

## **'Do you really want to hear about my life?': doing 'feminist research' with women in sex work in Eastern India**

**Mirna Guha, Anglia Ruskin University**

*This article reflects on insights gathered from doing feminist research during my doctoral studies in international development. My research focused on the lives of women formerly and currently in sex work in Eastern India, and their experiences and resistance of everyday violence. I argue that the adoption of a life-history interviewing method created possibilities to move away from standard topics associated with sex work, and allowed women in sex work to discuss the dynamism and fluidity within their lives, within, before and after sex work. I also explore how this method enabled the theme of koshto (pain) to emerge which challenges the framing of violence in sex work as exceptional. I argue that women in sex work need to feel heard and acknowledged within feminist research, not simply as subjects of knowledge-gathering or to inform development discourses and interventions, but as human beings with dynamic personhoods. Finally, I share lessons learnt which can be useful to future feminist researchers researching sex work, within a current environment of ideologically polarised discussions on victimhood and agency in sex work.*

**Key words:** Feminist research; life-history interviews; sex work; Eastern India; *koshto*

### **Introduction**

The 'herstory' of the relationship between sex work and feminism is complicated. Acknowledging this complexity is imperative to reflect on what a feminist approach to researching the lives of women in sex work can look like. Women in sex work have historically been excluded by the mainstream feminist movement and marginalised within discussions on violence against women. This has occurred due to the radical feminist framing of sex work as violence, and, in India, of violence in sex work as a caste-based issue, coupled with Indian feminists' ambivalence regarding female sexuality (Gangoli 2008, 24). This marginalisation is perpetuated by current development discourses on HIV/AIDS and human trafficking, which enforce ideas of 'prostitution-as-risk' and 'prostitution-as-violence' (Shah 2014, 24-25) and demand unique interventions to end violence in sex work.

In this article, I discuss using the life-history interviewing method in my research with 42 part-time and full-time women sex workers in two historically prominent red-light districts in Kolkata (Sonagachi and Kalighat), India, over a six-month period across September 2014 and April 2015. I show how this method created possibilities to move away from standard topics associated with sex work. It also allowed women in sex work to share their accounts of the dynamism and fluidity within their lives, within and before/after sex work.

As an Indian middle-class woman, with caste-based and socio-economic privilege, and studying for a doctoral degree abroad, my interactions with my research respondents - who were women from peri-urban and rural backgrounds with low levels of literacy - were bound to be inherently unequal. However, the adoption of the life-history interviewing method enabled respondents to speak in ways that challenged and opened the 'boundaries of standard topics' (Devault 1990, 99) and created a space where respondents could 'provide accounts rooted in the realities of their lives' (ibid).

In the next section, I discuss my experience of working on anti-trafficking interventions prior to my doctoral research, and the acquired knowledge of the relationship between feminism and sex work, that created the context for and preceded my research. I then go on to discuss the method of life-history interviewing. I relate how my respondents responded to the request to share life-histories, and how this affected the interviewer-interviewee relationship. There were instances when respondents established boundaries, which resulted in changes within the data collection process. Accepting these boundaries was essential to doing feminist research, as it signalled to the respondents that their concerns and desires were being listened to during the process. I end with a discussion of how the life-history interviewing method allowed the theme of *koshto* (pain) to emerge, not only across the red-light areas but also among respondents from the other two sites of fieldwork. This included 'rescued' sex workers living in an anti-trafficking home, as well as women formerly in sex work who had returned to their villages in the southern district of the state of West Bengal.

### **Contextualising my research: first-hand experience, and feminist herstories**

#### *My experience of working with sex workers prior to my research*

As a development practitioner, between 2010 and 2012 I interacted with young women (aged 17-26) who were vulnerable to and had experienced coercive entry into sex work in India and Bangladesh. I did this through visits to NGO-run shelters for women rescued through anti-trafficking interventions, as well as visits to rural communities where young women had returned after exiting sex work. On one project, I interviewed a group of 'survivors of human trafficking' about their experiences of returning to their homes and communities after exiting sex work. Invariably, the conversations veered towards experiences within sex work. While the young women emphasised their coercive experiences, questions around positive experiences (if any) were met with shy silences and an occasional giggle.

This made me reflect on the 'grey' areas within the experiences of women coerced into sex work – and how development programming may require their beneficiaries to accommodate and translate these experiences into its 'standard vocabulary' (Devault 1990, 99). This, and the polarisation in discussions on sex work among feminists and within the development sector, led me to my doctoral research and my desire to research the experiences of women within sex work. I discuss the background to these polarised discussions in the next section.

#### *Anglo-American feminist debates*

Juno Mac and Molly Smith have argued that 'sex workers are the original feminists' (2018, 5). Sex workers have organised, participated in and agitated against workplace closures, unacceptable working conditions and the weaponization of morality to stigmatise sex workers. The authors discuss this in relation to sex workers in Europe from the medieval

period to contemporary times. They also highlight other collective actions taken by sex workers globally and across history, to support each other in child caring activities, financial matters and participation in political action.

Yet despite this 'precocious feminism' (Mac and Smith 2018, 9), the relationship between sex workers and the wider feminist movements in different contexts has been tense, finally bursting forth in the 'sex wars' in Anglo-American second-wave feminism in the 60s. This tension contextualises the terrain within which feminist researchers work when they focus on the lives, rights and choices of women who sell sex.

Specifically, feminists within the Anglo-American movement have been sharply divided in their views on sex work, and its relationship to violence against women. As the field of gender and development research, policy and practice has involved many feminists from within this movement, this is significant. The infamous 'sex wars' on 'issues of feminist sexual morality' (Ferguson 1984,106) within second-wave feminism yielded two camps: the radical, and the libertarian. While radical feminists argued that 'sexuality in a male-dominant society involves danger... [and] that sexual practices perpetuate violence against women' (ibid. 106), for libertarians the 'key feature of sexuality is the potentially liberating aspects of the exchange of pleasure between consenting partners' (ibid. 106). But these are not mutually exclusive positions, since contemporary sexual practices can involve both pleasure and danger (ibid).

These opposing views have resulted in radical feminists framing 'prostitution' [1] as violence against women, while the other end of the polarised debate posits it as a form of (sex) work (Sanders 2016). Teela Sanders argues that the idea of 'prostitution' as 'inevitably and inherently' violent against women is underpinned by a 'contradiction between the ideological theorizing on female sexuality and the use of the female body, and the reality of violence against sex workers' (ibid, 94). This is echoed by Juno Mac and Molly Smith, who argue that 'sex workers have long noted with ambivalence the interplay between prostitution as a site of metaphor and as an actual *workplace*' (2018, 2). They highlight how second-wave feminist rhetoric, as noted by Kate Millet, drew on sex work to describe the exploitation of housewives in marriage. Nuancing this, Teela Sanders (2016) argues that while marriage was considered oppressive since it involved the sanctification of power of men over women by the state, (radical) feminists in the second wave considered 'prostitution...the more damaging institution that was an extension of oppression within a capitalist market'.

I first encountered these Anglo-American feminist debates as an undergraduate student of English Literature in an Indian University and found them re-emerging within differing views on sex work in the development sector. In particular, the radical feminist views manifested strongly within the abolitionist view on sex work popular within anti-trafficking discourses and interventions. However, views and interventions on sex work in India are also influenced by its own feminist herstories, particularly that of the Indian Women's Movement which I discuss next. [2]

### *Sex work and the Indian Women's Movement*

Prabha Kotiswaran argues that 'Indian feminist theorizing on sex work largely mirrors the Anglo-American debates with its two major feminist camps of abolitionist and sex work advocates' (2014, 87). However, Indian feminists' engagement with sex work, and their

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conceptualisation of violence within it, 'depart[s] in a few significant ways from these...positions' (ibid., 88). Instead of being a 'mere iteration of North American radical feminism' (ibid), the Indian abolitionist stance is preoccupied with interrogating the role of poverty and caste-based inequality in perpetuating women's engagement in 'prostitution' (ibid).

Numerous recent studies (Black 2007, Chandavarkar 2008, Rozario 2000, Kotiswaran 2014) show that despite these efforts, the recruitment of lower-caste women into the sex work industry to serve upper-caste men has persisted to the present day. The enduring and complex association of caste with women's participation in sex work in India led to its framing as a 'caste issue' instead of a 'women's issue', where the exploitation of sex workers has been perceived as caste-based exploitation and not as a wider issue of violence against women or sexual exploitation (Tambe 2008). However, in R.C. Swarankar's study of the *Nat* community in Rajasthan, they argued that although 'caste panchayat' is a strong and effective political institution, which governs the social-sexual behaviour of the Nats, 'Nat women are sex workers, not by the social sanction of the caste panchayat alone' (2008, 125). Factors such as 'society, patriarchy, freedom to the males [sic] to have sex outside the family and caste and involvement of sex traders' (ibid.) need to be considered too.

Geetanjali Gangoli has argued that 'there are, essentially, three different ways in which Indian feminists have addressed the issue of sex work – silence, as hurt and violence, and as potential choice and liberation' (2008, 22). Apart from the perception and categorisation of sex work as an issue of caste-based exploitation, Geetanjali Gangoli argued that the 'silence' is due to the narrow and rigid perception of sexuality that emerged from the focus of the Indian Women's Movement (IWM) on legal rights and violence against women in the 1980s. Sex work featured tangentially in issues of rape and sexual harassment, which galvanised action within the IWM against the police and the judiciary (Gandhi & Shah 1992).

An example of the reluctance on the part of Indian feminists to engage with violence in sex work, and their ambivalence regarding sexuality, was reflected in their silence around the illegal raids of brothels in Mumbai in 1996. Although the law permits raids when children are present, adult women were detained and then forcibly repatriated (Gangoli, 2008:26). A report released by the National Commission of Women, that focused on societal violence on women and children in prostitution argued that 'mainstream struggles of and for the emancipation of women in India have remained immune to the situations and needs' (NCW 1996, 9) of women sex workers. Pushpa Bhawe argues that this negligence is due to women engaged in sex work being constructed as 'not good' women in a society that categorises women as pativrata (chaste) and prostitutes (2008, 41). Women's movements, therefore, have not naturally or organically considered women in sex work when focusing on violence against women. Considering this, Geetanjali Gangoli argues that recasting women sex workers as perpetual victims of violence, and approaching sex work as 'hurt and violence' (2008:22) has allowed some space for accommodation in the IWM's campaign against violence. One of the ways this happened was through the infusion of a radical feminist rhetoric within anti-trafficking interventions during the 1990s.

Srila Roy notes that 'few of the autonomous women's groups that were formed in the 1980s and represented what is considered to be the most militant, visible phase of the IWM survive today' (2011, 589). The NGO-isation and professionalisation of feminists in the late 1980s and early 1990s occurred due to the 'greater availability of funds and a general exhaustion with

movement-based mobilizations' (ibid.). This meant a reliance on international and government funding, as well as on institutional support structures.

As part of my research (Guha 2019), I looked at the transformation of a feminist collective (that worked with children of sex workers) into an anti-trafficking NGO, and the eventual reliance on state funds for its anti-trafficking shelter. I highlighted how this created power inequalities between the state and the NGO, with the latter losing control over whom its shelter can be used to house. Such experiences show 'carceral feminism' (Bernstein 2010, 143) [3] in action. This frames solutions to violence against women as state-led criminalisation and incarceration of individual men as perpetrators; the 'rescue' and custodial care of women as 'victims'; and the adoption of a protection-as-safety rhetoric. These have been critiqued by various feminist campaigns such as, *Why Loiter*, *Blank Noise*, *Take Back the Night Kolkata*, and *Pinjra Tod (Break the Cage)* [4].

The focus on 'rescue' and 'protection' also speaks to class-based inequalities, which transcend the Indian context. Juno Mac and Molly Smith referred to the emergence of 'a new kind of role' in the 19th century, which combined the 'ideal values and attributes of middle-class femininity to paid employment' (2018, 9). They argued that, in part, this was a feminist project, where women took on philanthropic and social work roles, alongside other forms of work outside the home. However, this 'reproduced rather than upset gender roles . . . [since the] women were reasserting their position in a class hierarchy over working class people, particularly working-class women and children, who were targeted as recipients for maternalistic and coercive forms of care' (ibid.). The authors also draw from Laura Augustin's conceptualisation of the 'rescue industry' to argue that this enabled middle-class women to gain a presence in public space, at the expense of their working-class counterparts (Mac and Smith 2018, 9).

These differing and complex perspectives informed my research process. Review of literature on sex workers globally and in India revealed a dominant representation of women in sex work as atomised subjects, where narratives of agency or victimhood are not adequately contextualised within an understanding of the full array of social relationships within the women's lives.

For example, I found that research in different sub-sections of the literature tended to focus on one aspect of social relationships. Descriptions and analysis of household and community relations existed primarily in research on traditional forms of sex work, where families and communities played a role in entry into sex work. Meanwhile, studies on human trafficking tended to focus on social relationships that lay behind experiences of coercive entry into sex work. Relations with state actors, particularly the police, and within the informal labour market, were highlighted in literature that was aligned with HIV/AIDS awareness initiatives. These research studies explored the inability of women in sex work to report violence, and the violence perpetuated by the police and state actors, as well as why women chose sex work over other forms of informal labour.

Each of these discussions of social relations existed disparately; disjointed from each other and aligned with a specific development discourse and feminist approach to sex work. This highlighted a clear need to look across the length and breadth of the social relations shaping the lives of women in sex work, to understand how these relationships affected women's

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entry into sex work and experiences within it. Furthermore, it was important to explore how various social relations changed in women's lives after they left sex work. Therefore, I needed research methods that would allow me to explore these issues.

### **Conducting life-history interviews: insights from the process**

To gain a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) [5] of the lives of women formerly and currently in sex work, I decided to adopt a life-history interviewing method. This was embedded in an open-ended ethnographic approach to fieldwork, drawing on and using participant observation. This allowed for a relatively non-intrusive way to observe the lives of a marginalised community, and is a method that has been traditionally used within sex work research (Sanders 2006).

When I entered the field, I didn't have a set agenda of questions to ask. The interview 'schedule' comprised one question: 'Please tell me about your life, starting from the first point you can remember and leading up to where you are now.' Within red-light areas, a period of ethnographically 'hanging out' and informal conversations with women in full- and part-time sex work preceded these interviews. In the Kalighat red-light district, these informal rapport and trust-building conversations took place on streets, at tea stalls, and within the women's homes during the day – while the women cooked their meals for the day or during dramatic soap operas that we watched together. In Sonagachi, a busier and larger red-light district, all interactions took place indoors.

Initial access to the respondents across both sites was facilitated by local NGOs. However, as a Bengali myself, having been born and lived in Kolkata for over twenty years, I was able to transition to independent access quite quickly. All the life-history interviews took place indoors, each session lasting 45 minutes to an hour, and conversations with each individual spanned several days. All the quotations that feature in this article are taken from these life histories.

#### ***'Do you really want to hear about my life?'***

In all the interviews, my opening question was met with surprise. Some did a double take, some repeated it to ensure they'd heard it right, and some laughed with nervousness. Often the question would be countered with variations of, 'Why are you asking me this?' or 'Do you really want to hear about my life?' or 'Do you want to know everything?' When I explained that I wanted to learn about the women, and their relationships and lived experiences across different times in their lives, this was met with responses such as, 'Oh, this isn't what people usually ask us'. These counter-questions echoed similar responses by Marjorie Devault (1990)'s respondents who on being asked about daily household work, and finding themselves in conversations which didn't seem like interviews, asked her 'Is this really what you want?' and 'Are you sure this is helping you?' (1990, 99). Marjorie Devault explains that 'they [the women] were prepared to translate into the vocabulary they expected from a researcher, and [were] surprised that we were proceeding in a more familiar manner' (ibid., 99)

This was similar to my respondents' reactions, and they pointed out that these questions deviated from the type they were usually asked by researchers. In the red-light districts, the women explained, the 'typical questions' revolved around sexual health, use of condoms, and sexual behaviour, as well as their children's care, schooling and wellbeing. At the anti-

trafficking shelter, residents were asked questions which pertained to their circumstances regarding entry and exit from sex work, and that inquired into relationships with family and community members in order to facilitate the process of reunification. In the villages, women who had formerly been in sex work were rarely asked about their experiences in sex work, as the focus was entirely about 'moving on' and 'surviving' their past.

Moving beyond asking about a specific stage or moment in their lives allowed for the respondents to set the agenda for the conversation themselves; thus, they spoke about what they wanted to speak about. I explained, too, that I was planning to put their accounts of their lives into a book that would help other people learn more about their experiences, and that this book would be an outcome of my higher studies in university.

### ***'We want to hear about your life': interviewees' questions***

The life-history interviewing method also allowed respondents to ask me questions about my life. Most of these were about my family, my partner, previous relationships, occasional tentative questions about my sexual relationships, living in the UK, and my work and studies. Respondents in Sonagachi preferred to smoke during the interviews, and would often ask me to join in. Some would crack jokes at my expense, often with explicit and implicit sexual innuendo to test my inhibitions and to 'shock' me. When I responded by sharing a cigarette with them and laughing along with their jokes, I could see them relax and they would start asking me personal questions. This enabled the development of an interviewer-interviewee relationship that was relatively non-hierarchical, as the respondents realised that I was prepared to 'invest my own personal identity in the relationship' (Oakley 1981, 41).

The life-history interviewing method allowed for different topics to emerge that were not exclusive to sex work, and allowed the respondents to 'ask back' and highlight commonalities in experiences. These commonalities allowed me, as the interviewer, to articulate and comment on the 'very personal business of being female in a patriarchal capitalist society' (ibid.,18). The life-history interviewing method also facilitated a kind of friendship and intimacy between my respondents and I, which required reciprocity, as I did not feel that I could ask my respondents about their lives and refuse to answer their questions about mine.

Sapna [6], aged 25, a full-time residential sex worker in Sonagachi, summarised her feelings about the opening question in the following way:

*It's nice to talk like this, you ask me about my life, I ask about yours. Sometimes people will come and ask such strange questions – about how we have sex, and with whom – it's so uncomfortable. To be able to talk freely to someone outside is important – you answer questions and I learn new things too.*

This highlights how the experience of sharing and asking about lived experiences subverted the power dynamics of traditional interviewing, encouraging the women to regard me as 'more than an instrument of data collection' (Oakley 1981, 48) on their lives.

### ***Establishing boundaries and saying 'no'***

Ann Phoenix has dismissed the idea of feminist interviewing as a 'cosy enterprise' where appeals to 'sisterhood' can obscure stark differences between women, and between

interviewee and interviewer (1994, 50). This is in keeping with an understanding of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1990), which acknowledges that experiences of inequality are affected by intersections of various social identities and marginalities, and are not restricted to gender.

I found being a 'feminist interviewer' involved acknowledging these differences by accepting boundaries set explicitly and implicitly by my respondents. These boundaries emerged from a recognition that, although as women we may share commonalities of gendered experiences, sharp differences between my respondents and I – on grounds of class, status, caste, religion, age, etc. – exist. Boundary-setting by my respondents took on various forms throughout the fieldwork process, and I will discuss the key ones that took place during fieldwork in the red-light districts.

### ***'Don't photograph us'***

The first instance of boundary setting occurred early in the fieldwork process. My first fieldwork site was Kalighat, and the first few weeks involved walking around the red-light district with a peer worker from a community-based HIV/AIDS and 'sex workers' organisation. These introductory walks involved introducing myself and my research to women who lived and worked in the area. The question I was asked most often in response was, 'Will you take photographs of us?' I would respond with, 'How do you feel about being photographed?' This open-ended question almost always elicited impassioned responses, with all the women in favour of not being photographed.

Rakhi, aged 60, who had retired from sex work and was living in the red-light area with her family, explained:

*People who come here to study our lives take pictures of us bathing, or pictures of ghaa [wounds] on someone's legs, or pictures of a child crying, and show them to people outside to show how sad or pathetic our lives are. Everyone bathes, has wounds and cries occasionally – we are no different [laughs].*

When I started fieldwork, I did not have any intention to photograph my respondents. This was to avoid any potential risks to confidentiality and anonymity, which I was aware of through my previous work with those who had left sex work. However, Rakhi's explanation, which was echoed by others, highlighted how wariness towards photography also stemmed from the fear of being misrepresented.

Zana Bruski's Oscar-winning documentary, 'Born into Brothels', that explores the red-light district of Sonagachi, in Kolkata, is an example of this. This documentary became the subject of intense debate about the homogenous and overwhelmingly negative portrayal of female sex workers and their children as helpless victims, and the wider politics of using the experiences of others for personal and professional gain. It led to the founding, in 2006, of *Amra Padatik* (We are Footsoldiers), an organisation for the children of female sex workers in Sonagachi. In acknowledgement of this history and the sensationalist visual politics that surround the lives of women in sex work, I decided to refrain from photography. Moreover, freezing sex workers' lives into a single image seemed counterproductive to the aim of the

research – which was to gain an understanding of the lived histories of women in sex work across their life-courses, and not restricted to one particular time, space and place.

The decision not to photograph my respondents and their neighbourhoods has led to some tricky conversations with sociologists, especially those not involved in feminist research. When presenting my research in academic spaces, I am often asked if I have any pictures of my field sites, and when I say I don't and explain why, this explanation is met with surprise and resistance. This was exemplified in a conversation that I had with an American and male Emeritus professor working on visual sociology, at a UK-based summer school in July 2018. After my explanation, he insisted that I had missed an excellent research opportunity by not photographing my respondents, and that I could have photographed the fabric of their garments, their homes and objects within, or their neighbourhoods, in ways that could still protect their confidentiality.

While I do not dispute that this may be possible, I explained that it was important, within the context of my research and its methodologies, to accept the boundaries set by my respondents and refrain from using 'creative approaches' to circumvent this. Not doing so would have hindered trust and be perceived as exploitative, even when the intent might be different. As a feminist researcher, accepting boundaries by respondents took precedence over potentials for 'research opportunities', which might garner praise from peers but would foster unequal power relations within the fieldwork process.

### ***Interruptions and locational shifts***

During the day, my respondents would stop the interview process when customers appeared. The interviews were conducted with the acknowledgement that they would and could be interrupted, which although difficult in terms of maintaining continuity for the interviewer, was important for the interview process. I did not want the women to suffer any losses in work due to participation in the research, and they appreciated this.

The respondents also determined the location of the interviews. In Kalighat, the HIV/AIDS organisation that facilitated access to fieldwork offered space within their community-based health clinic for the interviews to take place. However, it soon became apparent that respondents preferred to be interviewed within their homes instead, especially since they were sharing life-stories – which required a certain degree of comfort, which was more possible within their homes. Rima, a 32-year-old, full-time sex worker in Kalighat explained:

*Usually people interview us about our work or children or health issues – it's easy to talk about those topics in the clinic. But you are asking for us to share stories of our lives, I would like to sit on my bed and talk to you, show you some pictures. All this is not possible here.*

Changing the location of interviews to the respondents' homes resulted from their invitation that I visit them. This was met with resistance from the peer worker from the community-based HIV/AIDS and 'sex workers' organisation, who was facilitating my access to the 'field'. It seemed that this resistance was due to a loss of control over the interview process, as well as the belief that I would need to be chaperoned back and forth from the brothel residences.

Once I made it clear that my safety was my own responsibility and chaperoning would not be required, and explained that for the research's success, independent fieldwork – approved by the organisation's director – was necessary, the issue was resolved.

Within their homes, the women were much more visibly relaxed, and I was the one who needed to adjust myself to an unfamiliar location. My respondents spent some time prior to each interview making me feel comfortable, but they would also dictate where I was expected to sit. This transfer of power to the respondents was crucial in allowing them to see that I would accommodate their wishes for comfort during an interview process that required them to be vulnerable and open.

### ***Ethnography with boundaries***

A second boundary that was established gradually and less explicitly was the request to not undertake fieldwork in the evenings, which was peak soliciting-time for sex workers in the red-light district. Customers visited the area throughout the day, starting from 11 a.m. and continuing into the night. However, after 5 p.m. there was an increase in visits, peaking after dusk. During early conversations, the women mentioned that they would prefer to be interviewed during the day, as they were preoccupied with work in evenings. In the absence of interviews, I could have conducted fieldwork in the evenings in the form of participant observation; however, I decided against this for two interlinked reasons. Both stemmed from my positionality. I was a young middle-class Bengali woman, and in my late 20s: across both red-light districts in Sonagachi and Kalighat, I stood out.

Despite being non-gated neighbourhoods, red-light districts in Indian cities are 'closed' to women who don't live and work in the area (Guha 2018a). Teela Sanders discusses the inherent challenges involved in navigating the 'sexual field' for sex work researchers (2006, 457). This involves dealing with and getting used to the sexualised environments within which sex work is sold and purchased, as well as encounters with potential customers. In Kalighat, my presence ignited curiosity and surprise, but I mostly felt safe within the neighbourhood. An exception was in September 2014, when a drunk man in Kalighat started shouting obscenities in my direction while I was 'hanging out' with some sex workers outside their residences, within the alleyways that ran adjacent to the main road. This was immediately countered with a strong response from the women, who shouted back and asked him to leave us alone.

I was thankful for their protectiveness, but also realised that 'keeping me safe' might impact their emotional, psychological and financial resources – particularly given that the man might be a potential customer, or know potential customers, and was not particularly pleased at the women speaking back to him. I realised then that conducting fieldwork in the evenings would be a risk to my safety and would also put an additional burden on the women who would feel the need to protect me.

Along with this, another reason to limit my fieldwork to daytime was the attention I garnered as a middle class, young woman. Customers would often enquire about my presence and whether I was available to exchange sex for money. This was done non-confrontationally; the

men never asked me directly but would ask the women, who would explain why I was there. Again, it became apparent that my presence in the space stood in comparison, in contrast and, potentially, in competition with the women who lived and worked in the area and who came from rural and peri-urban backgrounds. During peak soliciting hours, therefore, this could be compounded and lead to possible loss of livelihoods, or at least detract from the women's ability to secure work. It became imperative therefore for me to restrict my fieldwork to the day, which allowed for more fruitful conversations and fieldwork that did not disrupt the lives and livelihoods of my respondents.

### **Changing methods: the use of phones and *Whatsapp***

In Sonagachi, the use of the life-history interviewing method also affected the medium through which interviews were conducted. Unlike Kalighat, where the women lived mostly in one-roomed households, in Sonagachi up to four or five women shared rooms. This was as a result of Songachi being a much more economically profitable red-light area, resulting in large number of female sex workers living and working alongside each other. In most cases, the women were comfortable to share their life-histories in a group setting, as they were familiar with each other's experiences. This also highlighted how experiences resonated across women who came from different religious backgrounds and from different regions. However, in some cases, it was evident that some respondents preferred to share certain aspects of their lived histories in group settings, but would remain silent when it came to other aspects. In an overcrowded and busy red-light district, privacy was difficult to manage. In this context, some women shared mobile phone numbers with me, asking me to call them at certain times to continue their interviews telephonically. Some also sent voice notes on *Whatsapp*, a free internet-based texting service. These were recorded in their own time and with details of certain experiences in their lives, which I could later follow up in person or over the phone.

This unconventional interviewing method, and the flexibility it required, was imperative given the unpredictability of conducting research in a red-light district. Moreover, being in touch over mobile phone and through *Whatsapp* made respondents feel that they could access my time beyond conventional 'fieldwork' hours. For example, often during late evenings women would call to share stories of a particularly interesting customer, or ask if I had time to chat. Additionally, through *Whatsapp*, they shared music and images on themes of love, loss, betrayal, hope, friendship, family, pain, and happiness – themes that emerged through the interviews.

I would often reciprocate with songs and images of my own, which allowed for a different form of connection to emerge. It also enabled being able to stay connected to my respondents who were part of a very mobile community. Due to arguments over money, women in sex work shifted residences within the sprawling red-light area frequently, and the mobile phone enabled a continuity of contact. Additionally, when the women had to go into hiding – usually due to issues with the police – they could call me and let me know what was going on, and would vent their anger and frustration. This provided an emotional release for the respondents, and highlighted the precarious nature of the lives of women in commercially organised sex work in India.

### **Analysing the data on life-histories: *koshto***

The use of the life-history interviewing method with women formerly and currently in sex work allowed for the emergence of *koshto*, a common theme and analytical category across life-history interviews with the 42 respondents, which included full and part-time sex workers in red light areas, 'rescued' women in an anti-trafficking shelter, and women formerly engaged in sex work who had returned to their villages in Eastern India under varying circumstances. Therefore, this theme resonated across the lived experiences of women in and outside sex work, across sites (households, communities, informal labour market, red-light district), and in relationships with members from their households, communities, the market and the state (Kabeer 1994).

These were experiences of *koshto*, which loosely translates to 'pain' in Bengali. The women used this word frequently across interviews to describe differing scales and forms of physical, emotional and sexual forms of violence inflicted by members across their households, communities, the informal labour market, the red-light area and by state (e.g. the police) and non-state actors (e.g. NGOs) that 'rescued' them from sex work and kept them in shelters, contrary to their wishes. This highlighted how there were commonalities across experiences of *koshto* within sex work and outside, that these were embedded in everyday social relations and persisted even after women left sex work, often driving re-entry into sex work.

This analytical category allowed for an analysis of how social relations drive entry into, shape experiences within, affect exit from and re-entry into sex work, as discussed in my earlier article (Guha 2018b). This challenged the marginalisation of women in sex work within conversations on violence against women in India, and drew continuities within their experiences and those of women outside sex work. This also enabled the emergence of dynamism and fluidity within the lives of women in sex work, where victimhood to *koshto* and the expression of agency while negotiating with and resisting *koshto* co-existed to the extent where it was difficult to think of one without the other. This evokes Soran Reader's concept of 'patience' in which 'the silenced and "othered" passive aspects of personhood' (2007, 582) is recognised. Soran Reader argues that 'there is as much of the self, the person, in the passive aspects of personal being, as in the active ones' (ibid., 603).

My respondents' experiences and negotiations with *koshto* highlighted how 'patience' features, such as 'passivity, inability, necessity/contingency and dependency' can co-exist alongside agential features, such as 'action, capability, choice and independence' (ibid., 592). These disrupt the binary assumptions of agency and victimhood which dominate discussions on the lives of women in sex work, and demand a move towards analytical categories that allow for them to be acknowledged as embedded in everyday social relations, and not as atomised agents exhibiting agency and victimhood in vacuum.

From a policy perspective, such categorisation also argues for an approach that is open-ended, sex worker-led, and aims at ending not a symbolic and ideological idea of *koshto* but one that is rooted in and addresses the complex and material lives of sex workers, acknowledging and respecting existing forms of 'everyday resistance' (Ortner 1995, 75) that they exercise. *Koshto* exists not because of engagement with sex work alone, but as a product of unequal power and gendered relations, and owing to wider cultural and social norms on women's sexuality, autonomy, mobility, and participation in informal labour. Addressing a singular experience of *koshto*, therefore, (for example, experiences of coercive entries into

sex work or risks to sexual health within sex work), without mapping these experiences against those in other social relations, means that interventions remain unsustainable. Finally, this analytical category allows for an application of Mary Ellsberg and Lori Heise's life-cycle of violence framework (2005) to the experiences of women in sex work. Although this is a popular and WHO-accepted model within discussions on violence against women globally, it has hitherto not been applied to experiences of women in sex work. By highlighting how this framework applies to the lives of women formerly and currently in sex work, the research challenges the conceptual marginalisation of female sex workers in global discussions on violence against women and girls.

### **Concluding thoughts: lessons on feminist values**

What I have learnt from my experience of fieldwork is that feminist research is inherently messy, and one which continues to disrupt the 'mythology of "hygienic research"' (Oakley 1981, 58). To *do* feminist research is to listen to and understand marginalised women's experiences within the context of their lives. This involves going beyond the standard questions we ask of women, in order to shed light on their marginalised experiences and to make space for conversations that do not take place simply to inform policies and fulfil research aims. It involves enabling respondents to set boundaries, to be silent (Jackson 2012) and refuse to respond, and to say 'no'. It means to be flexible as a researcher in order to allow these changes, even when such changes lead to 'missed research opportunities' or require defending unconventional research methods. It requires that we recognise that 'research excellence' can never be prioritised over the wellbeing of the women's lives we research, and that we remain reflexive to the challenges our presence in the field poses to the lives of the women at the centre of our studies.

The findings from my research highlight that feminist researchers working with women in sex work need to go beyond ideological-led discussions of agency and victimhood in sex work. This involves using conceptual references and frameworks that question the marginalisation of women in sex work within research on violence against women. There is a need to accept that a 'feminist' solution to violence in the lives of women formerly and currently in sex work cannot be to abolish sex work, and remove social and economic options from an already marginalised community. As feminist researchers, we cannot and should not place the burden of solving patriarchy on women in sex work. Instead, we need to demand openness and nuance within policies and interventions targeting women in sex work, and ensure that women's fluid, dynamic and, at times, contradictory needs are placed at the centre of designing research, policy and practice. To *do* feminist research is to recognise that asking for the experiences of marginalised women to fit within the confines of hegemonic research and policy approaches perpetuates and maintains gender inequalities (Kabeer 1994) and is, in and of itself, a form of gender-based violence.

### **Notes**

[1] As a term, 'prostitution' is contested. It is a term used by abolitionists (in conjunction with commercial sexual exploitation) to emphasise its sexually exploitative nature. However, it is rejected by those who argue for its destigmatisation and decriminalisation, and emphasise it as a form of work – this perspective argues for the use of the term 'sex work'. In this essay, I

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have used 'prostitution' in quotes to acknowledge its problematic and pejorative history and 'immoral' connotations, and have used sex work instead as a less stigmatising descriptor.

[2] Despite the mainstream feminist movement's reluctance to engage with sex workers in a practical and material way, gender and development policymakers and practitioners (often located in the North) have funded sex workers' movements and organisations in developing countries, informed by the different and polarised understandings of sex work outlined here (Guha 2018). Sex work is alternately seen as a livelihood among livelihoods that offers more for women in acute poverty than other forms of work available to them, or as violence against women. These debates are currently live in international NGOs, with some staff advocating for their organisation to adopt an agreed position on legalising sex work, as Amnesty International did on the 26<sup>th</sup> of May 2016.

[3] 'Carceral feminism' refers to a feminism that advocates criminalization (through a reliance on the state to police and prosecute) and incarceration to solve gendered and sexual violence. It was first used by Professor Elizabeth Bernstein in the article *The Sexual Politics of the "New Abolitionism"* (2007).

[4] *Why Loiter, Blank Noise, Take Back the Night Kolkata, and Pinjra Tod (Break the Cage)*. For more information, see Shilpa Phadke et al (2011), Srila Roy (2016), <https://www.facebook.com/groups/418272638270238/> and <https://www.facebook.com/pinjratod/>

[5] The term 'a thick description' is associated with anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973). It requires ethnographic research to be highly detailed and contextualised, where differing meanings and interpretations within a culture are considered and thoroughly documented.

[6] All names have been changed to ensure confidentiality, and all ages are self-reported.

#### Notes on author

**Dr. Mirna Guha is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge. Her research specialisms include gender-based violence, social justice, and social relations within marginalised communities. She teaches postgraduate and undergraduate modules on feminist theory and practice, globalisation and social policy, and the sociology of sexuality. Mirna can be reached at [mirna.guha@anglia.ac.uk](mailto:mirna.guha@anglia.ac.uk) and HELMORE 204, School of Social Sciences, Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, Anglia Ruskin University, East Road, Cambridge CB11PT**

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