

# “All in the name of love”: Understanding the Relationship between Sex Workers and their Intimate Partners

Findings from participatory research in north Karnataka, India

Parinita Bhattacharjee<sup>1,2</sup>, Raghavendra T<sup>2</sup>, Mahesh Doddamane<sup>2</sup>, Sapna Nair<sup>3</sup> and Shajy Isac<sup>1,2</sup>  
<sup>1</sup>University of Manitoba, <sup>2</sup>Karnataka Health Promotion Trust, <sup>3</sup>Independent consultant

## OBJECTIVE

To understand the drivers of violence and condom use in the relationship between sex workers and their intimate partners

## METHODS

The study was conducted in two separate, three-day residential workshops with 31 female sex workers (FSWs) and 37 intimate partners (IPs).

### TOOLS

The study used five Participatory Learning and Action tools with FSWs and six tools with IPs

- ‘Exploratory Tools’ were used for observation and reflection on experiences
  - Symbols
  - Venn Diagram
  - Hopes and Fears

- ‘Analysis Tools’ were used to explore relationships, and identify linkages and perceptions
  - Octopus Diagram
  - Problem Tree
  - Ballot Box

The writings, drawings and other outputs from the tools were analysed and interpreted along with the FSWs and IPs. Their comments and observations during each of the analyses sessions were noted.

## WORKSHOP PROCESS

### WITH FSWs

- FSWs initially found the use of a pen, drawing and expressing their views on a paper challenging. Hence, preferred verbal expression to drawings.
- Some of them started using pen and paper on the second day, which motivated and encouraged others to do the same
- Most of them preferred one to one sharing with facilitators than in a group specially on the topic of condom use
- They became more comfortable to share on issues of violence, hopes and fears in a group by the second day

### WITH IPs

- IP groups were divided on the bases of their age and marital status to ensure some degree of homogeneity and make them feel comfortable
- Most IPs had higher literacy levels and preferred writing about their experiences rather than expressing through drawings
- They were also more open to group discussions
- They appreciated the workshop as they rarely got an opportunity to discuss about their feelings

## FINDINGS

### Perception of self and intimate partner (FSW respondents)

- Most FSWs’ relationships with their IPs were marked by signs of insecurity, fear and violence although they described ‘love’ as the foundation of these relationships
- Most FSWs perceived their IPs as ‘husbands’, and their relationship with them as equivalent to a marital relationship

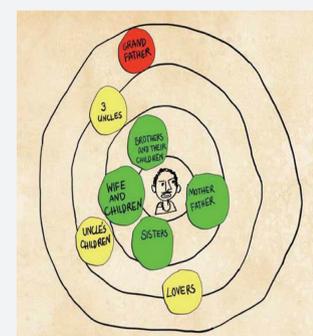
“My lover is very cunning and follows me wherever I go just like a dog. When he is angry, he wants to bite me and destroy me at any cost...I feel like a parrot and want to fly freely.”

- FSW, 22 years



### Importance of the relationship (IP respondents)

- FSW lovers were placed in the inner and bigger circles of the Venn Diagram, indicating the high importance of these lovers in their lives. Majority of these IPs were unmarried.
- Most of the married IPs placed their family members in the inner and larger circles, and assigned them greater importance than their FSW lovers. Parents, brothers, and/or wives and children got priority over the FSW lovers.



### Ideal images of the relationship

#### Intimate Partners

“Both my wife and my lover have to be loyal to me. If I ever come to know that my lover is going with other men, I will kill her.”

- Married IP, 25 years

- Images showed that both wives and FSW lovers were expected to be loyal, possess a good character, dress ‘decently’ and be caring.
- Images showed that duties of caring for children and family were expected of wives and not of lovers.
- FSW lovers were expected to primarily provide sexual satisfaction, pleasure and even romance.

#### Female Sex Workers

“When he is with his wife, he does not respond to my calls as he fears his wife and parents will come to know that I had called. He calls when he comes out. He lies to me saying that he was at the bus stop and does not openly say that I am at my wife’s place. This behaviour affects my trust as I know for sure that he is with his wife.”

- FSW, 25 years

- For FSWs, ideal IPs were those who:
- were responsible for their children
  - cared for the FSWs’ parents in their old age
  - publicly acknowledged FSWs as their wives
  - accompanied them to the temple
  - treated FSWs and wives alike

### Violence and conflict

#### Female Sex Workers

“I had gone for training for 3-4 days, he asked me where I had gone, and whom I met and what did I do there. He was not satisfied with my answer so he asked me to prove my love towards him by putting my hand in the boiling oil. He said if my hand does not burn, then only it will mean I truly love him.”

- FSW, 33 years

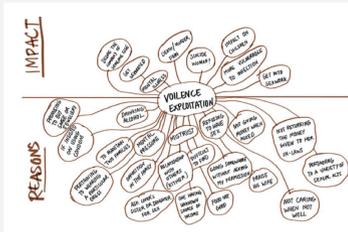
- Insecurities, suspicion and jealousies constitute one set of causes of violence in intimate partner relationships

#### Intimate Partners

“Sometimes, I see that she has more money. When I ask her where she got this money from, she stammers and lies. She sure had fun with other men! When I have told her that I will take care of her, why should she do all this (sex) work? So I get angry and pick up a fight. Then I will naturally look for someone else, no?”

- IP, 36 years

- A sense of superiority gave IPs sanction to use violence over the FSWs
- Suspicion and mistrust triggered violence in these relationships



### Condom use in the relationship

#### Female Sex Workers

“My intimate partner does not get satisfaction if he uses a condom. He says that he is my regular partner and hence has a right to have sex with me without a condom.”

- FSW, 20 years

- Non use of condoms were due to:
- Deep love and trust in their partner
  - Fear of actual violence and harassment from partners



#### Intimate Partners

“I have used condom with my lover when I used to go to her as a client. But now that I am her lover, I do not feel the necessity to use condoms as I trust that she will not have sex with anyone else other than me.”

- IP, 36 years

- Non use of condoms were due to:
- Non use being considered a privilege as intimacy and love made it superior to client–sex worker relationships
  - Trust and love
  - Perception of condoms as a barrier to sexual pleasure and as being cumbersome



### Fears and hopes in the relationship

#### Female Sex Workers

- FSWs had various fears, including:
- losing their partner or violence
  - being caught by their partner while entertaining clients
  - contracting diseases such as HIV from their IPs

Despite the fears and presence of violence in these relationships, FSWs hope for a ‘romantic future’, where the intimate partners would love them and look after them ‘forever’ or ‘till the end’.



#### Intimate Partners

- IPs had various fears, including:
- estrangement and breakdown of their relationship with their FSW lover
  - estrangement leading to alcohol addiction, or causing them to become violent with their FSW lovers
  - being compelled to use condoms, while others feared contracting HIV from their FSW lovers

IPs also hoped for a romantic future with their FSW lovers. Some hoped to marry them, have children and live together with them forever.



## CONCLUSION

- Intimate partner relationships characterised by low use of condoms and high incidence of violence pose high risk for HIV infection among sex workers
- High risk in these relationships comes from prevalent social and cultural norms around gender roles, masculinity, fidelity and the acceptance of violence against women
- Programmes to prevent HIV among FSWs must recognise the complex nature of intimate partner relationships, as distinct from commercial, paid relationships and need to include interventions with their IPs
- Prevention efforts must centre around empowerment of women, transformation of social and cultural norms around what it means to be a man and ending the acceptance of violence against women

