
The Untold Story of Female Sex Worker

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ABSTRACT

The sex trade in the Philippines is illegal, yet, is considered the third-highest money-making industry in the country. Sex workers are vulnerable to violence which cause social problems, stigmatization, and infection of AIDS/HIV. This study explored the experiences of female sex workers. It is anchored to Objectification Theory by Fredrickson and Roberts [1] and Marxist Feminist Theory by Marx [2]. The Van Manen [3] six steps served as a guide in analyzing data. Purposive sampling and snowball technique were used to identify participants. Researcher-made guide questions were used in gathering data. Survival, financial comfort amid risk, family acceptance and disregard, low self-esteem and stigma, and sex addiction, were the four central themes identified. The study concluded that sexual engagement with multiples partners is caused by compelling factors whether eventually accepted or struggled with continuously. It is recommended that local government unit provides holistic services to address their financial, physical, psychological and social health needs.

KEYWORDS: *lived experiences, sex workers, sex addiction, survival, low self esteem*

INTRODUCTION

Prostitution is often considered as the “oldest profession.” A kind of work whereby a person “performs, offers or agrees to perform any act of sexual intercourse, fellatio, cunnilingus, masturbation, or anal intercourse with any person not their spouse in exchange for money or other things of value”. Sex work is deeply embedded as morally deviant as much in law as it is in the public imagination. The general public, have stereotyped prostitutes variously as social pariahs, fallen women or ‘bad girls’ and to use such images to distinguish this ‘deviant’ group from ‘normal’ purified populations (Roberts) [4]. The social and legal regulation of prostitutes has been used as a “means of establishing wider criteria of what is acceptable behavior in the public and private realm”.

In 2013, it was estimated that there were up to 500,000 prostitutes in the Philippines, from a population of roughly 97.5 million, and could be as high as about 800,000 people. This profession is illegal and that, any person found to engage in the sex trade or give sex services in exchange for money is punishable by law under the Philippine Penal Code Article 341 (Particia) [5]. Senator Cayetano authored a Senate Bill No. 2341 s. 2010 the "Anti-Prostitution Act" (Senate of the Philippines) [6]. The bill was reintroduced in 2013 as Senate Bill No. 3382 (Senate of the Philippines) [6] and in 2015 as Senate Bill NO. 2621 (Senate of the Philippines) [7].

The sex trade in the Philippines proliferated during the United States military presence after World War II. Bars flourished near the US military bases. Female sex workers were employed as singers, dancers, waitresses, or as guest relations officers. Most women involved in prostitution aspired to sustain the standard of living of their families (National Statistical Coordination Board) [8]. One of the spurious features of prostitution is the desire and possibility of earning a high income, without specialized skills, such that even the lowest earnable income could be multiple times more than the attainable amount from a full-time specialized job (Fatehi, Sadeghi & Ekhlasi) [9]. Poverty, lifestyle, the attitude of people toward money, and the social acceptance of prostitution are among the reasons that it thrived through the millennia.

The Philippines, like, its neighboring Asian countries is known for prostitution and sex tourism. It ranked as the third highest money-making industry in the Philippines (National Statistical Coordination Board) [8]. In some cases, men travel to the Philippines to avail of paid sex, particularly with young children. In sexual tourism, men do not experience constraints like the ones existing in their home countries and enjoy trips to exciting places. In foreign countries, men expose women and girls to sexual abuses through troublesome and often dangerous methods. By turning prostitution into a form of tourism, it has come to be recognized as one of the factors for economic development in emerging countries (Hodges) [10]. More than ever before, prostitution has become institutionalized, organized, and globalized (i.e., through trafficking and the internet).

Theoretical Framework

In discussing the lived experiences of female commercial sex workers, the Objectification Theory by Fredrickson and Roberts [1] and Marxist Feminist Theory by Marx [2] were utilized in this study. The first theory claims that most women are sexually objectified (SO) and are valued objects for other people's use. SO takes place when a woman's body is separated from her as a person and is primarily regarded as a sexual object of male to fulfill his sexual desires (Bartky) [11]. The theory postulates that sexually objectified females engaging in the sex trade are at high risk of mental health problem (sexual dysfunction, depression, eating disorders). Moreover, SO increases the anxiety of women toward their physical appearance like how they look when they get older, the decreased awareness of internal body sensation (i.e., sexual arousal), the social stigma (i.e., not able to meet the societal and cultural standard), and anxiety (i.e., fear of being raped).

On the other hand, the Marxist feminist theory postulates that sex workers are exploited as being victims of capitalism. Due to the notion of inequality between men and women, the latter work at low earning jobs and subordinate social status. The women who are victims of oppression are more prone to becoming prostitutes (Green) [12]. Marxist feminists view prostitution much like the commodification of labor by Karl Marx. Like in other forms of labor, women who are engaged in prostitution render services daily for individuals who pay the highest remuneration. Often women work as prostitutes when other lucrative employment alternatives are unavailable to them (Van DerVeen) [13]. Female individuals are involved in prostitution as a means of living primarily in a patriarchal society which emphasizes male dominance in home and work domains.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research design was employed using the phenomenological approach. A qualitative study explores and understands phenomena (Creswell) [14]. It is especially useful in discovering the meanings people give to the events they experience (Denzin & Lincoln) [15]. A Phenomenology is a qualitative approach that seeks to "explain the meaning of the lived experiences of individuals" (Moran) [16]. The present study used Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology in describing and understanding the experiences of female sex workers in terms of understanding their feelings toward their means of living.

This study was conducted in Salug Valley in the Province of Zamboanga del Sur, Philippines.

There were five participants in the study. The criteria for the selection of the participants were the following: (1) female of legal age; (2) have been in the sex trade for not less than six months; and (3) had given the consent to participate in the study. Before the interviews commenced, the participants confirmed that they met the criteria aforementioned.

After the participants were identified, a researcher-made interview guide was used. A series of scheduled interviews were conducted to gather data.

The six steps of Van Manen [3] were used as a guide in exploring the experiences of the female sex workers to afford a deeper and richer understanding of the nature and meaning of everyday life experiences. These six steps include: (1) turning to a phenomenon of interest - formulating research questions to elicit information pertaining to prostitution; (2) investigating experience as being lived -conducting interviews to allow the participants to describe their experiences and feelings toward engagement in sexual services; (3) reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon –analyzing the participants' statements as to early themes and sub-themes leading to the formulation of essential themes; (4) describing the phenomenon in the art of writing and rewriting - revising the written output to describe vividly the experiences of the battered women; (5) maintaining a strong and oriented relation to the phenomenon- incorporating the prior observations made and the suggestions received; and (6) balancing the research context by considering the parts and the whole-understanding the phenomenon based on the individual and holistic perspectives. These steps were followed carefully in the conduct of the study and in the presentation of the data.

Clarifications and apprehensions of the participants were addressed, accordingly before they signed the document for informed consent. During the conduct of the interviews and the writing of the data respect for privacy was observed. The confidentiality of their responses and the anonymity of their identities were assured.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Survival and Financial Comfort Amid Risks

Some participants opted to become sex workers due to their desire to survive. Richelle cited: "I choose this job because we are poor, my husband left me, and I do not know what to do. I have two children attending school, and I depend on myself. It is difficult to look for a decent job when you are merely an elementary graduate." In this regard, when women find it difficult to live normal lives, especially when having been subjected to abuse are easily lured

into the sex industry (Pettal, Kase, & Proos) [17]. The statement above reveals the dire need of the woman to survive and be able to feed, clothe and send her children to school which has prompted her to become a sex worker. Being without a husband, poor and uneducated it would be tough for her to find work immediately and enough money to survive. Prostitution for her was the best option. "Any change depends on where people are in their lives at the time of the change".

Several studies conducted and revealed that 65 % of sex worker have children with an average of two children per individual (Jeal & Salisbury; Sloss and Harper) [18]. Marites shared the same reason given Richelle for engaging in prostitution. "I have two children I need to support. I had become a single mother when my husband left me. I was then desperate as to how to sustain the daily needs and my children's schooling." The two participants claimed that they were compelled to engage in prostitution out of the dire need to support their families. Economic scarcity is used as a justification for commercial sex engagement; poverty serves as an excuse for an immoral activity. However, the descriptions of the women interviewed for this research provide real-life experiences caused by poverty. But, while Richell and Marites engaged in the sex trade for the sake of their children, other participants see it as a lucrative means of earning money to support their lifestyles.

Numerous researches concerning prostitution and sex work underline poverty and poor socio-economic conditions of survival as the primary reason for women entry into sex trade. While this may be true for a majority of cases, poverty is not the sole driving force (Davis) [19]. According to Michelle, "I earn 600 to 800 pesos per customer, and usually four to five customers per night. Each customer lasts thirty minutes to an hour." Similarly, Janet claimed, "Having sex for money is the best thing that has ever happened to me." Jane also cited, "I need to catch up with fashion and technology to be on par with my friends. I indulge in the sex trade so that I can buy what I want."

Though the sex trade is an easy way of earning money, it is deemed considered of high risk. Jane, one of the participants, explained: "This job is dangerous because there is a high possibility that I might get beaten up or killed, but I just ignore it because of the money." A report from the Justice Department (2011) in the Philippines revealed that the rate of mortality for female prostitutes is forty times the national average. Ninety percent of the female prostitutes had been sexually molested, beaten, or raped by customers and pimps. Not only are prostitutes at risk of sexual aggression, but they are also prone to acquire sex-related diseases like HIV/AIDS for having sexual relations with multiple partners, who may be, inflicted with the disease.

Providing commercial sex is a risky means of living. It is life-threatening with a high risk of acquiring HIV/AIDs or any other sexually-transmitted diseases. Sex workers recognize the threat of physical harm and their well-being (Spice) [20]. However, they continue with sex business for the money. As cited by Janet: "I know that I put my life in danger with this kind of work, but I cannot do anything but do as what my customers wish me to do." Thus, sex workers submit to the demands of their customers with the money earned. The participants admitted having experienced beating bitten and slapped by some customers. But the women considered physical beatings as part of their job. They ignored the possibility of harm and focused on the money they could earn at the end of the day. The following were the revelations given by Richelle, Michelle and Marites:

"One of my customers wanted me to act like I am being raped. He wanted me to scream. When I do, he shut my mouth. He enjoyed watching me struggling for air, gasping for breath."

"When I refused what my customer wanted me to do, he slapped me and pulled my hair."

"Sometimes sex got rough with some of my customers, especially the younger ones. They wanted to experience different sexual positions."

The risk of violence is quite high in the life of a prostitute. Psychological abuse (insults and humiliation) predominates. Any female sex worker can experience physical and sexual abuses. After a verbal abuse, brutal and physical violence follows in the forms of punching and kicking. A study by Reid [21] revealed that women engaged in prostitution encountered higher instances of abuse and violence. The participants of this study have placed more importance on the immediate-gratification motivation through money with willful disregard of their welfare. As claimed by Williamson and Folaron [22], women engaged in prostitution became increasingly attached to earning a significant amount of money despite the risks involved.

Family Acceptance and Disregard

Working for commercial sex is not a living that one's family can readily accept. It entails morality issues and social stigma. Families of sex workers cannot take pride in this kind of livelihood. However, the participants claimed that their families had knowledge of the nature of their work but were not affected by it. What was more important to their families was the money they could earn in meeting household needs.

Low-income families willingly accept prostitution as a job to meet gastronomical needs and have comfortable lives. Though commercial sex workers may feel degraded, they are more concerned about bringing food on their tables, as well as in providing the other basic needs of their families. According to Richelle and Marites: "My children know about my work. I do not need to hide it from them, especially that our neighbors know what I do for a living. I feel that I owe it to them to be truthful." Also, "I do not need to feel ashamed anymore unlike before. As of now, I have been used to my work, so have my kids. They do not complain when there is food on the table".

Some participants engaged in this work because of family predicament. Others, by peer influence or personal curiosity not addressed accordingly by their families. Jenny cited: ", and they often talked about having sex for money. They encouraged me to do the same. Out of curiosity, I willingly tried it." In Jenny's situation, she was not forced to take part in the sex trade. She did it out of her own free will. It was not her intent to become a sex worker but was influenced by her friends to become one. She envied the fast money earned by her friends and thought of enjoying the same. She felt that being a sex worker was a better option instead of becoming a saleslady or household help.

Furthermore, Jenny's father is a drug user and her mother is an alcoholic. Hence, no one could reprimand her in sex-related activity. She claimed: "My parents did not find out whatever I was doing because what they were busy with their affairs. They asked money

from me to support their vices." These statements reveal the common experience among sex workers - growing up in troubled families. The women had too little parental monitoring, and never had the chance to talk with their parents about matters of utmost value to them.

Parents fill important emotional needs. Parental connectedness (feelings of warmth, love, and caring) is thought to provide protection from reckless and deviant behavior (Williams et al.) [23]. Strong parent-child emotional bonds protect adolescents from risky sexual behaviors (Taylor-Seehafer & Rew) [24]. The attitude of parents is one factor that determines the future of children. When parents indulge vices, the young ones are left to decide for themselves, without parental advice and guidance. But, when parents approach their role as sex educators in positive, affirmative ways, young people are better able to make healthy sexual decisions and to build loving relationships. Studies revealed that parents could affect aspects of their children's lives that are beyond the reach of schools or health services. These include monitoring and supervising of activities when a child is out of school especially during weekends and evenings after school. In connection to this, Marites claimed, "My mother was aware that I became the talk of our neighborhood because I engaged myself in the sex trade, but she never cared about it because I gave her the money." Wilson and Widom's study suggested that the connection between child abuse/neglect and practicing prostitution during early adulthood is fostered by early behaviors such as early initiation into sex, runaway, early use of drugs, involvement in juvenile criminal activity, and frequent problems at school (Wilson & Widom) [23].

The attitude of this participant's mother shows her disregard for her child's well-being. Women or young girls not provided with discipline and care from their families can easily be persuaded to seek the comfort of other people despite any possible adverse consequences.

Low Self-Esteem and Social Stigma

Women engage in sex trade soon discover that escaping troublesome domestic concerns through making an erroneous decision leads them to even worse situations. The concept of "easy money" cannot compensate for the consequence of one's action. According to Jane and Marites: "I have too much guilt and shame knowing that what I am doing is not good" and "This is not the kind of life I dreamt for when I was yet a child." The statements show the remorse of the participants. In this regard, guilt, low self-esteem, depression, emotional stress (Valera et al.) [25], hopelessness and vulnerability (Wong et al.) [26] are common among sex workers. Prostitution leaves an indelible mark in the physical and emotional aspects of a sex worker's self-image. Furthermore, Richelle, Michelle, and Jenny claimed:

"I feel worthless. I have nobody I can turn to. My life is useless."

"My life is nothing but full of pain and struggles. I am not worthy of anything."

"I am tired of this kind of life. I feel worthless."

The feeling of worthlessness experienced by an individual can have a significant adverse effect on one's emotional condition. Such feeling is significantly associated with lifetime suicidal tendency (Wong, Leung, & Woo) [27]. The study revealed that among the symptoms of depression, worthlessness had the strongest association with a lifetime suicide attempt. People who view themselves of no value and no chance to improve ones' living condition find it difficult to look at life in a better perspective. This perception is generally unfavorable

and is likely to result in depression, anxiety, grief, or stress. The longer a person feels worthless about oneself, the more difficult it is for the individual to overcome the self-image.

Every female sex worker behaves differently, but most of them want to earn much money in a short time than indulging themselves to guilt and shame. Michelle stated: "Feeling guilty and ashamed of my work will never give me money to support my family. It does not matter anymore even if they say I am not a virtuous woman." Many women feel the need to separate their means of income from their private lives. They can employ numerous coping mechanisms to ensure the separation between work and self. However, overtime delineating oneself from the sexual activity, one, is engaged into, becomes impossible. It is increasingly difficult to bring the "self" back, which, leads women to feel worthless, filthy, and loathsome.

On the other hand, research findings show that the feeling of stigmatization among sex workers negatively affects their well-being (Kong) [28]; (Vanwesenbeeck) [29]. Adverse social reactions or social stigma is a factor that causes burnout among prostitutes (Vanwesenbeeck) [29]. Michelle and Jenny claimed: "Although a sex service in exchange for money is a lucrative business, sex workers feel ashamed of their work particularly when someone asked about the nature of their work. When these women pass by, they feel that the neighbors talk about them." Sex workers commonly face significant stigma-related barriers regardless of where they work, due to their perceived violation of gendered norms through sex with multiple partners and strangers, taking sexual initiative and control, inciting male desires, and receiving fees for sex. Social stigmatization is typical among prostitutes, and it is detrimental to their well-being.

Sex Addiction

Sex workers are at risk of becoming sex maniacs (Dryden-Edwards and Conrad) [30]. Apt and Hurlbert [31] described sexual addiction as a feeling of overwhelming desire to have sexual escapades, yet also become bored quickly of relationships. Sexual addicts may exhibit long term enduring patterns of chronic relationships or intimacy problems while at the same time showing low self-esteem.

Like drugs and alcohol, women engaged in the sex trade having multiple sex partners can also be sexually addictive. This sex addiction is best described as a progressive intimacy disorder characterized by compulsive sexual thoughts and acts. Like all addiction, its negative impact on the addict and family members, increases as the disorder progresses. A number of the participants claimed that they are becoming inclined into sex. Jenny asserted: "I cannot live without having sex daily. I am always looking for it all the time. If I do not have a customer, I do it by myself." The statement of Michelle implies that she is addicted to sex and she masturbates if needed when she has no customers. In this sense, sex addiction is engaging in persistent and escalating patterns of sexual behavior acted out despite increasing negative consequences to self and others (National Council on Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity) [32]. Like drug addicts, sex addicts experience chemical changes in their brain. The individuals may turn into substance abuse which heightens sexual urge as a coping mechanism of sexual desires. Sex and the thought of it overwhelm the individual concerned, and this can adversely affect his or her job and interpersonal relationships. "I like having sex every day with different customers. Although I love the money I get, I also crave for rough sex itself" as claimed by Marites. Even if she engages in sex daily, she feels constant sexual desire.

While addicts may be able to control themselves for a certain time, eventually the addictive behavior escalates to a higher degree that the sexual addicts themselves struggle against their own behavior. Often, they found themselves helpless in containing their sexual urges. The sex addicts realize that they have become promiscuous. While others feel passive about their condition, others feel depressed, lose their self-esteem and shame. Jane admitted: "Not only that I am addicted to drugs, but I am also addicted to sex." Sexual addiction and substance abuse are commonly interconnected. Alcoholics are usually promiscuous. Certain drugs like 'shabu' are known to contribute to high sexual tendencies.

A person who wants to enhance one's sexual experience may use certain drugs to increase endurance in sex, intensify sensations, and prolong the sexual contact. Richelle admitted: "Some customers gave me ecstasy drug which I also like because it helps me forget who I am." The link between the drug and sexual addictions is strong when people want to escape the emotional consequences of their actions. Sexually inclined individuals and drug dependents may not necessarily be undesirable people. Biochemical processes may cause Their actions that when they recover their sobriety, they feel devastated and repugnant against their own insatiable needs.

The Reality of Me

I hold my head high, As I pass by;
They look at me with questioning eye
They do not hear as I give a sigh
Nor do they see me when I cry.

I never dream to become one
Wishing what I do can be undone
The dire needs are all I see
With no one else to run but me

At times, I look, I see a shadow
of myself from afar
A stranger standing on shifting sand
A wounded soul, alone and afraid

Accepting whatever, come what may.
What I am now I cannot help
Making me feel so buried deep
in the mud of my shallow self

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There are different reasons for the emergence of women prostitution but economic, social and mental factors more influential. Prostitution results in many cultural, social and economic problems in society, including negative and destructive consequences at both family and personal level.

Sex workers need to grapple with the realities of their lives. Sexual engagement with multiples partners may be caused by compelling factors whether eventually accepted or continuously struggled. Women carrying the burden of domestic needs choose survival over dignity. While a number, find satisfaction in what they do, other sex workers are remorseful of their means of living. They are in a situation which, they eventually find difficult to free themselves.

Further research needs to be conducted to understand the nature and the extent of all forms of prostitution and sexual exploitation fully. Agencies established for women's welfare and protection create livelihood and scholarship programs to give women engaged in prostitution some options for the betterment of their lives. Moreover, parents provide guidance and monitoring of their children, especially during growing years.

It is essential that elected officials and administrators take prostitution policy as seriously as policies in other, more established administrative domains as health, schooling, work or the environment, and to prevent it from descending into a state of antagonistic morality politics. For such transformation among elected officials and administrators, they must be aware of the profound differences of belief and value of the effects of prostitution in making social policy. There must also be the creation of a stable body of well-trained, experienced administrators who shall specialize in prostitution policy. Continuity is crucial here. As with every social domain, it takes years to attain the kind of experience that allows for collective problem solving through public learning (Ansell) [33]. Also, it takes a long time to gain the trust of sex workers and proprietors that allow administrators to communicate information effectively and “read” the signals of exploitation. It is crucial to create an audit committee to generate novel solutions and critical assessment. And it is imperative to allow relevant groups, sex workers in the first place, but also clients, proprietors, and residents of prostitution areas, to participate in the design and implementation of policy measures. Not only do they have the practical, experiential knowledge that makes it possible to design feasible policy measures, but under the right circumstances they can come up with the kind of mutual gains solutions that will overcome intransigent conflict (Forester) [34].

Lastly, a bill must be passed to decriminalized prostitution and create more policies that would provide social protection to the victims and ensure the prosecution of persons who control and profit from the trade by exploiting the victims' poverty. The bill would also offer programs and services that would promote their economic well-being (DSWD 2013).

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