

A Community-based Qualitative Study to Explore the Experience and Understandings of Intimate Partner Violence among Women in Sex Work and their Intimate Partners in north Karnataka, India

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Objective

To explore how women in sex work and male intimate partners (IPs) describe their experiences and understandings of intimate partner violence (IPV) in north Karnataka state, south India.

Background

The high prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV) among women, and particularly those in sex work or female sex workers (FSWs), has been increasingly recognized.¹

Studies involving female sex workers have focussed on violence from clients, often quantitatively identifying risk factors.^{2,3} Few studies have examined IPV facing FSWS and none have included both male and female partners or taken a community-based research (CBR) approach.^{4,5}

Qualitative community-based research is valuable for better understanding the mechanisms by which multi-levelled factors may be increasing vulnerability to IPV, from the perspective of women in sex work and their male intimate partners.⁶

Chaitanya Mahila Sangha (CMS), a peer-run community-based organization, has been working with the Karnataka Health Promotion Trust on HIV prevention among female sex workers for over ten years in Bagalkot district, Karnataka in south India. This study was a baseline for the evaluation of their jointly-led Samvedana Plus program to address IPV vulnerability.



Map of Study Districts in Karnataka

Methods

Participants were purposively selected to maximize variation among female sex workers and their intimate partners enrolled in the program from Bagalkot district. The research questions, interview tools, ethical protocols and data collection were undertaken with a Research Committee of selected representatives from CMS.

Data Collection

- Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted by trained community research investigators (CRIs) with 12 FSWS.
- A trained local male research investigator conducted interviews with 10 male intimate partners with consent from their female partners.
- Data collection was completed between July and November 2014.
- Interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated into English.

Thematic Content Analysis

- Coding of de-identified interviews in NVivo 10.0 and organization into categories was undertaken with guidance from the semi-structured interview guide. Pseudonyms for interviewees are presented here.
- Discussions between the first and second author and CRIs/RI were undertaken to contextualize and summarize key points across interviews.
- Collaborative analysis with the RC based on these main points was undertaken to determine themes on how violence is experienced and understood by the respondents.



Description of Participant and Relationship Characteristics

- Female participants were between ages 24-47 years, none were married, all were Devadasi and of a Scheduled Caste; all but two women had children, a quarter having children with their IP; all women but two were employed outside of sex work.
- Male participants were between ages 21-48 years; occupations included agricultural or non-agricultural laborers; education ranged from none to second year Commerce College; all were Hindu except one Muslim and of a range of castes; all but two were married to other women.
- Intimate relationships started 4-25 years ago (average 13); half of the IPs started as a client.
- Male IPs were one of the main sources of crucial financial, and often emotional, support in most female respondents' lives. Their relationships were often likened to a marriage, which was related in large part to women's hopes to strengthen their and their children's security in the face of widespread social, economic and legal exclusion.
- Respondents shared commonly-held gender role expectations, including that the male IP should "take responsibility" for her family socially and financially. In turn, women were said to be expected to serve or care for him, remain faithful and modest, and especially stop sex work.

Experiences of Violence

- Violence varied in each relationship: some couples reported no violence; most experienced at least verbal or minor physical violence, which was often mutual and repeated; and there were a few cases in which the woman experienced severe physical violence.



"She does quarrel with me if my mobile is in busy mode...I give her one smack or two. She starts crying and skips the meals for couple of days. After that she calls and we both chat with love. This is happening usually." (Ajay, 21 years)

"He hits me, he blames me, he says he will not come again and go, but he comes again after three days or four." (Sharmistha, 26 years)

Understandings of Violence

What are the triggers and underlying causes for intimate partner violence?

- A commonly-held view was that if the man is supporting his female IP then he can be verbally or physically violent to correct her "mistakes". Mistakes were most commonly defined as unfulfilled gender roles expectations (described earlier) on either the man's or woman's side.
- A related issue that was one of the most common triggers of IPV across the interviews was regarding expectations for faithfulness and suspicion around her engagement in sex work.

"Any man will get angry if women do mistakes. He will not get angry if she cooks and serves properly and she obeys them." (Ravi, 30 years)

Should intimate partner violence be accepted in any or all circumstances?

- There was widespread acceptance of violence if the IP was supporting her financially.
- Some held that violence was a sign of love, so that the IP cared enough to become angry.
- Some women did not think that violence is correct, particularly when the IP was not greatly supporting her or she did not make a mistake. However many of them still accepted violence due to fear that he may leave or cause more problems.
- Some male IPs said that violence may be incorrect or more troublesome than it is worth.

"Yes, he beats her [female IP] because he gives money to her, if someone goes to stop the fight he argues with them that he has that right because he gave money to her. That is why no one will interfere in such issues" (Padma, 42 years)

"They should also respect us and treat in dignified manner. Do you think we have kept them to behave like that? We don't. That is the reason [not to accept violence]." (Kaveri, 35 years)

"If they do any mistake or vulgar act we can beat them... It is not correct, as if I get angry and beat in any sensitive part, I have to take her to the hospital for treatment. It will be a problem for us again, what do we get from beating?" (Manjunath, 48 years)

Conclusions

- The results demonstrate that vulnerability to IPV was structural in nature, involving the interplay of issues on multiple levels, including gender role expectations and norms on violence.
- Our qualitative analysis allowed a deeper exploration of the myriad life and relationship issues that fed into the occurrence of violence, complementing past studies to linearly identify factors associated with IPV.
- Though violence was accepted by many respondents either based on normative or practical considerations, there were those who stated that violence is not correct in any circumstance, indicating the potential for change among couples and the wider community.
- The process involved a multi-directional transfer of skills and knowledge that can benefit studies to come. The trustworthiness of results was strengthened with direct input from the community representatives.

Implications

- Our findings suggest that programs must work not only at the individual and relationship levels to address triggers of violence by changing behaviour, but also the community and societal levels to address the structural nature of IPV.
- Ongoing evaluation research should be undertaken to assess the effectiveness of structural programs for reducing IPV, particularly as they are increasingly involving men and the wider communities.
- Future population-based research should be conducted to better understand the impact of norms and the generalizability of the relevant issues underlying IPV in this study among FSWS or among marital couples elsewhere. Qualitative studies adapting a similar community-based research approach would also be valuable to explore variation in how these issues may manifest in other contexts.



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