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Abstract

High rates of empowerment, HIV-related knowledge, and condom use among sex workers in Sonagachi, India have been attributed to a community-led intervention called the Sonagachi HIV/AIDS Intervention Program (SHIP). In this research we examined the crucial role of brothels in the success of the intervention. In-depth, semistructured interviews were conducted with 55 participants of SHIP. The results indicate that brothels help sex workers reduce HIV risk by (a) serving as targeted sites for SHIP's HIV intervention efforts, (b) being operated by madams (women managers of brothels) who participate in SHIP's intervention efforts and promote healthy regimes, (c) structuring the economic transactions and sexual performances related to sex work, thus standardizing sex-related behavior, and (d) promoting community empowerment among brothel residents. Implications of these results are discussed for future efforts to replicate SHIP's success in other sex work communities.

Keywords

community-based programs; HIV/AIDS prevention; sexuality / sexual health; sex workers; women's health

With 2.3 million people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA), India has the second-largest population of HIV-infected people in the world today (Baingana, Thomas, & Comblain, 2004; World Bank, 2009). Sex work is one of the engines driving the spread of the epidemic, with scholars documenting an HIV prevalence as high as 50% in sex work communities in some cities (Gangakhedkar et al., 1997; National AIDS Control Organization [NACO], 2007). The sex worker community in Kolkata in the State of West Bengal has a much lower prevalence of HIV (7.6%), and appears to be significantly less vulnerable to HIV than sex worker populations in other parts of the country (NACO).¹ High rates of empowerment, HIV-related knowledge, and condom use among sex workers in Sonagachi, Kolkata's largest red-light area,² have been attributed to a community-led intervention called the Sonagachi HIV/AIDS Intervention Program (SHIP; Basu & Dutta, 2008; Basu et al., 2004; Swendeman, Basu, Das, Jana, & Rotheram-Borus, 2009). Utilizing peer educators engaged in HIV education and advocacy around sex work issues, SHIP has been hailed as a model intervention program by the World Health Organization (Wallerstein, 2006), and now serves as an exemplar of community-based HIV interventions with sex workers all over the world (Gupta, Parkhurst, Ogden, Aggleton, & Mahal, 2008). In India, the Parivartan Project, funded in part by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, is a major initiative which seeks to replicate the SHIP intervention in

other sex work communities in the country (CARE, 2009; Hanck, 2007).

One of the unique aspects of SHIP is that it has successfully incorporated the social milieu of brothels into its efforts to reduce HIV risk among sex workers. However, research on SHIP has seldom taken into account the fact that the intervention explicitly targeted brothels in the Sonagachi red-light district of Kolkata. As a consequence, the crucial role of brothels in the intervention's success has gone largely unexamined. The failure to document the salience of brothels in SHIP's intervention handicaps initiatives to replicate its success, and ignores the influence of brothels on the sexual risk environment of sex work. In this research we sought to address this lacuna in our understanding of SHIP's processes by examining the manner in which brothels acted as a catalyst for the intervention and helped in reducing risk for sex workers in Sonagachi.

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Background

Brothels as Mediators of HIV Risk

Scholars have noted that the negotiating power of sex workers is shaped by the social and institutional environment of brothels and is subject to the influence of actors such as brothel managers, residents, and clients (Basuki et al., 2002; Bhave et al., 1995; Cabezas, 2004; Joesoef et al., 2000). The evidence is mixed, however, on whether brothels exacerbate the risk of HIV infection or protect against it. In an ethnographic study of brothels conducted in China, Huang, Henderson, Pan, and Cohen (2004) found that in some cities, sex workers who were dependent on brothels for residence and employment were constantly monitored by brothel managers and had little power to negotiate condom use with clients. Moreover, scholars have found that normative gender roles are reinforced in the brothel environment, undermining sex workers' ability to engage in safe sex (Ragsdale, Anders, & Philippakos, 2007). Often, brothel managers and pimps, wary of losing clients who prefer not to use condoms, actively discourage sex workers from using them (Basuki et al.).

Other studies, however, have found that in certain circumstances, brothels can reduce the sexual risk and violence associated with sex work. Examining legal brothels in Nevada, Brents and Hausbeck (2005) found that the bureaucratization, public scrutiny, and official regulation associated with legalization reduced interpersonal violence and sexual risk among brothel residents. Similarly, Pyett and Warr (1997) found that compared to street sex workers, brothel-based sex workers in Canada were less exposed to coercion, violence, and a risky sexual environment. In Thailand, a 100% condom-use policy in brothels initiated by the government relied on brothel managers for its implementation (Ainsworth, Breyer, & Soucat, 2003). Similarly, in South Africa, a health intervention program sought the cooperation of the manager and staff of a hotel renting its rooms to sex workers to establish a clinic on the premises (Stadler & Delany, 2006).

Brothels and HIV Risk in India

In India, brothel-based work constitutes a significant portion of the sex trade industry (Asthana & Oostvogels, 1996; Buzdugan, Halli, & Cowan, 2009; NACO, 2007). In a sample of sex workers rescued from brothels by a nongovernmental organization in Mumbai, India, Silverman and colleagues (2006) found that duration of stay in brothels was significantly correlated with risk of getting infected with HIV. There is, however, some evidence to suggest that brothels are a protective factor for sex workers. In a recent study of 17,529 sex workers in South India, Dandona and colleagues (2005) found that

although almost half the sample reported not using condoms, brothel-based sex workers were significantly more likely to use protection.

Brothel sex workers in West Bengal (the state where this study was conducted) appear to be at a lower risk of HIV infection, and enjoy better work conditions compared to sex workers in other parts of the country. Whereas Silverman and colleagues (2006) found an HIV prevalence of 23% among rescued brothel sex workers in Mumbai, Sarkar and colleagues (2008) found that 12% of brothel-based sex workers in West Bengal were infected with the disease. Even among rescued sex workers in Mumbai, being from Bengal was protective against HIV infection (Silverman et al.). Moreover, the majority (68%) of Sarkar and colleagues' sample of brothel sex workers in Bengal reported engaging in sex work voluntarily.

Despite evidence of the salience of brothels in sex workers' transactional interactions, for the most part HIV interventions have not been designed to align with brothel culture to shape its sexual risk environment. The Sonagachi Project in Kolkata, Bengal, appears to be a notable exception to this trend, and has actively targeted brothels in its initiatives to collectivize sex workers.

The Sonagachi Project

Started in 1992 as a peer-run condom education program implemented by the Indian Government's All India Institute of Public Hygiene, SHIP became an independent, community-based HIV intervention program for sex workers operating in one of the largest red-light districts in India (Chakrabarty, 2004). Conceived initially as an educational intervention in which trained sex workers would go door to door to discuss HIV among brothels in Sonagachi, the program helped sex workers collectivize and unionize around a sex work identity, mobilize against harassment, and negotiate successfully with neighborhood organizations to reduce their exposure to violence and HIV risk (Basu & Dutta, 2008; Cornish & Ghosh, 2007; Ghose, Swendeman, George, & Chowdhury, 2008; Jana & Singh, 1995). The program has responded to the needs of sex workers in the community and now operates health care clinics providing services to 20,000 sex workers, a savings and banking cooperative that invests in community business enterprises, several schools for children of sex workers, and a *babu* (long-term customer) group that helps clients avoid being targeted by the police (Chakrabarty, 2004; Jana & Singh). These activities are now coordinated by the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (or Durbar, as it is better known), the sex workers' union that has emerged out of the initial peer-based HIV intervention project. SHIP remains the major HIV intervention program implemented by Durbar.

In longitudinal studies, scholars have found that compared to control groups, sex workers in SHIP reported significantly higher increases over time in levels of HIV knowledge, autonomy, financial security, and rates of condom use (Basu et al., 2004; Swendeman et al., 2009). The initiative has been referred to as a model community-led structural intervention that has made sex work safer by modifying the environment in which it is conducted (Blankenship, Friedman, Dworkin, & Mantell, 2006; Gupta et al., 2008). Although scholars have emphasized the importance of collective identity, community empowerment, and the establishment of safety norms around sex and sex work in documenting the success of SHIP (Ghose et al., 2008; Swendeman et al.; Jana & Singh, 1995), it is unclear how these collective processes and new norms emerge from the everyday lived experience of SHIP's participants. In this research we examined the living and working conditions of brothels involved in SHIP to address this gap in our understanding, and to foreground the manner in which brothels structure the risk environment for sex workers in Sonagachi.

Methods

Sample

In-depth, semistructured interviews were conducted with 55 participants of SHIP. We used theoretical sampling methods, whereby sampling is guided by theoretically relevant constructs (Draucker, Martsolf, Ross, & Rusk, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Given the fact that we were interested in exploring the manner in which the intervention utilized the living and working conditions of brothels, purposive sampling was initially utilized to select key informants who had been long-standing brothel-based SHIP participants, and were identified by staff members as people who were knowledgeable about SHIP's history and its activities. Participants were selected from SHIP's membership list. In the initial wave of sampling, 37 brothel-based sex workers were selected for interviews, 10 of whom belonged to the original group of peer educators who had initiated the SHIP intervention. The rest of this sample had been involved in SHIP for a minimum of 5 years. The brothels that these women operated in were closely aligned with SHIP, participated in its activities, and belonged to Durbar, the sex workers' union.

Analysis of the interviews with the initial sample identified the possible relevance of the differences in street and brothel-based sex work conditions. Given that previous research has identified brothel-based and street sex work as the predominant modes of sex work in Sonagachi (Chakrabarty, 2004), we decided to include street sex workers in our sample to explore the differences in the two modes of work. Moreover, in the second

wave of sampling, we sought to recruit brothel madams (women brothel managers) involved in SHIP, because preliminary analyses highlighted their salience to the risk environment of brothels. With SHIP staff members once again assisting in identifying potential participants from SHIP's membership rolls, in the second wave of sampling we recruited 9 madams and 9 street sex workers into the study.

The final sample included 37 brothel-based women sex workers, 9 madams, and 9 street-based sex workers, 7 of whom were women and 2 of whom identified as male-to-female transgendered sex workers.³ Interviews were conducted in a secure room in SHIP's offices. Institutional review board clearance was obtained from Durbar and the relevant U.S. universities.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews were conducted in Bengali and Hindi (the languages spoken by sex workers in Sonagachi) from 2006 through 2008, by a team of three research scientists that included the first author (Ghose). In the interviews we explored participants' living and working conditions, the manner in which brothels and street sex work environments shaped their sexual practices with customers, and the manner in which their involvement with SHIP shaped their working and living conditions as well as their sexual behaviors. Interviews were translated into English and transcribed for textual analysis. QSR N6 (2007) computer software was used to analyze the data. A grounded theory approach was utilized to code the interviews, whereby concepts emerged from the data and informed the coding of subsequent interviews (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Six primary codes were identified by the lead author (Ghose) and verified by the other authors. Fourteen axial codes were then identified by each of the authors and verified by the team. To fulfill the criteria of fit and understanding (Straus & Corbin, 1998), abductive reasoning and theory-matching methods were utilized to generate theoretical concepts, verify them through matching, and link with existing theoretical concepts for interpretive purposes when emergent codes aligned with them (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Data collection was terminated when theoretical saturation was reached; i.e., when new analytical concepts ceased to emerge from interviews and the codebook was not being changed appreciably (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

Results

Brothel-Based Sex Work in Sonagachi

About 85% of sex workers in Sonagachi operate out of brothels, and 13% operate as street sex workers who

solicit openly on the streets and engage in sex at a site of the customer's choice (Chakrabarty, 2004). Although brothels in Sonagachi range from large, multistory establishments to small hovels housing about three or four sex workers, the brothel-based sex workers in this study lived with about seven other women, on average. Most (81%) lived with one child, and about half lived with babus (long-term customers). Sex workers usually lived with their families in one room. Much of the room was usually taken up by a large bed, which doubled as the site of business, as well as the center of family interaction. Family meals were usually eaten while seated on the bed, which also served as a sofa. When the worker engaged a customer in a session, the babu and children usually moved to another room, or gathered in front of the brothel entrance. Although cramped for space, brothels provided shelter, safety, and a sense of kinship for sex workers and their families. One worker explained:

This is my home—this bed and this chair. At least I'm not like so many of the sisters out there—having sex wherever the customer takes them, living on the street. What we have is little, but it is ours. My children get to play with the others in this brothel. My babu is right here with me. I know all the other workers here—we are all involved with SHIP. It's a little family.

Contrasting her current living conditions to those of brothels not involved in SHIP, where she had lived earlier, another worker stated,

It is very, very different here. . . . Before Durbar, I was afraid to step out of my room, scared to challenge my madam. Sometimes I would get beaten up and locked in for days. I finally ran away, and in this brothel, when I, my fellow brothel sisters and the madam joined Durbar and started getting involved with the HIV project, everything changed. Now my madam looks after me, I have friends here. This is more of a home, while those other brothels were hell. Yes, we still yell at each other at times—we have all the usual struggles between residents. But that's what happens in any family. We work it out as sisters.

The sense of ownership, kinship, and reconfigured relationships that joining SHIP appears to engender suggests the kind of healthy processes that are at play in these SHIP-aligned brothels, and will be expanded on further in the next sections of this article. It is important to note that although most participants acknowledged that their current living conditions were less than ideal, they also repeatedly stated that living and working conditions were

vastly improved from the times prior to their involvement in SHIP.

Brothels as Targeted Intervention Sites

Because private homes for sex workers and their families were also sites of transactional sex, brothels operated simultaneously as public and private spaces for sex workers. Brothel entrances were popular hangouts for workers, who either spent time among themselves or attempted to divert pavement traffic into their rooms. Brothels were explicitly targeted by peer educators in the early stages of the Sonagachi Project. For an intervention based on a door-to-door educational campaign, the public access to brothels constituted easier targets compared to other private residences in the neighborhood. As sex workers themselves, SHIP's peer educators were aware of the social codes organizing the public gatherings in front of brothel entrances. One pioneering peer educator noted,

When the first government HIV educators went up to brothels, they were shooed away. They were not customers, so they were treated as a nuisance. We, however, knew how to blend in with the crowd. We used to say, "Sit, sit, let's have some tea." We'd buy people some tea from the tea boy, sip it in the bhaad.⁴ Some gossip would be exchanged, some complaints. "Do you know that mastaan⁵ can't last five minutes, for all his big words?" Stuff like this. Then we'd gradually bring up HIV, talk about how we have joined SHIP as educators, talk about condoms. The didis⁶ would listen to us. We were part of the adda⁷ scene. . . . We would gossip about all those men who didn't want to use condoms—how they just didn't understand what it was to protect one's family. This is how we would slip in talk about condoms.

As is evident from this passage, the theme of which was repeated by several early SHIP peer educators, the Bengali tradition of adda over tea was instrumental in facilitating their entre into sex worker gatherings. Whereas scholars have noted that engaging in adda is usually a male activity in middle-class Bengali spheres (Chakrabarty, 2000), it is interesting to note that the private/public space created by brothels allowed tea and adda to be inscribed into the social settings inhabited by sex workers. Tethered to the acknowledged (and therefore unhindered) public activity of targeting customers from their brothel doorsteps, sex workers in Sonagachi were able to create a public space infused with the social codes of adda. This, in turn, allowed educators versed in these social codes to infiltrate these spaces and recruit sex workers into the intervention. Embedded in "adda-gossip" modes

conducted on brothel doorsteps, discussion of condoms and HIV became extensions of feminist meaning-making discursive exercises. Mirroring the exchanges described by the worker in the passage above, where empathy was expressed toward fellow sex workers and antipathy toward men customers and/or pimps, SHIP staff would initiate conversations about condoms in ways that engendered solidarity among workers who sought to protect themselves, while simultaneously indicting as outsiders customers and pimps who resisted their use (Ghose et al., 2008).

Several SHIP activities similarly targeted brothels as the sites of engagement in the initiative to create a sex worker collective. SHIP staff actively recruited madams into the intervention. As opinion leaders, especially in their brothels, madams played a vital role in ensuring safety and reducing HIV-related risk, as will be enunciated later in the article. Brothels involved in SHIP were singled out during recruitment drives for collective action, and constituted ideal sites for mobilization. Explaining SHIP's tactics to recruit sex workers for these actions, one participant said,

We now know which brothels to go to in order to get together sex workers quickly when the need arises. We go door to door to these brothels when word comes in that a sex worker has been arrested and we need to gherao⁸ the police station, or organize a rally to protest harassment. Last year, we worked on hundreds of brothels in order to organize thousands of sex workers in a march on Parliament in Delhi, demanding that they decriminalize sex work. It took a lot of explaining and planning, but we were able to pull it off.

Brothels thus constituted a mobilizational context that allowed flexibility in recruitment strategies. Impromptu protests relied on the participation of brothels that were allied to the program. Simultaneously, brothels were targeted for long-term mobilization campaigns such as the march on Parliament.

Brothels also became sites of recruitment for other SHIP program activities. Peer educators for the program were drawn from brothels that were particularly receptive to the HIV educational campaign. Staff members of SHIP's Usha banking cooperative regularly toured the brothels to collect deposits from sex workers to build individual savings accounts for them. One staff member explained:

In the chaos of everyday living, sex workers find it difficult to save money. We know our members' brothels—where they live and work. We do a daily round of the brothels—and say, “Didi, what portion

of your earnings do you want to put in your savings account today?” This way, even if they give 1 rupee because they have only earned 20 rupees that day, at least they are saving every day. This has become a daily practice for us.

Brothels were thus sites that could be conveniently targeted by an intervention like SHIP to engage, educate, recruit, and mobilize sex workers. They helped to amplify the reach of the program, providing it with an audience for its activities and a pool of potential participants. Once brothels were successfully recruited into SHIP's activities they could be transformed into sex work venues that ultimately reduced HIV risk for its residents. Our results indicate that brothels targeted by the intervention influenced the HIV risk environment through (a) the incentivization of brothel madams, (b) the structuration of the sex work environment, and (c) the creation of empowerment networks.

Incentivizing Brothel Madams

Madams were usually older women who had engaged in sex work for a considerable amount of time and commanded respect in the sex work community because of their experience, position, and connections with other brokers in the sex work community. Madams who were targeted by the intervention gained much of their knowledge about HIV from the intervention. One madam noted,

I don't know about others, but SHIP has definitely been good for me. For example, medications, HIV—earlier we didn't even know about them. SHIP has taught us the value of the condom. One does not always know what infections or diseases we might have inside our bodies. For example, you look fine from outside but I don't know what may be wrong inside your body. This culture of knowing has definitely helped in a big way.

As opinion leaders in the brothels, madams were important nodes of information transmission and crucial to the implementation of safety practices in the brothels. Emphasizing her role in the intervention's efforts, one madam who was also a SHIP participant said,

I explain to the girls that they should use condoms. I emphasize the fact that these people from SHIP are giving us knowledge so that our lives are safe, and we can prevent ourselves from acquiring any such infection or disease.

Madams, however, were more than mere opinion leaders in a brothel. The meshing of transactional and residential space in the brothel required them to wear

several hats. As managers of a business, madams needed to ensure that brothels were safe and viable sites of trade. Simultaneously, as monitors of a living space, madams often inhabited a role that was similar to the head of a family. SHIP had formulated its message to target this multifaceted role of the madam, actively recruiting them by emphasizing the necessity of health and safety for the sustainability of the trade, as well as for the maintenance of the family. Madams who were Durbar members echoed this orientation, folding notions of business viability into concerns of health safety. One madam stated,

It is important for my girls to enjoy good health. If she is sick then I need to ensure that she gets medical attention either in our own clinic or outside. If she needs some money then I have to help her and ensure that she is getting proper remuneration. . . . I charge her room rent and that is to my benefit; she is getting a room and health care—that is to her benefit.

Simultaneously, the same madam invoked her responsibility as a tutor, mentor, and protector of the women in her brothel:

I need to train her to become a madam, in how to avoid getting involved with bad elements. There are some babus who want to live off the girl's earnings, take it all to pay for their own families, but that is to be avoided. There should not be any torture or extortion. I will look after her as my own child, as I am also earning through her. I will take care of her both mentally and physically.

In the passage above, the madam's demarcation of women sex workers from exploitive men clients bore the stamp of a collective identity. The strong sense of opposition expressed toward "bad elements" and coercive men marked them as agents of risk for her wards. Simultaneously, the strong familial responsibility she felt for her wards established her kinship with them. However, this narrative of familial connection was laced with the recognition that the ties that bound her family together were not biological: she took care of her wards because she was also financially dependent on them. The sense of familial kinship was thus based on the professional relationship that bound madam to sex worker. This complicated construction of family, where familial and professional roles constituted each other, was enunciated further by another madam:

They are like my sons, they are generating income for me and it is my responsibility to look after them. If I don't look after them, will they stay here?

They will not have any sense of attachment. They will wonder what the point is in staying with a madam who doesn't care for them or look after them in their time of need.

In traditional Indian families, providing for sons is considered to be a means toward insuring the future, because sons look after parents when they become adults. By comparing her relationship with her women wards to that between sons and their parents, where instrumental needs were braided into familial ties, the madam recognized that the brothel family reconstituted gender roles: her "sons" were her women wards, and therefore needed to be prioritized and taken care of to insure her future.

Attempts to include madams in an initiative such as SHIP were fraught with risk given the history of exploitation of sex workers by their madams. The New Trade Union Initiative, a national federation of trade unions, has expressed its opposition to Durbar's inclusion of management in its union, noting that by extracting the surplus generated by sex workers without working themselves, madams were exploitive agents rather than union-eligible workers (Sukthakar, in press). Durbar has traditionally responded to such critiques by casting the larger societal forces that marginalize sex work as the true enemy, attempting in the process to enunciate the possibilities of collectivizing with madams and customers against such coercive elements (Ghose, in press; Jana & Singh, 1995). Durbar's stance on the subject has been supported by recent scholarship that has documented the manner in which madams have worked with SHIP and Durbar to fight against police coercion, reduce HIV risk behavior among their wards, and restrict their cut of sex workers' earnings to an appropriate fixed rate (Cornish & Ghosh, 2007; Jana & Singh). Although these findings seem to lend credibility to the above passages in which madams described the manner in which they ensured the safety of their wards, of particular interest was the motivation that drove them to do so: they appear to have assumed the role of guardians for sex workers in their brothels. This process replaced the routinized and coercive exploitation that was generally associated with madams in brothels, with a relatively benign stewardship which ensured that SHIP's messages were implemented in the brothels they managed.

Structuring the Sex Work Environment

The chaotic environment of street sex work. Much of the coercion and violence that sex workers were subjected to were instigated by the variability in the negotiating environment of sex work. Street, or "flying" sex workers, as they are known in Sonagachi, were forced to constantly haggle with customers and pimps, leaving them especially vulnerable. One flying sex worker stated, "Lots of times

customers really give us a lot of trouble. They first want to have the session and then pay money, and they refuse to use condoms. And we can't exactly fight them." Moreover, given that customers often paid more for having sex without condoms, engagement in safe sex practices was often severely compromised by financial inducements. A flying sex worker noted, "There is no real rule or standard practice out on the streets. We negotiate every time with customers. We work with a pimp from time to time. Sometimes they ask us to work without protection."

Often, economic transactions became part of coercive treatment practices on the part of police, pimps, and local gang leaders. One male-to-female transgendered sex worker recalled,

We faced many problems as we stood on the streets; mainly from the police and the local goons. Police used to dump us in the vans, ask for Rs. 60,⁹ and used to have sex with us. They used to take money as well as service. The local goons used to charge money for their wine. They used to say, "You people stand here and earn well, so you have to give something to us." If we said no, they would beat us up. See here, they once stabbed my hand with a knife [showing a large scar on her hand].

Visibility, especially the kind garnered by transgendered sex workers, became a major risk factor for flying sex workers, exposing them to violence, rape, and arrest.

Brothels as structuration devices. In sharp contrast to this transactional milieu marked by fluctuating values, expectation, and sexual practices, brothels that were targeted by SHIP provided a stable and fixed menu of prices. Organizational theorists have noted that institutional norms, standards, and expectations structure processes in a given organizational field (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Cooney, 2007; Orlikowski, 2000). Applying Anthony Giddens' (1984) concept of structuration to organizational fields, these scholars note that people, ideologies, and material devices help to structure organizational processes, and are in turn molded by these processes. In the organizational field of sex work in Sonagachi, brothels that were targeted by SHIP operated as structuration devices, standardizing transactional and sexual practices.

Structuration of economic processes. A classification system has emerged among most of the brothels in Sonagachi, many of which started out as sites for SHIP activities. Sex workers in category-C brothels charge under Rs. 80 (about U.S. \$2) for a session, category-B sex workers charge between Rs. 80 and Rs. 200, and category-A sex workers charge over Rs. 200. Older and less-desired sex workers generally populate the lower paid categories, whereas the most popular sex workers belong to the highest paid category. Customers are made aware of the price

range at the entrance of a brothel. Some brothels house sex workers across categories, in which case the brothel madam informs customers about the pricing. The preset pricing structure in brothels has taken the arbitrary bargaining out of the valuation process that is at the heart of the sex trade industry, limiting opportunities for conflict, coercion, and violence. Moreover, most SHIP-associated brothels are known to advocate safe sex practices. Customers know this going in, and are less likely to resist using condoms.

An important way in which SHIP has helped to standardize the financial transactions endemic to the sex work industry is by working with madams to set a fixed fee rate (about 50%) for their cut of the earnings of sex workers who live and work in their brothels. This has transformed the relationship between madams and sex workers: Whereas previously madams exerted totalitarian control over sex workers and would take almost all their earnings, the relationship between the two parties is more egalitarian now, and in many cases has become a mutually beneficial business partnership. Commenting on this change, one sex worker noted,

Before SHIP, the madams would extort money from us. We had to give up all our earnings except what we needed to survive day to day. After becoming SHIP members, things have changed a lot. If they take more than is due, we can now complain to SHIP and they talk to the Madam. They even come around periodically to make sure we are not overpaying the Madam. My madam is also part of SHIP—she is very supportive.

The economic structure of SHIP's brothels is significantly different from the exploitive environment of brothels described in previous research (Huang et al., 2004; Ragsdale et al., 2007), or even those in Sonagachi that are not involved in SHIP (Chakrabarty, 2004), where sex workers become economic slaves dependent on brothel managers for their sustenance. The contrast underlines the importance of the economic structuration that SHIP has engendered within its brothels.

Structuration of the sexual environment. Street sex work corners were contested sites; flying sex workers in Sonagachi often competed for the same passing pedestrians and had tenuous control over their physical territory. The flying sex workers we interviewed repeatedly noted the impossibility of imposing any standards of safe sexual practice on customers in an environment where a man could just move on to the next sex worker if he didn't care for the negotiated terms. Moreover, the visibility that came with working on the streets exposed sex workers to threats from various sources. Several flying workers noted the vulnerability associated with their visibility:

We get into trouble a lot. Sometimes when we stand in certain areas, the neighborhood people, including the mastaans bully us and shoo us away. Sometimes they hit us, but we keep quiet because we have to earn money. What to do? We have no choice.

One of the main problems we face is that since we operate out on the roads, the police sometimes come by and forcibly pick us up and take us away to the station. . . . When all the auto drivers come and crowd here, the roads get jammed . . . sex workers who stand on the Ultadanga bridge will sometimes get into a drunken state. That is when people protest.

The lack of access to a stable and private space left flying sex workers at a distinct disadvantage when negotiating for safety in their sexual transactions. Brothels that were targeted by SHIP addressed this issue by creating a safe sexual space for sex workers and their customers. We found that the sexual environment of these brothels was structured through norming processes and through the creation of safe sexual performative spaces.

Norming. Norms surrounding sex and sex work, drawn from SHIP's principles, took root in brothels, creating a safe environment for sex workers and their customers. Brothel madams involved in SHIP were important facilitators in the norming process, ensuring that safety rules were not violated by customers. Calling attention to her role as the guardian of her wards, one madam stated,

I have to ensure that he [the customer] is using a condom, or making payment properly or keeping to the agreed-upon time with her. If the girl is forced to do anything, I have to intervene. I have to make sure that she is not forced to have the types of sex she is not capable of having or is unwilling to have.

Another madam recalled the time she had to take action against an errant customer:

The customer was so drunk and high once that he couldn't control himself or his movements. He started beating and abusing one of the girls. It was very late in the night, so we called our building guard and had him kicked out.

Customers were not the only ones required to follow house rules. Norms that emerged out of interactions between house residents delineated a code of conduct for sex workers themselves. One brothel resident described the way these rules were reinforced in conversation with other residents:

We discuss complaints by customers. We tell the girls, don't harass the customer. We explain that if this customer goes away, then others won't come to this brothel. Because of you, five other girls will have to lose their means of livelihood.

Rules and norms of safe sexual behavior were strictly enforced, not just by madams, but also by brothel residents themselves, confident in the knowledge that they would have the backing of their madam. In response to a question about how she dealt with noncompliant customers, one participant said, "No, I will never have sex without a condom. Not worth it. I kick them out, and if they don't go, I call for help." This enhanced sense of empowerment helped participants to engage in what Moji and colleagues (2009) referred to as a positive reappraisal of their living and working space, thus orienting themselves to the advantages of operating in a brothel:

I may not have much power out there, but this here [indicating her room]—this is mine. Follow my rules, or else, out!

This is our home, our brothel, our work. No more pimps, no more bad customers. The madam also belongs to Durbar [SHIP]. I can force people to leave if say, I feel unsafe, or some other sex worker here, or even my children, feel threatened.

The sense of ownership of their private space that allowed these participants to drive customers out of their brothels was integral to sex workers' capacity to create safe sexual norms for themselves. These norms were so explicitly negotiated with customers that regular clients who adhered to them were incorporated into the norming process by becoming guardians of house rules themselves. Several sex workers in these brothels talked about trusting their long-term customers to impose house rules on newer customers. One worker recalled a particularly violent encounter with a drunk customer:

I thought this customer was going to tear me apart, he was so drunk. There was a babu of the didi [elder sister] in the next room. He came out since he couldn't stand it any longer. He confronted the drunk and sent him away.

Another worker acknowledged the manner in which men customers help to create a safe environment within brothels:

If say at night, something happens to you. Say you have to be hospitalized suddenly, or you need help,

the women can provide a little help but the men can help much more—with customers, with the police if necessary. Having them around the brothel is a great help.

Brothels thus translated the educational messages of the SHIP intervention into norms and rules that reduced HIV risk for residents.

Creating a safe sexual performance space. Although the structured economic and sexual environments of brothels increased condom use and safe sex practices, they also allowed sex workers to seamlessly integrate condoms into the session by providing a safe sexual performative space for them. Condoms were transformed from medical devices into tools of the sexual trade. One worker noted,

I take him to my room, dance for him, get him aroused. Then I put on the condom. This way, wearing the condom is pleasurable . . . he does not think about HIV when I'm putting it on. He ends up enjoying it.

Similarly, Ghose and colleagues (2008) described the manner in which SHIP participants engage in controlled drinking with clients to undermine their resistance to condoms, while simultaneously delaying negotiation of condom use until they are suitably aroused. It is important to note that such sexual performances can only take place in the safety of the brothel. The private sphere of the room referred to by the sex worker in the passage above allowed her the time, space, and safety to engage in a sexual performance culminating in the use of condoms. Without control of this private space, alcohol use and delayed negotiation of condom use might well become the risk factors that scholars have documented them to be in other contexts. Moreover, brothels provided the privacy that sex workers sometimes required when protecting themselves without the knowledge of the customer. One worker stated,

When we want to make customers put on the condom but he refuses or he won't sit down, then we tell them to throw away the condom. After a bit, we go to the bathroom and take out the female condom from the drawer and wear it and come out. The customer doesn't find out and I get to keep him as well.

Brothels thus created a private performance space that enhanced sex workers' control over sexual encounters with their customers. The sense of personal empowerment that SHIP sought to inculcate in sex workers was deployed successfully within the safe zone of brothels.

The processes described in amplifying the concept of structuration align with the manner in which scholars

have extended it to analyze other industries (Cooney, 2007, Orlikowski, 2000). Norms, rules, and rituals that emerge within the field become institutionalized and in turn, structure processes in the field. In our research we found that brothels provided the institutional context for structuration forces that ultimately shaped the practices of residents. The logic of structuration holds out the possibility that when an intervention like SHIP successfully injects healthy norms and practices into a brothel system, the changes might endure beyond the first group of participants if they are inscribed into the institutional processes of the brothel itself.

Developing Community Empowerment in Brothels

In describing the success of SHIP, scholars have noted a significant increase in community empowerment that leads to a decrease in risky sexual practices among participants (Ghose et al., 2008; Swendeman et al., 2009). However, scholars have ignored the critical role of brothels in the inculcation of this sense of community. Thrown together in the close confines of the brothel living space, SHIP participants learned to treat fellow residents as part of an extended family. One participant noted,

My friends here in Sonagachi are the other sex workers who are the tenants here [in the brothel]. We stay in the same house and they are like my sisters. They are more than ordinary relatives; they are my friends. They are my mother, my father, my siblings, they are everything to me.

It is the support that she found among fellow tenants that led the participant quoted above to define fellow brothel residents as more than "ordinary relatives." Wong, Sands, and Solomon (2010) noted that community identity springs from shared experiences of stigma and discrimination. Shedding light on this process, a sex worker traced the pathway to empowerment by stating,

Yes, we help each other in the brothel. The atrocities and the harassment inflicted on us within the locality . . . the thugs who would harass us and would hit the young girls . . . sometimes the madam would not give some of the girls their due share of the money. If any such beating and harassing happens, then we stand up for each other, we support each other and we put a stop to it.

Brothels served the important function of supplying people with hastily organized collective actions in response to crises. A sex worker noted,

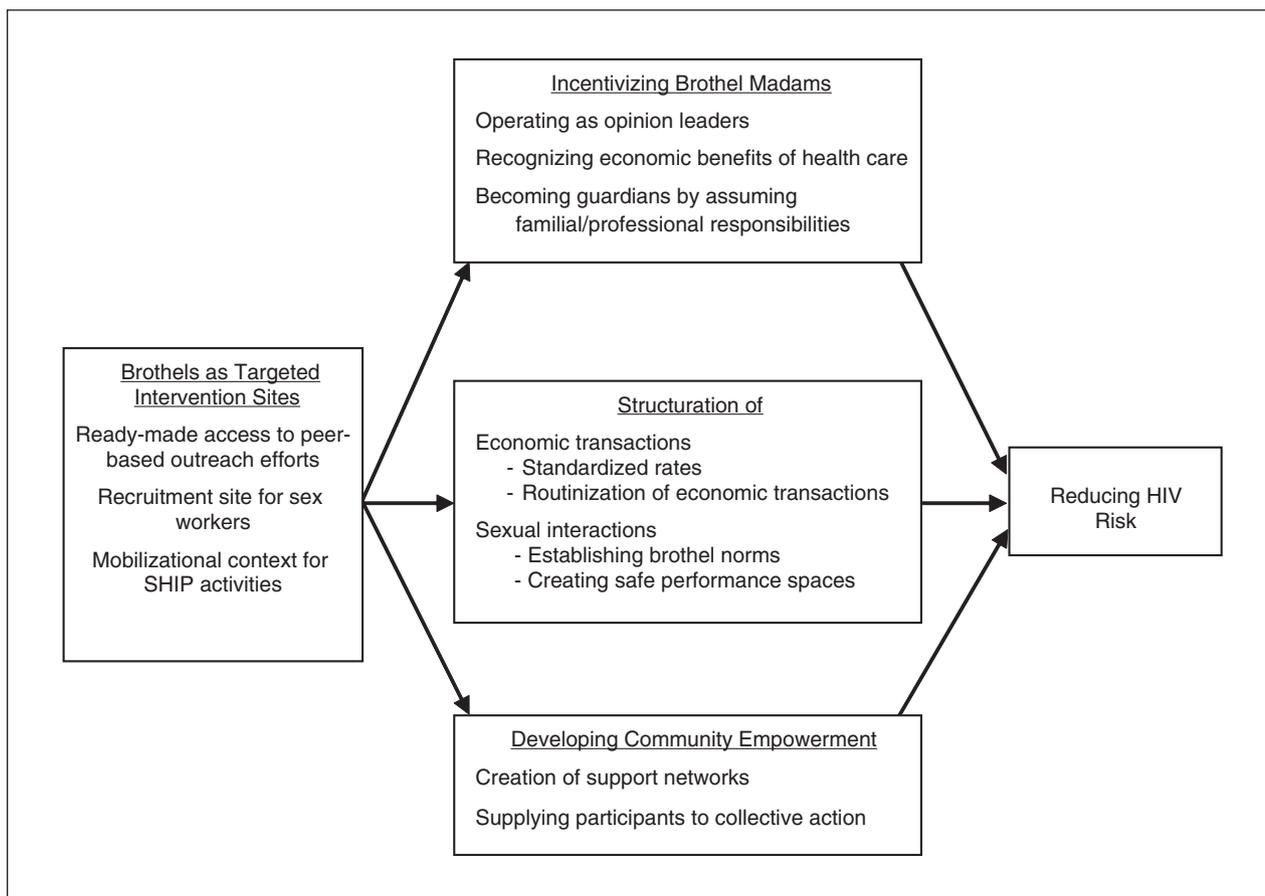


Figure 1. The role of brothels in the Sonagachi Project

If there is a sudden problem in the next-door brothel, and numbers are required to counter some form of violence, then we go out to help immediately when SHIP knocks on our door. Likewise, if tomorrow there is a problem here, then I know that they will come out for us. Sometimes when a sex worker is picked up by the police, then SHIP comes to us and we [fellow brothel residents] immediately go to the police station to protest.

When SHIP needed to mobilize large numbers of sex workers for rallies, brothels became the recruiting nodes for the collective action. Describing the crucial role they played in organizing thousands of sex workers in a march to New Delhi to protest laws that criminalized elements of the sex work industry, one SHIP organizer recalled, “We went door to door, first to brothels that were in the program, then to other brothels. We knew which brothel to target and which to avoid. This way, we got thousands to board the train to Delhi.”

Scholars have described the creation of solidarity among sex workers and collective mobilization around

issues as key elements in the development of community empowerment among Sonagachi’s sex workers (Basu et al., 2004; Jana & Singh, 1995; Swendeman et al., 2009). Our results indicate that brothels influenced both of these crucial processes. The brothel provided a context that crystallized sex worker solidarity and supplied actors engaged in collective action.

Discussion

The results indicate that brothels served as the catalyst for the success of the Sonagachi Project (see Figure 1). Utilizing grounded theory methods, we have identified a conceptual framework that traces the manner in which SHIP-involved brothels reduced risk among sex workers. Initially, brothels became tangible targets of recruitment for the SHIP initiative. Taking advantage of their unique role in the sex trade industry, the intervention sought to convert brothels into healthy spaces. Three significant elements of targeted brothels facilitated the establishment of safer sex environments within them. First, madams were actively recruited and persuaded to

create a safe environment for sex work in their brothels. Recognizing that it was in their financial interest to maintain a healthy regime in their brothels, and motivated by feelings of responsibility for their “wards,” brothel madams became crucial public opinion leaders in this endeavor.

Second, brothels provided the safe space necessary for participants to negotiate the risk-reducing strategies they were taught by SHIP peer educators. Ultimately, these strategies were integrated into their performance as sex workers in the safety of their rooms. Brothels became structured work environments protected from the unpredictability of street sex work, ultimately allowing the safety-first norms of the SHIP intervention to take root. Finally, brothels became crucibles for the fomenting of collective identity and community empowerment. The congregate living environment of brothels engendered the development of networks of support inflected with the ideology of the Sonagachi Project, which has been crucial in reducing HIV-related risk practices.

The stark difference between the health-promoting brothels involved in SHIP and the kind of exploitive brothels described in previous research (Huang et al., 2004; Ragsdale et al., 2007) underlines the manner in which SHIP has transformed the risk environment of participating brothels. The pathways to the reduction of HIV risk delineated in Figure 1 have important implications for the role of brothels in structural interventions with sex workers.

Brothels as Educational Sites

The activation of brothel madams as public opinion leaders was an important strategy that transformed brothels into sites of education about HIV and risk-reduction. Norming processes allowed the knowledge and transformed attitudes towards sex work to take root among sex workers and clients. Although Stadler and Delany (2006) have explored the possibility of locating health clinics in brothels, the results of this study indicate that a more limited strategy of actively recruiting brothel managers and select residents can help in the diffusion of knowledge among other residents, and transform the brothel into a safer space.

Brothels as Stable Housing

Scholars have documented the manner in which housing lowers the risk environment for people living with HIV and those vulnerable to infection (see Aidala & Sumartojo, 2007). Congregate housing, in particular, reduces the chaotic environment that exists on the streets, builds a network of support among residents, and protects them from the risk factors they are exposed to in unstable

living environments (Aidala, Cross, Stall, Harre, & Sumartojo, 2005; Dickson-Gomez et al., 2009). The results of this research suggest that some of the same protective factors are associated with brothel living. In particular, two emergent processes help to establish a stable and supportive community in brothels: the assumption of caretaking responsibility by brothel madams and the development of collective identity among residents. The isolation and exposure to coercive elements in the sex trade environment of flying sex workers was replaced by a supportive environment in which the goals of the intervention project could be translated into behavioral practices. Interventions with sex workers need to conceptualize brothels as potentially stable housing, with all the ameliorative effects associated with the provision of shelter.

Brothels as Safe Sex Sites

Whereas scholars have noted that brothels can be sites of coercion (Huang et al., 2004; Ragsdale et al., 2007), these results point to the possibility that they can provide a space for the staging of sexual performances that ultimately increase the control of sex workers over the sexual encounter. Integrated into the sexual performance, safe sex measures are less visible to customers, leaving them less room to resist. Although community-based interventions with sex workers have treated brothels as collaborative partners before, they have seldom sought to explicitly align with the sexual dynamics that are at play in brothels. It is important to note that even in the Sonagachi Project, the actual sexual encounter in a room was never targeted beyond education around the use of condoms. The themes emerging from these data point to the ways in which sex workers took the initiative to integrate their knowledge about HIV into their sessions with customers. Future interventions would be well served to treat the brothel as a potentially healthy sexual space and actively engage with the sexual rituals, performances, and norms that emerge within it.

Brothels as Catalysts for Mobilization

Scholars have noted that one of the notable successes of SHIP is its ability to mobilize sex workers to resist harassment, stigma, and oppressive laws. Ghose and colleagues (2008) argued that the scale of these actions, and the impact it has had on society, might indicate that SHIP's mobilization has engendered a sex workers' social movement in India. Efforts to replicate SHIP seek to collectivize sex workers in other communities along the same lines (Kerrigan, Terres, Torres, Overs, & Castle, 2008). However, few scholars analyzing SHIP and initiatives to export it to other sites take note of the

role of brothels in mobilizational efforts in Sonagachi. Our results show that SHIP's initial targeting of brothel-based sex workers transformed brothels into spaces that promoted the norms and ideology of the intervention program. These brothels thus became the recruiting base for the program, ultimately emerging as reservoirs of actors, leaders, and strategies for the social movement. By contrast, street sex work poses a significant challenge to mobilizational efforts. Our results suggest that community empowerment-based interventions need to explicitly target brothels where they are present, and work toward replacing street sex work, where it is predominant, with modes of sex work that allow workers the same levels of control over their work sites as the brothel-based workers in this sample.

Conclusion

SHIP has been described as a community-led structural intervention, and has successfully improved the availability, accessibility, and acceptance of risk-reducing strategies among sex workers (Blankenship et al., 2006). The results of this study showcase the crucial role of brothels in the transformation of the structural environment of Sonagachi's sex workers, and highlight the vectors of influence brothels exert over the decision-making strategies employed by sex workers. Future research needs to test this framework in other peer-based HIV interventions with brothel residents. The framework suggests that the concept of structuration which has been used in organizational studies to analyze other industries (Cooney, 2007, Orlikowski, 2000) can be extended to describe the processes of the sex trade industry. Future scholarship needs to develop theory in this area to better understand the processes of the sex work industry, and the manner in which they shape risk environment for sex workers. Finally, we believe that the pathways of influence delineated in the conceptual framework can guide future interventions with brothel-based sex workers.

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Notes

1. Kolkata is one of India's largest cities, and is the capital of the state of West Bengal.
2. A red-light area is the neighborhood in a city where sex work is conducted.
3. Although there are relatively few transgendered sex workers who are long-standing members of SHIP, we included 2 who were older SHIP participants in our sample because of their knowledge about SHIP, their exposure to street sex work conditions, and the unique challenges they negotiated as transgendered street workers.
4. Earthen cup traditionally used by street tea stalls in Kolkata, ubiquitously used to sip tea on street corners.
5. Local hooligan or street tough who usually hangs out with fellow mastaans on street corners. In Sonagachi, this group would also include local pimps.
6. Literally translated to mean "elder sisters," this is a term often used to convey respect and friendship.
7. Sessions of discussion and conversation usually structured around the consumption of tea in bhaads, that is a traditional part of the social landscape in Kolkata (see Chakrabarty, 2000).
8. A traditional Indian political form of nonviolent protest in which a building is surrounded to restrict movement into or out of it.
9. A little more than U.S. \$1.

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