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Rescue and Rehabilitation: A Critical Analysis of Sex Workers' Antitrafficking Response in India

In 2007, when Priya was sixteen years old, she ran away from home with her boyfriend because of troubles in her family. Her stepfather was harassing her, complaining that she was a “burden to feed.” Shortly thereafter, she began working in a brothel, about one hundred miles from where she was born. Because she is underage, a local sex worker collective, registered as a community-based organization (CBO), removed her from the brothel and registered her with the local police. The police returned her to her parents and required them to sign a letter indicating that they would stop harassing her. As with most sex worker CBOs, the peer educators focused on reducing HIV transmission, largely by addressing structural barriers to preventing transmission—such as social stigma and police violence. The CBO did not provide direct follow-up services to ensure Priya’s well-being, since the peers felt the police would harass them if they did so. Instead, CBO peers kept a watchful eye, observing whether or not Priya appeared in the red-light district. Over the past five years, many similar CBOs are now being called on to lead antitrafficking work.

Sex workers' response to trafficking

The increasing worldwide focus on sex workers in global development programs has highlighted the significant and complex relationship between HIV prevention and antitrafficking programs. This article explores sex worker participation in developing responses to underage sex work in the Indian states of Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal. It shows that conven-

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tional antitrafficking and HIV prevention programs, while equally important, may have contradictory and competing aims.

The feminist antitrafficking approaches and theoretical arguments are varied and complicated. This article does not explore all the positions. Rather, it focuses on two dominant arguments—advanced by anti-sex work and sex work feminists—that have influenced feminist practice. The anti-sex work feminist position has become institutionalized as the dominant antitrafficking paradigm adopted by governments worldwide. This position conflates trafficking with prostitution and thereby views sex workers as victims. Legalizing or otherwise legitimizing prostitution is believed to fuel sexual exploitation (CATW 2008). Anti-sex work feminists support policies that use grassroots groups to advocate for, rescue, and assist women in leaving the sex industry (CATW, Equality Now, and European Women's Lobby 2008). In the dominant antitrafficking approach, men and traffickers are blamed, women are seen as victims (Brown 2000; Wilson 2000), and the notion of prostitution as work is contested (Leidholdt 1999).

In contrast, sex work feminists believe that constructing sex workers as victims—particularly in economically deprived contexts—relinquishes the opportunity to allow sex workers to overcome structural barriers (Shah 2004; Blankenship et al. 2006; Shanon et al. 2009). Ratna Kapur (2001) argues that representations of third-world women as perpetually underprivileged and marginalized equate choice with wealth and coercion with poverty. Consequently, no space remains to recognize and validate the choices that women make when confronted with limited economic opportunities. As Jo Doezema (2001) notes, “In claiming the ‘injured prostitute’ as the ontological and epistemological basis of feminist truth, [antitrafficking feminist work] forecloses the possibility of political confrontation with sex workers who claim to have a different experience” (28). Sex work feminists recognize the importance of combating human trafficking and argue that to help women who are forced into the trade, antitrafficking measures must be disconnected from sex work that takes place between consenting individuals (Sullivan 2003; Miriam 2005). According to Doezema (2002), the argument that women cannot consent to commercial sexual interactions reflects antifeminist ideas about female sexuality and, particularly, women's sexual autonomy. Sex work feminists acknowledge that coercing minors into underage sex work is a criminal offense (Seshu 2005; Durbar Antitrafficking 2009) and that entirely different interventions are required. However, sex work feminists criticize government and nongovernmental organization (NGO)-supported antitrafficking approaches that use rescue models as a foundation of their

work.¹ What the study brings to bear, considering the importance of both feminist critiques, is that sex workers engaged in antitrafficking work are neither victims nor resistance leaders in this domain. Specifically, they are not allowed access to state and social infrastructures to effectively lead change efforts. Rather, sex worker CBOs negotiate choices within constraints of socially and economically deprived contexts.

This article presents research on the efforts of sex worker community-based groups to address their HIV-prevention and antitrafficking mandates as well as the different and often incongruous approaches CBOs have taken in these two efforts; it considers each approach within structural interventionist and feminist frameworks. My argument points out the contradictions in the two mandates since the conventional antitrafficking approach is problematic. Most antitrafficking programs do not address structural barriers—such as poverty and vulnerability in source sites, police violence, and criminalization of sex work—or present a nuanced understanding of desire and underage bodies. Therefore, their approach does not employ an expansive understanding of sex worker engagement beyond the limited realm of the red-light district. Sex workers' participation relies on spaces outside their immediate, endangered world, which CBOs have little or no access to. Sex workers are absent, or have little say, in a state response led by law enforcement and by women-and-child-development departments. Moreover, sex workers do not engage with socioeconomic concerns affecting vulnerable communities at source sites. They are not able to influence social norms related to gender and sexuality, particularly when it comes to desire in relation to women's bodies. The problems identified in the sex worker antitrafficking response appear to have less to do with sex workers and their collectives themselves and more to do with an overall failure to give sex workers a critical voice in a response that addresses structural barriers to change.

Sex workers' participation in antitrafficking response: Restricted to endangered spaces

The HIV epidemic, increased migration, and HIV response have helped transform Indian sex workers from an invisible and largely insignificant group to a target of health, welfare, and surveillance programs (Ghosh 2004). In the early 1990s, sex workers also emerged as agents of change and as part of an HIV-prevention solution grounded in structural inter-

¹ See Saunders (2000), Doezema (2001), Network of Sex Work Projects (2002), and Jayasree (2004).

vention models (Parker, Easton, and Klein 2000). As a result of their relative success, sex worker CBOs are now central to the government's five-year HIV/AIDS response strategy (National AIDS Control Organization 2006).

Raid and rescue operations are a key aspect of government interventions to address trafficking. These operations are generally carried out by law enforcement officers, such as the assistant commissioner of police. A raid and rescue team enters an identified brothel unannounced and removes underage girls, and women, by force. The girls and women are identified through the use of decoy customers. Ideally, they are then interviewed and provided with health care services. Afterward, the girls are placed in a government or other officially certified safe house. According to the 2003 National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) report (Nair 2003), this approach raises concerns related to state corruption, including bribes, extortion, sexual coercion, and complicity on the part of the police. Moreover, rescues can be traumatizing, and girls face the risk of abuse in the safe house and can be re trafficked (Ministry of Women and Child Development 2010).

The government of Andhra Pradesh has developed a campaign promoting prevention, rescue, legal reforms, rehabilitation, health care services, and education. The Department of Women Development and Child Welfare launched and carried out the campaign at the district level. Similarly, in West Bengal, the government supported the creation of advisory bodies under the Immoral Trafficking Prevention Act (ITPA) at the state and district levels.² The rescued girls in West Bengal are placed in NGO-run short-stay homes and are given education, health counseling, and vocational training.

Although government and NGO efforts are well intentioned, the raid and rescue approach has not demonstrated effective results. One study shows that raid and rescue actions often result in repeat trafficking or in increased debt for the sex worker if the rescued woman is bailed out by the brothel owner (Bandyopadhyay et al. 2004). The 2003 NHRC report

² The ITPA is the main legislative tool for preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and underage sex work in India. In its current language, the ITPA does not criminalize sex work but rather penalizes soliciting, brothel keeping, sex work, and commercial sex if carried out in public or notified areas. New ITPA amendments, under consideration, seek to criminalize clients of sex workers and expand the definition of trafficking to include anyone engaged in sex work, including consenting adults. Initiated in 2006, the proposed amendments introduce new clauses and definitions to intensify criminal sanctions against sex work. All entry into sex work will be read as trafficking, and "trafficked" sex workers would be subjected to coercive exit measures such as raid and rescue operations.

shows a significant number of repeat trafficking episodes: among rescued women ($n = 526$), 17.5 percent had been to rescue homes once before, 1.8 percent twice before, and 6.6 percent more than twice before. Only 74.1 percent were first-time entrants. As many as 145 respondents (25.8 percent of the total) had been provisionally rescued. That is, they were taken to rescue homes and shown in the records as having been rehabilitated, yet they had to be rescued again. In other words, they returned to the brothels from which they had been rescued to continue working.

Methods

To obtain the most reliable responses, I selected community-based groups that had been operating for at least two years in Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal, in areas where the states had focused antitrafficking resources. Interviews consisted of sixteen focus group discussions with CBOs and 118 open-ended interviews with sex workers and NGO staff. Investigators used the interviews to gather examples and stories of girls who were targets of the antitrafficking interventions led by sex worker community groups. The unit of analysis included the CBOs ($n = 6$) and cases of rescued minors ($n = 41$). Investigators developed the sample using a snowball method and from there proceeded via a case-mapping approach. Individuals affected by or involved in identified cases were interviewed. Multiple perspectives from those involved in each case were collected to compile a single, summarized, case. Each case was condensed in matrix format in order to make clear the patterns and themes at work in the rescue intervention. Respondents included CBO members, NGO staff, law enforcement officers, brothel owners, and staff from safe homes. Because the trafficked girls were not available to interview, cases were narrated by sex worker peers and others involved, including brothel madams, police, and CBO and NGO representatives. The lack of trafficked girls' perspectives presents a study limitation.

Investigators used a matrix-based approach to data analysis in which coded text from the transcriptions was extracted and then interpreted via comparison among cases (Miles and Huberman 1994). The matrix displays contained condensed data that helped investigators to draw conclusions based on patterns and themes. This reduced the possibility of selective reading. Interviews quoted in this article were conducted by Veronica Magar in Guntukal, Hyderabad, Kolkata, Rajamundry, and Vijaywada in 2008. All respondents spoke on condition of anonymity. Interviews not conducted in English were translated by local translators. Interview transcripts are on file with the author.

Findings

Source sites and migration

According to the forty-one cases reported by CBO members, the median age of girls rescued from the brothels was fifteen years old. The youngest girl was twelve years old and the oldest was eighteen years old. However, on rare occasions, women up to thirty-three years old have been rescued. Often clients pay more for younger girls. “Aunties,” or older sex workers, may charge between 20 and 300 Indian rupees (US 40¢–\$6), whereas younger girls can charge up to 2,000 rupees (\$40). A virgin girl is generally sold to a brothel for 20,000–50,000 rupees (\$400–\$1,000). The weak economic position of aging sex workers and the market demand for younger virgin girls are motivating factors for aging sex workers to find younger girls to support them. As one CBO member reported, “[aging women] motivate other girls and become madams. They talk to any young one, servants who have a lower salary . . . daughters of sex workers who are tempted with jewelry and mobile phones. She will ask other sex workers to find young girls, virgins. Virgins are the best, the most wanted ones.”

When asked why male clients want underage virgin girls in place of experienced mature women, many sex workers reply that this is essential to clients’ individual preferences. When asked why CBOs did not use behavior change and communication methodologies to alter men’s perceptions of what is desirable, many laughed and dismissed the possibility. They reported that such a program would be unthinkable, largely because their communities, as well as their donors in the HIV/AIDS development sector, would be critical. Not surprisingly, when a public health practitioner was asked why such behavior change initiatives were not considered, he replied, “Changing men’s behavior [in relation to desire for mature women] would put the HIV program at risk. We would get criticism from religious people, our society, and those groups who do not like sex worker groups.”

Thirty-eight of the girls migrated to red-light districts from situations of abject need as a result of family debt from dowry demands, gambling, or family crisis. Specifically, almost one-third of rescued girls had not been living with either parent at the time when they migrated. Of the thirty-seven girls with at least one living parent, a third of their fathers were not contributing to the family income because of injury, alcoholism, family abandonment, or death. Many of the girls lived with siblings or extended family members.

The migration trail from home to brothel in all forty-one cases consisted of four primary scenarios, in keeping with John Frederick’s (1998) definition of soft trafficking (see table 1). In over one-third of the cases

Table 1. Migration Trail: Broker Source, Broker Involvement, and Destination

Broker at Source	Number (n = 41)	Source Location	Broker at Source or Destination	Destination
Uncle/aunt/brother-in-law/cousin/grandparent/father/neighbor	15	Village	→ Sold to local broker (village)	→ Brothel
Boyfriend/husband	9	Village	→	Brothel
Mother (sex worker)	6	Red-light district	→	Brothel
Girl/woman runs away from home (no broker)	5	Village	→ Bus or train station (boyfriend is broker)	→ Brothel
Unclear	6			

($n = 15$), a family member sold the girl to a local broker, usually an *auto-wallah* (driver of a three-wheeled taxi), who in turn sold her to a brothel. In another one-quarter of the cases ($n = 9$), she eloped with a local boy. After a period of about two or three months, he sold her to a brothel. The new husband acted as a broker in these cases and sold the girl to another local broker or directly to a brothel. In six cases, the girl's mother was a sex worker and sold her to a neighboring brothel, often because she herself was in debt and her earning potential, as an aging sex worker, had greatly diminished. According to one CBO member, "This is how the daughters get involved in sex work. . . . If there is an economic crisis at home, it is more common. Poor sex workers are tempted. Those who save money, plan, and invest . . . it is different. These are few, but they are more stable and will avoid [sex work] for their daughters."

Another five cases involved girls who befriended a broker on the bus or at the train station where they arrived after running away from home. The broker then captured and sold the girl to a brothel. In two cases, girls were sold to a brothel by their husbands, from their marital village. In one case, the girl's husband deserted her and her parents arranged for her to migrate. Aside from these cases, five other narratives revealed that community members sold girls to brothels for profit once they determined that the girls' families were destitute or had no strong kinship ties. In one case, a father sold his daughter to a broker to pay off debts. In another case, a local transgendered person living and earning money through sex work sold a girl to a local broker after befriending her over a period of several weeks.

The forty-one case narratives were reported solely by CBO members because family and community members at source sites could not be

interviewed. Therefore, it is not clear whether the family was complicit or if the girl had prior knowledge of their intent.

CBO antitrafficking interventions

CBOs manage underage sex work cases with varying levels of quality and intensity, depending on what is feasible in terms of their time and geographic distance from where the girls migrated. In contrast to the conventional antitrafficking model, CBOs usually begin negotiations with brothel owners, family, and in most cases police only after engaging in rescue work. Two of the six CBOs interviewed for this study had developed self-regulatory boards consisting of CBO members and state actors who assess the legal concerns of a new entrant, such as her age and whether she is willingly entering the profession.

Why sex worker-run groups address underage sex work

All six CBOs reported two primary motives for addressing underage sex work. The first stems largely from a desire to overcome stigma. As one CBO leader stated, “The world has the false idea that sex workers are only responsible to engage more and more younger girls in the trade . . . so we decided to show the world that we are not that. We want them to see that we are not bad, we are like them. This is more important to us, and we support the [ITPA] law.” CBO members expressed a longing for the “world to see” that sex workers are not immoral, criminal, and corrupt, as they believe the public perceives them to be. By focusing on the illegal aspect of underage sex work, they aspire to change widely held biases against sex workers. Accordingly, many CBO members support the law that prohibits underage sex work. All the CBO members interviewed agreed that girls should not work until they are adults. They believe that once a woman is eighteen, she should be able to choose whether to enter the sex industry.

A second, equally important motive for engaging in antitrafficking work relates to sex workers’ willingness to challenge issues that compromise their rights to safety, health, and well-being. As one lawyer reported, “Many see trafficking as no different from violence by police or local ruffians. Setting ‘age’ and ‘willingness’ as qualifying criteria is a way of demanding control over their working lives.” As an expression of individual and collective agency, antitrafficking measures are a significant component of CBOs’ portfolios. According to CBOs, police and NGO interventions are flawed, and their motivation is inspired by the government’s failed attempts to combat trafficking through rescue methods. CBO members state that the government, through law enforcement and

the Department of Women Development and Child Welfare, not only is ineffective but also causes unnecessary harm. When describing the evolution of CBO members' work with minors, one CBO leader stated, "The marginal community people, those girls, minors, will talk more freely [with us] than state powers. Under brothel madams and the police, she has no rights and does not have the power to say no. To prevent this, we now do antitrafficking work." As this quotation illustrates, CBOs feel that sex workers can do a better job than the state at addressing underage sex work. Despite commitments to protect migrant sex workers' human rights, state actions indicate otherwise. Antitrafficking measures lead to repression in the form of restrictions on movement for women, increased surveillance of sex workers, and the forced return of migrant sex workers (Doezema 2002).

Sex worker CBO interventions

CBO investigations are typically led by sex workers who are trained as peer educators. In this capacity, they are generally recognized and appreciated by brothel owners, pimps, and police for HIV-prevention support in the community. Peer educators often use the same HIV networks to limit underage sex work. They pride themselves on their ability to build relationships with multiple players who have a legitimate stake in the problem, particularly with the girls themselves. It is through these relationships that peer educators often gain unrestricted access to sex work venues throughout red-light districts. Generating trust, over months and sometimes years, allows CBO members to navigate through, and manage, precarious and often hostile environments.

Unlike their antitrafficking counterparts—namely, police officers and NGO staff—sex worker peer educators use these relationships to identify and remove underage sex workers from red-light district settings. This is fundamentally different from government and NGO approaches consisting of raid and rescue operations. NGO and government rescues are conducted with fanfare, often against sex workers' will, whereas CBOs remove girls discreetly and generally with their consent. However, when sex workers determine that a brothel occupant is underage and the madam resists her removal, CBO members organize rescue efforts. In rescue cases, sex workers engage police by either calling on them for support or reporting the rescued cases to them.

Five of the six CBOs reported that if a madam resists, they use one-on-one counseling and advise the madam about the criminal laws and policies that could affect her. Success in removing underage girls relies on

a madam's awareness of the law and the CBO's relative influence in the brothel, based on years of HIV prevention work. As one CBO member stated, "We're even helping madams and gaining respect in the community. Madams understand laws that could hurt them. They are cooperative now because their sex workers are getting treatment, even condoms. We help them fight the violence. Business is increasing since sex workers are healthy." Despite the fact that CBOs consider the majority of narrated cases to be successes, some CBO members express concern about compromising their relationship with madams. One CBO member stated that the only girls she would remove are ones who readily volunteer to leave. In cases where madams resist, CBO members continue counseling. One CBO member suggested, "I continue counseling and counseling until they understand [the law and what is ethical]."

While madams are compliant in some cases, others refuse to support peer educator efforts to remove girls. In those cases, CBO members resort to pressuring madams, often through police threats. According to two CBOs, the smaller, weaker brothels are easier to persuade than the larger, more established brothels that use hooligans and the police to protect them. If the brothel's use of underage or forced sex workers is overlooked, then the negotiation strategy is less successful. If peer educator involvement in their brothel plays to their interest, madams sometimes agree to sex worker-led initiatives, particularly when these are an improvement over police interventions. Indeed, antitrafficking work can be enhanced by the presence of an HIV-prevention program. This combination may be the ideal to strive for—one in which established relationships are used to negotiate a solution that all parties can genuinely accept.

Three CBOs reported that they discovered the existence of an underage girl through a network of rival brothels that purportedly acted as informants to police or CBOs to undermine their competition. However, although the information brought to CBOs may appear valuable, using information from one brothel against another may undermine the trust established to support HIV-prevention efforts, thereby compromising an effective HIV response.

One CBO developed a self-regulatory board five years after it first began working in the red-light districts. Having learned from that experience, another CBO launched a self-regulatory board soon after it was established. As a part of their peer education duties, CBO members scan the red-light district on a regular basis. They hear about who comes and leaves through well-developed networks. When they determine that a new girl has entered a brothel, she is invited to meet the board members. Based on medical evidence and her testimony, board members determine

whether or not she is underage. If she is there willingly and is over eighteen years old, she is invited to visit the drop-in center, where she can receive HIV-prevention counseling and clinical treatment and be recruited into the CBO. Underage girls are not permitted to enter the sex industry and are repatriated or placed in a girls' home. Due to a lack of trust in the state and a commitment to ownership of the initiative, one CBO reported that it works entirely independently from the police.

Rescues

According to the CBO case studies, underage girls leave the brothel setting in three primary ways—individual escape, removal through support of CBOs, or police-led rescue operations. Out of nineteen cases, CBO members removed fifteen girls. Of these, police support was solicited in six—either they were brought when CBOs threatened to file a case against the madam or they appeared at the scene on their own. In one case, the police notified the CBO when a girl was rescued and asked the CBO to provide social support. Four girls escaped on their own or (in one case) with the help of a client. In several cases, particularly those in which the police intervened, the CBO members met with heavy resistance from the brothel.

According to many CBO members, girls who have worked in a brothel between two and six months generally do not want to be rescued, despite their newfound understanding of the law. CBO members feel that within a few months girls grow accustomed to their new lifestyle and their ability to earn relatively substantial amounts of money to support their families. According to government officials interviewed, underage girls resist rescues because “they are greedy and spoiled.” As a high-level official reported, “They get used to a comfortable, good life . . . biryani, mobile phones, and new saris every week. They are spoiled because they can do what they want.”

While CBO members do not agree that a sex worker's life in India is easy, given the harsh levels of stigma, state-perpetrated violence, and HIV infection, many agree that livelihood security coupled with comparatively greater independence is highly regarded. Also, young girls in the brothels develop new relationships with other sex workers, who often become their surrogate families. Perhaps most importantly, many maintain a strong sense of responsibility toward siblings and parents who rely on their earnings.

Nonetheless, CBOs exert rigorous efforts through ongoing counseling to encourage girls to either return home or be admitted to a protective

home. Threats of police involvement and legal ramifications appear to have the most persuasive effects.

Conflicting and incompatible forces: The problem of rescues

Four of the six CBOs provided successful removal and rescue stories. Success, from their perspective, is when a girl is removed from a brothel and integrated into a stable social system, be it in her village or in a protective home. By and large, they did not express discomfort with the processes and outcomes of their removal efforts. When asked whether they felt it was problematic that many cases were lost to follow-up and at risk of being retrafficked, they expressed the need to continue the work despite the obvious failures and disappointments. Two CBOs, however, revealed internal struggles with their new mandate. Members began questioning their actions: “Young girls . . . if it’s a small issue, we can deal with it, major issues we can’t. In a brothel home, new girls come, but I can’t just go in and rescue those girls. . . . Brothel homes are stronger because they have a good link with politicians and the police. They can do something against us—legally, illegally—like sending rowdies to beat us. The clients may revolt against us. The rowdies may kill us.” This quotation highlights the incompatible forces behind the dual and conflicting loyalties required when conducting HIV work and relying on a conventional antitrafficking model. It draws attention to the danger involved and the extent to which the HIV program can be unwittingly compromised in favor of antitrafficking. When first embarking on anti-trafficking work, CBO members quickly became aware of the contradictions that emerge when integrating antitrafficking work that relies on individual-based interventions, such as rescues driven by law enforcement, with HIV/empowerment interventions based on a structural framework.

Rescuing daughters of sex workers

Three of six CBO members interviewed narrated an array of removal stories that ended successfully. Two of these CBOs focus almost exclusively on daughters of sex workers. Sex workers’ rescue of sex worker daughters may, in part, be the reason why their efforts were deemed successful. Within the purview of their own community, they establish relationships with the girls’ mothers and can more easily provide ongoing management of cases in their own communities. In one case, a mother took her daughter, Rana, to the clinic at the drop-in center for sexually transmitted infection (STI) treatment, and a CBO member counseled Rana and her mother. When the CBO member described the various risks Rana faced, her mother began to cry, saying, “This is my problem. I took her to

madam due to a financial crisis. We don't have food to eat." The CBO pooled money for Rana to learn tailoring. CBO members visited both Rana and her mother every three days to ensure that she remained enrolled in school. They helped the mother start a small catering business because she was no longer able to earn enough money from sex work. She joined the CBO and self-help group, where she received loans for the business and tailoring class.

Sex workers risking themselves to rescue girls

Not only are the rescued girls and HIV programs susceptible to harm as a result of rescue efforts, but CBO rescuers are also at risk, as Laxmi Devi's story reveals. Several stories detail the extent to which CBO rescuers use heroic measures to remove girls from brothels. In one case, two CBO members repatriated a girl and were assaulted by villagers who accused them of being traffickers.

Laxmi's story. My name is Laxmi Devi. I have been a sex worker in Andhra Pradesh for over ten years, a CBO member for two years, and an advocacy team member for one year. Two months ago, I rescued Sashwati, a fourteen-year-old daughter of a sex worker, after her mother came to me searching for her missing daughter. We asked Sashwati's friends where she might be, and they told us that a brothel madam had befriended Sashwati over the months, promising her money, biryani, and jewelry. The next day, I befriended the brothel madam, sharing stories of all the young beautiful girls that I had. I asked her for help in finding a brothel where I could sell them. I told her that we could potentially make a lot of money together. She gave me the address of the brothel she did business with. After much convincing, she then agreed that I should go ahead and take the girls alone since they did not know her. When I reached the brothel in Mumbai, I told them that I wanted to join her brothel. They agreed. Three days later, I found Sashwati. We escaped together by asking the brothel madam if we could use the toilet outside. We returned home together. Sashwati's mother and I filed a complaint with the police. In turn, the brothel madam submitted a complaint against me and the girl. She denied having any relation to the trafficking incident. . . . Instead she accused me of bringing an underage girl to the brothel house. Then the police arrested me, and the case is ongoing. He [the police officer] pulled my hair, beat me. I refused to go to the police station, so he arrested me. I finally convinced the superintendent of police of the true story. He called

the brothel madam and convinced us to settle the cases. The girl is with her mother studying in tenth grade now.

Laxmi Devi's story reveals a characteristic course of events. Like many sex workers driving the antitrafficking work in their CBOs, her determination and zeal are striking. Her actions, while noble, left her exposed to tremendous personal danger, with no guarantee of success. When asked why she chose to place herself at such great risk to rescue a girl, she said she felt it was her duty and would do it again. She and her CBO counterparts further stated that CBO members are obligated to go to any length to rescue girls.

Life after rescue: Repatriation, protective home, or runaway alternatives

Once girls exit a brothel, they are often repatriated to their home of origin. Among the thirty-four cases reported in which the final destination of the girls was known, twenty-one girls returned to their natal homes. In four cases, CBO members accompanied girls back to their sex worker mothers. CBO members reported that they prefer sending girls to their natal home because "girls should be home with their families." In most instances, two CBO members escorted the rescued girl to her natal home. In order to avoid social stigma, the CBO members fabricated a story detailing how the rescued girl had encountered the CBO members. For example, they agreed to tell the community that she was found searching for work in the neighborhood.

In nine cases, girls were placed in a protective home or a hostel, owned privately or by the government. However, all CBO members reported deplorable conditions in homes in which girls were physically, emotionally, and sexually maltreated and received little if any support or guidance, and CBO members have tenuous relationships with protective home managers and administrators. State-run protective homes are designed to accommodate vagrant or neglected girls in need of care and protection. Most homes are not prepared to assume responsibility for girls who are HIV positive, have drug addictions, maintain boyfriends, smoke, and expect the freedoms granted to them in the brothels. Nor do they have the capacity to offer the kind of psychological support that is essential to girls who have been removed from a brothel under duress and are away from their support network. While describing his work with underage girls from brothels, one district youth coordinator summarized his frustration with these homes: "Shelter homes are not properly motivated. Proper vision

is not given to them. Suppose the girl is raped. She is a victim. The moment they know she's HIV positive, she is highly discriminated. She will run away. These homes lack vision. . . . Vision means . . . if you force a child to eat, they will not eat. You must help the child to eat . . . caring for them. Why, on the third day every such girl wants to run away. There's no love and affection. They are treated like animals." Ravina's case illustrates the homes' lack of staff capacity to manage complex rescue cases, particularly when rescued girls are believed to be HIV positive.

Ravina's story. Ravina Devy works on the highways and belongs to a brothel community. She is sixteen years old and HIV positive. After she was taken from the brothel, CBO members admitted her to a girls' home. This home accepted her with great reluctance. Ravina eats as many as thirty sachets of *paan* (betel nut) a day. She began mutilating her arms with a safety pin many years ago as a way to calm herself. She has a boyfriend, who has been restricted from visiting her. She has a close relationship with the madam, whom she visits on the weekends. However, she also developed a close relationship with the CBO members, who have been keeping an eye on her since she was taken from the brothel. Ravina and the three other underage sex workers who lived in the home were very unhappy there. They pleaded with the CBO members to assist them in leaving. When asked why she wanted to return, Ravina often repeated, "anyway, I'll die of HIV. Let me live the way I want." The CBO members documented several incidents of mistreatment at the protective home. For example, staff there did nothing to help Ravina get treatment and HIV medicine. She was locked in her room and not allowed out. The staff threw food on a plate that they pushed in her room. On one occasion, when Ravina began bleeding heavily, they refused to take her to the doctor. Instead they threw medicine at her. According to the CBO members assisting Ravina, "the staff in the home were not even willing to touch her."

Follow-up and case management

CBO members agree that managing cases through follow-up care is a critical component of their support for underage and unwilling sex workers. Most feel that case management, after the rescue, has been the most challenging component of this work. Of the twenty-one cases that were followed up, thirteen were managed through telephone communication. In these phone conversations CBO members inquired about the girls'

socioeconomic situation and security. Often, however, when they made the calls, the repatriated girls were not available to talk. If they were unable to talk on the phone, CBO members became suspicious that they may have reentered a similar migration trail, in which coercion may have taken place. When asked about their response to these suspicions, most stated, “We can do nothing.” In four cases, the girls were married, often arranged by the CBO. In four of five cases where the girl was the daughter of a sex worker, CBO members maintained regular contact with the girls. CBO members are generally more consistently accessible and involved in the lives of sex workers’ daughters, given their geographic proximity. Girls placed in protective homes, however, are under the jurisdiction of the Department of Women Development and Child Welfare. Consequently, home managers generally prevent CBO members from maintaining relationships with the girls. In theory, cases were followed until the girls were considered to be in secure situations, ideally married or repatriated with their families. In practice, geographic distance, lack of time, and core CBO responsibilities were cited as reasons that many girls were lost to follow-up.

Repatriation

In the majority of rescue cases, girls are repatriated to their natal or marital villages. Unlike police-led rescues, when CBOs lead the process, girls are treated respectfully. CBO members take several steps to ensure a girl’s safe return to her home. Unlike the police, for example, they ensure confidentiality and provide girls with food, one-on-one counseling, and what they often refer to as elder-sisterly love and affection. Upon a girl’s repatriation, the CBO members create a story to convince village elders that the rescued girl is still chaste.

As described earlier, there is little indication that CBO members effectively follow cases after repatriation. As one NGO staff reported, “Repatriation . . . it’s an absolute failure. The stigma of a virgin that is defiled is worst imaginable. After she arrives back to her home village, how long can the girl hide the information and stay safe? I don’t know. I think the only place she feels welcome is the brothel again. When she is rescued and sent back to the village, life becomes very bad. The family, villagers find out. Everyone approaches her asking her price. Then she will come back.” Reports of rescued girls who were retrafficked are not uncommon. CBO members often surmise whether or not the girls have been retrafficked in three primary ways when they follow up with a phone call. These include whether parents admit that their daughter has been retrafficked, whether CBO members infer that she has been retrafficked when the

parents do not permit them to talk to the daughter, and whether a girl is identified when she returns to the red-light district.

Because girls are repatriated to the same highly vulnerable situations that prompted their original out-migration, most CBO members believe that girls generally repeat cycles of perilous migration with recurring periods of bondage. One informant, who had worked on antitrafficking for over five years, suggested that interventionists must consider the wider context from which women surface: “A recently married woman, deserted by her husband, went to work in a brothel. She was rescued and returned to her parents. In response, the parents said, ‘Why are you returning her to us? We sent her for earning. Why are you coming here always? Again you brought her to us. You are giving publicity. These official visits . . . they are branding our girl. You tell us she should not work. Then give us other options.’”

As revealed in the narrative, CBOs can contribute to further stigmatization and heightened risk for underage girls. Many soft-trafficked girls are repatriated only to find yet another calamity when reaching home. In addition to losing her livelihood capacity, which affects not only herself but a girl’s entire family, frequent visits by CBO members generate stigma and shame that the girl must endure long after CBO members depart. In their effort to restore her power, the antitrafficking approaches actually create structural barriers, stripping the girl and her family of their agency by preventing them from choosing sex work as a livelihood alternative. Not only are the solutions undone, but the CBO members do not present a viable alternative, leaving the family destitute and the girl vulnerable to being re-trafficked. These examples show that repatriation, after rescue or removal, does not include sex workers’ ability to address the structural causes of underage sex work in which coercion is used. As a reactive response rather than a preventative one by its very nature, the conventional antitrafficking approach adopted by sex workers does not challenge social norms, institutions, and policies that maintain sex workers as vulnerable subjects.

Police—Friend or foe?

As structural interventions, CBOs challenge police violence and corruption, and yet their antitrafficking work has found them working with the police. In so doing, they contribute to state corruption and abuse. This may in part be due to the fact that CBOs have learned to respond to structural inequities through crisis response, counseling, and advocacy. It may also suggest that those who align with police have not had adequate

support to reflect on political and ideological understandings, or on the manifestations of their actions.

Except for one CBO, which prefers to work independently from law enforcement, all CBOs in the study indicated that they report underage girls to the police with varying degrees of success. The group that avoids police engagement expressed misgivings about police collaboration for both political and ideological reasons. Members understand that in order to challenge police conduct, they cannot comply with police interests in relation to sex work. Not surprisingly, when police are involved, a variety of problems ensue. Some CBO members negotiate with the brothel owner to remove an underage girl, at times with the help of the police. In Jaya's case (described below), police mishandling compromised the fragile brothel-CBO relationship. In another case, the CBO reported an incident in which an underage girl ran away from the drop-in center where she was temporarily held until members found her a home. The police officers promptly reported the incident to the media. The following day, the local newspapers printed stories criticizing the CBO for holding a minor girl without parental consent. Not only was the girl's confidentiality breached, but the integrity of the CBO was jeopardized.

By and large, police officers are regarded as dishonest and consequently mistrusted by CBOs. For example, one CBO member reported that the police officer involved in Jaya's case was given 5,000 rupees (\$100) from brokers for protection. The CBO member implied that it was not unusual for police to accept bribes. When asked why they involved the police, CBO members replied that they feel they are legally required to report cases to the police. Moreover, they feel it is important to maintain a collegial relationship with them.

Jaya's story. Jaya was sixteen years old when she was sold to a brothel. She asked a local CBO member to help her leave the brothel premises. Since the brothel is large and powerful, the CBO's advocacy unit felt it did not have the capacity to help her. Members turned to the superintendent of police for support. After rescuing the girl, the police sent her to a local hostel. Since Jaya's rescue, the CBO has experienced numerous problems with the brothel. In addition to continuous slander against the CBO across sex worker communities, the brothel owners submitted a false report to the police accusing two CBO advocacy members of running a brothel themselves. They were required to appear at the police station for ongoing counseling and training, despite their attempts to explain

their authenticity as CBO leaders responsible for HIV program interventions. Where Jaya now resides is unknown.

The advocacy group in Jaya's case aligned itself with the police, which resulted in strained relationships within the community. A nuanced understanding that cooperation with the police causes CBOs to diverge from a structural intervention approach that relies on (sex work) feminist principles to one whose aim rests in the hands of sex workers' greatest adversaries, namely the police, was not apparent. This group's cooperation with the police may be due in part to the fact that members are unaware of the likely consequences of their actions. Forming collectives involves more than organizational development, crisis intervention, and advocacy training. It not only requires members to be well informed but also requires training in critical analysis and ongoing reflective practice.

While CBO members are not legally required to notify the police if an underage girl is identified, many believe it is important to report her nonetheless. CBOs' relationship with the police is not always believed to be in their best interest. For example, sex workers may find that they are actually acting as police informants against sex workers or brothel owners. They sometimes find that they are complicit in police violence and corruption when they hand over names of new entrants into a brothel. Whether, how, and to what extent police should be engaged in sex workers' rescue efforts raises dilemmas.

One CBO explicitly refuses to involve the police in handling underage cases. Not unlike other CBOs, this group complains about poor police conduct against sex workers. When raids were conducted, for example, sex workers were beaten, raped, and detained while most brothel owners remained unaffected. One young girl was detained and made to dance nude to Bollywood tunes by the local law enforcement officers. Young girls were often detained for days without charges. As one CBO member reported, "Three underage girls were put in jail, without water, without charge. . . . We fought and paid one thousand rupees to get them out."

Brothel evictions create big problems for sex workers. Police are pressured by senior officials to produce quotas of trafficked girls and use the media to demonstrate that they are preventing underage girls from entering the sex industry. All six CBOs reported that police pressured CBOs to support police officers in their duty to combat underage sex work. For example, CBO members were often forced to give information about the brothels to the local police. Three of the six CBOs were asked to provide contact information on brothel owners and brokers. These same brothels were regularly asked to provide information about all new arrivals. It was

not clear, from the interviews, how the police used this information. Presumably, the information would be used to strengthen the police's anti-trafficking efforts. However, such information could create opportunities to extort money and maintain tighter control over the red-light districts. In one case, the police requested that the CBO counselor share all information provided by the girl she was counseling.

Structural interventions aim to address police violence and corruption, which force sex workers to go underground and can lead them to be re-trafficked, thereby placing them at increased risk for HIV. However, when conducting antitrafficking work, sex workers can sometimes find themselves complicit with police. By handing over information to the police, sex workers engaged in antitrafficking work shift their allegiance from their sex worker collective to the state. Unseasoned sex worker collectives may be unaware of the contradictions inherent in such moves. In these cases, the sex worker as agent, capable of consent as understood by (sex work) feminists, is replaced with sex worker as victim, aligned with the state and needing protection.

Risk to HIV programs

When integrating state-supported HIV/AIDS programs led by sex workers with state-supported antitrafficking programs led by police, the integrity of the HIV program is often compromised. HIV program staff have historically struggled with gaining entry into brothels to provide HIV prevention messages. After awareness-raising, counseling, and negotiation efforts, sex worker peer educators generally enter brothels in cases where others are not permitted. As part of the community, CBO members can establish a relationship with a brothel owner based on trust. They also fulfill a felt need by providing brothel residents with access to services and information such as condom use, STI treatment, and responses to violence. Once apprehensive madams permit CBO members to have access to their brothel residents, it is critical that the CBO members maintain trust and rapport. One peer educator reported, "If I rescue the girl, the sex workers won't come to clinic and I won't be allowed over there to bring the girls to clinic. So when the advocacy team asked me to bring two girls, I told them that I can't risk my relationship with the brothel owner and risk health of the other nine sex workers there."

In this case, the CBO members and peer educator engaged in a heated disagreement about whether or not the peer educator should accompany them on a rescue mission. The peer educator was pressured by her CBO counterparts until she finally agreed to go to the brothel to rescue the

underage girl, but only as a passive participant, standing in the background, without speaking. Despite her silence, however, the madam demanded that the peer educator leave at once, shouting, "You don't come back. I'll lodge a complaint against you." In response, the CBO workers shouted, "We'll lodge a complaint against you. . . . You will be the one with trouble since you are running a brothel home." In this iconic case, the ambitious intent to remove an underage girl disrupted the fragile relationship between the peer educator and the madam. The peer educator's now dual role of supporting health and well-being (HIV prevention) is coupled with her additional conflicting responsibilities to monitor, regulate, and act as police informant in the brothels (antitrafficking) in which she is trying to build relationships.

Conclusion: Sex worker participation that does no harm

Sex worker CBOs continually show a valiant commitment to combating underage sex work in their communities. In contrast to many police departments and NGOs, CBOs ensure that rescued girls preserve a sense of agency within the constraints of the law while also bringing into play a genuine ethos of compassion. As seen in the forty-one case studies, the CBOs employed multiple ways of intervening once an underage girl was identified, particularly in relation to police involvement. One CBO's policy is to avoid police entirely to minimize potential abuses imposed by them. Others engage police by reporting cases to them or involving them in rescue operations, often resulting in further abuses against the rescued girls or the CBO members themselves. Sex workers are effective in removing underage girls from brothels through relationships developed with madams. Potential harms to HIV prevention aims arise, however, if the CBO's peer educators remove girls under duress and without the consent of the madam. As Laxmi's case illustrates, great risks occur when individual action is taken without attention to underlying structural causes, as opposed to collective action aimed to address social, political, and economic concerns.

Equally distressing is sex workers' inability to effectively complete their work as case managers following a girl's departure from a brothel. As in many countries grappling with human trafficking, raids and rescues represent the mainstay of the Indian government's antitrafficking program. Their best efforts notwithstanding, CBOs are not able to ensure that girls will be safe in local protective homes or back in their villages, ultimately rendering their efforts failures. The findings reveal that protective homes are not only inadequate but often unsafe and exploitative. Sex workers

are not allowed access to these homes. Ignoring this undermines the structural model they espouse in their HIV prevention activities. Moreover, there is insufficient evidence that girls are not re trafficked or severely stigmatized once they return home. Sex workers are relegated to the dangerous spaces of the red-light district. Consequently, the sex workers' risks also place the HIV program at risk.

Unexpected ramifications that challenge the entire ethos of a sex worker-led movement require deeper inquiry, as the following quotation from a CBO staff member illustrates: "One girl we rescued twice was seen again in the red-light area. I asked her, 'why did you come back a second time?' She said, 'I will come back a third time, fourth, and fifth time. I can't stay [in my village]. They will kill me.' When I told her that she would be rescued again, she asked me to tell her the red-light districts that exist where we don't work. When I told her, she said, 'then I will go there next.'" Rescue efforts, supported by sex workers, run the risk of undermining the very activities that CBOs wish to support. Tremendous goodwill among CBO members cannot be seen apart from the immense pressure they are under to undo the stigma of an "unchaste" woman. The belief that underage sex work violates sex worker rights and their need to prove themselves and make good on their reputation is an enormous burden that most likely contributes to their willingness to support the government's misplaced focus on rescues.

The study findings also reveal that sex worker CBOs are restricted from asserting a critical voice in areas beyond the domain of the red-light district. They are not seen as credible resources to criticize the structural barriers affecting them. For example, sex workers are not invited to engage in solutions aimed to alleviate poverty and marginalization in girls' natal and marital homes. CBOs must be able to have a say in the wider context from which young women surface. Sex worker CBOs have had inadequate opportunities to engage in policies and laws related to police and (mismanaged) rescue and raid operations. Instead, they are expected to cooperate with laws that work against them. As we have seen throughout the study, CBOs do not have entrée into protective homes. If they are not able to address the custodial issues raised in these stories, CBOs cannot respond effectively to repressive experiences that detained girls endure while living in substandard accommodations against their will. Finally, clients' desire for undeveloped female bodies goes uncontested by sex workers. Interestingly, sex workers complain about losing clients as they age, but they are not permitted to challenge social norms around heterosexual sex with underage virgin girls, even within their own endangered space.

Another path

The limitations of sex workers' antitrafficking interventions, examined in this study, lie largely in the fact that they are prohibited from addressing underlying structural concerns. For them to be able to do so, change would have to take place in the state apparatus, village source sites, and public perceptions of women's bodies to ensure positive images of adult women. While engaging sex workers in antitrafficking work may appear to be democratic and progressive, because sex workers are still thrust into the purview of the brothel with limited participation as a result of restricted access to other dimensions of the trafficking and antitrafficking worlds, they are rendered ineffective. In this article I emphasize key actions related to prevention rather than a focus on merely reacting.

The first and perhaps most obvious structural intervention relates to supporting and amending laws to decriminalize sex work. The criminalization of sex work undermines women's agency by forcing both minors and adults into a precarious underground industry, rendering them more vulnerable to violence and making it harder for them to leave if they choose to do so.

Vulnerable communities at trafficking source sites should receive state support and be encouraged to provide opportunities to youth—through education, livelihood sustainability, and actions to combat gender inequality—that will address the root causes of the socioeconomic fragilities families face. CBOs should be able to help ensure that those girls who do migrate are able to do so safely, with livelihood options secure and available.

If the police are unwilling or unable to discipline their own members who beat, rape, and torture sex workers and use antitrafficking laws to extort money from them, the government must be held accountable. The police must see that officers and their commanders do not use a rescue model that undermines the rights of vulnerable women and girls. Training should be offered, and corrupt police should be publicly repudiated, dismissed, and prosecuted. An independent body to monitor police violations should be well resourced, with substantive involvement of local CBOs and human rights groups.

Underage girls should be treated as empowered agents rather than as victims, recognizing their right to make choices as an inherent feminist principle. They should receive their full due legal process, including their rights to legal and psychological counsel, when they are unwillingly detained in a protective home. The government should establish voluntary shelters that function as safe havens for girls at risk of violence without compromising their privacy, personal autonomy, or freedom of movement.

Such homes should forbid disciplinary measures that use solitary confinement. Sex workers should get support to develop, monitor, and support such homes and processes.

To reduce their risks and function more effectively, CBOs could consider alternative approaches to trafficking in the red-light districts and on the street, in line with structural intervention and (sex work) feminist approaches. Advocacy campaigns to support structural interventions using “do no harm” strategies that work against repressive police practices and so-called protective facilities might replace rescue operations as the dominant mode of action. CBOs may consider ensuring collective responses through a self-regulatory board or task force and through systems and procedures rather than individual action. Internal structures could address problems such as police duplicity or political power imbalances with large brothels while pressuring social services to improve protective facilities.

Finally, researchers and CBOs should conduct action research related to male sexual desire with the aim of developing behavior change campaigns that seek to shift client attention away from virgin and underage girls to women who are fully mature and experienced, and who have greater ability to exert their agency. Not only would such women be more physically developed, but their sexual repertoire would be more likely to include safer services. CBOs should be able to lead behavior change efforts to this end.

r e a c h: research and action for change

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