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Sex Workers in Chennai, India: Negotiating Gender and Sexuality in the Time of AIDS

Salla Sariola

PhD in Sociology
University of Edinburgh
2007

This is my own work unless indicated otherwise.

Salla Sariola, 24ᵗʰ August 2007, Edinburgh

Abstract

Risk of HIV and illness are the dominant context in which sex work is discussed in India and there is a lacuna of social scientific analysis of sex workers' lives. HIV interventions negotiated between global actors such as UNAIDS, World Bank, USAID etc, the Indian government, state level AIDS prevention bodies, and the local NGOs, have constructed 'sex work' as an epidemiological category rather than treating it as a social concept. Based on fieldwork in HIV prevention NGOs, and participant observation and interviews with sex workers in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, in August 2004-August 2005 to understand the realities of the sex workers lives, this thesis proposes research on sex workers, with specific reference to gender and sexuality. Theoretically the research seeks to answer the question: how to understand agency of vulnerable populations and how do sex workers use agency in oppressive environments? This thesis also engages with the feminist debate of selling sex as profession or as oppression of women's rights. I argue that sex workers actively negotiate sex work and their lives with the means at their disposal. This is done not only in the context of negotiating the risks of sex work but also in the broader context of other needs, for example money, love and sexual desire. While sexuality is a taboo in India, the analysis contributes to the understanding of discourses of women's sexuality and the sexual behaviour of sex workers in Chennai. While the women's experiences are closely knit into the global nexus of the HIV industry, sex work comes across as a complicated knot of poverty, desire, women's oppression, love, cooption, and motherhood.

Glossary and abbreviations

Aattoo = Autorikshaw
Akka = Older sister
Aravani = Person of third gender, also *hijra*
Burkha = Veil
Che ayaiyo = Dearie me
Chuditar = Loose tunic with loose trousers underneath
Chumma = 'Just like that', casually
Cini (field) = Film industry
Dalit = Political term for outcaste or 'untouchable' castes, see also Scheduled caste
Devadasi = Women who performed Hindu rituals in temples in the past, associated with prostitution.
Dupatta = Scarf folded over shoulders worn with *salwar kameez*
Hijra = Person of third gender, also *aravani*
Jolly = Joy, good mood, happiness, pleasure, orgasm
Karpu = Chastity, also *pattanaye*
Keep = Kept woman, concubine
Kothi = 'Indigenous' term for homosexual
Kuli = Day labourer
Lathi = Bamboo stick used e.g. by the police
Loop = IUD
Lunghi = Men's waistcloth
Meals = Selection of curries and rice
Naicker = A higher caste of Telegu origin who have moved to Tamil Nadu
Panthi = Client, man, also *party*
Party = Client, also *panthi*
Pattanaye = Chastity, also *karpu*
Petticoat = Skirt worn under a sari
Pottu = Mark on the forehead between the eyes
Purdah = Seclusion of women
Rowdy = Hooligan
Salwar kameez = loose tunic with loose trousers underneath, also *chuditar*
Sambar = Soupy curry
Sangham = Society
Scheduled caste = Group of outcaste or 'untouchable' castes, see also *dalit*
Shakti = Feminine power
Shantosham = Happiness
Thali = Thread tied around the neck (on women) that symbolises marriage
Tiffin = Snacks
Vaange = Come in
Vanakkam = Hello

APAC = AIDS Prevention and Control Society
CAPACS = Chennai AIDS Prevention and Control Society
CBO = Community-based organisation
CHES = Community Health Education Society
CIDA = Canadian International Development Agency
CSW = Commercial sex worker
DFID = Department for International Development
ICWO = Indian Community Welfare Organisation
IFPEC = Indira Female Peer Educators' Collective
ITPA 1956 = Immoral Traffic in Persons (Prevention) Act
IVDU = Intravenous drug user
MSM = Men who have sex with men
NACO = National AIDS Control Organisation
NGO = Non-governmental organisation
SIAAP = South India AIDS Action Programme
STD = Sexually transmitting disease
SWCWS = Social Welfare Centre for the Weaker Section
TNSACS = Tamil Nadu State AIDS Control Society
UNAIDS = Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS
USAID = United States Agency for International Development
VCTC = Voluntary counselling and testing centre
YRG CARE = Y.R. Gaitorande Centre for Aids Research and Education

Acknowledgements

CHAPTER 1 Introduction

Leaving my house like many other mornings during my fieldwork in August 2004-August 2005, I challenge the traffic over a stinky river and get to the bus stop, uncomfortably aware of the scene I make just by standing there. I know that women solicit by standing at bus stops. I look around at the women there. I have learned that the sex workers do not look any different from other women, so anyone could be soliciting. I look around suspiciously … Would I be able to identify a sex worker after meeting so many? Autorikshaws drive slowly past the bus stop, offering rides. As far as I know, some autorikshaw drivers are middlemen and could be taking women to clients. I catch a man staring at me. I quickly turn my eyes away.

I am on my way to meet a sex worker for an interview. I met the woman a couple of months earlier at an NGO meeting. We were introduced to each other by other sex workers, and she was keen on being interviewed. First I go to meet my translator at the Vadapazhani bus depot near the film studios, near the woman's neighbourhood. I am dressed up in a *salwar kameez*, loose trousers underneath a loose tunic, with a shawl thrown over my shoulders. It is hot, around 37C, and I am sweating underneath all the clothes. Still, I am worried about my reputation. I am worried about my being associated with the sex workers in the eyes of the local men. With the rape stories the sex workers have told me, I have become very self-conscious and increasingly negative towards men's intentions.

I wait for my translator at the Vadapazhani bus depot. Suddenly, two women that I know walk past. They see me and stop to talk. They talk to me in Tamil very quickly; I can understand enough to tell that they know me from the NGO. They act strange, talk and laugh loud, are distracted, and I realise that they are drunk, which is very rare for women in general, though it is a common way that sex workers relax. It dawns on me that they have probably been seeing clients. I

greet them, but after exchanging niceties in a somewhat haphazard way (the women are giggling, erratic), the women tumble away rather quickly.

My translator arrives and we walk to the neighbourhood where the woman lives. After our initial introduction at the NGO, we had arranged a meeting to which she never showed up. After meeting her again at the NGO, she convinced me she still wanted to talk with me; that she had just been unable to be home at the previous time we had arranged. This time, she is there. She invites us in with a smile. "*Vanakkam, vanakkam! Vaange vaange!*" – "Hello, hello! Come in, come in!" We are invited inside the house and we sit on the floor. Her house is small; it has brick walls and a thatched roof. Colourful plastic pots of water are lined up next to the wall. She has a small kerosene stove and cooking pots fill the shelves. There are pictures of dead relatives and images of Gods on the wall. After polite questions regarding her family's health, her health, her children's health, and the wellbeing of all the people we know together, I ask how she feels about the interview. She says she's happy to talk, and I pull out the recorder. I explain to her once again about my work, and that what she tells me will be confidential and anonymous, and that I will not share her information with the NGOs. She sends a neighbour, who has come in to see what is going on, to buy some *cool drinks* for us. I ask her to tell me, in her own words, her life story. The following narrative is merged together from the narratives of several women whom I interviewed during my fieldwork.

Mariamma, a woman in her late 20s and a mother of two, wakes up in a small hut in Chennai, Tamil Nadu. She sends the children to school, washes the dishes from the night before and prepares some rice and *sambar,* a soupy lentil curry, for the evening. She washes the children's clothes and hangs them to dry. Around noon, Mariamma gets a phone call. An older lady she knows from her neighbourhood tells her that there are clients who would pay for sex, if she was interested. The lady is her madam, an older sex worker who connects sex workers with men who want to pay for sex. Mariamma is penniless and the ration of rice is almost gone. Her children have not eaten anything else but the

thin *sambar* that whole week. Her son, in particular, has had a cough for a long time. She is worried. The lady on the phone tells her that there are two men waiting at Parry's Corner, a big bus depot. Mariamma says yes and rushes to call her friend Sarasvati, who decides to come along. Mariamma and Sarasvati like to work together; it provides them with security and makes them feel less alone. They have been friends for a long time and they know everything about each other. They always go to meet clients together – approximately three times a week.

Mariamma starts to get dressed. She changes her nightgown into a *sari.* She puts on a bright red bra underneath. She has three *saris* hanging from a string on the wall. They are all made of cheap, artificial material: one yellow, one blue and one red. She chooses the yellow one and folds it around her. She searches for her red lipstick; she has hidden it away from the children in the far-end corner of her cupboard. She sees herself from a cracked piece of mirror, applies lipstick on her lips and rubs it on her cheeks as well. Finally, she brushes her long hair and plats it. She wants to look beautiful for the clients to please them, but not too flashy – she does not want to draw too much attention to herself. She is afraid that someone might recognise her and realise what she is doing. She is afraid for her own and her children's reputation. If she were caught, then everybody would come to know, and she is sure that she would then have to move house again and her children would be thrown out of their school. It had happened to others.

Mariamma walks through the area she lives in – a slum area that has been improved a little by a local NGO. The neighbourhood has concrete houses, and water pumps at the end of the roads. The water truck comes twice a week to fill up the water tanks, but even so it is not enough for everybody for the whole week. Most of the houses are similar, with two floors, with families from different backgrounds living together in any given house. Within the houses, the flats are small, around three by three metres each, with a small kitchen space and a communal toilet. The narrow roads are just wide enough to drive

an autorikshaw through; they are covered with broken and crumbled concrete. It takes about 20 minutes for Mariamma to walk from her house to the main road and the bus stop. It is hot and she is sweating, but she cannot afford to take an *aattoo* (autorikshaw) every time. She meets Sarasvati in the main junction, they buy a generous amount of flowers to put into their hair and then they get on a bus together to go to Parry's Corner.

At Parry's Corner, it takes them a long time to find the men. Parry's Corner is a big bus depot from which hundreds of buses depart daily to take people to the neighbourhoods of Chennai. While the women search for the men, two policemen patrol the area. Mariamma freezes; she is afraid of the police. She has experienced how it is to be caught up at the bus stop and questioned. Other women have also told her that the policemen at the station demand money, and that they also force women have sex with them. The two women stand on a platform and pretend that they are waiting for a bus until the policemen have gone.

Finally, they call the clients and spot them standing next to a fruit vendor. They greet like people who know each other, to avoid attention. The men are in their mid-20s. They are dressed in white-collared shirts and straight trousers. One of them even has a mobile phone hanging from his neck, tucked away in the front pocket of his shirt. They look decent, so the women decide to go with them. The men say that they will pay Rs.500 between the two of them. The women agree and they all walk together to a nearby lodge.

The lodge is dirty; the turquoise colour whitewash had faded and stained long ago. Images of Hindu gods hang from the wall. The men pay Rs.100 for the room and they all go in. The men who run the lodge know well what the room is for, but they ask no questions. The room has two small bare beds and nothing more. The sheets are dirty. Mariamma confirms that they will get Rs.500 and clarifies that there has to be condoms.

The men have brought a bottle of whiskey with them and they offer it to the women. Mariamma and Sarasvati have a drink to relax. They chat. Mariamma nearly vomits from the bitter taste of the whiskey but it sooths her and she soon feels floppy. Sarasvati chats to the fatter man. Mariamma turns to take off her sari, folds it carefully and places it in the corner, now feeling vulnerable and exposed. In the meantime, Sarasvati starts to give oral sex to the fat man. Mariamma does not look. The slim man wants her to take all her clothes off – the petticoat, blouse and the red bra – but she refuses. He grabs her breasts forcefully, pulls her blouse so that it tears and shows the red bra, and throws her onto the bed. He climbs on top of her and penetrates her. By this point, Mariamma is so drunk that she has stopped worrying about anything. As soon as everything is over, the women demand the money. It turns out that the men only have Rs.400 with them. The women protest and quarrel with the men, but as the men say they have no more, the women submit to this and leave.

Mariamma and Sarasvati wander off to Parry's Corner and chat. They are agitated at being cheated. Mariamma has a pounding headache and her body aches too. They stop to buy some *meals*, rice and spicy curry sauces, and hover back to Mariamma's house to eat. Sarasvati leaves and Mariamma lies down on the mat on the floor to take some rest. She falls asleep thinking of her children. She feels how much she loves them and tears fill her eyes.

The above narrative is exemplary of women's experiences in sex work and what happens during a sex work encounter. It is a pen portrait of some venues of sex work in Chennai and some of the concerns of women in sex work – as well as the challenges of my fieldwork in gaining access, and my feelings about doing research on the subject. Interviews with fifty-six sex working women make the foundation of this thesis. I was particularly interested in questions of sex work, sexuality, gender, identity, and the problems that women in sex work face. The specific research questions that I set out with were:

1) How do female Tamil sex workers perceive their identity, especially regarding gender roles, sexuality and social position?

2) What are the issues that the women face regarding sex work, and how do they experience these issues?

3) What is the impact of gender roles on the lives of these women?

4) What is the meaning of sexuality in the lives of these women?

5) Do these women have sources of positive self-identities (e.g. motherhood) and social support, and, if so, to what extent are these inclusive?

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this thesis is informed by post-structuralist and feminist writings. It is not, however, an attempt to test these theories by reference to the lives of the sex workers. Rather, I am using concepts that have been used and/or coined by academic writers that have been called post-structuralists, following e.g. Michel Foucault (1998 [1976]) and Judith Butler (1990), but I do not see myself strictly within a post-structuralist paradigm due to my reservations about these writings. My reservations regarding post-structuralist writings come from the abstractness of these theories, which tend to be very detached from people's lived experiences and provide very little contemporary empirical evidence in their support. The methodology of my research demands the opposite - an analysis that is strongly rooted in fieldwork data: the experiences of the sex workers collected by using interviews, and participant observation conducted in HIV prevention NGOs in Chennai.

Feminist theorising has informed this thesis in several ways. Firstly, feminist epistemology guided me to looking at women's lives in general and encouraged sensitivity to power relations in the research process (see e.g. Stanley and Wise 1993; Wolf 1996). Furthermore, sex work theorising is predominantly feminist. Of these theories regarding selling sex, I discuss an abolitionist stance that aims at abolishing prostitution (e.g. Barry 1984; Jeffreys 1997) and argues that women who sell sex are victims of the power relations between men and women. Sex workers' movements in the West, on the contrary, argue that selling sex is work and that women have the right to do with their bodies what

they want, including selling sex (see e.g. Nagle 1997; Pheterson and St James 1989). The notion that women can have agency in selling sex has enabled analyses regarding sex work that is more nuanced and complex, and has lead to a research paradigm that I have named *Post-Structuralist Research in Selling of Sex* (see e.g. Brewis and Linstead 2000a and b; Sanders 2005 a and b; Zatz 1997). While these writings have been predominantly Western, I take from this theorising the idea that women in sex work can and do have agency. Because the whole of chapter two is dedicated to discussing these theories, I will not elaborate them any further here.

Thus, central to my analysis is the concept of agency, which ties into Foucault's theory of power. Foucault's theory on power, which he formulated in the book *History of Sexuality vol. 1,* has been extremely influential for the way human agency is seen, suggesting that power is everywhere and ever present (1998 [1976]: 92-102). While the role of individual agency was somewhat neglected in Foucault's writings, the idea that this power is used by all individuals has enabled analyses in which individuals are seen as subjects who negotiate the discourses that surround them, specific to time and space. As his take on power has been extensively analysed elsewhere, I will not delve deeper into this analysis here (see for example Foucault 1980, 1982; Hindess 1996; Wickham 1983). With these theoretical premises in mind, sex workers come across as individuals who negotiate their conditions within the oppressive discourses and structures around them. This thesis is a study of how oppression and agency can coexist in the lives of sex workers in contemporary India. It is not a stance on the discussion of structure vs. agency but rather a more nuanced analysis of power that sex workers use as individuals in rather powerless positions. In this sense this thesis is an analysis of agency in the margins.

The dominant context in which sex work has been discussed in academic literature and in the field in India is HIV prevention. Sex workers have become subjectified in HIV prevention discourses by a process that I call the epidemiologisation of sex work. 'Sex work', rather than being a social concept,

has become a health-oriented term, reduced to health aspects, and sex workers are seen as vulnerable to HIV and as vectors who can pass it to others. This is a representation that is victimising and judging. The process of the making of the subject of the 'sex worker' through the dominant HIV discourse in India is one of the themes explored in this thesis. The process by which this has taken place resonates with Foucault's concept of governmentality[1], through controlling the individuals by normalising certain practices, as is the case in the normalising of the sexual behaviour of the sex workers. This is different from the normalising of the reproductive behaviour in India in general and particularly in 1970s during the Emergency, in that, unlike then, the attention now is not on how much 'sex leading to reproduction' people have, but rather with whom people have sex and if those people are the culturally appropriate sexual partners. Before, there was the assumption that sex is problematic for the nation only when it leads to irresponsible population explosion, but with the spread of HIV, the reality that not everybody has sex according to 'traditional' norms (which limit sexual behaviour to heterosexual, marital and monogamous relationships) has become public knowledge. NGOs that conduct HIV prevention are creating new forms of governance when monitoring the sexual behaviour of the sex workers by (e.g.) statistics, maps and maintaining close contact with them. Later in this thesis, I will discuss why the majority of HIV prevention efforts in India address sex workers; I have traced this to moral ideas related to scrutinising women's (sexual) behaviour and its relation to the honour of the family.

Sex workers have used the discourse of HIV, victimising as it may be, as a stepping stone for mobilising and making financial gain through peer education and (ab)using incentives for participating in meetings arranged by HIV prevention organisations. Peer education provides an opportunity to negotiate

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[1] For an excellent discussion on the concept see: '*The Foucault Effect: studies in governmentality*' Graham Burchill, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller (eds.) 1991, and more on governmentality in the light of ethnography and modernity see e.g. '*Anthropologies of Modernity: Foucault, governmentality and life politics*' Jonathan Xavier Inda (ed) 2005.

the stigma[2] about sex work with a more positive identity harnessed in HIV prevention. The context of HIV provides a particular subject position to the sex workers, who choose and reinforce it. I argue, however, that this representation is a simplification of the realities of the sex workers. When looking at women from a more socially oriented point of view - one that is informed by feminist theories of gender and sexuality - sex workers come across as more than what the HIV representation suggests. My analysis of the sex workers, then, is similar to what Gayatri Reddy (2005a) did when analysing the *hijras* - opening up the popular and academic stereotypes regarding groups that have been approached from a stagnant angle (gender in terms of the *hijras*, risk of HIV in the context of sex workers) and providing a broad analysis of the sex workers.

Before moving on to the 'socially-informed' overview of the concept of agency and what this analysis has enabled – looking at sex workers beyond the HIV representation – the concept of agent/subject/individual requires some opening up in the Indian context. Theorists have suggested that the idea of self in India is not individualistic, but instead is 'dividualist' (e.g. Trawick 1990). Self is defined as a social concept, a porous entity in which 'the self' continues in other humans and, at times, in gods as well. One's self is defined through one's roles in relation to others; one is a sister, mother, mother-in-law, wife, etc.

Trawick (1990: 242-3) sums up:

> "…As life proceeds, what happens to self is neither individuation (increasing differentiation of self from others) nor internal integration (crystallisation of a stable sense of self) but rather a continuous deindividuation and decrystallisation of self, a continuous effort to break down separation, isolation, purity, as though these states, left unopposed, would form of their own accord and freeze life into death."

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[2] Goffman (1968) defines stigma as a situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance. In Chennai selling sex is seen as disrespectful, polluted, pitiful and deviant. Those who do or are perceived of selling sex are labelled as loose, lacking social value and immoral.

The usefulness of a Western based, individualistic, notion of self, which the earlier theoretisations propose, becomes problematic in this context.[3] When self is viewed as 'dividual', the ability to negotiate individually, without consideration of other members of the community, becomes extremely difficult. When people are viewed as dividuals and especially when women's transgressions perceived in a morally loaded way, when the fluid, relative and negotiated boundary of social acceptance is transgressed, the person enters the realm of marginality. This often means being cut from resources and social acceptance. The sex workers inhabit this space of marginality, and it is also often marked by violence and stigmatisation against them. Outside social acceptance and cut off from family networks, many sex workers face the need to negotiate their lives individually rather than dividually, with the means that are available to them, which usually means merely themselves and other women like them. This detour brings us back to the individual modes of negotiation, but within a context in which that is a highly stigmatised process, rather than an 'American dream'.

While I maintain that sex workers choose to represent themselves according to the HIV representation and are forced to negotiate their lives individually, rather than as 'dividuals', is there anything else to be said about the social viewpoint concerning the analysis of the lives of the sex workers within this oppressive context? How can we understand agency within oppression? Why do sex workers have to negotiate their lives individually rather than as dividuals, as would be culturally appropriate?

Tension in understanding women in situations in which they seemingly assert very little agency or partake in ideologies that from the Western viewpoint seem oppressive – such as women in fundamentalist religious movements, or prostitution – led some feminist theorists initially to label these women as being under false consciousness or socialised into their own oppression (Mahmood 2005: 6). Saba Mahmood argues that, since the 1970s, these analyses have been

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[3] This Western notion of individuality has been challenged e.g. by Jeffery and Jeffery (1996).

seen as problematic and have led to studies of human agency in the structures of subordination (see, for example Abu-Lughod 1990; Scott 1985). Rather than labelling sex workers under false consciousness or socialised culturally, similarly to Mahmood (2005) I raise the question: How do women contribute to their own domination, and how do they resist or subvert it, if they do?

Mahmood (2005), in the first chapter of her book '*Politics of Piety – The Islamic revival and the feminist subject*' on women's participation in a pious Islamic movement, challenges the notion that feminism is necessarily a derivative of liberalist and emancipatory politics. Mahmood problematises the universality of the desire to be 'free' of structures of domination and suggests that, without problematising the concept of resistance as part of a liberalist project, feminist theorising not only ends up romanticising resistance, but, by discussing resistance only in the context of 'acting *against* domination', it also ends up reinforcing the dichotomy of resistance vs. domination. She argues, following Foucault, that in order to understand power and agency, these issues need to be studied in their historical and cultural contexts, and that it is simplistic to look at resistance only as activity against (e.g.) patriarchal dominance; instead, all action should be seen as agency. With a liberatory framework and without a cultural contextualisation, some action might be missed or misunderstood 'from outside'. This way, agency appears not as resistance but as 'activity' that at times might mean choices that are 'restricting' and 'oppressive' and at times might mean choices that are 'subversive' and 'liberating'. This way, both forces can operate in an individual's life simultaneously (Mahmood 2005: 1-39). A viewpoint that recognises that women in sex work can have agency and/or are not just victims of their surroundings has informed some existing academic debates of sex work and has also led to the definition of selling sex as work.

When we look at sex workers in India from a social (and not a health-oriented) viewpoint, they come across as a heterogeneous group, one that deserves exploring in depth to do justice to the realities of their lives. An analysis that

looks at domains of gender and sexuality in the lives of the sex workers suggests a more subtle view of sex workers, in which they are not victims of their condition, but agentic women who use selling sex to serve their interests. This was a relative and personal process, but, overall, selling sex came across as a strategy for various things. The women negotiated doing sex in a way that was least harmful to them physically and mentally, and in a way that was the least harmful to their reputation. Sex workers also negotiated the type of sex that they offered based on a Tamil notion of 'pure sex'. Some of them viewed anything other than vaginal sex as impure, and stuck to that, while others saw this social code (wives cannot do 'impure sex') as the reason why many men came to sex workers – and because the men wanted it, that was exactly the repertoire that was needed. Some sex working women preferred having random clients, while others preferred regular clients – and often, the women started relationships with their regular clients. For some women, these relationships were the primary motivation, and the money came only as a positive side effect. Those who came from different backgrounds did sex work in various ways, and for different reasons and motivations. The money that they earned ranged between Rs.20 (25p) and Rs.1000 (£12.5) per encounter. Some of those women had been coerced to sex work, while some had entered voluntarily. The route of entering did not have an impact on how they felt about what they did; some women who had entered voluntarily felt ashamed about it, while others who were originally trafficked were among the most 'empowered'. Ironically, the field of HIV prevention needs to recognise that sex workers are a socially diverse group, rather than seeing the problem of HIV prevention from a health-oriented viewpoint. For effective HIV prevention, the human rights of the sex workers need to be finally recognised.

I do not deny the violent realities of the sex workers. Many women had faced violence at the hands of police and clients. They had been ostracised by their families, and many were in fear of spoiling the reputations of their children. Many had internalised the stigma surrounding sex work to the extent that they dreaded the sex work they did. Further, the women's ability to negotiate use of

condoms was limited in that the women were inferior in all domains of the client encounter: in terms of: gender, sexuality, money, and their social positioning associated with their role as a sex worker, a very negative stereotype that made them constantly vulnerable to HIV and STDs (sexually transmitting diseases).

With these research questions and the theoretical backdrop in mind, this thesis is organised as follows. Chapter two discusses predominantly Western theoretical writings on prostitution and sex work. It sets the scene for one of the underlying themes of this thesis: analysing whether selling sex is oppression or profession. I argue that a contextual, culturally specific analysis is needed, rather than relying on universalisms, and this turns the gaze to the context of Chennai. Chapter three analyses theoretical writings in the context of India and Chennai with regard to gender, sexuality, and HIV. I argue that the dominant discourse of women portrays a rigid role for them: as reproductive, self-sacrificing mothers. Rape of lower caste women, the spread HIV, the existence of *devadasis* and sex workers, however, all challenge the normative ideas of sexual relationships restricted to marriage and monogamy, discourses that restrain women in particular.

This led me to analyse the sex workers' feelings about sex work within the context of restricting discourses concerning women's sexuality. How do the women, whose lives challenge these discourses, feel about this? To what extent do they conform to those norms or resist them? To find answers to these questions given the taboos around sexuality and the lack of any other practical means of accessing sex workers, I approached NGOs that do HIV prevention in Chennai. This process of data collection is analysed in chapter 4. After this, I move on to the empirical chapters of this thesis. These show which discourses are available to the women in talking about sex work, sex and gender, and how they understand them. Chapter 5 contextualises sex workers in the broader context of HIV and shows what the women's relationship to HIV prevention NGOs was like. I maintain that within the global context of HIV discourse,

HIV should not be treated as a health problem but as a social one. In order to provide successful HIV prevention, sex workers' human rights need to be recognised and general awareness programmes conducted. Chapter 6 analyses the social backgrounds of the women. Sex workers are a diverse group to the extent that we can hardly even talk about 'a group' at all. Only the stigma surrounding sex work joins them. In chapter 7, I analyse the reasons that the women I interviewed said had led them to sex work. Discourses that were available to the women were poverty, Tamil nationalist ideas that valorise motherhood and demonise 'loose' women, and coercion. Chapters 8 and 9 engage with the debate concerning selling sex as profession or oppression, and discuss the problems that sex workers face, such as violence, poverty, gender position and norms about women's honour and the consequences that lead from loss of it. Also in chapters 8 and 9, I move on to analysing the ways in which the sex workers negotiated these problems. I argue that the dichotomy between seeing selling sex as essentially oppressive or as a profession is abstract and theoretical, and that while this dichotomy is useful for understanding the realities of sex workers, their experiences do not reflect either end of the dichotomy. In chapter 9, I analyse the sexual relationships that women had, which many times challenged conventions about sexual behaviour and ideas about prostitution and women's sexuality. Chapter 10 concludes the arguments made in this thesis.

CHAPTER 2 Politics of sex work

Outlining the history of selling sexual services involves of the discussion of sexual morality. This chapter outlines the paradigmatic changes in sex work theorising. Writings on selling sex stem from feminist writings and analyses of women's rights, deriving mostly from the West. Given my call for a nuanced and contextualised analysis of sex workers' lives, it may seem contradictory to begin with an overview of Western theoretical approaches to prostitution/sex work. I will proceed with such, however, because these theorisations have dominated the writings about sex work, informed the conceptual genealogy of 'sex work', and influenced policies and laws against prostitution, trafficking and HIV prevention globally. This theorising provides a theoretical framework for this thesis, and this chapter provides a rationale for why a localised analysis of sex work is necessary. How exactly sex work is perceived in India is discussed in the next chapter.

The paradigms of academic debates of selling sex have ranged from oppression to profession, depending on the rhetorical emphases: whether selling sex is seen as a structural oppression or as a mode of work. These positions have also been strongly political and often seen as related to women's rights to be untouched, or their rights to make choices regarding their own bodies. The 'abolitionist' stance, in particular, aims at abolishing prostitution as an oppressive form of violence against women, in which women are seen as victims. The ensuing debate has also been marked by moral panic and emotive stances, and often the academic discussion has reflected middle class values. Recently sex working women's voices have emerged, and this has challenged the abolitionist stance considerably. Sex working women's demands for the right to do sex work have made the debate more nuanced and complicated. Bringing out the local, contextualised, and personal experiences of the sex workers – rather than the universal – is the only way to produce academic discussion that comes close to the sex workers' lived realities and meanings.

In this chapter, I will discuss the main paradigms in the theorising of prostitution/sex work, which all come from feminist writings, namely the abolitionist, Marxist/Socialist, and what I will call *Post-Structuralist Research in Selling of Sex*. The latter has been theoretically guided by post-structuralist conceptualisation and the sex workers' movement in the Anglo-Saxon world. I will argue that a context-specific analysis is needed to understand the realities of the sex workers. Looking at sex work as local and personal, specific to time and place, can open up assumptions and biases about ideas around sexual relationships and stereotypes that can be found in some academic writings. Studying sex work can question preconceived ideas such as: women in sex work are always depressed and are victims of their surroundings; sex is only part of loving relationships; no woman would sell her body if she had a choice; or that selling sex is always similar and experienced similarly – oppressively – by women, despite the context.

Abolitionist approach and its critiques

The 'abolitionist' stance, aiming at abolishing prostitution, has a long history and questions around prostitution have been on the agenda throughout the existence of the feminist movement in the West (for discussion see e.g. Musheno and Seeley 1986; Outshoorn 2005). Abolition aims at uprooting prostitution because it is seen as the core of the oppression of women by men. This viewpoint has been taken on board more recently by e.g. Sheila Jeffreys (1997) and Kathleen Barry (1984), who both see that prostitution as an aggressive form of oppression by male sexuality over women, and that calling it work normalises this abuse – i.e. it is women's right to live without male oppression. Because of the pronouncements of some women about the right to choose to do sex work, Jeffreys argues that those women who argue this are inherently wrong in their understanding because of their subordinate position and lack of knowledge and, ultimately, their lack of access to feminist theorising (1997: 128-160). Raymond (1998) argues that sex workers' organisations in the US (e.g. COYOTE Call off Your Old Tired Ethics) who try

to fight for the rights of the sex workers are funded by and in turn support the sex industry. Overall, the abolitionist stance has theoretical assumptions about the nature of prostitution and does not base its arguments on the lived experiences of the sex workers themselves.

Kempadoo and Doezema (1998) have pointed out problems with this thinking, suggesting it victimises women involved in prostitution and demonises men and their sexuality. The abolitionist approach leaves very little space for agency. The underlying definition of prostitution in this approach implies a categorised identity that has only negative connotations to it. It suggests a fixed role that dominates the person's other roles. The abolitionist aim, to uproot the sex industry, fails to understand and affect the trigger factors that lead people to sex work. Abolishing selling sex is only likely to push the activity further underground and leave the women in the trade even more vulnerable.

Later in second wave feminism, the 'abolitionist' approach to prostitution gave way to a less antagonistic strand of thought that came from Marxist/socialist feminists. These arguments tried to explain (quoting Catherine Overall's title) '*What is wrong with prostitution*?' without essentialising men and women.

Catherine Overall (1992) dismisses three conventional assumptions about sex work, arguments that have been used to claim that prostitution is 'wrong'. 1) 'Sex work is unsafe'. In contrast, Overall suggests that sex work is not inherently violent, that not all sex workers have faced violence and that not all clients are violent. Sex work could be conducted safely in (e.g.) controlled and protected environments. 2) 'There is coercion involved in sex work.' Overall shows that some female sex workers say they have entered sex work voluntarily and that they enjoy it. Thus, sex work is not *inherently* coercive. 3) 'Selling body lacks intimacy.' Overall argues that what is sold is an illusion of intimacy and that there are other jobs that are intimate, such as masseurs, and yet these are not considered objectionable.

To answer the question 'What is wrong with prostitution?', Overall argues that the problem is the relationship of prostitution and patriarchy, and that prostitution is an inherently gendered practice in which women are commodified and constructed as the sexual servants of men. She concludes that buying sexual services benefits men only. Shrage (1994) has criticised Overall, suggesting that the relationship between patriarchy and prostitution can not be drawn as simply as this. Shrage argues that, using this logic, there would be no prostitution in non-patriarchal, non-capitalist societies, which is not true. For example, Cuba has a socialist/communist politico-economic system and prostitution has been reported by (e.g.) Cabezaz (2004) and Clancy (2002). Secondly, Shrage (1994) argues that capitalism commodifies labour and exchange in general, rather than sex work only, and therefore this problem is not inherently sex work specific either.

Shrage (1989) is also critical of some assumptions that (e.g.) Jeffreys has made. Shrage challenges conventions around sex work of (e.g.) biologically over-sexed male sexuality, the natural superiority of men, that sex pollutes women, and reification of human practice. She argues that *these conventions* about sex work should be changed because they subordinate women rather than being social facts. However, Shrage (1989) concludes that sex work and marriage have been argued by Marxists feminists to be similar, but as sex work cannot be changed and as it is degrading for women, it should be objected to by all feminists.

Marxist/socialist feminist theorising has led to looking at sex work from a new perspective that made it possible to study the selling of sex from a pluralist viewpoint that allowed a manifold analysis and problematised universalist theories of prostitution. The rhetoric of patriarchal power, however, still remained central to the arguments.

The next paradigmatic turn came from questioning the power dynamics in the client- sex worker relationship, the exchange of resources, and the right to work

– instead of social oppression. Zatz (1997: 722) criticises Overall's use of the concept of power and argues that this analysis misses women's benefit from the encounter – women benefit financially from sex work. Sex workers' agency, which is present in Zatz's (1997) interpretation of the sexual transaction, has been propagated by sex workers themselves. In the 1970s, sex workers in the US and Europe started to mobilise and became the protagonists of their own rights arguing that what they do is work not prostitution (e.g. Nagle 1997; Pheterson and St James 1989). Looking at sex work as work – that does not involve coercion – is linked to human rights and recognises that people have a right to decide what they do with their bodies. I will elaborate on this discussion.

Work/choice

Sex workers' movements in the West promoted seeing prostitution as work rather than as oppression (see e.g. Pheterson and St James 1989). The approach is critical of the false consciousness-tone of the abolitionist stance and assumes that women like men have the ability to choose for themselves and have self-determination over their lives and bodies and should not be penalised or stigmatised for that. Furthermore, those who are in sex work should be seen as having the right to safe and healthy working conditions.

A clear watershed in the theoretical debate came from Zatz's (1997) writings. Zatz has provided a great critique of the abolitionist position suggesting that while it is preoccupied by ideal types of situations and societies it ignores the socio-political realities that enable sex work. If sex work is objected to based on women's vulnerability to violence, why not create policies that protect that? Following a Foucauldian approach, Zatz (1997: 300) argues that a negative restricting environment will keep on producing oppressive conditions, violence against women, legislation that hampers the rights of the sex workers and stigmatises sex workers as inherently different from other women.

'The woman's (objectified) body is used by a man. This narrative emphasises man's satisfaction and the woman's static body ignoring the monetary exchange. The other emphasises the monetary exchange and the man's static desire, ignoring the sexual qualities of the act. The man's (objectified) desire is used by the woman.' (Zatz 1997: 295)

Concerning the debate about choice and power within sex work, Zatz (1997: 280) argues that all sex-related practices are experienced differently and no theory cannot be represent all sex workers' experiences even when theories are specified to a time and a place. The sex workers' own arguments echo the abolitionist ones in that they see sex work as catering to the men's sexual needs, but instead of placing themselves as the victims of it, they gain from it. The radicalness of Zatz's argument in writings about sex work is that male sexuality is not first of all essentialised and not considered inherently violent, but the violence sex workers are subjected to derives from power imbalance that criminalisation creates or reinforces (Zatz 1997: 291). Zatz's theory parallels Judith Butler's (1990) idea of gender as performative in that similarly, Zatz questions the essentialisation of sex work and argues that sex work is produced specific to time and place.

While the 'abolishing' approach essentialises sex work by arguing that all women are inherently victims in the process, the sex workers movement has emphasised the sex workers' experiences rather than discussing theoretically the ideas of the oppression of women in and through prostitution. Sex workers do not come across a homogenous group that experiences things alike. Especially given that Doezema and Kempadoo (1998) point out that few sex workers actually conduct sex work as a 'full-time' job throughout their lives. Instead, many work part-time, irregularly and only for certain periods in their lives. Therefore, sex work is not an identity category based on moralistic variables but a mode of making money. Sex work entails that one sells 'sex', not the whole self. Zatz (1997) argues that the sex work movement is modelled from the gay movement albeit sex workers do not identify with their desire but their work. 'There has been a movement from acts to identity but for the

prostitute sex becomes the truth of the subject not by organising her desire but organising her labour' (Zatz 1997: 300). What is problematic with this approach is that calling sex work work has not necessarily removed the stigma on selling sex.

While the abolitionist stance emphasised the oppressiveness of all prostitute relationships, the 'sex as work' approach has opened up a new viewpoint of agency in relation to doing sex work. However, the latter approach has also created difficulties with regard to defining criminal aspects in relation to sex work, namely, the role of trafficking. Stepping away from the assumption that prostitution is inherently oppressive and emphasising the work aspects has lead to a conceptual differentiation between voluntary sex work, and trafficking and coercion. Differentiating forced and voluntary sex work has been criticised because it can be difficult to draw the line between them (Outshoorn 2005). However, protagonists of the 'work' approach are not ignorant of the coercion that trafficked women might be subjected to, but call for a critical, not sensationalist view of trafficking. Thus, an edited book by Kempadoo (2005) reconsiders trafficking and prostitution and tries to clarify the reality behind the tabloid headlines about women's sex slavery. Articles in this book suggest that trafficking, migration and sex work get mixed up and often the voices of the presumed victims are not heard. For example Kempadoo (2005) argues that the moral panic about trafficking is 1) often based on invalid numbers and lack of proper research and, 2) is based on upper and middle class norms of gender and sexuality, 3) is xenophobic in that migration by people who are poor and resort to sex work to make money are less desirable migrants than those who are highly skilled. Finally, not only women are trafficked for sexual purposes but also homosexual men, transgender people and boys. Kempadoo and several other writers in the book point out that the trafficking discourse demonises sex work and that not all trafficking leads to sex work and that not all sex work implies coercion. For example, Mix (2002) and Ruenkaew (2002) argue that many Thai sex workers in Germany had in fact been sex workers already prior to immigrating and that immigration to Europe was part of a longer chain of

migration, first within Thailand, in which women sought better employment opportunities. Also, Fredrick (2005) observes that, at the border of India and Nepal, NGOs that aim at helping victims of trafficking and preventing trafficking often count women migrating with men as victims of trafficking unless they have appropriate identification and invitations from the job that they are going to work in. When people are moving looking for better employment options, they do not always have a job, not to mention formal papers. Yet, this is not necessarily trafficking. The discourse of trafficking feeds itself without necessarily involving 'real' trafficking.

Also, Laura Agustín (see for example 2003; 2004) has conducted extensive research on migration to Europe and the US with reference to sex work and argues that many women she interviewed were in fact liberated female travellers in whose migration patterns sex sometimes played a role in making money, rather than them being 'victims of trafficking'. Outshoorn (2005) criticises Agustin's work for lacking a gender analysis of the sending countries, where job opportunities for women might be lacking or where care of children and family members is left with women. While this is a relevant account of the need to contextualise people's choices, Outshoorn's critique is misguided in that in Agustín's argument is not to prove the relationships between oppression and sex work but to point out that there is a moral panic about trafficking that is more often based on presumptions and stereotypes than 'facts'.

Theorising prostitution/sex work has predominantly come from feminist writings. The paradigmatic changes in theorising selling of sex have emerged from abolitionist approaches, which were critiqued by Marxist/Socialist feminist ideas about work and then led to a viewpoint that emphasises individual experience over a universalist theory of prostitution, and stresses pluralism of voices. The universalist abolitionist approach has been challenged by sex workers themselves and stirred up debate concerning choice, power, conventional ideas about men and women, sexuality and human rights. Attempts to understand sex work/prostitution not as binary opposites but as

diverse realities have brought out differing analyses to challenge the dichotomy. I think of this last approach as the *Post-Structuralist Research in Selling of Sex*. It attempts to understand the realities of sex workers in the UK in capitalist, pornographised, late-modern, individualistic society to take a step away from the philosophical debate of choice and rights. In the end, debate whether sex work is a choice is irrelevant and elitist. What matters is that those people who engage in sex work should not have to take risks to their physical and mental health while doing so. This way, I fall on the 'work' side of the debate, but not without critiquing aspects of this.

Post-structuralist research in selling of sex

The theoretical debate over whether sex work is oppression or profession has become somewhat fruitless, and there have been attempts to diversify the discourses on sex work. The ones analysed below take the viewpoint that there is indeed a difference between sex work and trafficking, but they do not attempt to find a single-solution to this debate, but rather attempt more nuanced analyses of the phenomena. This views sex work in a broader societal context and focuses on the cultural context in which sex work takes place, rather than limiting the analysis to the level of choice that women have, which has limited the theorising of prostitution/sex work. For example, Brewis and Linstead (2000b) and Sanders (2005a) have analysed sex work in the wider context of late-modernity and gender relations and analysed the lived experiences of sex workers. Brevis and Linstead (2000b) argue that sex workers' construction of their identity is an element of their identity building that is part of a reflexive identity-construction typical of late-modern era (for a sociological meta-analysis on this, see Giddens 1991). Consumption is central to lifestyle choices of the individual and, for the clients, buying sex is a part of that; and sex workers' bodies are commodified products of consumerism. Sex workers capitalise sex over other skills as individuals in a capitalist society (see e.g. Sanders 2005a).

Brewis and Linstead (2000a) see power in both parties of the transaction. However, because the 'closeness' of the transaction of sex to the women's body and mind, sex working women face a situation in which their identities are potentially under threat. For this, sex workers have built ways to manage the risks to their identity by distancing themselves and by being professional (Brevis and Linstead 2000a). In the process of protecting one's identity, Brewis and Linstead (2000a: 89) have defined maintaining a private and public separation as central. This distinction is extended beyond physical limits of space; being mentally absent is an attempt to maintain this boundary; a 'real' (sic) self separate from the one that engages in the sexual practice, and this is seen as a way to avoid the image of a fallen woman (Brewis and Linstead 2000a: 89). Allowing clients to enter only certain areas that are not personal are examples of keeping distance mentally and physically, which suggests professionalism (Brewis and Linstead 2000a: 90).

Regarding the theorising of identity by Brewis and Linstead (2000a and b) and Sanders (2005a), several interesting questions are raised about identity and self. The women concerned had developed and applied multiple means to differentiate themselves from their work. Many times, this reads as it being 'not my real self that does sex work'. This raises questions for the post-structuralist ideas of 'self' as centre-less as articulated by (e.g.) Judith Butler (1990), and self as individually negotiated trajectory as described by (e.g.) Giddens (1991). These different ways of analysing identity regarding an individual self depend on the underlying understanding of what 'self' is, an understanding that might be considerably different from the way in which Indian sex workers think of self, due to the differing ideas of self in that context.

In the subsequent article, Brewis and Linstead (2000b) see sex workers as operating among discourses about sex work, and their experiences reflect those discourses. Within the negotiation processes involved, there remains variation between the women's experiences and, particularly, their experiences regarding their own sexuality. Similar to the ideas of Zatz (1997), the impact of the

structures such as the legal status of sex work varies from place to place, the backgrounds of the sex workers are different and individual, and the conditions in which sex work is done, ranging from peep shows to street walking, makes a difference in how sex work is experienced. For example, those women interviewed by Brewis and Linstead (2000b) considered sex as work and, within this, their negotiating processes varied from struggling with the 'fallen woman' label to admitting that they like easy and gentleman-like clients and that they enjoy having sex with them, which suggests that a universal experience cannot be assumed. Brewis and Linstead argue that women compartmentalised their private and working selves. It was sometimes difficult to negotiate these, though, and at times these roles overlapped. The negotiation and overlapping was not always a negative process that caused stress, as suggested by the following example from McKeganey and Barnard (1996), but, for example, women also sometimes fell in love with clients, or enjoyed sex with them (Brewis and Linstead 2000b: 94). The acknowledgement that some women enjoy sex work is an important contribution that challenges conventional writings about sex work.

McKeganey and Barnard (1996) studied female sex workers in Glasgow. They suggest that women had difficulties accepting what they did, which caused them to feel stressed and conflicted. Similarly to the women described by Brewis and Linstead (2000b), these women had developed means to tackle this conflict by separating the role as a sex worker and the act from their 'real' (sic) self. They went through routines before and after going to work, such as only wearing certain clothes at work, separate from their normal clothing. Contrary to the women in Brewis and Linstead (2000b), these women did not say they ever enjoyed sex with their clients, but rather, while in the act, they would make an effort not to enjoy the sex and to refrain from doing sexual behaviour with clients that they liked with their partners. This suggests that within their sexuality they had a personal erotic area of sexuality and also 'occupational' sexual behaviour. It was not easy to prevent sex work from affecting the other aspects of their life. The most difficult relationships were with their partners.

Partners felt the stigma concerning sex workers as 'bad women' and were upset that their partners did not perform proper female behaviour, which created jealousy and ambiguity in them.

Also Sanders (2005a and b) conducted 50 interviews with sex workers who had entered sex work voluntarily and worked in licensed saunas, escort services, brothels and homes. Drawing on participant observation from 10 months of fieldwork in Birmingham, she argues that feminisation of labour in many fields of employment has included 'commodification' of women's bodies, i.e. the use of feminine heterosexuality as enhancing the capitalist transaction, such as the stewardesses, hairdressers and secretaries, etc. Sanders (2005a) argues that sex workers are capitalising on sex and sexuality rather than other skills or assets. The sex workers she interviewed sounded like entrepreneurs who were maximising their efforts with breast implants, who went to the gym to keep themselves fit, etc, responding to a presumed male fantasy. Naturally, due to differences between the UK and India and the material conditions available, the ways that entrepreneurship was conducted in India was different but not entirely unheard of among the women I interviewed. I would also see the level of 'pornographisation' in Western culture providing a major difference impacting on how the sex workers prepare themselves to make the most out of the transaction (for the negotiation in sex work, see in chapter 8), while social changes in Tamil Nadu regarding attitudes towards sex suggest that normative restricted ideas about sexuality are being challenged (more on this in the next chapter).

While the Western context is very different from the Indian, the above research are useful in that, while they analysed sex work in a broader societal context, they also recognised the cultural subtleties and differences and did not simply formulate grand narratives or universal theoretical generalisations (assumptions) of sex work. Zatz (1997) argues that sex work cannot be analysed on a philosophical/theoretical level, detached from the particular legal status of sex work. Maintaining an empirically-driven approach that analyses

individuals within the local context without imposing a viewpoint of gender oppression or HIV prevention, for example, is the best way to represent the experiences of people in sex work. Two exemplary studies that have informed my research are outlined below.

Ethnographical approaches in sex work research

The abolitionist approach, the sex workers' movements and the *Post-Structuralist Research in Selling of Sex* and, albeit not always so neatly divided, have used the language of 'rights' to justify their line of thinking and all have asserted that it is the right of women not to be sexually abused, and it is the right of women to choose what they do with their bodies. The divide is not simply theoretical, as some of the comments suggest, because the theoretical stances inform policies around trafficking globally and nationally, as well as NGO projects that work in HIV prevention or rehabilitation of sex workers. In this way, the existing policies and the conceptual environment e.g. cultural attitudes influence the ways in which selling sex takes place.

Attempting to avoid universal theories of selling of sex has led to analyses of sex work focused on particular contexts, trying to understand the women in sex work in their cultural contexts, avoiding colonial, patronising, ethnocentric interpretations. Looking at women in post-colonial contexts has also allowed an analysis that takes into account colonial histories, poverty, differing gender roles than those of the Angle-Saxon world, and globalisation. A particularly strong emphasis in the analysis of sex work outwith the Anglo-Saxon world has been the viewpoint of public health, which places the risk of HIV as central to sex work research. The following two rare examples investigate sex workers without placing gender oppression or risk of HIV central to the analysis; rather, they discuss agency and choice in the respective cultural contexts.

Gysels et al. (2002:182) investigated sex workers in Uganda, who all came from deprived backgrounds, had experienced rape and coercion and suffered

loss of children. Gysels et al. divided these women into three different categories based on how and with whom they practiced sex. The authors observed that women who had no financial support or existing funds and lacked assertiveness to demand more money were in the worst situation socially and financially – they got poor local clients, and were often forced to take any clients they were able get, many of whom refused to use condoms. Waitresses, the second category, who earned their money by serving in roadside bars, also made money by providing sexual services and catered to local men and passing truckers. These women were in a position from which they, in the face of a crisis, might have fallen into category 1, unless they had managed to save some money to start a bar of their own. Bar owners, category 3, were the best off financially, catered to well-earning truckers, had financial steadiness and were in the best position to negotiate condom use. Gysels et al. argue that, although the women were grouped as described above for analytical purposes, they did not form a 'group of their own'. Many of them did not define themselves as sex workers, and in a context in which sex is commonly traded for subsistence, labelling it as such would be simplistic. What was involved involved a relationship that is a combination of attraction, love, economic dependence, dependent children and the pressure of social norms.

Women often came to sex work as a result of being fed up with their marriages for varying reasons, e.g. being forced into marriage, marrying an older man they did not fancy, their husband having several wives, him not providing financial support and violence from the partner. Although, as the authors argue, this choice was more out of necessity than resistance, I would grant more agency and power to the choices these women made. All the women had so-called regular partners with whom they did not use condoms. Sometimes they were married to their regulars, and at times these men had other partners. The relationships with their 'regulars' did not always last very long, and both the women and the men might have other partners. The examples suggest that these Ugandan sex workers actively decided if they were pleased with their life situations and made changes accordingly; and, in this process, marrying men

and having sex with multiple partners were a part of the strategy employed to gain a better position in life.

This is a great example of a study of sex workers that does not try to investigate choice or oppression but discusses the women's lives as they have told them to the researchers. This example challenges the emphasis on the nature of sex work and instead discusses the economic realities experienced by women who engage in sex work. This research also suggests that ideas about sexuality as related to marriage or loving/intimate relationship are not universal.[4] For these Ugandan women sex was a mode of transaction that was embedded in relationships between men and women, whether that was a 'sex working' one or not. Here the conceptual boundaries of what is and what is not sex work becomes blurred.

The second example of an excellent piece of empirical analysis that places sex work in a broader social context that I want to discuss is by Rubenson et al. (2005), who studied sex working minors/adolescents in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, by using personal narratives. They argue that poverty is a major contributor to sex work and is why many adolescents and women become sex workers. In Ho Chi Minh City, many girls saw sex work as a way to get out of poverty, to make good money and to provide support to their families. There are poverty- and class-related struggles reflected in these life stories – and similar struggles can be seen in the Indian context, in that 'children' there too often have to work to support their families. Also, the family-centred social structure assumes that children support their families. Unlike many other analyses of sex work in developing countries, sexually transmitting infections were not at the core of the narratives analysed by Rubenson et al. (2005), although they were part of them, but individual life events and experiences were. The use of life stories can provide a much more personal sense of why sex work was conducted and how it had been entered and how it was

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[4] For an excellent discussion of this, see Pigg and Adams (2005).

experienced. The approach was not public health oriented and made attempts to understand the lives of the sex workers as they themselves understood them.

There are problems related to ideas about age in sex work due to the local legal status and perceived capacity for self-determination of minors. Giving a voice to minor sex workers provides an account of why and how sex work is experienced by them, particularly with the backdrop that adolescents are commonly thought to be more at risk of abuse, lacking in agency, unable to make informed decisions, and likely to be victims of coercion and luring. Indeed, coercion and rape were present in 9 of the 22 women's life stories; and 10 girls reported sex work as their economically-defined choice. One young woman, for example, knowingly sold her virginity and started to earn money as a sex worker (Rubenson et al. 2005). Rather than feeling demeaned by selling sex, and while concerned that her family might find out about how she earns money, she was also proud of maintaining her family and educating her brother (Rubenson et al. 2005). For three girls, sex work had provided a dream come true (*sic*), a luxurious lifestyle and a rich boyfriend and a way out of poor and oppressive conditions (Rubenson et al. 2005). These examples suggest that individual experiences are varied and cannot be reduced to victimhood.

Without trying to find one overriding, exclusive definition of the women's experiences, and keeping their multiple experiences in mind, the research of both Gysels et al. (2002) and Rubenson et al. (2005) show how much financial struggles contribute to how and why adolescent girls and women become involved in sex work. The structural reality of poverty and gendered employment markets indicates why and how sex work becomes an option for some women. And yet, the economic realities are not a sole explanation for why sex work is conducted for most poor women do not do it. In both pieces of research, the women concerned entered sex work because they could; doing sex work was in demand. Also, these research examples show that ideas of sexuality are not universal, and that sexuality is not only expressed in an idealised, heterosexual, loving relationship, something which not all people can

afford or prioritise. The connection of love and sex is not universally observed. The logic of this argument could be stretched to arranged marriages – romantic intimacy is not a precondition to these unions and might only develop after the sexual relationship is initiated. More than anything, these two pieces of research show that individual women's experiences are very unique and personal and that people cannot be labelled as victims or survivors. When the experiences of women in sex work are so diverse and multiple, this begs a question: does any of the theorising of sex work outlined above say anything about sex work in India?

Context specific?

Since sex workers have started to champion their rights, the concept of 'sex work' has become a politically correct way of addressing sex work/prostitution in the attempt to remove moralising from conceptualising the act of selling sex, and to emphasise it as a form of work. Wardlow (2004), however, challenges the idea that a globalised term like 'sex work' can be used when analysing different local contexts, because selling sex will take on different meanings in different locales due to local norms and ideas surrounding work, sexuality, gender relations, etc. She agues that 'sex work' as a global concept is empowering and meaningful in a context where 'work' in general is seen as respectful and labour is capitalised as an economic strategy, and where work is common for both women and men. In contexts where work does not have the same respected position, calling sex work work might not have the uplifting/empowering effect that it has in the West. While the sex workers' movement has originated from the West, it is reasonable to investigate the usefulness of the term 'sex work' elsewhere.

There are issues in using a universalised term such as prostitution or sex work in trying to understand people's experiences. I reject the term prostitution because of the stigma that it carries, and because it gets associated with street prostitution in a narrow sense. Sex work can take different forms ranging from

lap dancing and street prostitution to porn films and dominatrix, etc. Sex work in contexts where work is seen as liberating carries connotations of empowerment. In a context such as Warldow has suggested, where work is not empowering but is the root of discrimination (like in India, where it is intertwined with notions of caste and purity), I hesitate to use this term. However, despite reservations, I have still elected to use the term sex work in this thesis, for the following reasons.

Given the existing choice of concepts, I find 'sex work' more neutral than 'prostitution'. It maintains sex as central to the definition; someone sells sex rather than 'self', for instance. To maintain sex as central to the definition recognises the problems that are related to sex work in the Indian concept (sex is a taboo and selling sex is stigmatised and associated with the lower castes), and it challenges existing ideas about purity and chastity of women that can lead to sexual harassment, violence and threats to life. I also propose that sex workers should be studied taking into consideration their 'holistic' identity. Not doing so is a common problem in 'prostitution' research. One of the rationales behind the use of the concept of 'sex work' has been to stop using the stigmatising label of 'prostitute'. However, failing to look at other areas of the lives of 'sex workers' except for the problems that they face reduces them to 'sex workers', not seeing them as persons as a whole, just as much as calling them 'prostitutes' simplifies them as individuals. As a consequence, I use the term sex work, but it should be read bearing in mind that I do not refer to the globalised term; instead, I use it to provide a way of referring to exchanges of sex and commodities such as food and money specific to the Indian context (more of which I will write in the following chapters) while keeping in mind the problems and reservations I have mentioned.

While I have outlined the debates in this chapter, I have also critiqued various stances concerning sex work/prostitution. The abolitionist paradigm has a universalist and theoretical stance on prostitution and does not consider the women's experiences. This viewpoint is often based on middleclass values and

ideas of love and gender. It is useful in pointing out that violence against women is part of broader structural problems, often reflecting patriarchy. A solution to these problems of deeming all women in prostitution as victims comes from the *Post-structuralist Research in Selling of Sex* paradigm, which suggests a more pluralist stance to understanding women who do sex work. Looking at sex workers as having a choice in entering sex work has opened up as less patronising form of theorising. However, the research in this paradigm comes from sex workers who have entered sex work voluntarily, this does not mean that all sex work is voluntary. Zatz (1997) has argued that seeing sex work as oppressive *per se* ignores the effect of the context in which sex work takes place with regard to the norms, gender relations, laws, etc, which determine the discourses around which sex work is experienced. I then conclude that we must understand sex work from the perspectives of the people involved in order to understand their experiences, while also being open to all kinds of realities within sex work. Analysing sex work thus needs to consider the effect of the context in the way that selling sex is experienced.

This turns the gaze to Chennai, the locale of my research. In order to understand the trade of sex and the realities of the women in sex work in Chennai, it is necessary to understand the conditions in which it takes place. For instance, as I said in the beginning, HIV has analytical prominence in research on sex work in the developing countries. This was the reason why I was unable to avoid the topic of HIV in my research; it is ingrained in the discourse of sex workers in India. In the next chapter, I discuss sex work in India and Chennai in relation to its conceptual environment; I introduce the situation of HIV, the discourses around gender and poverty, the dominant ideas about women and sexuality, and alternative voices to these.

CHAPTER 3 Contextualising sex work in Chennai

In the previous chapter, I discussed theorisations of sex work/prostitution and feminist approaches to this that have predominantly originated from the West. I finished with issues concerning the generalisability of the experiences of sex workers and a called for a localised analysis of sex work. This chapter contextualises my whole thesis and describes Chennai, the locale of my fieldwork. Sex workers do not operate only in geographic spaces, however, but also in conceptual environments; therefore I will go on to discuss discourses on gender and sexuality that inform opinions and ideas about sex work in the context of Tamil Nadu.

There is no red light district in Chennai; rather, sex work takes place all across the town. Therefore, in order to write about the context of sex work in Chennai, I need to describe the people, places and ideas that contribute to the social construction of sex work. First I discuss the city's recent economic development, and the fact that Chennai is also a target for migration and is the centre of the film industry in Tamil Nadu. (A more detailed description of the sex work encounter will appear in chapter 8).

Then I outline three major discourses that inform sex work in South India. First, I talk about HIV prevention in Chennai. As the discourse of HIV is closely linked to sex workers, I will show how focusing sex workers only from the perspective of health has led to the *epidemiologisation of the concept of 'sex work'*. Second, I relate these to *discourses around gender and sexuality* in India and Chennai. Here I discuss dominant ideas about women and sexualities, tracing the genealogies of these ideas to the colonial era and nationalism. There are challenges to normative ideas about women's sexuality and monogamy, due to the prominence of HIV in Tamil Nadu and the counter-hegemonic narratives provided by *devadasis* and sex workers. The last section is an analysis of the existing literature on sex workers in India from the viewpoints of autonomy and agency: the *development discourse on sex work*.

The argument proposed in this chapter is threefold. First, I argue that a narrow focus on the risk of HIV has made 'sex work' and 'sex worker' epidemiological concepts which fail to understand the social realities of sex workers and their lives. Second, I show that there is a conceptual lacuna in literature concerning the gap between ideas about women as 'chaste' according to dominant upper caste norms in India, and the existence of sex workers. Third, I show how these discourses form the conceptual context in which the sex workers operate. The structure of this chapter reflexively engages with my understandings of sex work, gender and sexuality before, during and after fieldwork; how fieldwork informed how I read relevant literature, and; how these texts helped me to understand my experiences.

Chennai in changes?

Chennai (formerly Madras) is home to about 4,2 million people (2001 census), up to 7 million according to more recent unofficial estimations. The population of Chennai has risen rapidly from a British port to the fourth most populated city in India. The scenery of the streets of Chennai is urban, not determined by high-rise buildings but bill boards. Roads are chaotic, traffic-laden and defined by autorikshaws and buses tilted by the weight of the passengers. Compared to other Indian cities it is still common to come across a carriage pulled by buffalos amidst the motor cycles, bikes, and cars, but coming from elsewhere in Tamil Nadu, Chennai will strike as 'urbanised'. People sometimes live on the streets, and it is business as usual for flower, fruit and *tiffin* (snack) vendors on the pavement. Gender is rigidly observed in dress; the *sari* is the most preferred outfit for women while men use the pant-shirt (straight trousers and a collar shirt), immaculately ironed, or a *lunghi* (loin cloth folded around the waist). Young women, especially students, can be seen wearing jeans and t-shirts or the *salwar kameez*, loose trousers and a tunic with a shawl folded over the shoulders.

Chennaites are benefiting from technological and economical advancements resulting from structural changes made in 1991. Together with the cities of Bangalore in Karnataka and Mumbai in Maharastra, Chennai is the technology hub of India. Chennai colleges produce engineers at an immense rate for e.g. factories of global technology giants like Nokia, which opened a factory in Chennai in 2004. Internet cafés are mushrooming throughout Chennai and its youth spend time in malls such as Alsa Mall, Spencer Plaza and Ciscon's Complex sipping *americanos* and communicating with text messages. The new 'modern' lifestyle has changed sexual norms and dress codes among younger generations. To those who are computer literate, the Internet provides an opportunity to meet other young people of opposite gender without chaperones: meeting people in chat rooms, making and maintaining amorous relationships by email and MSN, and going through marital advertisements. Internet also gives access to sexual images and pornography in a way not seen before, more often than not internet cafés had computers in private cubicles, but more than once I sat in an Internet café without private cubicles and saw young men rubbing their penises through their pockets. These changes made the middle class youth that I met through friends unrelated to the sex work industry sometimes interpret their experiences using the metaphor of being torn between tradition and modernity. As norms regarding meeting the opposite sex are still restricted, this creates a demand for sexual services for young men and students, and the sex workers I got to know defined them as a regular client group. *India Today* (2006), a widely read weekly news magazine that comments on social and public issues, made a survey on young men's sexuality and sexual behaviour which suggested that 49% of young men in India had bought sex.

The prevailing sexual norms could be described as conservative, and sex and sexuality are sensitive subjects. An incident in 2005 involving a prominent film star and actress Kushboo illustrates this taboo. Kushboo spoke openly in public about the need to address issues of sexuality and made a plea for safe sex. She questioned the normative demand for women's virginity in marriage and men's

open sexual expression of their urges. Her comments created an outcry; she was seen to denigrate Tamil women's morality. Vehement criticisms were made and there were demonstrations against her, and crowds equipped with brooms and flip flops (a sign of humiliation) gathered in front of her house and the office of the Tamil Film Artists Association (Anandhi 2005). Her effigies were burnt and there were calls to banish her from Tamil Nadu. However, changing sexual norms can still be observed in such public attempts to deconstruct the taboos around sexuality and create more realistic discourses of it, but also in the increased amount of pictures of scantly dressed women used in advertising in public. Obviously, not everybody is willing to accept this and a further example of conservative values at the brink of a cultural change was reported in *The Hindu*, a national newspaper printed in Chennai, in May 2007, from the BJP party state leader L. Ganesan. He argued that the BJP is concerned about the changes in the civil society that promotes sex education, stressing that the BJP is against all sex education, especially in schools (*The Hindu* 30th May 2007). Sexual norms may be changing but in the public sphere conservative attitudes still prevail.

Sex work - diffused phenomena

Various people told me that J. Jayalalithaa, the chief minister of Tamil Nadu during my fieldwork, had earlier eradicated brothels in the broader Chennai area and that, after this, the sex work scene had moved further underground. These people told me specifically about brothels in Tiruttani and Mahabalipuram because they had been in these places at the time. Tiruttani has a famous Hindu temple and attracts pilgrimages – I also interviewed some *devadasis* there – and Mahabalipuram is a famous village with Pallava Era temples. These villages were described as having brothels because they attracted a lot of tourists, although the eradication was not restricted to these areas. Ms Angeline, a human rights lawyer, told me that the eradication of brothels was a central government order that had taken place a few years before my fieldwork; she did not remember exactly when, and no-one else addressed

this clearly. In fact, very few women mentioned these changes, but the one woman that I interviewed in Tiruttani said that the brothels that she had been in were gruesome places in which women were kept by force. The existence of brothels does not necessarily suggest red light districts and, in the absence of a red light district or mass-brothels in Chennai, I will describe the organisation of sex work more generally here, while the details of this are provided in chapter 8.

As the capital of Tamil Nadu, Chennai is a centre of education and a target of migration and transportation, all of which attract people from elsewhere in Tamil Nadu and the neighbouring states. Chennai has sizeable Telegu, Malayali and Kannada minorities, and altogether 6.6% of its population are migrants (more than 400,000 people), a third of them from other states (Census [India] 2001). Some of the migrant women end up selling sex, while some of the men contribute to the clientele of sex workers. As well as migrants who settle there, truck drivers (whose wives stay in their original villages and cities) also contribute to the clientele of the sex workers. Train and bus stations and road sites are common venues for soliciting. In Tamil Nadu, APAC researched truck drivers and their helpers and concluded that 24.2% of them had paid for sex (APAC 2005:19).

Because they are uprooted from the controlling monitoring of their original communities, these client groups – students, migrants and truckers – have the freedom to indulge in the sex industry, and they also potentially have the money to spend on purchasing sex. Sivaram et al. (2004a) found that men often bought sex after having consumed alcohol. In their study of wine shop customers, the men also bought sex were described as an equal mix of married and unmarried men, from a range of occupations, economic statuses, working in government and private jobs, or were students or self-employed e.g. as autorikshaw drivers and day labourers. The cost, as well as the sex worker, was often shared. Men often encouraged each other to have 'riskier sex' to get value for money and gave alcohol to the sex worker hoping that she would adjust to

their sexual fantasies. Alcohol fuelled men's behaviour - the men said that alcohol enabled them to be more confident, experiment sexually, and enjoy sex in general. They also reported that alcohol made them more aggressive and sometimes led to violence and forcing sex workers or partners into sex. However, there are other factors (besides the population of uprooted men) that contribute to the demand for the sex work. I will discuss the norms that control women's sexuality and restrict the types of sex that they normatively can and will perform, namely fostering an unwillingness to have oral and/or anal sex, which men then seek out from sex workers. However, an explication of men's motives in relation sex work is not the aim of this study; my observations are made from the accounts of the sex workers, rather than from interviews with clients.

Chennai is also famous for its film industry. Films are immensely popular among the Tamils, and sex workers often solicit in film theatres. The relevance of the film industry to this thesis is threefold. Film studios are situated near Kodambakkam and Vadapazhani bus stations. These areas are among those in which many of my informants lived, but they were not akin to red light districts and selling sex was not restricted to these places. As elsewhere, the lure of the glamour of the film industry is a big draw for people who are seeking the road to fame. The film industry hires hundreds of thousands of people as supporting actors, actresses and dancers, and the supporting actors and actresses union alone has 100.000 members. Many sex workers were supporting actresses or working as beauticians in the film industry, and providing free sex was defined as a 'must' in order to get a job. The same madams who arranged sex contacts also worked as middlemen to help women get into the film industry. Indeed, the film industry is very much associated with power in Chennai: film fan clubs have been analysed from the angle of political power (Dickey 1993; Rogers 2007) and film stardom has been a prerequisite for political careers (see e.g. Forrester 1976). Most prominent politicians in Tamil Nadu have been film stars, including M.G. Ramachandran and J. Jayalalithaa, who was the chief minister of Tamil Nadu during my fieldwork. This connection relates to Tamil

nationalism. Watching films is a common leisure pastime, and Vera-Sanso argues that the film industry in Tamil Nadu is the main source of distributing nationalist ideas and discourses to the public. While in the theatre, the audience relives these experiences and comments on the events. While films distribute nationalist references (for an analysis of this, see Pandian 1992), they also have the role of influencing public norms around gender and sexuality. Penny Vera-Sanso (2006) argues that dominant ideas of women's sexuality derive from nationalist processes and that film can be seen as a medium for distributing these ideas. Prostitution has been dealt with in *Arrangetram* (1973) and *Mahanadi* (1993). While these two films are not sexually explicit, many blockbusters have song and dancing scenes that are. Films often flirt with the boundaries regarding sexuality, but always within the acceptable norms. While opportunities in education and industry point to economic development, and there are some changes in norms regarding sexuality, economic development has not improved the lives of everybody.

Violence of development

Development in Tamil Nadu and Chennai has not affected everyone, and the gap between the well-to-do and the poor is increasing (see e.g. Kapadia 2002; Sundaram and Tendulkar 2003). The ability to access computers and mobile phones, to gallivant in malls, consume films and so forth, suggest a certain level of economic status. However, development in Chennai has not been equal for all. 25% of Chennai's population still live in slums (Census [Tamil Nadu] 2001). The processes of development are also gendered; Moghadam (2005) suggests that neoliberal structural adjustments occurring since the 1980s around the globe have particularly impacted women, and have increased insecurity and vulnerability among women, leading to the feminisation of poverty. For example, while the feminisation of labour has created some jobs for poor, uneducated women, the conditions under which women have to work remain appalling and undermine condition standards agreed upon by labour unions. Padmini Swaminathan (2002) provides a critical and detailed analysis of

demographic factors of caste, education level, gender, work participation and urban vs. rural areas in Tamil Nadu, and she concludes that gender and caste inequalities are still actively being created. Economic changes have lead young Scheduled Caste women to the labour market, but this usually entails work that is unreliable and unprotected by unions and under conditions that are unhealthy or tedious. Where strict Brahminical norms prevail, working also has deteriorating effects upon women's reputations, as visibility in public means that women are outside the control of their families, which raises questions about their reputation and honour.

Kapadia (2002) has argued that, with economic development since the 1990s, the position of middle class women in Tamil Nadu has been declining due to *sanskritisation,* the process by which lower castes adhere to the upper class and caste norms practiced by traditional Hindu communities. Bereman (quoted in Gorringe 2005) argues that *sanskritisation* is least prevalent among the tribal communities, the urbanised and modern elite, and the lowest castes and classes. Gorringe (2005) argues that a change towards upper caste norms and values is evident in the increasing prevalence of dowry instead of bride price, as well as female infanticide in Tamil Nadu, which suggest changes in practices around gender, sexuality and women's autonomy.

Much of my fieldwork was spent in slums with people to whom the Internet, malls and cafes were not an everyday reality. The women I got to know lived from hand to mouth while working at jobs to support themselves and their families. Swaminathan (2002) has reported that poorly educated women in general from Tamil Nadu enter the labour market because other income sources are not enough to support their families. Entering sex work was done under just these types of pressures: the women that I interviewed were structurally already in a vulnerable position, as they had relatively little education, had entered the labour market to support their families, and had little training to access jobs that would have supported them. While the women I interviewed used these rationale to explain why they had entered sex work, and structural reasons such

as poverty and gender subordination were undeniably part of the 'violence of development' (as neatly defined by Kapadia et al. 2002) in their lives, poverty and gender subordination do not explain why some women enter sex work while others do not. With the lack of a functioning welfare system in India, the ways in which women understood and negotiated the constraints of gender subordination and poverty through sex work and how they felt about this is the subject of this study. I will describe the residential setting of the women and venues of sex work with more detail later, but because the women reside in conceptual as well as physical spaces, I will now turn to the discursive aspects of sex work and HIV.

NGOs in development and HIV interventions

While the Indian government has a decentralised social welfare and healthcare system, charitable societies and non-governmental organisations play a major role in filling the gaps of the dysfunctional healthcare and social welfare system in India and Tamil Nadu (see e.g. Caplan 1985), and NGOs are seen to be well connected and capable of recruiting many people in a short amount of time. Reproductive questions have been an arena long addressed by NGOs in India, and HIV has become an extension of this. Since the finding of the first case of HIV in 1986 in Chennai, HIV prevention has become a major target of international aid and development work. In Tamil Nadu, the 'trendiness' of HIV in development work can be observed in the fact that many NGOs which in 2004-2005 worked in HIV prevention had a previous history of working in some other field (also, while parts of Chennai and Tamil Nadu were destroyed by the Tsunami in 2004, many NGOs switched over to working in Tsunami relief, as money was pouring into this area).

Steinbrook (2007) argues that epidemiological data from India is much more imprecise than from e.g. South Africa, due to inadequate ways of collecting data and limited numbers of venues where this data is collected. Among 14-to-50-year-olds, the estimate of HIV prevalence is 0.5% to 1.5% percent, and the

spread of HIV has shown some signs of slowing (Steinbrook 2007). Steinbrook (2007) argues that about 95% of women and men in Tamil Nadu have heard of HIV, which is more often than people in other states have heard of HIV. When it comes to knowledge of the continuous use of condoms needed to prevent the spread of HIV, there was a huge gap in women's and men's knowledge: 82% of men knew that continuous use of condoms reduces the risk of HIV, as compared to 42% of women (Steinbrook 2007). Similar findings have been reported by Pallikavadath et al. (2005), suggesting that, in rural Tamil Nadu, while 82% of women knew about HIV and 72% knew that it was possible to avoid contracting it, only 31% knew how to do so. This suggests that women are in a disadvantaged position in terms of accessing correct information about HIV, and are thus at risk of contracting HIV when men do not initiate condom use consistently. Brahme et al. (2005: 383) suggest that only 7.4% of men visiting a sexual health clinic in Pune used condoms regularly; some of their partners were regular girlfriends/partners, which might bring this number down, while the percentage was higher if the partner was a sex worker. Low levels of accurate knowledge among men have also been reported by APAC (2004) and Sivaram et al. (2005) in Chennai and Tamil Nadu, and by Arunkumar et al. (2004) in Kerala. The reasons why women are generally less aware than men of HIV and STDs lies in the women's socially subordinate position, deriving from ideas about women's honour, leading to women being secluded and e.g. not being able to go school. In contexts where women's sexual purity is linked to women's honour, having knowledge of HIV and condoms can be seen as openness to promiscuity (Steinbrook 2007). Sadly, having less knowledge of HIV and the need for condom use in a context where nearly all women are sterilised as the main form of contraception increases their risk of HIV and other infections.

Twenty years after the finding of the first case of HIV in India in May 2006, India was announced by UNAIDS as having the highest number of HIV infections in the world - 5.7 million were estimated to be infected with HIV. Of the Indian states, Tamil Nadu has the highest incidence of HIV. The first case

of HIV in India was found by the research group under Dr. Suniti Solomon, after a group of sex workers were deported from Mumbai. Dr. Solomon is still an important figure in Chennai around HIV; her legacy has informed several HIV-prevention projects, some of which are associated with John Hopkins University and funded by USAID. The conceptual connection of HIV and sex work was already made at that time, and has since remained an inescapable union. HIV prevention in Tamil Nadu focuses on high risk groups and particularly on sex workers. The general practices on which HIV prevention is based are negotiated between the main funding bodies and the Indian government. HIV prevention from the viewpoint of health has become the main arena in which sex workers are addressed, and the attention to sex work has therefore been on its health aspects rather than on its social dimensions.

Efforts to curb HIV have addressed the sex workers and created an interesting opportunity to look at the governance of sex work. I will now examine how the sex workers are addressed from the viewpoint of health, and how the notion of 'sex worker' has become an epidemiological concept.

Discourse of sex work as a health concern

Apart from the *devadasis* – women who performed dance and religious rituals in Hindu temples, which at times included sex with priests and pilgrims, and who were deemed as prostitutes – a limited amount of literature exists on sex work in India. The lack of literature up to the finding of the first infection of HIV in Chennai in 1986 suggests that sex work prior to this was largely underground – particularly after the banning of the institution of *devadasis* in the 1950s – and that it was ignored, tolerated and academically unrecognised. Only a limited amount of literature was available regarding sex work prior to my fieldwork, even though Venkataramana and Sarada (2001) found evidence of between one million and 16 million sex workers in India in 1999. This is a huge range and it confirms that very little accurate knowledge, particularly knowledge that is not tainted by moral judgements, is available.

In India, the genealogy of the concept of 'sex worker', apart from the *devadasis*, has emerged from and along with the discourse of HIV. The connection between HIV and sex work has been made since the beginning of the AIDS epidemic and has fed into an approach by which sex workers are seen as central figures in HIV prevention, an approach influenced by guidelines of UNAIDS and the World Bank (I will elaborate on this connection more in chapter 5). Heterosexual contact with sex workers is seen as the reason for 85% of HIV infections, according to NACO, the Indian government board that administers HIV prevention (NACO 2004: 14). Sex workers are defined as members of the 'high risk group', who are at risk of HIV transmission to themselves and others. The concern over HIV has brought the subject of sex work to public/academic interest and has created a plethora of writings on HIV prevention through sex workers (see e.g. Asthana and Oostvogels 1996; Blanchard et al. 2005; Evans and Lambert 1997; Evans 1998; Jayasree 2004; Nag 2001; O'Neil et al. 2004; Pardasani 2005; Rao et al. 2003). Since the onset of HIV, nearly all social scientific articles on sex work have been restricted to the most effective prevention models positioning sex workers as key actors, while there was hardly anything written about sex workers before then. Of course sex work occurred prior to it being reported on, but this can nevertheless be seen as an example of how discourses 'create' and construct social phenomena.

Most of the literature on HIV and health neglect social aspects related to sex work. Blanchard et al.'s (2005) work demonstrates the limitations of the HIV discourse regarding sex work. They compared the socio-demographic characteristics of 414 *devadasi* women and 1174 other sex workers in Karnataka in relation to HIV prevention policy implications. They concluded that *devadasi* women tended to start sex work at a younger age, were more often from a rural background, were more likely to be more commonly illiterate, worked more often within their homes, and were less likely to report client violence or police harassment (Blanchard et al. 2005: 139). They note

that this latter point might be because the religious status of the *devadasi,* as well as their rootedness in rural communities where people know each other, so that, if they work from home they might be less visible to 'random' and potentially violent clients and police (Blanchard et al. 2005: 145). Blanchard et al. (2005: 145) also conclude that, while elsewhere in India sex workers' movements have been hampered by reluctance to identify as a sex worker, '*devadasi-hood'* could form a good basis for political movement due to a lower level of stigmatisation and a higher level of acceptance in their communities. Their findings are fascinating but their research is done only in the context of HIV prevention. While sticking to the health viewpoint, the article misses the opportunity to analyse, for example, gender relations, 'occupational dynamics', individual experiences, meanings, and a counter-hegemonic discourse that challenges the dominant discourse of sexuality whereby women's sexuality is restricted to marriage. These examples suggest that 'sex worker' has become an epidemiological category almost by definition and research such as by Blanchard et al. (2005) ends up reinforcing the epidemiological concept of sex worker and maintaining sex workers at the centre of attention in curbing the spread of HIV.

The idea that sex workers alone transmit diseases is not new. For example, in late 19th century, *devadasis* and other women were made available to the British and other soldiers in the Madras compound (Raj 1993). The institution of sex work was regulated, and women were demanded to undergo regular checkups for sexually transmitting diseases. If they were found infected, they had to leave and submit to treatment and 'rehabilitation', while the soldiers were not put under any scrutiny. This suggests a moralising discourse on prostitution and, considering the imbalance in attitudes between men vis-à-vis women, suggests again that women's transgressions of the moral norms and the responsibility for these transgressions was not seen similarly to men's.

The focus on the health aspects of the lives of sex workers has led to a neglect of the social aspects of their lives. Hardly anything is known of these women

beyond their health aspects, and a social analysis is needed. There is a presumption that HIV transmissions occur through sexual contact, which challenges what we know about the sexual norms that restrict women's sexuality and their interaction with men in general, bringing the concepts of sexuality and gender to the fore. Writings of *devadasis* and sex workers in HIV prevention enable ruptures to be seen in the discourse of pure and chaste womanhood central to ideas about femininity in India. The existing research fails to explain the conceptual tensions here - if discourses of purity and chastity prevail, how are we to understand the existence of sex workers? In accounts of sex work and HIV prevention, the crucial aspects of gender and sexuality are gravely ignored. I will turn now to the few academic writings about sex, sexuality and gender in India and briefly review them.

Discourses around women and sexuality in India

Prior to my fieldwork, there was a conceptual void in my understanding about sexuality and women in India. On the one hand, sensuality has been long been a part of the Hindu religion, culture, society and social order. 'India' had produced the *Kama Sutra*, which praises sexuality and sexual practices and devotes a whole chapter to courtesans and prostitution. Erotic temples with carvings of people in all sorts of gender combinations, in most imaginative positions, are found all over India, such as in Konark in Orissa. On the other hand, in writings about women's behaviour, positions related to kinship and their functional role in the homes, women were associated with purity, family honour, spirituality, asexuality, and the domestic[5]. These writings are restricted to practices around gender, and do not touch upon the issues of sexuality and sexual behaviour with reference to erotica in particular.

Women's subordinate role in north India and under control of, first, the father, then the husband and, finally, the son has been demonstrated by Jeffery (1979),

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[5] See Caplan (1985) on upper-class women in Chennai; Hancock (1999) on orthodox Tamil Brahman women; Jeffery (1979) on upper class Muslim women; Trawick (1990) on Tamil upper caste women; Wadley (1980a) on Tamil women in general.

Jeffery et al. (1989) and Jeffery and Jeffery (1996) while books by Caplan (1985), Hancock (1999), Jeffery (1979) and Trawick (1990) suggest an upper-class and caste discourse regarding women. They all talk about norms that restrict women's behaviour toward men in particular. These writings suggest that women in India have little autonomy over the issues of reproduction and sexuality, such as whom they marry, and who they are expected to have sex with. Femininity is associated with purity, submissiveness, chastity, and modesty in dress, speech and behaviour. A practical method of monitoring women's honour is '*purdah*', the seclusion of women from the public. Jeffery (1979) studied a respected Muslim community in Delhi and argues that *purdah* is not just a Muslim practice but a ubiquitous South Asian practice that takes varying regional forms. Variations in *purdah* range from covering the body with a full *burkha* that has a net over the eyes, to covering the head with the sleeve of a sari, to covering the whole upper body with a *dupatta* (a scarf that is folded over the chest), to avoiding eye contact and communications with men completely.[6]

These ideas of women's honour and purity have been traced to colonial processes and also to the idea of women as the subjects of nationalist struggle for independence. The contemporary ideas that idolise women as mothers and as submissive are parallel to Gandhian ideas about women that were put forward in the nationalist movement (see e.g. Chatterjee 1989; Dell 2005, Kishwar 1986; Patel 1988; and Tambiah 2005, who reported similar findings regarding the Tamil movement for independence from Sri Lanka). Ideas about women as mothers, bringing up children and being inherently chaste, passive, and non-violent (Kishwar 1986; Patel 1988) were a tool to negotiate colonialism in the struggle for independence, and used to show the moral

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[6] Predominantly feminist debates have debated the role and level of agency involved in *purdah*. Jeffery (1979) argued that the women themselves have a role in the maintenance of *purdah* and are not just socialised into this role and simply pawns of patriarchal gender oppression but also agents able to see 'beyond themselves'. Women do not take purdah without complying and particularly the younger generation, are aware of the limitations that purdah and the isolation it causes. This analysis allows more agency for women. Women are not victimised 'third world women' but the analysis of agency recognises that women have various amount of power e.g. depending on their position in the family – the newly married wife, the unmarried daughter, a mother-in-law, widowed grandmother etc.

superiority of the Indians over the British. Women's bodies acted as the symbols of the purity of their families, communities/castes and the nation at large (Chatterjee 1989). Women's purity maintained the purity of race. The discourse of women as chaste and under *purdah* crystallise in the idea of women's honour as family honour (although the degree of this varies locally). Women's honour as the symbol of family honour and interrelated with the reputation of their family members, communities and castes, explains how and why women's transgressions are judged more harshly: more is at stake (see e.g. Das 1975 on a discussion of this).

These ideas, however, are challenged, for example, by the everyday practices of *devadasis*, by the rape of lower caste women and by love marriages. These ruptures in normative sexual behaviour challenge the project of sexual purity, in that not all women act upon the norms of sexuality and that some men seek sex outside their marriages. These above norms stand out as upper caste and class-based ones and are not universal and prescribed positionings.

Besides the dominant upper caste discourse of women's sexuality, one that is restrained to marriage, counter-hegemonic voices exist on the margins. *Devadasis* set markers and represent disruptions to ideas about women as either controlled virgins or monogamous, auspicious wives. The institution of *devadasi* has been traced back to 100 A.D. (see e.g. Kersenboom-Story 1987). Though the *devadasis* have received some recent attention, much of it has been historical in its context (see e.g. Kersenboom-Story 1987; Orr 2000) rather than discussing contemporary *devadasis*. Very little is known of the contemporary *devadasi* institution, but there is evidence that the institution has not disappeared entirely, but exists in e.g. Karnataka (Blanchard et al. 2005; O'Neil et al. 2004) and is tolerated underground. Under the colonial/reformist discourse, *devadasis* were viewed from the Victorian moral perspective as victims of sexual oppression. Social reformists had lobbied against the institution of *devadasis* since the late 19th century, and it was eventually banned. These reforms were part of the construction of the nationalist ideology

of women as pure, sexless and chaste. The *devadasis* posed a threat to the coherence of the discourse of the Indian people and nation as pure and morally superior as compared to the British. From a structuralist viewpoint, the *devadasi* were the polar opposite of the idea of the pure women enshrined in the nationalist discourse and were seen as impure, disease-ridden, and sexually active. Even worse, they were women who at times held powerful positions in their communities, and who gained impressive properties. Kirsti Evans (1998) has argued that this viewpoint essentialised the institution of *devadasi* as sexual service and 'sexualised' the institution as prostitution which was due to a lack of understanding of their rituals and social relationships involved. Sexualising *devadasi* demonises the whole institution, and again suggests a moralising attitude to women's power seen as not controlled and against the dominant upper caste ideology regarding gender and sexual norms.

These moral ideas inform how sex workers are seen. Sex workers fail to adhere to the moral norms of chastity and monogamy, and because of this they are heavily stigmatised. Sex workers are seen as the main vectors of HIV, a view maintained by the statistic that 85% of HIV infections are sex work-related (NACO 2004: 14). The persistence in focusing on sex workers as key figures in HIV prevention echoes the need to construct an 'other' in the nationalist project. Gisselquist and Correa (2006) argue that HIV transmission has for more than two decades been mistakenly associated with heterosexual commercial sex. They triangulated various data and suggested that, contrary to the above reported statistic, the rate of HIV transmission by sex workers is actually 2-27% (*sic*) of the 5.7 million transmissions. Gisselquist and Correa argue that persisting in blaming sex workers is due to cultural moral ideas (2006: 741). In this project, prostitutes are juxtapositioned as the 'other', in contrast with the 'good women' in their homes (Ghosh 2004: 108-110).

Ideas about women's roles as restricted to familial roles, under intense scrutiny in terms of what options they have due to the preoccupation with family honour and chastity and conservative ideas about sexuality, had shaped my own initial

understanding of women's positions and roles in India before going to do my fieldwork. I saw a gap between the upper caste and class norms and the literature on *devadasi* and sex workers regarding HIV prevention. The literature on HIV suggested that not all women are bound by the discourse of women as monogamous, auspicious, sexually modest and economically looked after by their fathers, husbands and sons. If the normative idea of monogamy and sexual restriction to marriage was not 'true', then what would the sex workers be able to say us about sexuality in a context where sex is a taboo? How do some women end up in sex work? I wondered how the Tamil sex workers fitted into these moral codes and practices, and I doubted the generalisability of discourses of femininity to the realities of many women's lives.

Tamil discourses of gender

Having questioned the universalist assumption of gender and sexuality, women in India, Tamil Nadu and Chennai unfolded as an actually heterogeneous group. Instead of assuming a pan-Indian account of gender and femininity, it can be seen that the position of women is affected by caste, religious and class backgrounds. For example, there are regional differences between north and south India. On a range of scales, Tamil Nadu is among the most developed regions in India (on a par with Kerala). Specifically, variables that relate to women – such as women's literacy, and infant and maternal mortality – suggest that women are in a better position in Tamil Nadu than elsewhere in India. Other examples of this include the tradition of bride wealth rather than dowry, the celebration of girls' puberty, and a low performance of female infanticide, all of which are perceived to reflect respect towards women. Dyson and Moore (1983) and Sundari Ravindran (1999) have suggested that women's more 'advanced' position in Tamil Nadu is due to higher autonomy. Dyson and Moore (1983) argue that this is related to the predominant kinship system in South India, in which cross-cousins marry each other; therefore, due to this proximity, women who are married stay within the natal family. Other arguments have been related to agriculture and growing rice, which is more

labour intensive than growing wheat, as in north India (Dyson and Moore 1983; see also Das 1975). This has required women's input in the labour force and, thus, women have a relevant and respected role in society, which has led to respect for women in other areas.

Other ideas about women's advanced position in Tamil Nadu relate to the Self-respect Movement in Tamil Nadu, headed by E.V. Ramaswamy, who took a deliberate stance against upper caste ideas about caste and gender. The Self-respect Movement valorised Tamilness against a pan-Indian experience, but also encouraged marriages of partnership, the equality of women, and lower caste participation in politics. Anandhi (1998) argues that, in the Self-Respect Movement's emphasis on equality for women, women were encouraged to take control over their bodies by using contraceptives, and marriage was encouraged as an individual choice based on love, rather than an economic-familial expectation (Anandhi 2005; George 2003; Gorringe 2005), therefore questioning the patriarchal roots of marriage and stressing women's autonomy. Penny Vera-Sanso (2006) argues that, in Tamil Nationalist politics in the 1940s, some of these ideas of E.V. Ramaswamy were dropped and instead it emphasised 'Tamil identity', in which part of the ideology was to see women as chaste and pure mothers and to valorise men. Ironically, the latter stance is not very different from the pan-Indian nationalist stance, and the ideas of women's purity and honour as indicative of family honour allows for the scrutiny and control of women's behaviour more than of men's.

Besides geographical divisions in India, caste and class status affect the position that women have. Findings from Van Hollen (2003) in Chennai suggest variations among women in terms of class. Van Hollen's (2003) studies of poor women with regard to reproductive practices showed that the women concerned were able to go out of their homes, as they had to work to support their family income. This could suggest that they had more autonomy as compared to their upper-class counterparts. Swaminathan (2004) also reported an increased sense of self-worth among women who worked outside the home.

Gorringe (2005) discusses Dalit women's autonomy in relation to Dalit anti-caste movements in Tamil Nadu and argues that, even though Dalit women are more autonomous in relation to upper caste women because their work allows access to the outside world, they end up having a double burden of paid work and housework. A similar critique was also suggested by Swaminathan (2004). The upper castes can afford to keep their women in the house, but this does not necessarily mean that women who have access to the outside world are empowered. Sundari Ravindran (1999) reminds us that women's equality with men is multifaceted and argues that women in Chennai are more autonomous in the public domain in comparison to their northern counterparts, but that they remain under the control of men in issues relating to the domestic, and in particular they do not have a voice on issues of sexuality. This raises interesting questions about sex work. Have sex workers broken through this rule? Do sex workers have power in the sex work encounter? Can they have power in the encounter when women in general do not have power in relation to sex?

Concerns about women's sexuality tie into ideas of gender and autonomy. Tamil discourses of femininity also idolise motherhood and women's self-sacrifice. Women's structural roles are related to the domestic: looking after the children, supporting the husband, maintaining the home and preparing the food. In her study of orthodox Tamil Brahman women's domestic rituals, Hancock (1999) suggests that these practices are not merely menial tasks but are seen as semantic rituals that construct and contain feminine power, *shakti,* that resonates respect towards Tamil Nadu women in general. Wadley and others (1980a) suggest in *'Powers of Tamil Women'* that, because of this power associated with Tamil women, they are given particular respect. Wadley (1980b) suggests that *shakti* is seen in god-like terms to empower women with the ability to control life and death. *Shakti* is associated with self-sacrifice, chastity, morality and creation (which is particular to married women with children), and this power status makes women auspicious (Egnor 1980; Hancock 1999; Reynolds 1980). Women's auspiciousness derives from 'pure' behaviour and marriage, but inherent in women's lives are also inauspicious

phases, such as menstruation, childbirth and widowhood (Hancock 1999).[7] Because women can have almost supernatural powers, they are seen to need to be kept under the control of the men (Egnor 1980; Wadley 1980b). Uncontrolled women's sexuality and sexual behaviour could have drastic effects and might lead to loss of family honour.

Transgressions of the moral norms can lead to domestic violence, ostracism, even death. Domestic violence is common in Tamil Nadu and has been defined as a tool by men to maintain power in the homes (in Chennai, see Geetha 1998; Go et al. 2003; Subadra 1999; in Kerala, see Busby 2000) and on a grand scheme of things ensures that women are submissive to patriarchy. Penny Vera-Sanso (2006) argues that men are violent when women challenge the social order: talk back, fail to make agreeable food, challenge the in-laws, or when they are seen outwith control (e.g. if women go to work outside the home). This suggests that domestic violence is related to men maintaining a powerful position over women. These arguments suggest that the discourses that surround gender subjectivities and the norms that control women's behaviour and sexuality are not just disembodied discourses but can potentially have destructive and dangerous material results. When women have very little power over questions of sexuality and live on the brink of violence, it is not surprising that HIV is also prevalent in Tamil Nadu. The above arguments highlight that women's honour is tied to women's sexuality and sexual purity, and show that there is little space to manoeuvre within the norms, and moral sanctions preserve these.

Overall, very little academic literature exists regarding the sexuality of women with specific reference to sexual behaviour and erotic pleasure in India. The dominant ideas of sexuality relate to upper- and middle-class ideals. These upper caste and class norms privilege keeping women at home, and women who work outside the home have been stigmatised as less 'chaste'. Women's work has been more prevalent in the south of India, particularly among poor,

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[7] Impurity of childbirth has also been observed by Van Hollen (2003) in Tamil Nadu and by Jeffery et al. (1989) in Uttar Pradesh.

often lower caste women, which has led to more open discourse about sexuality within these communities (Kishwar 1999: 216-221). However, being able to work does not mean that these women are immune to the norms of sexual restrictions and monogamy. Presuming an essentialised Scheduled Caste sexuality would propose a positivist idea of culture and a prescribed understanding of sexuality.

An example of individually negotiated sexuality comes from Viramma, a Scheduled Caste woman who told her life story to Racine and Racine (Viramma et al. 1997) and gave an account of her life that involved sexual desire and pleasure, while Jyoti Puri (1999) talked about the desires of middle-class women. Both these accounts suggest that there are times when individuals can recreate and challenge norms around sexuality, times when they buy into them and when they may challenge them. Even if Tamil women have access to work and are theoretically seen as more autonomous, they are still bound by the prevailing sexual norms.

The discourses of HIV and patriarchal attitudes towards women inform attitudes towards sex workers. These attitudes are also present in academic writings about sex workers in India in which sex workers are seen as victims and/or culprits. I will turn to this next.

Development approach on sex work

I have shown that the rise of HIV in India and Tamil Nadu has brought new interest in the sexual behaviour of people who are seen as risky to themselves and others. The academic writings on the subject reflect discourses and ideas embedded in HIV prevention and the patriarchal attitudes that demonise women's sexuality. Accounts that address social concerns around sex workers and their lives are rare, and I see such work as the '*development approach to sex work*', as it emphasises empowerment and the human rights of sex workers. The aim of these is still to minimise that risk of HIV, however and they continue to fail to depart from the viewpoint of HIV.

Echoing the Western debate about sex work as oppression or profession and sex workers as agents or not, attitudes toward sex workers in publications about sex work/HIV in India range from perceiving them as victims to seeing them as self-determined individuals. Much work states that sex workers are socially stigmatised, exploited, oppressed and powerless. Rao et al. (2003) go to the extent of arguing that the women even see themselves as fallen and outcaste. While this may be so, using it straight-forwardly as evidence of victimhood is a one-sided interpretation of the women's agency and fails to understand that women might have differing reasons for saying this. Indeed, Oldenburg (1990) argues that the lifestyle of courtesans in Lucknow was actively chosen and reflects the women's desire for financial independence and sexual control over the restrictions on female behaviour and limitations to domestic roles.

A victimising assumption that 'no woman would be a prostitute if they had a choice' is present, for example, in discussions by Pardasani (2005) and Rao et al. (2003). This reflects the moralising ideas of upper caste sexuality in around the underlying assumption that having sex with many men for money is exploitative as well as against dominant understandings of monogamy. Rao et al. (2003: 595, 600) argue, somewhat contradictorily, that women do sex work as the only alternative to destitution, given that sex work can provide twice the amount of money compared to the other jobs that are available to them. There is an assumption here that sex work is incomprehensible as a preferable option, even if it provides more money, which neatly reflects the view that sex work is not an active choice, but has to be explained as an act of desperation to be understandable. Similarly, Pardasani (2005) argues that women end up in sex work as a means to survive the economic conditions because of their ignorance. Her argument echoes the abolitionist stance to prostitution: that some women are unable to understand their best interests and fall into prostitution. These views ignore the agency of the women concerned and assume that there is a universal mode of sexuality that corresponds to upper-caste ideals, and departing from this derives from desperation and represents victimhood.

While some of this work essentialise sex workers as victims and without agency, some see agency in the lives of sex workers with reference to HIV, because creating an environment in which sex workers can fight for their own rights and become empowered is seen as crucial for effective HIV prevention (Asthana and Oostvogels 1996; Blanchard et al. 2005; Evans and Lambert 1997; Evans 1998; Jayasree 2004; Nag 2001; O'Neil et al. 2004; Pardasani 2005; Rao et al. 2003). Through empowerment, the rise of the notion of sex as work has allowed space for identity-based politics. This notion is discussed by Ghosh (2004: 110), who argues that sex workers in Durbar Mahila Sangham, the first sex workers' collective in Calcutta, actively shifted opinions away from the idea that sex workers are 'polluted' (*sic*), towards the language of human rights and particularly that of workers' rights. However, despite this, compared to Western research on sex work, a debate about the right to (sex) work (in safe conditions) is sparse in Indian the research literature.

One exception to this is Jayasree (2004), who takes a human rights approach to sex work and discusses the problems of sex workers from Kerala from the sex workers' point of view. This approach criticises the Indian legal system, which allows interpretation of the law against sex workers and justifies acts of violence against sex workers by legal authorities such as the police. Jayasree (2004) also argues that sex work is 'work' and emphasises sex workers' right to oppression-free sexuality, and thus separates sexuality and the act of selling sex. Another example is Avin (2004), who argues that rights and empowerment are necessary conditions for any effective health message. Therefore, she suggests, HIV prevention cannot be a narrow health-focused approach to sex work, but must be an overall human rights-based approach that addresses advocacy, stigma and violence, and that targets people with power around sex workers, such as pimps, brokers, brothel owners, clients and partners (Amin 2004).

To a greater or lesser degree, all of the academic writings on sex work discussed in this chapter focus on HIV. Attempts to understand the experiences of the sex workers has moved a step toward granting the sex workers agency rather than making them into objects of HIV prevention by seeing them as victims or as scapegoats for the spread of HIV. However, research within *the development approach to sex work* which calls for empowerment and human rights does not question the current state of affairs socio-politico-culturally. Namely that India and Tamil Nadu are highly patriarchal societies where economic survival is increasingly difficult, poverty is strife, violence against women is common, and women do not have a say in matters of sexuality. Moreover, work which suggests that involving the sex workers is crucial to making HIV prevention more effective, is still conceptually reductionist to health aspects. Overall, it fails to analyse the social realities of the sex workers lives outside/beyond the discourse of HIV. In these writings, sex working women's identities and experiences remain absent. Indeed, this is the rationale of my research, which aims at bringing out the experiences of the sex workers. I write about the sex workers in Chennai among whom I did fieldwork from the social point of view, and will provide a holistic account of them as individual persons in their broader context, rather than just as vectors of HIV transmission.

Conclusions

I started this chapter with a description of Chennai as a city, and then discussed relevant concepts that inform and form the discourses within which sex workers operate. Women in India are limited to the home according to upper caste and class norms and their sexuality is closely restricted in the name of family honour. These norms are enacted with some regional and caste and class differences but overall femininity is associated with purity, chastity and submissiveness. Taboos about sex explain the gap in literature; investigating questions of sex often results in blank faces and uncomfortable moments in research. The discussion of sex work only in the context of HIV has reduced

'sex work' and 'sex worker' to epidemiological categories. Research on HIV/sex work contains little from sex workers themselves and fails to bring out their accounts and opinions.

Consequently, social aspects of HIV in India around who the sex workers are and how they come to do sex work remains a mystery. Is it poverty and being victims of male sexuality that motivates women to do sex work, or are there agentic, empowered, or unconventional choices behind this? How do they feel about sex work against the backdrop of strict chastity norms? What are the major issues in their lives? What kind of experiences have they had while doing sex work? What was the meaning of sexuality in their lives? Furthermore, do sex workers say something about sexuality outside the dominant discourse? When the NGOs address sex workers as key to HIV prevention, what is the relationship between the sex workers and the NGOs? What kind of governance is created through this relationship? Clearly, there are things unsaid and unwritten in the dominant discourse on sexuality and which the HIV prevention discourse does not explain, and sex workers are key to exploring such things. How I went about answering these questions is described in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4 Methodology

In this methodology chapter, I will discuss the process by which I went about investigating the gap between the 'chaste' women in India and the increasing literature on HIV prevention and sex work. I wanted to do fieldwork among the sex workers in order to understand them from their own perspective within the broader context that they live in, rather than limiting myself to HIV interventions. Because of a lack of other possible points of access, I used NGOs that work in HIV prevention as my gatekeepers. This raised methodological and other concerns, particularly given that I had wanted to avoid the baggage of the HIV and health discourse! Considering that the aim of my research is to get away from the viewpoint of HIV, it might be surprising that I used NGOs to access sex workers. I was, however, constrained to do so because, as noted earlier, there is not a centralised red light district in Chennai through which a researcher (or a client or anyone else for that matter) could access sex workers, and so it was only through these NGOs that I was able to make contacts.

Working with sex workers was charged with ethical/political as well as methodological concerns. Sex workers are a stigmatised and marginal group, which affected the ways in which I was able to access them, as well as what they felt they were able to say in the differing contexts that I met them, and what was said about them by others. I will analyse the problems that arose during my fieldwork and how I tackled them – particularly those that derived from working with NGOs, problems of representation and standard narratives, and my being associated with the NGOs. These problems relate to the fact that sex workers are marginalised, and the topics I was interested in are a sensitive subject in India and laden with shame. Despite this, sex workers as research participants were not powerless as I discuss in chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9 in particular.

Access

I will start the analyses of my fieldwork and the process of my data collection around reflecting on the methodological challenges related to sex work research that Shaver (2005) has identified. Sex work research has been traditionally conducted through red light districts/ tolerance zones and/or larger indoor venues such as brothels and saunas (often located in these areas). In Chennai, however, there is no red light district, and sex work is an underground activity (Asthana and Oostvogels 1996). There is no particular area that I could have strolled around, as Shaver (2005) did in Montreal, San Francisco, Vancouver and Toronto, or as McKeganey and Barnard (1996) did in Glasgow, making contacts and collecting data. Because Chennai does not have a red light district and sex workers do not wear anything that distinguishes them from other women, this left me with the only choice of accessing sex workers through venues that they did use. The only such venues in Chennai were the NGOs that conduct HIV prevention.

Shaver (2005:2) argues that, when using NGOs for access, there is a danger of drawing conclusions that actually represent only part of 'the population', those that use the NGO, which would then lead to representing the group in a homogenised or one-sided manner. Thus, I was aware of the problems that working through organisations might impose on the representation of sex workers. Using NGOs as points of access might have a considerable impact, depending who the NGOs were networking with amongst the sex workers. Not all sex-working women might be involved with these organisations. There was a chance that I could be introduced to women from particular groups of sex workers – street-based, home-based, brothel-based women, call girls and third gender sex workers (groups of sex workers defined by Asthana and Oostvogels 1996, from the time before mass-brothels were eradicated in Chennai) and not others. In the initial stages of fieldwork, the women I was introduced to were active participants of the NGOs: sex workers who worked as *peer educators*

and *counsellors* i.e. who were therefore in prestigious social positions in the community. They represented an authority in the community and might not represent the interests of the women who were not in this position.

During data collection, I tried to make sure that I would not fall into the representation trap by making sure I interviewed people from all kinds of backgrounds. The fact that Chennai does not have a red light district determined the fact that I had no clear boundaries as to who would be an informant (as long as they did sex work). When I was not defined by organisational 'space', I looked for women from different backgrounds and modes of sex work to get a picture of the 'boundless' social construction of sex work.

I tried to ensure that I had accounts from women who differed in terms of the 'way' they worked, demographically in terms of their age and marital status, and also in terms of the relationship they had with the NGOs. However, I found that the categories of sex workers defined by Asthana and Oostvogels (1996), often also used by the NGOs, were not helpful in relations to the women that I met. I ended up with a sample which is representative in limited ways. All my respondents visited the NGOs, but not necessarily regularly. Some of these women were new to the NGOs and started visiting them during my fieldwork, while 23 women, over a third of the women I interviewed, were peer educators in one or the other of the NGOs that I visited (the full details of the sample are provided later). Sex working women who try to hide the fact that they do sex work are unlikely to visit the NGOs, due to their fear of being seen and associated with them (and thus exposed). Young sex workers were difficult to access, and I was also not able to access the high-class sex workers that Asthana and Ostvogels (1996) suggested operate in Chennai, even though they were unable to interview any.

During my fieldwork, I enquired about these high-class call girls from my informants, and received diverse responses. Some NGO activists told me that

high-class call girls do not exist, but that some street-based sex workers who are more educated and know how to speak a few words of English pretend to be a 'high-class women' and get more money like this. Other respondents argued that such women are actually not professional sex workers, but rather college girls who need extra money to support their lush lifestyle. In other countries/cities e.g. Bangkok in Thailand, the obvious places where such women would be available are on-line and in five-star hotels, where women would either hang out or be 'available at request'. A quick browse on-line revealed one English-language (generally associated with the upper-class sex workers, and thus also catering to international tourists) professional escort agency that offered call girls in the biggest cities in India, including Chennai. Also, I frequently visited the clubs and bars of the five-star hotels with my Western expatriate friends and never saw anything. Most of these expatriates were men who knew what I was researching, and I had asked them to tell me if they ever encountered anything like this outside of my presence (no further questions asked, guaranteed!). None of them ever did. It seemed there were more rumours than actual data about high-class sex workers. I cannot be sure whether the meetings that were promised to me and then cancelled were agreed upon just to please me, or if such women actually existed.

Women used various modes of sex work practice and rarely stuck to one, and I discovered ones in addition to those defined by Asthana and Oostvogels. Sticking to the definition of sex workers by Asthana and Oostvogels was not useful, which also raises questions about the use of rigid categories in general. In the end, it was not straightforward which groups or categories sex workers worked in, in the streets, brothel, homes etc, because they tended to go where work was available rather than operating in set categories. This also differed over their working lives, so that any categories that they are 'in' are not only fluid but also time-specific.

The presumption that women from various 'categories' of sex work would provide differing accounts made me try to ensure that I had participants from

varying life situations/contexts. Residence in Chennai affected which NGO networks sex working women used. I was able to get to those networks by snowball-sampling with the help of those whom I already knew living or working in particular areas or involved in particular organisations. Age group and marital status turned out to be more difficult. Young girls and unmarried women were hesitant to 'come out', and meetings promised to me were often cancelled. I learned about these unmarried women as I got to know their mothers or through the NGOs and I interviewed one minor (the ethical implications of minor sex workers will be discussed later). Finding ways to access women who had a less close relationship with NGOs also proved to be difficult. Still, it was up to people whether they agreed to be interviewed. Overall, whilst not a generalisable sample, I gained rich data from a diverse array of women. Details of the composition of the women that I interviewed will be provided in chapter 6.

Shaver pointed out the risk of generalising about sex work from one sub-group, such as the street-based sex workers and that doing so runs the risk of reinforcing the existing stereotypes and victimising or demonising the whole group of sex workers (Shaver 2005:2). I have kept this fully in mind. I take the stance that women's experiences are individual and personal; I do not assume essentialised identities that could be grasped by trying to access women from particular modes of sex work. These categories are not based on identities but on settings that pose certain problems for the women who work in them (e.g. street-based sex workers are more vulnerable to violence due to their visibility on the streets, etc.). The experiences of women in these sub-categories cannot be generalised from, although NGO staff and other experts in the field tended to do so. Using 'demographic' variables would not ensure a comprehensive representation of the group of sex workers either. The married women I came to know all experienced sex work differently; making generalisations of 'the experiences of married women', or those of 'who work on the streets' would do violence to the personal experiences and interpretations of the individuals concerned. This, of course, does not mean that general themes are not found in

the women's accounts and experiences. To enable both of these levels of interpreting the data from my fieldwork, the detailed and the general, I have provided an analysis that points out both of these. Chapter 5 includes specific individual accounts and general themes are discussed in chapters 6 to 9 extracted from accounts as they were told to me in the contexts we were in, time-specific, encouraged by our interpersonal relationship, my agency as a researcher, and the interview format.

Above I discussed how using NGOs could potentially be a problem in terms of the characteristics of the group of sex workers accessed. There were other problems in using NGOs as intermediates, which I will discuss next.

Participant observation in NGOs

I worked altogether with six NGOs, and I visited and discussed with people in another eight NGOs, one CBO (community based organisation), and visited two government offices and health clinics. I have included descriptions of the NGOs that I worked with in Appendix 2. I have not included those organisations that targeted MSMs (men who have sex with men) and *aravanis* (the Tamil word for *hijras*, a group of third-sex/gendered people) as they were not the focus of my analysis. I divided my time between the NGOs, so that I initially stayed in them for one to three weeks to get a sense of their services and activities and their relationship with the sex workers. After this, I made sporadic visits to keep up contacts or made phone calls to see how they were doing. I tried to keep up contacts so that any changes would be told to me, and to get information on any meetings with sex workers. Through these NGOs, I first got to know the sex workers that I later interviewed (listed in Appendix 1). I did not face serious problems in finding sex workers because the local NGOs worked closely with them. In fact, I was in my first meeting with sex workers only a week after I landed in India[8].

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[8] Although, before starting my fieldwork, I had made some contacts with HIV prevention NGOs in Chennai by exchanging letters, my first actual contact with these NGOs was serendipitous. I was hanging out in Mahabalipuram, a village 50 km south of Chennai, to

I conducted participant observation in NGOs and attended the daily programmes that they ran as well as the more rare celebrations and special events. I interviewed staff members, I partook in staff meetings, peer educators' weekly/monthly meetings, the World AIDS day celebration, the peer educators' annual conference, various occasions when NACO/ USAID/ TNCACS/ CAPACS/ APAC officials or media representatives visited the projects and sex workers came to interact with them, staff trainings by sex workers, and trainings for peer educators. I joined staff on field visits and observed staff interacting with the sex workers in their homes, NGOs, and in large group meetings. The activities of NGO staff members could be summarised as: writing reports and planning budgets, arranging celebrations and special events, making field visits, networking with funding bodies/other NGOs, and making written notes on their various activities. When I spent time in NGOs, I mostly had the role of observer-as-participant. Gold (1958, in Davies 1999) has defined four roles for the participant observer: complete observer, observer-as-participant, participant-as-observer, and complete participant. I attended all the above described activities and talked to people, asking about what they did and why they did it, but I did not exactly 'do' what they did, nor was I completely a 'fly on the wall' either. Conversations with staff members were, in most cases, done 'on the spot' with several people pottering about in the offices. I was able to arrange one-on-one interviews with 24 NGO staff members and 3 other people working on the subject, details of which are provided in Appendix 2.

When peer educators and sex workers visited the NGOs, this was usually around a theme or planned activity, which took most of the attention and time

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recover from jetlag. I was drinking tea in a café when I saw a small A4 poster on the wall with Tamil text and the red ribbon, a symbol for HIV, on it. As I did not read Tamil then, I asked my friends what it was and they told me it was an education and information poster put up by a local NGO that had an office down the road. I visited them the next day and I spoke to the project coordinator, Ravi Chandaran, who then took me to the head office of the NGO, ICWO (Indian Community Welfare Organisation), in Chennai the following day. I was lucky in the sense that I happened to come across an NGO that had good relations in the field, which enabled me to conduct my initial interviews a week after landing. Following this initial contact with ICWO, I made contacts with other NGOs by snowballing through NGO staff and sex workers.

of the people. Overall, sex workers did not spend so much time in the organisations, so that I could have spent my days there waiting for them to come along outside the planned schedule. So, when there was not a special occasion for the sex workers that brought them into the NGOs, sitting in the NGOs was not very successful in terms of making contacts with sex workers. It was, however, a good time for conducting participant observation of the NGO practices.

Problems with working with NGOs

A challenge of using NGOs to access sex workers was that some of their existing practices impacted the research process, and these implications were difficult to avoid. For example, aside from *peer educators,* when sex workers visited the organisations they received a small incentive for attending. Particularly if there was a function to which prestigious visitors, media, foreign guests, or representatives to funding boards from India or abroad had been invited, the attendants received a grant towards their travelling costs, lunch, tea and biscuits, and a gift such as a sari, or crockery. The same applied if there was a sex workers' annual meeting or any other function to which a large number of people were invited/needed. However, the problem with incentives was that women came along because of the incentive. Staff in the organisations complained that women would not come if there was not an incentive. It is unclear which organisation started the practice, but there was the ubiquitous opinion that paying women had corrupted them and that they now fail to see that coming to the NGOs was in their long-term empowerment and health interests, rather than providing just a short-term financial benefit.

An illustrative example comes from an annual conference for sex workers. 'Normally' there was rivalry between the networks of sex workers and HIV positive women who were infected by their husbands. However, the HIV positive women's network was happy to join this annual meeting when there was a sari as incentive. In this function, when the NGO staff started to

distribute the gifts, there was a small stampede. In that particular meeting, I made some new contacts, one whom I then visited the next week. When I met with her, she was utterly shocked and surprised when I asked her about sex work: she said she was not into that at all, that she had only come for the sari. The practice of paying people to attend meetings affected my research. Some women actively asked me for money to interview them, and I will discuss this further in the section on ethics.

The second problem related to using NGOs as gate keepers follows from the question of incentives. As I showed in the example above, non-eligible people attended meetings in the hope of the incentive offered, which made it increasingly difficult to define the sample and to know who was a sex worker. This bias was inherent in the target population of the NGOs and reflected in my sample as well. A few times, someone I had known for a while through the NGOs declared that she was not a sex worker. I wondered then why these women were in the NGOs talking about condom use and clients. I believe that these women were perhaps sex workers but did not want to admit it openly. Incentives certainly had an impact on why they came to the NGOs, but other factors were also likely to be involved in these women's denials, such as the fluctuating nature of the definition of a sex worker[9], the limited nature of work available for unskilled women, the availability of the NGOs, and the stigma on coming out as a sex worker. The only way to find out about such things was to talk to the women more, and I will elaborate on the interviewing process next.

Interviews

Because of problems related to the NGO approach focused on HIV and health, as well as the limitations of the hectic NGO schedules, which did not allow intimate one-on-one discussions amidst the daily routines, I was proactive in trying to arrange interviews with the sex workers outside of the NGO offices. To make contacts through the NGOs, I chatted to people informally when there

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[9] I will return to this in chapter 9.

was a sex workers' meeting at the NGO offices. Other ways of making contacts included going to large group meetings of sex workers arranged by the organisations or by using the existing contacts in the field. Often, after the initial introduction on the NGO's premises/at large group meetings, participants invited me to visit their homes, either with the staff or on my own. This way, I got to know where these women lived and then later went along by myself, if I knew I was welcome.

If the NGO was popular among the sex workers, I interviewed them on the premises privately. Alternatively, interviews were conducted in the women's homes. In all cases, if someone specifically said they could not take the risk of allowing me to come to their home for a visit, as it might raise questions among the family or neighbours, or because someone might overhear our conversation, I did not impose myself.

The interviews started from demographic data, which were provided based on what the respondents felt were meaningful to them (and, looking back, I got this demographic data quite haphazardly). I preferred using an open-ended way of interviewing over a survey-based method, to differentiate myself from the NGOs that used surveys or case studies for their proposals, to help build trust.

> *Sripriya: 'Someone came from the local NGO, they used to come and ask for some case studies for writing proposals and get some money like that [laughs]. So I didn't think you were like that but I had a doubt.' (Interview transcript p.16 lines 29-34, 25th April 2005)*

I wanted to make the participants feel that they were heard and that I was interested in them personally rather than just 'filling numbers', again as the NGOs did. I wanted to catch the in-depth meanings and understandings of what they said, which was often at the expense of 'facts'. The interviews had a loose idea of being focused on auto/biographies (see e.g. Cotterill and Letherby 1993; Jeffery and Jeffery 1996; Stanley 1992, 1993; Stanley and Wise 1993 on auto/biography as method) in order to get a sense of the women 'as a whole' rather than through a fixed idea of them as sex workers.

In the end, I conducted 56 interviews with female sex workers, and the list of these women in provided in Appendix 1. I formally interviewed my key informants (18 people) two or more times. Interviews were predominantly led by participants. I asked questions to clarify and elaborate when necessary. Once a particular topic had dried up, I would introduce another theme. I used varying interviewing techniques, such as using questions and statements to find the best approach, to allow each individual to express herself, and small summaries to clarify whether I had understood correctly what the response was. I probed further if the answer was short or vague, as was usually the case with regard to questions around sexuality. I was aware that probing could be taken as leading, and I was careful not to do this very directly or in a particular direction, so that the respondents would not feel a need to manufacture answers. Sometimes the women did not need any questions; sometimes they were very resentful in their responses. In the case of the latter, I reapproached these topics indirectly in order to understand whether they were rejected due to sensitivity and shyness or whether I had asked something that the person had not considered or that was insignificant to them. Talking about my relationships or role divisions in my 'typical family' enabled participants see how their practices were different from mine, to see beyond what they took for granted and explain how things worked in their families. Sometimes it was useful to take the role of a daft foreigner to whom people had to explain how things were. Because I was 'married' (in reality, I was not wedded but I lived with a male partner during my fieldwork, which suggested to the women that I was entitled to have sex and that I knew about it), I was able to refer to 'men in my society' and to sexual relationships, and in this way I was able to initiate discussions about clients or husbands, moving on to how women felt about these relationships and ultimately to questions regarding their own sexuality. Also, I was able to generate discussion on taboo topics such as women's sexuality and sexual practices by asking about clients or condom use. Interviews lasted from around 45 minutes to about three hours.

An official interview was often marked or symbolised by my bringing out the recorder. At this point, I reconfirmed issues of consent, anonymity and confidentiality, and told them of their ability to withdraw from the interview. Written consent was difficult to obtain because most of the women were unable to read or write. Usually, at the end of the interview, I gave them the head phones so they could listen to parts of the interview, and this created good laughs.

The interview themes are presented in italics below, and in parenthesis are some of the more specific topics that I explored under each theme.

Background

Introduction and demographic data

Describe your family and other important relationships when you were a child and now.

Sex Work

How did you become a sex worker? Describe the first experience and feelings after that. How have your feelings and thoughts changed over time, if any? What do you think of sex work in general?

Do you have other sources of income?

What kind of experiences have you had as a sex worker? (Regarding men – clients, husband/partner, police, other sex workers, family relationships, HIV, condom use.) If negative, how do you overcome these? If positive, ask more.

What are the main concerns in life and regarding sex work? (also gender roles, children)

How do you think other people see sex work? (Stigma, why there are sex workers, shakti, HIV)

Do you do have supportive and encouraging relationships? (NGOs, other sex workers, non-sex workers, family members)

Gender and Sexuality

How do you manage having sex with different men? (Heat, body fluids, does one enjoy having sex, implications for personal erotic sexuality and

relationship with husband, thoughts about men and women and male/female sexuality in general.) Ask more about any references to sexuality they make.

The structure above was to help me to get started in the interviews with the backdrop that I was investigating sex work and the women were introduced to me as sex workers. Especially when I had just a one-off chance to interview a woman, we tended to stick to these themes. With those women with whom I was able to build a relationship and have several visits, the themes were discarded and we talked about all possible subjects, ranging between religion, films, pets, children, me and my life, Tamil culture and how I saw Chennai/India, and especially food, etc. Doing so enabled me to talk with them about other dimensions of their lives, such as motherhood, gender, sexuality, children, and enabled me to explore ways in which power, resistance, and positive self-esteem, or means of negotiating their role as a sex worker, might occur.

The subjects of these interview topics are sensitive, some of them taboo and laden with stigma. When I went to do interviews about the above-mentioned topics, I now see that the stigma surrounding sex work and the fact that I was often seen as associated with the NGOs affected the kind of data I got.

Standard Narratives

While doing the interviews, I sometimes felt wary of the accounts I was told because some answers came across as 'standardised' (for a similar experience in sex work research, see Nencel 2005 in Peru). When I read my transcripts at face value, I believe I get an understanding of what the women thought I wanted to hear. Next, I will analyse in which contexts I felt I was mostly likely to receive standardised answers, and the origin and content of what I call 'standard narrative'. I will discuss this further below.

Because sex work is a stigmatised and semi-illegal activity[10] in India, one can expect difficulties in receiving answers. Shaver argues that the problem of reliability derives from the stigma of sex work: manufactured answers might be given due to concerns about anonymity, out of the need to protect the identity of the narrator, to reflect a politically correct version of reality, or the participants might simply say what they think that the researcher wants to hear (Shaver 2005: 2). The other major influence on the standard narrative was the HIV discourse. As I have discussed, the HIV discourse is the dominant mode of talking about sex work in India, and women who engage in sex work have close ties to the NGOs. The HIV narrative included that 'everybody always uses condoms', and 'sex work is conducted due to poverty'. I witnessed several NGO meetings in which sex workers were indoctrinated to give certain answers that were in line with the official HIV discourse and the aims of the NGOs. These reflect the concerns of the health-related research reviewed in previous chapters, which, concerning the lives of the sex workers, privilege the health viewpoint and HIV prevention over social variables. Ultimately giving these answers was intended to convince donors of the quality of the work that NGOs conducted and I became an extension of this.

The fact that the sex workers reiterated the NGO rhetoric raises the need to do extensive fieldwork in order to penetrate this rhetoric. I do not see the fact that the sex workers used standard narratives necessarily because they lacked a voice of their own, or as a problem of reliability, as Shaver has suggested. Instead, it should be treated as data, as it tells various things to the researcher about the context in which the research is done. Studying responses that reiterated the NGO rhetoric in the context of the interview setting and relating this to the broader context of society illuminates why the women might have felt they had to give standardised answers and which discourses were available

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[10] By this I mean that the law regarding sex work is very ambiguous. Soliciting is illegal, but technically one could take money for sex if this happens privately. Then again, pimping and living off of the income of a sex worker is illegal, which means that partners, children, etc. could be prosecuted for living with a sex worker. Furthermore, many people are not aware or their rights or the legal status for sex work, and are therefore subjected by police to harassment and demands of free sex and monetary bribes

to them. Their use of the rhetoric of HIV reflects how powerful the discourse of HIV is in the lives of the sex workers and how they had adopted this rhetoric as their own. The use of this rhetoric is a form of agency. The rhetoric of HIV gave the women an opportunity to steer the attention off more personal questions but also more broadly an opportunity to negotiate a more positive identity.

While I was interested to understand the lives and experiences of the sex workers on a more holistic level than what the previous attention on HIV has allowed, I made attempts to 'get beyond' this discourse of HIV that was manifested in the standard narratives. The first way that I managed get beyond the standard narrative was by exploring the sex workers' lives outside the NGO context. Through this it became clear that there were many situations in which sex workers did not use condoms, and that there were many reasons why women entered sex work. I will analyse this relationship of global HIV policies and the HIV discourse later on; here I will show how I was boxed into an NGO-related role initially during my fieldwork, which affected what I was told. The following factors had an impact on how and why standardised answers were given and in which contexts women were more prone to use the HIV discourse rather than talk more openly about themselves:

• If the person's life story was not coherent over several interviews

• If the answers were particularly short and repeated the same answer to all questions, such as: *'I am poor. I do sex for money. I need money.'*

• If money was asked for openly (there was an incentive)

• If the person was in a hurry, obviously just in it for the money rather than out of an interest to talk about herself and her ideas

• If we were in a large NGO gathering

• If we were in a small NGO gathering where there was a particular topic that directly related to the NGO's activity

• If we were in an NGO gathering that was aimed at funders

• If someone that I trusted had said something contradictory

• If the narrative included a rumour or gossip that I had heard elsewhere that was contradictory (this was also very interesting)

Aspects that might have a 'biasing' effect, but not always so, included if:

• There was an NGO member of staff present
• The interview was conducted on our first meeting

The most personalised and least standardised responses came in these settings:

• In the person's house
• When there were no others present, or perhaps in the presence of only one best friend who was also a sex worker
• In the office of an NGO that the person was familiar and on good terms with, in a room where there were no others present
• After several meetings, after rapport was created

Why standard narrative?

I found a helpful way of looking at the responses that people gave me was to unravel these by using Ochberg's (1994) concept of the audience. Ochberg situates (life) stories around the formation of social identities. He argues that peoples' identities are related to others' reactions to them. An individual's 'public record' is affected by how others see that individual, and this record can be influenced, formed and reformed by telling stories about one's life (1994: 134). So, the audience plays a significant role. Using Ochberg's understanding of social identity, they were reconstructing their biographical narratives in the light of the somewhat oppressive social circumstances that otherwise might lead people stigmatise or judge them, and they were perhaps afraid that I might do so as well. I was an empathetic listener. In the case of those women who were involved in the NGOs, they were used to telling their life stories to counsellors, to project funders and to media representatives. They had learned

that telling their stories in a certain way to these audiences got them a lunch and their monthly salary from the NGOs. I was probably seen as associated with the NGOs and so as a continuum of this audience, which was a product of me using NGOs for accessing sex workers. The following example also reveals the assumption that women's encounters with NGO staff were defined by being top-down, and that women were 'talked over' or actually told what to say. At the beginning of the interview, Salla and Bhavaani, a research assistant whose role I discuss later, tell two sex workers Sasika and Faria, about their rights, and about the interview.

*Faria: 'Are you **going to tell us about HIV** or condoms?*
Bhavaani: No, she is researching into finding out more about sex workers. If there are any questions that upset you please don't feel you have to reply.
Sasika: There's nothing like that. Nothing will worry me. If you ask why I say like this; she [Salla] will go and tell others, and make those who don't know, know, so I'm not worried.' (Interview transcript p.1, lines 42-46, 16th May 2005)

The quote suggests that some women were very pleased to talk about themselves, but the NGO context did not allow this. Not all of the women were happy to share their experiences or disclose their status as a sex worker. Besides the existence of a global HIV discourse and NGO practices as described above, I believe that the reason why I was provided with a standard narrative was not only related to my status as a white researcher but also had to do with the question of silence in sex research. I now see that telling a standard narrative was also meant to conceal certain aspects of the sex workers' lives that were too sensitive to be told, and to protect their identity in terms of self-image – to maintain a proper image in the eyes of others and to avoid labelling. The standard narrative that was presented to me was a way of maintaining secrecy over other, more personal and dangerous matters.

Silence

I suggest that the standard narrative was also told to protect individual experiences and to avoid the stigma surrounding sex work. Based on the experiences of another marginal group, lesbian women in seven countries across Africa, Blackwood concludes that secrecy and silence act as strategies 'to avoid violence, and yet these strategies also help to create and preserve spaces for women to be together because the general population is unaware of their existence' (Blackwood 2003: 105). In fact, Blackwood concludes that 'Secrecy appears to be an oppressive condition that denies people freedom to live as they choose, yet the opposite of secrecy, exposure or 'truth' (coming out of the closet), is a modernist Western strategy that may be politically and personally damaging in many contexts' (Blackwood 2003: 105). Thus, in contexts where homosexuality or sex work is negatively judged, open admittance can be harmful to the individual physically, socially, or mentally. Nencel's (2005) experiences in Peru, where female sex workers avoided identifying themselves as sex workers due to the stigmatised nature of this category, echo this.

Similarly, sex workers in India know that their action is against the norms of heterosexual monogamy and that it is stigmatised, and therefore they might feel the need to explain or justify their actions in a socially acceptable way. Further, using certain discourses could be a strategic way to create positive identities and dissociating from moralising notions of being a 'loose woman'.

Taking victimising accounts sometimes reflected in the standard narrative at face value can be undermined by the informal messages that the participants sent by their body language, gestures, mood, expressions etc. Among the women that I interviewed, Praveena for example asserted several times that she is in sex work only for money, but then in the next sentence told me with excitement about her two regular clients/boyfriends and, while blushing and laughing, about the mutually pleasurable sex they have. Sevati, whom I also

interviewed, told me that her brother was mentally challenged, that she was the breadwinner of her family (parents, brother etc.) and that her family ostracised her but kept on demanding the money that she provided. But while she told horrendous stories about how her family coerced her, she laughed. In both cases, the verbal and non-verbal clues that were given were in conflict. The first woman's sexual relationships with her regular partners, and the fact that I later found out that Sevati's brother was not disabled but studying to become a doctor, and that Sevati had a considerable wealth, provide ruptures in the standard narratives. This suggests that it was not appropriate to admit that one was making profit or 'social capital' through sex work.

Furthermore, many sex workers in Chennai told me that they made attempts to conceal their role as a sex worker, and telling a standard narrative was a powerful way to hide one's membership in a marginal group. Doing so tells a lot about the dynamics of social propriety, sexual norms, and the power and gender structures involved. Without going into an in-depth analysis of gender and sexual norms in India here, it is worth mentioning that the female sex workers that I interviewed presented sex work as a means to make money, not as an identity for that would suggest they were promiscuous, making them a 'bad woman'. Sex workers as the dichotomous opposite to 'good women' were marginalised due to norms surrounding gender and sexuality. Coming out as a sex worker meant shame, discrimination, and ostracism from family.

My noble aim of bringing out the voices of a marginal group turned out not to be in the interest of the participants. Without careful consideration of ethics and the consideration of the social context, such an aim of giving a voice can be idealist, liberal and individualist, and not always possible or desirable in a context where these are not held as values. To properly understand my fieldwork process and the sex workers' role in it, I had to accept that the politics of freedom were not always possible or wanted by the research participants. In the case of the sex workers in India, speaking out was potentially 'dangerous', stigmatising and marginalising. As Adrianne Rich

suggests in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* (1979), silence is political and strategic. This silence and hesitance towards research is interesting data and shows the stigma surrounding sex work. Concealing truth or providing standard narratives are not necessarily signs of lack of agency, but may also be understood as strategic and political. These examples of telling a standard narrative support my earlier argument that sex workers are agents who are capable of negotiation, they had taken the HIV discourse as part of their lives and identities and reflected this in the interviews. 'Resistance to research' shows the considerable power of participants in the research process. The stigma on sex work was also seen in my ability to obtain a research female research assistant, which I will turn to next.

Research assistants

The stigma concerning sex work can also be seen in how potential research assistants saw taking part in the research. Female research assistants were particularly difficult to 'attract' and keep. Over the year in Chennai, I had five research assistants. Of these, two worked with me for just about two weeks each. The remaining time was divided between the other three. The role of the assistants is important to my analysis, since they impacted how I was able to communicate with the participants. I did my best to learn Tamil, but my Tamil was not good enough to understand the subtleties of the interviews. And though I became rather knowledgeable of the words and phrases relevant to my research, I still wanted to have an interpreter to support me.

Princy, a 24 year-old Christian woman, was a social work graduate and very good in her communications with the sex workers (and her English was also very good). We worked together making house visits and building contacts for about three months until the Asian (or Boxing Day) Tsunami happened. She was a pious Christian and felt a calling to go to help the people who were suffering from the catastrophe. My next assistant, Devi, was a 30-year-old PhD student in the department of geography at Madras University, and she was the

only one of my assistants who was married. Against her plans, she found she had to focus back on her research and resigned. After this I was desperate to find someone reliable to work with me for the remaining time, particularly because I knew that the last months can be the most productive time of fieldwork. I used all my contacts and friends with whom I had studied five years before at Madras School of Social Work, my new friends in my neighbourhood and in the NGOs but I kept on getting the same response: female candidates were worried about their reputation when they heard what the work would involve, i.e. working with sex workers and talking about sex and sexuality. Many said that they were afraid to be associated with sex workers and HIV, because it would make their marriage prospects worse.

While I was looking for an assistant, I visited the departments of sociology and anthropology at Madras University. Although the sociology department was female-dominated, only the men were interested in taking the job. These college women were probably feeling the same way about the job as those whom I had tried to contact through my friends and other contacts. In the department of anthropology, I met two young women who were about to graduate with master's degrees. One of them, Bhavaani, was very interested in the job. Her English was excellent, she had fieldwork experience, and she was keen on taking up the job. We worked together and conducted most of the interviews together during the remainder of my fieldwork, and she turned out to be an excellent research assistant and companion.

Now, several questions rise. How did the participants feel about the fact that I frequently appeared with a new person? Many women asked about the 'previous assistants' – they asked about Princy and the tsunami victims, and whether Devi had already conceived – so they did recognise this change. Sometimes the women instructed a new assistant about the length of our relationship together or how funnily I spoke Tamil when an assistant was not there to help me.

The assistants were very positive and appreciating with the sex workers. They were all able to link up with people and talk with them very naturally. Although they did not share a class background – the research assistants were generally from more wealthy backgrounds – they shared the cultural background of knowing about, for example, the same films and film stars, and they chatted about these to break the ice. Everybody's professional attitudes and friendliness crossed the religious, caste and class boundaries. Bhavaani verbalised most clearly how she had changed while working with me. She said that she had thought that women 'in her culture' were respected and appreciated. She was shocked to understand how the female sex workers were treated, and how fragile and dependent on men a woman's life was.

In general having a research assistant made a difference and was always very helpful. While travelling, I could ask about local customs, habits and practices. Bhavaani especially was very chatty and could ponder aloud for hours. Assistants were essential in providing a sense of security while wandering around in the slums. Furthermore, it was an invaluable help to have someone who knew as well as I did what was going on in my research and who I could talk with about it. We would evaluate people's interviews together, and talk about what was going on in their families. Often, things were left open or unexplained and we used the clues we had to find out what was going on. An example of this was when we tried to decide whether a sex worker's daughter had become a sex worker. Bhavaani and I both felt that she was, based on the evidence we saw in the house such as photos and love cards from men, but this was consistently denied by the mother, and the cards and photos of men with loving greetings were said to be from 'friends'. Another example comes from when we tried to follow up on some gossip. Leena had been hit on the head and she had a deep cut on her hairline. Neela said that she was battered by her husband; Sevati said that she was attacked by a client. Bhavaani and I together tried to weigh up the gossip and find out what had happened.

Regarding language and translation, the research assistants were invaluable help in understanding nuances in the interviews. Research assistants translated the interviews on the spot and later transcribed and translated half of them into English. This half was proof-read by another Tamil speaker. Those that were not transcribed by the original translator were transcribed and translated to English by the same proof-reader. This way the interviews were crosschecked to ensure the preciseness of the translation. Especially with my last research assistant, Bhavaani, with whom most of the interviews were made, there was hardly anything that was 'lost in translation'. The proof-reader pointed out only a few incidents where assumptions were 'read into' the translations such as when a sex worker explained how she went to the film theatre with the client, and this was told to me as 'they went to the theatre and she masturbated him' based on the knowledge that that is how sex in film theatres usually happened.

The taboo and silence around women's sexuality (which I discuss in chapter 9 and will not elaborate here) led to a resentfulness that was sometimes difficult to penetrate. Probing and probing to the level of rudeness sometimes enabled gaining answers about relationships and their nature, sometimes ended up in giggles and laughs and/or confused and embarrassed silence and a change of topic. Because sex and sexuality are a taboo, and at times very uncomfortable topics to discuss, this begs a question – what 'right' did I have to ask these questions? – and it brings me to ethical questions in general.

Ethical questions revisited

The topic of female sex work is highly sensitive, and thus ethical concerns were bound to the whole research process: the questions I asked to begin with, and of whom I asked them. Ethical questions have been touched upon throughout this chapter, such as in my desire to bring out the voices of the women, and the discussion of power in research, and are not restricted to the ethics section of this chapter. It is worth going through some major points with more detail,

however. I will discuss some issues of self-governance[11] in my research undertaken to ensure that I did not have an overtly harmful impact on my interviewees. They will hopefully convey my concern of the well-being of my participants, and that I did not treat people as merely data for my research.

I never befriended people without explaining why I was there to talk with them to begin with. I had the role of a researcher but this did not mean I was distant, uncaring or cold. I wanted to give something to the people concerned, rather than just using them as data and it would be equally unethical to get to know the participants in order to obtain data from them without engaging with them.

Before starting my fieldwork, I was aware of BSA (British Sociological Association) and University of Edinburgh ethical guidelines, which seemed reasonable and useful tools for difficult situations. In 'real life', I found them very abstract and difficult to apply outside of the Western context in which they were written. Some principles, like the guidelines on anonymity and confidentiality, were relatively straightforward but became more complicated in for example peer educators' annual meetings that hundreds of women attended. In smaller meetings and NGOs, it was easier to introduce myself, tell about what I was doing and about the women's rights in relation to me and the research. I tried to ensure that people knew that I was doing research so that they could give their informed consent for participating, and to let them know that they could object to my presence in groups and sessions, that they were not obliged to take part in the interview, and that their participation or non-participation would not affect their role in the organisation through which I accessed them. Their anonymity was highlighted: in the final publication, all names and obvious contexts would be changed. In small groups and interviews, these rights were easier to confirm individually. When some women did not know how to read or write, I considered informed verbal consent more appropriate than written. I also guaranteed anonymity between the women and did not spread rumours.

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[11] I am indebted to Dr. Angus Bancroft for this pertinent term.

Overall, I treated my participants with respect and I did not want to distress them, or to make them feel guilty or judged; I could do this, as I was not pressed by norms that stigmatise sex workers. Not only because being too abrupt or rude might have put them off of my research, but because, as members of marginal groups, they were stigmatised by the surrounding society and I felt that I did not want to treat them this way as well. Furthermore, the NGOs had a habit of 'talking over' rather than 'talking with' these women. I wanted to maintain a relationship with them in which I did not patronise them. Sometimes this meant that I neglected controversial questions over trust and acceptance. In these complicated circumstances, predefined, abstract ethical guidelines were not helpful. This was partly because I felt that the context of the NGOs put me in a certain position with regard to the NGOs – I did not want to parrot their stance and reinforce the impression I was associated with them – and partly because I was not qualified for some of the situations that occurred. For example, I met two HIV-positive women who continued to work. One woman had gone from sex work to pimping[12], and the other one, while living alone, still had a relationship with a partner who supported her. He knew about her seropositivity status and yet they continued to have unprotected sex. She said they loved each other and that whatever she has, he would not mind having. I asked if she was aware of the fact that she could re-infect herself if her partner also became infected. In this situation, I felt that questioning and giving advice was the level of involvement and engagement I was able to have, and not much more. This woman had good support from the NGOs, was aware of the medial details of HIV, and looked after herself well.

Peer educators were much more efficient in accessing new women and including them into their networks than I was, and as I used the networks of the

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[12] Although I discuss this in more detail later on, it is important to highlight here what 'pimps' in the Chennai context mean. Based on the literature on sex work/prostitution and popular imaginary pimps come across as coercive dangerous, usually male, characters who are networked with gangs, drugs guns who callously profit from the exploitation of women. In Chennai, however, pimps were older sex workers who were no longer successful in attaining clients but instead used they contacts to network sex workers and men for a small profit. I will discuss these women in more detail later in chapter 8.

NGOs (i.e. peer educators) to access women, it was likely that the women I met had already been in touch with peer educators and NGOs and were aware of their seropositivity status. During tests in the government hospitals and YRG CARE (one of the NGOs), sex workers receive pre- and post-test counselling that provides them with information on HIV, transmission and risks, how to look after themselves if positive, etc. Had I come in contact with a woman who struck me as not being aware of HIV and condoms, I would have tried to discuss this with her in a friendly way that would imply that I cared for her as a person (and not just as an NGO subject who was seen as no more than a number to secure funding) and I would have asked her what she thought about getting in touch with peer educators for more information.

The idea of working with a marginal group in India was not only to fill academic voids about 'spoiled identities', but to give a voice to women who have not been previously heard. Giving people a voice is a noble aim, a (politicised) attempt to bring out the voices of people whose accounts have been neglected, who are struggling for rights, recognition, or representations that would do them justice. However, doing research that enables this can prove to be more difficult than it seems and, in the worse case scenario, can be unethical and marginalising. I faced these issues while doing fieldwork. Due to the stigma attached to sex work, sex workers face daily risks of violence and rape, ostracism and lack of legal rights, on top of which they are blamed for the spread of HIV. I do not argue that the aim of giving these people a voice should be given up completely; instead, I show what kind of problems can occur and suggest that doing research with an aim of giving voice needs to be done with a careful consideration of ethics and the context in which the research is conducted.

When I tried to make contact with sex workers at one of the NGOs, the women bluntly asked what I would do for them in return. I expressed a mantra about giving them a voice, creating knowledge about them and writing about their problems. '*But what are you going to do for us <u>now</u>, as <u>individuals?</u>*'

(Fieldnotes 14th Sept 2004) they insisted. In the beginning, idealistically, I hoped that I could create a difference with my research project, and that as part of the research process, I would encourage group meetings in which women would collectively discuss their problems and concerns. This idea could be characterised as top-down, as these meetings would be planned by me and one of the NGO leaders, and would not result in any further actions. Other ways of feeding back that I thought of were giving transcripts and photographs to the sex workers. But many women did not know how to read, so handing transcripts to them was out of question. When I took pictures of the women, with consent, I gave them copies, which they appreciated. When sex workers insisted that they wanted my help, they did not refer to 'empowerment'. Instead, they were addressing their immediate, everyday need: money.

> *(In an infamous small group discussion, before I decided to use incentives) Sheelamma told Princy that instead of giving tea and biscuits women might want money. I asked afterwards which they would prefer and they all said money. Ambuja said that I shouldn't worry about issues of consent. They are happy to help with my research: they weren't given a chance to study in their lives but they can 'live through me', she explained. (Fieldnotes 9th Dec 2004)*

While planning my fieldwork, I was hesitant about incentives. Paying people for their time has been done in previous research, because they are giving their working time to the researcher (for example, by McKeganey and Barnard 1996, and by Shaver 2005). I felt, however, that the use of incentives raises questions of ethics and validity. Paying the participants might affect their motivation to take part in an interview. People might tell me what they think I might want to hear in order to receive the money. I felt that paying participants could be seen as symbolically similar to the relationship between the sex workers and the clients. Nevertheless, just to collect information from people for a PhD would be equally unethical. Prior to fieldwork, I considered options for how I could help my participants – for example by paying for medicine or a visit to the doctor. This, however, raised the problem of where to draw the line. How could I determine for whom I would pay for expenses and for whom I would not? Would I pay for those who had more time to spend time with me? For those

who were poorer? Although it would have been a fair idea to help out those who were really in need of financial help, it might have raised jealousy among the other participants. Therefore, I went to do my fieldwork hoping that women would be interested in taking part for their own sake, and that I would not need to pay anybody money but would try to help in other ways.

As I blathered about giving them a voice and creating an awareness of the women's problems, the women waved their hands and asked again. With hesitation because of being symbolically associated with a client, and after consulting my informants at the NGOs, I settled on an incentive of Rs.50 (about 60p, locally worth about two lunches or 10 bus fares) for participants as compensation for their time. This reward was given after an official interview and only once – there was no incentive for follow-up interviews. As my research assistant Princy put it: *'We are not paying every time we say: hello, how are you?' (Fieldnotes 4th Nov 2004)* The incentive had varying effects on the fieldwork process. Some women were surprised when the incentive was offered, and it was sometimes refused. These women said they had wanted to have a chance to talk about their thoughts and feelings. On the other hand, when I asked key sex workers in the field to introduce me to other sex workers, at least three women pimped the interviews and took a 20% commission of the incentive. Several things arise: Pimping for Rs.10 showed how financially desperate both pimps and sex workers were in terms of making money. It also taught me the hierarchies of sex work and who the pimps were. Pimping interviews also reflects how the existing modes of the ways that the NGOs accessed sex workers were reflected on my research. It shows how the NGOs attract sex workers to fill up their quotas for the amounts of people they had taught about condoms and STDs – and they then end up as encouraging statistics showing the success of HIV prevention.

With the backdrop that NGOs paid incentives to the sex workers, I am not surprised that the women asked for money from me. This general NGO practice did have an affect on my research and I did get people come for interviews who

were only interested in the money. I purposefully did not tell the women about the incentive in advance, to try to guarantee that those who attended were interested in participating, but I believe that the women I interviewed did tell other women that this would be included. If I invited women through other sex workers, I emphasised genuine interest, and once the women started to know me better, the financial interest reduced. Nevertheless, having an incentive solved the problem of who would be supported or helped and rewarded for their time – it was everyone who gave an official interview. Apart from this, I tried to help the women that I interviewed with little things: buying food whenever necessary, paying for buses, *autoriskhaws*, putting people in touch with NGOs, for example getting Ishwari to be a peer educator in an NGO, and taking Nanda to live with me when she needed a place to stay. Most were knowledgeable about the NGOs, and to those who were not I recommended they go to them for any help they needed. Despite the problems with working through NGOs, it was good that the NGOs were in place, as I was able to refer women to them when they needed financial help and a more long-term and long-lasting relationship after the end of my research.

Because I did not want to impose myself, I restricted myself to those sex workers who were willing to meet and talk with me, emphasising voluntary participation. For example, many of the women lived in arrangements in which they did not want people around them to know that they sold sex. This way, home visits had the potential of being unethical. To avoid unethical moments, I visited people only with their consent or if I knew I was welcome. My presence had to be explained with excuses to the curious neighbours, partners etc. I asked the women how they wanted to explain my presence to their friends and family, and I went along with whatever they said. If men or neighbours were present, I was happy to chat about the latest news about children, schooling, recent films and pets, or about myself, because people were rather curious to hear about me as well. It was often said that I was a researcher who was doing work on women's life in India or that I was working in the office through which I knew the woman. The most troubling incident took place when I was

taken by an NGO fieldworker for a house visit to Pooja's whom I had not met before but who had consented through one of the NGOs to see me and had arranged for me to visit with the fieldworker, with whom she had a good relationship. We found her home with her husband, whom, I was told, did not know about her job as a sex worker but knew about the fact that she let others use her flat for sex and her extra income through pimping. Therefore, I did not ask her anything about her career, but rather more about her family and we chatted about general things.

Pooja herself introduced the topic of pimping and allowing others to use her house as a 'brothel' (for sex). While I asked more generally what that meant, she started crying and telling me that her husband had left the family for a while and this had forced her into this. To me, it sounded very dubious whether she was talking about how she had ended up doing sex work or pimping. She asked her husband to go out and do some chores so she could talk to us about 'women's things' more freely. He refused. They got into an argument about what actually happened in the past, and he wanted to explain why he had left the family. I was very uneasy about the situation and, with the backdrop that he had been described as violent, I was very worried about what would happen after we left. Soon, I made up an excuse to leave, thinking that my presence made things worse. She insisted on coming for another interview, and we decided to meet the following day at the office. After we left, I asked the NGO fieldworker – who was a man – to go back to see how things were in the family. The next day the fieldworker told me that the husband had been upset about being shown in a negative light in my eyes for having left the family and not making money for the family, effectively failing in his masculine duty, but there had been no argument or violence.

In ways such as this, I posed a risk to the women's privacy, although I did my best to minimise it. As a principle, I never discussed anything sex work-related in front of children. When I established relationships with women and they found that I was interested in them personally – that I was not just someone

who was happy with the standard narrative, that I wanted to hear more about their lives – we also had pre-planned official interviews in a private space on the NGO premises at their convenience.

Perhaps because of my background in social work and counselling, I firmly believe in the therapeutic nature and healing qualities of talking about issues. Talking about issues might evoke alternative ways of thinking about problems, create alternative narratives and discourses, or subvert them, even if just in one's own mind, leading to possible action. At the back of my mind, perhaps idealistically, I had the idea that these conversations might lead the women that I interviewed to question certain power hierarchies, and thus to empowerment and collective activism, although it was not my aim and I did not assume that the women did not already have the elements of 'empowerment' within their reach (i.e. I did not assume that I would walk in and save them).

Of course, poking the sleeping bear might lead to waking it: for some of the sex workers, thinking about these issues, many of which were oppressive, in the interview setting was stressful and upsetting, causing them great anxiety. I was terribly cautious about people's mental states throughout the fieldwork process. In interviews, I did not want to leave women in the state of being upset and we tried to end on a positive note. Here, I think the social work/counselling training was useful. Supporting people through difficult topics and creating an atmosphere wherein they felt it was safe to talk about issues is a professional skill. Many women said they appreciated a chance to talk to someone. We often cried together. There was a lot of holding hands and hugging. These conversations were not the ones that the NGOs encouraged. Some women said that they had never spoken about these issues and that no-one had ever asked them about themselves. *'Ask more questions', (Fieldnotes 25th May 2005)* Sevati ordered when she came to the CHES office one day and saw me there. Kuntala and Ishwari, two sex workers I interviewed who were both very anxious and depressed about their life situations (not all the women were), said

several times that they were grateful for the fact that they had someone to air their feelings with.

> Ishwari: 'When I talk to you I am ventilating. Most of the time I'm not talking to others... I don't want to be in poverty. I want good food every day. Once I go to clients, the next my body will be in pain... The next day I will have no ventilation. I cannot share with my friends either. I cannot with share with anyone. I want to leave this field. That's my dream. I can speak openly with you so I enjoy it.' (Interview transcript p.9, lines 1, 15, 23-27, 24th March 2004)

This trust, however, included hearing stories of abuse and incidents that were ethically problematic. University of Edinburgh School of Social and Political Studies ethical guidelines suggest that the researcher would have a 'whistle blowing responsibility' if 'unacceptable practice is identified with vulnerable populations or minors'. In this case, this would mean reporting the abuse of sex workers in order to help them. This turned out to be problematic in Chennai, however. There was very little I could have done about the sex workers because all the available options were equally daunting.

Generally, I felt powerless to do anything about the experiences the women had. Violence against women? Rehabilitation for them so that they could leave sex work? Rehabilitate them from what? There was a governmental rehabilitation home, Vigilance Home, that the anti-vice squad used for 'rehabilitating' women who they caught soliciting or who were trafficked (this was told to me by the chief of the anti-vice squad, Mr Arunmugasam; none of the women I met had been there, nor did I get permission to visit it). I asked Ms Angeline, a human rights lawyer, about the anti-vice squad and about the Vigilance Home:

> Salla: 'Basically what happens? Does the anti-vice squad only do raids or do they try to create jobs or rehabilitation afterwards?
>
> Angeline: [listing] Deserted wife, and the people who used to show their face in the film or modelling, from there and all they are rescuing. Here it [sex work] is not an organized thing, here there is no red-light areas, no? So they are searching, they are raiding and

some informants will tell them that here somebody is running the brothel. So through that they are rescuing the women.

Salla: How do they in practice work this rehabilitation and rescuing process?

Angeline: There are no measures for rehabilitation for Tamil Nadu. They are having a vigilance home; ah, it is like a jail, that's all. They are not imprisoned, they are in the bail period...(laughs)...So, there is no rehabilitation measures and nobody is willing to rehabilitate them, even the women are addicted to this work and so it is very difficult to rehabilitate them also! The law talks about raid and rescue but there is no measures, there is no procedure for raid or rescue. And even the Vigilance Home they are having ah.. it's only a ah.. a shelter home for the accused. They are ill-treating the women even. Only once in thirteen days the women are allowed to take bath. Many women they complained and reported it to me. Even in a public hearing, which was conducted by the National Commission for Women and State Commission for Women. The women openly they shared this. Once in thirteen days they are getting water and daily they are not brushing their teeth.

Salla: Are the guards mainly women or men?

Angeline: Women... And even for emergency sake some other women, some murderer or some other thief that women also will be there... Right now some 85 women are there. Actually that will be comfortable for 60 but they have 85.' (Interview transcript p.1 line 36- p.2 line 46, 3ʳᵈ March 2005)

Effectively, 'rehabilitation' meant punishment. Telling the police was out of question, because the police were one of women's main concerns. The women were terribly afraid of the police, and they reported that the police took advantage of them. Reporting to the police would, then, lead to the women being blackmailed, raped or put into Vigilance Home. 'Rehabilitation' was not something the women wanted.

Influenced by the sex work literature and not wanting to have a moralising stance about what the sex workers did, I do not believe in rehabilitation or abolishing sex work. I think sex work needs to be understood in the broader context and in relation to other questions in the circumstances in which these women live, rather than judged as degrading, morally bad, inherently violent

(etc) in and of itself. Having that approach would have been very oppressive in the context, and not what the women were suggesting they wanted. I do not think that doing sex work is 'bad' and I would not advise women not to do it. They did not really have better or worse options available to them. I believe that some women in sex work who might want to get out of it could be helped by alternative forms of employment. One of the NGOs had started a project of this sort, candle making, but as far as I saw, the equipment was getting dusty and no candles were made, and what the women were meant to get from this financially was so little that it never compared to the income that sex work could provide. There was a saving scheme with IFPEC (a sex workers' collective), through which they tried to save money for the rainy day. I never saw it being implemented, though: It was taking baby steps.

Having gained the women's trust, I found out about things that were usually hidden from outsiders. I got to know about two minor sex workers who were 15-17 years old, and I heard a rumour about a daughter of a sex worker who I knew who was 14 years old, and two young women who were 18, engaging in sex work. Before going to do fieldwork I was committed to reporting abuse. Being given such information and facing the cold reality of under-age sex work was emotional, and I was aware of the fact I did not necessarily want to hear this because of the ethical questions involved. Not investigating this area out of personal distress, or because of the ethical problems involved, would be equally unethical in the sense that this would mean committing to the lie that under-age sex work does not exist, as insisted by the peer educators and NGOs.

I had a chance to interview one of these under-age women, Vanita (17 years old), with the presence of her friend, Leena (25 years old). Vanita was extremely strong, was conscious of what she was doing, and did not feel troubled by what she did at all. I enquired about her feelings about sex work in roundabout ways, and when I did not get an answer to suggest that she had qualms about it, I did not push such questions further because I did not want to

give the impression that I thought that there was something wrong with what she did when she herself did not.

I discussed the question of minor sex workers with research assistants and with Mr Jeeberaj, an activist working against trafficking in women. Considering that the women that I met in general had been married between the ages of eight and 18, and that the majority had wedded between the ages of 14 and 16, the minors that I met were of marriageable age according to Tamil norms. Considering that reporting under-age sex workers to the police was out of question, that the option of 'rehabilitation' was equally bad, that alternative modes of livelihood were limited and that the minors were of a marriageable age, it seemed to me that their staying with their families was the best option. Because women on their own are frequently taken advantage of and because of the general lack of a welfare system, without their families the young women might end up destitute, even less protected, and doing sex work in even worse conditions. Now at least they had the monitoring of their families and those around them – the same people that scrutinised sex work in general and made my access to them more difficult – looking out for them. I made the judgement that the minor sex workers that I met were better off doing sex work while living with their families.

Had there been young girls under the age of 14 doing sex work, I would have sought a hostel type boarding school for them with the help of the NGOs and Mr. Jeebaraj and Ms Angline, who were working on issues of human rights and trafficking, or I might have arranged accommodations for them in an orphanage for girls in sex work provided by MCCSS Madras Christian Council of Social Service (though most of the girls in this orphanage were daughters of sex workers who could not afford to look after them, rather than minor sex workers).

Throughout my fieldwork, I felt powerless to control things beyond myself, i.e. the research situation where interviews were done. I could not have a set of

principles that I could just apply as my fieldwork unfolded. The young and old women I interviewed were already in sex work. It was very upsetting for me to face the fact that there was very little I could do about their circumstances. Hearing their concerns, sorrows, problems and issues was emotionally very stressful. In order to be able to complete the research project, I shut down my feelings and emotions about it. I admit that in the writing up process I found the ethical questions the most emotionally straining ones to confront, as they brought back to me the powerlessness of the research process. Halfway through my fieldwork I was worn out to the point that I wanted to finish the research and come home. I decided, however, that that is what everybody else had done and that, for the sake of the women, I should bear it and get it done. The only way to 'get it done' was to put my feelings away and to get on with it. I did fine, particularly as I expanded my research scope as I learned about the context in which sex work was done and discovered points of agency. Yet, I became bossy towards men and an increasingly negative and sceptical person. At the end of my fieldwork, I hated 50% of the population: all the men (not a rational thought at all). It was time to go home. I was tired of hearing the rape stories, tired of having my personal space violated in buses, on streets: I was tired of tilting at the windmills of what I felt was the oppression of women in general. It was so ubiquitous, there was nothing I could do about the violence or abuse against the sex workers and women generally but to ignore it. My negativity can be seen in the first versions of the first chapters I wrote. But as my anxiety dispersed, I found I was able to write about the women's agency and resistance that was subtly embedded in the data.

As much as my sense of the powerlessness to change the broader power structures in which women lived overwhelmed the data collection process, it also inspired my writing process. I hope that my writing about the sex workers' experiences in such a way that gives them a voice will create a more realistic awareness of their lives that is not victimising or moralising. I am considering writing to the NGOs to give feedback.

Writing publications about sex workers involves ethical considerations, however, because of the ways in which sex workers are represented. The 'real' and the 'imagined' are intertwined and how the 'imagined' construct the 'real', and the other way around, needs considering (Sunder Rajan 1993: 10). In this context, looking at representations of sex work has illustrated connections between the global and the local: how the international HIV industry, with World Bank, UNAIDS, etc., create the subject of 'sex workers', and how the sex workers themselves re-use a representation that is related to HIV. While I discuss these issues further in chapter 5 and critique the representation put forward by the HIV prevention viewpoint as simplistic, my own stance is problematic on two levels. First, because portraying sex workers as having multiple sexual relationships, not all of which are determined by desperation, runs the risk of reinforcing popular stigmatising stereotypes if taken out of context. For example, representing these women as sexually liberated may lead to reinforcing the stereotypes of sex workers as 'dirty sluts' or bad mothers. The women I interviewed vehemently denied being this, and instead encouraged the HIV –related representation also used by the NGOs. This is tied to the second point. Sex workers/peer educators, to some extent, had chosen a public image that they represented. My representation portrays these women as a heterogeneous group in which not all were 'victims' of poverty and men and shows that some of the women, at times, used these relationships for money and/or love/sex/partnership, etc. Representing the sex workers' lives becomes problematic against this backdrop. Whose voice do I represent? My findings, or theirs? While this needs to be reflected upon in relation to each context in which they are represented, by considering this I suggest that I am aware of the problems involved. Consideration of how the subjects of research are portrayed in publication is a part of the ethical considerations of the research process.

Though my description of my feelings of powerlessness has brought me as a researcher to the fore of attention, this research is not about me or my feelings. However, I will discuss questions of intersubjectivity in a bit more detail, as my presence was my main research tool and affected the data I was able to collect.

I believe I was able to get beyond standard narratives and gain access to women's private lives by having respect and acceptance as my primary attitudes towards the women.

Intersubjectivity

Using open-ended interviews was a way to get beyond the standard narratives and usual topics that were dealt with in the NGOs/HIV prevention context. Being able to negotiate the interview space, where some women felt free to elaborate their experiences beyond that narrative, I believe, was due to positive intersubjectivity. I will reflect here on my subject position and how that affected the research process.

Fieldwork is often described as having reflexivity as one of its central defining features. Feminist researchers (see for example Maynard 1994; Stanley and Wise 1993; Wolf 1996) point out that reflexivity is not just an attitude regarding handling interviews, but it concerns the researcher's role during the research process. The researcher needs to be aware of her role in the data collection process – how her background, autobiography, training, methodological and theoretical preferences, guide the data collection process. Whilst the researcher is subjective in her interpretation, transparency in how her analysis was made can be achieved by being aware of her role as a researcher, which has been described as positionality. While this is an intrinsic part of fieldwork, many researchers actually fail to provide this information in-depth.[13] Often, they discuss their role but do not present their experiences or emotions, particularly if they are negative, complex or might challenge their authority. This struck me while reading feminist research where this silence was broken (by, for example, Funari 1997; Marshall 1994; Skeggs 1994; Wolf 1996). These feminist writings were concerned with questions of power and recorded and analysed in-depth and in detail the process of their research, including the feelings that the researchers had regarding the processes.

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[13] However, this could also be due to the reluctance of publishers to include methodology chapters in the publications.

There were power hierarchies bound into my role as a researcher in the context of South India, which were visible in how I first became associated with the NGOs. I come from a Western background that is economically privileged compared to those that I interviewed. Arguments for being an outsider and being an insider to the studied culture have been summarised in Wolf (1996). She argues that the insider/outsider dichotomy is not a fruitful one, as both positions have their benefits and disadvantages and lead to important albeit perhaps differently proposed data. Rather, she argues, the 'positionality' of the researcher should, lead to considering questions of power in the research process (Wolf 1996). As I could not become a Tamil sex worker, by definition, I could only be a keen researcher, an empathetic listener who kept on visiting people and was overtly interested in their life. I maintained an unreserved liking for the people that was not hindered by fear of losing my reputation. As I described concerning my research assistants, women especially had reservations about being associated with sex workers, because it might have affected their marriage prospects, a concern that I did not share. The only way of making sure that these social positions and power dynamics did not influence the research process in a negative or undesirable way was to stay in the field long enough so that I would be seen as an individual rather than as an image of my status as a white Westerner. As I discussed in the section on incentives, at the beginning in particular I was asked for money, a household job, or to be taken to Europe. This way, my image as a foreigner was recognised by the participants. Although I cannot fully comprehend how people saw me or how my foreignness affected the research in their eyes, I tried not to create or invite e.g. class differences. I did not have a maid, I did my housework myself, and I always travelled by bus or train like they did, all of which the people I got to know saw as rather bizarre – not only because they saw me as a white person whom they, in the beginning, expected to be rich, but also perhaps because women do not often travel on their own.

In terms of other structural positions, although I am a woman like my female participants, the ways of being a woman, i.e. the social construction of womanhood, is so different between Finland, where I was born, Scotland, where I had lived for three years, and Tamil Nadu with reference to class, caste, religion and sexuality, that I could not *assume* that my gender could be seen as a benefit for gaining access to other women. In India, as social locations are gendered and women have clearly defined tasks and spaces, as a woman I might have had easier access to these areas and thus to women's everyday life activities (see also Vera-Sanso 1993). In this sense, I could say my gender was beneficial to the process of fieldwork, but on the other hand, it felt very unsafe to go and do participant observation in certain venues of sex work. From the stories of violence women told me, it was unsafe to go to do participant observation at soliciting points, and when I visited two lodges with male NGO staff, because I was advised not to go alone, I had very uncomfortable experiences.

Without thinking about emotional responses in and to the fieldwork context, an analysis of the input of the researcher to the data collection process would remain shallow. Looking back, there were several points during which I had to face the emotional impact of the fieldwork process. At the beginning of my fieldwork, I had trouble seeing through the HIV discourse that the women provided and which portrayed them as victims of HIV and violence. Initially, my intention was to investigate their means of negotiating and resisting the stigmatised position of sex worker from the point of view of identity, but rapidly I felt it was unethical to gain a PhD from this, that it was almost scandalous to write about the sex workers' problems when resistance was hard to find. The stories they told me were filled with violence, gang rapes and assaults. Many of these women had adopted the victim discourse that the NGOs used to elicit money and media coverage. When I asked the women about their lives, they recalled all the problems they had, in exactly the same way that the NGOs talked about sex workers as victims of violence and HIV. As I have already mentioned, hearing these stories of rape, violence and other problems

related to sex work was extremely straining emotionally and I felt that, without my social work training (from my undergraduate degree) I could not have dealt with these emotions.

At this point during my fieldwork process, I reflected upon the purpose of my research. Despite the emotional strain, I felt obliged to finish my research to tell the stories of women who were already in a marginalised position: I did not want to fail them as well. I also reflected on my way of accessing the sex workers and on the existence of the standard narratives. I made a conscious move to try to meet people in their homes and to talk to them about other things apart from sex work. I felt that simply limiting interviews to the subject of sex work would reduce the participants to being just a 'sex worker' just as much as talking about the women as 'prostitutes' would do. The conclusion I came to is that sex work is not a holistic overarching identity that penetrates all aspects of these women's identity, but rather a mode of making money.

Eventually, the way I got beyond past the victim discourse and the problem of reducing the women to the role of sex workers was by observing them as individuals with a holistic identity that was not limited to 'sex work'. This enabled me to find points of power, resistance, positive self-esteem, or means of negotiating the role of a sex worker in the other areas of their lives, while still recognising that the role of a sex worker entailed dimensions of violence and destruction. Many of the women I interviewed subverted the stereotypes of sex workers as victims of HIV, poverty and patriarchy. Among the complex realities that the sex workers came to discuss with me, the most unexpected finding was that pleasure was sometimes the primary motivation for them for doing sex work, rather than money. I will discuss the sexual relationships of the women later, but here I want to focus on my learning experiences in the field. The major learning experience was the challenge to my own attitudes. Going through my literature-based knowledge about sex work, the perceived relationship of selling sex to one's identity, the relationship between love and sex, what counts as women's oppression, feminism in general, I then put much

of this aside. The fact that I learned to see the sex workers as agents is reflected in my discussion later of sex work and agency.

Feminist researchers have drawn due attention to the power dimensions of the research relationship. All the examples discussed in this chapter suggest a power relationship that is not only in the hands of the researcher. The women I interviewed produced a standard narrative, were silent, sometimes lied, came to the interviews to about their feelings or to get money, pimped interviews, and/or failed to attend the arranged meetings. These examples suggest the power or agency of the participants, rather than residing entirely with the researcher.

While my agency certainly moulded the research process, data collection was not an easy-flowing process determined by me, but rather a chaotic series of events that was at times an easy conduct of meetings and interviews, and at other times a very frustrating and unrewarding experience. The description of my fieldwork here seems like a fairly coherent narrative of an unproblematic series of events. However, it was often not possible to maintain any control over even basic things like who was going to be interviewed. Meetings with sex workers that were promised by NGO staff often failed to happen, people were not home when agreed, and I was rarely informed of these changes in advance. Plenty of time was wasted in the general chaos. An example from my early fieldnotes, when I tried organising a focus group and concluded that this was not very successful, illustrates this:

> *Sheelamma, Pugazh, Ambuja, Joshita, Vasumathi, Arugiam, Jeevitha and Zaima, me and Princy were present try out a small group discussion, similar to Sivaram et al. (2004b): constructing a storyline 'for a film' of how a woman gets into sex work. It didn't work out. During the discussion 2 women changed in the beginning: one of them had to go take her medicine, one of them had to leave. Later a few others came and went as well: A cat stole two fish from one of them. Ambuja cooked. Just to get going it took over 2 hours. (Eventually Princy went to help Tsunami victims, never finished the transcribing and I never heard back from her. The recordings were not unique so I*

Once I realised the problems concerning planning in advance, I stopped relying on pre-arranged plans and simply used my knowledge of where people lived and went along to meet them (providing that I knew that I could do this and that it would not pose problems for the women). By the end of the year, I had collected a quite extensive list of phone numbers and I often ran through the list to see who might be available. If plans for meetings were made further ahead than for the next day, I would call the day before to make sure that the plan was still on, and again in the morning before leaving the house. One reason why the plans at times failed is the fluctuating nature of sex work. If sex workers got a client, this would over-ride the other plans they had and if the sex workers had not had enough clients to cover their daily expenses, they would have to stay on and work longer.

Nencel (2005) had similar experiences when studying sex working women in Peru. Avoidance and breaking research contracts is a kind of power that participants use and Nencel (2005) argues that it is the researcher who is often at the 'mercy' of the participants, who are giving out information about their lives only to the extent that they are comfortable, leaving the researcher to make sense of what is allowed for her to see and know.

The ability to tolerate uncertainty and frustration, and keeping focus, were a big part of the fieldwork experience. Giving up mental plans and going with the flow and adjusting accordingly enabled me to remain sane. I had to trust that, although I sometimes felt that I had little control over how the data collection turned out, it was still good and valuable data. While I appreciate the rigorous data collection methods that Shaver (2005), and McKeganey and Barnard (1996) used, I must admit that in my case it was difficult, if not impossible, to maintain such an approach because of the problems described above. Although the fieldwork process and data collection were chaotic and often not in my hands, I had to make the best use of my one year time in Chennai. Within the

one-year time constraint, I had to be extremely focused and well-organised to maximise my time. I found it useful to reflect back upon what I was working on every month: about which conceptual avenues that had opened were relevant and interesting to follow through. I also reflected upon whether there had been a shift in my focus, and what implications that had. I weighed, with my original aims in mind, what questions were still unanswered and how I could get data to cover them. I defined possible lines of analysis and what kind of data was needed for each. What arguments could I make from my data, and what further evidence did I need to back up those arguments? The results of my research should be read keeping in mind the chaotic nature of the fieldwork process in general, the criticism that I propose on my data later in this chapter, and that my findings cannot be generalised to a wider context but should be read as an analysis of the accounts of the sex workers that I encountered, their versatile accounts of sex work, and their lives and experiences.

Therefore, rather than thinking around strict identity categories of the researcher, I conclude that relationships and rapport in the field are more relevant in data production. Even if one was able to know what the right boxes for data collection were and ticked them, the research encounter still boils down to inter-subjectivity and interaction in the relationships between the researcher and the participants. Beyond the fact that my gender and my social background of not having cultural burdens of fear of losing reputation might have slightly helped me in getting access to the sex workers and being accepted by them, I could only trust in my personality, experience and careful consideration of research design to be able to 'sell myself' to the participants and to build bonds of trust. I had to rely on reciprocal relationships and my interaction skills as tools in generating data. I tried to create an image of myself that would be perceived as respecting, professional and warm towards the participants; I wanted them to see that I appreciated their lifestyles and choices and that I was eager to hear their stories; I did not want to give the impression that I was interested in them only in the context of my research. And so, I was ready chat about myself and all kinds of other things. I was welcomed into

meetings, chats and homes. In the end, I felt I had been accepted as being loosely part of the community. I believe this is because I had an unambiguous liking and acceptance towards them, which was not usual in the Indian context. If there ever were situations where I had to take sides, I always took the side of the sex workers and defended them, their choices and lifestyles. Learning to like the women was the outcome of learning to know them; they were not simply targets for my noble political aim of giving a voice to a marginal group, or for gaining a PhD. I firmly believe that intersubjectivity within a respectful attitude towards the sex workers I got to know enabled me to get past being associated with NGOs and to go beyond the standard narratives.

In this methodology chapter, I have discussed the process of fieldwork and the methodological choices made and challenges faced. Accessing the women through NGOs and the issues concerning this has been one of the central themes. In the next chapter, I shall build on my earlier comments about the context of HIV being the dominant forum in which sex work is discussed. And will focus on the relationships between the sex workers and the NGOs. By now the reader might want to know more details about the women that I interviewed. I will save that for the following chapter, however. I have chosen to present my findings in this order because I want to strengthen the idea that the context of HIV is the predominant discourse of and available to sex workers. The context of HIV has been the dominant forum in which sex work has been addressed, against which my social analysis is done. This conceptual order was also reflected in how I was able to access data: first, very much in the context of HIV prevention NGOs. As I will discuss in the next chapter, in interview situations in the earlier steps of my fieldwork, I was provided with this standard narrative by individual sex workers, which are an element in and expression of the global assemblage of HIV. This showed to me that some sex workers had obtained the HIV discourse as part of their personal and collective modes of agency. Eventually my fieldwork and the course and shape of interviews that I did changed, so that, as discussed in this chapter, I came to interact with the sex workers I knew in a more holistic way that was not limited

to the context of HIV prevention. Through this I came to realise the sources of agency in their lives, including in the sex work encounter, as well as seeing the use of the standard narrative as a manifestation of their agency. Consequently in the chapter which follows, I introduce and analyse the global assemblage of HIV and its discourses in Chennai, importantly including the role of the NGOs in relation to this while my analysis of the sex workers' accounts 'beyond the standard narrative' is in the four chapters following it precisely because the HIV related view point does not veer away from the health oriented viewpoint and thus I focused my analysis on social aspects of gender and sexuality. I feel that the context of HIV needs to be introduced first, however, before I elaborate the social lives and experiences of the sex workers. Failing to include NGOs and HIV would mean ignoring a prominent part of the sex workers' lives and their aspirations. Sex workers' agency in the context of HIV has been researched elsewhere (Cornish 2006; Gooptu 2000; Pardasani 2005) and thus the analysis in the next chapter is focused on the global assemblage of sex work and the relationships of the people who are involved in HIV prevention in Chennai broadly, rather than agency in particular.

CHAPTER 5 Sex workers and the 'global assemblage' of HIV in Chennai

In this chapter, I will discuss the global assemblage of HIV and how this impacts on the relationships of the HIV prevention NGOs and the sex workers in Chennai. While HIV has been the dominant context in which sex work has been addressed, it may seem curious that I should analyse this given that the context of HIV was precisely what I was trying to avoid when beginning this research. I start my detailed analysis with this, however, because there has been an epidemic of HIV-related writings on sex workers that address the risks that HIV poses to sex workers and their clients. Also, while the attention has been on sex workers in relation to HIV prevention practices, this has only addressed the health aspects and neglected the social aspects and the human rights of sex workers. The processes of governance, however, have been neglected. I show the ways in which the HIV industry has created the 'sex worker' as an epidemiological object of HIV prevention. The chapter, therefore, 'unassembles' how discourse of HIV impacts on the HIV prevention NGOs. I argue that HIV prevention is a performance, where all parties involved perform in their own interest, and that HIV prevention has become a part of the development industry. From the perspective of the sex workers, for those women that I interviewed, HIV prevention was one of the modes that they used to negotiate their lives, providing some sources of agency as well as reinforcing the stigma surrounding sex work.

There are two intertwined threads in this chapter. The first concerns the relationships between HIV prevention NGOs and the female sex workers in Chennai, Tamil Nadu. The second concerns how the global assemblage of HIV prevention unfolds in the field and affects the sex workers' lives through the NGOs. How have the ideas of HIV prevention been taken up in the field? How do the sex workers locate themselves in relation to the international discourse of HIV? How do global discourses and the everyday lives of the sex workers

that I interviewed meet? How does agency play a role? How does each party use the 'HIV discourse'? What kind of implications do the HIV prevention programmes have for the sex workers?

This chapter has three main purposes. First, I discuss HIV as a global assemblage in India within the context of sex work. Here I discuss the role of international donor agencies and the principles of HIV prevention in India/Chennai. Second, I move on to show how HIV prevention is implemented in the field. Third, I provide criticism of the HIV prevention programmes in Chennai and argue that they fail because they address HIV as a health problem and not as a social one. I argue that maintaining such a representation is related to global policies on HIV, as well as to the material and conceptual conditions in which NGOs have to operate.

I draw on a number of sources in presenting my analysis and formulating these arguments. I make extensive use of relevant literature in the field, in particular the existing work on the 'global assemblage' of HIV discourse. But as one of my purposes is to explore how this plays out in at the level of NGOs in Chennai, I also make use of my fieldnotes in teasing out some of the processes involved. In addition, while most of my analysis of the sex workers is in the chapters following this, here I also provide extracts from some interviews in support of the analysis being made. From both of the latter, the reader is again referred to Appendices 1 and 2 and chapter 6 where details of the sex workers and the NGOs are provided.

HIV as a 'global assemblage'

Trying to understand the connections embedded in globalisation, Aihwa Ong and Stephen Collier describe 'global assemblages' as sites of 'new material, collective and discursive relationships' (2005:4). These assemblages render 'classical social scientific concepts such as society, culture and economy' (2005:4) as simplified and vague and 'yet the travelling of these assemblages is

worthy of anthropological analysis even if they do not fit into the traditional context of anthropological analysis'. Treichler (1999) and Karnik (2001: 322-32) argue that there are 'two epidemics' of HIV: a biological epidemic and a social discourse, i.e. the interpretive understanding of HIV, which both affect understandings of HIV, and these ideas, as much as the virus, travel globally. Thus, HIV is not just a medical condition but a social discourse as well. This suggests that the social meaning associated with HIV differs from the biological facts of HIV and comes with a baggage of, for example, stigma attached to it in the Indian context. Global assemblages as phenomena are not new – ideas have always travelled, but the special nature of global assemblages as defined by Ong and Collier (2005) is that they are accelerated and ubiquitous within globalisation.

Global discursive ideas and material conditions take on local forms. The connections between international policies on HIV and the care and prevention practices implemented on the local level provide an excellent example of a 'global assemblage'. International agencies such as World Bank, UNAIDS and USAID, guide and fund the attempts of the Indian government to curb HIV, and HIV has become a part of the 'development' agenda. Concerning funding, there are guidelines on and expectations of how prevention work should be conducted. Looking at the sex workers' relationships with the NGOs from the viewpoint of the global assemblage is useful because it is shows how HIV is a discourse available to the sex workers and how it affects their lives. Also, HIV prevention practices have changed the social construction and the practices of sex work in India. Ideas about HIV and HIV prevention practices are both useful for sex workers and reinforce their oppression.

Global assemblage in this context refers to a set of ideas of HIV – such as what causes it, how it can be prevented, and how prevention is best done – that have led to international prevention and care policies and practices. Treichler (1999) shows that the explanation of what HIV is and how it transmits was a socially constructed process, and negotiation and compromise took place between

various laboratories, scientists and activists before a commonly agreed upon definition was achieved (e.g. HIV as the cause of AIDS under given circumstances: that the virus has access to living cells, which can then lead to immune deficiency in a person, and finally to vulnerability to several different medical conditions [AIDS]).[14]

An agreement regarding what HIV 'is' has led to various policies on and practices surrounding its prevention that remain internationally negotiated. HIV-related ideas, policies and practices have subsequently travelled across the globe (Karnik 2001). UNAIDS, an agency that advises and advocates on HIV-related issues and joins efforts against HIV, was formed 1994. In 2004, UNAIDS was asked to draw up global guidelines to help countries to fight against HIV transmission and AIDS. Two sets of guidelines have been published since: one in 2005 and one in 2007. These guidelines promote technical policies suggesting that each country should operate under UNAIDS guidelines together with 'best practice and evidence' that are country-specific and developed through a systematic collection of evidence through various local stakeholders. The UNAIDS guidelines stress localised interventions to HIV, such as: 'know your epidemic': who are the people locally amongst whom HIV spreads, and to what extent, so that the response can be made accordingly; consider gender, human rights, and poverty; address stigma; involve powerful stakeholders (UNAIDS 2005, 2007). Some operationalised ways of doing this include voluntary testing and counselling, using peer

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[14] Treichler (1999) describes how four main people/groups were involved in the debate and struggle for the definition, genesis and even the naming of HIV: virologist Robert Gallo at National Cancer Institute in the US; Luc Montagnier at Pasteur Institute in Paris; and New York-based physician, Joseph Sonnabend, who called for a broader definition of the cause of AIDS, including other viruses and socio-developmental conditions, including poverty and malnutrition. At the fifth AIDS conference in Montreal in 1989 (discussed in Treichler 1999), Nicholas Regush questioned the rigour by which some of the early HIV claims were made with regard to the social construction of scientific facts; the definition of the cause of AIDS and what HIV is (a type of leukaemia, an immunology-related disease, a virus etc); its conditions (to what extent did socio-economic factors contribute to the spread, or was it simply viral transmission?). Debates of when and how HIV started (from chimpanzees to people in Africa, propelled through the eating of bush meat and through blood contact in animal sacrifice, or through polio vaccines that were cultured on monkey livers in the 1950s in central Africa, continue to this day (see e.g. Hooper 1999; Martin 2001, 2003).

educators, promoting condoms, blood screening, and raising general awareness and behaviour change

(UNAIDS website,

http://www.unaids.org/en/Policies/HIV_Prevention/default.asp.

Accessed online 13th Aug 2007). These guidelines address localised forms of action, but this has not always taken place, and it is possible that these guidelines have been 'localised' as a reaction to critiques such as the one given below.

Perhaps because HIV was first identified in the West, or because most stakeholders initially were Western, there have been suggestions that the underlying ideas of HIV prevention were 'Western-biased'. For example, Karnik (2001) has argued that initially Western ideas about HIV were used in India when trying to understand the epidemic's form. Karnik analyses scientific articles regarding HIV in India at the onset of the epidemic to grasp the meaning of HIV that arrived in India, and to map out the global processes of how HIV is talked about and constructed. For example, the use of the concept 'high risk' made its way uncritically into Indian writings on HIV, where Karnik argues that the use of ideas about 'high risk' groups or populations is problematic. The assumption that high risk groups such as 'sex workers' propose a risk to the rest of the population assumes that others are low-risk, and is particularly problematic when the rest of the population is never defined or tested and when comparisons and conclusions are made based on samples that are not representative of the whole of India (Karnik 2001: 327). In the West, HIV was associated with homosexual men and intravenous drug users, and this association was present in the articles that Karnik studied in the Indian context as well. However, constructing 'homosexuals' or 'intravenous drug users' as high risk is also problematic because they have little resonance in India because these are not 'indigenous' terms, nor is HIV spreading there in this way (predominantly): in contemporary India, 85% of the infections are argued to take place in heterosexual relationships, with an assumption that this is via sex work (NACO 2004: 14). Karnik (2001) shows that, in early writings on HIV,

poverty and economic situations were not included as factors contributing to the spread of HIV and, also, blood transfusion patients were excluded or not investigated thoroughly.

Karnik's examples beg the question: do internationally defined models of HIV prevention apply in all contexts? What does the 'global assemblage of HIV' mean in practice? I will now turn to the relationship between international agencies and the Indian government's efforts at HIV prevention.

Indian government and international agencies in HIV prevention

In 1987, in the wake of the first HIV case in India (found in Chennai in 1986), a semi-independent board, the National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO), was formed within the Indian government's Department of Family Health. An actual planned mode of conduct was started in 1992, in the form of a programme called 'The First Phase of HIV Prevention'. Although NACO sets the national framework of how HIV is prevented, the practical work is implemented by NGOs. Chennai has about 60 NGOs that work with HIV, of which most are development organisations that have introduced HIV into their programmes, rather than focusing on HIV solely (which characterises the organisation that I visited). The main funders of NACO are the World Bank, USAID, DFID and CIDA, while ideological support comes from UNAIDS. These NGOs are harnessed in the implementation and performance of HIV prevention in the field.

In what was called 'The Second Phase of HIV Prevention' (1999-2006), NACO set cost-effective HIV prevention as its primary aim. This was done via three different goals/tasks. Primarily, by reducing the spread among high risk groups:

"By identifying target populations and providing peer counselling, condom promotion, treatment of STIs and enabling environment. These would be locally modified and delivered largely through Non-Governmental

Organisations, community based organisatins (*sic*) (CBOs) and the public sector using generic protocols." (NACO website

 http://www.nacoonline.org/abt_phase2.htm. Accessed online 22nd Oct 2006) The second primary aim is to protect the 'general community' (*sic*) by conducting mass awareness campaigns, making voluntary testing services available and improving blood banks. The third aim is to provide low-cost care to those who have already been affected by HIV/AIDS. NACO also aims to provide organisational support to and to strengthen the capacity of NACO and its staff on the state and national level. (NACO website, http://www.nacoonline.org/abt_phase2.htm. Accessed online 22nd Oct 2006)

These aims are relatively straightforward and practical. They address who should be targeted, how they should be targeted, by what means these people would be informed about HIV, how STDs should be treated, and who should do the actual work. They do not ask why and for what reason HIV spreads, they only provide the means to intervene. Interventions aim to reduce the incidence of HIV by focusing on health and safe sex practices. What the aims do not recognise are the structural problems that might occur in HIV prevention and how these could be addressed. Wider structural problems that affect the spread of HIV, such as women's position, poverty, or inequality, are beyond the realm of 'cost-effective' intervention measures. The aims provide a means to show that the problem of HIV is addressed, but because significant factors that contribute to the spread (such as those above) are not considered, they do not reflect a wholehearted effort to do something about the disease. Studying the origins of the guidelines might give insight into the conceptual foundations of the prevention practices.

A document containing correspondence between World Bank country director and the NACO project director (for India) from 1999 named '*Project appraisal document on a proposed credit in the amount of SDR 140.83 million to India for a second national HIV/AIDS control project,*' (World Bank 1999) shows that, whilst the World Bank agreed to finance the Second Phase of HIV

prevention in India, this came with a set of aims and guidelines as to how it should be done. These aims are exactly the same ones that NACO states on its website. This suggests that the aims by which the prevention is to be done are at least partially initiated by the World Bank. Among the people who planned the document and conducted research for it was a team that consisted of both Western and Indian individuals. To what extent the First Phase had an impact on this document is not clear. It is also unclear as to whether or not the aims and guidelines of how the Second Phase should be conducted were planned in cooperation with people in the field. Considering the level of negotiation between the funding bodies, and to what extent this process was done in collaboration, is beyond the scope of this research. Looking at this process of global policy transfer would make an interesting research project, however.

Although I do not know exactly how and by whom these outlines were drawn regarding India and Chennai, evidence from elsewhere can elucidate this process. Murray and Robinson (1996), while discussing HIV prevention problems in Australia and South East Asia, point to international influence as the origin of the HIV discourse: 'NGOs may be ad hoc groups or established organisations that take HIV prevention on board, [they] are locally run but import funds, consultants and the 'AIDS discourse' developed by Western government programmes and the World Health organisation (Murray and Robinson 1996: 44; see also Patton: 1990).

Even if the process of how (and from who) the initiation of HIV prevention has come into the realm of the Indian government remains unclear, its existence suggests a dialogue between the Indian government and international agencies. The threat of HIV was not simply ignored by the Indian government in the way some Sub-Saharan countries have done. I do not accept the view that existing policies have been entirely dictated by the multinational organisations. Gupta (1998) has suggested regarding global environmental discourses and their resonance in India, that these are imposed by multinational organisations and unions form a new type of post-colonial governing that exceeds the governing

between states and its citizens. However, the similar relationship between the international funding bodies and advisors of HIV and the grassroots actors has created a new type of relationship between the global and local – the global assemblage of HIV and the discourse of HIV that address the sex workers. In HIV prevention practices, one can see how the HIV discourse is a reflexive process, and how its performance has been initiated as well as internalised.

On paper, HIV prevention looks very encouraging and positive. But the aims provided by multinational organisations and the government can only tell us so much. How do these aims, that at first glance seem rather reasonable and agreeable, become used in practice? How is HIV prevention conducted at the grassroots level? What do the people that implement these policies think of them? What kind of impact has this had on the lives of those targeted? I will turn to these questions now.

HIV prevention in Chennai

As part of structural adjustments in 1991, the Indian government decentralised its responsibilities in health care and social welfare to the third sector, particularly to NGOs. In Chennai and in the rest of India, HIV prevention too has been decentralised to NGOs. The Indian government participates in HIV prevention by giving funds to state-level organisations, e.g. in Tamil Nadu the state-level organisation is TNSACS (Tamil Nadu State AIDS Control Society). Within Tamil Nadu, the problem is seen as being so focused in Chennai that Chennai has its own body to deal with it, CAPACS (Chennai AIDS Prevention and Control Society). Besides Chennai, only two other cities have their comparable bodies, Ahmedabad and Mumbai. NACO gives money for condom promotion and voluntary testing centres and for promoting behaviour change and training of health experts, reflecting the government guidelines.

A TNSACS NGO advisor explained to me that government projects do not have money in the budget to fund the immediate, often social-cum-economic

needs of people in the high risk groups, for example those that might make a sex worker have to accept a client without a condom when more money is offered. But the advisor also explained that HIV was a treated as health, not a social problem. In Chennai, Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry, HIV prevention is also funded by APAC (AIDS Prevention and Control Society) - APAC receives its funds directly from USAID, which it then distributes to the NGOs that work in the field. APAC funds more than 60 NGOs for HIV prevention all over Tamil Nadu, and CAPACS funds 15 projects in Chennai.[15] Other smaller funding bodies are DFID, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Elton John Foundation, John Hopkins University, Action Aid, and smaller donors in Europe.

NGOs implement HIV prevention by aiming at HIV awareness-raising among 'high risk groups', many of them addressing sex workers. The main modes of this work involve using 'peer educators', vocal and powerful individuals from among the target groups, to communicate with other sex workers. Other ways of doing this involved: meetings arranged for the sex workers (smaller ones weekly or monthly, or larger ones annually); social marketing of condoms; and special events (usually targeted at stakeholders related to the sex workers, like doctors, lawyers, and other civil society representatives) such as the viewing of a documentary made about HIV patients in Tamil Nadu, the World AIDS Day demonstration and so on. The NGOs differed in their efficacy at arranging these; some were more haphazard, some were well-organised. NGOs all had different organisational histories in social welfare and health care, for example, one of them had started as an NGO that helped blind people, but now they receive funding from the same sources to do HIV prevention.

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[15] CAPACS funded NGOs in Chennai: '3 Interventions for CSWs (commercial sex workers), 2 IVDUs (intravenous drug users), 1 MSM (men who have sex with men), 1 street children, 1 film industry people, 1 truckers, 1 porters, 1 eunuchs, 2 slum population, 2 intervention for auto drivers'
http://www.capacs.org/ngos.htm. Accessed 31st July 2007.
APAC funded NGOs in Tamil Nadu: '13 prevent along highway, 7 women in prostitution, 10 women and tourists in prostitution, 8 slum intervention, 7 industrial intervention, 2 VCTC (voluntary counselling and testing centre), 5 care and support, 1 integrated STD (sexually transmitting disease) and MHC (maternity health clinics), 2 migrants projects, 1 MSM'
http://www.apacvhs.org/NP_APAC_NGOs.html. Accessed 31st July 2007.

Following the idea of global governance, it has been argued that NGOs in general are an extension of World Bank neo-liberalist policies (Kamat 2004), and that they cover up for poor state welfare structures (see e.g. Sen 1999). Townsend et al. (2004) argue against this view and claim that there are organisations that 'think independently' and that try to promote social transformation and developmental change. I challenge their view that NGOs are simply either greedy or sincere, corrupt and money-minded while others are not. This rather naïve dichotomy and Townsend et al.'s (2004) argument does not acknowledge the economic realities AND social norms in which NGOs have to operate. Along the lines put forward by David Mosse (2005), NGOs have to operate within the particular conditions that they are in: they have to struggle for economic survival, particularly if they are working on a stigmatized subject such as HIV in India, and they might need to maintain a certain rhetoric according to the existing funding policies. I quote my field notes on this:

> *CAPACS consultant Ms Uma was critical of how HIV prevention on an organisational level is run in that money is being circulated. She believed not so much into the coordinators' pockets but because the funding always comes as refunds after the actual expenses have been made, as a result a lot of the money is lost when it arrives going into paying debts, loans and interests. NGOs, she said, merely keep up their own reputation and position rather than the cause of the sex workers. She argued that NGOs are not necessarily corrupted and greedy but do so to gain status and steady income. "When one has skills to apply for money, it comes in; the funding bodies do not measure how much one loves the job or how sympathetic one is to the target group." (Fieldnotes 4th April 2005)*

There were several NGOs in Chennai that worked in the field of HIV prevention and I did not have enough time given my focus on the sex workers to say anything authoritative about all of them. My access to NGOs in the field was somewhat opportunistic, and I did not choose between them according to a particular line of thought regarding sex work. When I asked sex workers which NGOs they knew and visited, the ones I worked through were very much the ones that they mentioned, without them necessarily knowing which of the

NGOs I was visiting. I will now turn to discussing the NGOs that work in the field of HIV prevention in Chennai referring readers to Appendix 2 for basic information on them.

NGOs in Chennai were mostly located in middle-class areas and were spread across town rather than being centralized in a particular area. The few that were in upper-class areas were immaculate, air-conditioned and well-equipped with the most recent computer technology, while others that were in the poorer parts of town were poorly maintained, dirty and shady. The NGOs were not necessarily in the areas where the sex workers lived, nor were they exactly where sex work took place. Generally, NGO premises had little offices with desks and plastic chairs. No matter how small the NGO, project coordinators had their own rooms. Apart from YRG CARE (one of the NGOs), which had several offices and was associated to VHS-hospital (Voluntary Health Services-hospital), the NGOs did not have medical facilities.

These offices were defined by condom promotion adverts on the walls, hand-made maps and charts, and campaign posters. The hand-made maps and charts detailed parts of Chennai. These were 'deviant maps', references to where sex work took place. They were areas that the NGOs had identified as centres of sex work, including pick-up points and places where sex was then had. The charts outlined how many condoms had been distributed, how many new contacts had been made with sex workers, and how many people had been referred for testing. For guests, these things were visible signs of the work that the NGOs did, and they were often pointed out as evidence of the activities of the NGOs. I observed that the charts tended to reflect the budgetary promises that NGOs had made to their funding bodies. The condom adverts and campaign posters were generally cartoons with Tamil and English text that encouraged people to practice safe sex. These summarised the symptoms of AIDS and the ways that HIV and STDs are spread. When the NGO was a sex workers' project, the posters had pictures of women with men; when it was a MSM (men-who-have-sex-with-men) -project, the pictures were of effeminate

men with masculine partners. Some posters advised abstinence and being faithful over using condoms; these were distributed by APAC, which was funded by USAID and reflected the US government's ABC policy (Abstinence, Be faithful, use Condoms). Some sex workers said that these pictures put them off because they were impure and inappropriate and that they did not want to go to the NGOs because of them. Similar information was available in IE (Information and Education) leaflets available in most NGO offices. Condoms were available in most offices – on request, rather than being on open display. Only once did I witness a woman asking for condoms. This might be coincidental, or it could mean that the fact that women could not discreetly pick the condoms up but had to ask for them might have stopped them getting condoms due to embarrassment.

The NGOs usually had a space where the sex workers could hang about and spend time. This was usually a room or a part of a room in a larger one – usually a rather empty space without furniture, where people sat on the floors on mats and cushions. A few offices had a TV in this room. While most offices offered tea to everybody in the afternoon, some also offered *'meals'* (rice and curries). Food was an incentive for the women to come to the NGO offices. Some offered food in their weekly meetings, while some only provided lunch if there was a larger meeting that took place once every couple of months.

From the above brief descriptions of the organisations involved in HIV prevention, I will now turn to how the NGOs' HIV prevention practices were actually carried out.

Performing the HIV discourse

I argue that the practice of HIV prevention was a performance that was utilised to induce resources by all parties involved, specifically the NGOs and the sex workers in Chennai. The national/global guidelines on HIV interventions set the general guidelines for these NGOs as to how to implement the

interventions. The NGOs generally practiced along these guidelines, in a manner very similar to each other, as they got funding from the same sources. This performance included the use of peer educators, using and reproducing the rhetoric of the HIV, and using incentives.

Peer education and HIV prevention

A good example of Karnik's (2001) idea of the global travelling of categories and concepts is the practice of using so-called peer educators, powerful individuals from among the relevant risk community, to convey the message of condom use and HIV to other community members (i.e. sex workers and their clients) in HIV prevention and public health awareness-raising work. All the organisations that I visited used peer educators to look for and recruit new sex workers for their networks, to direct sex workers to voluntary counselling and testing at government hospitals, for counselling in general, for distributing condoms to high risk groups and doing social marketing of condoms to local shops, and for awareness-raising among external sources. Peer educators were paid an honorarium for their contribution, and I observed that peer educators were often madams and brokers.

While all the NGOs that I was dealing with in Chennai used peer educators and some hired sex workers to work in the offices, using peer educators is not standardised in India. Dandona et al. (2005) suggest that their use should be standardised because they share a common belief that employing sex workers as recruiters is more efficient. I would agree on the need to standardise the practice of using sex workers because, as there is no monitoring of this, the peer educators I came to know reported that their salaries were often late, and that they were paid less than was promised in the budgets given to the funding bodies etc. While there are very few alternative income sources for the sex workers, standardising the practice of using sex workers as NGO staff could potentially make their position more secure, root the NGOs' actions in the grassroots women's networks (thereby making them bottom-up rather than top-

down), and provide sex workers with an opportunity to organise themselves and to use the NGOs for social mobilisation purposes.

While peer education is a haphazard, un-standardised practice used in HIV prevention, the power within this process lies not just with the NGOs, who gain from having sex workers as recruiters. Sex workers also use the HIV discourse to further their interests: using peer education for social mobilisation, claiming a new more positive identity and an alternative income. Peer education has allowed for collective action by the sex workers and is a source of self-respect. Resulting from these experiences, in Chennai an organisation of sex workers is taking baby steps, and there is now a peer educators' collective, IFPEC (Indira Female Peer Educators' Collective).

In a sex workers' annual meeting, the women present had the chance to go to the microphone and talk about their experiences. Komala said:

> *'Our parents gave us a name but the police and others have spoiled it for calling us by dirty names and as prostitutes. But now we should be proud for our name is now "peer educator".' (Fieldnotes 25th Oct 2004)*

Rajitham said:

> *'We are peer educators. We should be proud of ourselves and the work we do. We can't know how many people we have helped but I know that I have changed many lives.' (Fieldnotes 25th Oct 2004)*

In these examples, which should be read keeping in mind that the context was a sex workers' annual meeting where women might have felt pressured to say things in alignment with the official HIV discourse, the women who spoke expressed pride in being peer educators and in helping others. Peer education came across as upward social mobility, a respectable alternative to their demeaning role as a sex worker. From my experience, HIV prevention had the support of (most) peer educators.

In an interview at her house, Maya told me about being a peer educator and what she does:

> *'To take care of my children's needs and other I became a CSW (sic, commercial sex worker) but now that they are older if they come to know what I do, they would not understand. For that reason I am working in an office as a Peer Educator. I have become a pioneer in educating the CSW by advising them on condoms, HIV and AIDS. I try to change their mind on an alternative income. Now, I am victorious over the problems in my house in the office and also outside. I am also a leader in the Indira Sangam (IFPEC). Like this, women should be able to overcome all the challenges. You can take me as an example...' (Interview transcript p. 2, lines 28-42, 20th Feb 2005)*

Maya here is suggesting that, since becoming a peer educator, she has also been able to overcome problems in her private life. Maya's account can be described, in the words of the development discourse, as 'empowered'. Through the constructive opportunity of helping others, Maya has not only become assertive as a sex worker, but also in other areas of her life – at home and elsewhere in community. Her life experiences have made her aware of her situation, and she wants to share that knowledge and the ability to take life under control to other sex workers.

Maya's account also suggests that replacing the stigmatised identity of the commercial sex worker with positive, constructive and more respected identities can be uplifting for women.

> *Maya: 'It's been two years and in that period I have changed my entire life. My brother said: "You are an orphan and even if someone hits you nobody will be there for you and very near in future you are going to be begging in streets." But now I have so many people around me, there are people in ICWO, World Vision [NGOs giving HIV awareness] and also among other sex workers. If something happens to me then there are people there to cry for me and to think about me.' (Interview transcript p. 8, lines 14-20, 20th Feb 2005)*

In this passage, Maya explains how important the NGO community has become to her. Her own family disowned her and initially she was very sad about this.

In a family-centred society and without supporting structures, a woman is very vulnerable if she is disowned. In the case of Maya, she found friends and support through the NGO, and she now feels important and finds value in her own life and in the lives of other women like her. Women like Maya, who were empowered, as well as women who did not have a reputation to lose, were able to associate themselves with these organisations. Here is an example of how the HIV prevention has enabled 'empowerment', that also shows individual agency. I discuss this matter further in chapter 8.

There were problems in peer education, however. I observed that some sex workers did not want to be associated with the peer educators because they gave away their identity in public situations. These women felt that anybody who was seen with the peer educators was associated with sex work, revealing the women's status as sex workers to those that they wanted to conceal it from. There was a risk of husbands finding out, losing housing opportunities, children's reputation, physical harm etc. Sindhamani said to me that, sometimes when she educated other women about condom use and STDs, they scolded her by saying: *'Why are you telling all this, who do you think we are?!'* *(Fieldnotes 16th Feb 2005)* Some women were uninterested in 'the message' of HIV prevention. Overall, the HIV projects have failed to address the problem of the stigma surrounding sex work/peer education. When peer educators addressed the difficulties in conveying the HIV message because some recipients refused it due to a sense of impropriety, instead of organising think-tanks on how other peer educators have managed, the NGOs simply told them to 'just go and do it again.'

In the above mentioned sex workers'/peer educators' meeting, the problem of the police was also mentioned, specifically, that the police can arrest a person who carries condoms with her/him. Peer educators I knew in Chennai always carried their identity card with them, which they could show to the police in case they were challenged. Also, for example, after spending the whole day at the NGO office, Nanda distributed condoms in the common MSM cruising

spots. In doing so, Nanda was frequently got bullied by the police. She told me that saying that one was a peer educator who was distributing condoms for an NGO did not necessarily stop one from getting bullied, whacked with a *lathi* (a bamboo stick), or taken to the police station.

Furthermore, the women's networks were not entirely smooth-running. Neela, for example, who had been abandoned by three husbands, was quite bitter towards women who were in relationships, and she shared her information only with those women who were 'single' like her. These quarrels between the women involved suggest problems within the HIV prevention practices. If peer educators are choosy about who they think deserves to be told about HIV (i.e. informed about free lunches and other incentives), this means that networks are not neutral and un-politicised, and not everyone will get access to the HIV message.

Upper-class women, whom the peer educators are unable to reach, were also mentioned as a problem, in that they cannot be educated if they cannot be contacted. Many sex workers nonetheless visited the NGOs and enjoyed their services. When they attended NGO meetings, they received lunch and tea. For important meetings like a visit by the funders, or an annual meeting for the sex workers, the women were lured to come along by offering them food, saris, or a free health check. NGO meetings were confidential, and going to the meetings did not challenge the women's reputation in public. The NGOs served a purpose for the women: instead of having to do sex work, they could go to an NGO meeting to eat or to get some money. Many women visited several NGOs and made me swear not to tell the other NGOs that I had seen them in the meetings organised by their 'competitors'.

Unlike visiting NGOs, becoming a peer educator requires one to 'come out' as a sex worker in public, which is difficult for many women because of the stigma of sex work (which is also associated with peer education). In this way, the NGOs offer the women a stigmatised position that makes them again

vulnerable to the problems that come with the stigma of sex work, including violence and blackmail from the rowdies and policemen. Not all women were ready to come out to the general public; for example, by fighting for the political rights of sex workers or by showing their faces in the media to discuss the problems sex workers were facing.

These problems resonate with the problems described by Murray and Robinson (1996: 46) of working as a peer educator in a social context in which HIV is stigmatised, and in which sex work is illegal and socially judged. The HIV discourse means that the women are being offered a role that is not detached of the stigma of sex work and it strikes me that the practices that Murray and Robinson critiqued in 1996 were still everyday practice during my fieldwork in Chennai in 2004-2005, and that nothing new had been taken on board about this in nearly a decade.

Although many researchers around the topic of HIV prevention in India are in unison about the efficacy of involving sex workers in preventing HIV and empowering other sex workers (in India see: e.g. Amin 2004; Blanchard et al. 2005; Dandona et al. 2005; Jayasree 2004; O'Neil et al. 2004; and also Campbell 1991 on brothels in Nevada), Asthana and Oostvogels (1996) challenge this standpoint. Asthana and Oostvogels (1996) argue that 'peer education' originates from the gay movement in the US. Murray and Robinson (1996) show that this model of HIV prevention travelled from the US to Australia, then to South East Asia, and from there it then spread around the globe. Asthana and Oostvogels (1996) try to find the reason for dysfunctional HIV prevention practice by returning to the roots of peer education, and they question whether the HIV prevention model originating out of the US gay communities can be applied to different social contexts (in their case, to the female sex workers in Chennai). They argue that community participation is not necessarily the best way of preventing HIV, but rather that more effective strategies include professionalizing sex work and addressing wider social and developmental issues that are obstacles to empowerment and thus to HIV

prevention (such as gender power imbalances and the hesitance of clients to use condoms). Asthana and Oostvogels (1996) address broader social and economical inequalities and power imbalances that peer education does not. In the Indian context peer education provides a good example of how the 'one model suits all' style of HIV prevention actually does not. Peer education, if standardised, can provide positive identity and social mobilisation, but an efficient HIV prevention program should have projects that address social inequalities along with this.

Using the rhetoric

The Chennai NGOs used the health-related discourse of HIV to promote the stability of their projects. The following examples show how NGOs performed this discourse and how the sex workers then parroted this. Telling a certain story maintained funding and, in this process, sex workers were integral.

> *Yesterday in SWCWS it turned out that their 3 year project funding is coming to an end and they are undergoing evaluation to see how they had done and if it will be continued. External reviewers come on a few days' notice. In the Peer Educators' meeting women revised under the instructions of the fieldworkers the HIV/STD message - names of STDs, symptoms and prevention, HIV and how they differ, what the difference between HIV and AIDS was, where to get treatment, what happens when one is ill etc. Few knew the answers fluently (Sripriya, Madhura, Vennila), while others didn't remember anything. I wondered if this was the difference between new and old peer educators. The women learned to say. "I am (name), I am a peer educator in SWCWS." This all was to ensure that the women had got the message and that also the reviewers understand that. Meanly one can ask – in three years, is this the outcome? – a handful of women who have the closest relationships with the NGO and thus they if anyone they should know the message –recite shorthands meant to convince the funders. (Fieldnotes 3rd April 2005)*

Another lengthy example from my notes is as follows.

> *I went to the side office of ICWO in Mahabalipuram where guests from America, USAID, were expected. USAID funds APAC, who funds the project of tourists and women in prostitution, that has its office in*

Mahabalipuram. I landed there at 8:30 in the morning. Preparations were going, on, cleaning, arranging seats, banners set up. At 9 o'clock IFPEC board members plus three other sex workers drove in with a van with Saroj, Nanda and Mohana from the MSM community. We, the 'community people' '(targets' of the HIV interventions, sex workers and some MSMs) and me, climbed upstairs to sit in the cool breeze of the thatched roof while the non-community staff members stayed downstairs to prepare for the visitors. We sat on mats on the floor and everybody, including Saroj, Nanda and Mohana, started to apply make up. The community members were there to interact with the guests, so that they could ask questions to get a more personal hearing of the issues in the community rather than represented by the staff. Of course, as we were to see, this went horribly wrong.

I applied make up on Maanika.[16] He was wearing a pant-shirt[16] and had a moustache but everybody spoke of him as 'she' so I corrected my mistake. I combed Nanda's hair, Bina wanted to put some kohl in my eyes. Saroj was helping me with translations. He said sarcastically that all the women seemed to be in love with me. Bina said: "Yes, I'd do her." When Saroj applied lipstick on himself, Bina said that his mouth was like a pussy. Everybody laughed and teased each other.

The morning went on and the guests were late. I went down to chat with Ravi and Hariharan. I wondered if these guests would be as ignorant as guests from the week before when NACO 'bigshots' had visited ICWO and asked the MSMs questions like: "When God created men and women why do you insist on wanting men"? And: "If you were to get a wife, would you have sex with her?", which were extremely backward and rude questions and upset the MSM community members. Hariharan laughed: "Hardly." I wondered how people get to such high positions with such ignorant attitudes to the work they do and Hariharan said it was due to the hierarchy of job distribution based on political prestige rather than education.

Soon sounds of drumming, pipes and trampling of hooves echoed in the air. Two white horses escorted a jeep to the entry of the office. The band played a fanfare. The guests stepped out and someone made blessings with burning camphor to them. They were two white American women, who were sweating immensely. Someone else applied kumkumum on their foreheads and they got jasmine garlands around their necks. Needless to say, this was not a usual treatment of visitors.

Downstairs, Hariharan gave a presentation aided with computer about the project and its activities. Upstairs Devashis Dutta, APAC project co-ordinator, prepared the women. He asked them questions

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[16] Pant-shirt = trousers and a collared shirt.

of their role as Peer Educators, what they did and what they knew of STDs. The women had been told to say that they were sex workers in the area although it was obvious to anyone who knew them that they were not. They lived in the northwest of Chennai, 50km north of Mahapalipuram village. These women were a core group of ICWO that gets taken around because they have learned the rhetoric of the funding bodies and can play on their rules for their own interest. Saroj had to pretend that he was a sex worker although he is not. Nanda is. The staff do not really know who the sex workers are who operate in the area, if there are any, the staff has no resources and means to visit the field. "They simply fill in the files to look like something is going on", Saroj told me.

The guests came upstairs and were made to sit on plastic chairs while the community members sat on the floor on mats. They asked about the peer educator's role, IFPEC, the children, the use of condoms. Women told that all sex workers are older women between the ages of 30-50. The old wizards said that the youngest sex workers they had been able to find were above 20. The women assured the guests that condom use was 100% but maybe some new women, who don't know of condoms and have less authority with the men, might sometimes not use them and get diseases. Of IFPEC they said that they had started to save money since the establishing of IFPEC where as before they used to spend their money in alcohol. "Saving gives hope and prevents daughters from getting into the business", they explained. Guests asked about the female condom, whether to promote it or not. Women responded with enthusiasm, it would be good to promote. Guests asked if the sex workers used condoms twice, women denied vehemently. Finally there was a discussion why not to combine the MSMs to IFPEC. It was concluded that as the clients are different, then why not.   (Fieldnotes 13th Oct 2004)

Examples like those above suggest that sex workers were groomed to give certain impressions and particular answers. On top of the answers that the sex workers were trained to give, there were actual lies in the second narrative that the women conveyed. Firstly, although many sex working women I met were between the ages of 30 and 50, and while the average age of sex workers was in the early thirties, there definitely were young and minor sex workers who were not in the given age group. Secondly, the female condom is not available in the Indian market and thus it was unlikely that many of the women had even heard of it[17]. Thirdly, when the women admitted that, outside those 100% of sex

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[17] The BBC reported on the 17th March 2007 that Tamil Nadu will launch female condoms on a grand scale.

workers who use condoms, there might be some new sex workers whom the peer educators had not been able to reach and who sell sex without condoms, this comes across as a token rupture in the narrative, an infraction that one would expect to be there, which ends up seemingly making the standard narrative all the more reliable. But stating that, apart from some new sex workers, everybody uses condoms, is quite untrue, as I came to find out.

While using the dominant rhetoric of the HIV discourse, any individual and possibly divergent narratives from the sex workers remained silent. While the sex workers were groomed to give correct answers on how to use condoms or regarding the symptoms of common sexually transmitted infections, their concerns about stigma or lack of viable alternative sources of income were not addressed. In maintaining the image that project aims were met and in ensuring that all the sex workers said that they used condoms, the women concerned were unable to say that they did not always able use condoms because of rape or coercion. The NGOs treated HIV as a biological problem which echoes the dominant standpoint and approach by the government, but social factors are also importantly involved: While talking to me outside the NGO context, the sex working women addressed the wider structural problems that they were facing and talked about their position vis-à-vis men, the power gap between men and women, poverty, their lack of employment options, and so on. Enabling these things to be said might have generated discussion on the real problems of HIV prevention: structural inequalities, lack of general awareness about condom use, and men's reluctance to use them. What strikes me as problematic here is how disconnected the dominant rhetoric is from the lived experiences of the sex workers I interviewed.

The answers that the sex workers were trained to give and which were reasonable in the context supported the agenda of the NGOs and resonated with the HIV discourse. These answers were aimed at convincing the funding bodies of the efficacy of the actions of the NGO, rather than actually enabling the sex working women to be heard. But these arguments were not just a ruthless use

of the sex workers, because the women also furthered their interests when they took this narrative of HIV discourse onboard. As much as the standard narratives of HIV discourse were given to prove the efficacy of the NGO, the women used the NGOs for their survival as well. The NGOs used sex workers to keep their funding flowing, while the sex workers used the NGOs for their survival.

Townsend et al. (2004:878) argue that this problematic situation is the fault of the funding bodies, which are money-minded and un-sympathetic to the cause of the NGOs. My observation is that this problem is an outcome of the NGOs, who want to maintain their financial status, and the interaction between the NGOs and the funding bodies. It is not that the NGOs are completely 'innocent' or at the mercy of the economical industry of international aid of multinational organisations. And also the process of using the HIV discourse to gain resources was a strategic action of all parties involved, including the sex workers. The sex workers were not simply 'victims' of this relationship between NGOs and multinational donors. In the process of HIV prevention, the sex workers and peer educators received incentives which I will discuss next.

Incentives and quotas in HIV prevention

I described in the methodology chapter how the NGO practice of using incentives to attract sex workers to their meetings affected my research. I concluded that the women asked me for incentives, because this was a common practice among the NGOs. Apart from one, all the NGOs attracted sex workers by using incentives to fill their quotas for the number of people taught about condoms and STDs. The only organisation that dealt with sex workers but refused to use incentives was SIAAP. They argued that this had a dramatic effect on the success on their programme, that their project had not flourished in Chennai because so many competing organisations paid the women and as a consequence the sex workers were unable to see 'politically', beyond their everyday needs.

One example that I have is that I met a woman in a sex workers' annual meeting and went to meet her the day after in her house in a semi-slum area. It turned out that she was not a sex worker but had been invited by someone in her area who then got an incentive for attracting a new recruit. She told me: *'I didn't know what the meeting was all about. I wasn't listening to the message but just chatted away with other people. I got the sari [the incentive for participating] and then came home.' (Fieldnotes 1st April 2005)* Here is a practical example of how both the agent and the woman concerned used the meeting for their gain: the agent who brought the woman to the meeting gained a small incentive (a common mobilisation incentive was Rs.10 =12.5 pence) and the woman got the sari.

Each year, all the Chennai NGOs set themselves target quotas for things such as teaching a certain number of sex workers about STD symptoms, introducing a certain number of new sex workers to NGO, and taking them to get HIV tests. I observed that, during the funding year, the NGOs feel pressured to show that they are achieving their goals. This is to show the funding bodies that they are being efficient and that the money they receive is not being used wrongly or mismanaged. The funding bodies review the efficacy of the projects annually to decide whether funding should be continued. Peer educators use their contacts in the field to bring eligible people to the networks of the projects. For example, I met Ishwari in a hospital where she had been brought by a peer educator for an HIV test. As I got to know her, it turned out that she was not a 'new' sex worker, but was a peer educator for another NGO; the other peer educator needed to fill her weekly quota, so Ishwari had agreed to go for the test. Because the number of sex workers that are willing to be identified is limited, the requirement of having to provide <u>new</u> women forces the peer educators to find any women that are willing. An example of the overlapping networks and the amount of NGOs comes from my discussion with an NGO project leader, Krish.

> *I said to Krish that it seems that because many of the peer educators
> are the same (between the different NGOs I had observed), they have
> succeeded to identify the right, eligible people. Krish laughed: "After
> a year when you know all the sex workers, it becomes apparent that
> there are more NGOs than women." (Fieldnotes 18ᵗʰ Oct 2004)*

The limited number of sex workers and the pressures on the NGOs to demonstrate their efficiency usually meant that new women going to an NGO were usually women who were new to a particular *organisation,* rather than women who were newly identified to *sex work.* The problem with incentive-led quotas is that peer educators try to make up the numbers rather than actively seeking to raise awareness among the sex workers about HIV. The precarious status of the NGOs and the uncertainty of funding have led to peer educators to feel the need to fill up numbers rather than raising awareness in a qualitative sense. The peer educators are bound by the pressures of the NGOs to fill the quotas, rather than actually being able to do good-quality awareness raising that is not dependent on numbers. But the fact that poor women, sex workers and peer educators still come to NGOs suggests that the NGOs serve some positive purpose for them.

> *Power is with those who are peer educators because they have the
> financial support of the NGOs. Collectivising in Chennai has not
> worked because there are so many incentives available. The
> temptation to get easy money is big. On the other hand the P.E.s (peer
> educators) do not want to loose their position and give up their
> financial reward and the incentives of attending meetings. One would
> have to do sex work again. It also seems that most P.E.s are old
> brokers and pimps that cannot have sex work anymore. Organising
> peer education to be self-directed might have destructive results for
> the HIV message – if money is not given, nobody might not come to
> the meetings. (Fieldnotes 4ᵗʰ April 2005)*

While the NGOs were using peer educators and sex workers to fulfil their quotas and keep the funding coming in, the sex workers and peer educators also received financial gains from attending. In my fieldnote above, I saw that this practice prevents sex workers from organising themselves in Chennai, and receiving financial and other rewards from the NGOs becomes their primary motivation, rather than political action. Similar conclusions are also made by

Asthana and Oostvogels (1996), who are critical of the way in which incentives given to peer educators become a way of making money rather than a reasonable reward for education (or rather than education as an aim in itself).

The quotas the NGOs have to attract a certain number of sex workers are made into statistics about the numbers of sex workers, STDs and HIV cases in Chennai. Paid participation in the networks of the NGOs, rote-learned symptoms of STDs and condom demonstrations during which no-one touches the condoms are conducted in expectation of financial reward and end up as encouraging statistics regarding the success of HIV prevention. As noted above, sex working women were not loyal to one specific organisation, but instead they visited several different NGOs. For example, like when Ishwari (the peer educator) went to get an HIV test to fill her friend's quota, figures such as this are fed back to NACO and end up as statistics. My reservation about the statistics of HIV in India derives from these and similar examples. My critique of HIV prevention is not against the NGOs *per se,* but concerns the problems created in the global assemblage of HIV. The NGOs operate in an economic context in which monetary payments come to them sporadically and are often delayed, which makes the NGOs feel pressure to use incentives to attract sex workers.

NGOs operate in the conceptual environment

While the economic realities are one dimension of HIV prevention, it is also defined by the conceptual context. HIV prevention is not value neutral, but is rooted in certain assumptions about gender, sexuality and cultural values with regard to what is and is not appropriate. HIV prevention practices in Chennai are not independent of the cultural norms and values that valorise the purity of women and restrict women's sexuality. These attitudes and ideas are reflected in the relationships between the sex workers and the NGO staff. When I interviewed NGO staff privately, they sometimes expressed views about the

women that were against the official line that reflects these cultural norms. This way, the cultural stigma of sex work affects the NGO staff too.

Relationships between NGO staff and sex workers were mostly cordial and polite. Arguments were uncommon, although sometimes hot tempered and verbally cunning older sex workers did end up in fights with the staff, for example after some pictures taken in ICWO of the faces of sex workers were published in a local Tamil newspaper. The paper was meant to publish a story about the neglect of sex workers, but ended up using the faces of the sex workers. As a result, the story goes, several sex workers had to shift houses because their landlords found out about their activity and, for example, Zaima received a serious beating from her husband. For the 'token' 'community members' working as staff in the NGOs, a common complaint was that even if they had, through their successful work in the field, been promoted to a job in the office, there was still discrimination towards them. Vijaya, a fieldworker in SWCWS who had been a sex worker, told me that she felt rejected and belittled in the office because of her sex work background.

Sharing food with members of another caste or class is a way of symbolically crossing the boundaries of caste and class, to transgress historic ideas that people of the lower castes or classes are somehow polluted. MSM fieldworkers in ICWO told me that other people in their office, who all ate lunch together and shared their food, refused to allow the MSMs to eat with them. Similarly, I never saw project leaders dine with the sex workers, while fieldworkers sometimes did. Refusing to cross this caste/class line is also perhaps a means of maintaining authority and hierarchy, as much as an idea of segregation.

Individually, at times, NGOs staff would declare to me their personal thoughts about the sex workers. For example, Stacy, a Christian social worker working in ICWO, told me that she thinks that what sex workers do is wrong and bad, and that every time she goes for fieldwork she tells them to come out of the business. The following example is from my notes about an interview with

three female fieldworkers (FWs) and a translator who worked with the sex workers' project in YRG CARE.

> *I asked the fieldworkers how they prepared themselves for meeting the sex workers and how they felt about meeting them. The explained that when they meet the sex workers they would introduce themselves and the NGO. Some sex workers might say that they are already with other NGOs and ask the FWs to approach them for a permission to talk. The fieldworkers would emphasise that they are not competing with the other NGOs but propose a joint effort. Health and family discussions were icebreakers. They would say that they have this account to fill and funds that they need. They offer medical camps, drawing attention to the health benefits of the project. At this point Suparna, another staff member who was translating, interrupted: That is what Sethumadam (project leader) told you to say, but what did you really feel? The fieldworkers chuckled: Initially they had fear about talking to people who have sex with many people but then also compassion and sympathy – "I am also a woman so I want to help." They also expressed anger: why they went for sex, why do they want so much money, they are so beautiful, they could get another job? Lekha (one of the fieldworkers) was interested in her own reputation: clients also approached her and that made her feel scared and humiliated. "I'm from a hospital", she would say to them, "do you want to come for an injection?" The men would refuse. She hadn't even told her mother about this, she was so humiliated. Later when the FWs gained a good rapport with the sex workers the sex workers appreciated them and invited them to for family meetings, functions etc. They don't only share good moments but listen to the women's problems as well. I asked what the FWs thought about rehabilitation. They were of the opinion that some women say for name's sake that they would rather do some other work but some people would really want to do something else. One fieldworker said that if the women were given another job, they would have trouble adjusting because they are used to a higher pay. One added that there is a stigma about sex workers – once a sex worker; always a sex worker, and they would keep on getting trouble and requests from the men. They are used to getting everything, not having to pay, getting a mobile, and exposed to sexual pleasure, she said. I asked if they saw the women as victims or not – bit abstract – but the FWs were able to answer saying that some women want beautiful clothes, they like to buy things and look gorgeous. Some will just stay home and want to be true to their husbands, they added. (Fieldnotes 7th April 2005)*

Often, middle-class female staffers felt discomfort, pity, and judgemental towards the sex workers. Despite many staff members' backgrounds in social

work or psychology, due to the general lack of social mobility and interaction, as well as a lack of knowledge of other groups in society, many people (for example, Padma and Monica, when they went to distribute food for HIV-affected people) were shocked by the poverty and abjection of the people they served. There was a certain level of unawareness of the realities of the sex workers among NGOs staff. The higher the person was in rank, the more likely it was that there was a discrepancy between what that person thought about the lives of sex workers and the actual realities of the sex workers. When I asked staff who the sex workers were, I got vague answers about their demographic backgrounds; I was told they were women who were poor and unable to support their children, or sometimes they were women who have sexual desires that their husbands are unable to fulfil. All the NGO staff that I interviewed defined sex workers as a high risk group. The modes of sex work described to me included full- and part-time sex workers, brothel-based sex workers, home-based sex workers, mobile sex workers and street-based sex workers. Child prostitutes and college girls from poor backgrounds were also sometimes mentioned. Mentioning these groups and not others reflects a level of ignorance about the social construction of sex work. Although most Chennai NGOs had elaborate hand-made maps of the areas that sex workers operated in, with pickup points marked with different colours, sex work in the film theatres (for example) was never mentioned. However, I learned about this venue for sex work only from the sex workers themselves (including those sex workers who were regular visitors to the NGOs).

What can be seen from the examples in this chapter is that, as discussed in chapter three regarding norms of women's sexuality and upper caste norms of sexuality in general, these discourses inform how sex workers are seen and thus how HIV prevention is conducted. Underlying the practices of the NGOs and the initial views of NGOs staff are similar attitudes towards sex to those present in the society in general – and these demonise and/or victimise sex workers. The norms and values regarding women's honour being tied to family honour

and restrictive ideas about women's sexual behaviour, around which sex workers are seen as immoral, leaked into the staff members' opinions.

> *An advisor led the meeting in ICWO-project office. First the past week's events were gone through. Women were asked what expectations they had for the upcoming TAI-project. Women suggested e.g. a blood test, the government doctors do not treat them well or they just stared at them. A tall woman from NSK Nagar demanded loans and help for the children. Condoms were applied on wooden dildos (second time I saw this during the year). Some were very handy, some were clumsy, some refused upfront. The same NSK Nagar woman said that she had seen incest pregnancies at the hospital. The TAI-advisor responded to this by telling a story of how superior Tamil culture is. Of the superiority of Tamil culture he gave as an example from his friend who refuses to have children in the US because they would grow up amongst guns and immorality etc. Effectively he didn't create conversation but avoided the question and started to impose his middle class values on the women. He told a folk story about a loving couple who ran away to be together, and only when she was bitten by snake in the forest, he held her hand for the first time. The relationship between a women and a man is holy, he said. What can the sex workers think about this, I wondered. I could see from Komala's face that she was really pissed off. (Fieldnotes 30th May 2005)*

NGO staff members were not free from cultural baggage, which is something the HIV interventions ignore. HIV prevention guidelines do not take into consideration that there are power dimensions in the relationships between the people involved in HIV prevention deriving from the stigma of sex work. The fact that the HIV prevention target group is stigmatised hinders the work that is done. Problems in HIV prevention are not restricted to interpersonal relationships, however, but are also embedded in wider structural conditions. I will turn to these structural constraints next.

Can women negotiate condoms?

As I indicated earlier, funding from World Bank is conditional to performing World Bank and UNAIDS guidelines on HIV prevention. The guidelines suggest that targeting high risk groups is an efficient way to intervene within

the rising numbers of HIV. Nationally, with the backdrop that 85% (NACO 2004: 14) of the infections are thought to come from heterosexual contact with sex workers, sex workers are seen to be in a position in which they could potentially curb the spread of the infection.[18] Therefore, the essential concern in most HIV prevention literature is whether female sex workers use condoms consistently. In the context of Chennai, this is difficult to estimate from the women's self-reported accounts. Looking at the slowly increasing statistics of HIV awareness among sex workers (see e.g. NACO 2004), it is reasonable to think that they do so *if the men are willing*, as I will discuss in detail in later chapters.

While the general level of accurate knowledge about HIV, sexually transmitted infections and the proper use of condoms is difficult to elicit, it is suggested to be rather low among men (APAC 2004; Brahme et al. 2005; Sivaram et al. 2005). In a situation where the general awareness level is low, and in which female sex workers are defined as high risk and seen as key actors in the spread of HIV, the responsibility for initiating condom use ends up being placed on the sex workers. However, because of the prevailing moral codes and values of Indian society, which highlight women's chastity and sexual purity and which also see women as inferior to men, women are in a difficult position in terms of negotiating condom use. CHES project leader Mr Muthupandian said to me that the idea that women are able to initiate condom use is absurd. Muthupandian explained that women are unable to impose anything on men:

> *'They are women and sex workers and thus seen as sex objects and socially inferior. Also, men have money, which the women do not and the one who has the money is the boss. Only if male gender norms are changed, social change can happen'. (Fieldnotes 11th May 2005)*

So sex workers, according to Mr Muthupandian, cannot realistically increase condom use nor (thus) safe sex behaviour because of their structurally inferior

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[18] I will show later that this is problematic because the concept of a sex worker – who is a member of a high risk group by this definition – is imposed; and, in fact, there are various heterosexual practices in which unprotected sex takes place that are not understood through this definition.

position in all the social domains involved in the transaction: gender, sexuality, money and power. He argued that all efforts should be targeted on men because, in a patriarchal society like India, it is still very much up to the men to decide whether condoms are used. Subbaiah, another project leader, compared the sex workers to caged chickens that are unable to run around free and be strong. He said that this was due to cultural ideas of how women are subordinate and because women are not taught to be assertive. *'Women in weaker positions are taken advantage of and because they do not know their rights they are unable to defend themselves'*, *(Fieldnotes 14th Sept 2004)* he said.

What both these men were pointing to was that they saw HIV prevention guidelines as insensitive to the local culture and norms by which men dominate in the areas of gender and sexuality. Muthupandian was strongly of the opinion that the reason why HIV interventions fail is insensitivity to local norms due to a Western bias in the intervention guidelines defined by UNAIDS, World Bank, APAC etc. Muthupandian said that, because of the ways in which HIV prevention is defined from above, according to ideas that are rooted in Western norms, these guidelines will not work in the Indian context, where conceptualisations of gender, individuality, and sexuality are different, and this inevitably leads to a failure to increase the success of HIV intervention.

Because it remains unclear who exactly initiated the policies of HIV prevention, whether Muthupandian's and Subbaiah's judgement that the principles on which local HIV prevention are based are 'Western' is correct cannot be known. This, however, does not negate the fact that high risk groups are positioned at the centre of HIV prevention policies while at the same time there is a general lack of awareness of and insensitivity to the local norms and social realities in which high risk groups operate.

While NGOs that focus their work on high risk groups are following national and global guidelines, I argue that the inefficiency of HIV prevention is not the

fault of NGOs *per se,* but because of a general lack of awareness, AND because of the sole focus on supposed high risk groups. Rather than being uninterested in the interests of the sex workers, the NGOs need to be responsive to the specific context in which they operate, with the tools that are available to them. Discourses that maintain sex workers as high risk and central to HIV prevention do not challenge the existing power hierarchies, nor do they address men's role in prevention; rather, they merely aim at maintaining the (financial) status of the NGOs, and because of this they end up marginalising sex workers further.

Concluding thoughts – governance of the epidemiological subject

The global concern about the spread of HIV has travelled to India and, together with the Indian government, multinational organisations have determined ways to curb this. With the lack of a functioning state-led welfare society, the role of HIV prevention has been given over to India's civil society. While the travelling of concepts and ideologies is by no means new, what is novel here is that while the HIV discourse has brought to the fore questions concerns a disease that spreads through sexual contact, this has brought sexuality – not just reproduction – into the public realm. The issue of reproduction and population control did not do so with such dramatic results because it did not challenge the norms of sexual propriety – it sought simply to limit the number of children people have, but it did not address who people have sex with and whether those people are the ones that they 'should' be having sex with. If the argument that 85% of the transmissions are heterosexual (NACO 2004: 14) is correct, the spread of HIV indicates that many people have sex with more than their heterosexual, monogamous marital partner.

By stressing risky vs. non-risky sexual behaviour, the HIV discourse brings sexuality to the fore in a new way because it was not previously been a subject for social control. While control of reproductive behaviour has been crucial in India in terms of population control, and forced sterilisations were conducted in

the 1970s, the gaze on HIV has highlighted not whether the sex one has produces offspring and how many, but rather *with whom* one does so. HIV prevention aims at a controlled, rationalised sexuality and safe sex practices. Monogamous and 'low risk' sexual behaviour have, in the dominant discourse of sexuality, been the norms and values of the upper-class, and it is these middle- and upper-class norms and values of sexuality that get reinforced, and thus the discourse of HIV also reinforces existing social hierarchies and inequalities.

Most of the NGOs used all their efforts to target women. Targeting the sex workers was done by meetings, hiring sex workers as peer educators and fieldworkers, using peer educators to search for new sex workers, getting a sense of the cartography of sex work in Chennai, taking sex workers to get tested, holding large group meetings, and indoctrinating them about condoms and STDs. The NGOs also had hand-made posters on their walls showing the numbers of sex workers that they had attracted and taken to HIV tests. These are examples of sex worker mappings made by the NGOs to gain knowledge, and thus power, over the sex workers' sexual behaviour. Trying to get a sense of what is going on in the field can be seen as an act by which control or power is gained. In this sense, the reason behind these modes of targeting the sex workers is to prevent the spread of HIV. This process has made the sex workers into objects of epidemiological governance and has created the subject of 'the sex worker' from the perspective of health.

In this process, sex workers have been addressed from the viewpoint of health. While the global assemblage on HIV offers a powerful discourse on and for the sex workers, what exactly happens between global donors, the Indian government, the NGOs and the sex workers has not been studied. This chapter illustrates these relationships and shows that neither NGOs nor sex workers are merely puppets in the international aid processes, but both use the rhetoric and resources of these processes in the service of their own interests.

In this chapter, I have addressed HIV prevention in India, and in Chennai specifically, as a global assemblage, and I have discussed the actors involved in the complicated relationship between multinational agencies, the government of India, the NGOs that implement HIV prevention, and the sex workers themselves. It remains unclear how these global policies and the policy transfer was initiated and implemented in India. It would be a fascinating subject for future research to look at the process of how a global health policy became taken onboard by the Indian government, and how this then unfolded in the field. Comparing this process with what occurred elsewhere would illustrate to what extent this policy is indeed initiated by actors such as World Bank. I have shown that the process by which HIV prevention is implemented by the NGOs concerned is not necessarily as straightforward as policy statements suggest. I have shown how each of these players performs the HIV discourse in the interest of their own interests, and that there is a significant amount of manoeuvring in this process by all parties.

HIV prevention is a rhetoric and a resource available to sex workers, which they use to support themselves financially and to renegotiate their lives. Peer educators and sex workers use the NGOs for mobilisation and incentives, just as the NGOs use sex workers to maintain funding from donors. The relationship, however, is not just a positive one, but also that stigmatises sex workers and exposes them to further discrimination and oppression. Because the stigma of sex work has not been addressed, only those few women who are willing publicly to come out as sex workers are able to benefit from the 'fruits' of sex workers' organisation. The NGOs in Chennai do not address sex workers' human rights, but continue to treat HIV as a health problem instead of challenging broader social inequalities or questioning the centrality of sex workers to HIV prevention.

The practices underlying HIV prevention in Chennai (using incentives and quotas, the rhetoric of HIV), as well as the fact that sex workers are harnessed in HIV prevention, maintain HIV as solely a health problem. Thus, the

prevention practices fail to address the social problems underlying sex work, and they fail to address the sex workers' human rights. By focusing on health and HIV, the HIV prevention NGOs focus exclusively on sex workers as subjects of HIV prevention, rather than having a broad target group. To focus on a tangible group makes sense under the conditions of HIV prevention as a cost effective project, but as a longer-term approach it cannot be successful in its key aim of preventing the spread of HIV.

Due to all the problems described in this chapter, HIV prevention fails to do what it aims to: to prevent the spread of HIV. HIV prevention that focuses on 'high risk groups' is simply 'putting a plaster on the problem' because it fails to address the root causes of sex work, such as poverty, violence against women, and men's role in the problematic knot of the social problem behind HIV – namely: ideas about male sexuality; lack of awareness of HIV; gender role divisions; lack of employment options for lone-mothers; and norms by which women who have been raped, had a love affair, or who are young and widowed etc. are treated. HIV should not be reduced to a biological problem and separated from sex work as is actually done. Promoting condom use and health awareness does not stop vulnerable women from going into sex work, who, in the current situation, became even more vulnerable while doing sex work, nor does it enable them to gain the greater equality with men that would assist in negotiating condom use.

I found that the Chennai HIV prevention projects and peer educators put forward an over-simplified picture of the realities of the sex workers – a picture that does not do justice to their complexity as a group and as individuals. Sex working women are NOT just epidemiological objects, and viewing them as such is simplistic and analytically victimising, and also leads to inefficient policies. Rather, they are individuals with social dimensions, such as gender, sexuality, and kinship relations. I will elaborate on this in the following chapters.

CHAPTER 6 Women in sex work

In this chapter, I will discuss the 56 women who I met and interviewed, their social-demographics and life stories. The intention is to broaden the dominant representation of sex workers which is limited to health. Health- and HIV-related representations show such women as victims of poverty and patriarchy and as vulnerable to HIV. Thus, the purpose of this chapter is to flag up the social aspects in the lives of the sex workers. From my findings, I argue that the existing victimising representations put forward by the HIV discourse are simplified representations of what I found to be the socially complex realities of the sex workers I interviewed.

During the interviews, I wanted to avoid a 'survey-like' approach that was used by the NGOs, in order to differentiate myself from them but also to avoid categorising the women before letting them explain themselves. I let the women talk about themselves in any way they found meaningful and relevant, and I have tried to maintain the ambiguities in their lives in my discussions of them. In the case of some women, I did not always have a chance to go back to them and fill in gaps in demographic data. In particular my analysis is based on the 18 women who were my key informants, whom I interviewed several times officially and with whom I met regularly. The findings introduced in this chapter make transparent the range of topics that will be analysed further in the later chapters regarding: going into to sex work, problems encountered in sex work, negotiating these problems, and gender and sexuality.

I shall present my findings through socio-demographic characteristics as well as in-depth accounts. The socio-demographic factors give an overall picture of the sample of women. These demographic descriptions are given in an exploratory sense to represent a summary of the women's backgrounds: details about them that they saw as relevant to their backgrounds, and issues that they thought I wanted to hear about (given my interest in sex work and, at times,

because I was seen as being associated with the NGOs and their HIV prevention projects). And because the aim of this research was to give voice to the sex workers themselves, I have also provided four in-depth accounts to present individual meanings and understandings of the women. The women talked about their families, about women's gender position, sexuality, NGOs, violence against sex workers, and why they got into sex work. Although these are also the themes analysed in the later chapters, I wanted to present these accounts as continuous biographic trajectories, as they show very powerfully how these varied themes can coexist in the women's lives.

NGOs often perceive sex workers only with reference to HIV, but doing so is limited because sex work in not restricted to HIV. Sex work is not experienced in isolation from the other roles that women have, and these other roles are connected with why sex work is done. While sex work was the focus of the interviews, women's other identities leaked through and were also discussed. Studying the experiences of women in sex work across a number of interviews through in-depth accounts suggests their multiple roles and the many dimensions of their identities: in this chapter, I have provided a descriptive account of the women's identities (with reference to age, education, number of children, cohabitation, sexual orientation and sexual partners), that is, around through socio-demographic characteristics, and I have elaborated these themes in four individual narratives. The findings presented through both demographics and focused accounts highlight the three main arguments of this chapter:

Firstly, sex workers are a heterogeneous group, and women from all kinds of backgrounds do sex work. Gooptu's (2000) research in the Calcutta Sonagachi red light district similarly showed that sex workers are a heterogeneous group. Gooptu (2000) traces the success of these sex workers' movement in Calcutta to the subversive, strategic act to treat HIV as a common enemy, which has enabled the sex workers to unite to fight for their rights. In Chennai, where women have not been mobilised, my findings critique HIV prevention that does

not take women's heterogeneity into account and that does not address the social problems behind the risk of HIV. I hope that showing the heterogeneous composition of women in sex work can disrupt rigid categories, promote understanding rather than judgement, and replace stigmatising stereotypes with realistic representations.

Secondly, I challenge the dominant notions of sex workers in India by showing that not all women are victims of their surroundings and that not all women experience sex work in the same way. This brings the notion of agency to the fore, and my findings show that, rather than being victims, women use sex work to negotiate their lives with the means available to them. In this negotiation, relationships with men play a central role.

This brings us to the third main point of this chapter: although the women interviewed are exchanging sex for money and goods, my findings suggest they do so around controversial and un-investigated relationships that challenge the stereotypical relationships between men and women in India, thereby raising questions about dominant norms concerning monogamy and heterosexuality. These findings suggest an institution of 'demotic' sexuality and suggest that women's sexuality is active rather than passive, asexual, or merely geared towards reproduction.

I begin by discussing the women's backgrounds, then move on to their marital statuses, relationships and cohabitation, and finally their sex work histories.

Socio-demographic characteristics: heterogeneous group

All the sex working women I interviewed lived in or near Chennai and came to the city to work, or else they worked in the surrounding villages. The plurality of the population of Chennai was represented in the women's backgrounds, and their socio-demographics suggest that women from all kinds of backgrounds – in terms of caste, ethnicity and religion – sell sex. Women from all kinds of

backgrounds are vulnerable to the poverty that potentially leads to the selling of sex.

The women interviewed did not live in designated areas, although groups of sex workers were able to live together if a non-judgemental landlord allowed this. All the women lived in areas that can be described as urban low-income areas, and in some cases they lived in slightly improved squatter settlements, but generally they did not live in the worst areas of the town (which were generally located along the rivers of Chennai and near the beaches). The low-income areas in Chennai are scattered around the town, such as around Tondiarpet, Tiruvottiur and Erukkancheri in the north, Vadapazhani, Koyambedu, Kodambakkam in the west, K.K. Nagar and T. Nagar in the southwest, and Poorur, Poonamallee and Avadi at the edges of the town. The Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board has worked to upgrade the slums in Chennai. Houses are made of concrete, even if they sometimes have thatched roofs. Water is very sparse in Chennai, and the areas that I worked in had communal water pumps where the women collected water to be stored in their houses. All homes that I visited had electricity. The areas were cramped and lacked privacy, and families stayed in minute spaces where a room up to around 2 by 5 meters was shared between as many as six people. Only a few had private toilet and washing spaces. Despite the cramped spaces and low income, families had pets, such as fish tanks, rabbits, dogs, pet rats, birds and boa snakes. There is not a red light district and the descriptions of the areas where the women lived are characteristic of any urban low-income areas and families in Chennai.

Class – rather than caste, ethnicity, or religion – is the joining socio-demographic character shared by these women. Caste is generally a major distinguishing factor in Tamil society; it can be seen in caste-divided party politics (Gorringe 2005), and in deep-rooted norms and practices (especially marriage) that do not necessarily relate to the ideology of purity or religion (Deliege 1992; Trawick 1990). Women said that they tend to know which caste

people in their neighbourhoods belong to, but that it was not important. For my informants, the meaning of caste had lessened, perhaps because they all lived in poor urban areas that were mixed-caste, mixed-religious settlements, similar to those that Vera-Sanso (2006) described in Chennai, rather than areas dominated by certain castes as Gorringe (2006) found in Madurai. Caste was dismissed by my informants as unimportant specifically because of the nature of sex work. In the words of one of my informants: *'If we think about caste we will not get clients and if they think of caste they will not get sex.' (Fieldnotes 22nd Dec 2004)* Caste was not often talked about beyond this. Caste boundaries are marked and maintained by women's purity and chastity, and are tied up with reproduction within the caste, but these norms and practices are infringed in sex work.

Rao et al. (2003) argued that some sex workers in Calcutta had defined themselves as 'outcaste'; this was not reported in Chennai. Most women did not disclose their caste background, but as some women belonged to higher castes, I can propose that, regarding this sample, (low) caste was not a determining factor that made women vulnerable to sex work. Caste as well as class background does not, then, *essentially* make anyone enter sex work.

The plurality of the population of Chennai and the fact that Chennai is a target for migration was represented in these women's ethnic backgrounds. The women were predominantly ethnically Tamil, but some were also from the neighbouring states of Telegu (four) and Malayali (two). All but one spoke Tamil fluently, but even she spoke well enough to get by. Contrary to the major cities in the north of India, where research on sex work suggests that many of the sex workers are migrants from the neighbouring countries Nepal and Bangladesh (Ahmad 2005; Frederick 2005; Sleightholme and Sinha 2002), these waves of migrant women in sex work had not reached Chennai (nor my sample).

Again, religious background did not stop women from entering sex work, and all major religions were represented: mainly Hindu, but also Christians (four women) and Muslims (four women). Religion was signified by e.g. images of Hindu Gods and Jesus on the walls of their homes, and in accessories, such as wearing a *pottu* (a red dot on the forehead, between the eyebrows) for Hindus, or not wearing one for Christians and Muslims. None of the Muslim women used the *burkha* (veil) when they left the house. Going to temple, mosque or church was often described as a way to give offerings to pray for a better future, and some women went to temple, mosque or church regularly, but none of the women represented themselves as overtly pious. Religion came across as a secular everyday practice. Four women self-defined themselves as multi-religious, or having changed religion when they married, and they argued that all gods are the same.

Marital status, relationships and cohabitation

In Tamil Nadu, a woman can be married after she begins menstruating, and all the women I interviewed were of marriageable age. Their ages ranged from 14 to around 50, as shown in Table 1 below.

Below 20 years	3
20-29	14
30-39	28
40-49	2
over 50	6
N.A.	2

Table 1. Women's ages.

Three women were under 20 years of age (plus another two young women that I suspected or was told a rumour about). Most (28) women were in their 30s, while the second-most prevalent age group was between 20 and 29 (14 women). Two women were over 40 years old, and six were over 50. The low representation of minors in the sample should not suggest that underage sex work does not exist. The fact that these girls were hard to reach and are

protected by the older women in their community prevented me from accessing them. Also, interestingly, the relatively large number of older sex workers problematises the idea of a 'glass-ceiling' for sex workers. However, my impression was that the oldest of these women were earning money predominantly by pimping rather than by selling sex.

The marital statuses of the women I interviewed are the most sociologically interesting aspect of the socio-demographics. The women's marital statuses, modes of cohabitation and amorous/erotic relationships challenge dominating theories about gender relationships. These relationships are also related to the reasons why the women had started to sell sex. Their relationships were not so clear-cut that they could be easily divided between married and unmarried; their relationship histories were convoluted. Table 2 below clarifies them and should be read against the existing assumptions of kinship, according to which women only live with, first, their parents, then (one) husband, and finally their son; and the related norms about chastity and sexuality according to which they marry (in an arranged marriage) one man with whom they have sex (and are expected to have sex with no-one else before or after that). The living and loving arrangements of the women in this research strikingly challenge these notions and clearly show that not all women in Chennai live according to these stereotypes.

'Original' husband	18
Sister/sex worker	8
Children/parents	9
Alone	3
Remarried/partner	8
N.A.	1

Table 2. Who 47 married women lived with (9 women were unmarried).

Of the 56 sex workers I interviewed, 47 were or had been married at some point in their life, while nine had never been married. The women's husbands were typically *kuli* (day labourer) workers, and were employed e.g. as *autorikshaw*

drivers, construction workers, or fruit and vegetable sellers, or else they were unemployed.

Twelve marriages deviated from the norm of an arranged marriage. At the time of marriage, 10 women from the 47 who were or had been married had eloped and had a love marriage. This is a high number, given that arranged marriages are still customary in South India. The high incidence of women in sex work who have had a love marriage suggests that options are limited for women whose love marriage fails, because of the stigma attached to love marriages, affecting the women concerned and their family honour (see Moody 2002). This stigma often leads to ostracism and lack of support from the woman's parents. In two other cases, the women had married a man who had taken advantage of them sexually, whom they had then agreed to marry for the sake of honour. Ishika said that she had demanded this from her rapist, because she was afraid of being ostracised and to shield her family from shame.

The majority of these 47 women's marriages were, however, still arranged. Only two women mentioned having been married to a cross-cousin, as has been customary in Tamil Nadu. Marriages had taken place between the ages of 8 and 18, but the majority had wedded around the age of 14 to 16. The age that the women were married was related to the years they had spent in education. If the women had married young, they had fewer years of schooling, and if they had married later, it was more likely that they had attended a higher level of schooling. (See Table 3 for details).

No schooling	4
1-2 years	0
3-4	1
5-6	8
7-8	7
9-10	7
11-12	1
N.A.	28

Table 3. Years in school.

Marriage in Tamil culture is associated with children, and all the married women had them. The women had one to five children, most often two or three, after which they had gone through sterilisation, the commonest form of birth control in Tamil Nadu. The nine unmarried women did not have children, but reported abortions. Four women reported that they had babies that had died or that they had stillbirths, but this number could be higher because only living children were asked about and the women tended to disclose infant deaths or stillbirths only if it had been particularly traumatic or dramatic for them. The general reproductive period in the women's lives was between 13 and 24. The women who had children under the age of 18 had the children either living with them or, in three cases, had put them to live in a hostel. Women in the older age groups (above 40) had children who were married, many of whom, according to the women, did not keep in touch with them. Motherhood was important to the women. They all talked about their children and, because motherhood came across as a very strong positive identity – but also as a reason why the women had entered sex work (to sustain the children). I will discuss this further in chapter 7, where I analyse the reasons the women gave for how and why they entered sex work.

Against the normative status of life-long marriage, 18 women I interviewed lived with the husband that they had initially married. Many of the original marriages had, then, failed. The women concerned explained that the failure of their marriages was due to varying reasons, such as the fact that the husband had died, left, or taken other wives, or that he had been violent, which had prompted her to leave him. The failure of the marital relationship was a prominent reason to enter sex work (see chapter 7). According to what the women said in the interviews, their marriages did not fail because of their entry into sex work, but rather that their entry to sex work was a result of their failed marriages. Therefore, sex work comes across as a strategy that is used by some women after failure of the normative marital relationship upon which Indian women generally depend.

When the women's marital statuses were not 'normative', with whom did they live? In terms of cohabiting, as Table 2 on p. 158 shows, of the 47 women who were or had been married, 20 lived without a husband or partner at the time of my research. Of these 20, eight lived with a sister or another female sex worker, nine lived with their own children or parents, and three lived completely alone. This again suggests that, after the marital break-up, a large number of these women were either forced or chose to live without their parents or in-laws: while generally it is rare for women to live alone or without their families.

The women interviewed had partners, whether they lived alone or were in marital relationships. Eight (Jayati, Sripriya, Sasika, Swasti, Sangita, Madhu, Lavali, Sindhu) women of the 47 were remarried or lived in a permanent relationship with a regular partner. Regular partner here means someone who is quite permanent, not just a regular client in sex work, although this line was sometimes blurred. There were women in all these statuses that had sex with regular customers for money. The regular partners were called *partners*, *lovers, boyfriends*, or the women called themselves as a *keep* (a kept woman) or as a second/third/fourth wife if they did not have a husband already. (The comments by the women suggested that a man could have several wives simultaneously, but women never had several 'husbands' simultaneously.)

These non-normative but fairly regular relationships were not confined to those whose marriages had broken up. Of the women who were still married to their initial husbands, eight of them (Uma, Mahadevi, Ishwari, Zaima, Ponni, Suddha, Diya, Jayati), had regular partners/boyfriends outside of their marriage. In half of these cases, according to the women concerned, their husbands did not have extramarital affairs. Seven women (Revati, Sevati, Manjula, Bina, Vasumathi, Suwarna, Kanchi) who lived alone had partners who did not cohabitate with them. Reasons given for this included: the men had other wives; marriage was seen as unsuitable (e.g. if the woman was older); the

relationship was based on love, rather than being arranged, and there were no chances of it being arranged; or simply that they did not want to have a man around. Of the nine women who were not married, five were young (Maria, Sheila, Vanita, Pramila, Sonali), though not all of the five were minors, and they did not have regular partners. Two unmarried older women (Avantika, Revati) (one of whom was a *devadasi*) remained single, and two unmarried women (Manjula, Sevati) (one of whom was a *devadasi*) had regular partners who they were not cohabiting with.

These findings highlight two things. Firstly, women who had a 'deviant' role as a sex worker nevertheless made attempts to live according to normative expectations, in familial settings with a husband or a long-term partner. Swasti is an example of a woman whose initial marriage had broken up and who had remarried:

> *Swasti: 'I did not marry him for money or anything, I just married cos he approached me and asked me to get married with him. He's working in catering, cooks for weddings. He already has a wife… I'm just keeping him as a man in my life. Basically I need protection and want a man in my life. So he doesn't give me money but instead, sometimes, I have to give him some money. The only thing is that he takes care of the children and stays around and is a man in the house.' (Interview transcript p.2 lines 2-4 and p.4 lines 32-35, 20th May 2005)*

Secondly, my findings bring sexuality to the fore. Because women's sexuality, sexual orientation and pleasure in India are a silenced topic, I made an effort to explore and to unravel the silence. My findings suggest that these women made choices about their relationships with the notion of 'desire' in mind – they were not asexual, and their relationships did not always aim at reproduction. As I have shown earlier, the rise of HIV has brought attention to sexual behaviour that is not confined to heteronormative monogamous relationships. This has meant addressing MSMs and female sex workers and while HIV prevention directed at female sex workers assumes heterosexual orientation, this was not true for all the women I interviewed.

One woman (Mercy) defined her sexual orientation as lesbian and two (Zaima, Komala) had had bisexual experiences, while the remainder were either in heterosexual relationships or did not report same-sex relationships. The other women talked entirely about men as their partners, clients and objects of desire. Those who I asked about same-sex relationships either sneered at them or said they thought they were odd. Uma said that sometimes clients ask for group sex, but that she had never had sex with another woman. She said that there are a few lesbian women in the NGO office that she goes to: '*When I see them, I will tease them. It made me laugh to see people like that. That's why this country is getting bad.*' *(Interview transcript p.6 lines 30-41, 11th June 2005)* There is not a public discourse of female same-sex relationships, although the art film *Fire* brought controversial public attention to this topic. Rather than encouraging public debate concerning lesbian rights, *Fire* was seen as an 'inappropriate' film and shown in 'blue' film theatres as pornography. There were no lesbian organisations in Chennai to promote such rights, nor did the projects that dealt with MSM issues have this as part of their agenda. None of the three women concerned lived in a permanent relationship with a woman at the time of my research; Mercy had done so in the past but now lived alone, Zaima lived with her husband and children, and Komala lived with her son.

Three women – not originally from Chennai - were from *devadasi* backgrounds. In two cases (Manjula, Avantika), they were not from *devadasi* families but instead had been married to the gods as an offering when they were toddlers at the breakout of pestilences: in Manjula's case this was chicken pox while cholera had affected Avantika's village. Neither had actually lived in a temple but, rather, the *devadasihood* had bound them only in that they were unable to marry. The third woman's (Sripriya's) aunts on her father's side had been *devadasis*. When she looked for a way to make money after her husband had abandoned her and when her father died, she was advised by her family that she could make money through sex because it was acceptable for them,

since they were from a *devadasi* family. I asked Avantika if being a devadasi was positive or negative:

> *'I don't want marriage, all that, I'm happy. There is no problem. No one is asking questions. I have food, I'm happy. Whatever I can do... If you have marriage, you will have so much trouble in your life. Being a devadasi, you are more happy. Without marriage you can have a happy life... I was very happy to say I was a devadasi. I don't want that circle, husband, wife, that circle. I don't want to be money minded. I can make up; I can walk the main road. In a family, I cannot make up, I cannot... Cultural problem will come. I am happy like this. I don't want any relations, only friends. Only friends can help. All relations are money minded.' (Interview transcript p. 6, lines 10-16, 20th Feb 2005)*

Manjula and Sripriya, who both lived with partners, were more ambivalent about the status. Although stating that being a *devadasi* was not shameful, Manjula still suffered from not being able to marry properly, as she was the third wife of a man who was violent towards her, while Sripriya was now in a relationship that she was pleased with, and had stopped doing sex work.

From discussing the women's socio-demographic backgrounds, I will now turn to looking at their histories of sex work. The following account of female sex work in Chennai follows on from showing that sex workers are a heterogeneous group in terms of their backgrounds, for they also conduct sex work very differently too.

Sex work histories

There was significant variation in how women operated in sex work in terms of the regularity, mode of practice, and the level of intimacy in their relationship with their clients. These variations challenge the notion of 'once a prostitute, always a prostitute' and a prostitute as someone whose whole identity is related to their mode of making money (i.e. selling sex). The women explained sex work as a versatile practice. The regularity of sex work varied during their lives, depending on how much money was needed and how they were able to

get clients. Aging, for example, significantly reduced women's chances to do sex work, but it did not always cause them to stop sex work completely. Often, sex work complemented other jobs they held in the informal sector, such as working as maids, construction workers, and in export factories. The length of time the women had been in sex work varied from three months to several decades. They had been introduced to sex work mostly through other women who were already into sex work, or by a female madam, and in a few cases through their husbands/boyfriends.[19]

At the time of my research: 17 of the 56 women interviewed reported that they did sex work part-time; their sex work status was not disclosed by 17 women; seven were full-time sex workers; at least six had only regular clients from whom they got money whenever they needed it; six women were pimps, although there were pimps who worked as sex workers as well; and three women said they had stopped doing sex work completely. Three of those who did not disclose their current status had been full-time sex workers earlier in their lives. Another four of those who did not disclose their status were minors or were unmarried. They had been pointed out to me as sex workers, and I did not interview them further. I am aware that mentioning these young women without more sense of their life stories defines them as 'sex workers' without a voice, but it is important to mention them because underage sex work in Chennai is not discussed elsewhere and because there is an NGO line according to which underage sex workers do not exist in Chennai.

As a comparison with the 56 women that I interviewed, according to APAC in 2003 (p. 22-24), in four major urban cities in Tamil Nadu, 63% of the sex workers were working full-time, with an average of 17 days per month. On average, they had 2.6 clients a day (APAC 2003: 23). In 2005, APAC found that, in eight districts in Tamil Nadu (96% of sex workers in lived in cities), 30% of the women were full-time, and 70% were part-time sex workers (APAC 2005a: 27). The inconsistency between these two statistics and the more

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[19] The self-reported reasons and the ways of starting out as a sex worker are intertwined, and will be analysed further in Chapter 7.

complicated nature of my findings is unlikely to reflect a change in the sex work patterns, but rather the difficulty of sampling a marginal group where people prefer not to identify themselves openly with it, which has probably led to biases in all the statistical material on this subject so far. It also shows that surveys manage to get only a superficial glimpse of the realities of the sex workers' lives. In order to convey the lives of the sex workers more fully, I will focus on four women's lives with more detail.

Mercy, Zaima, Uma and Kuntala

As useful as these descriptions of the sex working women that I interviewed as a group are, this gives only a narrow understanding of the lives of the women individually. They provide a general overview of the group of women I met and talked with, but are limited in understanding of the meanings of their lives of individual women. The aim of this research was to bring out the voices of the women who are sex workers. These voices are conveyed here by presenting four accounts of particular women's life stories in a way that does not break them thematically. This is to provide a more linear sense of how different events occurred in these women's lives.

These accounts are not generalisable to all sex workers, nor even to the all the 'sample' of women I interviewed; rather, they illustrate the different experiences of the four women as gendered, sexual, emotional, social, etc beings within their social contexts, how their lives led to sex work and how they felt about it. In the interviews, these women reflected on their experiences as young women, talked about marriage and how they got into sex work, and shared their views on gender, sex work, men, sex, and the issues that sex workers are collectively facing. Some of what they said shows quite neatly the networks that exist between the women, something which unfolded during the interviews. The women's accounts suggest some similarities between them, but also show differences in their interpretations of their situations.

These accounts that follow draw on between two to four formal interviews for each of the four women, as well as on several informal chats. In most cases, these interviews were recorded; in the few cases in which they were not, I made notes as soon as I got home that evening. The interviews were conducted with my research assistant present, and sometimes the women had a female friend who was also a sex worker present, and they lasted between one-and-one-half and three hours. These accounts are often not focused on the particular, as is the autobiography of Viramma, a Tamil Dalit woman whose whole life story was recorded in Viramma et al. (1997). Rather, they are products of the interviews that we had, with the backdrop of the methodological issues discussed in the previous chapter: my particular interests in sex work, gender and sexuality, and the women's knowledge of this. They are glimpses of those life events that the women saw as relevant to their stories of sex work.

Mercy

When I met Mercy in ICWO for the first time, she was very pregnant and glowing. Mercy was a 25-year-old Malayali (from Kerala), who had studied up to the ninth standard, done a beautician course, migrated between Kerala and Gujarat, worked on a shrimp farm, and finally settled with her husband in Chennai. She had an arranged marriage when she was 17, and gave birth to a son. Her husband was from Madras. While she and her husband worked on the shrimp farm in Gujarat, she had an affair with another woman.

> *'There was trouble between Saheli [another woman] and her husband. As she was always around he suspected a relationship between the pair of us. So as it became such a big problem I decided to come to Madras with my husband...(Interview transcript p. 1 line 42- p.2 line 2, 2nd June 2005) My husband had a job as a security guard here in Madras for the Hindustan Engineering College. We were happy together, he was earning well and I stayed at home, he wouldn't send me anywhere. We were comfortable and jolly. Then on his way to work he died in an accident. It was about a year after the wedding. My son was one year old (sic) when he died. I've only one son.*

Salla/translator: So, did you return to your mum's or your mother-in-laws?

Mercy: Me and my mother-in-law never got on so I stayed here alone with my son. My mum and dad were a help to me. But I decided I would stay alone. I knew how to be a beautician. (When) I had finished my studies and was a year at home I did a 6 months course in it. So I told my mum I would manage and set up or work in a beauty parlour. She said 'the choice is yours; if you stay at home you don't seem able to cope'. So I spent 6 months at home after his death, that was all, then I left my son with my mum and promised I'd give her money monthly. I got work at the beauty parlour and it was going fine when suddenly I got underpaid. I said 'this isn't enough', I got 1250rs a month. Well, so I thought 'I don't need this'. So I knew a broker/agent for make up and I went to him and told him my work situation. He said there was a man, some manager who would give me work if I 'went' with him. He openly told me. I was scared and was put off, but the broker said 'once you're in you get a good salary, and it is only for one day, not even that, you only have to go with him once'. I thought about it hard, I couldn't be alone without any money, so I finally accepted it. I 'went' with him once and he gave me 1800rs and promised to find me work. And right the next day he phoned and said someone needs a beautician. I went and was working for X [a famous film actress who's old and is still acting]. I was working there for four months, living in as well.' (Interview transcript p.1 lines 8-30, 18th Feb 2005)

While working there, Mercy met a girl, Latika. *'The pair of us got to be really close. So 6-7 months went by. You know 'lesbian'? Well, me and Latika got into that. Actually since when I was young I had these desires. I don't know how I got married. I never desired to be with a man. Even now it's the same. I see sex (work) as a job; I can't show my preference in that. So I was there a year and we were so close.' (Interview transcript p.2 lines 3-6, 18th Feb 2005)*

After persuading her parents, Latika, whose parents lived outside Chennai, moved in with Mercy, so that neither of them would have to live alone, but they did not tell anyone about the fact that they were a couple. Latika was looking after Mercy's son and Mercy was earning money.

'I've actually tied a thali to her. I took her to a Hindu temple, because actually both Latika and I are Hindu. My husband was Christian which is how I got the name Mercy, so I call myself, Sathia-Mercy as

my Hindu name is Sathia. So at this temple we exchanged rings and I tied a thali onto her. And as close as we were, her mum came and gave us hassle. Latika didn't show her thali out publicly, she wore it on a chain.' (Interview transcript p.2 line 45-p.3 line 4, 2nd June 2005)

However, Latika's parents wanted to marry her off but Latika refused. This is when troubles started. Latika attempted suicide when she was pressured to leave Mercy, but eventually consented and went back to her parents' house, where Mercy visited her.

'Latika's mum said 'Please don't come to see Latika any more. Stay some days without seeing her. If you want speak to each other do it on the phone'. Even if we speak on the phone she (Latika) won't let me be, she'll cry and cry so much that the man at the telephone booth asks me what's up and tells me to get her whatever she's crying for! So I said 'With this I'll end it. I shan't phone either, forget me; I'll not come to your area'. Latika didn't know what her mum had said to me and I didn't tell her so Latika was asking me 'Why, for what reason?' I said 'Get married to someone and live with them, and you live your life and I mine'. And she asked me if that's what the friendship was worth. I said it had nothing to do with the friendship. I told her to get married and be happy and well and promised I'd visit her wherever she was as a friend. And she said 'I don't care if I die, I don't want to get married'. Well, so that problem finished. Then suddenly a call came 'I can't stay here, take me away somewhere. They tell me that I'm this old and I'm still not married', Latika was sobbing. Latika's mum works as a housemaid in Madras (Chennai) so I went over to where she works and asked her why she was scolding Latika like that. I explained that I'd had Latika in tears to me on the phone. The mum replied coldly and sort of told me to mind my own business, 'You don't have to ask me that', she said 'don't meddle in this'. So I left. And Latika phoned again that day and said 'Please don't take this as me scolding you but I'm asking you not to phone me again or visit'. I had a cell phone and I wanted to smash it I was so angry. It was because I had the phone that she could phone me so I threw it and it broke into pieces. I left it and she wandered around from a long time without my number unable to speak with me. Suddenly one day around 8pm at night she was there standing at the door. I was amazed. I thought she must have come with her mum but she'd come alone with her suitcase. When I asked here what happened, she said her mum had quarrelled a lot and said 'You phone that Mercy up all the time and chat away moaning. If you want to go, go, but I'll have nothing more to do with you, you can forget me.' (Interview transcript p.6 line 29-p.7 line 10, 18th Feb 2005)

So, Latika ran back to Mercy because her family still wanted to marry her off and because they questioned her about Mercy and their relationship. At this point, Latika's parents came looking for her and, when Mercy and Latika moved, Latika's parents thought that Mercy had trafficked her. When they found Mercy and Latika, they beat Mercy up. Mercy filed a case against them. In the end, Latika moved back to her family, though she calls Mercy once a month, and Mercy lives alone with her son. After Latika, she has not had any long-term relationships. In the future, she would like to live with her son, but maybe to have a wife also.

Mercy identifies herself as a lesbian, an unusual and rare public identity in India. It is not unusual in the West to have sex workers who are lesbians, but in India, lesbianism is rare or un-discussed.

> *'There must be countless women like me who are keeping it inside their heart and suffering. I often wonder if a man likes a woman and goes to take her on how would it be? In my heart I am a man because I'm a lesbian. My outward appearance is female but in my heart I am a man. I think 'I am like this, I'll keep my girl like this, that's what I think. But having said that I don't go around harassing people! I want to keep a lady as a wife. Just like how a man desires to keep his wife those sorts of desires I get as well. It is all a dream...(Interview transcript p.6 lines 17-24, 2ⁿᵈ June 2005)I see it as purely different from my work. You know Nagalakshmi at the office? Well he said when he found out I was lesbian that there was a lot of work for me in Bangalore where lesbian girls were in demand. The job was lucrative but I didn't like the idea. I like to go with those I like. I take sex work just as a job I don't have a pleasure from it. I don't want to go doing it for other women.' (Interview transcript p.3 lines 3-13, 2ⁿᵈ June 2005)*

Mercy describes herself as a man; she says she prefers to wear trousers and T-shirts, and that she also has manly characteristics, such as being bold and aggressive and protective over women around her. She talks about the NGOs and says that they are generally good and that what they give is important. She is not very critical of them, and only when I asked her about lesbians' rights did she agree that that would be an important form of action.

When Mercy and Latika lived together, at work Mercy witnessed her boss '*lying in a strange way*' with a man who was not her husband. Mercy was shocked and quit working for her as a beautician. She used her contacts to get jobs in the film industry. After a while, however, the shootings did not provide enough money and Mercy got into sex work for the second time. She understood that these relationships were part of the film industry and, although she did not like the idea, she understood that it might happen to her again. So when Zaima, her friend who was also a sex worker and a pimp and who worked in the film industry, called up a man, she knew what was expected from her**.** *'I got home and started thinking: I'm not going to have another marriage and I can't sustain my body on mud so I'll have to do what humans do.' (Interview transcript p.8 lines 43-45, 18th Feb 2005)* We talked about sexual acts with clients. She said it is all play on her part when she is with clients. She would only touch their head and talk to them nice because otherwise, she says, they would not come back to her. She was embarrassed when saying that she would not give anything else except what is 'normal', but she will let them touch her or take her clothes off if they pay for it. She has six regular clients whom she meets about twice a month. When I first met her, she was pregnant by a client. She did not want the baby and looked for an abortion, but the pregnancy was too far advanced. However, she grew attached to the baby and in the end was disappointed when it was stillborn.

Zaima

I met Zaima in ICWO. She was a fieldworker for the children's project and later started to work as a counsellor because she had a lot of contacts and she was known to work well. She was about 50 at the time of study, and lived in the suburbs of Chennai with her husband, two sons and daughter-in-law. Zaima was often in a good mood and ready to crack jokes and have a laugh, but at the same time there was something broken and melancholic about her.

She was born to a very poor family. Her mother was a sex worker, although Zaima understood this only much later. Once, her mother had a partner who set his eyes on Zaima and he coerced her into have sex with him. At this time, Zaima was 13. *'That time'*, Zaima says, *'I did not know anything about sex or anything wrong with that.' (Interview transcript p.1 lines 4-5, 9th Feb 2005)* Soon after, because the family did not have much money, her mother sent her to live with another client. At the age of 15, Zaima had her first periods and, she said, she had also gained some sense in her head and refused to do sex work anymore.

At this point in her life, some neighbours intervened and sent her to work as helper in a 'decent' family. Once, when she was shopping for the family, a man put his eye on her. They became friends, and they met sometimes. However, the family found out about this and called Zaima's mother. They refused to tolerate this inauspicious behaviour and they asked Zaima's mother to collect her. The man, however, married Zaima and they lived happily together. The man worked as a TV mechanic and earned good money, though they did not save any of it but instead went to pictures, ate in hotels etc, enjoying themselves. Zaima is a Muslim and at this time she used to wear a *burka* when they went out. Zaima said this had been a good time in her life.

But then, her mother's partner gave her a hard time. Once when they were alone, he tried to have sex with her and said she should marry him. She rejected this, saying: *'You are my mother's partner; I'm married and a good woman now.' (Interview transcript p.1 lines 19-20, 9th Feb 2005)* She felt that he was like a father to her and that he was, after all, a good man. She had a fight with her mother. She felt horrible the whole day and cried a lot. When her husband came home, he asked what was wrong but she complained she had body pains and that she was not feeling well. She cried all night. In the morning, he asked again and she decided to tell him what had happened, telling him her whole story. Instead of being understanding, he became suspicious. They started to have fights continuously; he questioned her doings, thinking she was flirting

with other men, doing sex work etc. Finally, she became so tense that she attempted suicide by taking poison. A neighbour rescued her and she recovered. The next time she tried to hang herself. She piled up boxes because the roof was so high and, while climbing up, they all fell and neighbours heard and rushed in (Zaima was laughing while telling me this.) The neighbours told her to leave the area because they were worried about the trouble that a suicide would cause for them, and they beat her. Zaima was forced to go to her mother's house. She tried to get to her husband to take her back and she visited him but he had fixed in his mind that she was a bad, loose woman and he told her to find one of her clients as a new husband. She was about 17 years old at this point.

Having been back at her mother's house for about two-to-three months, her mother's partner approached her again, offering to marry her. At this point, she felt she had no choice and accepted. They got married and she had a son. The husband was a business man and sold lorries. He was away for months and then brought a folder of money for Zaima to buy household goods. They lived together for five years. Then she started bleeding from her *loop* (IUD) and removed it. Because of this, she got pregnant again and had another son. Her husband started to give her trouble again, demanding to have sex with Zaima's mother. She tried to persuade them to have sex outside her home, so she would not get a bad reputation. Next, her husband demanded to have sex with both of them together. Zaima felt she had no choice and so they did. Eventually, she said it was not good and asked her mother to move out (drying her eyes silently). Despite their differences, Zaima was very attached to her mother and she died during my fieldwork, Zaima grieved deeply for her.

Zaima's landlady, who was a broker, had followed carefully what happened and suggested clients to her when she saw that she needed money. The landlady's son also wanted Zaima and so she had sex with him, thinking she could get her own house like this. He did not give anything, though, and she says she felt cheated. Somehow, Zaima managed to purchase a piece of land in

an area of Chennai that was at the time merely a dirt track. She built a thatched hut and still lives there; it was dark and very cramped. She still lives together with the same man. She says she dislikes being with him and he drinks and abuses her; she feels that he is the person who has 'spoilt' her life, but he is the father of her children. Her younger son is physically and mentally challenged, and she feels responsible for and looks after him.

Zaima started to work in the film industry as a makeup girl soon after her first husband left her. She said that the actors requested sex from her and other girls who worked there and that, slowly, she got into the profession of sex work. She told me she was very beautiful when she was young – and she still is – and that she had a lot of clients, but she did not save any of the money. Now she is too old to work and she longs for peace in her life. She lives on the small salary she gets from ICWO and pimping younger sex workers.

> *'Nowadays, I'm not doing sex work and even if I don't feel like doing it, when I'm tempted to do it I pray to God to somehow cancel it. One part of my heart says that if I go I will get at least some Rs.500 and I'll even fix the appointment but another part of me prays to the God to somehow cancel it.' (Interview transcript p.2 lines 37-41, 9th Feb 2005)*

She is very bitter about her life and experiences; she recalls being raped, and she feels that she was cheated at whatever she did. Her husband and her oldest son abuse her verbally. The only things she cites as pleasurable and meaningful in her life are her counselling work in ICWO and thus being able to eat, the Islamic traditions that she likes, and occasional lesbian encounters with her friends. Her relationship to other women is striking and unusual.

> *'That [relationships with women] is for fun and I will do it rarely and it will be with close friends. Now here they talk about Komala and me and we both attended a party (=a client) and it happened then, but it's not a habit. I had another friend who had the same name as myself and both of us were drunk. And that happened because of my husband when he came to know that I was a sex worker and then he started blackmailing me saying that "You are mine and you have to pleasure me, so bring one of your friends and let me be with her. See I'm not*

going to be with her lifelong, it's just for fun". I thought ok if I satisfy him maybe he will take care of me. So I introduced one friend, she was also from poor family and she was a CSW. He asked us to have sex and we did it for him but I enjoyed it and so that is in the corner of my mind always. So now with Komala, I just have fun and we tease each other and to Komala I say, "Hey, you are my wife." I don't do this as regular and it is just for fun and there is no shame in this because it is just for fun.

Bhavaani: You said that you were with your husband and a friend as three persons. Even that habit was started by that man.

Zaima: Yes and even that habit was started by this man... In the similar way I have introduced a lot of women to him and I will give 50 or 100 rupees to these women. What to do, I have told this man the truth and I also think about my handicapped son. Because of this weakness I used to give him a lot of leeway. I told you that he has always used me as a sacrificial sheep but this lesbian habit is just for fun, there are some who have this habit but I don't do it always.'
(Interview transcript p.8 line 31-p.9 line 11, 9ᵗʰ Feb 2005)

Uma

I met Uma, a young woman who smiled a lot, for the first time in the SWCWS office, where she sat quietly. I met her the next time when I was doing social marketing of condoms with Lakshmi, one of the SWCWS fieldworkers. Uma told me she had malaria. We went to her house and she seemed quite excited about me being there. She lives with her husband and son in a tiny flat. During my fieldwork, her family moved due to family problems. Both of the flats were in poor, slum areas in the north of Chennai. They are typical slum flats. This flat consisted of a room in a concrete two-floor building. The room was about 3x3 metres in size and had no bed, but had sleeping mats rolled up and standing in the corner, a small cooker under a tiny window, and a few pots and pans. They had a small cupboard that held their clothes and belongings. The fan on the roof went on and off because of electric cuts.

Uma is 25 years old and belongs to the *naicker* caste (a higher caste of Telegu origin who have moved to Tamil Nadu). She studied up to the third grade and then helped her mother in selling fruits. She does not know how to read or

write. She had a love marriage when she was 20 years old. Uma and her husband are from different backgrounds ethnically (he is Telegu, she is Tamil), in terms of class (his family lived in a rented house and hers in an owned house), and religiously (she is Hindu, he is a Christian), and because of this, Uma's family does not approve of the marriage. The couple were in love for three years before they got married. *'What was your relationship like?'* I asked. Uma explained that they exchanged letters, looks, and the like; I asked if they were intimate and Uma blushed and laughed: *'Che ayaiyo, dearie me, I did not know all that!' (Interview transcript p. 4 line 32, 11th June 2005)* Uma's father used to beat her for seeing him; everybody knew they were courting.

After her marriage, she gave birth to five children, four of whom died soon after birth. She felt that, at the hospital, they could not do anything to help her and the babies. She said the doctors wanted to keep the son who survived for monitoring, but she refused and blackmailed them to give let her take the child home with her – she felt that experts had failed to look after her four other children and would probably fail with this son as well. She calls the boy 'the God's child' because he was born on Christmas Day. She is very happy about this son, although she was devastated when the other children died. Consecutive pregnancies have made her very weak, and Uma is very thin. She went through the family planning operation (sterilisation) after her last child was born, which was done in agreement with her husband and mother-in-law.

Before I met Uma, she had met another man, who keeps calling her and wants to marry her. He is a truck driver who has a lot of money. He has given Uma a mobile phone, paid for her son's clothes, and given her money for rent. Uma says that she met the man as a client. Now they are in love. For example, they have been to the Marina beach, which is a common destination for newlywed couples. It is obvious that Uma is very smitten about the man, and that she is not just meeting him for his money. However, Uma's husband found out about the affair and they ended up in a huge quarrel.

'My husband doesn't go to work. There is not even milk for the baby. That's why I started doing this. I suffered a <u>lot</u>, at that time; this man [the lover] was some help to me. He bought me milk and this and that. Everything. He gave me house rent. So like that it grew. What my husband said at the [police] station to him was:, "I married my wife through love marriage. You've only just come along". The police beat him [the lover] up, with a stick. He [the husband] gave money [to the police] and made him be hit badly. The man said "I'll still speak [with her], however much I get beaten". His [Uma's lover's] mother tells him not to speak with me, and she even tried committing suicide. She's told him he should marry the girl of her choice. He went and saw her, but he said he didn't want to marry her. They are also comfortably off. In one day he earns Rs.2000. He gets a monthly salary on top of that, and also any petrol or diesel which is left after he has delivered the tank, he sells on to other shops. In the petrol shops their books will be straight because they've received what they asked for. Then he sells the excess and makes Rs.50,000.' (Interview transcript p. 5 lines 6-22, 11th June 2005)

When her husband found out about the affair, he beat her up, and she was also threatened by her natal family and her in-laws not to meet him again. In despair, Uma poured kerosene on herself, wanting to die. She suffered minor burns on her stomach and chest and had to spend a week in the hospital. She decided to stay with her husband because she did not want to lose her son. She said she feels sorry that her husband, who used to be a good man, has now started to drink and mentally abuse her: *'Have you been to the brothel again, have you met your boyfriend again?' (Fieldnotes 10th March 2005)* She feels guilty for what happened; and she understands that there is more at risk than just her own feelings because her sister and mother have threatened to kill themselves if she continues to meet her lover. After further discussion about what she wants herself, she started to cry and said she would like to talk to her boyfriend.

Regarding sex work, Uma told me that she works on a full-time basis and that her clients are generally autorikshaw drivers and businessmen. She earns Rs.300-1000 per client, and she usually has three clients per day. She said she will 'give anything' because she needs the money. If she complains, her pimp will say: *'Why are you complaining, you got the money, you have been paid.'*

(Fieldnotes 10th March 2005) Uma argues that men will come (to sex workers) because their wives will not do impure things. She often works with Payal, her best friend, and recalled moments when they were asked to have sex together with a man:

> *Uma: '(Sometimes) he'll (the client) want us both there, for company. And by company he means we are naked and stroke him and that, whilst the other has sex. (Interview transcript p.6 lines 21-22, 11th June 2005)*
>
> *Salla: Where do you usually go?*
>
> *Uma: We go to houses. If someone from the house has gone out, we'll go to lodges.' (Interview transcript p.7 lines 6-7, 11th June 2005)*

I asked if she and Payal ever met 'nice clients' (in contrast to the violent or cold men that they described). In this particular interview Uma and Payal were there together, and their initial answer was that, yes, some clients are rich and give a lot of money, mobile phones, saris etc. Then they rather vaguely said that some are gentle, and that they will adjust to whatever the men want. Uma says that if they (sex workers) are harsh on the men, the men will take them by force – so if the women are nice to them, the men will also treat the women with care. She recalled a recent incident when 10 men gang raped her and only one man used a condom.

Kuntala

I met Kuntala for the first time in one of the peer educator's annual meetings. She was very beautiful and slim, spoke very well and I was impressed by how articulate she was. However, I did not see her for a long time after that, until I ran into her by chance and she invited me to visit her house. I thought she was very honest and frank. She did not want the money that was offered for the interview – she was almost offended when I said at the end that there was an incentive – but she took it eventually. She welcomed me and my research assistant very warmly every time we went to see her, and she said she was

always very relieved after talking with us. Kuntala lived with her husband and two children, 8 and 7 years old, in a thatched-roof hut that belongs to her father. They have a bed, a small cooking space, a cupboard and a small black-and-white TV. She has also adopted her nephew, who is around 15. Her other sister lives nearby.

Kuntala comes from a family that had four children. His father was a farmer and they had their children well-educated. One sister was a nurse and another earned a BSc degree. However, one of the sisters had mental health problems and committed suicide. Kuntala says that because of this, her mum is now also mentally affected and has been admitted to a local mental health hospital, where she is being treated. Her mother otherwise wanders around the streets pointlessly. I met her mother once and her dress was old and dirty and her hair stood up. Despite this, when she spoke to Bhavaani, my research assistant, she was quite collected and talks to her in Telegu, asking her about her caste and background.

Kuntala completed school up to the tenth standard. She was married off when she was 15 because her family had problems; she said her parents thought that at least one of the children should be settled. She said she was totally ignorant about marriage and felt as if she was still a child. She recalled that she did not even have time to have a 'good time' with her husband because she beacuse pregnant immediately and had two children. She said she did not know how to look after the children, and they were brought up by her sisters and mother. She said that she had no interest in being a mother and she pushed the baby away when it was crying. She did not want her second child, but the pregnancy was too far to terminate. She went through sterilization after her second child; this was against her family members' will, but she threatened to go to the police if they tried to stop her. She was lonely and jealous of her peers, who were still going to school and college. She says that, at the time, she longed for company and started to go out more and in this way came to sex work.

'I didn't have anybody to talk to about my husband and problems. Both my sisters were like that, asocial or mental. I was social but there was no company, I was unable to be myself or free. When I tried to look for company from outside, other people pulled me into this. I needed support and companionship but they turned out bad.' (Interview transcript p.3 lines 37-40, 11th May 2005)

Now, at 24, she said she now enjoys being a mother and likes being with her children, wanting to raise them well and make them smart and not easily deceived. Especially, she said she wants to empower her daughter. Her children are studying in English to make sure they get good opportunities in life. She wants to make sure her children trust her with all their worries. She is proud of them and, by the way she behaved when I talked with her, she has adopted motherhood as her identity, rather than using it to explain her sex work. I observed her play with and enjoy spending time with her children and saw that she was also quite protective of them outside the house.

She used to work for Action Aid (another NGO) as a cleaner, but her travelling expenses were so high the she spent all her salary on that. She has now stopped working as a sex worker since her husband told her to stay at home – the work in Action Aid was also a pretext for getting out of the house – despite the fact that her children's school fees have not been paid. She raised heartfelt concerns about being exposed as a sex worker.

'Whenever I do sex work, I'm worried about other people. I think if anybody has seen me, I have no peace of mind. After I have stopped I feel better, I feel free, strong. If they give any job, I will go.' (Interview transcript p.2 lines 17-20, 4th March 2005)

Kuntala was very worried that her husband might find out about her sex work and she has stopped even being seen with other sex workers. She had already been beaten for going out, and said she would expect a much more violent reaction if her husband were to find out that she did sex work. She would like to get a proper job in the nearby area.

Kuntala's husband is an autorikshaw driver and is apparently of good nature but drinks quite a lot and when he gets drunk, he becomes abusive and beats her.

> *'He always fights with me and then I think: "I don't want to live with him." I want to leave him. But then I think of my family and if I would leave people would blame me and think of me in bad name: she did all that... I'm always crying. Sleep is not coming. You are continuously doing like this, it becomes a problem. I'm worried about my family. I still have a brother who didn't get married. My older sister is not married because she is mental. Second sister became mental and died. After my father died, I'm the only one who is looking after the family. I am thinking about the family situation so I am unable to sleep. Every time after we fight, I think how I can leave but then I think what would happen to the others.' (Interview transcripts p.1 lines 26-29 and p.2 21-27, 4th March 2005)*

If the people from the neighbourhood or her relatives speak badly about her, her husband becomes angry, drinks and abuses her. *'I tell him off when he's sober and then he says he's so sorry. He does not apologise but says he will not scold her again.' (Interview transcript p.1 lines 6-9 11th May 2005)* He is suspicious when Kuntala goes out with other women from HIV-awareness NGOs, because these women openly say that they are sex workers. Now, she does not dare to talk to them for that reason.

> *'I don't go often (to meetings) because I'm afraid that he will find out and I know that if he will understand what is going on, my family will be affected, family's honour will be lost. The women in the area they make themselves public. It's fine if you talk in a meeting but even if you are with them in a bus, they will come out as CSWs (commercial sex workers). The way they talk, the way they tease each other, every body will come to know. I'm scared to be seen with them. I never take the same bus, I don't want to be associated with them. I don't like it, I'm ashamed by it. When I go (to a meeting), I give an excuse where I'm going. But because my husband is an autorikshaw driver, he knows what kind of women they are. He knows what's going on around and so when I'm going to a meeting, he doubts me. That might be the reason why he gets drunk and scolds me. For the past 8 months I have completely stopped it. If I want pleasure, I can go to him. If something happens to me, who will look after the family? What I want is to eat, a dress and to be happy. Although what he earns is not*

enough for us, we have to get a loan. So for that reason I want to get another job.'(Interview transcript p.3 lines 19-34, 11th May 2005)

While Kuntala was still in sex work, she was a home-based sex worker, using madams to find clients for her. She would get Rs.200, of which the madam took Rs.100 as commission. She feels bad for having done sex work and she is worried about if anyone she knows had seen her. She has no peace of mind because of this and with all the family problems. Though she had done sex work, she had hated it and despised herself for it. She said that, after she stopped doing sex work, she felt better, free, and strong. I asked her if there was any difference in the intimacy between her and the clients and her husband, and she said that there was not much difference:

> *'If he had been alright, if he had been very nice to me, I would have been here and I wouldn't have to go out. So there was not much difference. I thought there would have been something for me, but my husband simply drank all the money and the money I got from sex work was for my needs. I earned a bit for myself also.' 'What about the physical intimacy?' 'I was very simple with my clients. At least with my husband I think he is my husband and there is some emotional connection also. With the clients it was like a dead person.'(Interview transcript p.4 lines 1-8, 11th May 2005)*

Notes on agency

The above accounts by Mercy, Zaima, Uma and Kuntala were some of the richest provided by the women I interviewed. Some of the women were not keen to talk about personal issues, but rather would discuss modes of sex work, problems in sex work etc. This could have been due to attempts to protect their identity. They provided rich accounts about entering sex work etc., but did not reflect so much on their personal trajectories. I have chosen to present Zaima's account because she was a Muslim and had fallen into prostitution at a very young age, Uma's because of her love affair, Mercy's because she was a lesbian, and Kuntala's because she was a housewife who was desperately trying to maintain her family situation and keep up the facade of 'normalcy'.

The findings reported on in this chapter complement existing knowledge regarding sex workers. Currently, the dominant representation of sex workers comes from the HIV discourse which suggests a health-oriented view of sex workers that presents them as victims of poverty and patriarchy, which drives them to do sex work, which then makes them vulnerable to HIV, and further violence and oppression. Such women are seen only as victims in need of empowerment. However, the findings of my research, which begin to unfold in this chapter, show that the HIV-driven representation simplifies the complex realities of the lives and careers of sex workers and does not do justice to the diversity of the group of the women involved.

This chapter has shown that the sex working women that I interviewed had agency, albeit in rather limited circumstances. Sleightholme and Sinha (2002), Blanchard et al. (2005), and O'Neil et al. (2004) suggest that poverty is the reason behind sex work. The women I interviewed for this research asserted the same, and they were all poor at the time of my research. Poverty is seen as related to a lack of education of women and thus a lack of options. Yet, my respondents were generally more educated than those in the research conducted by APAC (2005a) which challenges the assumptions that only the poorest and uneducated women enter sex work. Sleightholme and Sinha (2002) argue from research in Calcutta that a majority (but an unspecified percentage) of the women there were coerced, tricked or sold into sex work, often by a family member. Many women in Chennai had been in a situation in which they did not have any choice but to enter sex work, due to financial burdens, or coercion (like Zaima). However, like Mercy and Kuntala, many others had a chance to consider the idea and had other options. The four detailed accounts are painful to read, because they highlight the oppressiveness of the lives of the sex workers; violence had been experienced by many of them both when doing sex work and at home, and thus violence was not limited to women's roles as sex workers. For example, Zaima had been raped as well as had experiences of marginalisation, abandonment, and ostracism from her family, and had to learn to deal with it.

The framework of these interviews was influenced by my theoretical approach to the topic and by the questions that I asked. I was influenced by the literature on sex workers' movements in the West, which insist on sex workers' human rights and operate on the presumption that sex work is work, rather than a form of oppression. Simultaneously, I was informed by post-structuralist feminism (e.g. Mahmood 2005) emphasising that agency is action, not just resistance. Furthermore, I found that the topic of the sexuality of the sex workers was a taboo, and I was interested in studying these complexities further.

On the one hand, my interviews clearly show that the women interviewed faced violence and structural struggles. On the other, I did not have to look for signs of agency and resistance with a fine-tooth comb because all the women displayed agency more than the literature around gender (referred to in chapter 3) suggests. Mercy decided to start her own beauty parlour. Zaima had affairs with women. Uma had a boyfriend. Kuntala had looked for an extramarital affair in the past because she was lonely and longed for company. These are striking examples of autonomy and individuality that are in contradiction with the stereotypes and women in India are submissive and passive. Agency and resistance were present in stories in which women challenged their roles as obedient and chaste wives and mothers, and were also sexually active to various degrees. This agency, however, was exercised under the pressures of structural constraints concerning gender subordination and poverty (for a great discussion of women's agency in north India, see Jeffery and Jeffery 1996). What the interviews point out is that the notion of 'dividuality' is not applicable to them. This concept has been contested by Jeffery and Jeffery (1996) and these women's experiences confirm such reservations. The women I interviewed, while they were bound by the structures of a non-individualist society where women typically depend on men, had been forced to negotiate their lives on their own.

The findings of this chapter could be summarised as follows. Among the women I interviewed sex work came across as a complicated knot of: various relationships and cohabitations; love and desire; financial dependency; coercion, violence and submission; motherhood and fatherhood; aspiration to conform norms; fear of ostracism; and relationships to children. I have not dealt with these topics in-depth analytically here because they will be elaborated and analysed in the following chapters. Chapter 7 discusses the reasons that women gave for why and how they had entered sex work, chapter 8 shows the main problems encountered by women in sex work as well as their agency in negotiating their lives, and chapter 9 discusses sexuality while analysing the women's experiences with reference to agency.

CHAPTER 7 Reasons for entering sex work

In this chapter, I will consider the reasons, motivations, rationales and justifications of the women that I met and interviewed in Chennai regarding why and how they entered sex work. Analyses of the main themes and discourses in the women's accounts reveal that many of the reasons for entering sex work are often related and intertwined. The interviews were led by the women, and were thematic rather than structured, and the women told me about the things they thought were relevant to their life stories. All the women had a rationale for entering sex work. This is not surprising, considering that sex work was my interest, although many of these stories seemed to be told spontaneously. The reasons that the women gave for starting sex work vary. As they often gave a number of reasons for why they entered sex work, I will present and discuss these reasons thematically. The most common themes to explain them entering sex work were poverty, failure of the patriarchal family system, and having to look after children although selling sex was also used strategically – for example, to gain an improved position in the film industry, or to pay off debts. Trafficking and coercion were the reason why some of these women had entered sex work initially, but they had later made the decision to continue sex work on their own.

These themes/stories have a complicated relationship to epistemological questions concerning reality. I am aware that the reasons that the women said they entered sex work were told to me with hindsight and in the particular context of interviewing. What they saw as reasons why and how they entered sex work might have changed overtime, and they might have been talked about differently depending on whom they were talking to. Because of the stigmatised nature of sex work in the Indian context, it seems likely that women would feel the need to justify why they do what they do, which might lead to an inclination to represent themselves as acting upon circumstances or as victims. Because of the dominance of the HIV discourse as the main forum by which

sex work is spoken about, and because I used NGOs in accessing the women I interviewed, it is no surprise that the women's accounts would be influenced by the NGO/HIV discourse. While this discourse is victimising, the idea that the women might have told me their accounts as intentional positionings (as victims), rather than 'as representations of reality', adds a lot more agency to what they said. By trying to convince me with politically correct victimising accounts, they might have also been trying to avoid further questions, or potentially, to protect themselves and their reputation. I do not want to dismiss the experiences of the women as simply 'stories' and in particular, I do not want to dismiss their accounts of trafficking and rape as 'narratives' as having no experiential basis e.g. as excuses or appeals to gain my sympathy. I will now discuss the reasons that the women interviewed gave me for why they entered sex work with these issues in mind.

I will link the reasons I was told to broader discourses in order to illustrate the structural conditions of the women's lives. The women's arguments could be interpreted as mirroring women's overall roles in Chennai, and particularly poor women's structural position in that society. Their answers, on the structural level, reflect the challenges for women living in a society that has a limited amount of social security and financial support for those outside the family network. Women's need to seek employment outside the home, and explaining this as 'doing it for the children', reflects their position as the main caretakers of children and their upbringing. The accounts reflect the fact that women's behaviour is more closely scrutinised and monitored and these accounts also tell about (the lack of) women's access to skills and education, the limited amount and type of jobs available to women in urban areas, and how women are treated in working life, where they are often sexually harassed. Finally, these stories tap into the discourse of Tamil nationalism with regard to ideas of women's purity, motherhood and self-sacrifice, suggesting an alternative narrative that is available to them, besides the HIV discourse.

Sex work as a strategy against poverty

From a structural viewpoint, Indian society is often described as having distinctive roles for men and women, in which women stay at home and look after the household and children while men earn money and look after the family's income. The patriarchal ideal supposedly 'guarantees' that women will initially be looked after by their fathers, then by their husbands, and finally by their son(s). The distinctively sharp division between productive and reproductive labour can create problems if the system fails e.g. due to financial reasons – and, indeed, purdah is more strictly observed among families that can afford to keep their women at home (see Caplan 1985; Hancock 1999; Jeffery 1979; Trawick 1990). If, because of financial hardship, women are forced to take on the role of maintaining the family, they do not have many resources, skills, or training to help them to do so (and for a similar analysis of women in sex work in Calcutta, see Sleightholme and Sinha 2002).

In the interviews, sex work came across predominantly as a strategy to fight financial hardship. As Ishwari put it: *'I'm earning money for food.' (Interview transcript p.2 line 28, 24th March 2005)* Many of the women described that they did not have enough resources to survive and that making money by selling sex was needed for survival and maintaining the family.

> *Leena: 'My husband doesn't give anything; I have to put it all for the rent and pay the school fees...he'd go in the morning and return at 10pm at night. With what he earns, it would just cover the price of coffee so that's why I put on a cotton sari and went to work as a housemaid. I didn't know about sex work. As a housemaid you get Rs.300... Then one day the man of the house called me and he locked the door. He said come to me and said: 'I'll give you Rs.400' and asked me to make love on the house bed. That was the first I know of this work...*
>
> *Salla: After intercourse, how do you feel?*
>
> *Leena: It is difficult, we [I] never anticipated we'd [I] have to do this; we [I] came expecting our husbands to earn money for us. And it's really painful; if my husband is not about, I'll bathe it in hot water.*

We [I] suffer, oh, so much. And it really happens, but what to do?
The family has to be saved…if I don't get Rs.500 I myself will phone
to make them (clients) come.' (Interview transcript p.3 lines 19-29, p.
7 line 44-p.8 line 2, 16th May 2005)

While poverty was a major rationale, it is worth looking into class backgrounds to situate the women's responses. The majority of women I interviewed were from lower-class backgrounds, where money and resources were sparse. I observed that most of them lived in low-income settlements, in poor conditions in slum dwellings and cramped accommodations, in residences that were about 3x3m (and shared with children and often a partner/husband). Only Sindhamani owned a flat in a lower-middle-class area. The poorest huts were in reeking slums and made of coconut leaf, with a cardboard door and sleeping mats without any furniture or belongings. Many women had come from poor families and, when they were young, there had been too many children in their families, so daughters were married off at an early age. For example, Bina was married at the age of 13, Madhu as early as 8. Kaveri explained that, in her family, there were four boys and four girls and that she had the main responsibility for housework because her mother was working outside the house. She said that food was always a problem and that she would often have to feed dinner to her siblings. Despite the hardships, she said that she had a happy childhood. She was married around the age of 15 and commented that her life before marriage was harder than at present.

However, poverty was not always present in the familial backgrounds of the women interviewed. Not all the women were originally lower-class, but something had happened in their lives that then led to poverty. In their biographies, for example, Sheelamma, Sindhu and Uma described how they had grown up in and/or married into privileged land-owning families. Sheelamma serves as an example: She was married into a wealthy family in Kerala when she was 13, and her father gave her several sovereigns of gold to take with her. She and her husband had several servants; she said that life was good. However, after seven years, her husband had an affair with one of the servant girls and got her pregnant. After serious fighting and domestic violence,

Sheelamma obtained a divorce. When they divorced, her gold was divided between the children and, with that money, the children were educated in convents and now hold degrees in law, medicine etc. Sheelamma, on the other hand, lives now in a dark, hot, 3x2m room by herself, without any contact with her children. So, sex work served as a strategy for women in difficult circumstances to survive, and not only women who were 'originally' poor entered sex work.

Lower caste women have always worked, so this alone does not explain why some women but not others enter sex work; other factors must be involved as well. Selling sex was always a way to negotiate financial hardships, but was not always an act of desperation. Instead, selling sex could be a potentially lucrative business, as the following suggests.

Strategic sex

The average price for sex among the women interviewed was between Rs.100-250. Madhu, Chapala and Ishika charged the least Rs.20 (23p) and also said that they occasionally sold blood to get money. A couple of young women said they would get about Rs.1.000 (£11.5) per client. This suggests a huge variety in the contribution that sex work provided to the women's income.

The possibility of earning relatively good money reasonably fast meant that sex work was not always an act of desperation or survival. In a few cases, the women explained that sex work was also a practical way to gain more skills and to clear off debts. Ponni, for example, said that she wanted to help her husband to start a business, and so took out Rs.10.000 as a loan:

> *Ponni: 'But when I was unable to pay back the debt, the money lenders said: go and sleep with someone and get the money back so I was able to clear that off.' (Interview transcript p.1 lines 13-14, 30th May 2005)*

Neela tried to help her sister to get better job opportunities:

While most women explained sex work in terms of necessity, it is interesting to consider whether they were hesitant to say they profited from sex work beyond obtaining 'necessities'. Perhaps because of the social stigma of sex work, very few women admitted that they used sex work to try to increase their life standards above the level of covering basic necessities. Potentially, sex work can be a lucrative business through which one could earn a lot of money – if one is fair, cunning and can attract rich clients – but this was rare. Only one woman managed this (and said it openly). She earned the highest monthly income: Rs.10.000. This is approximately as much as a college-educated person can earn in an IT job. This woman ran a souvenir shop to camouflage her earnings and to waive suspicions regarding her income. However, for most of the women, sex work was a backdoor option. Pooja explained that she knew that she could put on her most beautiful sari and go and stand at the bus stop if she needed money. Most women did not work full-time, and sex work contributed part of their income. Poverty was reported as the reason why women had needed to go out and look for jobs, but sex work was never said to be the first job for them.

Employment options for women

Most of the women I interviewed were in poor living situations and when they sought work to sustain themselves and their families, they were only able to get certain jobs because their education level was not high and they did not have the skills that would have enabled them to get a well paying job. The women's education level varied between no schooling to the twelfth standard (see Table 3 on p. 160 for details). One sex worker (not part of the sample, because I was unable to interview her properly) who was the lead peer educator in MSDS (a HIV prevention NGO that I visited briefly just outside of Chennai) had college

education. Four women I interviewed had not attended school at all. The second major cut-off point was after the fifth standard (class), when primary school is completed. Eight of the women had studied up to fifth to sixth standard. Seven had studied to seventh to eighth standard, seven women up to ninth to tenth standard and one woman reported having completed twelfth standard. Twenty eight women did not disclose their education level. The level of education among the women I interviewed was higher than reported by Aids Prevention and Control Society (APAC), which funds NGOs with aid given by USAID and provides statistics about sex workers in Tamil Nadu. According to APAC (2005a), a third of the female sex workers in six cities in Tamil Nadu were illiterate, and 47% had completed primary education (up to class five). Even if most women who disclosed their level of education had schooling, there were still some of them who did not know how to read/write. Most of those I interviewed were able to write their own name. All of them knew how to do basic maths – for instance, to calculate how much they had been cheated if the client did not pay as originally agreed. Three women (Pugazh, Maya, Zaima) understood a little English. Lack of education in and of itself does not lead to sex work. With other factors such as break up of marriage and poverty, then lack of access to education and training and a limited number of options for employment made sex work a viable option to earn money.

The women I interviewed explained that, prior to starting and alongside doing sex work, they also worked at other jobs that are generally available to uneducated labourers – for example, as construction workers, watchmen, export factory workers, or maids[20]. Opportunities for unskilled, often illiterate, women are limited, and finding a job that would cover the expenses of a family with several children was difficult. The women stated that they entered sex work for their and their families' survival, because their initial jobs were not enough to run the family. When they had been working in other jobs, all of the women

[20] Women's participation in the informal employment sector has been researched by e.g. Swaminathan (2004), and she and many others (see e.g. Moghadam 2005) have suggested that the introduction of capitalism in India and elsewhere has feminised poverty in that women represent labour power that gets the worst paid jobs because women tend not to belong to labour unions.

reported that men had harassed them sexually (similar findings about women's experiences of sexual harassment in the work place have been reported from Chennai by Swaminathan 2004). From this, they said, it was a small step to sex work. They had to decide between a low paying job and sexual abuse, and sex work and the lack of options and sexual harassment at work, sex work meant more money with less effort.

> *Vanita: 'I saw that wherever I went it was like that, housemaid work, company work – there you had to 'adjust' and work otherwise you'd not get the job, then you'll get Rs.1000 salary – how many would I have to adjust to? 10 people – can I do that? They do pay although some cheat on you say they loved you – you can't trust anyone these days. So with sex work you get a phone call, go to their house and get Rs.500 in hand and you arrange with 2 or 3 people. If I don't have work, I'll stay at home.' (Interview transcript p.3 lines 31-36, 16th May 2005)*

For some women, there had been ignorance or a misunderstanding of the nature of what was being suggested to them. Pooja's husband fell sick, she tried to borrow money from her friend and then:

> *'The friend asked why Pooja wanted to get into debt; she knew a way to make money for free: "Come tomorrow wearing your best dress." The lady took her to a lodge at Kovalam beach to see a client. Pooja hesitated but the agent persuaded her: "You have already come here, why should you not do it. If you go home now, your husband will ask you where you have been the whole day and you come in empty handed. Anyway you have been inside the lodge and your reputation is spoilt when people see you coming out.' (Fieldnotes 28th Oct 2004)*

As in the case of Pooja, madams often had a role in bringing women into sex work. Muyal said: '*There was no livelihood. Went to the cinema and there were female agents who said you can get money and don't have to suffer anymore.' (Interview transcript p.9 lines 26-35, 24th May 2005)* Her comment suggests that madams network women and clients. However, this relationship is not always coercive. Ponni herself had approached one of the madams in her neighbourhood:

> *Ponni: 'Six months ago there was problem in the home and there was no money so I actually asked one of the ladies here who is also a sex worker about some job, is there any work in here.' (Interview transcript p.4 lines 17-19, 30ᵗʰ May 2005)*

Based on accounts such as this, it would be one-dimensional to suggest that all women were tricked or coerced into sex work, or that they lacked agency. Neela provides an example of decision to enter sex work:

> *Neela: 'My husband abandoned me so I had to look for an outside job. I worked in government jobs [as a cleaner] and at construction sites. Everywhere I went there were men who asked for sex from me. At some point I thought why would I not make money that way rather than burden myself at these tiring jobs.' (Fieldnotes 18ᵗʰ May 2005)*

Another example of an 'easy career choice' decision came from Sripriya. Sripriya's husband deserted her because of a bad omen in her horoscope that l the husband would be killed if a son was to be born in a certain month. She moved back to her parents' house but eventually her father fell ill and she needed to make more money for the family:

> *Sripriya: 'When my father fell sick at the time one lady approached me. I went there, I went for Rs.5000 and then I had been there for one month. That is a place where the brothel is. I was there for one month with the lady and I earned a lot of money... [However,] there were many raids and rowdies [caused] problems so after some time I left the brothel house. I came to home and without depending on anybody I started to do the profession on my own.' (Interview transcript p.5 lines 9-14, 44-47, 25ᵗʰ April 2005)*

Although many women were not pleased or happy about being in sex work, to see sex workers as just victims is over-simplified. The examples above suggest that, once a woman is in the sex industry, the quick and easy way it provides for making money becomes an incentive to stay in sex work – and this is not necessarily a 'disempowering' solution. My interviews do not provide any evidence for or against the idea that being able to negotiate sex work to one's benefit is related to education that those who are the best educated would also be the most well-off or the best in avoiding the violence-related to sex work.

Knowing how to read and write, however, was an asset, but was not necessary for becoming a peer educator in one of the NGOs. Apart from household jobs, factory work and construction site work some of the women interviewed had worked in the film industry. From the women's accounts of employment, the film industry because seems to have trading sex strongly embedded within it.

Film industry

The 'road to riches' story of a girl finding stardom through the film industry seems globally ubiquitous, and the film industry, *cini field,* was important Chennai. Many are made locally and these films require vast numbers of supporting actors and actresses. I was told by my informants that people in supporting roles are expected to have sex with the directors, managers etc. to be recognised and to get a proper role, which reflects the general discourse of film stars and the film industry.

> *Madhu: 'If the woman is in the cini field, it means she is a prostitute, she HAS TO do that. It is a rule.' (Interview transcript p.6 lines 14-15, 31st May 2005)*

Responding to the several requests by the men in the industry was not restricted to those women who wanted their faces on the screen, for those who wanted to get jobs in preparing the stars (e.g. makeup artists) were also told that they had to use their bodies to climb up the ladder. Mercy used this opportunity to make contacts and promote her beauty parlour. A similar account is given by Zaima:

> *Zaima: 'It was fun [working as a makeup artist in the film industry] but we also needed to do this [sex] work and adjust with them. I got into this work by that and I did not enter into this willingly.' (Interview transcript p.5 lines 38-39, 12th May 2005)*

These accounts problematise the definition of sex work for the exchange of sex to get a role or position in a new film can also be defined as a kind of sex work. Furthermore, the same madams who recruited sex workers also recruited supporting actresses for the film industry. This suggests that the film industry

and the sex trade are indeed linked, which raises interesting questions that would be fascinating for future research.

Looking for jobs was something the women interviewed emphasised that they did so because of poverty. The difficult financial situation that led them to sex work usually followed a rupture in which the family structure of gender roles and responsibilities had collapsed. What this suggests is that it is not poverty *alone* that leads to sex work – not all poor women resort to sex work. The women also indicated that the men were married to had a role in why they had entered sex work because they failed to look after them, which brings familial relationships to the fore.

Failure of family structure – women as heads of households

Except for nine younger women, the rest of the women I interviewed had been married before they started to work as sex workers. All the married sex workers I met presented an account of how the family structure had failed them. Their husbands and fathers failed to look after the financial needs of their families and their women. These men had either died, left, fallen sick, became unemployed, or had other wives, and thus their contribution to the household's income generation was insufficient or nonexistent.

> *Neela: 'After my husband left me and I went to my mother's house, they told me that they can't take care of us all. I took my other child and was roaming around - what can you do with a baby in your arm? I even begged and I was crying and praying…' (Interview transcript p.1 lines 22-24, 17th May)*

In the case of married and cohabiting women like Suddha, Kuntala, Uma, Sharita, and Ishwari, they said that they had started sex work because their husbands did not have a job and therefore their families did not have money for food and bills. Their husbands worked in *kuli* (day labour) jobs whenever there was work available, but commonly the men had work less than once a week and this was not enough to cover the family's expenses. Men were often

described as 'no good' and irresponsible and this was interpreted as lack of caring or love on the part of the men. Ponni and Leena said that their husbands did not give them money to run the household, although they earned some money themselves. Similarly, Kuntala's, Sangita's, Jayati's and Maya's husbands did earn money, but used their earnings to buy alcohol or drugs, and the two latter women had grown tired of it and left their husbands. Because of this, the women said, they were forced to look after themselves and their families by whatever means that they had.

While blaming their husbands for the collapse of the family's living situation underpinned this narrative, it was not always the men who initiated the break-up. Of those women who were separated from their husbands, in at least seven cases it was the women who had left their husbands. Some had left because of their husbands' drug and alcohol use (Maya, Sangita and Jayati); some (Sangita, Swasti, Jayati, Sheelamma and Bina) also said that they had left because of domestic violence; and some also (Sharita, Vasumathi and Sheelamma) left because their husbands had brought a second wife to the house.

> *Jayati: 'I left him. He gave me trouble, beating me, torturing me, took drugs so I left him... It was really difficult with him beating me and that, so I came away by myself.' (Interview transcript p.1 lines 24-26, 3rd April 2005)*

> *Swasti: 'After 5 years of domestic violence I told him, why don't you go to your first wife, I can't tolerate this anymore.' (Interview transcript p.1 lines 27-28, 20th May 2005)*

Swasti effectively threw out her husband after she grew tired of domestic violence. These experiences show that women have more agency in household matters than the victimising argument suggests. Effectively, although not necessarily directly, the women were involved in creating the situation that led them to sex work. Ironically, when women seek to get out of violent and abusive relationships, they often fall into other circumstances that are also potentially violent and abusive.

The family systems around the women I interviewed had eroded for one reason or another, leading the women to seek income from sex work when they had to look after themselves and these resort to sex work? Why not go to live with their parents instead, or get support from their in-laws?

Natal families, in-laws and love marriages

In cases where marriages had come to an end, only Sheelamma's divorce from her husband was viewed positively by her in-laws and the in-laws gave her dowry back to ensure that the children got their heritage. Later, once the rumours of her being in sex work came out, she was resented by them as well. In most cases, if the women had lived together with their in-laws when the separation occurred, the women left their husbands and their in-laws did not ask them to come back (in fact, Sripriya's and Vasumathi's in-laws were responsible for ostracising them and throwing them out of the house, because they both had a bad omen in their horoscopes.) When the women left their husbands, it was clear that they did not want to continue living with them or their in-laws. But even if the women were left by their husbands, they complained that it was still difficult to go back to their maternal home.

Women's chastity is related to marriage and, just as widows are seen as impure (Hancock 1999), women who have been married and fall out with their husbands can be seen to have transgressed the same boundaries of chastity and are not necessarily welcomed back to their families. Poor families especially are unable to take a daughter and her children back, as this would mean more mouths to feed:

> Sripriya: 'Everything is over, you need to go now, they said. And they never gave food to my child nor they gave milk and I was starving at my house and no one bothered to ask about me.'(Interview transcript p.3 lines 36-39, 25th April 2008)

A disproportionately large amount of women in the sample had love marriages; and particularly in those cases when the marriages came to an end the women were rejected by both their in-laws and their maternal family. For example, Sangita married a non-Muslim man. He turned out to be very violent and also demanded that she should have sex with his friends. She ran away from him, but because of the shame of her love marriage, she was rejected by her sisters (both her parents had died).

In this way, natal families and in-laws can contribute to the difficult situation in which women face poverty and the collapse of the family structure which leads to sex work. Again, not all women in such circumstances start to sell sex, and the women I interviewed said that they failed to get support from their families and in-laws, they explained that the reason they got into sex work was to look after their children.

Motherhood

Besides poverty, and the collapse of the patriarchal family system, another dominant explanation for sex workers concerned was motherhood. Most of the women interviewed stated that the main reason they earned their living as sex workers was to take care of their families. Income from other sources was simply not enough to cover the costs of the children's school fees, books, clothes and so on. Some of the women had put their children into an English school to ensure they would learn English properly and thus get a better education and better future opportunities. In this way, educating their children was an investment – almost the only one available to them. Some women gave their children away to be looked after by a relative, or sent them to a boarding school to be educated. The importance of motherhood explains why these women take chances at the expense of their own health and safety.

> *Maya: 'He was a drug addict and I left him. At that point of time I had to take care of all the needs and necessities of my children…I want my way of life to end with me and I don't want my children to get into it.*

They should never know about my secret [about sex work] and I want to end my life like that. My children's future will be spoiled because they are grown now, I should be a good mother. If I am not a good mother then they might ask me "Are you a mother, you do a whore's job?" In Tamil this is how they will say. They won't ask me if they brought me by this work.'(Interview transcript p.2 lines 12, 22-23, 11th May 2005)

Sripriya: 'After the marriage and after my husband left me I entered into this for the sake of my children. I should support my children...I want my children to progress in life.' (Interview transcript p.2 lines 10-11, p.8 line 50, 25th April 2005)

Salla: 'Do you love him [a regular customer/lover]?'
*Kaveri: 'His caste is different. He is a Muslim. I'm a different caste. We see each other speak and go for the odd trips but that's it. I'm doing it for money. I like him but he's not that handsome. He has a different personality; **I just do it for my kids**.' (Interview transcript p.5 lines 25-27, 17th June 2005)*

As shown above, their family situations were such that the women interviewed needed to contribute to the household earnings in order to provide their children with food, education, clothing etc. Using children as a rationale could be another acceptable discourse for women to explain their actions, of course. The marriage system around the women had eroded for one reason or another, and they were left alone to look after themselves and their children. While these women had failed to meet societal expectation as wives, acting according to their feminine gender role by looking after their children can be seen as still acting according to the norms of the society. In explaining that they entered sex work because of their children, they emphasised the altruistic role of a mother. The majority of the women did live with their children, though five of them had sent their children to be looked after by in-laws or in hostels. If there had been a greater number of women without their children, this would have ruptured the discourse of motherhood, but still would not necessarily suggest that those women who had given their children away were 'un-motherly'. That is, giving children away was often described in relation to the fact that there was not enough money in the house and that the children were considered to receive better education in the hostels etc.

When women made references in the interviews to motherhood, this could be seen as an attempt to construct a more positive identity. Identity as a mother offered them a chance to manage the negative role they had as a sex worker. And by doing so, the women were also tapping into the Tamil national discourse of women as mothers and self-sacrificing, and indicating that they were still good mothers and women: even if they were acting against the norm of chastity, after all, they were doing it for their children. And at the same time, this could also be an attempt to externalise the 'fault' or the 'misbehaviour' and assign responsibility to the men and to external structures, thereby removing it from themselves.

Accounts that emphasise motherhood illustrate how normative the woman's role as a wife and a mother is. However, not all the women wanted the role of a woman who stays in the house, looking after the children. In particular, Kuntala and Maya had felt that they were trapped in their homes and they had looked for company outside. This did not turn out as they expected, because they ended up doing sex work, but it still shows ruptures in the discourse of women's feelings and attitudes towards their given role as women. It also challenges the victim representation of women to sex work: at times they initiated the relationships that led them to having sex with men for money (I will elaborate on these sexual relationships further in chapter 9).

> *Kuntala: 'I didn't have anybody to talk to about my husband and problems. Both my sister were like that, asocial or mental. I was social but there was no company, I was unable to be myself or free. When I tried to look for company from outside, other people pulled me into this. I needed support and companionship but they turned out bad.' (Interview transcript p.3 lines 47-41, 11th May 2005)*

> *Maya: 'One of my friends saw that I was fed up with life and I was very young, I would have been 22 or 23 years. My friend said that I have to enjoy life and she made me meet a guy, that is, as a love affair, and then I entered into this path step by step.' (Interview transcript p.2 lines 17-20, 11th May 2005)*

Further examples of ruptures in the discourse of womanhood that views women as essentially chaste and reproductive-oriented are provided in the accounts of two of the three *devadasis*[21] that I had the chance to interview. Manjula had by choice not married, but now lived with a partner. Avantika had hoped to get married to a young man, but her being a *devadasi* had prevented that. They both pointed out that *devadasis* no longer dance at the temples, but that their right as a *devadasi* is that they can have sex with anybody they want without anybody being able to challenge them. Manjula in particular gave the impression that she felt very liberated by the fact that she did not have the responsibilities of housework or childcare and she was not expected to follow the norms of female sexuality. These two women were able subvert the norms of chastity because of their *devadasi* background. This suggests that, in Tamil culture, there are groups to whom sex work is socially 'allowed'. Generally, *devadasi* is not seen as a positive role, and it is a role available only to those who have family ties to *devadasis* or who have had that role since childhood, which explains why sex workers have not reconstructed this as a foundation of a social movement and identity.

So far, I have discussed contexts of sex work where women explained their entry into sex work by referencing external conditions with a level of autonomy, in that these women had a chance to think about selling sex. Several quotes in this chapter, however, have hinted that some women entered sex work via coercion and trafficking. I will discuss these next.

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[21] The question of *devadasis* certainly needs further research. The *devadasi* institution was officially abolished in the 1950s. However, from my findings and research from the neighbouring state Karnataka (O'Neil et al. 2004), it is apparent that *devadasis* still exist. The women I interviewed suggest that there are two types of *devadasis*. This was also suggested by an NGO leader from another area. There are those who are similar to those *devadasis* from the past – who are typified by caste lineage and who work at the temples, and then there are those who have been sacrificed to temples by their parents in exchange for e.g. hoping to cure a fatal disease. These women can stay in their homes rather than moving to the temple, but they are officially married to the god and cannot thus get married to any man.

Trafficking/coercion

Trafficking is a problematic term in the sense that it is defined in different ways in various research or human rights statements. Trafficking in the sense of someone being kidnapped and forced to work as a sex slave was not observed or reported during my fieldwork. Despite the massive literature on trafficking and the moral panic about women being sold as sex slaves, as well as the reputation of India receiving sex slaves from her neighbouring countries (particularly Nepal and Bangladesh), active coercion was rarely involved in the lives of the women I interviewed in getting into sex work. However, this could be because that those women who have been trafficked might be better protected, or the fact that Chennai does not have a red light district, an easy target for trafficking, or mass-brothels.

Forced sex or trafficking was rare among the sex workers I interviewed. Four of the women (Swasti, Komala, Revati and Vasumathi), however, had been actively forced into sex work. Swasti was forced into sex work when she was looking for a job. She was approached by two women who told her about a household job for two weeks and offered her Rs.1500. She did not know it would entail sex work. In the job, she refused to have sex but ended up being beaten and tortured for her refusal. She told me that she had to host at least 10 men a day and was sometimes locked in during the night. When she left after two weeks – it was unclear why she was able to leave at this point and not earlier – she discovered that she was pregnant and had an abortion, because she felt she could not afford to have another child, but also because she felt that if her family found out about what happened they would kill her. Komala was also forced into sex work when she was looking for a job as a maid in Indonesia. Both of these women ended up in sex work after receiving false promises about work when they needed it. After the initial event, both of the women continued to work as sex workers independently.

Revati told me her life story, which was particularly gruesome. She was an orphan and, at a young age, was adopted by a woman who was a pimp. After she reached puberty, her virginity was sold a to a man who was much older than her. After this, she stated that she was sold to various brothels around the country and was often drugged when she had her clients. All protestation or defiance resulted in a beating, and she commented that girls sometimes 'disappeared'. She also described raids that the police conducted to abolish mass-brothels, and how they had to hide in a well behind the brothel so that the police could not find them. Eventually she escaped with the help of a client, and at the time of the interview she lived alone with her daughter outside of Chennai and supported herself by doing sex work independently. Vasumathi's husband, who turned out to be a pimp, forced her into sex work by first making her sleep with his friends and then blackmailing her to provide them with a more luxurious lifestyle. Vasumathi was the only woman where the husband was involved in the coercion or pimping. In Vasumathi's case, the elements of servitude towards husbands made Vasumathi accept her husband's coercion. Both Revati and Vasumathi also continued in sex work.

In several cases, exposure to other sex workers and accumulated poverty had led women from the same family to go into sex work. In one family, the mother-in-law and her two daughters-in-law were sex workers and, in four cases, two sisters worked together as sex workers. Three pairs of mothers and children were in sex work: Zaima's mother had been a sex worker; Sasika and Vanita worked together; Joshita (one of the above daughter-in-laws) did sex work and there was a rumour that her minor daughter did too; and I suspected a fourth pair: Bina was a peer educator who was always very ambivalent about her sex work status, and I suspected that her daughter might also do sex work - she was a dancer. Rather than necessarily leading to the conclusion that this is a common practice, the finding that women from the same families had entered sex work could be due to the networks that I had access to, or it could indeed suggest that women of the same families enter sex work due to desensitisation of the norms restricting this behaviour. Which ever, it neither supports the view

that sex workers force their children to become sex workers, as suggested by the documentary Born into Brothels, nor denies it, as suggested by Pardasani 2005, both concerning Calcutta.

A young, unmarried woman's reputation strongly affects her marital opportunities, and some of the unmarried women I interviewed – though not all of them – were minors. In Western sex work theorising, being a minor is seen as a factor that makes the act of sex work inherently coercive. However, this needs to be considered with reference to marriage in the Tamil cultural context, where the acceptable marriageable age is much lower than 18. Minor girls were generally carefully protected by their madams (mothers, sisters, or other older women from the community), so that I did not have a chance to interview many of them. Of the unmarried women, I was able to interview two properly (Vanita, 17 years old, and Sevati, 29 years old) and one briefly (Pramila, 20 years old), and I attended home visits with NGOs staff in which the status of another three girls became apparent (Sonali, about 20 years old, Maria 18 years old, and Sheila, 14 years old). I had doubts about two more young women, who are not in my sample because of their undisclosed status, but they were the daughters of sex workers that I knew well (Bina's daughter, 18 years old, and Joshita's daughter, about 12 years old) and there were rumours that they had entered sex work, though this was never openly disclosed.

Vanita, who is 17 years old and has worked as a sex worker for two years, says:

> Vanita: 'Some come into sex work at 14 year-old girls as akka [Salla, lit. big sister] knows, small girls. Can you classify 14 as small? Well, it's not 8, is it? [laughs] But it's not like that, I mean that even for a 17- or 18-year-old who can start a family, she shouldn't go nor be in that field but she is. If she hasn't started a family, she is fresh.' (Interview transcript p.9 lines 14-17, 16th May 2005)

Vanita is suggesting here that at the age of 17 to 18, women are considered old enough to get married (and thus to have sex), and that 14-year-olds are not children anymore, as they have usually reached puberty by then. However, she

hesitates and finds it difficult to draw the line between being too young and being old enough to start sex work. By that definition, Vanita herself started doing sex work at a dubious age (15). I asked her how she thought sex work might affect her future marriage prospects, and she explained that she was aware of ways to act properly on her wedding night to protect her secret:

> Vanita: 'If I get married they'll know, because they'll think it [her vagina] is loose. My friends they tell me how to act, to say it hurts...' (Interview transcript p.10 lines 16-17, 16th May 2005)

Technically, except for Sheila and Joshita's daughter, the unmarried women were of a marriageable age and were not culturally considered to be 'too young'. The two older unmarried women, Sevati and Pramila, lived alone and did not have an aura of secrecy around them, as the rest of the girls who lived with their families certainly did. For example, Vanita's mother routinely lied about Vanita's age to me and to the NGO staff (whereas, to clients, she was presented as younger). Judging by the protection and secrecy around them, the people involved knew that others might think that having young girls in sex work is unacceptable, and several of the sex workers made negative comments about Vanita's mother:

> Swasti: 'Do you know Vanita and Sasika? The little girl and the mother? She does a lot. She goes without condoms. She actually has white discharge. A mother should not involve her daughter in to this business. She has only one daughter and even she will tell a customer for Vanita. They go for shooting, they go here and there, and, what, still they don't have money?! You should not involve your daughter into this, it is very unfair. Until you have married your daughter you should look after her very well. You should not leave your daughter and eat with that money.' (Interview transcript p.5 lines 17-24, 20th May 2005)

Swasti suggests here that, despite the fact that some minor girls did sex work with their mothers, this was seen to be out of order. Many women specifically said that they would not allow their daughters to do sex work.

Concluding remarks

Making sense of the reasons how and why the women I interviewed entered sex work raises questions about the 'truthfulness' of the responses: what actually happened and to what extent are these accounts rationalisations made with hindsight? Penny Vera-Sanso's (2006) observations in an urban community in Chennai can shed some light onto the question of women's work.

Vera-Sanso (2006) describes the internal processes of neighbourhood control, including gossiping and 'bad-mouthing' people of the area. In this urban community, a mixed settlement like the ones I worked in, because of the lack of caste coherence and values, there was no sense of shared community and trust. The discourses around which people monitored each other on reflected Tamil nationalism, emphasising purity and self-sacrifice of women, and valorising men (Vera-Sanso 2006: 196). With economic and social changes, such as paying dowry and inflation, men failed to look after their families and women had to work contribute to the family income (Vera-Sanso 2006: 196). This was seen as a failure to protect the purity and chastity of their wives, central to the discourse of femininity. Men's failure to fulfil their masculine roles led to alcohol use and violence, or they started another family or deserted their wives (Vera-Sanso 2006: 196). When the women went to work, they were obliged to explain their actions according to the discourse of femininity, as an act of self-sacrifice and part of being good mothers (Vera-Sanso 2006: 197). Using nationalist discourse is not necessarily just an attempt by the women to represent themselves as victims, nor cunning lies to show themselves in a better light. These ideas about womanhood were no doubt felt by the women – most were brought up thinking this is their role in life. In a context in which their reliability is scrutinised by others based on these norms, motherhood is the culturally acceptable reason to justify why they do what they do, the only explanation that they can justifiably give without putting themselves into a further degrading position.

The culturally appropriate discourse of why women work articulated by Vera-Sanso's respondents, are exactly similar to the reasons that the women in my research gave. None of the reasons about how and why women came into sex work – due to poverty, lack of employment options, failure of masculine roles, and motherhood – rule each other out or are necessarily more or less true. Women's exposure to poverty due to failures of the family system, and thus their need to work to support their children, sexual harassment at work, coercion, and the active decision to continuing sex work independently can all coexist at the same time. For example, as noted in the previous chapter, Zaima provided four different reasons for how she got into sex work: 1) through her mother pimping her before her maturity, 2) because they were poor, 3) by her neighbour pimping her when she was in a financially dire situation; and 4) because she needed contacts in the film industry when her marriage failed. In another example, Sripriya said in the beginning of her interview: *'I do this for my children' (interview transcript p. 2 lines 10-11, 25th April 2005),* but later on told me how she started to do sex work because her family was from a *devadasi* origin. And once women were in sex work and 'they had lost their reputation' as reliable and honourable women, it was difficult to get out because of the stigma about what they did.

The explanations given by women I interviewed about how and why they had started to sell sex complied with the dominant norms of femininity. Alongside the stigma about sex work and the shame they often experienced, they strongly related to motherhood as a positive identity, perhaps because they lacked a defined 'subculture' which could have provided them with another positive source of identity and self-esteem.

All the above stories suggest that sex work is an available 'choice' for making money. This suggests that there are social mechanisms that give people access to it – otherwise, women could not end up doing it. Because the majority of the women had been 'normal' housewives who did not have a connection to sex work (with the few exceptions of *devadasis* and the women with family

members who were sex workers), this suggests that there is a network or institution of sex work that enabled them to start selling sex. Rather than being a 'culture' or 'community' *per se,* sex work is a loosely connected network of people and places that enables sex work to occur: madams and middlemen (autorikshaw drivers, wine shop staff and other street vendors) and potential trafficking networks that bridge the sex work encounter, beaches and bus stops where women solicit, places of sex such as lodges that turn a blind eye, and 'friends' who allow sex workers to use their flats for sex. When sex workers get into these 'underground' networks, a new world opens up to them and often sex workers progress to pimps (madams) when they get older and have a wealth of contacts, both men and women, and are aware of those venues for selling sex.

My findings of the complex reasons why women enter sex work add to the representation of HIV, according to which sex working women are simply victims of patriarchy, poverty and male sexuality. It cannot be denied that poverty and gender play a role in why women enter sex work, but the factors involved are not so simple and the issues that *lead* to poverty are ignored in this explanation. Vera-Sanso's (2006) analysis of the neighbourhood community brings gender relations and the role of men clearly into focus concerning women's poverty. The role of men and men's difficulty in adhering to traditionally masculine values increases the likelihood of female poverty, which also becomes more likely when work is unreliable and the labour market provides no continuity or security for both men and women. Furthermore, gendered patriarchal values and practices that prevent women from getting access to education, and viewing women outside the home as sexual prey, were involved in leading women in my research to sex work.

Despite these oppressive conditions, the women's accounts show levels of agency within their limited options. For example, some women had the opportunity to decide whether or not to enter sex work, and some women decided to continue in sex work after having been trafficked. How do we

understand these accounts without denying the effects of the oppressive structures, or without falling into a cultural relativist trap? Can agency be talked about in conditions where the subjects are not necessarily being actively resistant or subversive, in which action could come across just as desperate acts of survival? These interpretational dilemmas call for an analysis of how to understand agency. I will discuss these questions in the next chapter, where I adopt a Foucualtian understanding of agency and consider whether sex work in the context of Chennai is profession or oppression. In doing so I will discuss the problems that sex workers face deriving from the stigma attached to sex work and how they negotiated them.

CHAPTER 8 Sex work and agency

By now it should be clear that sex workers in India are members of a marginalised group. On top of the vulnerability stemming from their gender, and poverty, it will be clear that these women also face sex work related hazards. Sex workers are heavily stigmatised and operate in a very risky environment. In this chapter I will describe and discuss sex work related hazards and the problems that the women interviewed were facing.

I begin by describing the socio-legal context in which sex work takes place and then discuss the stigma attached to sex work, health problems that the sex workers must deal with, violence and lack of legal support. I argue that the problems that the women experience derive from the stigma of sex work. I then move on to explore the ways in which the sex workers negotiated these problems, challenging the notion that sex workers are powerless victims. Sex work unfolds as a strategy rather than a trap and sex workers negotiate their conditions in order to do sex work in the most private and physically, psychologically and socially safe way possible. I argue that, despite the problems of sex work, many women who were interviewed showed signs of autonomy, independence and feelings of powerfulness, and I will discuss the concept of (strategic) agency as a shorthand for thinking about this. I conclude with reflecting on these women's experiences in the context of the theoretical debate about sex work as profession or as oppression and I argue that seeing sex work as a dichotomy, as either oppression or profession, is not nuanced enough to fully understand the realities of the people involved.

Existing writings about sex work have largely restricted their attention to the risk of spread of HIV (e.g. Asthana and Oostvogels 1996; Blanchard et al. 2005; Evans and Lambert 1997; Evans 1998; Jayasree 2004; Nag 2001; O'Neil et al. 2004; Pardasani 2005; Rao et al. 2003). Such writings describe the actual encounter between sex workers and clients in a very limited way, and what goes on between the client and the sex worker has not been studied in any

detail. Doing so throws light on the agency of women concerned and questions the gender stereotypes involved in the dominant perspective of HIV and its prevention. This helps to increase understanding of the dynamics of the sex work encounter, and of when and how the risky situations actually occur. Addressing this gap in the literature, in addition to discussing the problems faced by the sex workers interviewed and the ways these were managed, I shall also explore the details of the sex work encounter (to the extent that sex work encounters can be generalised).

Stigma

According to the prevalent discourses of femininity and masculinity, South Indian gender roles are very distinct and there are very different standards for how the two genders are expected to behave. While all women who work outside the home can be seen to challenge the norm of women's reproductive role as homemakers, sex workers face a further stigma relating to the sexual nature of their work. There is a strong normative restriction on women's sexual behaviour, discussed earlier. The prostitute is seen as the complete opposite of the 'pure woman', and these stereotypes still prevail. As a woman who is sexually active outside marriage, the sex worker threatens the social structure. The public image of sex workers reduces them to loose, immoral, insatiable, greedy and bad women, so the representation is a moral one, not just disparaging of their 'work'. With the backdrop of Indian/Tamil notions of appropriate femininity, women are seen as the carriers of the family honour. When women's honour and reliability is judged through continuous monitoring processes, as Vera-Sanso (2006) has suggested, and when women are seen to break those norms, they are much more harshly judged than men by their families and other people.

Because of the stigma of sex work, women face practical difficulties, such as finding housing. They cannot usually afford to buy their own houses and live in rented accommodations in more or less run down areas of Chennai. After their

way of earning money becomes public, the sex workers are often asked to move away from their rented houses. One of the women I interviewed had been forced to move eight times during the past six years. Many of the women were afraid that their reputation as sex workers would spoil their children's opportunities – that their children would be bullied, or required to leave school if their mother's status as a sex worker came out.

The stigma and its consequences are so powerful that the women I interviewed reinforced and subjected themselves to it. When I asked the women in Chennai how women ought to be in their communities, their responses included things like husband-serving, not talking back, unconditionally abiding, being chaste, asexual, and looking after their families, which suggests that these are not simply external values but ones that sex workers also hold. Common emotional responses to sex work among them were also shame and fear. The shame derived from failing to live up to expectations regarding the appropriate behaviour of women. The experience of being labelled, named, rejected, abandoned, exposing their bodies to many men and living in fear made many of these women depressed and tired of living.

> Ponni: 'I used to be so proud of my heritage and Indian culture. I used to think so highly of Tamil Nadu women cos they are supposed to be so chaste people but now I feel so ashamed to even think about all this because I'm doing this...' (Interview transcript p.2 lines 23-26, 30th May 2005)

Sex workers challenge the expectation of chastity because they are, by definition, not chaste. Their disadvantaged position as women, as poor and as members of a stigmatised community who were seen as always sexually available due to their loose nature, puts them into a position that marginalises them further and puts them more at risk. For example, the women I interviewed complained that it was difficult to initiate condom use with their clients, which in turn makes them more vulnerable to STDs and HIV, which is one way (among many) that the stigma of sex work affects the women's health.

Health

Writings about the health of sex workers in India are limited, for while they discuss the failure to use condoms and the problems related to high risk groups' lack of condom use, they writings fail to address how those risky situations occur, and focus on risk of HIV as the only relevant dimension of health in the lives of the sex workers. The following discussion considers the sex workers' overall as well as sexual health and should be read while keeping in mind that there is a line of thought that sex workers are no more at risk of HIV than are any people with an active sex life (Alexander 1996; 1987: quoted in Karnik 2001: 327; Seidel 1993: 176).

When women have a social role that is seen as lacking any value or rights, it is highly difficult for them to exert any power, authority or control over the men they are involved with. Because of this, with the increasing number of HIV infections in Chennai and Tamil Nadu, HIV is a serious health risk that the women in sex work are facing from their clients and their partners. Despite attempts by NGOs and the government to increase awareness about HIV and condom use, the risk of HIV has not decreased in India. Presenting reservations about the quality of data related to the regional differences in facilities to calculate HIV, Steinbrook suggests that the <u>increase</u> of the prevalence is slowing down (Steinbrook 2007: 1089). Two of the women I interviewed told me that they were HIV-positive. According to APAC, in Tamil Nadu, 9.5% of sex workers are HIV-positive, and 56% had at the time of study at least one sexually transmitted disease (STD) (APAC 2005a). The findings from my research suggest that sex all workers are at times unable to use condoms, which puts them at increased risk of infections.

Because of their lack of financial security, the sex workers are sometimes forced to place financial concerns (e.g. their children's well being) over their own long-term well being. In particular, at times, a client will offer to pay more to a woman if she agrees to have sex without a condom. Rao et al. (2003)

showed that, in Calcutta, sex workers faced a 34-21% decline in their earnings if they only have sex with men who use condoms. Most sex workers in Chennai that I interviewed had been in a situation where they were forced to have sex. Rape and gang rape were not uncommon. In these situations, the women were powerless to negotiate condom use. In Western countries, there has been a significant amount of research on the condom use and condom persuasion tactics of sex workers. For example, Cusick (1998) has outlined five contexts/reasons why condoms are not used suggesting that while condom use among sex workers in Glasgow was an absolute norm, there were certain situations they were are not used. These included: when having sex with a regular; when having sex with a client who has become a partner; urgent need to earn money; powerlessness with a violent client; and the slippage or breakage of condoms (Cusick 1998: 137-141). Clients' hesitation about using condoms was negotiated by coaxing them, pleading on behalf of their own and their wives' health, or to protect the sex worker; but also by walking out of the situation, returning the money, and by discussing the sex acts on offer in advance.

The women I interviewed in Chennai reported not using condoms because of the threat of violence. Uma and Payal thought they were going to have sex with two men, but instead were met by eight others in the lodge where they were taken to, and only one of these men used a condom. Condom use was also waived with regular and romantic partners, sometimes because of love and trust, but also because asking for condoms raises questions about the woman's purity rather than the man's, even if they both had partners outside the relationship.

> Vanni: 'In my house if I tell him to come [to have sex with me] but use a condom, he will not come, he'll get suspicious if I've been around.' (Interview transcript p. 5 lines 45-46, 24th May 2005)

Overall, as I have pointed out earlier, given the Tamil gender norms and power dynamics, condom use is not something any women can dictate and for sex workers it is still very much up to the clients whether or not they are used.

Sex workers are also at risk of STD transmission through their husbands and partners. Adultery was common, as many husbands and partners had other wives or lovers, or simply met up with other sex workers. Condoms were not used at home due to issues of trust. Also, normative gender expectations require women to show respect to their husbands, and obey them, not challenge them by, for example, demanding condom use. Demands to use condoms raise suspicions about women's fidelity, but men's infidelity is socially accepted. Similar results have been reported by Go et al. (2003: 296) from Chennai, showing that domestic violence is inflicted by perceived transgressions of gender norms, such as the incompletion of household chores, failing to be submissive to the husband or parents-in-law, refusing sex, or suspected infidelity.

The stigma concerning sex work was also reflected in how the women interviewed were treated in health care institutions. Women reported being looked down upon in hospitals, and government health care was considered particularly dehumanising: the sexual health units were criticised for giving rude, abusive or arrogant treatment. This way, stigma at times prevented women from getting proper medical care for sexual and reproductive concerns. This treatment is not limited to commercial sex workers, however, for Jeffery et al. (2007) and Van Hollen (2003) have reported that poor women in general receive this sort of treatment in government hospitals. This suggests that the problems that the women faced were not solely because they were sex workers.

These women should not be thought of solely as sex workers. On top of diseases that are directly related to sex work, they suffered from the diseases of poverty, such as malaria, fever, diabetes, chest pain, gynaecological problems, abortions, miscarriages, still births, etc. These illnesses frequently prevented

the women from working and increased their anxieties about not being able to maintain an income for their family. Ironically, many women were unable to take care of their bodies and could not afford to buy for example insulin or to go to a private hospital where they could have received appropriate care. Most of them lived in poor housing conditions without adequate access to fresh clean water, proper toilet and showering facilities etc, which increased the likelihood of infections and the spread of diseases. The health of the women I interviewed related to the stigma surrounding sex work and to the powerlessness brought by violence or its threat. I will now turn to explore more directly the violence that the sex workers experienced.

Violence

Many of the women I interviewed, despite their attempts to negotiate the risks related to sex work (elaborated upon later in the chapter), had been in a situation in which they faced violence. Almost all the women told a story in which they had been raped or beaten by a client, *rowdy* (a local hooligan), or a policeman, or in which their valuables had been stolen. In one of our meetings, for example Leena had a bleeding bruise on her head, and she told that, two days before, two clients had attacked her when she and her friend had picked them up on the street. The men attacked them and demanded their jewels and mobile phones, and when Leena refused she was hit on the head with a rod. The women made so much noise that the two men ran off.

In particular, rape was a common experience of violence for the women I interviewed. Twelve of the sex workers told me they had been raped, but because rape tends to be underreported, it is likely that the actual number would be higher. And Uma, Payal, Sasika and Sangita said they had been gang raped. This occurred when they had gone with one client to a lodge, but then found there were other men waiting for them and that they had to have sex with all of them with no extra compensation. Sleightholme and Sinha (2002: 85-89) and Jayasree (2004) also report violence against sex workers from Calcutta and

Kerala, respectively. These violations sometimes took place when women were not soliciting or looking for clients. Street-based sex work was described as being most prone to violence, perhaps because of the public exposure. Jayasree (2004) reports violence against sex workers by *rowdies*, but also by the public when it takes 'justice' into its own hands.

The fact that women are attacked in the streets is related to women's roles and visibility in public. Sex workers are seen in public, which undermines their chastity and makes them appear 'available'. Vanni complained to me that men see them as objects is related to stigma on prostitution and leads at times of violence. Although sex working women did not use a dress code that would have picked them out from other women of their class and caste backgrounds, the violence against women in the streets suggests that they could have been identifiable to some clients and *rowdies*. Attacks also happen in places that are known for soliciting for sex work (e.g. at bus stops and depots). A 'spoiled woman', even though she is not soliciting, is assumed to be available for sex, and this makes such women vulnerable and easy targets. In the eyes of men, this perceived sexually lewd status of sex workers makes the women valueless merchandise, and the men think they can have sex with them even when the women do not want to do so, and there seems to be an underlying assumption that a 'prostitute cannot be raped'. Sleightholme and Sinha (2002: 87) argue that there is a line of thought that sex workers are always sexually available.

Violence was not restricted to these women as sex workers, however. Many of the women living with their husbands or regular partners faced domestic violence and mental and verbal abuse. This was often related to alcohol. Domestic violence has been reported as common in Chennai within slum-dwelling families (Go et al. 2003). Busby (2000) suggests that, in a fishing village in Kerala, domestic violence is relational and not seen as an act committed by men against women, but rather something that the women also cause themselves by behaviour that leads to quarrels between a couple, which the men then react to by drinking, which makes them aggressive. In Chennai,

the suspicion of sex work and having other partners was described to me as being behind the violent outbursts. Consequently, the women I interviewed faced threats of violence from all sides: clients, regular partners, husbands and the police. However, due to a general lack of awareness, the women did not know that the law might potentially protect them.

Law and legal forces

The law that deals with sex work/prostitution in India, the Immoral Traffic in Persons (Prevention) Act (ITPA 1956), is ambiguous to say the least. According to this law, sex work is not illegal; however, the conditions under which sex work can be done are so restricted that practically everyone taking money for sex ends up breaking some aspects of the law. The law includes no distinction between voluntary or forced sex, and it collapses together prostitution and trafficking. Soliciting is punishable, but paying for sex with a 'single' woman privately is legal. Forcing someone into sex is illegal. But as there is no legal difference between voluntary or forced selling of sex, and 'prostitution' is automatically seen as sexually exploitative, then this makes paying for sex illegal. The law is very ambiguous on the issue of trafficking, and all kinds of intermediation are seen as trafficking. A 'pimp' is defined by Indian law as someone who lives off the expenses of a sex worker, enables sex work to take place, or forces a person to work as a sex worker.

Because of a lack of advocacy of sex workers' rights, the women interviewed were highly unaware of the law and its details. But the dubious status of the law was rarely the subject of discussion in interviews, and the women rarely said that they 'did not like doing sex work because of the law and its illegality'. They did, however, comment on the police as one of their main problems: the police arrested and blackmailed them and they had no protection from this. Because they were unable to defend themselves from the police and were ignorant of their rights, they ended up having to pay 'fines' to policemen. The women also reported demands for free sex by the police, as well as custodial

rape. Thus, the women did not see how the law or the police could offer any solutions to their problems; in fact, they felt the situation to be quite the opposite. Although the women did not perceive the stigma, acts of violence, ostracism etc that they faced as human rights violations, the examples provided in this chapter suggest that violations of sex worker's human rights are common and that sex workers are not able to trust anybody but themselves.

Human rights of sex workers

Due to the stigma of sex work, sex workers face ostracism, violence, labelling, lack of rights and many of the human rights violations against sex workers in Chennai that I have reported are related to broader societal inequalities, such as women's subordinate position, the taboo of sexuality, caste discrimination and poverty. Theorising human rights has stirred up controversy among anthropologists and sociologists, who debate whether universal notions of rights can exist at all, while the rise of 'politicised knowledge' has forced social scientists to confront questions about the ethics of objectivity (see e.g. Cowan 2001; Goodale 2006a and b; Hammar 1996; Riles 2006; Speed 2006). Detailed fieldwork such as mine provides data on how human rights are played out in practice producing data that is locally specific and an analysis that is a dialogue between universal human rights and local culture.

Rights to sexuality, healthy working conditions, and freedom from violence, coercion, stigma, (the fear of) HIV, and the condemnation of child prostitution and trafficking, are not specific to sex work, but have particular resonance in this context and have been defined as sex workers' rights. These have been vocalised by Western sex workers and scholars (see e.g. Kempadoo and Doezema 1998) and highly-educated Indian feminists (see e.g. Jayasree 2004; Pardasani 2005), rather than by the Chennai sex workers themselves. Perhaps for this reason, the human rights discourse has not yet trickled down to take effect in this local area. Unlike in some other major cities in India, sex workers in Chennai have not formed themselves into a movement to fight for their

rights on a large scale. Also, NGOs that work with sex workers limit themselves to HIV prevention and health, rather than addressing the social and political aspects of sex work. With this focus and the low general awareness about condom use, their approach ends up stigmatising the sex workers further as the 'vectors' of disease, rather than addressing their human rights.

The Chennai NGOs that had HIV as their focus, did very little in terms of advocacy, education about the law on prostitution, or concerning the human rights of the sex workers. There were two instances of people who worked on the subject: a human rights lawyer-activist Ms Angeline; and an NGO, SIAAP. Ms Angeline had initiated the sex workers' movement called IFPEC (Indira Female Peer Educators Community) with the help of the ICWO, and she educated IFPEC peer educators about their human rights so they could teach other women. This was, however, the exception and not the rule.

Having explored the problems faced by the sex workers, I want also to emphasise the ways in which sex workers negotiated these struggles without denying the harsh conditions in which sex work takes place. Simply describing the problems faced the sex workers would provide a one-dimensional representation of them as victims. In the beginning of my fieldwork, I had trouble seeing beyond the stories of violence and victimisation. Once I started to visit the women in their homes and came to know them better, I discovered that they had developed various ways of dealing with the negativity toward their perceived identity. Although the sex workers are in a very marginal and difficult position that seemingly does not leave them much space for struggle, the women I interviewed had developed means to negotiate the risks around them. They had carved out small spaces of control and resistance within their oppressive life situations and in particular, they had developed strategies to resist the stigma of sex work and the physical, psychological and social risks related to it (for a similar argument from Australia, see e.g. Brewis and Linstead 2000a and b; and in the UK e.g. Sanders 2005 a and b).

Sex work as a strategy

Despite all the troubles described above, the women I met were generally not depressed, poverty-stricken, anxious, or pathetic. In other words, being weighed down by their troubles was not their only response to sex work. They were women with pains and sorrows but also joys and pleasures, similar to many other women I met from similar social and economic backgrounds. Many of the women, as discussed earlier, commented that, before they turned to sex work for income, they worked in the low-paid jobs available for illiterate and/or uneducated women and in which they were sexually harassed. In this context, sex work seemed a more lucrative option to them, despite the risks that I have described. For some women, sex work meant easy money and an opportunity to earn. One woman described sex work as a 'backup option' – she had confidence that, if she needed money to run the family, she could put on her best sari and stand at a bus stop and get the money for this through sex work. Money compensated for the hardships.

Some women resisted the stigma of sex work. They had learned not to care what others thought of them, and they managed to negotiate the negative effects of the sigma on their self-identity.

> *Swasti: 'I went and joined at an export company and while I was working there I thought, anyway I came to sex work through force – let me also continue with it. Morning to evening until 6 I used to work in the export company and go home at 10 and in between I earned some money by doing sex work. The people from the export pimped me and took me out so I thought it was easy for me.' (Interview transcript p.2 lines 22-26, 20th May 2005)*

Swasti went on to describe herself as having an identity as both a whore and a mother/wife. She was quite realistic about her abilities, and said that she does not need to depend on her partner for anything for she could live on her own, making an income just by herself if needed.

Thinking about the life situations of the sex workers with the conceptual backdrop of agency, it becomes evident why the women did sex work in a situation that is oppressive, stigmatising, and not liberatory in a feminist sense. Mahmood's (2005) take on agency allows us to see how these women actively shaped the prevailing conditions for their own purposes. In spite of the problems and challenges the women I interviewed had developed strategies by which they negotiated sex work and were not just passive victims of class and gender. They lived an everyday life that gave them meaning beyond their time doing sex work, a meaning that, in some senses, balanced that work. In this sense, sex work itself comes across as a strategy. It was not simply a trap they had fallen into, but a strategy that they used to improve their own lives and the lives of those around them – sometimes for better, sometimes for worse. These women are agents who negotiate life situations for their own ends, with the means available to them. Some of these strategies have to do with the sex work itself as a reaction to the oppressive conditions in which they must live, and some of them are strategies by which they do sex work in a way that is safest to them and their reputation. Modes negotiating the sex work contact are aimed at managing the encounter on various levels: improving their situation financially; negotiating emotions involved in sex work; and ensuring the safest possible working conditions. I move onto describing and analysing these strategies and discussing how sex work is organised in Chennai.

Pick-up points and making contact

One NGO worker described the prevalence of sex work in Chennai to me like this: *'There is no red light district here, the whole city is a red light area.' (Fieldnotes 2nd Aug 2004)* Indeed, women operated and picked up clients all over the city. While Chennai does not have a concentrated area where the sex workers operate, like Calcutta and Mumbai do, there were some places that were typically used as pickup points. Research from Chennai predating my fieldwork suggests that sex workers fall into neat categories according to the way they contact clients (Asthana and Oostvogels 1996). My findings are quite

contradictory: I observed that women interviewed went wherever work was available, rather than forming rigid categories (e.g. 'brothel-based' or 'street-based'), and women went from streets to brothels and vice versa, if necessary. Also, even if they worked in one particular way for a period, during their whole time as a sex worker they might have used different ways of earning income, rather than working solely in one modus operandi. For example they might start as a sex worker in brothels and later move onto the streets, then finally work from their own house. This shows how uninformative the term 'prostitute' is, signifying a role that is stagnant, and conveying the image of a street hooker, while in reality sex work in Chennai is a versatile practice. In my interviews in 2004-2005, sex workers explained several modus operandi to me, which I now move onto discuss.

Marina beach, a long sandy beach that is a tourist attraction during the day, becomes a hot spot for female sex workers and gay and transgender people at night. Bus stops, particularly bus depots, are also popular places to solicit. Often, sex work was referred to in interviews as 'going to the bus stop'. Going to the bus stop involved dressing up in beautiful clothes, wearing flowers etc, but the attire was not flashy nor was soliciting signified by a typical costume or outfit like the stereotypical Western 'street hooker attire' of high-heeled boots and a mini-skirt. In other words, women did not wear shared markers that would reveal them as sex workers. It is interesting that the favoured dress was the sari, rather than any Western type of dress associated with being modern (and opposite to what is seen as 'traditional' dress, the sari) and, more importantly, with being 'loose' or 'sexy'[22]. The stigma of sex work explains the dress code. The women I interviewed wanted to look attractive but not too obviously 'slutty'. This could give them the chance to 'un-identify' as a sex worker, for example, if they were approached by unwanted clients or a policeman. Remaining anonymous was a way to avoid unwanted attention, and

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[22] For example, in the *India Today* sex survey (2006), young men studied across India thought that dress was associated with sexual openness, whilst having expectations of chastity from young women at the same time: 50% of them thought that women who wear revealing clothes are sexually liberated, while 39% did not. Of the young men, 74% would not marry a woman who admitted having had premarital sex, and 63% expected his wife to be a virgin.

acted as a camouflage for protection. It also reflects the lack of young middle-class sex workers in my sample, who, if they exist, might more commonly wear 'Western' clothes.

I knowingly witnessed sex workers preparing to go to work twice. One example is as follows:

> *I joined Lakshmi, a field worker of one of the NGOs on her round to do condom promotion. She asked around some of the little shops around a slum area in the North of Chennai if they were interested in having condoms for sale in their shops. We met Uma there and soon her friend Payal joined us. We went to Uma's house and bought few meals that we shared. Uma's phone rang continuously and she agreed on a meeting at Parry's corner (a central bus depot). It turned out that the meeting she had agreed on was made through Lakshmi's husband who was their middle man. Uma and Payal started to prepare themselves for the clients. Payal changed into a yellow sari, Uma wore a chuditar (salwar kameez) and a flashing red bra underneath. Uma also applied make up, blush and lipstick. Uma was visibly excited, Payal was calm. I asked if they had condoms and Uma said yes but did not show them. Lakshmi said that the clients will bring them. (Fieldnotes 10th March 2005)*

Like Uma and Payal, working together was a way that many women used to try to avoid violence from the clients. Other women I interviewed went to places where there were many other people, which suggests that there is security in numbers, or met clients through private arrangements.

> *Sasika: 'At Vadapazhani bus stop, I stand outside there. That's where everyone, ladies, gents, everyone stands, they wait there to go shooting. When ever I get it [I go].' (Interview transcript p. 12 lines 35-36, 13th May 2005)*

> *Faria: 'I won't go in the morning...I won't go and stand at bus stops. If someone I know finds me someone, I'll go. Once a week.' (Interview transcript p. 13 lines 12-13, 13th May 2005)*

As these comments suggest, the same women may solicit for both sex work and for film shootings in a bus stop near the film studios, which emphasises the connection between sex work and the film industry.

Also, in order to protect their reputation, these women worked in different areas from their own. This was to protect those close to them, especially the reputation of their children. Also, in one of the areas where the sex workers I interviewed lived, there were criminals who insisted on sex or blackmailed sex workers if the women were not strong enough to resist them. Therefore, the women tried to choose settings which were least threatening. This varied individually; some women worked only during nights, some solicited at bus stops or on Marina beach, some used highways etc. For example:

> *Suwarna: 'I would see clients on the roads mainly, also at bus stops.*
>
> *Salla: How much money would they give?*
>
> *Suwarna: Money? Some would buy me cloth, others shoes. Not more than Rs.100-200rs.' (Interview transcript p.2 lines 41-44, 24th May 2005)*
>
> *Swasti: 'I come out everyday, sometimes I get clients, sometimes I don't. In theatres with 2-3 persons, get Rs.150 or so, sometimes I will get Rs.300-400 and that's enough for me, I will go home. I go to Udhayam theatre in Ashok Nagar. Sometimes I will stand on the bus stop and someone comes with a scooter and asks me. Then I will take them to Pallawaram lodge and they will take Rs.200 and I will get Rs.200 and be back by 6 [pm].' (Interview transcript p.3 lines 1-6, 20th May 2005)*

As suggested here by Swasti, other pickup points were film theatres. Although there are film theatres in Chennai that are specifically known for showing sexually suggestive films, or '*blue films*', sex was not restricted to these.

> *Salla: 'Do you go [do sex work] in the porn theatres?*
>
> *Neela: It could be anything; I will not bother about it. They [clients] won't bother about it. What they care about is that from their body that should come out fast. If not, they will only harass us more. If they are oversexed, then our job becomes easier.' (Interview transcript p.8 lines 36-42, 17th May 2005)*

Because the contacts for sex was took place in public places, and as there were not external markers to visibly show that a woman was a sex worker, I was confused as to how exactly contacts with clients were made and inquired about this:

> *'I went to visit one of the side offices of one of the NGOs that I used to visit. I knew the social workers there and one of the field workers, Zaima, who was a sex worker herself. With Zaima, there were two women sitting around (Old-Miriam and lady I didn't know), killing time. We were all introduced and we started to talk. The lady I did not know told that she had six children of which the first had died to toxaemic pregnancy. She was 16 at the time. Although I had been meaning just to chat with these women about themselves, the conversation turned to sex work again. I was perplexed about how the women find guys or the clients identify them. Zaima said that they stand on the bus stop but do not take the bus. I still didn't understand: A lot of women use busses, including myself, and I had not seen men approaching women at the bus stop in a very suggestive way at all. Zaima explained that the initiative can be made by the man or by the woman, for example by asking the time. I asked if there was a body language or signing that they used. Zaima showed with her fingers a gesture in which she rubbed her thumb against her index and middle fingers as if she were playing with notes. Another example was to place one's hand next to one's ear clenching the three middle fingers and pointing out with the thumb and the pinkie, resembling holding a phone at one's ear. Women started a play to illustrate how it was done. Zaima was standing on a 'bus stop' and the third woman acted as the guy. Zaima made eye contact with him and he looked back at her in a questioning way. She signalled with her head a hardly visible nod suggesting 'let's go' and turned to go while he followed her. I was still confused by this and as to whether a conversation between a strange man and a woman was always a suggestion to have sex. "Yes, normally unknown women and men do not talk to each other", the women explained. "If someone approaches a woman, she can simply slap him." I enquired about this from one of the social workers later on. Stacy, a Christian woman with social work training, told me that some men look at women (and apparently the gaze is never neutral) but you are not allowed to look back because it gives an impression of lewdness, unchastity and immorality. Sex workers cannot slap men because 'being sexy' was exactly what they were (after).' (Fieldnotes 5th Nov 2004)*

What was said to me suggests that contact is made, not so much through speech or vocalised suggestions, but through a subtle body language. I witnessed this a

couple of times when I was travelling alone on public transport. A particularly telling event occurred when I was travelling on a bus alone on my way to my Tamil language class. I was sitting on the women's side (properly dressed in a *chuditar* – a loose-fitting *salwar kameez* similar to those the female staff in the NGOs wore), facing the front of the bus. One the same side in the front of the bus next to the driver, there was a row of seats facing inside of the bus rather than straight ahead. A man in his 30s stared at me constantly. By this point, I had not learned to be assertive enough to challenge these gazes, so I did my best to not to look at him but to stare past him. As the bus shook and jerked on the bumpy road (and took ages), our eyes met a couple of times. At one point, he shook his head with a questioning lifted eyebrow and simultaneously phrased the word *'Poogalaam-aa?'* with his lips, which translates as 'Shall we go?'. Although this does not necessarily show he was trying to buy sex, I conclude that men approach women discreetly, and due to norms restricting interaction between men and women, this contact is made as subtly as possible. At bus stops, in film theatres and on the beach, contact is made with as little contact as possible (that outsiders can see), just enough to form an impression of what is being sought and offered. A side effect of the need for discreetness is that it reduces the women's chances to make a proper evaluation of the state and character of the client, as her decision to pick him up or not has to be done on the spot, without drawing too much attention to herself.

For the same reason – the need for discreetness and the inappropriateness of interaction between unfamiliar men and women in general – mobile phones have become an important part of sex work and linking up with clients. Most of the women I interviewed had a mobile phone and considered it central to their work albeit those women who were the poorest and also charged the least (i.e. Rs.20-30 per intercourse) often did not have mobile phones. Those women who did not have one were saving to buy one or hoping that some client (or me) would buy one for them. Whether women worked alone or via a madam, mobile phones were used to make contact with clients. Independently, women used the phone to keep contact with regular clients and, if they worked via

madams, the madams gave the sex workers' numbers out to the clients, who then set up a meeting themselves.

In addition to mobile phones, *madams* were important for distributing information about sex workers and making contacts with clients as discreetly as possible. The madams linked clients and sex workers without the women having to go out and stand about in the public, which in itself raised suspicions among others. Those women who wanted to work as privately as possible liked to use madams, with the condition that the clients they met were from neighbourhoods other than their own. Female madams seemed to be far more numerous than middle<u>men</u>, and they had wide networks among the women interviewed. These madams were often older sex workers who had moved up in the hierarchy when they became too old to make a living by doing sex work themselves. In one of the semi-slum neighbourhoods in Chennai, located near the film studios, the madams that pimped women for sex work also recruited backup dancers and supporting actors and actresses for the film industry. Middlemen were men who worked often near the film theatres as, for example, juice vendors etc or in lodges where sex took place, and who pointed out sex workers to clients and vice versa. These men did not take part in recruiting new women into the trade like the madams did. ICWO, one of the NGOs that worked with sex workers, had identified what they called 'mobile sex work' after they discovered a group of sex workers who operated as a group with a car/van. The brokers in the resorts outside Chennai called these mobile sex workers when clients asked them about purchasing sex.

In the sex work literature, pimps, or people who help to make sex work contacts, are often associated with coercion. 'Pimp' is defined by Indian law as someone who lives off the earnings of a sex worker, enables sex work to take place, or forces someone to work as a sex worker. Madams in Chennai could be seen as pimps using the second definition, as they helped to make contact between the sex worker and clients. This was not, however, seen as threatening or as force by the women I interviewed. In fact, it was quite the opposite:

madams were the ones who made the contact with clients possible, and some of the women told me that they would not know how to operate alone or in private. Also, the madams did not force the women to engage in sex work or use force against them if they did not earn enough or go to work regularly. However, the women did complain to me that sometimes the madams took a share that the women thought was 'too much'. In terms of 'trafficking' (or bringing sex workers to the trade), the madams did play a role in recruiting new sex workers: the women interviewed commonly said that they entered sex work when they were in a financially dire situation and either they were asking around for work or someone saw them struggling and suggested that they 'do this'. This way, the madams could be seen as taking advantage of another person's financially difficult situation, but ultimately the choice was the women's as to whether they did it or not. What the madams did, however, is illegal under Indian law (ITPA1956). However, the madams that I talked to never commented on any moral qualms about their work and they described themselves as women who had been forced by circumstances to do what they did.

With the clients

If the statistics reported by *India Today* (2006), that 49% of men in Chennai have bought sex are correct, one could assume that there are enough clients for the women to choose from. The women I interviewed decided which clients they took based on their 'gut feeling' of how reliable they might be, as well as their personal beliefs and tastes. Sanders (2005b: chapters 4 and 5) describes this as an 'instinct' that develops through professionalism.

The women interviewed chose certain kinds of clients to try to avoid violence and abuse. Most preferred to pick up what they called 'decent-looking' men who were perceived as non-violent and respectful. There was a misconception about HIV and sexually transmitted infections among some of the women, who believed that decent-looking men are 'in families' and do not have these

infections. In a study of sex workers in the UK, Sanders (2005b) states that these sex workers scrutinised very carefully which clients they allowed into the saunas they worked in. The stereotypically 'decent client' was an upper-class man, clean, smartly dressed and always white, all associated behaving well and with non-violence (Sanders 2005b: 51-71).

When I interviewed her, Sasika described an encounter with a client and implied agency in this contact:

> *'If I tell you the truth, they come up nicely to us, all scared and shy and ask us to go with them. Whether we go or not is our decision, therefore he is all loving towards us. He'll feed us and only because he begs, we go. The husband is not like that, he'll act all boisterously heedless whether the kids are there or not. He's lived many years with me, he should know better and be more understanding. The kids have been brought up by him, and I'm like I am because of him. Just because he pays the rent he seems to think that it's his right to have me.' (Interview transcript p.8 lines 15-21, 13th May 2005)*

Violence was not the only consideration the women had and also chose clients based on their perceived sexual laboriousness. Some women wanted young men and boys because they were seen as eager and did not take much time to come. Some wanted only old men because they were seen as usually happy with just hugging and kissing. Some did not take guys who were drunk or on drugs because they were considered more aggressive, had difficulties getting an erection, or took a long time to ejaculate. On the other hand, some took clients who were under the influence of drink or drugs because they were thought to be easy to deceive, and the women could slip a condom on them without them realising it, or give them sex between the thighs. However, for all of them choosing certain types of clients was an important way of maintaining a sense of control and protecting themselves.

After the contact for sex is made, sex takes place in various places and ways: in lodges or cheap hotels, by giving hand jobs in film theatres, in the clients'

homes, in the 'brothels', or (if they were at the outskirts of Chennai) in the nearby fields or bushes during the night.

> *Swasti: 'Some people are calling into the bushes and the forests but I'm not accepting. I will not go the bushes and all, I will only go to the theatre and lodge. Like Leena got hit in the head when she went to the bushes, what if that happens to me, who will know?' (Interview transcript p.5 lines 6-9, 20th May 2005)*

Those brothels that I heard people talk about and that I visited were not huge complexes where sex would take place in several rooms to which the girls would be labour-bonded, as in the public imagination. Instead, these were small slum huts that the owners, who were often older sex workers and madams themselves, allowed the sex workers to use for a small fee. The two lodges I visited were dirty guest houses that were furnished to the bare minimum; the rooms had beds in them and not much more, but nothing really indicated that they were regularly used for sex work although it was obvious that the lodge workers I chatted with knew exactly what was going on.

Generally, there was a presumption that the sex that was provided was vaginal penetrative intercourse. The range of prices varied greatly from Rs.20 to Rs.1000, depending on the sex worker. The young and light-skinned women were able to get Rs.1000, whereas the poorest and most uneducated women only charged the lowest fee. The median was Rs.100-250, and anything over Rs.500 very rare. However, while vaginal intercourse was the norm, some women, like Sevati for example, preferred hand jobs, for which she charged about Rs.100. For a few women, the price of sex was dependent on what was provided. For example, Neela worked in film theatres and also outside them. A hand job in a film theatre was Rs.50-100, but intercourse in a friends' hut was Rs.300-500. She said that she picks up two to three clients in the film theatres or at the beach everyday, and does sex there as *'discreetly as possible' (Interview transcript p.7 line 10, 17th May 2005)*. All the women interviewed complained about clients who did not give the amount of money that had been agreed on originally. Although it was never explicitly stated, this implies that

most of the time the money was exchanged after the sex, rather than before. Only one woman mentioned this, saying that she advises other women to do the money exchange before and not afterwards, suggesting that this is not routine practice. The fact that some of the clients are picked up in public places while avoiding unnecessary attention also supports this, because exchanging money publicly could make it obvious to others what is going on.

Protecting from STDs and pregnancies

The women I interviewed all made attempts to protect themselves physically and psychologically from the potential violence and abuse in the sex work encounter. As sex workers are commonly scrutinised with regard to health, it is worth noting that they also tried to protect themselves from unwanted infections and pregnancies. One of the behaviour changes that the NGOs try to create is for sex workers of to use condoms, and they attempt to teach them how to convince their clients to use them. Women were encouraged to talk to the clients gently but firmly, and to appeal to them with the risk of pregnancy and consideration of their wives' health. The sex workers themselves were convinced to use condoms by emphasising the risk of becoming pregnant or ill with an STD, the potential loss of income while ill with an STD, and the cost of abortion. From the women's self-reported accounts to me, it is difficult to estimate the success of this.

A lot of what was said to me by the women about condoms was fuelled by the NGO rhetoric, and they eagerly tried to convince me that they always used condoms. In the meantime, while telling me about rape or forced sex, they also said that condoms were not used. It would be fair to say that women used condoms whenever they were able to do so. Condom use in itself does not guarantee protection, however. Uma, for example, talked to me about anal sex and disclosed that men use coconut oil as a lubricant to enable penetration of the anus. This is alarming in that oil corrodes condoms and thus allows HIV to transmit. Coconut oil is commonly used, for example, for hair and skin, and is

available everywhere. Thus, it is likely that coconut oil is a common lubricant in all types of sex. Although I witnessed several events where condoms were advocated by the NGOs, lubricants in general were never mentioned – not to mention the need to use a water-based lubricant and not an oil-based one. Uma continued telling me that men also change between anal and vaginal penetration without washing in between, which is another welcome call for infections.

After women have had about two children, female sterilisation is the normative mode of birth control in Tamil Nadu. As most of the sex workers were married and had children, they had also gone through sterilisation, or *'family planning'* or *'the operation',* as it was more commonly known. This way, pregnancy was not a concern to most of the women interviewed. Minor or unmarried women, however, reported abortions. For example, Vanita had an abortion when she was 15, and Pramila had one during my fieldwork. Only a couple of married women reported having had abortions, and usually they were encouraged during this to go through with sterilisation. As noted earlier Mercy was pregnant by a client during my fieldwork. She was disillusioned about this because, as she explained, she defined herself as a lesbian AND the baby had started from a non-loving relationship AND she wished to have no more children. When I saw her the next time, she said that she had had a stillbirth. Perhaps if fewer women were sterilised, condoms would be taken more seriously. If birth-control does not need to be thought of, there is one reason less to think about protection. The abortions of those women who had not undergone sterilisation, including the married women and Mercy's pregnancy, show that condoms are not used consistently.

These family planning operations brought out interesting dynamics in the relationships of the sex workers, showing the messiness of the sex work category and challenging the HIV discourse. At least two women (Ponni and Ishika) asked if I knew a way to reverse their family planning operation because they wanted to have children (and thus establish their relationships)

with the partners they had acquired through sex work. Ponni wanted to leave her husband and live with her partner and have a child for him. As this shows, the concerns of the women were, at times, very different from those that the NGOs promoted.

Maintaining control over clients to ensure physical safety, and 'pure sex'

Clients were often called as *'party'* or *'panthi'*. The latter is interesting, in that *panthi* is the generic word for a 'man/partner/lover' in the *aravani* (Tamil name for *hijras*) language, which could suggest some networks of communication between the female sex workers and the *aravanis*. The women I interviewed described their clients, without exception, as men from 'all backgrounds'. This meant that the men were from all castes, social classes and occupational backgrounds and of all ages and marital statuses. When I asked why they thought men came to see sex workers, the women interviewed gave various answers. They said that the men were not getting what they wanted from their wives, for example, oral, anal or group sex that were explained to me as impure modes of sex that wives will not do. They also said that men go to sex workers when their wives are away in their native places, after delivery or when they are otherwise unavailable or disinterested in sex. These women's own complaints about their husbands' requests for sex while living in small cramped rooms with children could provide another explanation for why men visited sex workers. Moreover, Sevati was of the opinion that clients wanted oral sex rather than vaginal because they were afraid of HIV. The women also said that they had young clients who were unmarried and wanted to explore sex. They also said that, when men get drunk, they tend to want sex, and if they do not get it from their wives they come to them. They did not explicitly say that men are more sexual or in more need of sexual fulfilment 'by nature'.

When I asked the women about sex in the interviews with them, sex was always mentioned in a roundabout way, and it was never discussed directly in casual interactions. Sex was rarely explicitly spoken of, but was instead

referred to as 'adjusting', 'going' (to do sex) or 'doing', and the meaning of this was understood from the (lowered, abashed) tone of voice or from the body language. All sex was discussed using English words[23]. Because of the participants' hesitance to be explicit about sex, I probed to understand the sexual encounter with their clients. In the context of why clients come to sex workers, all the women said that there are things that wives cannot/will not do because of impurity. The culturally perceived impurity of anything other than vaginal sex is interesting, and some of the sex workers also refused to do these things. They described to me their restrictions in terms of what kind of sex they provided and they each had preferences regarding the kind of sex they would offer, but this was usually negotiated at the venue where sex work took place.

Some women refused practices that they thought were impure, for instance having oral sex or taking their clothes off. Mostly, they said that they refused to do anything more than 'the normal', which meant vaginal penetration with the men on the top. When asked if they did 'other' things, this was often frowned upon or treated with disgust. Some of them said that they would let the clients touch their breast or genitals if the men paid for it, but that they refused to do anything more themselves. They might also refuse to remove any other clothes than their *sari*, leaving their petticoats and blouses on. Having to remove clothes was, for many of them, a frightening experience and was considered very demeaning. Some women, however, said that because they needed the money, they could not set any limitations on the clients and that they did anything the men asked for – for example, taking their clothes off, giving oral sex ('mouthing'), or anal sex ('back'). They said they were unable to state any demands – the clients were paying and they had to adjust to anything the men wanted, even if they did not like it or it was painful for them. Some women said that they put up an act to pretend that they liked the clients, and that they talked

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[23] Based on the language used by sex workers in Calcutta, Dell (2005) argues that certain sexual acts are associated with impurity due to the nationalist dichotomy of women's purity – 'sexual' being the polar opposite of 'pure'. Following the logic of trying to construct a positive identity against Colonisers, Dell argues that, in this discourse, Indians were constructed as spiritual and pure, whereas all that was considered impure was associated with the Colonisers and was coined in the English language.

to them nicely, rubbed their backs or touched their faces lovingly in hopes that they would be more generous and less violent towards them; however other women said that they did not make any contact with the clients and would only lie down: *'I was just a log lying there' (Interview transcript p.4 line 14, 2nd June 2005)* Mercy said to me.

Adjusting to the clients' wishes and whims was a practical way of managing the sex act in order to avoid any conflict that could lead to violence. It was also a way to manage finances; some women said that if they would not agree to do something (meaning some form of 'inappropriate' sex), they would not get paid. A lengthy quote from Ishwari and Kaveri, two sisters, illustrates this (and also makes references to women's chastity and Tamil culture):

> *Salla: 'Customers will ask all sorts of questions to adjust with them, how do you feel about that?*
>
> *Ishwari: I'll adjust and go she doesn't adjust. They'll say [mumbled, plus action?] and she'll say I can't and come away, but I'll do it. And you know [whispers] oral sex? That I'll do, she won't. Not to everyone but with regular customers.*
>
> *Salla: Why do you refuse that?*
>
> *Kaveri: I don't like it. [Her sister laughs in the background] Eh, yuk, disgusting. I won't even do it with the hands.*
>
> *Salla: 'Would the men ask you to do other positions than you lying on your back?'*
>
> *Kaveri: I'll only do it lying down.*
>
> *Ishwari: [Whispers] Oral.*
>
> *Salla: Would you keep all your clothes on whilst doing this?*
>
> *Ishwari: I'll take off everything.*
>
> *Kaveri: I take off my sari. So I have on my blouse and in-skirt.*
>
> *Ishwari: I do it "foreign style" so I'll do everything [both laugh].*
>
> *Salla: You don't feel shy doing it the "foreign style"?*

Ishwari: [Whispers] I won't get money if I think about being shy. They tell me to take off my clothes.

Salla: Do you watch blue films beforehand?

Kaveri: I haven't seen.

Ishwari: I've seen one or two. In the house on a c.d. you can see them, you know, with the actress's and actors from films...

Kaveri: Is that on the TV?

Ishwari: No! They'll show you personally! If it is put on, Tamil Nadu will stink/reek [laughing].

Salla: Then afterwards how do you feel, in the sense after you met the customer, how would you feel?

Kaveri: The stomach hurts. And legs. Then I've some money for the kids, or to pay off a debt, or to buy some household things. If suddenly the body is unwell then I'm happy to have the Rs.200 or whatever. We only do it for our kids' sake. If it wasn't for them we'd go somewhere and get our food and get a job. If our husband was ok then why would we be doing this?' (Interview transcript p.9 lines 2-25, p.10 lines 13-32, 17th June 2005)

The women's ability to control the sexual act was related to their ability to negotiate the encounter – certain practices were preferred over others that were considered dehumanising. Perhaps due to a lack of a professional discourse of sex work as a set of skills to be learned, women's varying levels of ability to negotiate the sex work encounter, and the amount of fear involved, meant that some women felt they had to 'adjust' to the men's requests even if they did not want to. Also, the women saw that men came to sex workers for those exact reasons, to get 'impure sex', so that these actions were an essential part of the sex work repertoire and thus not to be denied. Ponni provides an example:

Salla: 'When you usually go with the client, what do they usually want?

Ponni: Most of them usually do normal sex, only sometimes I will be on top, but some of them ask for oral sex and I have till now never

done oral sex. They never compelled because I used to sell very well and they are decent people.

Salla: Did people ever ask sex in the back (anal sex)?

Ponni: Someone asked but I didn't agree.

Salla: Do you do anything like this with your husband?

Ponni: No.' (Interview transcript p.6 lines 14-21, 30th May 2005)

Ponni suggests here that there is an understanding of sexual practices that are considered 'normal' compared to others that are not; she reflects a common view that certain types of sex are appropriate while others are not. The division between pure and impure sex that associates pure sex with vaginal penetration suggests a tacit connection between reproduction and women's role in sex. Sex that is not potentially reproductive is impure. The women's attempts to deny clients impure sex could be related to the Tamil nationalist ideas of purity of women so that making such claims could be seen as asserting that they were still good women even if they did sex work, because at least the sex they did was 'pure'. Using English terms could also be seen as the women distancing themselves from the act itself – it compartmentalises the 'sex' and the 'self', as the sex workers did in the research carried out by McKeganey and Barnard (1996) and in Brewis and Linstead (2000a), so that they can maintain that they are still good <u>Tamil</u> women, even if they engage in what was perceived as impure and inappropriate behaviour.

The women's interactions and relationships with their clients were not restricted to them negotiating how to have sex and preventing disease. The relationships with clients were also always affected by emotional risks and I will now explore how the women interviewed managed these emotions.

Psychological strategies of doing sex work

An important way of managing sex work emotionally and physically was through drinking. The women interviewed said they would drink at different

points: before soliciting to manage the stress of having to go to work, when with the client to reduce the pain from the intercourse, and afterwards to reduce the emotions of shame, guilt and stress related to it.

> *Vasumathi: 'Whenever I go to clients I take drinks... See, I can't be very stubborn and show on my face that I don't like it. So I take drink to be a little more relaxed. I will not remember what happened.' (Interview transcript p.4 lines 22-25, 9th June 2005)*

At times, the sex workers met together to drink and talk about their experiences. When they did so, they would tell each other about the clients, sex, violence, give and get advice, air emotions and have a laugh.

> *Maya: 'Last week I was unhappy so I went to my friend's place and got some drinks and then smoked. After that I felt that I had drunk enough and the next day I started with my regular jobs again.' (Interview transcript p.12 lines 32-35, 11th May 2005)*

There are side effects to the drinking, though. Being drunk during sex makes the women vulnerable to theft and abuse. They lose control of their own body, fail to look for signs of sexually transmitted diseases, and cannot insist on condom use. They also end up spending their small income on the expensive alcohol. Most women did not see drinking as a problem, though – it was seen as an important way to loosen up. Women with children who were old enough to understand that drinking was not appropriate for women told me they tried to drink in such a way that it did not affect their children. This reflected the fact that, normatively, drinking is not allowed for women and it was extremely rare to see women drinking or drunk.

In this section, I have described individual strategies that the women interviewed use to negotiate risks from sex work. It has been clear that the women also supported each other, and that there were collective efforts by the women to negotiate sex work. I turn to discuss these collective efforts next.

Networks, organising and NGOs

The women interviewed stated that their main sources of support were each other and there was an informal network between them. Many women solicited together, particularly on the streets, and they met up together to talk about their concerns, to share worries and to discuss clients. They were each other's confidantes and helpers. The women in these networks helped each other through rough times by lending money, sharing clients, keeping each other company and sharing information:

> *Salla: 'Do you have any friends among the sex workers?*
>
> *Swasti: Neela. We usually go together. If she gets it, she goes, if the other gets it she goes, we never fight about it.' (Interview transcript p.6 lines 22-24, 20th May 2005)*

> *Salla: 'In general do you talk about customers between you and your friends?'*
>
> *Uma: Yes, we talk about all that.*
>
> *Salla: So what sort of things do you say?*
>
> *Uma: We talk about how they acted, how much they drank. And we'll drink too. It's not like they harass us/give us trouble [without a reason], it depends on how we behave as well. If we say we can't do that and kick up a fuss, then he'll do it roughly. If we are all nice then he won't get angry. We [talking with friends] will say "oh he's a terrible man he makes it very difficult" we might say. We talk well about the nice ones and badly about the bad ones.*
>
> *Salla: Do you talk only to Payal or...?*
>
> *Uma: No, to other friends as well but Payal and me are very close. We have known each other a long time. All her hardships she'll tell me and all mine, I'll tell her. If she's having a hard day I'll go and keep her company. We go together visiting clients at the same time.' (Interview transcript p.5 line 26-p.6 line 6, 11th June 2008)*

Sasika: 'I teach everyone: don't drink. Drink, say, beer. That helps to keep your body strong. But don't go overboard. Make him drink and sit back without drinking more. And likewise use a condom and always take the money first.' (Interview transcript p.9 lines 40-42, 13th May 2005)

Women in these networks were at times competitive about clients, for those who were pale skinned, young and voluptuous were the most successful in attracting clients. The women rarely criticised each other, at least to me, but sometimes they moralised about others if they had done sex work as minors. The networks were also at times quarrelsome, for instance, Neela ended up in a fight with Leena once at a bus stop, and she spread rumours about Leena's head injury, saying that Leena was beaten up by her husband, rather than a client. According to Sevati, a third person, Neela spread these rumours because she was jealous of not having a husband herself. The fact that the women talked about each other in interviews (when sometimes I did not know they knew each other) suggests that the network that I had access to was quite tight: if a rumour started in it, it would have reached the other side of town the next day.

Sex working women's networks in Chennai have been harnessed by NGOs for HIV prevention and for recruiting new women into the NGOs. These NGOs have then become a more reliable source of support for the women concerned, particularly because they offer a chance to get money from a source that does not mean doing sex work and that is relatively stable and reliable. Many sex workers had become part of the NGOs doing HIV awareness, and they gain positive self-esteem from trying to help others. These peer educators worked for a small honorarium in one or several NGOs using their contacts with other sex workers to distribute the message of using condoms and teach about sexually transmitted diseases, as well as about the NGOs and the incentives available from them. But NGOs do not only provide the sex workers with an income – there is also a chance for social mobilisation, as noted in the earlier discussion of peer education.

In red light areas in Calcutta and Mumbai, sex workers have joined together in political movements and pressure groups, but this has not yet happened in Chennai. In Chennai, the typical response from the women I interviewed was that they did not want to be organised in public because they did not want to risk the reputation of their children, but this does not sufficiently explain the difference between Chennai and the other cities. At any rate, the lack of political organisation means that sex workers' rights are not on the political agenda and that violations of their human rights continue. And yet, from other areas in India and according to scholars and activists working with sex workers, organisation is the only way to gain human rights and to effectively demand condom use. Both Sleightholme and Sinha (2002: 85) and Jayasree (2004: 62, 64) argue that organisation provides protection from violence and coherence of condom use, in that men cannot find sex workers who will give them penetrative sex without this.

Why has women's organisation not been successful in Chennai when it has worked elsewhere in India? The answer as cannot simply be reduced to cultural differences between south and north India, particularly when southern women have been suggested to be more autonomous than their northern counterparts (Dyson and Moore 1983; Sundari Ravindan 1999).

It is possible to compare projects that have aimed at empowering sex workers in other locales. For example, results from Cambodia, where empowerment projects were implemented in red light districts, but also in rural and urban settings where there was not a specific sex work zone, concluded that women in red light districts were keener on organising (Boontinand 2005). This supports the case from India, in that the cities in which the organisation of sex workers has been most successful have been those that contain red light districts. This implies that the shared space of a red light district allows the sex workers to get

together and form coherent 'policies' regarding condoms. This is not the case in Chennai, and there, women's organisation has been minimal.[24]

From the problems and modes of negotiating sex work, I will now turn to consider what these findings suggest about the theoretical debate of whether selling sex is oppression or profession. I will look at the ways in which the sex workers entered sex work, what their experience of sex work has been, and what they get out of it. I will address this question considering the context of Chennai.

Profession or oppression?

The feelings about doing sex work among the women I interviewed varied significantly. Regarding their health, the women's experiences and thoughts about sex work ranged from being concerned about STDs and HIV/AIDS to fear of violence. When there was no coercion involved in their entry into sex work, the choice to start using sex for money involved some chance for them to consider the idea (and often the women said they forthrightly rejected it due to moral reasons but then eventually gave into the idea). Their first contacts with sex work were often marked with shock and fright. However, after this point, the plethora of their experiences comes in. After starting to work more regularly (although this might have just been once or twice a month), women had very varying experiences and feelings about their sex work. This ranged from shame and fear to autonomy and enjoying some aspects of it. Recognising that sex work can be enjoyable is relatively radical in relation to the theorising of sex work/prostitution. The enjoyable aspects that were described to me were: access to sex, boyfriends, getting love, finding a lover who looked after and

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[24] Cornish has argued that areas that have a tradition of trade unions can facilitate the organisation of sex workers (2006: 302). This would suggest that, because Bengal has a history of trade unions, the idea that sex workers as workers should form unions is not as odd an idea as compared to areas where that tradition does not exist. In Chennai, the dominant form of organisation has been related to Tamil nationalism, which valorises purity of women (for party politics, see e.g. Gorringe 2005; women's organisations see e.g. Caplan 1985) and thus, as a template, is in contradiction with the organisation of the sex workers.

gave pleasure to them and the ubiquitous financial benefit that was mentioned to compensate the effort. Although many women said things that reinforced Tamil ideals of pure womanhood, for some, sex work was also a kind of oppressed freedom whereby they challenged the traditional feminine role and broke free from duties that they did not want, such as being a wife, in a relationship, oppressed, submissive, and so on.

These diverse experiences of and feelings about sex work challenge some theoretical ideas about sex work and prostitution. First, there was no one kind of reactions to sex work that would support sex work as either profession or oppression as a binary for these women's responses do not reflect either end but facets of both. Second, the different ways of entering sex work do not necessarily determine how an individual reacted to it. The divide between coming into sex work voluntarily and being forced into it did not map onto 'disempowerment' or distress – those that were trafficked were not necessarily the most disempowered. For example, Swasti, who was trafficked and had been kept in a brothel by force, then continued doing sex work and was very independent and determined. Neela, who started off from begging on the streets, was disillusioned that her attempts to have a normal family had failed but she was very pleased about having brought up two daughters on her own and providing them with a high level of education in a private English school. Ishwari had entered sex work by choice, but hated it, while at the same time she liked the fact that she had sex with her clients, which she was unable to do with her husband. Kuntala, who had entered sex work by her own choice, dreaded doing sex work. All in all, these choices were made by the women but under limited options.

Consequently, to use this dichotomy between oppression and profession does not provide sufficient understanding of the diverse experiences that the women I interviewed have. Trying to see prostitution/sex work as one or the other (profession or oppression) helps to understand the conceptual underpinning, but it does not help in understanding the different experiences people have once

they are in sex work. Investigating women's agency in sex work from a broadly Foucauldian notion of agency enables an analysis in which sex workers in Chennai can be seen as actors who, in an oppressive context, negotiate their life with the strategic means available to them. From the wide range of experiences of the women in sex work in interviewed in Chennai, I conclude that, while there are limited options and also elements of coercion involved, these sex workers are not simply victims whose lives are determined by their harsh conditions, as they shaped their own lives with the means at their disposal.

So far, I have discussed sex work as a negotiation of violence and stigma with various coping mechanisms and within small relatively autonomous spaces. The women I interviewed monitored their relationship with their clients with regard to intimacy and violence. Sex work was a way to economically improve their lives, but also provided them with access to relationships. Indeed, sex work itself is a relationship. In this reflection on sex work as oppression or profession, relationships and experiencing intimacy and sexual pleasure occur as ways of negotiating and improving the women's lives which need to be taken into account. I will move on to analysing these relationships next.

CHAPTER 9 Sexuality and sexual behaviour of the sex workers

Clients and sex are, by definition, intrinsic parts of the sex work encounter. In the previous chapter, I showed how women used their relationships with men strategically as ways to negotiate their poverty and their gendered disadvantage relating to employment opportunities and education. The women do not simply calculate and manoeuvre these relationships in their own interests but the picture is complicated by issues of pleasure, love and desire. These, however, are rarely talked about. Sexuality is a taboo all over India, and sex workers were rarely willing to break that taboo with me. I begin this chapter with a lengthy extract from one of my interviews. It suggests neatly the various levels that sexuality operates on, the experiences of sex workers, and what kind of problems there were in researching these.

> *Salla: 'Did you feel that there was a difference between having sex with your partner and your clients?*
>
> *Vasumathi: Whenever I go to a client, I take drinks. With my partner, I don't drink. See, I can't be very stubborn, I can't actually show in my face that I don't like it. So I take drink to be a little more relaxed. I will not remember what happened.*
>
> *Salla: Do you play any kinds of tricks to amuse the clients, like being more attractive, or making some sounds to arouse the clients?*
>
> *Vasumathi: No.*
>
> *Salla: What do you think while you are having sex with them? Or would you not think anything because of the alcohol? How would you manage the act?*
>
> *Vasumathi: I will always think hoping it will be over soon. It needs to be soon over. I would also think of my son. I'm doing it especially for my son. But I'm not doing it only because of my son, I'm doing it also because of that man. I always used to think, "how will I get out of this situation?" That sort of thing will be running in my head.*
>
> *Salla: What about with your partner?*

Vasumathi: While he was OK with me, I didn't have a problem but once he made me do this sex work and he was a broker I didn't have any thought about it. Actually, whenever we did it, he would force me. We were fighting about this. The assistant director [a friend who later became her partner] *was there and I was doing so much sex with other men but I didn't have an affair with him. My partner was suspecting me and always saying bad things about him so I felt really angry and bitter. This is one person who has not done anything and why all this? That man actually got me into sex work. So he used to force me into sex sometimes and always after a fight.*

Salla: What about in the beginning or with your first husband?

Vasumathi: I used to be happy. I used to have climax.

Salla: Could you initiate sex or is that something only men can do?

Vasumathi: I will not, only he would.

Salla: Would you... When he initiates and you get into the mood, could you then tell him what you want or you adjust with what he wants?

Vasumathi: Whatever he does, I am satisfied.

Salla: What if he become satisfied before you do, how would you feel about it?

Vasumathi: I used to take it as ordinary, there was no other way.

Salla: Would he ever try to make you climax?

Vasumathi: I didn't know much about sex then, so whatever he did, I accepted.

Salla: What about now? Suppose you have a relationship, like with that director, could you tell him what you want?

Vasumathi: I don't have to tell, he'll do everything that is necessary. I actually don't feel like telling it out.

Salla: Would he worry about whether you like or not?

Vasumathi: He wants to make me happy.

Salla: So does he make an effort to make you happy?

Vasumathi: He will look after me.

Salla: Now, can women be outspoken about issues related to sexuality in a relationship?

Vasumathi: Because even though women have needs within themselves, they will not ask outside because once if they ask the partner either the partner will feel happy, she is asking me, or the other reaction will be that immediately he will be suspicious. For example, if they are in a family, they will think: 'I'm going away for 15 days, during this time is this lady going to have a relationship?' This is my opinion why they [women] *might not ask outside.*

Salla: Why so much lack of trust between men and women? Why all the suspicion?

Vasumathi: The men... Because men are actually doing all these things, they are having sex outside and having relationships. Immediately they will think that women are also doing it. It's not the lack of trust between them but men have a guilty conscience. They think women are like that as well. Some women are like that that, they are very faithful to their partners but some women will go out also. But mostly the women are not like that, it is the men who go out a lot.

Salla: Do you think women are expected to be more faithful and a good wife but men are not expected to be faithful and a good husband?

Vasumathi: The Indian culture is like that.' (Interview transcript p.4 line 22- p.6 line 17, 9th June 2005)

This extract from my interview with Vasumathi is tellingly poignant about the issues that surround sexuality in many ways. First of all, Vasumathi describes her feelings about having sex with her clients and partners. She tells me how she copes with her emotions during sex with clients, by thinking of her son and numbing herself with alcohol. She moves on to describing how she experienced having sex with her husband, but how these feelings changed after he coerced her into sex work. But when I ask about her experiences with her own sexuality before things went wrong with her husband, her answers become very short and the interview begins to resemble an interrogation. She is uncomfortable about elaborating on her sex life, although she spoke more openly about her sexuality than most of the women that I interviewed. Once the conversation is brought back to a more general level of 'women's sexuality', she starts to elaborate on

her answers again. She ties questions of sexuality to wider questions of relationships between men and women and the norms that control women's behaviour, but not men's, suggesting that that is typical of Indian culture. In the meantime, she provides examples of sexuality, sexual behaviour and relationships between men and women that break these norms, in that as a woman she was not restricting sex to marriage. In the rest of this chapter, I analyse these issues further.

I start by discussing the taboo around public discussions of sexuality in India, and then move on to discourses concerning women's sexuality. I argue that, among the discourses that shape women's sexuality, there is no real acknowledge of women's sexual pleasure. However, the sexual behaviour of the women I talked to is far from the dominant ideal: these women are neither asexual nor passive in their sexuality. They are negotiating their relationships with clients depending on their financial, emotional and sexual needs, and depending on the kinds of relationships they are in with other men. In this way, it is impossible to confirm the state that sex work is always oppressive: these women experience and negotiate the sex work act in very different ways. I conclude with a discussion of what I call 'demotic sexuality', a popular discourse of sexual behaviour that challenges the dominant notions of monogamous marital sex.

Taboos against public discussion of sex in India

Sex and sexuality in Indian communities have rarely been discussed in the academic literature on marriage and gender in India. Marriage is almost universally described as an absolute norm, and discussions of premarital or extra-marital sex are rare. What discussion there is has been restricted to heterosexual relationships, reproduction and gender roles (see e.g. Jeffery et al. 1989; Trawick 1990), while sexual behaviour, sexual identity and eroticism

have been largely ignored.[25] Sexuality and the sexual orientation of men and *hijras* have been recently given more attention (see e.g. Asthana and Oostvogels 2001; Cohen 2005; Reddy 2004; Srivastava 2004; Kulkarni et al. 2004; Verma and Lhungdim 2004). Gayatri Reddy (2005a; 2005b) has also published an excellent ethnographic account of *hijras* and 'MSMs', men who have sex with men, in Hyderabad. Female sexuality, however, has not been elaborated on to any significant extent. The most detailed autobiographical female account that has discussed sexuality and sexual pleasure has been provided by Viramma, a *dalit* woman from rural Tamil Nadu (Viramma et al. 1997).

At the beginning of my fieldwork, I had a naïve preconceived idea that sexuality in India was largely restricted to monogamous marriage. However, I did expect that this discourse was not without ruptures. I had read everything that was available about sex workers in India, which just by existing does not fit neatly with normative ideas of monogamous marriage. But, because all of this literature on sex work was related to HIV prevention, I was unable to grasp the social construction of sex work and sex workers in a wider sexual and gendered context. I see this gap in the academic literature as partly due to the general Indian taboos on discussing sexuality openly, and indeed I found myself that it was a difficult subject to approach. Nonetheless, I expected that if anyone would be able to talk about it, it would be people who are involved in sex as 'a profession'. How, then, do the sex workers I met see sexuality? How do they manage their sexuality while having sex outside the normative practice of monogamy and women's chastity? What kind of an impact does the sex have on these sex workers' sense of their own sexuality?

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[25] For exceptions, see e.g. Paul Hershman (1974). Also Jeffery and Jeffery (1996) show that women's songs, sung either after childbirth or at weddings, hint at women's active sexuality in ways that are not admissible in everyday public discussions. John and Nair (1998) edited a book *'A question of Silence: sexual economies of modern India'* but articles in this are either historical analyses or analyse media/literature representations and not based on fieldwork.

I found it reasonably easy to elicit some details about sex work, such as how sex was conducted with paid partners, and the sex workers provided these answers without emotion. With those of them who were most willing to talk about sex, I tried to approach the question of their own sexuality. Talking about gender norms and norms that restrict women's sexuality was rather unproblematic, and some women were able to dissect the differing norms surrounding women and men on the issue of sexuality. However, when the questioning came to the woman's own personal experiences, the taboos concerning sexuality became more apparent and, in particular, the issue of female pleasure was hard to touch upon. My questions were answered with embarrassed giggles, astonishment and, often, silence. How could I understand this silence around women's sexuality? I will start off this analysis by looking at discourses that surround women's sexuality and how these women talked about them, in order to place their experiences in a broader gendered context.

Discourses around women's sexuality

Sexuality is a complex and complicated subject of analysis because it collapses various concepts together, such as pleasure, fantasy, sexual behaviour, sexual orientation etc. Before outlining some challenges in research on sexuality, a brief discussion of researching sexuality in general is appropriate. The concept of sexuality itself emerged from early 1800 onwards, at the onset of the medicalisation of human behaviour (see Foucault 1998 [1976]; also Adams and Pigg 2005). Gagnon and Parker (1995: 7-8) outline a history of sex research and sexology from Foucault through Freud to (for example) Kinsey and Masters and Johnson and outline six commonalities or presumptions that have characterised Euro-American cultural baggage in research on sex and sexuality.

1) Sex has been considered as a natural force existing in all societies that is in opposition to civilisation, and/or inherently negative.

2) Sex is a natural drive found in all individuals, sexual behaviour is present in all societies and cultures and sexual behaviour is a response to individual sexual drive, not shape it.

3) Fundamental differences exist between men and women, leading to masculinity and femininity as natural.

4) Men's sexuality and heterosexual practice is normative.

5) Knowledge is better than ignorance and research leads to human betterment.

6) Belief in science is positive and scientific knowledge of sex and sexuality as a universal is desirable and possible.

These presumptions suggest that sexuality has been considered as constant and fixed across cultures. However, since the 1960s, there has been a shift in research towards understanding the concept of sexuality as socially constructed. According to Gagnon and Parker, this has meant deconstructing gender and sexual orientations, viewing 'categories' such as homosexual, heterosexual etc as socially constructed, and acknowledging that there is an ambiguity in the relationships of behaviour and identity (Gagnon and Parker 1995: 9-11). In the following section, I present a discussion of the specifically south Indian discourses that structure, control and formulate women's sexuality. Following Judith Butler (1990), I argue that these discourses precede the individual. They shape the individual's performativity – in this case, regarding gender and sexuality and I shall outline how the sex-working women conform to and challenge these discourses.

Women's sexuality restricted to marriage

Sexuality plays various roles in women's lives, and it changes through different life stages. Marriage is still a norm and an expectation in south India and, as Busby (2000) suggests, about a Keralite fishing village, men and women become whole and 'complete' through the qualities and practices joined through marriage and, more specifically, reproduction. The sex-working women I met in Chennai all understood marriage in this kind of way.

Several women interviewed explained to me that they had no understanding of sex and sexuality before getting married. Particularly those women who had married at a young age said they did not precisely know what being married entailed beforehand, regardless of differences in their ages at the time of research or whether they were originally from urban or rural areas. Apart from three married women and the women who were unmarried when I interviewed them said that they had a sense of what women's roles in marriage were. Even though most women said they did not have an understanding of sex before getting married, they said that they had had romantic expectations about (falling in) love in marriage, as shown in popular Tamil films. Marriage was the locus of sexuality: for these women, it was unthinkable to have sex before marriage. For example, some women had had premarital affairs, which in some cases led to a love marriage, but none of these affairs entailed sex. Love marriages in India are still rare, although in this sample as discussed earlier several women had married out of 'love'. Rather than suggesting that these women are somehow more sexually liberated, doing sex work could be seen as the outcome of what happens when love marriages fail. As I commented earlier, due to the stigma concerning love marriages, in-laws and natal families often refuse to help when those marriages fail, and I have many examples of this in my field notes.

One such example concerns Ponni, who explained that after her marriage, there was a time when she was happy, and her sexuality was directed towards her husband.

> *Ponni: 'When I was young, I was quite pretty and I used think I'd get a good life. Now it has all been spoiled. All my dreams have been shattered.*
>
> *Salla: What dreams were they?*
>
> *Ponni: There is no intimacy between us, but when I was young I always dreamed of that, my husband taking me out, going out with a scooter, going shopping, love between us. There is nothing now, we just stay together because of the children. There's nothing.' (Interview transcript p.3 lines 1-7, 30th May 2005)*

Infatuation with the husband was seen as part of the life stage of the early years of marriage, particularly before children were old enough to be privy to it and in this she said: *'The kids are grown up now so we don't have sex because if the children saw, they'd get ruined, wouldn't they?'(Fieldnotes 28th Sept 2005)*

Sexuality, then, was restricted to the age when women were having children, and it was seen as inappropriate to express an interest in having sex at an older age. Once children were 'grown up' (after the age of 10 or so), particularly when the family lived in cramped accommodation, marriage was described as a practical, rather passionless institution. So, according to the dominant norms that many women adhered to, sex was part of that stage of marriage that glues partners together and produces offspring, which confirms the relationship and gives the woman a status as an auspicious married woman.

However, ruptures to this narrative exist and the women talked about how sexual pleasure is sought by having affairs – on the part of men, but also by women. Women explained that, because sex was difficult in marriages due to lack of space, children, and cultural notions of age and 'pure sex', men used sex workers or had affairs. This was not just restricted to men, however, and I will later discuss how some of the women also had their own extra-marital affairs.

This generalisation of how sexuality is related to women's life stages does not say much about how women's sexuality is constructed and maintained, and to understand this requires an analysis of the discourses that surround sexuality and gender. This allows us to see beyond the naturalised 'this is how things are' to what lines of thought maintain and recreate women's positions and, more importantly, how the women perceive them.

Women's honour

I argued earlier in the thesis that a woman's perceived 'purity' is a marker of her honour, and that the honour of the family is dependent on the honour of its women. Honour is constituted and observed through certain types of behaviour and actions, such as pre-marital chastity and monogamy. It cannot be simply gained, but must be performed: it is performative in that it has to be continuously reinforced and re-enacted. Central to a woman's honour is her socially functional role as a mother and the carer of her family. I would add to the writings of women's purity and respectability the concept of sexuality. One important marker of a woman's purity and respectability is sexual behaviour that is restricted to the marriage and to one partner, the husband.

The women I talked to in this research acknowledged these norms and played along with them. They expected sex to be related to marriage, and recognised the norm of monogamy. They saw monogamy as related to women's sexual purity and perceived chastity.

> *Muyal: 'If you ask why, just look at the cultural norms Indians follow and have followed for centuries, that of one man to one woman. Abroad they simply view it as a friendship and if they can't go with this man they'll go with that man. It is not like a big stone around their neck, they'll talk frankly. But here it is one man to one woman. If a husband and wife get to know each other well and if the man goes with someone else, then the woman will think what has she got that I haven't? The husband was everything to me but then he has gone off so you hide your feelings and then what happens? You can't go without it showing outside... she thinks: when he's going like this why don't we [I] go as well? She might say: it's alright for men, [but] we [I] should remain respectable for the kids' sake, our name will be ruined if we go. All this she keeps inside herself but the situation brings it out of her. How long can she withstand all that? If a husband is good to his wife it's like everything good has been sent to her.' (Interview transcript p.12 lines 24-35, 24th May 2005)*

In this extract, Muyal suggests that monogamy is both a norm in the culture and is also 'forced', since she describes it as 'a stone around the neck'. She is also suggesting that men are under less surveillance than women, and that women should hide their feelings of betrayal and stay with their husbands for the sake of their children. She suggests that women are dependent on men. Similarly,

Vanita expresses what she describes as culturally approved double standards over the control and perception of men's and women's behaviour:

> *Vanni: 'Due to our culture and customs, when you have one man for one woman as the norm, and the gods sanction that, so then that's how people behave. Those who have 'wrong' desires, they shame them. If they shame you even for talking to gents then if they knew you were going with these men, what would that world look like? Because of these rules and shames, they act every cautiously and carefully.*
>
> *Bhavaani (research assistant): OK, so you are saying like that, one man for one woman. The wives may be like that but how many husbands do you know who abide by that and are honest to their wife?*
>
> *Vanni: They are like that.' (Interview transcript p.6 lines 9-16, 24th May 2005)*

The women I interviewed used the idea of chastity (*karpu/pattanaye*) to explain what was expected of respectable women. Ponni, for example, said that before she came into sex work, she used to be very proud of her Tamil culture, because, she thought, women were particularly pure and chaste in Tamil Nadu:

> *Salla: 'What kind of behaviour is chaste?*
>
> *Ponni: Women, if you mean chaste, is being with one man. Living through with him whatever happens and bringing up the children in a very good manner. My lover got me a gold ring but my younger boy asked why you are wearing gold and necklace and all. I said, it's only covering cosmetic, it's not real gold. But he said, you wear all this and I can't watch TV? So I thought where will I go, who will, give me money? The situation is like that. If the man in the family is good, there's no need for me to go out. I sold the ring to buy the TV for him.' (Interview transcript p.8 line 31-p.9 line 5, 30th May 2005)*

These women are clearly able to conceptualise themselves as operating within the norms of Tamil women's purity and chastity. They reflect the existing Tamil nationalist discourses of monogamy, heterosexuality and women as self-sacrificing. They reinforce the assumption that chastity and motherhood are central to femininity. When sex-working women described themselves in ways that highlighted themselves as a 'normal' woman, they were avoiding what

they recognised as the stigmatised identity of a 'loose' or 'promiscuous' woman. In the next section, I discuss how the stigma on women in sex work – or these women's failure to conform to the norms restricting women's honour – can lead to vulnerability and to violence.

Violence of discourse

The discourse attached to women's honour can have very violent outcomes when these norms are seen to be transgressed. A woman who has lost her honour and is no longer perceived as chaste is vulnerable to harassment; and women who are harassed in these ways can easily enter a cycle of further harassment and vulnerability. Women's honour cannot easily be retrieved, which makes them vulnerable to more harassment. For the women themselves, a dominant discourse involved a loss of chastity through sexual harassment and rape. For some of them, sexual harassment was often seen as the fault of the woman, who was seen as an agent responsible for what she received: such women were tacitly blamed for exposing themselves or in some way encouraging a sexualised attack with lewd or suggestive behaviour. In the next quote, two sex-working women discuss how honour is lost and what is at stake:

> *Vanni: 'Men look at women as mere objects and it has only been a recent transition because the situation has changed.*
>
> *Muyal: The men don't think of the women they know as his mother, his sisters, his wife. Instead if he sees a tear in the side [of a dress] he'll simply stare at it...*
>
> *Vanni: There'll be troubles at home in the family, his wife can't do sex work [impure sex] so that's why he goes to another. He doesn't have a baby so he goes to another girl, and gets married. We are definitely objects. ... Only money and pleasure, these have become all-important and therefore the thinking changes. 'With money anything is possible' becomes the motto, respect, honour, have all gone, money is all. Those with money no one will look at their back [past]. ...*

Salla: Is it only sex workers who get harassed and raped by rowdies, because having lost their reputation they are more vulnerable to it or do all women experience the harassment?

Muyal: All women, it is not just sex workers. Think of all those studying at college, they'll be dressed decently, with a pant and shirt but still they...

Vanni: If the girls go with them the ladies get pregnant, college girls.

Muyal: They are just going to college, and these rowdies they think "How can we trap them?" They look in each of the autos, and they look at the lover speaking with her and observe where she goes, they do this over some days and then they – about four of them – carry her off ... and rape her. So it is not just sex workers it is all women, even those in families.

Vanni: Some have a pleasure in it but then when the lover has left her and disgraced her then the thing living in her stomach she can't take care of so she aborts it and so it goes on.' (Interview transcript p.13 line 15- p. 14 line 22, 24th May 2005)

Expectations of sexual purity are different between men and women. In the above extract, the two women discuss how women's visibility in public and increased involvement in the employment and education sectors raise questions about women's contact with men, as well as about women's chastity (see also Blomqvist 2004).

These discourses are not just limited to women and their femininity but are also applied to men and their masculinity. Many women I talked to suggested that they ended up doing sex work and having affairs with other men due to the failure of their husbands to look after their families or due to these men's violence against them.

The discourses discussed above around women's honour represent dominant discourses regarding women's sexuality, femininity and gender roles. According to these, sexuality should be directed and restricted to the marriage and is thus controlled. In this framework, what scope is there for (women's) pleasure?

Lack of a discourse of women's sexual pleasure

When I asked Diya in our first interview how she felt about her sexuality, she said: *'I'm the best possible partner for my husband.' (Fieldnotes 28th Sept 2004)* Diya's remark suggests that women's sexuality is a matter of reproduction and pleasing their husbands, where there is no space for women's own sexual, erotic feelings. With the backdrop of violence towards those who transgress the norm of women's purity, it is no wonder that the women interviewed do not speak to others, including me, about sexual pleasure and, particularly, the possibility of an orgasm. They gave the impression of taking a passive role in sexual intercourse and said merely that they are pleased with whatever their partners do. Also, some of the women openly said that they did not care for sex. Sexuality was suggested to be a part of a marital or loving relationship, rather than something that was independently theirs; sexuality was discussed as 'relational'. Sripriya, for example, talked about sex work, clients and sex in marital relationships as follows:

> *Sripriya: 'Most clients are married and are in a family. The person they marry should act as they wish, that is, they might want to have sex after they are drunk and have oral sex or other kinds, but it is not possible in the family. They cannot have all their wishes fulfilled by their wives. However, if they come to me then they can have the sex which they wish. So that is not possible in the family however they can fulfil all their wishes with the sex worker...*
>
> *Salla: Can wives expect the same from their husbands?*
>
> *Sripriya: Yes... women do expect it, they do think about that. If you ask me, I will expect it but not everyone will expect it depending on their family culture, that is, there will be a mother-in-law and father-in-law and they will have household chores until 10pm. They will have a sister-in-law. But they will definitely expect this... But they will not say this to their husbands.* [Instead] *they will take a lover,* [to get] *what they could not get from their husbands.' (Interview transcript p.11 line 17- p.12 line 8, 25th April 2005)*

Sripriya's example and the excerpt from my interview with Vasumathi at the beginning of this chapter, both suggest that there is no discourse of female sexuality that would allow women to talk about sexual pleasure and their sexuality to their partners or to anybody else. The following conversation from my interview with Ponni also illustrates this silence about women's sexuality very well:

> *Salla: 'Would you ever feel quite satisfied* [santhosham, jolly] *when you had sex with your husband or now with your partner?*
>
> *Ponni:* [Laughs] *Before it used to be OK with my husband although it was never that great because our hearts were not tuned, but with this man (new partner), I feel happy.*
>
> *Salla: Does your partner consider that you are feeling happy or is he quite selfish?*
>
> *Ponni: He will also satisfy me… I can't lie, whatever I think I tell it out* [referring to answering my politically incorrect question, this was obvious in the context].
>
> *Salla: Can you tell your partner what you want or he just does his thing?*
>
> *Ponni: I won't tell anything like that. I feel shy* [laughs].
>
> *Salla: Why do you feel shy?*
>
> *Ponni: I can't explain. There are no words. I don't know how to explain this.' (Interview transcript p. 7 lines 5-17, 30th May 2005)*

This excerpt from Ponni's interview shows clearly that she feels that she cannot talk about sex and sexual pleasure. She refers to her honesty and her inability to lie when she explains how she is able to give any kind of answer at all. Uma, who is married but has a boyfriend, gives a similar account of women's sexuality – or rather, the lack of a discourse regarding it – and avoids my probing and very open questions regarding sex:

> *Uma: 'The clients come out* [to buy sex] *because they've been scolded* [by their wives]. *So it's just "chumma"* [just like that]. *They go as*

"husbands" only with their wives. With us they get what they want, give us money and go…

Salla: Who thinks about your happiness?

Uma: Only Dinesh, that man [her boyfriend].

Salla: Has he ever satisfied you sexually?

Uma: Yes.

Salla: Physically as well? Not only emotionally.

Bhavaani (research assistant) adds: Makes a climax come, when you're with him.

Uma: What does that mean? I've made him happy and he has made me happy too.

Salla: Would you be able to tell him what you want or you'd just be happy with whatever he does?

Uma: I won't say anything like that and if I ask he'll take it wrongly. It will reflect badly on me. He's an unmarried man.

Salla: What if the partner doesn't do the right things? How would they know how to make you happy if you don't tell them?

Uma: I won't say and he won't say.

Salla: Why?

Uma: It's because we are like husband and wife, that's why we don't talk about it.

Salla: When you and your husband were first married and you were in the first stages of love and all that, at that time were you able to tell your husband what you like and how you'd like him to hold you and touch you, so that it would feel good, or even with him you wouldn't say it?

Uma: No.

Salla: Why?

Uma: We don't, do we? My in-laws and all are there. There are 2 rooms. My sister-in-law still isn't married, so she and my mother-in-law were in one room and us in the other so we didn't talk.

Bhavaani: Would the noise travel?

Uma: Yes. Only once the baby was born did we move out.

Salla: Do you think women are able to talk and tell men? Would they accept it? Are women able to express themselves or do they just have to be quiet?

Uma: They will tell. If they've been drinking…Otherwise they are shy. Men do it without any shyness [shame] but women get shy. There are women who say you have to do like this for me, only then will I go… "What's your friend like! She's over the top", they'll say. "She's super company!"

Salla: So, men actually want the women to climax while they are having intercourse with them.

Uma: Yes.

Salla: So, would some women pretend that they had an orgasm while attending to clients if they don't feel like it? Would they act that way?

Uma: Yes, some do that. Now suppose if they don't get what they want at home there are women who go [to do sex work] *to get pleasure. But there are also those who go for money. Say the husband doesn't satisfy you. As soon as he comes home he goes to sleep. Work, home, work, that's all there is to their life. In the same way if the men think their wives just go to work and back home, then work again. Or goes to her mother's house they'll also go with someone else. That's what's happening.' (Interview transcript p.8 line 25- p.9 line 40, 11th June 2005)*

These women were able to indicate to me that they do not ask or direct their partners in sex, but that they nevertheless enjoy what is going on. These examples suggest that women are bound by the discourse in what they can say, but this does not necessarily mean that they will feel or act that way. My interpretation is that the lack of a discourse around female sexuality is the other side of the coin of the discourse according to which women 'are' asexual, and I see this as related to women's sexuality being normatively restricted to reproduction and motherhood and associated with purity, not with desire or erotica.

The above extracts suggest that different relationships with men involve different expectations, and that the level of emotion and intimacy indicated what kind of sex was supposed to take place. For instance, emotions are involved in sex with partners and husbands, and in marital relationships, sex is supposed to be 'pure', while sex workers offer acts that are not allowed in marriage. The women interviewed discussed certain practices of sex as 'normal', while others were not. Thus, vaginal sex was the norm, and oral and anal sex were seen as impure and abnormal. However, their responses to requests for these sex acts from men varied in terms of which women received them, and from whom. Some women felt that they could not refuse them requests from their husbands because of the power and sexual right of husbands, whereas some women felt that they could not deny these from their clients because they would otherwise not get clients. This was not related to the amount of money that the women charged (which could be seen as related to self-worth and empowerment). Such practices were never refused because of physical risk or lack of it, or maintaining power over the encounter. Rather it was that 'pure' sex was seen by all the women as the sexual act that leads to reproduction, and they wanted to maintain an image of themselves as still respectable women, even if they had to do sex work to support their family.

While all of the women felt awkward in talking about sex (this is clear from the interrogatory nature of the parts of the interviews where sexuality was discussed), these excerpts illustrate that there was a popular understanding of sex that did not limit it to a wifely duty. In fact, the women's comments clearly show that they are not sexless or uninterested in sex. Those women who did not avoid the questions I asked talked about sex while smiling and laughing coyly. The words that were used for sexual pleasure were the English words 'jolly' and 'love' and the Tamil word *santhosham* (happy, pleasure, joy). Graphic or explicit descriptions of sexual behaviour were extremely rare, but, for example, Sevati said to me that she and her boyfriend *'have sex at least five times a day' (Fieldnotes 25th March 2005)* and Madhu told me that they will do it every night and *'she loves it' (Fieldnotes 31st May 2005)*. Thus, the women were

sometimes able to subvert the idea of women as passive in their sexuality in what they said to me. Sex in marriages, they acknowledged, was not always satisfying and women (and men) looked for satisfaction from others. In the next section, I will discuss women's relationships further and suggest that women 'have sexuality'. Sex working women I interviewed made sexual choices and adjusted to sexual relationships depending on who they were having sex with, how they felt emotionally towards that person, what other relationships they were in and what economic needs they had.

Managing sex with clients

As commented earlier, there is a thought which sees sex work as inherently demeaning and oppressive to all women. How did sex-working women in the south Indian context feel about having sex with clients with the backdrop of the prevailing discourses around women's sexuality? How did the sex workers experience sex, and what kinds of meanings did they attach to it?

To look only at how sex workers manage sex with their paid clients would be a simplistic way to analyse sex workers' sexual repertoire and the sex that takes place. The sexual relationships of the sex workers I interviewed are complex and diverse. Women in this sample had husbands, partners and clients, all of whom were involved in networks of exchange of money and sex. These men could be divided into several categories. There were husbands who were 'normative marital partners', in unions that were joined by marriage. There were also 'husbands' whom the women had as security and façade, who often had other wives. 'Partners' were men, some of whom were 'illicit' lovers (while the women were still officially married and/or living with a husband), while others were short-term boyfriends. Clients were divided into 'randoms' or regulars. These categories are not fixed, but flexible and in constant change and under constant evaluation. Random clients can become regulars, who can become partners and husbands, and husbands and partners can leave. Sexuality and sex in these different relationships are experienced differently. The women

interviewed expressed clear choices over their sexual partners, suggesting that women's sexual preferences are not passive. While modifying their sexual behaviour with different partners, the women suggested they had an active response to sex work encounters. In these ways, they challenge the idea that they are purely 'victims', whether in sex work or through the passiveness of women's sexuality in general.

The crucial aspects of their relationships with the clients, partners and husbands are the levels of affiliation, dependency and emotional reciprocity in the relationships. While relationships with random clients would have the lowest degree of emotional reciprocity and affiliation, regulars would provide more emotional reciprocity but not affiliation. Husbands provide a high degree of affiliation but only some provide emotional reciprocity. Some lovers provide affiliation and emotional reciprocity, but if the relationship is illicit, they do not provide affiliation. Next, I will analyse how these different kinds of sexual relationships are managed.

Sexual contact with random clients

Most of the sex work encounters which the sex working women described to me fall into the category of sex with random clients. In order to manage these sexual encounters emotionally and sexually, the sex workers use varying strategies to negotiate the situation. To maintain emotional control over the sex work encounter, the women control the level of intimacy in the relationship. Some women said they found that having sex with a stranger was more emotionally depressing, demeaning, and troubling than it was to other sex workers. This emotional distress was often described to me in terms of their guilt in acting against social norms regarding women's sexuality and femininity. Sex like this was the most unchaste and inappropriate way to break these norms, and their greatest fear was being found out about and being shamed and ostracised. As noted earlier, to manage the encounter, the women

distanced themselves from the act, used alcohol and hoped it would be over quickly. Clients were treated coldly and with passiveness in the sex act.

Some women preferred to take irregular clients as another means to avoid intimacy and to avoid having to see the men again. They wanted to keep their work as far from their 'everyday life' as possible, and not meeting clients again was part of this distancing. This was particularly the case with women who had husbands who lived with them. Kuntala is an example.

> *Salla: 'Was there any difference between the clients and your husband?*
>
> *Kuntala: It was all the same. If he had been alright, if he had been very nice to me, I would have been here* [at home] *and not gone out. So there was not much difference. I thought there would be something for me* [in marriage] *but my husband ended up drinking all the money and the money from the sex work I used for my needs. I earned a bit for myself also.*
>
> *Salla: What about the physical intimacy?*
>
> *Kuntala: I was very simple with my clients. At least with my husband I think that he is my husband and there is some emotional connection also. With the clients I was like a dead person.' (Interview transcript p.4 lines 1-8, 11th May 2005)*

Kuntala stopped doing sex work during the time I was doing my fieldwork because she was afraid that her husband would find out, and she wanted to maintain a relationship with him. Those women like Kuntala who had strong commitments to their husbands negotiated the boundaries of what is adultery in a number of ways: by not being unfaithful 'inside their minds', by keeping the clients at distance, and by not falling in love or having emotional relationships with clients. When sexual relationships between men and women are socially expected to be monogamous, the main source of distress for the women came from breaking that norm. Those who found a way of tolerating doing sex work told me they had got used to having sex with random clients. Those who were unable to negotiate the guilt or the stress or the fear of being revealed often found more steady partners. However, some women preferred more intimate

relationships with their clients, again showing that the sex workers' responses to the sexual encounter with the clients was not standardised.

It has been reported in sex work research from the West, regarding sex workers' sexual response to the paid sex act, that they avoided certain sexual practices because they liked them. In Hart and Barnard (2003) sex workers saved the sex that they enjoyed for their personal relationships, keeping these acts completely separate from the paid, distanced act. The Chennaite sex workers I interviewed did not describe managing their sexuality in this way. This could again be seen to be related to the lack of a discourse of women's pleasure.

Regular clients and lovers

The women in this sample had different preferences with regard to the level of intimacy that they had with their clients. Some women preferred regular clients because they believed that having regulars increased the respect between the two, meant a lesser risk of violence, and that the men felt more obliged to look after them. In some cases, the women did not call these men regular clients at all, but rather boyfriends. The concept of a regular client complicates the understandings of sex work because, as it turns out, these clients are not just random guys but men with whom the women have long-term relationships.

Those women who had regular clients had between two and five regulars who visited and supported them. In many cases, there was a warm relationship between the couple. At the beginning of her career as a sex worker, Maya took random clients, but now, after 15 years in sex work, she only has regular clients. She has developed a respectful relationship with her regulars and describes them in the following terms:

> *'They respect my feelings and also they are not tough on me because they are very decent and they are in a family. They come to us because they are not getting sex from their wives. Only if I entertain*

them, they will like me and would come back to me and I will be remembered. So they are not tough on me, we give each other mutual pleasure and we understand each other and they deal with me as humanely as possible.' (Interview transcript p.14 lines 21-26, 11th May 2005)

Some of the women I interviewed who did not have issues about having extramarital affairs, or did not have husbands, often developed warm relationships with clients. When women did not want to institutionalise such relationships the men were seen as regulars, as opposed to boyfriends. Maya told me how she made sure she did not get too involved with these men:

'If I start to love any of the clients they will cheat you and go. That is they will try to get as much from you as possible for that reason I don't love any of the clients. Probably I will give a small place in my heart but I will not fall in love with them. Even if I am in love with someone and if he returns the feelings also I will not love them because whomever I fall in love, we will ultimately separate so I do not fall in love with anyone.' (Interview transcript p.15 lines 11-17, 11th May 2005)

Some of the women interviewed had boyfriends/lovers that they did not live together with (e.g. Uma, Kaveri, Ponni), while others lived together as partners or were (un)officially married (e.g. Bina, Sangita, Sindhu). Relationships with boyfriends were less publicly established, particularly if the relationship was 'illicit' and the women were still officially married and/or lived with someone else. These men gave the women concerned money when they needed it and also supported them in other ways (for example, by buying them mobile phones or paying for their children's school fees). This way, money was not always immediately related to sex. The fact that there was a certain level of continuity in the relationship guaranteed that money would continue to flow in for the women, and the men got sex and meals when desired. This relationship resembles more that of a concubine or a mistress. In these cases, the women are often very smitten about their partners, and money is not necessarily central to the relationship. In fact, for example, Sangita, Madhu, and Swasti had partners living with them whom they supported, rather than the other way around. They explained this to me by saying that women cannot live alone and they had taken

these men to live with them to give them the façade of a relationship and security. In the next section, I explore three of these relationships in more detail and show their relevance to my final argument concerning 'demotic sexuality'.

Spectrum of sexual relationships

Ponni started to sell sex six months before I met her. Before that, she worked in the non-sex industry for three years, but this provided insufficient income for her to cover the financial costs of her and her family's life. She worked on the streets, near a film theatre in Pursawalkam, from where she took her clients to a nearby lodge. Three months before I met her, she got a client with whom she now has a love affair; she is the mistress of a wholesale distributor who supports her financially, and she does not see anyone else. She is very smitten with him and would like to reverse her family planning operation to have children with him. *'Basically now I am his mistress and I thank God for that' (Interview transcript p.5 lines 6-7, 30th May 2005),* she said.

Ishwari had a love marriage at the age of 16, and she and her husband have two children. She complained that, from the beginning of their marriage, he refused to have sex with her and, she says, he does not have sexual affairs with any other women, either, and that therefore their marriage is not happy. She started doing sex work because her husband had no work. She told me that 'random' clients are just for money, but that she has two regular clients with whom she can enjoy sex, because, with her husband, she cannot.

Bina was married off at the age of 13. She has two daughters from this marriage, and a son. By the time her youngest daughter was born, her parents arranged her a divorce because her husband was very violent. Now, 16 years later, for the past four years she has had an affair with a young man. They have gone through an unofficial wedding, but one which his family does not know of nor recognise. There are several reasons why they are not seen as suitable partners, such as their age difference – it is seen as inappropriate for the woman

to be older than the man – and thus they keep their relationship a secret. It is not clear how they met. They are very loving towards each other and she says that he has promised, against all odds, that he will stay with her and return to her if his parents arrange a marriage for him with someone else.

Ponni, Ishwari and Bina are good examples of how the spectrum of 'sex work' is fluid, ranging from one-off encounters to concubine relationships that are sometimes called '*keeps*'. Examples like this make it problematic to limit the analysis of sex workers' relationships to random clients, because there is a complex range of activities that involve exchanging sex and money. Not all the relationships between the sex workers and the clients are limited to what stereotypically could be called 'prostitution'. Some women in my sample had consensual, 'agentic' relationships with particular men and described having strong emotional feelings for them. Some of them lived with these men, while others did not. And in the intimate relationships, there were emotional engagements, feelings of love, and plans to elope or to have children. Consequently to call these affairs simply 'sex work/prostitution' would be misleading.

What this adds to the existing knowledge of sex workers is sexual pleasure. It is clear that sex workers, by the nature of what they do (having sex for money), challenge the existing norms of monogamy. But what is radical about these findings is that these women do not just have sex for money in a strategic way. The concept of sexual pleasure complicates the whole question: sometimes sexual pleasure is the primary motivation, rather than the money. Considering that sex work takes various forms, some of which cannot easily be seen as 'prostituting', it is problematic to conclude that sex work is or is not an oppressive practice, or that it has predictable, generalisable or homogenous effects on the individual women involved. It is clear that sex work is not an oppressive practice in all cases and at all times, and that the women interviewed do not always interpret what they do in that way. There was scope for agency to

negotiate these encounters to be emotionally reciprocal, as well as to provide financial support.

How can we then understand these varying experiences of sex and sexuality that deviated from the monogamous heteronormative ideal? It is clear that I cannot make generalisations about the sexuality of all women and men in Tamil Nadu based on the experiences of the sex workers I interviewed. However, I can, through these examples, show that there is another, parallel, discourse of sexuality that deviates from the Tamil ideal of heteronormative monogamous post-marital sexuality, one that I call the 'demotic discourse of sexuality'.

The demotic discourse of sexuality

Alongside the dominant discourse of women and sexuality, by which sex is restricted to marriage between two consensual partners and in which women have only a reproductive and asexual role, there was an alternative discourse. Women questioned the concept of chastity in, for example, folk tales that they interpreted according to their own experiences (two of these are attached as appendix 3). The women interviewed criticised the idea of chastity and suggested that nobody is really chaste. They also rejected any binary opposition between the 'prostitute other' (an invented tradition, according to Dell 2005) and the chaste wife, suggesting that these standards of purity produce unfair criteria by which to evaluate and judge women. These narratives were used to manage their sexually 'unnormative' behaviour and in the interviews they criticised normative heterosexuality as unrealistic. The alternative discourse, what I call a demotic discourse of sexuality, concerns other forms of sexual behaviour, ones that include sexual pleasure. Sex can be fun, exciting, dangerous, breaks families, destroys marriages and makes unions collapse, and behind the curtains, for a variety of reasons, people have affairs with various people other than those that they are married with.

In the demotic discourse of sexuality, partners are not one, and they are not necessarily joined in union. The demotic discourse recognises that young men often do not control their sexuality, but visit sex workers alone or with friends. It acknowledges that husbands whose wives are away, or who have wives who take restrictive sexual norms seriously and do not agree to 'impure' sex, have other forms of sexual access. And women have partners, boyfriends and lovers other than their husbands, and they can have sex without the intention of reproducing. The fact that some women I interviewed vehemently denied being sex workers, and that their relationships with their 'boyfriends' resembled concubine and mistress relationships, suggests that it is not just women who have entered sex work who have illicit or extra-marital affairs. Although I cannot make any authoritative claims about women who do not restrict their sexuality according to the dominant discourse, the example of these women suggests that there are some women who are not sex workers are not bound by these norms. Alongside the discourse of women's passive sexuality, in which women are sometimes taken as not having a sexuality at all, is another discourse, in which women do have sexuality, even if they cannot often find the space to act upon it or the words to talk about it. The women I got to know expressed themselves in a way that was not 'chaste', but rather erotic and suggestive. They made choices in life that were not according to the prevailing sexual norms and ideas about women's passive sexuality. Some women admitted liking sex, and had partners because they were unable to be sexually satisfied by their husband. While wider generalisations about female sexuality sex workers cannot be drawn, these examples support my argument about the existence of a demotic sexuality.

Generally, divisions between men and women were seen as strongly linked to biology and reproductive roles (for a similar argument, see Busby 2000). What made a woman or a man was seen to be constituted in part through their relationships with the opposite sex, and sexual relationships helped to constitute this. Heterosexuality was seen as a norm among the sex workers, with a few exceptions. However, heterosexuality as normative has been

challenged in writings on MSM and *hijras* in India (e.g. by Reddy 2005a and b) and among the women I interviewed, the examples of Mercy, Komala and Zaima challenge it too. Mercy defined herself openly as a lesbian and had been in a long-term relationship with another woman. She saw herself as a 'man', taking pleasure in dressing up in trousers and shirts, and described herself as vocal and aggressive. Mercy's account suggests that external markers were seen as definers of gender as much as certain behaviour, that 'performance' makes one who one is (see also Busby 2000). And Komala and Zaima were frequently teased for their relationship in a way that suggested that their friendship was more than 'platonic'. I asked about this and Zaima told me that she had bisexual relationships, sometimes with Komala. Her relationships with women had started when her husband demanded to see two women have sex together. She submitted to this because he knew about her sex work history and she wanted to compensate him for this. She then found same-sex acts quite pleasurable and kept on having affairs with women on her own. '*I'm quite disillusioned about my life*', she said, '*but these occasional lesbian encounters make me happy.*' (Interview transcript p.9 line 10, 12th May 2005)

It would not be true to suggest that the women interviewed originally entered sex work in order to have the kind of sex they desired, since this was never articulated. Nonetheless, as in some Western sex work literature (see, for example, van Raay 2006), sex work can be a way to have sex that is liberated from a patriarchal relationship. At times, for some of the women in my study, sex work turned into an affair, or money was 'made' through boyfriends. Some of the relationships these women had were not 'prostitution', strictly speaking, but rather loving relationships. The assumption that they allegedly were 'sex workers' comes within an environment that restricts heavily women's sexuality heavily, and relationships that do not conform to the normative definition were seen as 'prostituting', as the moral opposite of the auspicious wife. But if any relationship between men and women that involves exchanging sex for money is prostitution, then many relationships define as prostitution. A more useful way to analyse these complexities regarding what constitutes sex work when

the women concerned in fact have various types of relationships is to reflect back on the HIV discourse.

'Sex work' as an epidemiological concept

How did women who were not necessarily sex workers, but had non-normative relationships, come to be seen as sex workers? I trace this back to the organisations through which I originally accessed them. Wardlow (2004) argues that, while the concept of sex work has risen from the sex workers' movement in the West and has found its way into academic language to replace the stigmatising term 'prostitution', it still has varying definitions attached to it. She argues that it is not clear whether 'sex work' is a more neutral term than 'prostitution', if it is meant to mean monetarised labour rather than a fixed identity, or if it is used to suggest a form of feminised poverty in which women are unable to find other forms of income (Wardlow 2004: 1018). She concludes that, while using a global term such as 'sex work' is potentially empowering, as it allows sex workers to use identity politics to fight for their rights, doing so simultaneously has the potential to ignore other localised meanings for exchanging money and sex (Wardlow 2004: 1038). This is exactly what is going on in Chennai with the use of the term 'sex work'. In a cultural context where extramarital affairs are socially judged in a negative way and can lead to violence against women, and many women are poor, it makes sense that women should visit NGOs to gain access to money and goods and to tap into discourses that are empowering, thereby suggesting that they are not promiscuous women. These women's own accounts seem to me to be attempts to represent themselves as victims, as in the HIV discourse, or as good women, as in the Tamil stereotype, but certainly not as agents of adultery.

'Sex work' and 'sex worker' are terms used in the Indian HIV discourse to suggest a 'high-risk' group. Yet, 'sex work' is not defined in the NACO guidelines. NGOs in Chennai used definitions such as 'street-based' and 'home-based' sex workers. But as we can see from the examples in this

chapter, those categories do not represent all the sexual relationships of the women 'in sex work' I interviewed, for some these women had affairs, regulars etc. I have shown in this chapter that the relationships that the women had were very complex and diverse. Not all the women were incontrovertibly sex workers, though some had non-normative relationships that made them morally inauspicious in the eyes of others. 'Sex work' was a term imposed by the NGOs and served as an umbrella term to cover all kinds of relationships. There was also an assumption by me when my research started that the women I accessed through the NGOs were sex workers by definition – because, I assumed, that was what the NGOs did: work with *sex workers* in HIV prevention. The NGOs involved in HIV prevention require an increasing number of women to show that they are efficient and fulfilling their targets. For women in poverty, working as a peer educator in an HIV prevention project was, at times, a better employment option than working in other unskilled labour jobs (like on construction sites), and those women who were not peer educators enjoyed the benefits of receiving lunch and other incentives like saris for coming to various functions arranged by the NGO. 'Sex worker' has become an epidemiological-organisational category, one that bears only a limited and somewhat misleading relationship to the everyday lives of the women who are included in this category by virtue of entering into a relationship with one of the NGOs in question.

CHAPTER 10 Conclusion

In this conclusion, I will go through the main arguments of my thesis and consider the implications of my findings. I began this thesis in the theoretical context of feminist writings in the West. There is an opposition between the abolitionist school of thought, which argues that prostitution is inherently oppressive, and movements arising from sex workers themselves, who demand the right to do sex work without stigma or violence. Interestingly, both approaches use the same language of rights. However, the debate has now shifted the extent that e.g. Wardlow (2004) and Zatz (1997) have suggested that sex work/prostitution is not a universal experience. Instead, people experience sex work according to their local norms, and particularly according to the law and the protection that is available to them. This encouraged me to look at sex work in its local context, with the backdrop of local norms, ideas and culture in India.

Twenty years after the first finding of HIV in India, in Chennai, it is worth looking at the current situation. Sex workers continue to be seen as a high risk group, and HIV prevention in Chennai is dominated by attempts to educate the sex workers. This focus is also seen in academic writings, which discuss only the risks that sex workers expose themselves and others to. In India, thus, academic and NGO understandings of sex work have been epidemiological rather than social, meaning that the prevailing context of sex work in India is HIV. The importance of my own research lies here – despite the fact that HIV prevention can and has provided women opportunities for empowerment and collectivising, a sociological analysis of sex work is needed in order to understand the sex workers' meanings and lives as a whole, in a way that is not restricted to the epidemiological dimension related to HIV. A social analysis of sex work, furthermore, is bound to raise inconsistencies in HIV prevention programmes in highlighting that HIV is not merely a medical problem and that sex workers are more than just vectors of disease.

The existing sociological and anthropological literature about women in India discusses gender and sexuality in the context of reproduction, monogamy and heterosexuality. The existence of sex workers highlights the fact that not all women act according to the dominant normative discourses. Who are these women and why do they do sex work? What is their take on the social norms around sexuality and gender? What can their accounts tell us about women and men in contemporary Indian society?

I specifically wanted to do in-depth fieldwork to answer these questions, because other modes of doing research would have not allowed a close enough encounter with the women to 'access' and explore their experiences. I was interested in finding out the meanings that they give to sex work, sexuality, gender, and the structural conditions they work in and how they feel about these. Faced with the taboos around sex and sexuality, and lacking other practical means of approach, I accessed sex-working women through local HIV prevention NGOs. In discussing methodology, I analysed the various impacts that doing fieldwork and using NGOs as gatekeepers have had on the data collection process, and the problems arise from this. While the women that I interviewed had differing relationships with the NGOs, their impressions and representations of me were affected by this intermediation of the NGOs, especially in the beginning. The fact that I was associated with the NGOs can be seen in the 'standard narrative' that I got, similar to the one the NGOs give to funding bodies to convince them that HIV prevention is conducted and implemented effectively, according to the agreed guidelines.

The NGOs' practices also impacted on the fieldwork process in other ways. Sex working women were used to getting an incentive for their time in the NGOs, and they asked me for incentives as well. After deciding to give an incentive, some of my interviews were pimped. I analysed the impact of this regarding the reliability of the interview data, with the conclusion that using an incentive and accessing participants through NGOs does not necessarily make

the process of data collection more 'unreliable', but can lead to interesting findings regarding the reality that precedes and frames the research – e.g. regarding the relationships and dynamics of the NGOs and sex workers, and their relationship to the funding bodies. While I aimed to analyse my interviews with the sex workers outside of (and in a way that would go beyond) the HIV prevention discourse, I have been unable to avoid it completely, and this had implications for my thesis in several ways. My 'sample' was largely accessed through HIV prevention NGOs, and I have written about HIV quite a bit because it defines the conceptual environment according to which sex workers are seen and because it is a powerful discourse available to the women themselves. The fact that I have been unable to avoid the context of HIV has potentially led to the neglect of other narratives that the sex workers interviewed might have provided.

The findings of my research need to be read within the discursive context of sex work, HIV and patriarchy. I have shown in this research that concepts travel globally and that the ideas and practices of HIV in the field are influenced by global actors such as World Bank, UNAIDS and USAID etc. The evidence from my research suggests an interesting local manipulation of the resources of HIV prevention. I do not argue that the NGOs that work in HIV prevention in Chennai are to blame for this. The root of the bias lies in the governance of HIV interventions and of sex work. NGOs operate in the conceptual environment that has been created by the global assemblage occurring between NACO, World Bank, UNAIDS, USAID etc. HIV interventions have become an arena of development work, as well as a fight over resources. Rather than being game pieces of this rhetoric, sex workers use NGOs and the HIV discourse strategically, NGOs use sex workers to convince funders of their efficacy, the Indian government receives loans, and the World Bank gets to give loans and enact their aim of decentralising the state. The findings I have presented also show how global assemblages create new forms of subjects and positionality for sex workers, and that this has been defined from 'above'. In that sense, this thesis has been an investigation of the global.

Whilst an in-depth analysis of this global assemblage and the relationship between the international donors agencies and NGOs is somewhat beyond the scope of this research, my findings suggest fascinating opportunities for further research on the policy transfer between all parties, the funding bodies, NACO, NGOs and their users.

Contemporaneously, all the domains involved in HIV prevention use a rhetoric that presents HIV as a <u>medical</u> problem that should be tackled by targeting high risk groups in HIV prevention, and by stressing condom use. What is not done is to address the social causes behind the epidemic, which would involve seeing the pandemic as a problem potentially affecting all individuals. On the positive side, this discourse has created a common enemy for certain social groups, such as MSMs, allowing social mobility and organisation, and for example the sex workers of Durbar Mahila Sangham in Calcutta have organised to advocated for their human rights. In Chennai, human rights were rarely discussed and were actively addressed by only one of the NGOs that I worked with. This way, sex workers are still seen as objects in HIV prevention, rather than being seen as subjects and agents in their social milieu.

Consequently, HIV prevention in Chennai does not work. The women I interviewed are frequently not in a position to negotiate condoms because of their subordination in all aspects of the sex work transaction. I would not go to the extent of arguing that focussing on sex workers in HIV prevention is a matter of 'conspiracy'. I do think that focussing on high risk groups can be an effective way to reduce HIV transmission, but this can only work in an environment where there is general awareness. On the other hand, mass awareness is costly and difficult in a context where talking about sex is still a taboo. Literature from India repeatedly shows that accurate mass awareness of HIV is low (though methodological and infrastructural issues need to be taken into account here), particularly in the rural areas and among women (APAC 2004; Brahme et al. 2005; Pallikavadath et al. 2005; Sivaram et al. 2005; Steinbrook 2007). In focussing on HIV, the existing interventions neglect the

broader power imbalances that women in general and sex workers in particular face.

This thesis then has several policy implications for HIV prevention in Chennai and India. The findings question the foundations and practices of current HIV interventions, and the rigid epidemiological connection perceived between high risk groups and others should be questioned. This health-oriented focus fails to address the power imbalances created by patriarchal structures that affect all women. It is ironic that only a social analysis that extends beyond the context of HIV brings out problems in HIV prevention and shows how the failure of HIV prevention is related to (gender) inequalities in the Indian society. Only by developing interventions towards the masses – and addressing wider inequalities with regard to gender, sexuality, and economic status – can any curbing of the disease be achieved.

Contrary to the HIV- and health-oriented viewpoint of the sex workers (albeit accepting that some sex workers use this rhetoric strategically), my research indicates that the immediate connection between sex work and HIV should be questioned. When looking at women's lives in more depth, a much more diverse and complex picture of the women concerned appears. What all the interviews that I collected contained was an explanation of how each woman had come to sex work. All the women suggested that their main rationale was poverty and the failure of the patriarchal system that assumes that women are homemakers and dependent on the financial contribution of men. As these reasons are exact reflections of those given by other women in Chennai for their decisions to work (not in sex work) (Vera-Sanso 2006), they can be seen as a public discursive response to the general upper-class/caste norm of women not working. Of the reasons that women gave for entering sex work, two other interesting lines for further research also emerge. The film industry has prominent links to sex work, and studying this connection and undertaking fieldwork in the film industry would provide more details on this. Also, my data show that the institution of *devadasi* is not extinct in Tamil Nadu, and its

contemporary forms would be fascinating to study further. Looking at the level of 'choice' in them getting into sex work, coercion occurred in some women's sex work histories, but others told me that sex work is a backup option that allows them to survive when they need extra income.

The ways that sex workers in Chennai operate are calculated to maintain themselves safe from violence and harassment, and from becoming publicly known as sex workers. Other examples of negotiation include: the fact that the women in my sample work together, that they work in areas other than their own to remain anonymous, that they choose clients who seem like decent 'marital' types (and are thus seen as less likely to have diseases), and that some women prefer clients who are under the influence of drugs and alcohol, while others think they are the clients who are unpredictable. Many have regulars, who offer a more respectful and thus safer relationship. In the meantime, women in sex work also use the NGOs strategically. They use incentives from the NGOs to replace some of the sex work they do, and they use NGOs as stepping stones for the sex workers' movement and social mobility. Other examples of agency are the ways that women do sex work strategically in order to get food, pay school fees, or buy clothes etc.

These negotiations illuminate the processes of strategic agency as *action*, not just resistance that the women I interviewed used. Looking at sex work as 'agentic' follows from debates in feminist research that try to understand the agency of people in situations where they have seemingly little power (Abu-Lugodh 1990; Jeffery 1979; Jeffery 1998; Jeffery and Jeffery 1996; Mahmood 2005; Scott 1985). Recognising agency in the selling of sex also challenges the earlier feminist paradigm that saw prostitution always as a form of oppression. Sex workers' agency is discussed, for example, by Sanders (2005b), who points out that the sex workers negotiate client encounters for their benefit and in order to be safe. And in India, Oldenburg (1991) points out that courtesans in Lucknow were empowered and had chosen to live outside the expectations of the limiting role of women as homemakers. The theoretical debate has

circulated around selling sex as profession or oppression, and my thesis has explored whether these binary concepts are applicable in non-Western contexts.

In some ways, the findings from Lucknow could appears anomalous, because sex workers in Chennai can be seen as victims of several power domains. Normative ideas about chastity, honour and purity marginalise and stigmatise sex workers as the polar opposites of the idealised wives and mothers institutionalised in nationalist movements across India. The stigma surrounding sex workers has led to violence against them, and violence has been reported all over India as one of the main problems that sex workers are facing. I found that sex work <u>was</u> used strategically in order to negotiate financial needs, but also to gain relationships. These findings contribute to theorising agency by showing how women use power in positions where they traditionally have not been perceived to have it. My findings empirically flesh out agency as a theoretical concept, and help make agency visible in the margins.

However, my analysis should not be read as a romanticisation of resistance or as a portrayal of the women I interviewed as heroines in their misery, their poverty, or their resistance, but rather as an attempt to understand their actions holistically. The effects of oppressive structures on the women's lives are undeniable. With the threat of death and violence, often the sex-working women had little choice in their lives but to comply. However, I still conclude that the sex workers in Chennai are agents who operate in a very oppressive environment. I write this because I find the dualism between oppression and profession is limiting, and because my data did not consistently suggest that selling sex was either/or. I find that the context matters much more than this debate often acknowledges.

Important matters here are the personal experiences and attitudes of the women. Ideas of oppression and profession are theoretical concepts from different schools of thought, which have taken sex workers as subjects of their political debates. However, in the reality of India, there are so many modes by which

women in general are oppressed that focussing on just eliminating sex work to create equality for women would be nonsensical. Rather, the problems that sex workers in this study face suggest that they are struggling with problems that patriarchal society has created, such as dowry murders; son preference, which leads to female infanticide and foeticide; 'eve teasing' (female sexual harassment); and the feminisation of poverty and domestic violence. Thus, my research suggests that the lack of education for women, the feminisation of poverty, sex work, violence against women, HIV, and the discourses that demand women to be submissive, are all interrelated. This again highlights the importance of addressing gender inequalities in Indian society and the need for mass awareness in HIV prevention.

Finally, my findings around relationships and sexuality are the most fascinating contribution to theorising 'gender' in India. Relationships are an integral part of the social construction of sex work, but they are also a way for the women concerned to negotiate sex work and life. Sex work was also a way to live outside the rigid norms of womanhood. These findings make the definition of sex work very complicated. Some of the women claimed they were not sex workers, but, in fact, were simply women whose relationships did not fit the stereotypical, rigid idea of women as monogamous housewives. My findings challenge the dominant ideal of sexual behaviour and suggest a demotic one: a discourse of sexuality that is not confined to monogamous, heteronormative activity. These findings raise questions about women's sexuality and contest the idea that women's sexuality is passive and related entirely to reproduction. Still, I found that even these women were bound by the 'silence' or lack of discourse of women's sexuality. In order to understand the complexities of sexuality, sexual behaviour, and how sexuality affects people's (sex-working or not) lives, further research is required. Not only because this is an academically un-investigated area, but more importantly because this study has shown that people make decisions in life that are influenced by desire, love and intimacy. Sexuality not only defines 'what goes on in bed' but also has an impact on

people's choices and identities that lead to roles that are, at times, stigmatising and stigmatised.

In this thesis, I have aimed to bring out the voices of the sex workers in such a way as to create understanding of their lives, options and opportunities, in hopes that such a viewpoint does not victimise them, romanticise their resistance, or reinforce negative popular stereotypes. I have aimed to show the women I interviewed act in a context that is, at times, against them and which they are, at times, able to negotiate. In terms of wider applicability, I hope to have shown that only a holistic representation of sex workers – one that includes sexuality – can lead to well-functioning policies that address the social structural problems that generate the vulnerabilities of sex workers in Chennai, and perhaps of all women in India.

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APPENDIX 1 - List of sex workers

1) Ambuja: in her 40ies. Ambuja's ethnic background is Telegu. Ambuja had a love marriage. Her partner had other wives over the years but they live together and have 3 children. Ambuja also works in the film industry. Peer Educator

2) Avantika: 33 years old. *Devadasi*. Unmarried but is the 2nd wife to her partner.

3) Bhubamma: about 60. Multi-religious. Has two children, of whom one is adopted. Widowed. Bhubamma worked in sex work for several decades and is a pimp. She is one of the leading figures in IFPEC and a Peer Educator

4) Bina: 32 years old. Bina went to school till 5th standard. Had an arranged marriage at the age 12, but he was violent and she had a divorce. At the time of my research she had a relationship with a younger man and she said she is not a sex worker. She has 2 daughters. Peer Educator.

5) Chapala: about 25 years old. Married to a man who raped her but later separated and at the time of my research Chapala lives with here sister Ishika who look after their children together. She has no education, and has been in sex work for 3 years part-time. Charges about 20-30rs per client.

6) Diya: 33 years old. Completed 8th standard at school. Diya is married with 2 children, but also has partners. Has done sex work for 4 years part time and earns about 4000rs per month. Peer Educator.

7) Faria: 34 years old. Faria is from Scheduled Caste background. She had a love marriage at the age of 16 but is widowed since. She calls herself a *keep*, meaning that she is involved with someone who already has other wives. She has 3 children. She works along highways and earns about 200rs per client, but also goes film shootings as a background dancer.

8) Ishika: 29 years old. Had a love marriage with a man who had other wives, and at the time of my research lives with her sister Chapala, with her two children. Ishika earns 20-30rs per client.

9) Ishwari: 28 years old, had a love marriage at the age of 16 and lives with her husband although she has partners. She has 2 children with her husband. She completed 10th standard at school. She is from a Telegu naidu caste background. Has been doing 2 years in sex work full time. Peer Educator.

10) Jeevitha: in her 50es. Jeevitha had an arranged marriage at the age of 12, at the time of my research she was single. Two sons. Has been in sex work 'for decades'.

11) Jaisanthi: 35ish. Married but single at the time of my research. Has 1 child. Has been in sex work for 8 years and earns about 300rs per client.

12) Joshita: 27 years old. Had an arranged marriage at the age of 14, and lives with her husband and in-laws. 3 children. Has done sex work for 4 years on a part-time basis. Her sister-in-law (Pugazh) and mother-in-law (Jeevitha) are in sex work and there are rumours about her minor daughter.

13) Jayati: 32 years old. Completed 10th standard at school. Married but separated, at the time of my research has a partner. 2 children. Earns 10 000rs per month from doing sex work and runs a gift shop as a façade.

14) Jeevitha: about 50 years old, married and lives with her husband, two sons and their wives, is the mother-in-law of Joshita and Pugazh. She has been doing sex work for several decades and acts as a pimp.

15) Kanchi: 37 years old. Completed 5th standard at school. Married but lives alone at the time of my research and is someone's second wife. Has children. She has worked in sex work for 7 years and earns 50-100rs per client. She also sells flower chains on streets and works as a maid.

16) Kaveri: 28 years old. From Telegu naidu caste background. Had an arranged marriage at the age of 14 but at the time of my research is single. Has one main partner, sometimes others. Has done sex work for 1,5 years. Ishika's sister.

17) Komala: married but since widowed, lives with her one son. President of IFPEC. Occasional liaison of Zaima.

18) Kuntala: 24 years old. Completed 10th standard at school. Speaks Telegu as her first language. Had an arranged marriage at 15 and lives with her husband. They have 2 children together and look after a nephew. Has been doing sex work for 5 years but stopped working during my fieldwork. Peer Educator.

19) Leena: 27 years old. Completed 5th standard at school. Married at the age of 16 and lives with her husband. They have 2 children. Has been in sex work for 5 years full-time and earns 6500rs per month. Works also a maid.

20) Lavali: 32 years old. Studied till 8th standard at school. Married at the age of 18 but now remarried. Has 2 children. 12 years in sex work.

21) Mahadevi: 38 years old. Completed 10th standard at school. Married with 3 children. 5 years in sex work.

22) Manjula: about 50 years old. *Devadasi*, unmarried, lives alone but has partners. Looks after her sister's 4 children that she has adopted.

23) Maria: 18 years old, no schooling, unmarried, lives with her family. Her sister is a sex worker (Sheila).

24) Maya: 35 years old. Completed 12th standard at school. Was married at the age of 18 in a love marriage but separated. At the time of my research she has boyfriends. Has 2 children. Maya has been in sex work for 15 years, and works on a part time basis – her partners give money when ever she needs it. Peer Educator.

25) Mercy: 25 years old. From a Malayali background. Completed 9th standard at school. Had an arranged marriage, but widowed and lives alone. Has a child, but had a miscarriage during my fieldwork. Identifies as a lesbian. Has worked as a sex worker for 5 years part-time, earns 1000rs per client but also works in the film industry. Peer Educator.

26) Muyal: 35 years old. Completed 8th standard at school. Had a love marriage but at the time of my research had partners/ regulars. Has 2 children. Works also in films as a background actress. Peer Educator.

27) Madhu: 28 years old. No schooling. Madhu was as married at the age of 8 to a man much older than her, but separated since and at the time of my research lives with her boyfriend. Has 2 children who do not live with her. Has done sex work for 9 years, and also works in films and occasionally donates blood for money.

28) Neela: 34 years old. Completed 5th standard at school. Married at the age of 16 for the first time but separated, and had consecutive partners none of which lasted. Lives with her two daughters. Neela has been 12 years in sex work, earns about 200-300rs per client. Peer Educator.

29) Nidhi: 43 years old. Muslim. Studied till 8th standard. Married at the age of 16, also lives with her sister, and has 5 children. Pimp. Peer Educator.

30) Nitya: 34 years old. Comes from a naidu caste background. Married at the age of 13, but at the time of my research lives with a partner. Nitya is a full time sex worker and earns about 1000rs per week.

31) Payal: 34 years of age. Passed 5th standard. Had an arranged marriage and lives with her husband, 3 children.

32) Ponni: 30 years old. Finished 7th standard at school. Had an arranged married at the age of 17 and lives with her husband but also has a boyfriend/partner. 2 children. Has been to sex work for 6 months part-time, earns 400rs per month.

33) Pooja: married with 2 children. Peer Educator.

34) Pramila: 20ish. Pramila is unmarried and had an abortion during my fieldwork.

35) Pratima: about 50 years old. Married. Pratima runs a saving scheme for IFPEC. We only talk about work in our interviews.

36) Pugazh: 27 years old. Pugazh had a love marriage with a man from a lower caste at the age of 13. 2 children. Mother-in-law (Jeevitha) and sister-in-law (Joshita) sex workers. Has regular customers.

37) Revati: 38 years old. Unmarried, lives with her partner, and has 3 children. Has been in sex industry since childhood - was initially trafficked and then continued on her own. Peer Educator.

38) Rajitham: 28 years old. Was married but widowed and at the time of my research has partners. 3 children. Has been to sex work for 5 years but at the time of my research only pimps. HIV +.

39) Sheila: 14 years old. No schooling, unmarried and lives with her family. Sister is a sex worker (Maria).

40) Sevati: 29 years old. Sevati is single, lives with her sister but her partner stays with them at times. In sex work for 'long', and she works full-time. Peer Educator.

41) Sonali: 21 years old. Unmarried, lives with here sister who is a sex worker (Sevati). Whether she is a sex worker or not is ambiguous.

42) Sindhamani: in her 40s. Sindhamani was married to a government worker but widowed, has 3 children. She says she is not a sex worker, but works as a Peer Educator.

43) Sasika: 38 years old. First marriage with a relative at the age of 16, but then widowed. Lives with her 2nd husband with whom she had a love marriage. Has been in sex work on a part-time basis and also works in the film industry. She has one daughter who is also a sex worker (Vanita).

44) Sharita: 35 years old. Completed 10th standard at school. Lives with a boyfriend. Has 2 children. She has been in sex work for 2 years, works part-time, and earns 5000rs per month.

45) Sheelamma: about 50 years old. From a landowning family in Kerala. Married but divorced and lives alone. Has 5 children who were brought up in a convent and by relatives, she has no contact with them. Has been in sex work for several decades, and also a pimp. Peer Educator and central figure in IFPEC.

46) Sangita: 23 years of age, Muslim, no schooling. Sangita had initially a love marriage but separated from him and has a partner. She has 3 children. Works in sex work full-time and earns about 2000rs per month.

47) Swasti: 35 years of age. Married at the age of 15 but had a divorce, and lives with a partner. Swasti has 3 children. Swasti was initially trafficked but then continued working on her own in sex work full-time earning about 1500rs per month. Also works in an export company. Peer Educator.

48) Sudevi: 35 years old. Completed 5th standard at school. Sudevi married at the age of 15 and has 2 children. Attends regular clients.

49) Sripriya: 35 years old. Comes from a chettiyar caste. Sripriya's paternal uncles were *devadasis*. Had an arranged marriage at the age of 16 but separated and at the time of my research she lived with her partner. Has 2 children. She has been doing sex work for about 10 years, but had stopped at the time of my fieldwork. Peer Educator.

50) Swarna: 36 years of age. Completed 8th standard at school. Married to a lover, has a daughter. Had been in sex work for 20 years and used to work on a part time basis, but during my fieldwork she had stopped. HIV +.

51) Sindhu: 41 years old. Married at the age of 15 but separated and at the time of my research has a new partner. Sindhu has 4 children, one of whom is disabled and lives in a care home funded by an NGO. Has been to sex work for 13 years, also works as a maid.

52) Uma: 25 years old. Uma lives with her husband with whom she had a love marriage. They had 5 children out of which only one survived. Has a tumultuous affair during my fieldwork that leads her to pour kerosene over herself. Has been in sex work for 5 years full-time and also pimps. Peer Educator.

53) Vanita: 17 years old. Completed 5th standard at school. Unmarried. Has been in sex work for 2 years and works part-time earning about1000rs/ client. Vanita also works as a maid and goes to film shootings. Mother is also a sex worker (Sasita).

54) Vanni: 38 years old. Married but lives alone, has 1 child. Vanni has been a sex worker for 3 years working part time. She didn't do sex work during my fieldwork but works in an export company.

55) Vasumathi: 38 years old. Vasumathi was forced to marry a man who had raped her. He was violent towards her during their marriage and she had a divorce. At the time of my fieldwork she lived alone with her son. She has been in sex work for 9 years, but then stopped and works as Peer Educator.

56) Zaima: about 50 years old. Muslim. Married with 2 children, lives with her husband, has also female partners (occasional liaison of Komala). Zaima has been in sex work since she was 13. At the time of my research she occasionally still does sex work but predominantly pimps, works as a counselor in one of the NGOs, and in the film industry. Occasional liaison of Komala. Zaima's mother was a sex worker.

APPENDIX 2 - List of NGOs

APAC – funding and research

Sidelining the government, APAC (AIDS Prevention and Control Society) privately funds HIV prevention in Chennai, Tamil Nadu and in Pondicherry. APAC receives its funds directly from USAID, and it then distributes the funds to the NGOs that work in the field, such as CHES, ICWO and SIAAP. APAC itself does not do any practical work with HIV prevention, but it provides guidelines and capacity building for the NGOs that it funds. The focus of APAC is broadly on NGOs that work with women in prostitution, tourists, truckers, migrants, young men, and slum dwellers. APAC collects survey-based statistics of HIV-related findings every year, called the HIV Risk Behaviour Surveillance Survey. Year 2004 was the ninth 'wave' of the survey. The ideas and practices based on which APAC operates are very similar to those of the government, such as promoting safe sex and STD/HIV testing (with the exception that NGOs also promote abstinence), resonating the US government's official (right wing, neo-Christian) line for HIV prevention and reproductive policies in their aid programmes. These guidelines were not, however, taken very seriously by APAC staff or by the NGOs that they funded. APAC's head office is based in the VHS (Voluntary Health Service) hospital in Tharamani.

I interviewed Dr Devashish Dutta who coordinated the Women in Prostitution project at the APAC office, 7th Feb 2005.

SIAAP – selling sex is work

SIAAP (South India AIDS Action Programme) is an NGO that works throughout Tamil Nadu but has its headquarters in a very posh area of Chennai called Thiruvanmiyur. The SIAPP office is very polished, with impressive new technology, computers and other assets, and all of the SIAAP staff speak English well. The project was started by the initiative of Shyamala Nataraj, a journalist and activist who was appalled when Tamil sex workers who were deported from Mumbai to Chennai were imprisoned after they tested positive for HIV. SIAAP started in the late-1980s, but was officially registered in 1992. The organisation is funded by APAC, Netherlands Stiching Gestalt Foundation and UNICEF.

SIAAP has two main projects side by side, one for empowering sex workers and one for training counsellors who work in the areas of HIV and sexual and reproductive health. In 2003, with regard to its mission of empowering sex workers, SIAAP began allowing the sex workers to be in charge of their own so-called *sanghams* (societies) thereby shifting some of the power from the organisation to the sex workers themselves, suggesting a change towards a more community-based orientation. SIAAP now only facilitates the *sanghams* by providing funding and giving intellectual support. The project secretary tells me that this has worked everywhere else in Tamil Nadu, except for in Chennai.

She believes that this failure is due to the existence of other, competing organisations who pay incentives to the sex workers for attending, which SIAAP does not do. Besides this, SIAAP does advocacy work and promotes health camps for testing and counselling for sex workers generally.

Of all the NGOs in Chennai, the rhetoric of human rights was most embedded in my conversations with the staff of this NGO. SIAAP promotes the sexual and human rights of sex workers, MSMs and people living with HIV/AIDS. When discussing the organisation with its project secretary, she spoke of sex workers' right to sexuality and to their freedom to choose what to do with their bodies, free from stigma. SIAAP is also a protagonist of the ideas that doing sex work is work and that everyone should have the right to do sex work without being stigmatised or the fear of HIV. These ideas, however, are not presented e.g. on their Web site[26]. Neither did I observe any actions toward promoting a change regarding the legality of sex work. Sex work is still technically illegal in India, and while SIAAP came closest to championing sex workers' rights and promoting sex work as work, even they did not push ideas about decriminalising or legalising sex work at the time of my fieldwork.

I did not visit SIAAP very often, for the simple reason that the members of staff were busy and because they did not really do any fieldwork that I could have participated in. I interviewed some of their staff and peer educators, who echoed the same ideas about incentives and the need for acknowledged sexual and human rights for its community members. Some members of staff critiqued SIAAP for being 'heavy' in terms of organisation (i.e. being compartmental and lacking organisational mobility). SIAAP 'community members' praised how good the training and awareness had done to them – which was not unusual, however.

As part of the participant observation at the SIAAP office, I interviewed five members of staff.

YRG CARE – medical research

YRG CARE (Y.R. Gaitorande Center for Aids Research and Education) was started by the initiative of Dr. Suniti Solomon, a microbiologist in the VHS hospital who identified the first HIV infection in Chennai, India in 1986. Since 1993, YRG CARE has worked in cooperation with John Hopkins University in the US to research HIV and promote HIV prevention. Many of these projects are reported through academic publishing (predominantly in medical science journals relating to HIV, but for ethnographic and social scientific articles, see: e.g.; Go et al. 2003; Go et al. 2004; Madhivanan et al. 2002; Sivaram et al. 2004a; Sivaram et al. 2004b; Solomon et al. 1998; Solomon et al. 2004). Funding for YRG CARE comes from e.g. APAC, VHS, Ford Foundation, and John Hopkins.

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[26] http://www.siaapindia.org/index.htm. Accessed 12th July 2007.

YRG CARE's sex workers' and clients' projects' office is in an impressive air-conditioned building in Egmore, which contains the facilities for a doctor, nurses, counsellors, several fieldworkers and administrative workers. They also have an office next to the VHS hospital in Tharamani, where the medical HIV tests are analysed and which contains a ward and counselling rooms where the actual work with people who are HIV positive is done. This organisation does not hire any sex workers for its projects.

YRG CARE trains community-opinion-leaders to promote awareness among their communities (these workers are very similar to peer education, though called by a different name), sensitises them about HIV, provides health camps in which high risk groups can be tested for HIV and STDs (the results of which are sent to John Hopkins for statistical purposes), Their latest project involved research and testing for clients in alcohol shops. YRG CARE has harnessed alcohol shop owners to part take in the project, and every fifth client in the alcohol shop has the opportunity to be interviewed and taken for a health test. Most people agree. The findings for this project were not published at the time of writing this, but a counsellor estimated to me that eight in 10 of those interviewed had had sex with sex workers and that three in 10 had had sex with other men.

As part of the participant observation at two YRG CARE offices (one in Egmore, one in Tharamani) I interviewed 7 members of staff, including the 4 fieldworkers, the project manager and two junior managers

SWCWS – meetings every Tuesday

SWCWS (Social Welfare Centre for the Weaker Section) is a small NGO in the north of Chennai, in Kaviarasu Kannadasan Nagar. SWCWS has one big room as its office, in which a corner is divided off by frames to serve as the office for Mr Subbaiah, who runs the organisation. SWCWS is funded by CAPACS and has a side effort of providing support for the blind (which was the original mission of this NGO). Immediately after the Boxing Day Tsunami, much of the organisation's work was directed to providing relief to those who were affected. SWCWS has one counsellor and four fieldworkers, two of whom are sex workers. Except for Mr Subbaiyah and one of the fieldworkers, all the staff members are women. The counsellor (who is Mr Subbaiyah's wife), one of the women fieldworkers (who is her sister) and the one male fieldworker are the only staff members who speak English.

This NGO's sex workers' project, which was started in 2002, sometimes came across as a money making effort because of its. strong emphasis on the indoctrination of HIV and STDs. In the meantime, the routine, based on which the project is run, is probably the most organised and systematic of the NGOs in terms of meeting sex workers with a schedule. Every Tuesday, sex workers come to spend the day in the SWCWS office. They sit around a big table and discuss things like relevant STDs and their symptoms. New peer educators are indoctrinated to (and old peer educators are quizzed about) STDs and condom

use. The importance of networking and raising awareness among other sex workers is stressed. When the time for the annual review came, I observed that the sex workers were pressed on all these realms of knowledge, as well as the complicated name of the NGO; in particular, one fieldworker who had a sex-working history scolded the peer educators ruthlessly to make them learn these things. (I elaborate this practice of indoctrination, which is related to quotas and the use of incentives, which are a ubiquitous practice in HIV prevention in Chennai in chapter 5). In the meantime, not many social issues were discussed related to e.g. police harassment of sex workers or the human rights of sex workers.

When I was conducting participant observation at SWCWS, I interviewed the head of the project and had informal communications with two fieldworkers.

ICWO – working for the sex workers

ICWO (Indian Community Welfare Organisation) was my first point of entry to the field, and it turned out to be the NGO that I spent the most time with. ICWO runs varying projects, which all target at HIV prevention. Most of my interviews in this NGO were informal and included the project secretary and 6 members of staff.

The organisation started in 1991 from the findings of Oostvogels (reported in Asthana and Oostvogles 1996). Indeed, the project coordinator, Hariharan Sir, had been a part of the data collection process. ICWO has projects for sex workers, as well as homosexual men. Funding to ICWO comes from various sources: APAC (which works with sex workers and clients in Mahabalipuram), CAPACS (a gay men's project in Chennai), and Action Aid (for women in sex work and their children). During the year of my fieldwork, they started to provide food for families affected by HIV and opened a clinic on the premises of ICWO funded by Bill and Melinda Gates foundation. Altogether, ICWO has about 25 staffers working on the different projects. The MSM project hired mostly members of that community, whereas there was only one sex worker on the staff of the sex workers' project. The staff mostly consisted of middle-class men and women, with perhaps slightly more men, many of whom had training as social workers.

Compared to the other NGOs, ICWO had the most contact with the sex workers and had the most things going on. On its premises could always be found some sex workers relaxing or filling in paperwork (as peer educators were obliged to report their activities). Hariharan Sir said that their breakthrough with being able to attract sex workers came after they implemented a development programme for the sex workers' children, the Udhayam project, following the initiative of Action Aid.

Hariharan actively promoted issues regarding sex work in the media. He has developed 'tricks' to attract and convey the message of HIV awareness; for example, on 24th Sept 2004, he had tiny grains of rice and other pulses carved

messages about condoms to them and then invited journalists to write about it ('the world's smallest HIV prevention message') (e.g. the *Hindustani Times*, 7 Oct 2004); in 2002, ICWO conducted a survey of sex workers and, when it was launched, this was reported in *The Hindu* (20 May 2002); *The Hindu* reported about an ICWO project paid for by the Elton John Foundation to provide food for children affected by HIV (3 Nov 2004); and a self-defence project for the sex workers was reported on 5 Sept 2004 in *The Hindu*.

ICWO operates in a house in a residential area in Anna Nagar West, with three small rooms as offices (of which the biggest is Hariharan's personal office) and one big room in the middle of the house that acts as the community room for any functions. Over the year of my fieldwork, ICWO expanded across the street. Bill and Melinda Gates foundation funded a laboratory for sex workers that is based in an office opposite from the original ICWO premises, with new rooms for socialising and counselling. Later, the MSM project, which had been secluded in its own little office away from others, moved officially to a new office in another flat across the street.

The staff of the MSM project criticised the rest of the staff for stigmatising them. They felt that the fact that the rest of the staff did not eat with them or share their food with them reflected the stigmatisation of homosexual men and transgender people. When I asked the other staff about this, the seclusion was waved away with the explanation of lack of space. The coordinator of the MSM project, Saroj (also known as Lalitha), was an important character in my fieldwork. Not only was he an invaluable informant of the MSM community, but we also became friends outside of work. Saroj spoke excellent English, which many of the other MSM staff members did not, and was very keen to tell me about the MSM community. He often accused Hariharan of keeping all the money to himself, and said that the whole project was corrupt. I was unable to get through to any financial records that would have suggested either way.

CHES – loose morals of sex-working women pollute innocent children

CHES (Community Health Education Society) was started by Dr Manorama, a paediatrician, when she discovered a number of children who were HIV-positive. As their numbers grew, with the help of USAID, she started an orphanage for children affected by HIV. During my discussion with Dr Manorama, there was an undertone that blamed and judged women's lewdness for infecting their children. Women were presented as guilty for causing this grief on their families. Dr Manorama is very sympathetic to children, and awareness raising videos made by CHES are emotional to the level of being troubling – such as when a baby dies in front of the camera. *'Loose morality is behind this'*, she told me.

Sure enough, my visit to the orphanage was disheartening. Children were mostly toddlers but there were also few infants and teenagers. The children were well-fed and had toys to play with, and the food they ate was more healthy and nutritious than food in regular orphanages … and yet, the children

slept on the floor and there was hardly any furniture. Some children had developed HIV. Those children who become HIV-negative are given up to adoption. HIV-positive children, or those that are seen too old for adoption, stay in the orphanage. Although the children were well-fed and seemed to be well looked after, they came across as touch-deprived. They would cling on you, piling up to sit on your lap. At one time, I had five children on my lap and others hanging from by back, and this was not a game. When I had asked the organisation what they needed, they asked for nappies and underwear for all 21 children.

In order to prevent HIV and not only deal with the causes, in 1998 CHES established a project for the sex workers that aims to prevent mother-child transmission. At the time of my research, there were 11 people working in the sex workers' project based in Kodambakkam, on top of which they have a more general women's health project. Now, they mainly run with the funding from APAC. The project has three counsellors and four fieldworkers, of whom two actually have contact with the community and go to do field visits. They hire no community members as their staff, but they do have peer educators, many of whom complain they do not get paid what the funding bodies designate for them (i.e. that CHES cuts their salary).

At the time of my fieldwork, the sex worker's project was not run efficiently; for example, the fieldworkers rarely had contact with the sex workers, and CHES rarely arranged any activities or meetings for the sex workers. I attended meetings for sex workers that were erratically run and that seemed to be determined by visits by guests from outside, or by the necessary annual programmes. Despite the passivity to their sex workers' programme, the project coordinator is very enthusiastic and critical – Mr Muthupandian showed brilliant ethnographic skill in being able to link together everyday activity and structural critique.

As part of my participant observation I interviewed 3 members of staff, including the project manager at CHES office and visited the orphanage run by them.

IFPEC – women's collective

In Calcutta, sex workers have been able to mobilise themselves to create encouraging results for HIV prevention and for sex workers' empowerment. Sex workers in Chennai have not mobilised, but the closest attempt to it is IFPEC (Indira Female Peer Educators' Collective). This movement was not initiated by the women themselves, but by a human rights activist, Ms Angeline, and by ICWO project leader Hariharan Sir. About 500 women have signed up as members of IFPEC, and the board members are trying to promote more women to join. The argument goes that, when the NGOs loose their funding or move to some other area, the women should still have some support from each other. At the time of the research, IFPEC worked as the offshoot of ICWO, had an office on the ICWO premises, and practically all the

programmes run by IFPEC are managed by ICWO. I see that what has inhibited the sex workers of Chennai from mobilising is the lack of a shared space, a red light district where they could actively organise themselves and affect improvement by banning all sex without condoms, as the sex workers in Calcutta have done. I interviewed the president, treasurer, secretary and number of the members of this collective.

Other relevant NGOs visited:

MCCSS (Madras Christian Council of Social Service): 1 interview with a member of staff at their office, plus a visit to their rehabilitation home for children of sex workers, 7th June 2005

MSDS (Madras Social Development Service): 1 interview with a staff member at their office, plus a focus group meeting with peer educators followed by field visits to their homes, 22nd-23rd Feb 2005

Other people interviewed:

Ms Angeline, a human rights lawyer, whom I interviewed at her home, 3rd March 2005

Mr Arunmugasam, the assistant commissioner of the anti-vice squad, the police department that deals with trafficking, at the police station in Chennai, 12th April 2005

Mr Jeebaraj, a human rights and anti-trafficking activist, at his office 'Just Trust' in NSK Nagar, 15th March 2005

Mr Pari, a coordinator at TNSACS, at TNSACS office in Egmore, 1st May 2005

Ms Uma from CAPACS, at her home as well as at the Madras School of Social Work, 31st Sept 2004 and 4th April 2005

APPENDIX 3

Two women narrated fold stories that subvert the concept of chastity:

'There is nothing like the concept of Putthinee – the goddess who is chaste – that is not possible. If you are born a woman then you are a whore. You can never be pure, chaste and so on. Because men have different thing like they can go to so many people but they are still supposed to be pure in the sense that there is nothing against them. But if a woman does this then she gets the name of the whore and all that. There is one story you know, Shakthi and Shiva? Shiva is also called Eswarn, Shakthi is called Eswari. They are husband and wife. Shiva is married to Paravathi. Paravathi, another name is Shakthi, another name is Eswari. So when Eswarn and Eswari were there, there was this lady who was a whore and that day she did not get any customers and the children were all like starving and all. So what happened she was praying to god. Please god help me, something like that. So what happened, Eswarn took the form of a man, came to her, paid her and came back. This Eswari saw and was so angry with them, she said "how can you do this? You went and helped a whore?" He said " oh so you think like this" and he kept quiet. So what happened next. They have this ritual wedding every some years and for that wedding she has a gold sari, which should be totally without any blemish, nothing. But what happened was that it was torn by a rat and Eswari didn't know what to do because if something is torn in that sari that means that the entire family will be destroyed or something like that so she was thinking ok what to do? She took the sari to a person who makes these saris ok. So she went to him and said like eh, please make it proper take of that so he said "ok I'll do it, I don't have a problem but then you have to spend a night with me", this man, the weaver asked her. "You have to spend a night with me." So she said "you know what? I'm a goddess and you are asking me such questions?" and she was so angry she went back. But then she had only one day before the wedding and she had to do something. So she went to the weaver and said "you make it proper and I will be with you for one day". So what happened after that, he made the sari ok and then they went inside some room and she started to remove her clothes. The man, the weaver he told her "stop" and he turned himself into Eswarn. He told, "see come on. That woman, she is a whore for her children's sake, she didn't want them to starve so she was doing it. But you wanted to whore yourself just for the sake of a sari then tell me who's worse?" So that is one story. There is another one. There was one saint and he was sitting in a place and praying. But there was a whore in the village she did not have any husband, or the husband had died or something and she had some children to feed so she was doing you know this sex work and that. And every time she goes, the saint keeps pebbles separately, she went with this man and that and these pebbles became like a mountain over time. After a long time what happens is this woman, her children they grew up, got married and she died. And she went to heaven and was in a palak [palanquin] – you know four people used to carry, I forgot the name. So she went in that to the heaven. But the saint when he died he was taken in one stretcher and there was nobody to carry it. So what happened was that he was so angry he went to Eswarn and

said why the poor woman got such good treatment, and I who am always thinking about you, I got such bad treatment. And the god told him. She was whoring herself for her children and she was looking after her own thing, but you are the one looking what she is doing every time and you're thoughts were more impure, very impure because her when she was doing it she was not thinking about that, she was thinking about me and she was asking me "please forgive me I'm doing this for my children". But you are the one who kept this mountain of stones thinking where she is going, what she is doing? So who is worse?'

'There was a woman who was married to a man and she was so chaste that she was able to mould a pot out of clay and carry water in it. Then one day on her way to collect water, she saw a man, actually she didn't see the guy, she saw his reflection, she saw somebody godlike and she thought oh how handsome. There and then only then her clay pot and chastity were broken and all that. So that time she did not see him directly she just saw his reflection in the water and she thought for a minute he looks so good. And for that her chastity was broken. Nobody is like that, nobody's pure.'