined by the positions of the powerful and the privileged would necessarily differ from the objectivity of the marginalized. This article is unashamedly partisan in looking at sex trade from the perspectives of those offering the service in the trade; it is their realities that get captured. Rather than compromising the value of this piece, this position—I would argue—actually strengthens and enriches it. As Sandra Harding has said:

The researcher appears to us not as an invisible, anonymous voice of authority, but as a real, historical individual with concrete, specific desires and interests...Introducing this

'subjective' element in the analysis...increases the objectivity of the research and decreases the 'objectivism' that hides this kind of evidence from the public. (Harding, 1987, p. 9)

The final point to clarify before getting into the main body of this article is that this narrative refers to real incidents in the life of real human beings who exist in the same spatio-temporal world that the author and the readers of this article inhabit. Quoting Karl Marx in *German Ideology* (2001, p. 42), one could say: 'They are (the) real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their own activity.' The author has directly interacted with girls and women whose situations are referred to here, in course of research and other social developmental activities. There is no claim, therefore, that the categories and situations discussed here provide a complete encapsulation of all there is to say about sex trade in India. It is possible that there are other classifications and situations that bring girls and women into the sex trade. But, these varieties and variations definitely do exist.⁴ Also, the focus of the article is not on sharing statistical data with the readers, but to expose certain human realities that define and determine the lives of girls and women in the sex trade in India, specifically those whose source state is West Bengal, India.

Why She Leaves Home?

Direct interactions, in the form of in-depth interviews, with over 70 adolescent girls who are survivors of sex trafficking across 10 districts⁵ of West Bengal have revealed that two types of girls from rural West Bengal get trafficked: the breadwinners and the adventurers. The standard argument that economic poverty alone is the root cause behind the trafficking of girls and women is inadequate to explain the cases of girls from families not subjected to abject economic poverty, insofar as starvation is not a reality for them. The poverty extends beyond the scope of economics alone and encompasses social poverty: the lack of opportunities to change one's life for the better. Further, had economic distress been the sole factor behind trafficking, it would be difficult to explain why certain states act as major source areas of trafficking survivors, while neighbouring states that are poorer economically and lag behind in terms of development, do not. West Bengal is a case in point, in contrast with the neighbouring states of Bihar, Jharkhand and Odisha.⁶

The breadwinners in West Bengal are girls and women who have to take up the onus of earning for the family owing to a variety of reasons: a dead or old and ailing father; a deceased husband; being deserted by the father or husband; male siblings being younger, etc. When it comes to women in the age group of 19 years upwards, they need to become breadwinners mostly when they are widowed or deserted by their husbands. With one or more children to feed, irregular daily wage-earning activities in the rural locations of many districts in West Bengal prove insufficient to organize food, clothing and shelter for herself and her child/ren, and these are the districts that act as key source areas of human trafficking. As for girls (up to 18 years of age), the need to take charge of providing for the family is mostly faced by the eldest of many siblings when the father expires or is rendered dysfunctional for income-earning activities due to dotage-generated frailty or some accident, in a few cases. Such girls might also belong to a woman-headed household, with the father having deserted this family.

Coochbehar, Dakshin Dinajpur, Howrah, Jalpaiguri, Murshidabad, Nadia, North and South 24 Parganas, Paschim Medinipur and Uttar Dinajpur are the 10 districts being referred to in this article. With the exception of Howrah and North 24 Parganas, these districts have poor urbanization, are low on the Human Development Index and have a high concentration of Schedule Caste (SC)/Schedule Tribe (ST) and/or Muslim populations, apart from being economically backward. Howrah, Nadia and North 24 Parganas present a marginally different picture in terms of urbanization, economic advancement and other development indicators, though they also feature as important source districts of trafficking survivors. The reason probably lies in the discrepancies that exist in the economic and development indicators between the rural and urban areas of these districts.⁷

The lure for the breadwinners, naturally, is always of better employment opportunities—as domestic labour in the cities of Bangalore, Delhi and Mumbai (these are the most prominent destination points), or in different locations in Haryana and Rajasthan; or as unskilled labour in factories in Gujarat or Andhra Pradesh (also major destination points). Lack of understanding of the cautions necessary to make migration safe, combined with exposure to men going to other states for work, makes these girls and women vulnerable to trafficking, so that they end up in the sex trade—till they are either rescued through police raids or somehow manage to find their way back home, at times with help from a customer.

The women either leave with the consent of their families—natal or marital, depending on where she lives post widowhood/desertion—or do not have families to care for them, so that they take decisions for themselves. The girls, on the other hand, sometimes leave with the knowledge and consent of the family, but an equal number of girls leave on their own in search of work, thereby combining an element of adventure in their breadwinner role. In fact, this set of girls, who leave home for income earning, challenges the social norm of the son being the provider; they argue that the eldest should take charge, even if she is a girl. When this argument fails, that is when she leaves without the knowledge of her parent/s. But those who are sent by the family for employment represent the classical example of economic poverty where every pair of hands signifies more scope of earning through labour. The moment a child reaches the age of 10 years (children below this age were not experienced to be sent for work by parent/s)—irrespective of the child's gender—s/he is considered fit for engagement in income earning. Such cases are more or less concentrated in SC/ST families where male alcoholism compounds the problem of economic poverty.

The need to find worthwhile employment for earning an income, the scope for which is extremely limited in rural West Bengal, especially in the districts mentioned earlier (with the exception of Howrah), thereby acts as a push factor for the trafficking of girls and women into the sex trade. The exposure to boys and men migrating seasonally for work, which demonstrates that regular income is available in cities away from home, acts as a pull factor. Complete lack of awareness and understanding of the cautions to be exercised for migration to be safe acts as a facilitating factor, in combination with the ubiquitous presence of traffickers who are always there to lure—often, an immediate or extended family member, or a neighbour or someone known to neighbours. The trafficker, it has been found, is seldom a completely unknown person, especially in case of those who leave home for income earning.

However, despite the commonality of the factors just described, not every girl and woman who leaves home for income earning is trafficked into the sex trade. There are many cases of rescue from inhuman situations of domestic or other forms of exploitative labour as well. Such rescues also include girls and women who had left home without the knowledge and consent of anyone else in their natal or marital families. Equally, girls and women who leave home for work with the consent of their natal or marital families also get trafficked into the sex trade. The exact reasons that

result in some girls and women being trafficked into the sex trade, while others in similar situations are not, thus remain inexplicable to some extent. It is this indeterminacy that also makes it clear that there is more than just economic poverty involved in human trafficking, even when the lure is of work and income earning.

This aspect comes out in full clarity with reference to the adventurers who are found almost exclusively among teenage girls in the 13–17 years age range in the state of West Bengal. Their narratives capture, in graphic details, the role played by the natural adolescent tendency of dreaming of a life that is better than what is immediately available, of wanting to be exposed to newer places and things beyond the confines of the rural community. Such girls are not necessarily from an economically impoverished family, where starvation acts as the push factor. It is the spirit of adventure; the lure of the new and the unknown. A majority of these girls elope with boyfriends in search of a better life with more opportunities—in Mumbai or Delhi mostly, to their knowledge. But there are also cases of girls who learn and enjoy dancing being taken by their dance teachers supposedly to perform in a programme in the nearest city. Girls going with neighbours/neighbours' relatives for something as innocuous as visiting a fair or an exhibition in Kolkata, or with their brothers-in-law to visit the city they live and work in, get trafficked into the sex trade as well. All of them leave without telling their parents of course, since they would not be allowed to go otherwise. One girl's history is particularly heartrending, for she had left home when her father's accident resulted in her having to give up her studies when she was in Class VII. From a north Bengal district, this girl had left home to travel to Siliguri town in search of a family who would allow her to live with them and enrol her in a school, if she did everything for them as domestic labour. She ended up in Budhwarpet in Pune, to be rescued after three hellish years in the sex trade.

Girls interacted with in the districts of Howrah and Nadia revealed that they were almost always trafficked to dance groups in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, in pursuance of their dream to perform in dance programmes in the city of Kolkata. The dance groups being referred to include offering sexual services to clients. It is with reference to these girls that the effect of urbanization becomes most clearly visible, since the push and pull factors have little to do with economic poverty and are directly connected with the dream of pursuing an interest—in their cases, dancing—to an extent not readily available within the confines of their village homes. The facilitating factors,

as with the adventurers from the other seven districts mentioned earlier, comprise of the villages lacking scope for developing one's special knack such as dancing; social norms that disallow girls to go and perform on public platforms; lack of understanding about the cautions needed in venturing alone; and the presence of traffickers who understand the psyche of these adolescent girls better than their families and communities.

Hence, the aspirations of the adventurous teenagers are simple and completely justified, when encapsulated in a categorized manner: the desire to escape the monotony of the life of domestic violence and desertion that she sees her mother, aunts and elder sisters endure, and to live a good life in a big city with a man she loves; the desire to travel beyond the known contours of the village where life is dull and boring at the best of times, with nothing beyond school and house chores and neighbourhood gossip to live with; the desire to showcase to people an art or skill she has acquired; and the desire to continue studies and become someone special.

Each of these dreams is heartily encouraged among teenage girls in urban middle-class families, but there are some sharp differences that are worth paying attention to.

1. Social acceptance of women marrying a man of their choice has increased among the English-educated urban middle-class in West Bengal, but not all the choices are readily accepted. A Hindu woman choosing to marry a Muslim man still causes considerable problems. However, the space for open discussions between parents and children about teenage affairs has increased among this stratum of Bengalis. In addition, early marriage is not an experience teenage girls from English-educated urban middle-class families in the state share with their rural counterparts. In combination with the considerably higher exposure to education, information and career options that the city girls get, these also act as deterrents against the need to elope early.⁸ The situation is the exact opposite in rural West Bengal. One of the most commonly used arguments for underage marriage of girls (in the 10 districts where interactions with survivors, women's groups and adolescent girls' groups happened, which form the basis of this article) was that early marriage was necessary to ensure that girls do not start having affairs and bring shame to the family. Under the circumstances, the only course of action available to a rural teenage girl who has fallen in love and desires not to marry someone else is to elope with the person she is in love with, who is, in many cases, the trafficker.

2. With reference to the experience of domestic violence⁹ and desertion, such incidents among urban couples in West Bengal is far from absent, but that is still not the only experience that surrounds the urban teenager from middle-class families. Her realities are varied, in sharp contrast to that of her rural poor to lower middle-class counterpart for whom this is the rule rather than the exception, with hardly any variation in her community and neighbourhood. The social sanction for wife beating is still far stronger in rural Bengal than in the cities, which allows for this status quo to continue, though the rising rates of domestic violence complaints (as per National Crime Records Bureau [NCRB] statistics) might suggest that young brides are beginning to question this life of strife. Be that as it may, a life of stress with early marriage and pregnancies, abuse and violence and/or desertion being the most common experience of the rural teenage girl, it is hardly surprising that escaping with her very own Prince Charming seems to be the only option left to her. Little does she know at that point—high on her dreams of a better life—that the prince has appeared only to sell her to a pimp or a madam.
3. The scope for exploring new things and places available in abundance to city girls in West Bengal is beyond even the dreams of their rural counterparts. Multi-channelled televisions are still a rarity in poor to lower middle-class rural families; computers and Internet are unheard of; going to a film show means a lot of preparations and travel since the nearest hall may well be some 20 km away, if not more. The mobile phone is omnipresent, but is seldom in the control of the teenage girls. It is this dearth of entertainment opportunities that makes going to a fair or a trip to Kolkata so tempting—a reality that most urban teenagers from middle-class families would find difficult to understand.
4. It is possibly unnecessary to discuss the differences experienced by teenage girls from English-educated urban middle-class families and those from poor to lower middle-class background in rural West Bengal with reference to develop and showcase their co-curricular interests and talents. Everything from school and college programmes and festivals to television reality shows exist for the city girls; none for those in the villages. Even to appear in an audition for a reality show, the village lass would have to travel to the city.
5. With reference to the desire to continue studies, now a fundamental right as per the Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, the need to leave home sounds almost absurd, except that it is not.

Among rural girls in the age group of 10–14 years, 8 per cent are non-literate as compared to 4.3 per cent among their urban counterparts. In the age range of 15–19 years, 16.7 per cent of rural girls are non-literate, while among urban girls, the rate is 10.1 per cent. The difference in the dropout rate before completing Class V is also quite telling: in the 10–14 years age range, it stands at 62.1 per cent among urban girls, as opposed to 74.4 per cent among their rural counterparts. In the 15–19 years age group, 30.2 per cent rural girls drop out of school before completing Class V, as compared to 17.5 per cent of urban girls (IIPS, 2010, pp. 40–41, Table 2.4). It also needs to be remembered that the urban dropout rates include the urban poor living in slums and does not, therefore, fully capture the vastly different reality of the English-educated urban middle class with whom the contrast is being drawn.

Her so-called Choices

A vast majority of girls and women in the sex trade in India are trafficked into brothel-based prostitution, which operates in a three-tier system that creates its own vicious cycle of the trafficked becoming the trafficker; the abused becoming the perpetrator.¹⁰ The freshly trafficked young girls, who could be of as tender an age as 8 years, live as what is known as *chhukri* in West Bengal. The term *chhukri* literally means ‘young lass’; but in brothel-based prostitution in Bengal, this term is used to denote the lowest rung of girls and women in the sex trade. A *chhukri* is one who gets no share of her income at all. She serves clients against food, clothing, shelter and accessories for her trade. Everything from the number of clients she has to entertain up to the rate per customer is controlled by the madam and her pimps. These fresh youngsters do not even go out on the roads to solicit; that, too, is done by the pimps. Her entire income is divided between the madam and the pimps.

Just as in any other trade, in the sex trade also, skills and negotiation powers increase with experience and practice and that helps a *chhukri* to move on to the next stage: the *adhiya*, which means ‘having half the share’. At this stage, the income earned through her services is divided equally between the girl/woman and her madam, but the pimp/s have to be paid by the girl/woman. By this time, these girls/women usually do much of the soliciting themselves, thereby reducing—but certainly not entirely eliminating—their dependence on pimps. Also, often, a

pimp becomes her non-paying, live-in sexual and emotional partner. These relationships change with either party deciding to get out of the partnership, but it is unusual to find girls and women in brothel-based prostitution without a *babu*, as the live-in male partner is called. However, there are also rare cases of the *babu* actually continuing to live with the same woman and identify as the father of her children.

The third stage is when the woman becomes independent of the madam, meaning that she functions on her own. This, too, is achieved through negotiations and the increased power of the woman who, by this time, becomes adept at manipulating the red light area dynamics to her advantage. This stage is seldom achieved prior to her reaching her mid-twenties, which is also the beginning of the end of her prime time in the sex trade. Women in the sex trade start losing customers by the time they are 30 years old, and post 35 years, it is a struggle. So, either she amasses enough money to become a madam herself, to live off the income of other girls, or she starts depending on the mercy of other younger women, who often engage older women as nannies for their children, as cooks, etc. This is the vicious cycle that makes some among the victims the perpetrators.

However, that role reversal is not restricted only to the older age when customers start dwindling. It is part and parcel of the trade and those smarter than others comprehend that early. A *chhukri* can and does buy her way towards the *adhiya* status by luring more girls from her village. An *adhiya* can fast forward her journey to independent functioning and guarantee the subsequent status of a madam by that same trick: becoming the supplier of more girls.¹¹

However, sex trade is not just brothel based; nor does it survive on those trafficked into it from rural West Bengal. In this state, as in others, there is flying prostitution as well, which refers to a system where girls and women offering the service do not live in a brothel, but pick up clients and go where the clients want them to; sometimes, they also take the client to a rented room in a nearby red light area when the client does not have a place of his own. This form of prostitution also includes girls and women who solicit on the streets, but there are two other varieties: girls and women who go to specific hotels/lodging houses/guest houses at specific hours to cater to clients; and girls and women who operate entirely under the control of one pimp who directs them through calls on their mobiles (provided by the pimp usually) about where to go and whom to serve. It is about these two categories that this article talks about next.

Admittedly, the number of girls and women met is far less than those who work in/have been rescued from brothel-based prostitution, and all the interactions were in the city of Kolkata, where these girls and women work/operate from. However, even the limited number of interactions is sufficient in proving the existence of these forms of sex trade, for no other claim is being made.

A group of 20 odd women had met this author in a guest house in a middle-class residential area in the south of the city. Each one was married; the youngest of the lot was 22 and the eldest, 31. They were all housewives in lower middle-class families residing in the adjacent South 24 Parganas district, in villages commutable by local trains. Each had at least one child, in most cases a son, studying in a renowned private English-medium school in the city. The distance these mothers travelled everyday with their children varied from one to two-and-a-half hours for one-way travel on local trains from their residential villages up to Ballygunge station in south Kolkata. Their husbands, by their accounts, were variously engaged in irregular income-earning activities like driving an auto or a rickshaw-van, plumbing, cycle repairing and electrical repairs. That income was hugely inadequate to cover the expenses of schooling of their children in a private city school, which—back then in 2005—had a ‘Reebok’ shoe costing ₹ 1,500 as part of the school uniform. Over and above, private tuition was compulsory for all these children in order to cope with the academic pressure, for their barely literate parents were not educated enough to help them with what they learnt in the English-medium school.

Sexual service to clients during the day time, when their children were in school, was thus a means to earn that extra money necessary to bring up their children like any other child in an urban middle-class family. As per the testimony of these women, each one was attached to one among a series of small hotels/lodging houses/guest houses in south Kolkata, all within a 3 km radius of the school. A fixed monthly payment had to be made to these establishments, irrespective of the number of clients they would get. Room rents on hourly basis would be taken by the management from the clients. Five to six women per establishment was the rule; they would wait in a specific room for clients to choose. Working hours were from 7 a.m. (after dropping the children to school) to 11:30 a.m., when they would leave to collect their children from school. After a break of about an hour-and-a-half, when they would share the packed lunch brought from home with their children and drop them off to coaching centres, the women would return for more work till about five in the evening. On an average,

these women stated, they would entertain a minimum of three and a maximum of eight clients per day. About 80 per cent of the husbands knew where the money was coming from; 20 per cent did not. Printed advertisements distributed in front of their children's school for part-time work had brought them to this trade.

Two other encounters occurred with girls and women in the age range of 17–22 years: one, in a restaurant-cum-bar in the posh Park Street area in the heart of Kolkata; and the other, in a coffee shop in the northernmost fringes of the city, near the airport. A total of 30 odd girls and women, with their average age being 19 years, were interviewed. They were all from villages of different districts and they were special—for they had managed to pass their Class XII examinations with good enough marks to get admitted to undergraduate colleges in the city. This is not at all a common occurrence in West Bengal villages till date. These college and university students had been brought into the sex trade by women agents in the areas where they lived in groups in rented one-room flats. The lure was of earning some extra cash to enjoy the city life like fellow students from the city—make-up kits, fashionable clothes, movies, occasional eating out, etc., simple pleasures that are taken for granted by most college-going youth from urban middle-class families. But for these girls and women, the money received from home was not enough to cover these expenses; nor was it feasible for them to ask for more money since none of them came from very well-to-do families.

These girls and women operated under the complete control of one agent or the other, who directed them to clients through calls on their mobiles. Mostly, they had to cater to clients in different hotels of the city, but sometimes, they had to take up assignments to go outside city limits for more than a day also. All of them said that they did not want to continue, but they were threatened and blackmailed by the agents. Indeed, they were a scared lot, perpetually anxious about their engagement in sex work becoming exposed to their educational institutions or their families.

Needless to say, not all mothers from lower middle-class families with one or more child in an expensive, private English-medium school take to sex work to make both ends meet. Nor do all good students who come from villages to study in the city get sucked into it. The indeterminacy remains, as in the case of those trafficked into the trade. Apparently, these women and girls 'choose' to be in the trade, though the socio-economic state of affairs that makes sex work the most readily available source of

income earning for them in itself determines that 'choice' to a large extent. Further, in both cases, the girls and women had not been openly informed about the kind of service they would have to provide; that was something that got clarified only through the encounter with the first client—as per the testimony of the respondents. The mothers' group had mentioned that there were women who opted out after finding out the nature of the job, but for the students, escape was not an option, as already mentioned.

A Tentative Conclusion

The entire scenario captured here is expected to demonstrate what was mentioned at the outset: that there are commonalities between the push, pull and facilitating factors that drag girls and women into the sex trade, but these factors affect different girls and women differently. There is enough indeterminacy to debar any generalized statement on how these factors would affect each individual girl/woman, even when their socio-economic situations are more or less the same. The utmost that can be justifiably inferred is about the factors that make girls and women vulnerable to being drawn into the sex trade.

It is because of this indeterminacy that the current debate in the social development sector on whether prostitution should be legalized or whether rehabilitation efforts need to be strengthened is useless. Possibly because the actors engaged in this debate come from a different socio-economic milieu, thereby experiencing life differently from the girls and women who are trafficked/lured into the sex trade that this either/or binary becomes unavoidable. For those who are in the sex trade, both needs exist with equal force. The absence of a comprehensive survivor assistance programme with adequate budget allocation across the nation leaves survivors of sex trafficking perpetually vulnerable to being re-trafficked, for in most cases, they are simply brought back to square one with no change in the realities that they wanted to escape from in the first place. In the case of those lured into the sex trade through means other than trafficking, survivor assistance through police protection for the college and university goers and livelihood assistance for the mothers and their husbands is indispensable to help them get out of the trade if they want to. However, all girls and women, without exception, had mentioned that some rights need to be guaranteed and some rights need to be ensured for them not to be treated as criminals when they happen to be in the trade. Perhaps, it is only when their voices will be captured

sufficiently enough to render into 'evidence' the realities within which they operate that state and non-state actors will get beyond the debate about legalization versus rehabilitation and think up need-based support programmes that can help all those who continue to be in the trade, or have been restored, but remain vulnerable to being dragged into it.

Notes

1. Dr Paramita Banerjee is a gender and sexuality rights specialist with more than 20 years experience of working extensively in different parts of India, Bangladesh and Nepal. She works as an independent consultant in the social development sector. Her expertise lies in research, capacity building, participatory evaluation, strategic planning, leadership development, community mobilization and documentation. As a MacArthur Fellow for Leadership Development, she implemented an adolescent leadership development programme with adolescents living in red light areas. The community-based organization, DIKSHA, grew from that initiative, and is currently being led by those young adults. She has a number of publications in the form of academic articles, research reports and translations of Bengali poems into English.
2. This author certainly believes in the existence of average human rationality or else, she would not even attempt writing this article; readers endowed with logical thinking are a prerequisite for this endeavour.
3. Girls and women are not the only ones in the sex trade in India, but this article concentrates on them in particular.
4. The author is grateful to the organizations and donors who supported these research assignments. Sanjog, a Kolkata-based resource organization, and ActionAid's Kolkata Regional Office deserve special mention. So do Groupe Developpement (now rechristened Acting for Life), Oak Foundation and the European Union.
5. Districts were identified on the basis of the presence of girls and women restored from sex trafficking; other aspects of these districts were studied to understand the factors that contribute to the vulnerability of girls and women towards being trafficked into the sex trade, not the other way round.
6. As per the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) report for 2011, published in 2012, West Bengal has a total of 481 cases registered under human trafficking, second only to Andhra Pradesh (p. 605).
7. Some relevant facts about the districts mentioned here, from the District Level Household and Facility Survey, Round 3, 2007–2008, are: urban population percentage—Coochbehar: 9.1; Dakshin Dinajpur: 13.1; Howrah: 50.4; Jalpaiguri: 17.8; Murshidabad: 12.5; Nadia: 21.3; North 24 Parganas: 51.3; Paschim Medinipur: data not available; South 24 Parganas: 15.7; and Uttar Dinajpur: 12.1. Percentage of marriage below the legal age of 18 years for girls—Coochbehar: 46.4; Dakshin Dinajpur: 48.7; Howrah: 30.7; Jalpaiguri: 17.1; Murshidabad: 61.6; Nadia: 40.4; North 24 Parganas: 27.1; Pashchim Medinipur: 45.8; South 24 Parganas: 39.9; and Uttar Dinajpur: 38.2. Percentage of households with below the poverty line (BPL) cards—Coochbehar: 41; Dakshin Dinajpur: 31.4; Howrah: 26.1; Jalpaiguri: 33.6; Murshidabad: 20.9; Nadia: 25.7; North 24 Parganas: 17.2; Pashchim Medinipur: 40.3; South 24 Parganas: 30.2; and Uttar Dinajpur: 39.4. Non-institutional child delivery percentage—Coochbehar: 52.5; Dakshin Dinajpur: 56.4; Howrah: 33; Jalpaiguri: 50.2; Murshidabad: 58.2; Nadia: 30.2; North 24 Parganas: 37.7; Pashchim Medinipur: 51.7; South 24 Parganas: 63.3; and Uttar Dinajpur: 72.3. Female literacy percentage—Coochbehar: 56.1; Dakshin Dinajpur: 54.3; Howrah: 70.1; Jalpaiguri: 52.2; Murshidabad: 47.6; Nadia: 59.6; North 24 Parganas: 36.5; Pashchim Medinipur: data not available; South 24 Parganas: 71.7; and Uttar Dinajpur: 36.5. Percentage of unmet family planning needs among currently married women in the 15–49 years age group—Coochbehar: 9.3; Dakshin Dinajpur: 9.9; Howrah: 8.4; Jalpaiguri: 11.8; Murshidabad: 10.6; Nadia: 7.4; North 24 Parganas: 11.1; Pashchim Medinipur: 9.2; South 24 Parganas: 9.1; and Uttar Dinajpur: 19.6. These figures, when studied in combination, reflect the uneven pattern of development, as also the gaps between economic status and human developmental indices (see International Institute for Population Sciences [IIPS], 2010).
8. Just as the main purport of this article has been developed from work experiences of the author, these are points taken from her lived-in experiences in the milieu she belongs to. No hard data back these claims, but there is no evidence harder than realities as they are experienced. However, for those who believe in numbers more than in lived realities, the *District Level Household and Facility Survey 2007–08: West Bengal* (the latest one available) mentions 18.4 years to be the state average of age of marriage for girls. In rural Bengal, it is 18 years; in urban Bengal, 21 years (International Institute for Population Sciences, 2010, p. 39, Table 2.3).
9. While a clear-cut urban–rural divide of the incidence of domestic violence is not readily available, the NCRB lists West Bengal as reporting the highest share of 498/A cases at 19.9 per cent, but Kolkata as one of the 53 mega cities does not feature among those topping the crimes against women list. See NCRB (2012, pp. 84, 88).
10. These assertions are based on direct interactions with more than 350 girls and women who have been/are in brothel-based prostitution. With about a 100 of them, the author has been in continued touch for close to 15 years now, through her engagement with youngsters from red light areas who have been spearheading a movement towards prevention of second-generation prostitution (among girls and women) and pimping (among boys and men) in two such areas in Kolkata, West Bengal, India.
11. This writer has directly interacted with one girl who was trafficked at 13 years and returned at 15 to lure six fresh girls of 13–14 years from her village. References to other similar cases have been copious from rescued survivors and women in the sex trade she has interacted with. The existence of girls below 18 years who get sucked into the trafficking racket has also been mentioned by representatives of civil society organizations and legal professionals working on the issue of child protection, as also by members of state mechanisms like Child Welfare Committees and Juvenile Justice Boards, since

such girls also pose a legal paradox: should they be treated as survivors of trafficking, or as perpetrators, as they are both—though children, as they are below 18.

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