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# “Whatever I Have, I Have Made by Coming into this Profession”: The Intersection of Resources, Agency, and Achievements in Pathways to Sex Work in Kolkata, India

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**Abstract** This article investigated the complex interplay of choice, socioeconomic structural factors, and empowerment influencing engagement in sex work. The analysis was focused on pathways into and reasons for staying in sex work from in-depth qualitative interviews with participants ( $n = 37$ ) recruited from the Durbar community-led structural intervention in Kolkata, India. Kabeer’s theory of empowerment focused on resources, agency, and achievements was utilized to interpret the results. Results identified that contexts of disempowerment constraining resources and agency set the stage for initiating sex work, typically due to familial poverty, loss of a father or husband as a breadwinner, and lack of economic opportunities for women in India. Labor force participation in informal sectors was common, specifically in domestic, construction, and manufacturing work, but was typically insufficient to provide for families and also often contingent on sexual favors. The availability of an urban market for sex work served as a catalyst or resource, in conjunction with Durbar’s programmatic resources, for women to find and exercise agency and achieve financial and personal autonomy not possible in other work or as dependents on male partners. Resources lost in becoming a sex worker due to

stigma, discrimination, and rejection by family and communities were compensated for by achievements in gaining financial and social resources, personal autonomy and independence, and the ability to support children and extended family. Durbar’s programs and activities (e.g., savings and lending cooperative, community mobilization, advocacy) function as empowering resources that are tightly linked to sex workers’ agency, achievements, and sex work pathways.

**Keywords** Sex work · Trafficking · Empowerment · Structural interventions · Women · India

## Introduction

Scholars have long been interested in sex workers as subjects of research, mostly in relation to sexually transmitted infections (STI), HIV/AIDS, and human trafficking (Dewey & Zheng, 2013; Gupta, Raj, Decker, Reed, & Silverman, 2009). Much of the research is undergirded by victimization and abolitionist paradigms that describe sex workers as powerless and static victims in need of rescue and rehabilitation (Agustin, 2007;

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Overs & Hawkins, 2011), and sex work as inherently coercive and a form human trafficking (Bernstein, 2010; Cavaliere, 2011; Chapkis, 2013; Doezema, 2010; Weitzer, 2007). Although there are many studies on how sex workers enter or exit the profession, relatively few examine why sex workers choose to continue doing sex work (Bowen, Dzuwichu, Devine, Hocking, & Kermod, 2011; Hester, 2009; Ingabire et al., 2012) even when they have alternative livelihood opportunities (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2006; Jana, Dey, Reza-Paul, & Steen, 2013; Jayasree, 2004).

This article contributes to a small but growing number of studies investigating the complex interplay of structural factors, coercion, choice and empowerment that influence engagement in sex work (Augustin, 2007; Devine, Bowen, Dzuwichu, Rung-sung, & Kermod, 2010; Jana et al., 2013; Jayasree, 2004; Sandy, 2007). The interplay between structure (the broader institutional, social, and political context within which actors make choices) (Samman & Santos, 2009) and agency (the capacity to exercise purposeful choice) (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005) is emphasized in empowerment theory and practice (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Kabeer, 1999; Kar, Pascual, & Chickering, 1999; Samman & Santos, 2009; Zimmerman, 2000), which is increasingly being advocated for in the application to sex work contexts (Blanchard et al., 2013; Blankenship, West, Kershaw, & Biradavolu, 2008; Kerrigan, Fonner, Stromdahl, & Kennedy, 2013; Sanders, O'Neill, & Pitcher, 2009; Wirtz et al., 2012). Empowerment approaches shift focus away from sex workers as passive objects of research to an emphasis on structures and dynamics that allow sex workers to exercise agency in their lives, and the portrayal of their stories that the current article examines (Jordan, 2002). Empowerment approaches also acknowledge that agency may be constrained in some domains of life, but that sex workers are nonetheless capable of making strategic choices that benefit themselves and their families (Doezema, 1998; Sanders et al., 2009). By contrast, anti-sex work enforcement strategies advanced by abolitionists, for example, may exacerbate victimization and marginalized social and legal status of sex workers, diminish agency, and risk violation of human rights (Jordan, 2002; Lim, 1998; Shannon & Csete, 2010).

Intersecting with victimization, trafficking, and empowerment discourses are longstanding public health concerns regarding the role of sex workers in the spread of STIs historically and HIV/AIDS more recently (Baral et al., 2012; Decker, McCauley, Phuengsamran, Janyam, & Silverman, 2011; Shahmanesh, Patel, Mabey & Cowen, 2008; Silverman et al., 2007a; Wirtz et al., 2012). The disease control paradigm has drawn attention to the high burden of HIV/STIs among sex workers and helped to improve access to prevention and treatment services (Baral et al., 2012), but may also contribute to stigma and discrimination against sex workers as “vectors of disease” or “bridge populations” (Rotheram-Borus, Swendeman, & Flannery, 2009). The success of empowerment interventions for HIV/STI prevention has highlighted agency and negotiation capacities of

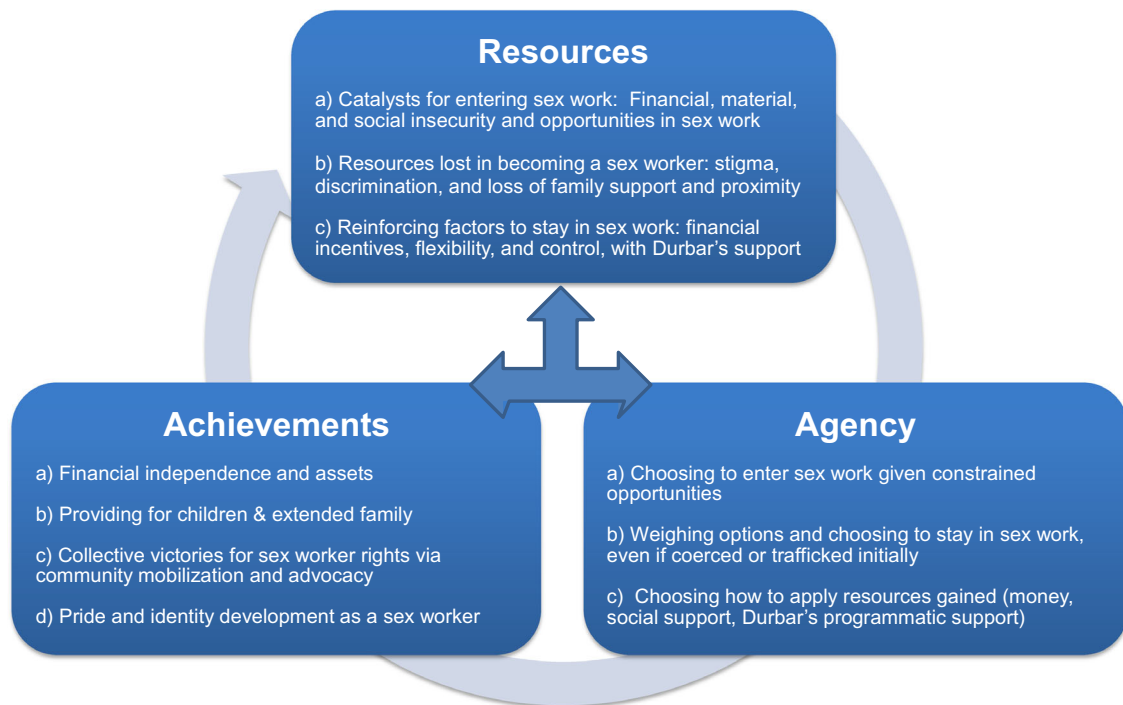
sex workers that are embedded in structural conditions and interventions that enable or constrain their agency (Basu et al., 2004; Kerrigan et al., 2013; Swendeman, Basu, Das, Jana, & Rotheram-Borus, 2009; Wirtz et al., 2012).

The reasons for entry into sex work in India are numerous and varied, but emphasized in recent research are financial motivations that are rooted in social and economic marginalization based on intersections of class, caste, color, gender, and poverty (Bowen et al., 2011; Devine et al., 2010; Saggurti, Sabarwal, Verma, Halli, & Jain, 2011). Other related factors include poor marital conditions, early marriage, low status of widows (Anjuli, 2011; Mohindra, Haddad, & Narayana, 2012), illness or death of relatives (Bowen et al., 2011), and occasionally trafficking by deception or coercion (Gupta et al., 2009; Saggurti et al., 2011). Binary conceptualizations of sex workers as either universally victimized or criminally deviant persist within research on sex work and obscure structural factors that shape and constrain agency of sex workers (Augustin, 2007; Bernstein, 2010; Kapur, 2002). For example, a recent survey study conducted in India asked sex workers to report only one “most important” reason for entering sex work (Saggurti et al., 2011), forcing respondents to choose between either coercive or voluntary explanations.

Research, policy, and programs on sex work will be well served in having a more nuanced understanding of sex workers’ lived experiences, particularly their pathways to initiating and continuing in sex work, and how empowerment interventions intersect with such pathways. In this article, we analyze narratives from participants in an HIV/STI prevention and community development organization for sex workers in Kolkata, West Bengal, India, known as the Sonagachi Project or Durbar ([www.durbar.org](http://www.durbar.org); Jana et al., 1998). Durbar bundles multi-level intervention and support strategies utilized by women’s empowerment programs globally (Kar et al., 1999), including essential health services, community mobilization, micro-banking, advocacy, and anti-trafficking efforts (Jana et al., 1998; Swendeman & Jana, 2013). We employ Kabeer’s (1999) theory of empowerment focused on constructs of resources, agency, and achievements to organize our analysis and highlight how sex work is described as empowering by the participants in this study, and particularly within the context of Durbar.

## Theoretical Framework

Kabeer’s model situates empowerment within *contexts of disempowerment* that set the stage for the action of resources, agency, and achievements. *Resources* are conceptualized as the *pre-conditions* and *catalysts* for exercising choice (agency) and refer to the material, instrumental, personal, and social capacities that people can draw upon to secure their economic livelihoods and general wellbeing (Kabeer, 2001). The concept of resources runs parallel to “structural factors” commonly cited in HIV/AIDS research (e.g., Blankenship et al., 2008; Evans, Jana, & Lambert, 2010) and “opportunity



**Fig. 1** Resources, agency, and achievements among sex workers in durbar intervention

structures” used in other empowerment scholarship (e.g., Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005). Intervention programs, such as Durbar, are also considered key resources that can support agency and achievements (Kabeer, 2001).

*Agency* refers to the ability of individuals and communities to recognize and act upon choices available to them, which are shaped and constrained by resources and opportunity structures, or structural factors (Kabeer, 1999). Agency may be conceptualized as the *process* by which resources are mobilized to gain achievements.

*Achievements* refer to goals attained that may, in turn, generate more resources and opportunities for exercising agency (Kabeer, 1999). Achievements are the *outcomes* of choices made and may refer to psychological, social, and material gains (Kabeer, 2001). Achievements are also the link in the positive feedback empowerment cycle described by Kabeer, in which each successful exercise of agency that results in achievements allows for the accumulation of resources and further enhances agency (see Fig. 1). This model informs our central arguments that pathways into sex work, and the choices made by sex workers after entry, are far more complex than “voluntary” or “forced” and that empowerment interventions like Durbar are key resources that can compensate for the states and contexts of disempowerment that influence engagement in sex work.

Changes in labor opportunities have been shown to be central to women’s empowerment in South Asia. Findings by Kabeer and colleagues in India (Kabeer, 2009, 2010) and Bangladesh (Kabeer, Mahmud, & Tasneem, 2011) demonstrate that a key

aspect of empowerment is the *kind* of paid work that women perform, not just whether or not women work. The most significant evidence of empowerment processes has been demonstrated by improvements in status for women who gain access to formal or semi-formal employment, leading to increases in women’s voice, agency, and power in the home and public spheres (Kabeer et al., 2011). However, formal employment opportunities for women in India are severely limited with 36 % labor participation overall but only 15 % employed in the formal sector (van Klaveren, Tijdens, Hughie-Williams, & Martin, 2010). Therefore, in addition to increasing women’s representation in formal sectors, a primary goal of empowerment programs has been to extend aspects of formal employment to work performed in the informal economy (Kabeer, 2012). This has been a central theme of Durbar’s work over the past 20 years, framing HIV/STI as occupational health hazards and mobilizing and advocating for workers rights for sex workers (Jana et al., 1998).

## Method

### Participants

Participants were recruited from Durbar in Kolkata and interviewed between 2006 and 2007. A large body of research has described Durbar’s development (e.g., Jana et al., 1998; Jana, Basu, Rotheram-Borus, & Newman, 2004; Swendeman & Jana, 2013), processes (Basu & Dutta, 2008; Cornish &

Campbell, 2009; Evans et al., 2010; Jana et al., 1998), and impacts (Basu et al., 2004; Ghose, Swendeman, George, & Chowdhury, 2008; Swendeman et al., 2009). Briefly, Durbar began in 1992 as a physician-led STI/HIV intervention program (SHIP or “Sonagachi Project”) in the Sonagachi brothel neighborhood in Kolkata. Over time, the program expanded and evolved into the sex worker-led organization now known as the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC), translated as the “unstoppable equal women’s committee.” Durbar is a statewide implementer of HIV/STI prevention and community development interventions, and a national and international model empowerment program with sex workers that also served as a model for the Gates Foundation funded scale-up of HIV prevention in India (Project Avahan; Piot, 2010). Durbar’s programs are sustained by government, development, and foundation grants, and by proceeds from its large savings and lending cooperative for sex workers (Swendeman & Jana, 2013).

Durbar’s broad aim is to transform the structural environment that perpetuates the marginalization of sex workers into an environment in which sex workers can thrive and access the same social and economic protections afforded to other members of the community (Jana et al., 1998). Durbar combines multi-level interventions for HIV/STI with many other sex worker community priorities. Services and activities include: neighborhood sexual health clinics; peer outreach, education, and condom social marketing via routine worksite and home visits; rights-based policy, stakeholder, and media advocacy; community organizing and leadership development; a robust savings and lending cooperative bank; self-regulatory anti-trafficking boards to monitor labor conditions in red-light areas; an ethical review board for research collaborations; and a variety of education, peer support, and mobilization programs for special interest groups in the community (e.g., children of sex workers, male partners, HIV+ sex workers; Swendeman & Jana, 2013). These strategies and their bundling in a community-led organization are exemplary of women’s empowerment programs globally as identified in a meta-analysis of over fifty organizations (Kar et al., 1999) and highlighted as a model intervention in an analysis of the global epidemic of HIV/AIDS among sex workers (Kerrigan et al., 2013).

## Procedure

In-depth, semi-structured interviews ( $n = 37$ ) were conducted with key informants purposively sampled from Durbar’s membership network to include sex workers with diverse experiences and levels of participation within the organization. Participants included 28 female sex workers, one hijra (male-to-female transgender) sex worker, four children of sex workers, four Durbar project staff members, and one babu (a live-in male

partner of a sex worker). Twenty-six sex workers also worked part-time for Durbar intervention projects previously or at time of interview, 17 as peer educators or outreach workers, eight as administrators or supervisors, and one as an executive officer in Durbar’s sex worker community association. Most participants lived and worked in one of nine main red-light areas in Kolkata: Sonagachi, Bowbazar, Kalighat, Kidderpore, Rambagan, Chetla, Lakhar Math, Hazra, and Sethbagan. Three sex workers lived outside the areas where they worked. Three “flying” sex workers worked on a roadside location adjacent to a Durbar outreach center that provides childcare for street-based sex workers. One sex worker also reported being a “mal-kin” (madam), which is not uncommon in this context as sex workers age and attract fewer clients (Swendeman & Jana, 2013).

UCLA and Durbar institutional review boards approved the study. Interviews were conducted in Bengali and Hindi by three of the authors in the sex workers’ brothel rooms where they lived and worked or in Durbar offices. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and translated into English, and coded in Dedoose version 4.5.91 (SocioCultural Research Consultants, 2013). The coding scheme was developed by the authors and revised over several iterations and confirmatory discussions. We focused on coded excerpts from narratives on life experiences leading up to initiating sex work, reasons for entering, leaving, and staying in sex work, marital/partner relationships, and work history.

We employed both grounded and theoretically driven approaches in the data collection and analysis. We tacitly used a grounded-theory approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Ryan & Bernard, 2003) during data collection and analysis in that we did not set out to collect narratives on pathways into sex work; rather, our aim was to collect data on participation and impacts of Durbar. Our semi-structured interviews began with an ice-breaker question, “How did you come to work in this place?,” which elicited unanticipated and detailed pathway narratives from nearly every sex worker interviewed. We also took a grounded approach to coding the pathway narratives and upon reviewing the results of this analysis, we found that they fit strongly within Kabeer’s (1999) model of empowerment.

Two prior analyses of the in-depth interview data used in the current study examined sex worker identity and community mobilization in Durbar in relation to interpersonal negotiations for condom use (Ghose et al., 2008), and the role of brothels in relation to housing security and HIV risks (Ghose, Swendeman, George, 2011). Here we focus on narratives of how and why participants come into and remain in sex work, highlighting the interplay between structure and agency in their lived experiences, and to provide further insights into potential impacts of Durbar and empowerment approaches with sex workers more generally. Results are presented that highlight the context of disempowerment, and resources, agency, and achievements in relation to sex work and Durbar.

## Results

### Contexts of Disempowerment: Poverty, Marital Relationships, and Work Experiences

Sex workers' narratives on their pathways to sex work were intertwined with themes of disempowerment that framed reasons for entering sex work in a context of constrained choices: economic insecurity and familial poverty, loss of a male breadwinner, limited alternative work opportunities that were often coercive, and occasionally also coercive or deceptive initiations into sex work. The majority of participants reported both economic and relationship factors as influencing their entry into sex work, which were salient whether they reported voluntary, coercive, or multiple reasons for initiating and staying in sex work. A mother of two children described how she had left her husband and willingly entered sex work. Her narrative describes a father's death, arranged marriage to an abusive husband, and a family history rife with economic struggles and efforts to find means of support (including a sister engaged in sex work):

My father died at a very tender age. We were very poor. My mother used to work as a domestic... she was offered a domestic job near Kolkata. My elder sister, me, and my younger brother came along with her... and my sister and I worked in a different house. Soon, I left that job to work in a house in the red light area. I used to run errands mainly. Money earned was very meager. My sister was in her puberty. She was wooed by boys and took up the job as a sex worker. As money earned by her was satisfactory, we left [domestic] work and started staying with her. I was also growing up. My sister married me off. My husband was an absolute rogue and a drunkard. He tried to sell me to a man. I was not happy there. He could not give me even the basic needs. He used to beat me up. The villagers conducted many *Panchayat* sittings [community meetings] but that did not help. My brother brought me to Kolkata from that hell and I got into this profession very willingly. (P33).

Unsuccessful relationships were often cited as reasons for entering sex work. More than half of the sex workers we interviewed described being widowed, abandoned, or abused by their husbands. Early and arranged marriages with older men also set the stage for union dissolutions. For example, a 32-year-old mother told us about rejection by her natal home and by her in-laws due to her widow status. As a result, she had to find a means of supporting herself and her child:

I was married at a very young age, and when I was 22 years old, my husband died. The child was eight months, and nobody at the in-laws' place looked happy with us. I was also not accepted well in my parents' place as I became a widow. Then, I came to Kolkata with a distant relation for

work. I was appointed somewhere but I could not work there as I had to do a lot of household work there. Then, I got acquainted with some friends and decided to join this profession [sex work]. (P14)

Other sex workers also reported how problems resulting from early marriages and dissolutions, and economic security, led to migration to search for work, including work in other labor sectors preceding sex work. One woman who had been engaged in sex work for 11 years told us:

I was married at the age of 10. I used to stay with my parents, but once my periods started, I began to stay with my husband. I conceived a child. When I was six months pregnant my husband left me and married elsewhere. My father tried to bring him back but I told him not to. We were very poor. I could not make both ends meet. I came to Kolkata and started working as a domestic help. But the payment was not satisfactory. The family members would starve me unto death so I left the job and went back to the village. But I could not stay there for long. Again, I came to Kolkata and worked as a domestic help in a house. I used to work in a plastic factory as well. They paid me Rs. 25/- [per day]. This would not suffice. One day I met one of my friends from my village... She told me that there was an excellent opportunity offering to pay me as much as Rs. 200/- [per day]. She brought me here, and I got into this profession. (P34)

Sex workers in this study often provided extensive detail about their former occupations and choosing sex worker over other opportunities. In particular, they described the ways in which sex work afforded substantially more opportunities for financial independence and autonomy to make decisions. Many sex workers clearly discussed considering multiple job options available and choosing to enter sex work due to the flexibility it provided them to meet their family's needs. A married woman who had been engaged in sex work for 15 years explained her motivations for entering the profession:

I required more money, as my husband was ill. With my earnings at that time, I could not afford it, so I chose this profession [sex work]. I thought I could earn more money from this profession. There was a fixed income from the tailoring and nursing home jobs, but here there is no fixed income. I can earn more from this profession. ... I had to spend more time at the tailoring and nursing home jobs, and therefore I could not take proper care of my husband who was sick. In this profession, there is no fixed time and so I work here after nursing my husband. (P01)

Choosing sex work over tailoring and nursing home jobs was a calculated decision for the woman based on more than just which job would provide the most income. Sex work provided her with flexibility to work and nurse her husband on

a schedule that worked best for her. She was also confident in her ability to maintain her job as a sex worker even if she had to take a day off to care for her husband. This level of flexibility was not possible in any of her previous jobs.

Many sex workers also described former labor experiences that included uncompensated sex work through coercion or sexual harassment. A divorced woman who was living with her new partner at the time of the interview told us about her economic struggles following her husband's abandonment of her and their child. She spoke of her experiences in several other jobs, including sexual transactions for work assignments but none of which provided sufficient income or autonomy to support herself or her child:

One day I left home and came to work as a maid. But the payment was not enough for me. I couldn't work in more than two houses. . . . Then I worked with laborers. But they wanted to have sex with us. One day a laborer took me with him. It was 10–12 years ago. He told me, "You don't have to do any work. You will just have to stay with me." I said, "If I don't work then how will I get paid? You will have to pay me even if you don't make me work because my purpose is to get paid." He said okay. He used to touch me. I was not comfortable with it. I told another laborer that he was doing such things. That man told me, ". . . if you let him sleep with you, then your work will be reserved." . . . I thought okay, I'll let him do it. . . . The laborer used to pay us for our work but there were no other payments for our sex with them. (P28)

Feeling disempowered and unable to control how employers sexually harassed and coerced her into providing sexual favors, this woman described choosing sex work over her previous job with construction laborers in order to have power over her sexual labor and decide the terms under which she would perform it.

In a few cases in our sample, women reported being duped and coerced into sex work, typically when seeking other economic opportunities. A woman who had been engaged in sex work for 39 years since age 15 described how her classmate tricked her into coming to a red-light district with the promise of a teaching job:

When I was in class 8, I was in love with one of my classmates. We were so poor, we could barely make ends meet. I wanted to marry him. Since I had a little education I told him that I wanted to get into the profession of teaching kids. Hearing this, he duped me and brought me here to Sonagachi. He sold me for Rs. (P06)

Other sex workers' narratives described being sold by family members or family friends into sex work, typically in the context of rural poverty, food insecurity, and large families. Notably, these sex workers also reported a range of economic and social factors as reasons for making a choice to stay in or

return to sex work despite their coercive initiations into sex work.

The narrative examples above illustrate that for many, entering or continuing to do sex work was not seen as an act of desperation but an act of agency, that is, a rational decision framed within the context of severely limited resources and opportunities. Most pathways into sex work involved multiple intersecting factors such as lack of financial resources and opportunities, limited social support, familial disruptions, and abusive marital or romantic relationships. In Kabeer's language, these states or contexts of disempowerment were the backgrounds against which sex workers in this study made choices to engage in sex work.

### Resources Lost and Gained in Sex Work: Stigma, Money, and Status

The narratives above also allude to material and social resources gained in doing sex work, but the sex workers also reported losses in social status and support from families and communities resulting from the stigma associated with sex work. These narratives typically included descriptions of exercising agency by engaging in sex work and using the money earned to achieve not only economic independence but also to support extended family to the point of elevating social status and compensating for the stigma of sex work.

In addition to the common loss of family and community acceptance, some sex workers were acutely aware of the potential losses in status extending to their children. Some women expressed fear of disclosing their sex worker identity to their children, in particular, worrying that they would not be able to marry their daughters off or would endanger their children if anyone else found out. As a daughter of a sex worker told us:

Many mothers have brought up their children away from them, especially girls, not boys. They have their daughters in boarding schools or at relative's places, so their daughters do not know the condition of their mothers because things have not been told to them. We want no mothers to hide anything from their children. So sometimes, they are not able to recognize their mother's profession. Maybe after a certain time, they accept that their mother's job is good, but they are not able to express it because of pressure from their in-laws. Some mothers are getting their daughters married, keeping their profession a secret, but in the long run when the in-laws come to know about it, they either torture the girl or burn her to death. (P25)

Although some women highlighted the detrimental effects of stigma limiting their daughters' future opportunities, others were more concerned about disclosing their status as a sex worker to their sons:



If my son ever inquires about my work, I will have no problems in answering his question. If he inquires about sex workers, I will tell him who sex workers are. Then I will ask him, “Will you be able to accept me in spite of knowing that I am a sex worker?” I will not feel hesitant to disclose my work to my girl, but since he is a boy, I will feel a little reluctant. (P49)

As a result of their fears of harming the marriage prospects of daughters or rejection by sons, many mothers chose to send their children to live far away, sacrificing their closeness and intimacy in favor of providing financial security and opportunities for education. Social stigma results in a consistent loss of social support and familial acceptance for sex workers.

Earning money through sex work allowed many women to provide for family members struggling with poverty, which improved their status and the opportunities for their children despite the stigma attached to sex work. In addition to the examples embedded in the narratives above, one sex worker stated succinctly:

With this money, I married off my sisters, bought plots (of land), and acquired a lot of assets. All my relatives know now. Earlier they were stigmatic, but now they are not. (P18)

This example illustrates the recurring theme that monetary gains and exercising agency in using money to gain achievements of property and supporting family eventually compensated for stigma associated with sex work. Another sex worker describes how earning money elevated her status within her home village, despite the stigmatization she faced from some community members:

I have rented a house, so I have a different position. Now, during the elections of the village, people come to my house and talk to me. In the masjid they need funds (I am a Muslim) but they said that prostitute’s money is not required there... At that time I didn’t have money but now when I have the money, if they come up to me, I ask them directly, “Will my money do?” If yes, then I can give. But I didn’t have the courage to say this earlier. But after working in Durbar I have this courage. I can say this now. Now that I have money, my dirtiness is washed away but when I had no money, I was nasty then. Then, I didn’t have anything to eat. Now, I have a house. I have bought land in two places. I have taken a loan. Earlier, my brother would say, “How would you get your daughter married?” I would say that, “If I have money, that will do, and if I don’t have money, then I can’t get her married. She will also be like me.” I would think of all these things. Now I have some peace and am independent. I can go wherever I want. My husband had only used me and had beaten me... Whatever I have, I have made by coming to this profession. I didn’t have anything. My husband had

died and I had two children. The girl is in class 5. My son does not stay with me. I have brought up my daughter and so I am quite happy now. (P26)

Not only has sex work provided this woman with higher socio-economic status, it has also helped her to gain psychological achievements in the form independence and peace of mind in her daily life. Leaving her male partners and earning a living on her own made her feel dignified and empowered when before she did not have the courage to stand up for herself against the cruel slurs of the villagers. Additionally, she notes that Durbar was instrumental in changing her sense of agency.

#### Durbar’s Resources Supporting Agency and Achievements

Most narratives describing agency and achievements were intertwined with attributions to Durbar’s support, which enhances the functional capabilities (resources and agency: Sen, 1985) of sex workers. Resources and achievements directly linked to Durbar include safe savings and lending in Durbar’s banking cooperative, a sense of collective identity and mutual support with other sex workers, and structural changes in relationships with local powerbrokers:

In the past, sex workers were attached to their madams and landlords, for which they had to obey the dictates from them. They had to shelve some money from their income to local parties and goons. Now after having DMSC (Durbar), sex workers started feeling much secured and DMSC is also looking after their problems, which gradually resulted in eradication of the peer problems. Now sex workers verify income daily with the madams, which was not [happening] in the past. With the help of this, now sex workers are able to buy shops, rent/buy property, save funds in the USHA [banking cooperative]. This helps them in taking loans for future investments. This is the way the *Adhiya* [debt bondage] system was abolished. (P13)

Durbar’s community mobilization, advocacy work, and banking cooperative are key resources credited with transforming economic relationships with powerbrokers. These transformations set the stage for all of the increases in agency and achievements illustrated in the narratives in this analysis. Economic empowerment through secure savings and lending in the Durbar banking cooperative enabled some sex workers to save enough money, without risk of theft or extortion, to invest in property and businesses outside of sex work. Structural changes are noted in reference to abolishing the *Adhiya* debt bondage system, in which new sex workers’ earnings are devoted to paying off a debt to a malkin (madam) for transport to the brothel, housing, clothing, and food. Social resources were built through an increased sense of solidarity among sex workers (i.e., the “peer problem”).



Learning to have pride in their profession and having solidarity with other sex workers were important personal and social resources to mobilize in the face of stigma from society. Several narratives highlight the hypocrisies of neighbors and family who stigmatize sex workers and yet benefit through coercive sexual favors and access to the financial resources of sex workers. Women often also expressed pride in their ability to support their families as sex workers. For example, as a widowed mother of two told us:

So I say that I am a sex worker. If I do not respect my profession, then how will others respect my profession? Now I can look after my brothers. I came here and built a house. We could stay in the same roof along with my parents. Now my parents have died but my brothers are with me. They have got married and have children. If I did not come to this profession, then nobody would know where we were. So I respect my profession. It's the goddess? Laxmi. It's true. (P52)

In another example, one mother described how solidarity with and social support from other sex workers motivated her to voice her grievances when neighbors and family harassed her. Although she had previously weathered insults from others in silence, after joining Durbar, she felt strong and supported to speak out:

Has the society given us anything? Nothing. We have found our own way out. So why would we be scared of society anymore. Now I can even say to the society and in our village. Even my brother doesn't like me. Maybe because of money they say good things about me in front of me. But they don't like us. He doesn't even introduce me to his circle of friends or relatives... People of the village would say that, "You do this and that kind of work." Many have seen me in Bowbazar and Sonagachi area and have objected to my work. I say, "It's ok that you have seen me there. So what? When I didn't have anything to eat day after day, where were you then? When my children didn't have anything to eat, where were you people then?" So I protested in this way. (P26)

Self-esteem and pride in their work proved to be crucial psychological resources for sex workers facing ridicule from others. This personal empowerment involved achieving a critical consciousness (Freire, 1973) regarding the contexts of disempowerment, stigma and discrimination, and lack of support from extended family and community (i.e., "society"). Against this background, sex workers framed their choices to engage in sex work and their empowerment in personal and collective protests, along with Durbar's support.

Exercising agency through the process of entering sex work resulted in a number of achievements reported by sex workers in this study, including financial independence, personal autonomy

and independence from male partners, and acquiring material assets and resources (such as a house or a loan). Many participants described that making decisions on their own, independent of spouses or partners, was crucial to achieving their personal goals. For example, one woman described her ability to save money after leaving her live-in partner:

After staying alone, I can save money. Previously, I was not able to do so. This is a development (since Durbar). If anybody, or any friends, asks us to go somewhere for some work or for watching a movie, I can go out on my own will. But if I had been staying with my "babu," I would have had to answer to him. But this is better. I eat when I want to, I go out for business when I want to, and work for Durbar when I want. This is a pleasure. I don't like "babus" anymore. I am doing well on my own. (P26)

Sex workers' narratives describing examples of enhanced agency are also corroborated by descriptions of Durbar's activities. A prior report from this data describes in detail the intersections of empowerment, agency, and condom use negotiation supported by Durbar (Ghose et al., 2008). Participants also discussed how they exercised agency to improve their treatment by clients more generally (i.e., beyond condom use) and reduce violence in red-light areas. For example, the sex workers who were members of Durbar decided to protest openly against clients who beat sex workers to make it clear that they would not tolerate abuse. One woman who previously experienced abuse from both her husband and her clients described the liberating experience of fighting back against violent clients by acting as a collective:

The didis [older women leaders] would tell us that if we join Durbar, then nobody could torture us. I have been beaten up several times. We stand on the roads and do bad work. That's ok, but if the boys insult and abuse us, we want to protest. Some would beat us, and some used to pour hot water on us. They have tortured us a lot. After joining Durbar, we all decided that if anyone comes and beats us, then we will also not let them go like that. We have come here for work. We have to earn to feed ourselves, then why should anyone beat us without any reason? Once, someone had come to beat us and then all of us held sticks. He got scared and went away and couldn't ever beat us again. (P26)

Here Durbar serves as a resource for community action. Many sex workers described how the existence of Durbar helped them to make choices to protect themselves and increase their visibility in society. For example, a hijra (traditional male-to-female transgender) sex worker decided to join Durbar after observing a collective action at the First International Conference for Sex Workers Rights in 2001. In spite of previous attempts to recruit hijra into Durbar, this sex worker had not

been swayed until seeing a powerful demonstration of what could be achieved through the collective voices of thousands of sex workers demanding recognition:

I did not find much interest because I had to look after my own business. But in 2001, when the first national conference with the sex workers was arranged, this gave us a platform. For example, earlier we did not know about condoms or the deadly disease called AIDS. We came to know through this conference. We got a chance to ventilate our grievances. There are many amongst us who carry on this profession in absolute secrecy. Even people back home do not know. They come, put on their make-up, get into business, and go home washing off the make-up. I was very surprised to see the large number of sex workers who participated and the way they interacted, and so, I made up my mind to join the project and the organization, and now I consider myself to be a very active member of the organization. I participated in each and every rally organized by DMSC (Durbar). (P7)

Such conferences and rallies organized by Durbar act as catalysts (resources) for sex workers to take action collectively to improve their status in the community. Although this sex worker had previously been aware of Durbar for many years before the conference, she had not decided to join until seeing the social benefits that being part of the organization could provide. Deciding to join Durbar and participate in rallies and events was a transformative choice to this sex worker who had been marginalized both within society at large and within the sex work community where female sex workers received the most visibility and support. This hijra sex worker became a significant actor in the process of change for sex workers in Kolkata.

Durbar's role in community mobilization and advocacy efforts to promote sex workers' rights also transformed relationships with other community stakeholders such as police and local politicians:

Now after working in Durbar, nobody can raise a finger at me. This is a change. Then, we didn't get any attention in the police stations or the jails, they hooted us out, they insulted us—this has changed. And the Panchayat members (community leaders) too had the same behavior for us; this has changed as well. Now we can mix properly with others, we can explain things to them. This has changed our lives. We used to be confined in a corner, as we were in this profession. But in Durbar, we have been able to go out and interact with others...Previously the "mastans" and "gundas" (local thugs) were very demanding, the policemen and the Panchayat members, they all exploited us. They said, "Randi, go away, we don't have any places for you sex workers." Whenever we went to lodge any complaint at the police station they shooed us

away like this [gestures]. Now, after joining the organization [Durbar], we can tackle these things well... Now when we go to the police station, [they] always offer us a seat, they talk to us, serve us tea. Then even the Panchayat members tell us, "Sit down didi, What do you want? Please come to us if you have any problem. We will help you." So now, everything is fine. (P29)

The programmatic resources provided by Durbar are credited with transforming relationships with local powerbrokers from exploitative norms to treating sex workers as citizens worthy of respect and support. These key structural changes empowered sex workers to achieve the personal, psychological, material, and social resources from sex work cited in their pathway narratives. At the same time, the narratives demonstrate how the agency of sex workers is structured in relation to others such as family, clients, neighbors, and other sex workers.

## Discussion

The sex workers' narratives in this study highlight the intersections of economic, social, and relationship factors that shape pathways into and remaining in sex work through increased resources, agency, and achievements. The narratives also demonstrate how agency and achievements are linked back to resources, particularly financial security and Durbar's programs. Following Kabeer's model, a base state of disempowerment formed the backdrop against which the women in this study considered their options and opportunities to support themselves and their families. Most sex workers reported family backgrounds characterized by severe poverty, which set the stage for familial disruptions, particularly the loss of a father or husband, resulting in even more severe insecurity and disempowerment, and influencing entry into sex work. The participants' initial disempowerment was strongly shaped by gender-based constraints such as reliance on male providers, domestic violence by husbands or in-laws, and the marginalization of widows, which exemplify the structural barriers that women face in achieving livelihoods independent of a husband or father in India (Anjuli, 2011; Bowen et al., 2011; Mohindra et al., 2012). Extended family, in-laws, and community either rejected the sex workers or offered little or no support. At times, assistance from neighbors or friends led to being duped into sex work or was tied to demands for sexual favors. Other research focusing on trafficking and sex workers in other regions in India identifies similar background factors influencing engagement in sex work (Bowen et al., 2011; Jayasree, 2004; Lim, 1998; Saggurti et al., 2011; Silverman et al., 2007b).

It is within this context of economic and social insecurity that we must also recognize that some sex workers report being

coerced into the profession. In India, this typically involves false offers of employment or romantic proposals (Gupta et al., 2009; Saggurti et al., 2011) and relatively fewer reports of being physically forced into sex work (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2006; Sandy, 2007). For example, in a random household survey of 200 sex workers in two Kolkata red-light neighborhoods, 16 % reported being “trafficked, duped, or coerced” into sex work, but also often in addition to economic reasons (manuscript in preparation). The sex workers in the current study who report being initially coerced also describe making a choice to return to or continue in sex work due to heightened opportunities for independence, personal and collective identity formation, and more flexibility and control over their work tasks compared to previous professions, and similar to other findings (Saggurti et al., 2011). Thus, reasons for remaining in sex work are closely tied with social and economic factors shaping entry into sex work.

Most sex workers in this study reported finding and exercising agency in willingly making a choice to either enter or remain in sex work in comparison to other work experiences, typically domestic, construction, or factory work, which is common in India (Sahni & Shankar, 2013). Such work experiences were also often exploitative and coercive, including expectations of sexual exchanges for work assignments, and did not provide enough money for these women to meet their own and their families’ needs. Sex workers in this and similar research report sex work as an opportunity to gain agency and control over their bodies and to receive compensation for the sexual labor they were already expected to perform (Agustin, 2007).

Sex workers had varied feelings about their decisions to enter sex work including frustration that they had to choose between poor job options, and blaming families and communities for their limited support or rejection. In the face of stigmatizing views, many of the women argued that their decision to engage in sex work to support their families granted them a measure of status and dignity. As Sandy (2007) noted in her study of Cambodian sex workers, claims of poverty “render women’s actions as logically (and morally) acceptable.” However, sex workers’ narratives in this study extended beyond moral acceptability of choices to expressing feelings of pride, autonomy, and critical consciousness supported by the social and economic resources provided by Durbar.

The analysis also reveals themes of resources lost in the process of becoming a sex worker, specifically increased stigma and further loss of family support, and social rejection. In some cases, concerns around stigma extending to their children led sex workers to arrange for their children to live in other places. These losses were typically counterbalanced by achievements that were highlighted as reasons for staying in sex work. Financial resources that allowed sex workers to earn a living and provide for extended family through remittances and purchases of property, farms, and businesses, were particularly transformative in elevating women’s status within their families and communities.

Financial independence functioned as a primary achievement for sex workers, which enabled achievements in more general autonomy and independence from men and families. These achievements were cited as sources of pride for sex workers who also typically cited Durbar’s support in making them possible.

Sex work in the context of Durbar’s resources and transformations of power relations is described as an empowering experience by the sex workers in this study. Many characteristics of formal employment, such as regularity of income and quality of working conditions, are achieved through semi-formal regulatory mechanisms implemented by Durbar (Jana et al., 2013). Additionally, the non-economic meaning and value of sex work promoted by Durbar in terms of personal pride, social status, and other indirect benefits are crucial to the transformative potential of empowering forms of work more generally (Kabeer et al., 2011).

There were several limitations in this study. First, study results may not reflect the experiences of male sex workers and transgender sex workers, since the majority of study participants were female sex workers. Second, since the participants were purposively recruited from Durbar in Kolkata, the results are not representative of all Indian sex workers. Participants likely have biases toward empowerment discourses due to participation in Durbar and their choices to remain in sex work. This likely shaped and informed their own understanding of their life course and their narratives on reasons for remaining in sex work, reflecting a critical consciousness that is germane to empowerment theory (Freire, 1973). By contrast, sex workers recruited from an organization focused on rescue and rehabilitation from trafficking or sex work, for example, might have different experiences or narrative frames, or might require more probing and critical reflection to elicit the complex explanations that were common and often well-developed among this study’s participants. Such development narratives are an important aspect of identity work, meaning making, and framing of experiences that can influence decision-making and are important aspects of the Durbar intervention (Ghose et al., 2008). Future studies should compare sex workers who have been exposed to empowerment interventions such as Durbar to those who haven’t been exposed, and to those who exited sex work, to compare how they conceptualize their pathways and potential links to their agency and achievements.

The results of this study suggest that the reason or mode of entry into sex work is not necessarily determinative of sex workers’ long-term status or empowerment. The assumption in much of the sex work literature that being trafficked into sex work leads to persistent powerlessness or vulnerability is reflected in studies examining associations between trafficking and HIV-related risk behaviors years after the trafficking experience (Decker et al., 2011; Silverman et al., 2007a, b). This study does not disconfirm vulnerabilities or disempowerment associated with coercive or traumatic experiences, but rather

points to the importance of socio-economic structural factors influencing pathways to sex work and the complementary observation that empowerment interventions, such as Durbar, might have greater effects in supporting or empowering those more vulnerable or disempowered (Swendeman et al., 2009). The results suggest a need to move away from polarizing discourse that constitutes all sex workers as trafficked victims or as voluntarily agents without understanding the complex interplay of constraints and choices (Sandy, 2007). Policy, programs, and research should focus on understanding contexts of disempowerment to design resource interventions that support the agency and achievements of sex workers and their families and communities.

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