

INSIGHTS FROM COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT WITH SEX WORKERS AND SETTING THE PATHWAY

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Abstract

This paper is regarding community engagement with sex workers who tell how they got involved in the trade based on their real life experiences. Through in-depth interview, they tell of their hurts, frustrations, disappointments and struggles which is never ending. Sex workers have been identified as a marginalized group and are often isolated. Community engagement with this group is to help them to cope with their life better and to ensure their well-being. This paper reports the insights derived from the community engagement with sex workers which are a need for survival, low self-image, suicidal attempt, betrayed by significant men, conflicts and how these conflicts are resolved in their own way and the desire for a normal family life. After the insights is recorded, then the pathway is set for sex workers. It has been observed throughout the interview that sex workers give utmost importance to the children under their care and undertake this responsibility well so that the lives of their children would be different from their own chaotic lives. Invaluable experience has been gained by engaging this marginalized community through social work intervention. Social work skills have been practiced through personal and in-depth sessions with sex workers who would otherwise want to lead withdrawn lives and struggle alone with their depressed state of mind. New hope and confidence has been imparted to this community so that they would take the necessary precautions to ensure their betterment at all times.

Keywords: *community engagement, sex worker, survival, low self-image, well being*

Introduction

Sex worker or prostitute is termed as one who is involved in prostitution. Sex workers could be probably an accurate description of how they perceive themselves in relation to sex (Nagaraj & Yahya, 1995). Prostitution is when two adults agree to have sexual intercourse. The only difference is that one adult has agreed to pay money to the other (Zweiniger, 2001). Strong (2001) defines prostitution as the exchange of sexual acts for money and / or goods. Prostitution has been called “the oldest profession in the world” and the economy in almost all countries has a sector engaged in this activity. But the size and scope of activities within the sector tend to vary with the degree of economic development and related factors that affect the growth of the sector (Nagaraj & Yahya, 1995). Prostitution of women and girls is clearly seen in all countries whereby it has become a powerful and flourishing business sector. There is a lack of statistics available regarding the number of sex workers in the country. There is also a lack of information regarding the children of sex workers and their schooling. There is no place for sex workers to cater for their needs and that of their children.

Community engagement primarily deals with the practice of moving communities towards change, usually from a stalled or similarly suspended position (Wikipedia). Community engagement is therefore a planned process with the specific purpose of working with identified groups of people, whether they are connected by geographic location, special interest or affiliation or identify to address issues affecting their well-being. A community may be a geographic location (community of place), a community of similar interest (community of practice), or a community of affiliation or identity (such as industry or sporting club) (Cavaye, 2001).

Methodology

This qualitative study approach is based upon data collected and data observed upon a series of community engagement with five sex workers on an in-depth one-to-one basis. It is based upon initial contact and rapport building. Interviews were carried out on appointments usually in the late evenings or night as the sex workers normally sleep in the mornings. The personal encounters encouraged the sex workers to share their experiences as this is the first time the sex workers actually “talked” to somebody regarding their experiences and struggles. Data was recorded after each interview was completed. These series of data collection methodology with five sex workers allowed the researcher to listen, observe, understand, accept, analyze, record and finally present as the insights from this community engagement. The insights then helped to set the pathway for these sex workers.

Insights from Community Engagement

a) Need for Survival

According to Zweiniger (2001), there is a direct causal relationship between the low level of women's wages and the recruitment of sex workers. Strong (2001) feels sex workers had been trapped in a dilemma which is rather complicated and have looked for financial resources through an easy way. Their crucial and basic need for survival includes food, clothing and shelter mainly for their children and themselves. Having a child under their care further justified this involvement. They do not want their children to be deprived of any love or unmet need as they had experienced. All the sex workers mentioned that they do not want to go to their families for help but rather want to solve their financial problems independently. This need for survival is of utmost importance to them.

Strong (2001) describes that limited income also has an impact on sex workers. Poverty is an increasing problem among women. They look for financial resources through an easy way out. Their problem in finding jobs is due to their low academic level and lack of skills. Women describe prostitution in monetary and material terms. The strong economic motivation for women entering prostitution is the same for anyone entering the work force. Perkins & Bennett, 1985, in a study of prostitutes reported that 97% of the sample stated earning an income as their reason for entering prostitution. In the Australian Studies in Law and Crime, 2002, most of the sex workers worked in commercial sex entirely for economic reasons. Pheterson (1989) explains that sex workers experience dishonor when they are often termed as "cheap" which is not measured in monetary value but in giving sex to many men who are their customers. A prostitute does not experience sexual fulfillment with her customer as prostitution is purely done as a source of income. "I only enjoy sex when I am with someone I care about" (Zweiniger, 2001).

b) Low and Negative Self Image

Sex workers think of themselves negatively. They have poor self-image and describe themselves as "bad". These are related to Erik Erikson's Eight Stages of Psychosocial Development theory that sex workers tend to suffer from depression and low self-esteem caused by their inability to fully develop through the necessary stages of personality. He further elaborates that this can be termed as arrested development when an individual who is unable to fully integrate with her inner conflicts and therefore suffers from reduced self-esteem and a poor self-image. These sex workers feel dehumanization as they feel they have been treated as objects. They have had engaged in sexual activities at a very young age. At a tender age, they did not receive acceptance, understanding and love. Thus they have been unable to make rational decisions in their life. Prostitution has

become a nightmare in their lives as it is not a job you can go out and admit to the world (O'Neill, 1996).

The sex workers come from broken families and have been abandoned by their family and community. They did not receive adequate emotional support from their parents. When they grow up, they tend to be anxious, lonely and unsure of their own identity. They are vulnerable to pimps and allow themselves to be controlled and manipulated. They are fearful of their future and have an insecure state of mind. Their life becomes unpredictable (Strong, 2001). According to Maslow, all human beings need respect. They also need to be accepted and loved. They need to be reassured often to enhance their self-worth. They face rejection especially by their own family and the significant people in their lives. Their painful experiences have actually led them to the streets (Pointer, 2001). Prostitution is a miserable job whereby sex workers are subjected to police raid and a humiliating medical check. They frequently are susceptible to infection and diseases which needs proper treatment and medication. One hundred and thirty people working as prostitutes in San Francisco were interviewed regarding violence in their lives and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). 57% said they were sexually assaulted as children and 49% physically assaulted. PTSD can result when people have experienced "extreme traumatic stressors involving direct experience of events that involves threat or violent harm to oneself or to somebody close" (Farley, 1998). There is a relationship between being a victim of abuse and working as a sex worker.

c) Suicidal Attempt

The suffering, shame and disappointments in their lives together with no peace on their minds have led the sex workers to have suicidal thoughts and attempts. They have not been able to love themselves thus creating an emptiness in their life. However suicide attempts among sex workers have not received much attention. In a study of 29 street youths, the feelings that dominated the reports was one of "aloneness" or "isolation" (56%), "depression" (37%), "emptiness" or "nothingness" (19%) and "anger" (13%). When these feelings and stressful experiences could not be tolerated any longer, they turned to suicide as a way of ending their pain. Variables related to suicide include loss of control, assault during sex, drug abuse as a "slow suicide" and breakups in intimate relationships. (Kidd & Kral, 2002).

Shneidman (1996) views suicide as an action taken when a person's threshold of pain has been reached and becomes unbearable. Their emotional state as they remember the abuse they suffered and indeed the memory itself is painful to bear (Schacter, 1996). The painful experiences at home have led the sex workers on the streets where extremely negative experiences continued with painful self-image of worthlessness. These powerful negative feelings combined with self-harming/destructive behaviors as a way of reducing pain, appear to lead to an extremely high rate of suicide (Pointer, 2001).

However the sex workers attempt for suicide has been pushed aside because they need to take care of their children. They want to protect and provide for their children. Their children give them joy and direction in their lives. The sex workers want to live for their children and give them the best. The love for their children keeps them going. The children on the other hand are close to their mothers and get angry when anyone talks ill of their mother.

d) Betrayed by Significant Men

All the sex workers have been let down by significant people especially the men in their lives namely the father, husband, boyfriend and male companion. The father of one sex worker gave her drugs when she was 9 years old. The father of another sex worker exploited her sexually when he was highly drunk. He did this to his helpless daughter when her mother was not around. The fathers did not fulfill their responsibilities but rather took advantage of their daughters. The husband of one of the sex workers left her and their baby in the lurch and even brought customers for her to have sex with so that he can take all her earnings. The mother-in-law of another sex worker continuously tortured her with harsh and vulgar words as she is dark in complexion. Her husband did not come to her defense at all but rather he allowed his mother to cause mental torture and mental anguish to his wife. A male companion of one of the sex workers was never to be found when he knew that she was pregnant with his child. Another sex worker's male companion did not marry her although he had promised her that he would. She bore him three children out of wedlock because he had promised to marry her. Her mother begged this male companion to marry his daughter and give her a new lease of life, but he refused. She later found out that he has a wife and was not willing to divorce his first wife.

The significant men of these sex workers did not protect nor provide for the women under their care but were rather cruel and unjust to them. The sex workers felt unloved by these men in their lives. They have been betrayed by the men close to them, thus making it hard for them to trust anybody else. These men have treated the sex workers unfairly and never gave them any importance. They made the women feel unworthy of themselves. This distrust played a major part in their involvement in prostitution. As stated in Erik Erickson's Eight Stages of Psychosocial Development, all of them have experienced isolation and rejection of some kind in their lives. They have isolated themselves for fear of being cheated and rejected again. They have run away from these significant people in their lives who were supposed to give them protection, security and comfort.

e) Conflict and Resolving Conflict

The sex workers know that their acts violate religious and social values. On the other hand, they justify their actions to affirm that they are not doing anything wrong or immoral. Their strategy to overcome their conflict is through smoking, alcoholism, drugs, other activities and chanting religious words. One sex worker has a dog as a pet whom she feels is her faithful friend as she is unable to have any close relationship with either a man or a woman. They feel it is not a necessity to discuss or disclose their conflicts. These conflicts, Erikson argues will restrict their ability to build trusting relationships with others. This lack of control may represent an obvious attempt to take charge of themselves rather than relying on other people. It is an attempt to be more independent and not to depend on anybody.

In Erik Erikson's Theory of Psychological Development, the entire life cycle depicts the eight stages, beginning with "Trust vs Mistrust" and ending with "Integrity vs Despair". In the first five stages, individuals will find opportunities to be productive in order to form their own identity. However, an individual who is unable to reach this level would develop low self-esteem. This would have a serious impact on the individual not to make an effort for continued development and unable to explore her potential. However, an individual who has a positive psycho-social development would develop skills for a life-long career and stable identity.

f) Male Power vs Submissive Women

The sex workers shared that they have been belittled by men every single day. They have become objects for man's masculinity. Men seem to have the right to have sex as they are able to pay and sex workers need the money. There is no law, no rule, no etiquette and no courtesy that stops any man from using vulgar words on a prostitute (Dworkin, 1994). The payment for older prostitutes is less compared to the younger ones. Men are more interested in the physical appearance and are attracted to younger sex workers and pay them more.

Although prostitution may have been one avenue for women to improve their economic position, it was usually at the expense of lowering their social status as women. As a woman's socio economic class might elevate when she acquires wealth through commercial sex, she attains none of the corresponding class privileges as her status slid

into the “deviant” class or “outcast”. To obtain wealth and independence, a sex worker had to trade sex for it and lose her social status at the same time. Pateman (1998) defines prostitution in her analysis of the social contract which involves males dominating female bodies and lives through a tradition of prescribed cultural, social and legal transactions of power.

g) Family Life

The sex workers voiced their dissatisfaction that they have not had a fruitful family life as they come from broken families. They expressed their need to have a family of their own like any other married couple. They termed their husbands as “good” as against themselves as “bad”. They want a gentle and loving man in their lives and not a man who would exploit and abuse them. They hope for fair and just treatment which they hardly had received in their lives. They hope to hear kind and comforting words and not vulgar words as they used to hear before. They hope to receive love and acceptance. The sex workers portray their feelings and desires just like any other woman. Once they have this in their lives, they will be able to overcome the negative feeling of themselves and leave prostitution for good. Until then they will continue in this trade.

Setting the Pathway

- a) Provide sex workers and their children the basic needs which comprises of food, clothing and shelter. The sex workers need not engage in sexual activity if these basic needs are provided. The children of sex workers need to receive proper schooling.
- b) Help the sex workers to accept and love themselves first. From the above sharing by the sex workers, they consider themselves as “bad” and are unable to love themselves. They need to love themselves first before they can love others. They need help to put their past aside and move on in life.
- c) Provide a personal and permanent space for sex workers to discover themselves and to be resilient. This involves therapeutic social work intervention to help them cope with their bitter and ugly experiences. They need to be true and honest to themselves. They need to be provided for their well-being.
- d) Rekindle trust and communication in the lives of sex workers. Sex workers should be able to communicate with others and live a normal life. They should be integrated in the community and not feel marginalized or like an outcast. They need to feel confident to be a part of the community.
- e) Peer educators are encouraged to provide a supportive environment to sex workers with regards to health, education and skills. Peer educators will be responsible to educate sex workers regarding the negative impacts of substance abuse, HIV/AIDS, other related diseases, safe sex and others. It would be easier for a sex worker to be more open to another sex worker with a similar experience as she feels she would be understood better and not judged negatively.

- f) Parents must think of their daughters just as worthy as their sons and provide for them equal opportunities for education and to preserve functional families at all times. The significant men in the lives of girls should think highly of them and their achievements.
- g) Rehabilitation centers may not be the answer. Rules, procedures, punishment and old methods may not work. All the sex workers in this community engagement who were placed in rehabilitation centers were not helped at all.

Conclusion

This paper describes the real life experiences of five sex workers. Community engagement ensures that issues regarding their well-being are addressed and looked into very seriously. Society needs to step out of the norm in rescuing the rejected and marginalized sex workers, empower them with self-worth and restore them back to society with acceptance and love. They need help and guidance to start a new chapter in their lives. The insights from these sex workers need to be taken into account as these are the areas that need most urgent importance and attention to work on. Rehabilitation center is not the answer to their betterment. In conclusion, the community engagement process ensures that the sex workers are integrated back to society where they belong and ensure they are no longer marginalized neither face any form of social isolation or discrimination. Community engagement needs to be built on kindness and gentleness.

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