

Devadasi and Their Intimate Partners: Dynamics of Relationship

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Abstract

Background: Devadasi practice is still prevalent in some parts of North Karnataka; most of the Devadasis get into sex work for their survival. During sex work, devadasis would get close to their customer, as they feel secure and emotionally satisfied. **Objectives:** The present study aims at understanding the Devadasi sex worker (DSW) and their intimate partners' (IPs) relationship and knowing the reasons for continuing the relationship even though they experience violence and abuse from their IP. **Methods:** Exploratory research design was adopted. Purposive sampling was used for the field visits. Data were gathered through personal interviews during field visits along with the counselors who were capacitated to deal with the relationship issues of DSWs and their IPs. Modified thematic analysis was used to analyze twenty field visit reports. **Results:** This study analyzed the quality and dynamics of the relationship between DSWs and their IP. DSWs and their IP define their relationship as "like marriage" without legal recognition. DSWs accept the violence from their IP as a symbol of love. Violence was identified as a key concern for the sex workers and is often acceptable in their relationship. **Conclusion:** The relationship between DSWs and their IPs needs to be understood before arriving at the care plan to deal with the relationship issues. There is an urgent need for developing an interventional model for the counselors and equip them to deal with the relationship issues of DSWs.

Keywords: Abuse, Devadasi sex worker, intimate partner, intimate partner violence

INTRODUCTION

In North Karnataka, the Devadasi system remains a culturally and economically valued form of sex work, and approximately 1000–10,000 young girls are inducted into the system annually.^[1,2] Most of the Devadasis in North Karnataka are from lower caste. Some of them live in separate communities within the larger towns or villages. The women and girls work out of their homes, which may have a separate room attached for sex work, or in the houses of their Devadasi neighbors. Some travel to larger rural centers to conduct dhanda in small-scale brothels, which usually consist of 1–2 girls in a home within an identifiable sex work area under the watch of a madam or "gharwali."^[3] Devadasi sex workers (DSWs)^[4] during their sex trade get emotionally connected to some of their customers, start perceiving romantic relationship with their customer, they in turn become their intimate partner (IP), who regularly visit and treat them as their property. Literature about DSWs suggests that being in an intimate relationship is associated with many barriers from their IP.^[5,6]

DSWs are also subjected to psychosocial vulnerabilities.^[7] In India, the National AIDS Control Programme has identified DSWs and their clients as two priority groups for HIV prevention interventions. The focuses of such interventions are mainly providing HIV prevention education through peer educators combined with free condom distribution and treatment for sexually transmitted infections.^[8] There is an urgent need for capacitating the counselors to shift their focus from condom counseling to deal with the problems of sex workers so that their quality of life can be enhanced and their rights get respected, recognized, and supported for their fulfillment. The present article deals with understanding the needs and issues of DSW and violence experienced from their IP, so that the counselors' skills can be capacitated to deal with

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the relationship issues of the sex workers with their romantic partners. The current study focuses on understanding the experiences of sex workers with their IP: what are the problems in their IP relationship? and why do DSWs continue the relationship, even though they are subjected to violence and exploited by their IP? These research questions constituted the focus of the study.

METHODS

The aim of the study was to understand the problems of the DSWs and the dynamics of their relationship with their IPs. The research study explored the reasons for continuing the relationship with the IPs, even though it is governed by violence. The study adopted exploratory research design, and purposive sampling was used to identify DSWs in Bijapur and Bagalkot districts, Karnataka. Psychiatric social workers along with the counselors of Karnataka Health Promotion Trust, during their field visits, interviewed DSWs to understand the dynamics of DSW relationship with their IPs. The interviews were recorded in the form of field visit reports not disclosing the identity of DSWs, and each DSW was given anonymous name and number. The reports were submitted to principal investigators. The principal investigator along with the psychiatric social worker analyzed twenty field visit reports of 8 months for the present article. The visit reports were read and reread to understand the problems of the sex workers with their IP. Information was collected on the meaning associated with their romantic relationship, problems in their relationship with their IP, and reasons for continuing relationship even though they are exploited by their IP. The problems shared during the interview were listed and supported with the quotes from the sex workers. Voices were grouped under each theme. Modified thematic analysis is performed through familiarization of the data through reading and rereading, generating initial codes from the data, searching for themes among the codes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming.^[9]

RESULTS

Sociodemographic details of the participants

Twenty DSWs were in the age range of 30–50 years; all of them were married to the Gods at their young age and all of them had IP visiting them regularly and experienced violence with their IP. None of the DSWs have attended schooling. All the twenty DSWs were practicing sex work in Mumbai previously.

Importance of relationship in the lives of Devadasi sex workers

DSWs were interviewed individually in their village with prior consent to understand their needs and to understand their relationship with the IP.

Theme 1: Love and possessiveness

IP expects the sex workers to be loyal to them. They would insist them not get into sex trade and promises to meet their financial needs if they are loyal to them. Most of the time, IPs

are not aware of the sex work of the Devadasi. Once known, it becomes the cause for their separation.

Mrs. V says “my intimate partner is everything for me, he is like my husband, but I am married to a god, I hope that he would be with me till my end of life, he would not have enough money to main both the families, I need to earn for myself and for my family, I know only sex work as a mean to get money, I do not know will he approve it or do I need to hide and run my dhanda.” I feel that “he is faithful to me, but because of my sex work, he may get infected with some illness, I am in dilemma, what should I do, How to negotiate for condom use in order to protect him from infections. If I ask my intimate partner to use condom he gets angry and questions that if you are not practicing sex work why you are forcing me to use condom?”

Mrs. X says “intimate partner treats me as his property, he does not get satisfied using condoms, so wanted to have sex without condoms, he expects me to be faithful to him, and agreed to take care of me and my family. I have two daughters from this relationship, he has agreed to educate them and marry them and would build house for me, and secure my future.”.

Mrs. T says “intimate partner is like my unwed husband, expects me to be like his wife, but does not take care of my family needs, to meet my economic needs, I do practice sex work, but my intimate partner feels that I should be loyal to him, he beats me if I do not cooperate and wanted me to satisfy him as his wishes and desires.”.

Mrs. L says “I trust my lover, and I want to spend my whole life with him. I cannot show suspicion of my lover by insisting that he use condoms, I do not know whether he is loyal to me or has many more relations like me apart from his legally wed wife.”

Mrs. B says “my intimate partner is like my husband, I take care of him like husband and he would meet all my needs, do I need to negotiate with him for condom use? But I do not know whether he has many more women in his life, apart from his legally wed wife.”

DSWs reported that their IP treat them as their wives but do not have legal sanction for their relationship, as more like husband and wife relationship (without legal sanctity).

Theme 2: Violence as a medium of expressing love

Violence from DSWs’ IP is very common in their relationship. Their IP under the influence of alcohol do abuse physically and sexually. DSWs do report being abused but accept it and perceive like husband–wife relationship, as they have a regular visitor to their home.

Mrs. V says that “intimate partner does not pay for sex nor takes care of my economic needs, but I like his company as he is emotionally attached with me, sometimes I need to take care of his responsibilities, I am happy to do so as I like and love him. I do not have any expectations of taking care of me, but I wanted him to regularly visit me.”

Mrs. L says “I like to be in the company of my IP whatever it is, he beats me or loves me, he is mine and I am for him forever, being in sex work, it is common to get physically abused by our customer, if same thing is done by the intimate partner, I do not feel anything wrong.”

Mrs. T says “my intimate partner wants me to stop my dhanda, he has promised me to take care of me. At times, he suspects me of continuing sex work, gets angry and beats me, sometimes takes away my money. He suspects me only because he loves and cares for me, I need to accept his love and his possession.”

Mrs. B. says that “whenever my Intimate Partner visits my home, would be tensed with some worries. He would drink along with me, feels relaxed in my company, under the influence of alcohol, beats me and verbally abuses me, later in the morning he would love me, does not remember what happened in the night, I also like his company even though he abuses me.”

Even though the relationship is governed by violence, DSWs do not consider it as abuse. They are not angry with their IP, as they are emotional connected and perceive it as love and possessiveness.

DSWs accept violence from their IP as a symbol of love. When they love their IP, they also accept violence.

Mrs. X says “I love him, so would like to be in his company, and entertain, fulfill his needs, at times when he is upset, he abuses me and beats, I do not take seriously.”

Mrs. A says “Hitting or questioning me is a form of expressing his love, as it is in husband and wife relationship, so I do not think it as an issue.”

Mrs. K says “Intimate Partner beats or screams, because he loves me, visits me regularly, meets my household needs, treats me like his wife.”

Mrs. L said “intimate partner likes me and my company, he visits regularly even though he has his family.”

Mrs. B said “in our village, husbands beat their wives, in my life, intimate partner is like my husband, it is okay to be beaten.”

Mrs. V says “me and my intimate partner would fight and he would stop visiting me for some time, later either I would try to get in touch or he would come on his own, our fights will not continue for long time.”

DSWs view the relationship with their IP as more like a husband and wife relationship without legal sanctity. As their IP are fulfilling their desire to have a “husband,” they bare the violence. Violence has been viewed as overexpression of love from their liked ones. Often DSWs experience fights and escalate into breakups with their IP. Unlike any relationship, even they do have fights related to trust issues, violence, communication difficulties, use of condom-related issues, uncertainty about the relationship, unhealthy boundaries, and violence. Most of the time, they look forward to resolve.

DISCUSSION

After abolition of the Devadasi system, Devadasis lost the religious and legal recognition and many continued their sex trade. In their sex trade, they do develop or get attracted with some of their customers and get involved and become their IP. Most DSWs did mention financial needs as the main reason for them in entering sex work.^[10] DSW migrate to cities such as Mumbai and Pune, where a vibrant sex industry has been practiced in the red-light areas. In fact, reports from both North Karnataka and Mumbai suggest that substantial migration of DSWs occurs from rural Karnataka to Mumbai.^[11]

Devadasis from their IPs face problems such as lack of trust, conflicts, communication difficulties, use of condom-related issues, unhealthy boundaries, violence, uncertainty about permanence of relationship, and unplanned separations. They continue the relationship with their romantic partners, as they feel secured in their company and their emotional needs will be met in this relationship. The current study highlights that violence has been accepted by most of the women as they like and love their IP. Violence among sex workers and reasons for continuing the relationship with their IP have been studied extensively.^[12]

DSWs reported experiences of gender violence such as physical, sexual, and verbal abuse during childhood, and past experiences of abuse were said to be compound feelings of worthlessness, and a similar finding has been reported.^[13] Many studies have reported that violence is a prominent feature in the lives of sex workers.^[14] A study by Bindel *et al.* found that two-thirds of the sex workers they interviewed experienced violence, while another study by Sanders-McDonagh and Neville.^[15,16] claims that many sex workers have experienced increasing levels of violence and complained of harassment by police and from their IP.

DSWs and their IP have relationship problems such as unhealthy boundaries such as using violence as a means to get satisfied, communication difficulties of not expressing their feelings and concerns with their IPs, trust issues like expecting DSWs to be loyal to them, and uncertainty of the relationship as it is not a husband and wife relationship. In order to provide interventions for these problems, one should have comprehensive knowledge of family and marital counselling to resolve relationship difficulties. A growing body of evidence suggests that couple-based interventions may be more effective than individual-based interventions in promoting safer sex behaviors within intimate relationships.^[17,18] It provides couples with an opportunity to learn and practice new communication and negotiation skills together.^[19] Women who engage in sex work in South India continue to be at a high risk for HIV infection through heterosexual transmission.^[20]

The relationships between the Devadasi women and their IP are quite complex. They compare their relationships to those of married couples in terms of power dynamics and decision-making. Few female DSWs mentioned that money, suspicions for unfaithfulness,

and lack of interest in family matters are important reasons for the disagreements. All female respondents said that having an IP has given them social status and increased their sense of security. Over time and with the intimacy, love, affection, and concern for each other, they may begin to think of their relationship as equivalent to that of husband and wife.^[21] For this reason, Devadasi women may hide their sex work practice from their IP. In most cases, participants consider themselves as husband and wife and resist behaviors that could undermine that relationship. Many Devadasis and other sex workers express the belief that suggesting condom use to a person implies infidelity and mistrust.^[22-25]

Limitations

DSWs were the participants of the study, and therefore, the results cannot be generalized to female sex worker community as a whole. With the changing society, the experiences and perceptions of DSWs and their male partners may also change over a period of time. Hence, our results apply to the particular moment in time in which people were interviewed. Documents may lack authenticity as they are not recorded. Visit reports may not be representative of the wider population of DSWs. This study did not explore other important factors such as DSWs' early childhood experience, future plans, and old age. More extensive, in-depth studies are needed to understand more about the complexities of relationships between DSWs and their IP under varying circumstances, in different kinds of communities.

CONCLUSION

It is a well-known fact that sex workers live on the margins of society as their work lacks legal and moral approval. Most of the DSWs in Karnataka are often poor and uneducated. Violence was identified as a key concern for the sex workers and it is often acceptable in their relationship. There is an urgent need for developing an interventional model for the counselors and equip them to deal with the relationship issues of DSWs. Even though pretest, posttest, and condom counseling are important in terms of risk reduction, there is a need for the counselors to focus on providing supportive counseling services for DSWs to deal with their IP, so that their quality of life can be enhanced. The capacity building training would go a long way in helping counselors to understand the dynamism of relationship, so that they can support DSWs, and hence their quality of life can be enhanced and the quality of relationship can be enhanced.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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