
THE ROLE OF MIGRATION IN SHAPING WOMEN SEX WORKERS' LIVELIHOODS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF INDIA AND THE UK (CASE STUDY: PUNE, MAHARASHTRA, INDIA)

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ABSTRACT

Internal and international migration has emerged as a key component of the global labor market in the twenty-first century. Female sex workers (FSWs) are a highly marginalized group within this migratory environment, situated at the nexus of social stigma, informal labor involvement, and geographic migration. The term "migrant sex worker" refers to people who, either voluntarily or under duress, leave their home areas, which are usually rural or economically deprived, to work as commercial sex workers in new places. Navigating complex legal, cultural, and social barriers is essential for this shift, which occurs both domestically and internationally.

There are many different and connected reasons why people migrate to the UK to work as prostitutes. The three main motivators are the desire for economic growth to improve the quality of life for oneself and one's family, obtaining qualifications for schooling, and being fluent in English. In addition, the UK is commonly seen as a place of relative freedom and prosperity that provides a haven from patriarchal oppression, homophobic persecution, and geopolitical strife. Many people use migration as a means of family reunion, personal inquiry, or debt relief.

Idealized views of the UK as a place of social and cultural mobility—narratives that are reinforced by media portrayals and the testimonies of returning migrants—frequently serve to bolster these goals, and they are especially powerful among younger populations.

FSWs' migration experiences in the UK and India are greatly influenced by restrictive legal frameworks and pervasive socioeconomic precarity. Strict immigration and asylum laws in the UK frequently prohibit formal employment, which unintentionally pushes migrant women into the sex industry as a means of escaping financial ruin.

The situation in India, on the other hand, is paradoxical. Although sex work is not illegal in and of itself, the criminalization of related acts makes life unstable for women who migrate from rural to urban regions. As a result, rather than

offering protection, the legal system in both jurisdictions usually makes migratory sex workers more vulnerable.

These movement trends are particularly evident in Pune, Maharashtra, which is home to the second-largest red-light district in the state. Pune is home to about 5,000 active female prostitutes, many of whom are from nearby countries like Bangladesh and Nepal as well as various Indian regions.

While sex work-related geographic movement is frequently driven by desires to increase income, it is mostly driven by ingrained systemic injustices, such as poverty, gender-based abuse, and limited economic opportunities, and forced relocation from the birth areas.

The migration of female sex workers from rural Maharashtra to Karnataka and across interstate borders is a manifestation of larger regional dynamics of informal labor mobility. However, government initiatives in India continue to fall short in meeting the unique needs of migratory women sex workers. The criminalization of sex work, the requirement that Aadhaar documents be presented to receive welfare benefits, and the limitations placed on access to safe housing and medical treatment all contribute to this gap.

Additionally, migrant female sex workers face increased risks due to their dual marginalization as "outsiders" and sex workers, making them especially vulnerable to abuse, wage inequality, and exploitation.

To alleviate the plight of migrant female sex workers, a comprehensive policy framework that prioritizes human rights and is sensitive to the needs of migrants must be implemented. Considerations of human agency, systemic barriers, and the unique power imbalances prevalent in the sex work economy in urban areas like Pune must be incorporated into such a paradigm. The conditions of migrant female sex workers in the Pune district are examined in this research, which places their experiences within the broader context of labor and migration policy.

This research interrogates the intricate nexus between internal migration and the economic sustenance of women engaged in sex work in Pune, Maharashtra. It concentrates on the socioeconomic determinants of migration, the ramifications of spatial dislocation for economic viability, and the policy corollaries for augmenting the welfare of migrant sex workers. Utilizing an empirical legal research methodology, this inquiry examines data derived from 400 sex workers in Budhwar Peth—one of India's preeminent red-light districts—to elucidate the multifaceted adversities confronting this vulnerable cohort.

Keywords: Migration, labor, Sex Workers, Policy, Law

Introduction

Migration is the term used to describe the movement of people or groups from one area to another and can take many different forms and involve many different aspects. The position of women within state institutions and social hierarchies has a considerable impact on their placement and spatial arrangements in modern migration patterns. Movements that are seasonal or circulatory, involving brief relocations for several months of the year, can be classified as temporary, semipermanent, or permanent. A notable subtype of contemporary migratory flows is this kind of movement. Furthermore, there are two types of migration: legal and illegal, and voluntary and coerced. Each of these types has different effects on migrant populations.

The confluence of migration and the trafficking of women for prostitution is one of the most severe examples of gender inequity. This issue has developed over time into a widespread, methodically planned criminal operation with a foundation in the exploitation of women. Poverty, gender-based discrimination, unemployment, lack of access to education, resource scarcity, and political and economic instability are the main causes of female migration. Some women travel to avoid the difficult socioeconomic situations back home, but others are driven by the possibility of working abroad, earning more money, and seeing different cultures.

The term "migrant sex workers " refers to individuals who travel and exchange sexual services for money, food, accommodation, prestige, or other benefits. Importantly, this definition excludes coerced or non-consensual sexual interactions, as sex work is understood to involve voluntary transactions (Valadier, 2018). Yet in reality, it's frequently difficult to distinguish between forced migration and voluntary movement, especially in situations when economic fragility and structural inequity are present.

Prostitution typically thrives in the early stages of a country's economic development, particularly in areas where there is a high rate of rural-urban migration. Persistent gender discrimination frequently prevents women from obtaining secure, well-paying jobs, which drives many of them to the sex business despite their increasing participation in the labour market. Millions of sex workers are thus still unable to take advantage of the quick economic expansion and social progress. In this situation, financial need, rather than direct coercion or slavery, is usually the driving force behind sex employment. Therefore, it is not appropriate to view prostitution as a transient and regrettable consequence of industrialisation that will

eventually fade away as women's salaries increase. On the contrary, as Barry argues, prostitution increasingly industrializes, transforming into “multinational sex-industry conglomerates [that] become autonomous economic forces” (Kotiswaran, 2011).

Migration, Sex Work, and Trafficking in India and the UK

Women and girls who migrate from rural or marginalised areas are frequently referred to as "missing persons" in both India and the UK, especially if their migration is unrecorded. The line between voluntary migration for sex work and trafficking is sometimes blurred by anti-trafficking regimes that aim to control or limit migration itself. However, academic research has attempted to distinguish between forced migration and movement connected to sex employment.

In the European labour market, migrant women are primarily absorbed into three sectors: domestic work (including housekeeping, cooking, and cleaning), caregiving for the elderly, children, and persons with disabilities, and the commercial sex industry. Women's social identities and lived experiences are shaped by constructs of femininity, sexuality, and the body, all of which are intimately linked to these types of labour. Since sexuality and bodily autonomy are viewed as essential components of individual identity, critics contend that the intimate nature of prostitution diminishes human dignity. The only difference between prostitution and marriage, according to Friedrich Engels, is that the former entails "piecework," whilst the latter amounts to everlasting service. In a similar vein, Karl Marx saw prostitution as a particular manifestation of the larger exploitation that comes with wage labour under capitalism.

An estimated 8 lakh (800,000) women work as sex workers in India, according to data from the National AIDS Control Organization (NACO). A significant percentage of these women are internal migrants who move from rural to urban regions in pursuit of better pay. Empirical studies indicate that migrant female sex workers are more likely to work in brothels, serve a larger number of clients, and earn higher daily incomes than their non-migrant counterparts (Banandur, 2012). These findings reinforce Barry's assertion that prostitution increasingly industrialises, evolving into transnational economic networks with considerable financial and social influence (Kotiswaran, 2011).

Budhwar Peth in Pune is a prime example of this socioeconomic phenomenon. This area, which is known as one of the city's oldest red-light districts, is home to some 700 brothels and 5,000

prostitutes. Even though Budhwar Peth lies in the heart of the city, it is typified by overpopulation, subpar housing, and restricted access to basic amenities like safe drinking water, healthcare, and sanitation. Commercial sex is supported by a complex economic and social ecosystem that is created by the socio-spatial organization of the area, which is characterised by narrow roads lined with modest cabins, tea stalls, retail stores, lodges, and brothels.

A large number of women enter the sex industry as a result of trafficking networks or acute poverty, according to empirical data and qualitative interviews. A sizable fraction of sex workers are migrants, whether they are displaced by force or participate voluntarily. People who have been trafficked are frequently forced to relocate, but other people migrate due to severe socioeconomic pressure. Among those trafficked, attempts to escape are frequently thwarted by institutional constraints and systemic exploitation, fostering a sense of helplessness that ultimately leads to reluctant acceptance of their circumstances (Shaju & Kumari, 2023).

Numerous interconnected factors, such as job opportunities, hopes for better living conditions, the need to pay for education, learning English, and residing in a nation that is seen as providing more freedom and prosperity, all have an impact on migrant participation in the UK sex industry. Repaying debts, fleeing patriarchal rule, conflict, or discrimination based on sexual orientation, pursuing personal fulfilment, and reconciling with relatives or lovers who are already in the UK are other reasons. Media narratives and testimonies from return migrants significantly shape these aspirations, particularly among younger women, reinforcing perceptions of the UK as a space for economic, social, and cultural mobility (Nicola, 2010).

Research Objectives and Questions

Primary Aim

To comprehensively understand and elucidate the complex mechanisms through which internal migration influences and shapes the economic, social, and personal livelihoods of women engaged in sex work in Pune.

Specific Objectives

- To identify the primary push and pull factors driving women to migrate to Pune and

engage in sex work.

- To assess the direct and indirect impacts of migration on the economic livelihoods of women sex workers in Pune.
- To provide evidence-based policy recommendations aimed at improving the safety, well-being, and livelihood options for migrant women sex workers in Pune.

Research Questions

- What socioeconomic, cultural, or political circumstances in their regions of origin drive women to migrate to Pune?
- Do specific geographic areas demonstrate higher propensities for generating migrant sex workers in Pune, and what factors contribute to these patterns?
- How does migration affect the income-generating capacity and financial stability of women sex workers in Pune?
- What is the impact of migration on the long-term economic stability and risks faced by women involved in sex work?
- What safety hazards do migrant women sex workers encounter, and how can policy interventions address these challenges?

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

In the Indian context, the unorganized sector is formally delineated by the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector (NCEUS). This classification encompasses all unincorporated private enterprises owned by individuals or households involved in the production or sale of goods and services, typically operated via proprietorships or partnerships with a workforce of fewer than ten individuals. This definition serves as a foundational theoretical construct for analyzing the economic integration and positioning of sex work within the broader informal economy of India.

Socio-economic Determinants of Sex Work in India

The socioeconomic landscape for sex workers in India is heterogeneous, shaped by a complex interplay of legal frameworks, societal ideologies, and prevailing economic constraints. Scholarly inquiries into the lived experiences of women in this sector offer critical perspectives on how sex work informs livelihood strategies and longitudinal economic outcomes.

The pervasive societal stigma surrounding the profession often manifests as systemic discrimination and social marginalization, which subsequently restricts access to essential services and fundamental rights. Nonetheless, for a substantial demographic, sex work functions as a primary mechanism for income generation, underscoring its role in facilitating financial subsistence and household security.

Geographic Concentration and Regulatory Environment

Sex work in India exhibits distinct geographic clustering, centered primarily within established "red-light" districts. Notable urban hubs include: • Mumbai: Kamathipura • Kolkata: Sonagachi and Bowbazaar • New Delhi: Garstin Bastion (GB) Road • Pune: Budhwar Peth • Allahabad: Meerganj. From a legal perspective, the act of sex work itself is not explicitly criminalized under Indian law. However, the regulatory environment is governed by statutes that prohibit ancillary activities, such as public solicitation, the operation of brothels, and pimping.

This legal dichotomy creates a precarious environment for practitioners, balancing de facto existence with de jure restrictions.

Migration Dynamics and Vulnerability Assessments

A significant majority of individuals within the sector are internal migrants, predominantly originating from economically distressed rural hinterlands, though urban-to-urban migration also persists. The drivers of this migration are largely voluntary-economic, including the pursuit of viable employment, the liquidation of ancestral debt, and the seeking of improved standards of living. Conversely, a critical subset—particularly minors—is subjected to involuntary entry into the profession. This trajectory is characterized by human trafficking, involving coercion, deception, and systemic violence, where individuals are forcibly displaced to urban centers for the purpose of commercial sexual exploitation.

Legislative Framework and Migration Patterns in the United Kingdom:

The legal landscape governing sex work in England and Wales is characterized by significant complexity and ambiguity, a status that has prompted recent formal inquiry by the Parliamentary Home Affairs Select Committee.

Legislative approaches differ throughout UK counties; for example, Northern Ireland has been using a "Nordic Model" approach since 2014, which purchases sexual services as a crime. On the other hand, as long as every participant is older than 18, exchanging sexual services for money is not prohibited in the rest of the United Kingdom. However, by making auxiliary operations illegal, the legal structure limits the trade's organization and visibility.

These consist of:

- **Public Solicitation:** When customers engage in "kerb crawling" or street-based solicitation.
- **Restrictions on Publicity:** Posting ads in public spaces (like phone booths).
- **Management and Operation:** It is still unlawful to operate a brothel, which is defined by law as any establishment where multiple people offer sexual services. Engagement and Consent Orders were introduced by the Policing and Crime Act of 2009 as part of a gradual transition to a more liberalised and rehabilitative approach. For anyone found guilty of loitering or soliciting, these judicial tools offer courts a non-punitive substitute for conventional sanctions. Rather, these orders require participants to attend supervised sessions that are intended to make it easier for vulnerable practitioners to receive vital social and health services, like housing aid, healthcare, and drug addiction treatment.

Legal Framework and Policy Implications

India's existing anti-trafficking legislation, particularly the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act (ITPA), conflates sex work with sex trafficking, creating legal ambiguities. The ITPA's comprehensive prohibition on soliciting sexual services fails to distinguish between voluntary and involuntary participation in sex work, potentially criminalizing the very trafficking victims it aims to protect. This legal framework often results in the mischaracterization of voluntary sex workers as trafficking victims requiring rehabilitation.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employs empirical legal research methodology with a qualitative focus, gathering

realworld data on the experiences of migrant women sex workers with the legal system and examining how laws shape their migration patterns and livelihoods.

Sampling Framework

The research focuses on Budhwar Peth, which houses India's third-largest red-light district, comprising approximately 700 brothels and 5,000 sex workers. From this population, a sample of 400 sex workers was selected for comprehensive analysis, representing a statistically significant portion of the total population.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection focused on key parameters including socioeconomic status, migration patterns, access to healthcare and education, legal protection, and overall well-being. The analysis examined income levels, living conditions, financial stability, sources of income, and financial challenges to provide insights into economic vulnerability and potential empowerment pathways.

Findings and Analysis

Geographic Origins of Migrant Sex Workers

The empirical data reveal distinct migration patterns among the 400 sex workers surveyed in Budhwar Peth. The geographic distribution demonstrates significant regional variations in migration sources:

Status of Migration in Pune City

State	Number of Women	State	Number of Women
Bengal	100	Bihar	1
Maharashtra	20	Uganda	2
Karnataka	18	Madhya Pradesh	2

Nepal	30	Tamil Nadu	2
Andhra Pradesh	5	Bangladesh	2
Uttar Pradesh	6	Telangana	2
Assam	5	Gujarat	2
Chhattisgarh	1		
Rajasthan	1	Other	2
Total	186	Total	14

Source: Data Collected from the Field

Migration Pattern Analysis

The data reveals several critical patterns in migration flows to Pune's sex work industry. West Bengal emerges as the predominant source region, accounting for over one-third of migrant sex workers, suggesting established trafficking networks and economic push factors in the region. The significant representation from Karnataka and Maharashtra indicates both inter-state and intrastate migration patterns, with Maharashtra's internal migration reflecting rural-to-urban movement within the state.

The presence of international migrants from Nepal, Bangladesh, and Uganda highlights the crossborder dimensions of sex work migration, potentially involving more complex trafficking networks and greater vulnerabilities due to documentation issues and linguistic barriers.

Socioeconomic Implications

The geographic distribution of migrants suggests that poverty and economic instability in source regions, particularly West Bengal and rural areas of other states, serve as primary push factors. The concentration of migrants from specific regions indicates the existence of established migration networks and recruitment pathways that facilitate movement to Pune's sex work industry.

Discussion

Push and Pull Factors

The research findings confirm that migration to Pune's sex work industry is primarily driven by economic necessities in source regions. The high representation of migrants from West Bengal and other economically disadvantaged states supports the hypothesis that poverty, unemployment, and lack of alternative livelihood opportunities serve as primary push factors. The pull factors include perceived better economic opportunities in Pune's established red-light district and existing social networks that facilitate migration.

Economic Impact of Migration

Migration significantly affects the economic livelihoods of women sex workers through multiple mechanisms. While migration may provide immediate income opportunities, it often involves exploitation, debt bondage, and reduced bargaining power due to unfamiliarity with local conditions and lack of social support systems. The economic vulnerability of migrants is exacerbated by their illegal status, limited access to formal financial services, and dependence on intermediaries.

Policy Implications

The findings highlight the need for comprehensive policy interventions addressing both source and destination factors. Effective policies must address economic development in source regions, provide alternative livelihood opportunities, strengthen anti-trafficking enforcement, and improve support services for sex workers in destination areas.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Key Findings

This research demonstrates that internal migration significantly shapes the economic and social circumstances of women engaged in sex work in Pune. The geographic concentration of migrants from specific regions, particularly West Bengal, indicates systematic patterns of recruitment and movement that require targeted policy interventions.

Policy Recommendations

1. **Economic Development:** Implement targeted economic development programs in

source regions, particularly West Bengal and rural areas of other states, to address root causes of migration.

2. **Legal Reform:** Reform the ITPA to distinguish between voluntary sex work and trafficking, ensuring that voluntary sex workers are not criminalized while strengthening protections for trafficking victims.
3. **Support Services:** Establish comprehensive support services for migrant sex workers, including healthcare, legal aid, financial services, and skill development programs.
4. **Documentation:** Develop systems to provide proper documentation for migrants, reducing their vulnerability to exploitation and improving access to government services.
5. **Cross-Border Cooperation:** Strengthen international cooperation mechanisms to address cross-border trafficking and provide support for international migrants.

Future Research Directions

Future research should focus on longitudinal studies of migration patterns, economic outcomes of different intervention strategies, and comparative analyses of policy effectiveness across different states and regions. Additionally, research should examine the role of technology in both facilitating and combating trafficking networks.

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