

## 5

## Sex Industry as a social issue in Sri Lankan context: beyond a social problem

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**Abstract:** The main objective of this study is to understand the influence of sex industry on the Sri Lankan society. Factors contributing for the sex industry to be prohibited, factors contributing the continuity of the sex industry, different perspectives of the industry and impact of the sex industry were studied. For the study, 30 sex workers in streets, brothels and who practiced individually in Colombo were selected by using random sampling method. This descriptive study collected qualitative data. In-depth interviews and non-participant observations were used as techniques. The collected data were analysed through narrative analysis by using the theories of Social Learning Theory, Functionalism and Symbolic Interactionism. It was revealed that there are both negative and positive influences of the sex industry. Though the individual and social factors causes to prohibit

this profession from Sri Lanka, these factors work as hidden factors to create and continue this profession. Also power authorities restrict this profession in the surface conditions. But they play a major role to reduce the negative influences of this profession. The standards about this industry are also created manifesting biases to the social, economic, political, religious, cultural and legal aspects. Here the sex industry plays an invisible role in the society. It is important to see how the society which creates a background for an

individual to enter the sex industry rejects the continuity of it at some point. Therefore they should be alterations in the social perspectives, ideologies and the values created about the sex industry.

**Key words:** sex industry, social issue, social problem, social perspective and Sri Lankan context

## INTRODUCTION

Sex industry in the Sri Lankan context manifests temporal differences. When the attention is paid on the historical details, it is evident that the sex industry was legal and had social acceptance during some periods in Sri Lanka. "The king's dome is a wet ground for sex workers. Ancient kings escort with sex workers. Some kings had a harem. That indicates these monarchs had many women" (Priyantha, 2010). Within such contexts, the sex workers who engaged in the industry were socially accepted.

But during some periods of time, the sex industry and the sex workers lacked or didn't have any social acceptance or social status. Therefore sex industry was considered to be an debarred profession in the society. In contemporary Sri Lanka, directly, some areas of the sex industry are prohibited by Sri Lankan law. Even if the sex industry is considered to be a "profession" it has no professional status in many countries including Sri Lankan.

The rudimentary aspiration of sex workers is to have economic emoluments through their profession. Therefore "the sex industry is providing their body or body parts for economic or other benefits to sexual needs" (Rathnapala, 1990). According to Rathnapala, sex workers hope to have not only economic benefits but also other benefits through the sex industry. It is important to understand the social perspective as well as the individual perspective of the sex workers in order to do an analytical study. The discourse which is created about the sex industry in the macro level does not support the existence of the sex industry. Thus, a sex worker could be identified with the following characteristics:

- i. Willingness to engage in sexual relations with anyone.
- ii. Such sexual engagement should be upon the expectation of some monetary or other reward in return.
- iii. Such sexual engagement should be in contravention of established social morals and norms (Amarasekara, 2008).

This discourse, attempts to mark the sex industry as illegal and alienated in the Sri Lankan context. The legal system also supports this discourse to a greater extent. In addition to that, Sri Lankan society is enriched with socio-cultural and moral values where family is considered to be the basic unit of the socialization process. In this society, family plays a major role for the each and every family member.

Therefore, the structure of the family and the responsibilities to the family to be fulfilled by the members are also important in this context. The factors such as sexuality and sexual relationships which process within the private sphere are also limited to the family. When such factors are limited to the family by legal means, it shows some specific conditions. That means, moving beyond the sexual satisfaction at the said context, these familial relationships are challenged. This situation has transformed the sexual relationship between a married woman and a man into a relational deal. Therefore, a commercial deal which goes beyond that situation is not permitted and given a respected space. Thus, sex industry in Sri Lanka has become a situation that occurs externally to the legal marriage and a socially rejected one.

Apart from that, sex industry is normally defined, having women or the female sex workers for money basis. The term of 'sex worker' is not only a female term (Coorey, 2009). This definition further shows that there are many types of sex workers classified by their gender uniqueness. The concept of 'sex workers' is obviously interconnected with gender. Most of the debates on the sex industry are designed paying direct attention on the sex workers especially female sex workers. Therefore in this study, the attention is paid on female sex workers as the most obvious category.

The sex industry is not a profession that contains just sex workers. It is an organized profession that has many supportive external parties. Parties who hold formal power to eradicate this industry are also supportive of the progression of it. But the most outstanding category of this industry is always the sex workers.

When it comes to the connection between the religion and the sex industry, the definition given by the various religions on the sex workers differ temporally. Sometimes, sexuality and sex workers were attached to the religion where sex workers became a privilege to the religious parties. The best example for this is the '*Devadas*' concept in India. The term '*Devadas*' referred to the ladies who are consecrated for god. There was temple prostitution in ancient Babylonia, Greece and India. In these countries they selected the most beautiful women and devoted them to the religious institutions as a public property. Therefore anyone can satisfy their sexual needs by using these women (Jayasooriya, 1998). Buddhist teachings promote the sexual relationship between a man and a woman. Therefore, the sex industry or the other services oppositely attached to it are rejected. The religions practiced by the people in Sri Lankan context always promote legally accepted relationships between the opposite sexes. As a whole, the religious context too, does not support the establishment or the continuation of the sex industry in Sri Lanka.

In addition to that, sexuality and the sexual behaviors are considered to be very private and confidential in countries like Sri Lanka. Therefore, it is rare to have open discussions about such concepts. Even within the families, the situation is the same. What is manifested here is that to bring such discussions into the surfaces of the society is considered to be atypical in the society. That is why the more commercialized concepts such as the sex industry are also rejected in the society. In addition to that, since sexuality is defined as a condition limited to an individual, which is shared with another individual, sharing it with many people for privileges or economic benefits has been subjected to professional criticism.

The factors which have been established within the individual level; as well as the macro level as a huge impact on the establishment and the continuity of the sex industry. The individual perspectives on sexuality, women, sexual relationships and the sex industry are also important. Some people accept the sex industry while others reject it. The internal attitudes and ideologies also influence on that. How an individual interprets the sex industry based on his/her own experiences and the psychological capacities impacts the creation of an overall idea of sex industry in the macro level.

But, it is rare to see people talking on behalf of the sex industry, instead of rejecting it. The reason for that is the idea that to voice for such socially rejected professions can cause an individual to be insulted in the society. This causes the establishment of the ideology of the majority. What is demonstrated here is that, even though the micro level factors give recognition to the sex industry for certain extent; the macro level factors avoid it. Therefore the macro level perspective is further

established and maintained in the society. The social impact on the sex industry is also created through the entire social perspective which is based on the macro level perspective. Nevertheless, sex industry has been conducted continuously and maintained in Sri Lanka as well as other countries for ages, and it has become an organized profession that has continued customer demand. Therefore, it is important to consider the factors that cause the continuity of the demand for the sex industry as a profession.

### 1. Factors contributing to the continuity of the demand for the sex industry

Sexual needs are one of the most prominent needs of the human as well as animal beings in the world. People adopt various methods to fulfill sexual needs and there are certain limitations in order to have a moral control over that. However an individual has a biological motivation to satisfy his/her sexual needs. In most of the countries, including Sri Lanka, the family is considered to be the primary unit that satisfies these needs. According to Murdock, the sexual needs are one of the needs that should be satisfied from the family. But these analyses, studies or justifications have not paid attention on the sexuality and the sexual needs of the unmarried people. The narrow definition has not identified the needs of such people. Here, through this study the factors causing clients to be associated with this profession can be explained as follows;

- To have sexual satisfaction, since they are unmarried
- To have sexual satisfaction when it is not adequately provided by the married partners
- Because of the curiosity about the sexual relationships and to get an experience and knowledge about it
- As a habit/addiction to sex workers
- Strong relationships with sex workers
- Having high sexual drives
- To satisfy unusual sexual needs, especially when they cannot be fulfilled with the legally married partner
- The easier access to sex workers and their service. Their relationship is not very personal so that the customers can satisfy their sexual drives in the mode of a deal
- No impact on the private life
- A means of satisfying sexual needs while ensuring the familial relationships (Field data, 2015).

It is noted here sex industry provides a service to the society. According to the functional perspective, even if the sex industry has been defined as an illegal profession that causes social issues, it has some social functions too. In that case in most instances, sex industry has been discussed as a means of controlling many crimes related to sexuality. This study shows that sex industry functions as a hidden factor to cause the continuity of the family relationships of many customers.

**"Most of the customers are not satisfied with their women. Women in houses don't bear anything to satisfy men as we do. So men come and satisfy their needs with us and they are happy. We are also happy. The family life is also continued very well" (Field data, 2015).**

In addition to that most of the studies show that the expansion of sex industry forces the reduction of crimes such as rape and child abuse in the society. It functions as a method that serves the psychological aspects and high sexual drives of the people. It is manifested here that on one hand, there are some parties who are benefited because of this profession. On the other hand it causes some social degradation. Therefore, it is important to consider the perspective of the sex workers as the main aspect of the sex industry.

## 2. The common concept on sex industry shared by the sex workers

The sex workers who are considered to be the basic feature to conduct the sex industry have chosen industry as their profession. Therefore it is important to identify the reasons that cause women to enter this illegal and socially rejected profession.

- Economic difficulties
- Unemployment and difficulty in finding jobs
- Pressure in other jobs and the dislike to engage in other jobs
- Personal interest and motivation to engage in this profession
- Environment and the socialization process (Field data, 2015).

When we consider these factors it is noted that both external and internal factors have a direct impact on the creation of a sex worker in society. This study also shows that even if they enter this profession due to the personal reasons, the social factors influence them to be established in the sex industry. The external forces create an environment for that.

**"We are like this because we are poor. If our parents had money we wouldn't be like this. If we don't want our children to fall into this hell, we have to do this job. We will teach and bring our children into higher positions. Then our children can move forward even if we couldn't" (Field data, 2015).**

Apart from that, there are socially expected gender roles for women in this context. There are responsibilities for women as a mother and a wife. Open liberal economic system also expects women to co-operate into the economic responsibilities of the family. In such situations a woman should be able to satisfy these needs. The profession that women choose to contribute in the satisfaction of family and responsibilities are also sometimes socially rejected.

**"My husband is disabled since 4 years, because of some genes problem. So I didn't have money to take care of the home and the child. We didn't have any savings too. So I had nothing to do except this job. Both my husband and child know about my job. Because they have understood me well, I don't have any problem. Even my child tells that he would do a good job and look after me" (Field data, 2015).**

But often, sex workers are vulnerable to the negative social impacts, because they are engaged in a profession which is prohibited and in which they shouldn't have engaged. The society expects purity and softness from the women on one hand. On the other hand, when it comes to the sex industry,

it is directly expected that women satisfy the individual sexual needs. Here these social expectations are controversial. The society expects a woman to play dual roles. In order to fulfill one social expectation, a woman goes beyond other social expectations. When a woman is not able to fulfill her responsibilities and duties to the family and the closed ones, there is a tendency for these women to enter these kinds of jobs.

**"When I lost my mother, there was no way to teach my younger brother and sister. Mother had no job. I had to take over the responsibility of everything. I was studying those days. No one wanted to give me a job. Everyone told me that I can't do a job because of the age. If they gave me a job, they might have been put into jail for using an underage child for work. But I had to find a job. So I entered this job" (Field data, 2015).**

This also shows that there are contradictions among the social expectations. Even if the ideology about women in the surface of the society limits the women, the hidden social aspect expects an unlimited role from women moving beyond biological, social and psychological capabilities (That's why it is important to look at the sex industry in different perspectives). Even though the sex industry is prohibited in the legal perspective, when it comes to the practical aspect, there are contradictions in function of the legal systems. Often the legal parties as well as the other parties involved in sex industry function not to eradicate it from the society but to promote the continuity of it so that they can have various advantages through that.

**"The police do not catch us because they know it is in vain. We know how to escape. We do many things. We give them money or other things if necessary. They don't catch us" (Field data, 2015).**

This profession, even though it is a socially excluded profession, necessary steps have been taken by the government in order to reduce the negative impacts of it. It costs a lot and needs labour on the side of the government. "Public health concerns have also played into the view of prostitution. Prostitution is commonly viewed as aiding the spread of venereal disease" (Edlund and Korn, 2002). Therefore especially they conduct special clinics to reduce the expansion of Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs). One of the recent steps taken by the government is to establish condom machines in urban areas where sex workers are very common. It also attempts to have some control over the negative impacts of sex industry but it is clear that no steps have taken to change perspective on the sex industry.

## CONCLUSION

This study manifested that there are positive as well as negative ideologies created about the sex industry. There is an ideology in the surface of the society along with another ideology underneath. But the prominence is given to the surface ideology. Even though this industry is an organized profession which has connections with many external parties, the most highlighted party is the sex workers. Here, once a woman ignores the social expectations, and becomes a sex worker, she is neglected and subjected to insult.

The standards about this industry are also created manifesting biases to the social, economic, political, religious, cultural and legal aspects. Here the sex industry plays an invisible role in the society. A society like Sri Lanka which is enriched with cultural and religious ideologies does not want

to accept it.

There are factors created by the society to push women into this profession. It is important to see how the society which creates a background for an individual to enter the sex industry rejects the continuity of it at some point. Therefore, there should be alterations in the social perspectives, ideologies and the values created about the sex industry.

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