

Trafficking of Children for Prostitution in West Bengal: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT The objective of the current study is to examine the context and processes of sex trafficking of children for brothel-based prostitution in West Bengal. The present paper is based on a qualitative design and thematic analysis of the primary data collected from the sex trafficked victims who have been rescued from the brothels. Four major pathways of trafficking have been identified for the children: employment induced trafficking, lure of better opportunities in the urban areas, façade of romantic relations, and run away children who easily succumb to the bait of traffickers. Based on the findings of the study certain policy recommendations have been suggested.

INTRODUCTION

West Bengal has emerged as focal point of activity for sex trafficking (ST) of children for brothel-based prostitution in India (Deb et al. 2011; Hameeda et al. 2010; Sen 2004). The trafficking of children in brothel-based prostitution has assumed serious proportions in the state of West Bengal (India) at the interstate as well as intrastate level and across the porous international borders. The districts of South and North 24 Parganas, Nadia, Murshidabad, Malda, Darjeeling, Coochbehar, Jalpaiguri and Uttar Dinajpur, Howrah, Midnapore, and Birbhum have been identified as potential supply centres of ST in Bengal (Chakraborty 2006). The state shares international borders with Nepal, Bangladesh, and Bhutan, and has the state borders with Sikkim, Bihar, Odisha, Jharkhand, and Assam. The traffickers effectively capitalize on the contiguous borders with these countries for trafficking women and children to adjoining places. Kolkata, the capital city of the state, is not only the trade, industrial and cultural hub of eastern India, but also serves as the centre connecting the north-

eastern states with the southern states of the country (Sen 2004). Migration from Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan, and within the country from the states referred to earlier, has been in existence for long.

The attributes to ST are both socio-economic as well as accidental. The extreme poverty conditions often lead women and children to explore livelihood where they become easy prey to traffickers who trap them in their interest by making false promises of comfortable livelihood. In accidental or situational trafficking, women and children leave their families in protest to emotional breakdown to regular impalpable hurting comments or sarcastic remarks, broken close relationship including loving relations. Low level of literacy is another facilitating factor for ST in Bengal, for its debilitating effect on potential victims who fail to read between the lines and understand the real motives of traffickers. Despite Sarba Siksha Karyakram (movement for education to all), the status of girl's enrolment in schools and the ratio of drops-out in comparison to male children continues to be a matter of concern. Gender discrimination, location of schools at far distances, adverse students-teachers ratio, indifferent attitude of teachers, recruitment of teachers on political consideration, lack of school infrastructure, engagement of girls in domestic works and sibling care are some of the stumbling blocks for girls in accessing education (Chakraborty 2006). A considerable portion of trafficking also occurs in guise of employment and marriage (Ghosh 2009). The persistence of extreme poverty, low level of education, maternal

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mortality, and maternal malnutrition are the important factors that have contributed to the high incidence of child marriage in the state. The first generation victims turned traffickers entice the teenagers from the villages presenting herself before them as a role model. The girls already engaged in the prostitution in Mumbai from the state, have also been found coming back to their hometowns to take more girls and force them into prostitution, sometimes even with the consent of their parents (Sen 2004). Furthermore, language also acts as a potent facilitator in perpetuating trafficking from across the borders. It is almost difficult to detect the presence of foreign traffickers and trafficked victims, as most of them are well conversant with the language of the state. Bengali—the language of the state is also, the language of Bangladesh, which camouflages the identity of the Bangladeshi nationals in West Bengal.

The objective of the study is to examine the factors propelling the trafficking of children for brothel-based prostitution in the state.

Terms and Definition

Analyses of adult sex work are fiercely contested and there is a wide-ranging debate about terminology, levels of control, and the nature of sex work (Montgomery 2009). The global stance seems divided on sex work yielding dichotomous rubric. The Abolitionist framework views all prostitution as exploitative, violative of women's rights and dignity, and advocates unequivocally for its abolition as an effective remedy. While, the second perspective argues for choice in the rights domain considering it as a source of earning or a viable livelihood option consciously made on the part of a female. They demand state patronage to prostitution industry and are against abolition of sex industry. Drawing upon the abolitionist framework, for the purpose of current research, all kinds of sex work is referred to as trafficking as per the recent United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, 2000 (here after referred to as Palermo Protocol). The definition of the trafficking as enshrined in Article 3 (a) is:

“The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability

or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs (Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime 2000).”

The term ‘child’ is used as defined by United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 1 as “every human being below the age of 18 years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier” (UNICEF 1989).

“Victim” denotes someone who has been the victim of a crime and does not refer to the person's agency or any other characteristics (Bnunovskis and Surtees 2012).

METHODOLOGY

The present paper is based on a qualitative design and thematic analysis of the primary data collected from ST victims who have been rescued from the brothels by the Child Welfare Committee (CWC) Kolkata and placed at different Non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Research on ST victims in brothel establishments is a challenging task, as identifying and reaching them, is a very troublesome and problematic instigating risk of various kinds to the researcher as well as the subjects. Reaching such cohorts via support service providers was the best plausible solution as it became convenient to approach as well as persuade them to share their experiences as victims find it difficult to confide to a stranger. Social workers mediated this distrust and facilitated rapport building. Part of the data was also collected using anthropological tenet of ‘key informants’. Key informants for this study were the NGOs' personnel's, and counselors and other stakeholders who provided major insights on the phenomenon of trafficking of children in the state.

Sanlaap is a specialist NGO dedicated to the protection of children trafficked into ST. It has four shelter houses for survivors of ST in and around Kolkata, as well as numerous drop-in-centres in red light areas. This research was con-

ducted at the Narenrapur shelter home just outside Kolkata. The Mahima Aftercare Home is another specialist organization working in the area of victim protection and assistance. The major activities of the Mahima Home includes, but are not limited to accomplish rehabilitation of the child ST victims through structure, counseling, education, vocational training, and spiritual development. Thirty respondents were identified for the study. All of the respondents were trafficked for brothel-based prostitution. Majority of the victims were Indian nationals (n=25) while five were Bangladeshi nationals. The age of the girls fell in the range of 15-23 years. Six of them were married before entry into the sex trade. The demographic details of the victims have been presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Socio-demographic profile of the respondents

<i>Age When Trafficked (Yrs)</i>	Below 15	15-18
	20	10
<i>Nationality</i>	Indian	Bangladeshi
	25	5
<i>Marital Status</i>	Single	Married
	26	5
<i>Religion</i>	Hindu	Muslim
	21	9
<i>Duration of Stay at Brothel (Months)</i>	0-6	6-12
	20	10
<i>Education</i>	No schooling	Primary
	23	7

Source: Field data

Initially, the researcher intended to apply the participant observation method for the study, for its advantage of systematic noting and recording of events, and observing their behaviours, and artifacts (objects) at the setting of the study (Chaulagai 2009). It also seemed to be the most appropriate tool given the exploratory nature of the research to bring out, in-depth information about the individual experiences (Simkhada 2008). The researcher explored the possibility of residing in a shelter home for some period to establish informal intimacy and rapport to unfold facts not known so far in view of the clandestine nature of ST operations. ST being a sensitive issue, the superintendent of the shelter homes was too reluctant to permit the researcher due to the issues of security, identity, and secondary victimization of the victims. This necessitated a rectification in the research plan for a

retrospective study of the victims, which may be equally meaningful, if not more. The study was designed in the backdrop of the WHO ethical and safety recommendations for interviewing trafficked women (Zimmerman and Watts 2003). Moreover, ethical approval for the study was obtained from the superintendent of the shelters and the ethical review board of Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur (India). The study, thus, involved retrospective qualitative analysis of information collected through qualitative interviews.

The data were collected from the inmates of the NGOs during the month of February and May 2012 as a part of fieldwork for the doctoral dissertation of the author. The sampling was purposive and convenient. Prior engagement in brothel-based prostitution was the primary inclusion criterion. Interview schedule and observation were the major tools of data collection. Purpose of the study was described, in brief, to the respondents and their informal consent was obtained for the purpose. The subjects had the privilege to withdraw from the interview process at any moment in case of discomfort. The safety and well-being of each participant were given utmost priority throughout the interview process. Caution, care, and sensitivity were maintained during each interview. In case, during the interview, if the participant appeared to be uncomfortable or emotionally distraught, the interview was interrupted and the participant was given adequate time to regain composure or to discontinue the interview voluntarily.

Confidentiality and anonymity were further ensured in the research process. All participants had a participant number for reference. Masking participants' names in the data provided anonymity to them. Interviews were conducted to obtain information regarding basic demography, trafficking history, and experience of entry into the trade (that is, recruitment), health issues and working and living environment. The issue being sensitive, and in view of methodological limitations (Bosworth et al. 2011; Godziak 2008; Harrison 2006; Brennan 2005), flexibility and sensitivity were assured in terms of wording and inclusion/exclusion of specific theme to avoid emotional derangement of an individual (Brunovskis and Surtees 2012). Interviews lasted for 30-40 minutes with each respondent. Focus group discussion (FGD) as envisaged in the primary plan was also dropped later as some of

the respondents were not comfortable with this idea and were reluctant to share their history in presence of other inmates. Subsequently, one to one interview was held in front of the counselor. While collecting data, a research log was maintained to create a research database to increase the construct validity and reliability of the study and maintain a chain of evidence revealing answers to the research questions. Theoretical sampling, thick description, and peer debriefing were employed to establish scientific rigor. The qualitative data collected from the field were transcribed, that is, they were typed (from interviews, and observational notes) into word processing documents. The verbatim transcripts of the interviews (in Bengali—the language of the interviewees) were translated in English to identify major themes for analysis. The researcher then carefully read the transcribed data, line by line, and divided the data into meaningful analytical units (that is segmenting the data). When meaningful segments were located, they were coded. The coding was done by marking the segments of data with symbols, descriptive words, or category names. After coding, the data were thematically analyzed according to the objectives of the study.

RESULTS

Analysis of the data highlighted four prominent themes propelling the trafficking of children into brothel-based prostitution: Employment induced trafficking, lure of better opportunities in the urban areas, façade of romantic relations, and run away children who become easy prey to the traffickers' ambush. It is common for girls from poor background to supplement their family income through such work and any such potential opportunity is immediately grabbed without fail. Sadly, traffickers cash in on this fact to hook their prey. Increasingly, children are tricked or duped under the pretext of finding suitable jobs in urban cities. Probable bait is two square meals, moderate income, and descent workload compatible to their skills.

Kabita (real name not disclosed) aged 17 years described:

“My neighbour promised me to arrange a job in Kolkata. Even after a long wait, I was not told about the job, I became suspicious. I was always offered some excuses. After reaching Kolkata, the contact person left me waiting at a

point and disappeared. After a while, he returned and took me to a building seemed to be old. I looked around with curiosity to find high-rise buildings as shown in movies. We went inside that building with a dim light. A well-dressed woman came to receive me; she seemed to be extremely polite and enquired about my family and whereabouts. Her positive retort, made me hopeful of securing the work I was promised. She welcomed me inside and after a while, she thanked the man and assured him of my well-being in his next visit. She seemed very cordial and generous, offered me food and even some cold drink (a luxury in rural villages). Later, she took me inside a room, asked me to make myself comfortable, and said I can begin my work from tomorrow. Later, in the evening one of the girls secretly dropped in and warned me about the kind of work I was supposed to do, which left me awestruck. I just felt betrayed. I immediately ran outside then a man got hold of me, struck me hard, and took me inside. I shouted and cried but in vain. I was beaten with leather belts continuously for 6-7 days when I succumbed.”

Aisha (22 years) described:

“My husband worked as a casual labor and would often be without employment for weeks. My brother-in-law promised me to get a job in Dhaka (Bangladesh). One day he came to me and said that one of his friends is going to Dhaka next day and he can arrange some work for me there. I was quite elated to find this opportunity. Next day I left with that man and we boarded a bus. The man gave me ‘singara’ (local snack) to eat and I got unconscious and fell asleep. When I gained my consciousness, I realised that it was not Dhaka as some people were speaking Hindi too. I grew alarmed but that man kept steady and took me to a roadside small dhaba (roadside eatery). After a while, another man came to meet me. His gaze was quite intruding which made me uncomfortable. Later, they had some talk aside and the first man asked me to go with that man. I felt quite anxious but the man (with whom I came) assured me that he knew this man and I could also trust him promising to return soon. That man called a taxi and we proceeded. The taxi stopped in a very congested market place. We walked for a while and entered into a dilapidated building. The woman there warmly welcomed the man. They moved to the room aside asking me to wait. Possibly,

they made some negotiations and he left asking me to take care of myself. Although I have seen brothels in movies but I never knew one day I would land into one. I immediately sensed the danger I was in. I just begged the woman to let me go but she would not listen. I was denied food and water and locked in a small room for almost a week, when I succumbed to her commands."

Thus, employment induced trafficking has been most frequently cited ploy used by the traffickers. However, some of the respondents who were already engaged in low paying jobs or irregular work were deceived under the pretext of 'better' opportunities in urban areas. Few of the respondents reported being engaged in menial jobs such as working in sweat shops or domestic enterprises. They were lured with lucrative employment opportunities yielding higher remunerations or better alternatives than previous one. The girls were ensured that they would be allowed to return if they dislike the job or want to change to another job. Some of my subjects were entrapped into the game of trafficking under the guise of better livelihood opportunities in the urban centres.

Asha described:

"I use to work in dhaba (local motel) near my house. My job was cleaning the utensils. The job was very tiring and had to work for almost 12-13 hrs a day. I used to get exhausted by the end of the day, while I was paid around five hundred bucks. There was man who frequented the dhaba, and was quite known visitor. He was quite sympathetic towards and sometimes generously gave me some money. Once he also gave me some old dresses to wear. One day he offered a job in Kolkata in some factory. He said that monthly salary offered would be approximately six times higher than what I was currently earning. I grew elated and readily agreed to move up. However, he sold me to a brothel."

Thus, children already engaged in some remunerative work are trapped under the guise of better alternatives and moved to urban cities.

Few of the respondents also reported being trapped under the facade of romantic relations. It has been reported that traffickers often pose as potential lovers and gain trust of the victims. After sometime, they persuade them to move along with them to a city for a romantic trip. Many times girls are so impelled by their promises that they secretly elope with them leaving the pro-

TECTIVE home environment. The traffickers secretly sold them to a brothel. The story of Nisha is a typical of such romantic façade.

"One day a friend of mine introduced me to her distant cousin brother who lived in city. He was quite good looking and far better than the other boys from the village. He displayed lot of interest in me that I also silently reciprocated. We began to meet secretly. My sister warned me not to mingle too much with a stranger but I did not pay heed to any of her words. One day he suggested let's go to Kolkata. I denied so he got angry and replied that I do not trust him and all that stuff. I felt very sorry to offend him and agreed to move with him. I knew my parents would not allow, so lied to them that I will be staying at my friends home for the day expecting to return home by evening. However, he sold me for Rs. 20000."

Thus, traffickers are adapting innovative ways even a façade of romantic relations.

Besides, it has been found that delinquents or run away children are also the potential targets. The respondents reported that traffickers are on look out for such children in their surroundings and trap them as soon as possible. Most of the victims reported being come in contact with their traffickers at the bus stop or railways stations in suburban areas. The traffickers are shrewd to identify the runaway children due to abusive home environment or non-conforming children often at conflict with their families. Traffickers approach them as caring and sympathetic uncles/aunts consoling them with kind words trying to seduce them through love and care. The young and naïve children fail to read between the lines and fall easy prey to their bait. Savita recalled:

"My father was alcoholic and spoilt all his money on alcohol. Hence, there use to be frequent fight between my parents that I always disliked. Sometimes my father hit my mother including me and my siblings following which there would lot of tension and sadness in my family. I gradually got tired to this episode and disliked my home environment. One day I decided I had enough of it and stole 50 bucks from my father's pocket while he was asleep. I had seen lot many people from my village working in urban cities. I thought anything would be better than living in this abusive family. One day when my parents were away from my home I quietly took some clothes in a rugged bag and

ran away from my home reaching bus station. However, I was quite baffled by the crowd at the station. I asked people standing there about the bus to Kolkata but no one gave me correct reply. After some time, a woman approached me and in an affectionate manner told me about the bus. She said that she was also going to Kolkata and I can come along with her. Pleased by her gestures I thought what's wrong in sitting with her. We began talking and I told her my whole story. Once at the destination, she suggested that I could stay with her until I get some work. Though filled with inhibitions, later I agreed not knowing what to do, where to go. She was a brothel owner who forced me to work at her brothel in Kolkata."

Thus, delinquents or run away children are also quite frequently victimized into ST for brothel-based prostitution.

DISCUSSION

The particular contribution of the study is the contribution to the under researched area of context and processes of ST in Bengal. Four major pathways of trafficking have been identified for the children: employment induced trafficking, lure of better opportunities in the urban areas, façade of romantic relations, and run away children who easily succumb to the bait of traffickers. Employment induced trafficking has been found to be one of the prominent themes as previously by (Vindhya and Dev 2011; Vindhya and Swathi 2010). It has been found that recently agriculture is no more economically viable for many families in rural areas due to the lowering water level and dissemination of new hybrid seeds. Thus, many families are found to abandon agriculture and shifting to alternative venues of employment. Impact of loss of traditional means of livelihood for female children has been double barreled. Firstly, it means decrement in investment on their welfare including education and well-being. Secondly, inflation coupled with the rising living costs has propelled their participation in economically productive venues outside their home environment. Traffickers have been found to effectively capitalize on this fact where they target girls from impoverished families looking for such opportunities. It is to be noted that people lacking technical expertise or formal education often seek job via informal networks such as word of mouth. Thus, the children including adults also

fall easy prey to employment decoys which is common in trafficking for labor sector besides trafficking for brothel-based prostitution.

Facade of romantic relation has been found to be the other common pathways into the ST via romantic partners, and friends as previously reported by Karandikar et al. (2011) and Simkhada (2008). Sale of the girls by romantic partners such as boyfriends or even by husbands is recurring event. Romantic relations easily motivate young children and traffickers have effectively capitalized on the fact where they pose as romantic partners gradually gaining their trust and later sell them to the brothels.

Child neglect led to the victimization of one of few respondents where ill treatment by the family forced her to leave the protective environment of family and run away. Run away child are easy targets for the traffickers. While trying to flee from home, she was intercepted by a trafficker at nearby bus stand that divulge important information about the techniques of entrapment. Traffickers have been found to look out for single adolescents near bus stand or railway stations.

Although India was one of the earliest parties to the *Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others* (1949), and claims to have implemented this treaty within its domestic legal system through the *Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Girls Act (SITA) of 1956*, subsequently amended and renamed the *Immoral Traffic in Persons (Prevention) Act (ITPPA) of 1986*, yet the problem of trafficking persists and studies suggest that thousands of girls and women are trafficked every year for the purpose of commercial sexual exploitation, and forced to servile in the conditions of slavery (Regmi 2006). Besides, the Indian Penal Code (IPC), 1860 has a number of provisions for penalizing perpetrators for trafficking children, including Sections 372 and 373 that punish the sale and purchase of minors for prostitution, and the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956, Section 6, forbids the detention of a person in premises where prostitution is conducted (Deb et al. 2011). Yet, despite these existing legal avenues, trafficking of children for ST persists unbridled; goes virtually unnoticed by law enforcement authorities due to numerous reasons. Major lacuna in Indian legal system is that it has limited itself to street prostitution and has stipulated harsh punishment

for street prostitution though the provisions of solicitation (Sec 8, ITPPA) but is silent on indoor prostitution, which is the major loophole of anti-trafficking mandates. Thus, brothels continue to run unabated since decades. Corruption among police and other law enforcement bodies continues to patronize the brothel owners who are seldom prosecuted for running brothels. Further, it has found that poor governance system plagued by corruption has effectively worked in the favor of the traffickers who continue to victimize the poor girls from rural areas under different pretexts.

Major limitations of the study are as listed follows: All participants were urban-based, accessing NGO services, and were recruited using convenience sampling, so the sample is not representative. It is also probable that social desirability effect might have influenced the respondents interview responses.

CONCLUSION

West Bengal has emerged as a hub for ST for brothel based prostitution with the influx of girls from within as well as from the neighboring countries-Bangladesh and Nepal. The data reveal that most of the victims were trafficked in their teenage (12-16 years of age). They all had been deceived into the ST under various pretexts. Employment induced trafficking has been identified to be a major theme. Further, façade of romantic relations has been also found to be present. Run away or delinquent child are also equally susceptible where they are targeted by the traffickers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Following policy measures may be useful to combat ST and protect the child victims of ST. Firstly, addressing the risk factors perpetuating trafficking is an elementary measure. A widespread awareness program on ST in children and female may alert people about potential traffickers enticing victims into various pretexts, phenomenon common in Bengal. It has been found that limited awareness on trafficking has further jeopardized the effective intervention measures. Thus, adequate sensitization of the police through training and education may help them distinguish the children from females and protect the children. Strict punishment may be stip-

ulated for trafficking children compared to the minors, as effective prosecution against the traffickers' may act as a positive deterrent for the people profiting from the acts of ST.

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