

THE DISCURSIVE NATURE OF THE DOMINANT SYMPATHY-STORY OF UNDERCLASS FEMALE COMMERCIAL SEX WORKERS

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Introduction

Underclass commercial sex workers (CSWs) are one of the most stigmatized groups of people in society. The fact that they engage in sex as a means of livelihood depicts them as an “immoral” group of people who are necessarily a “blight” on society. They are also seen as one of the primary causes of social and cultural destruction. Their class position and the illegality of the activity in which they are involved invariably accord them a marginalized position in society.

Based on a few factors such as the location of their “work” and the way they access/are accessed by their clients, underclass CSWs could be classified into three broad categories: those who work at cheap guesthouses, those who are accessed on the street but work in rooms, and those who live and work on the street. However, this broad classification does not undermine the inherently heterogeneous nature of this underclass discourse.

Almost all of the underclass CSWs who were interviewed for the present study had a set story in terms of which they discussed their “predicament” with the researcher whom they always regarded as an outsider. The aim of this paper is to explore the alternative ways in which this dominant sympathy-story of underclass CSWs could be read. These alternative understandings will provide useful insights into how hegemony operates in society and how members of marginalized discourses

attempt to come to terms with the dominant and hegemonic discourse(s).

Methodology

The nature of this discursive study is not to be empirically exhaustive, but rather to point to the ways in which this marginalized community carries out its living. The discourse analysis is based on qualitative data gathered in the form of direct and indirect interviews conducted mainly with underclass female CSWs and also with their clients and three-wheeler drivers in selected urban locations in Kandy in 2005 and 2006. The study is primarily based on the life narratives of twelve CSWs representing the three categories described above. The study also looks at existing literature on CSWs.

Discussion and conclusion

The dominant sympathy-story in terms of which the underclass CSW discusses her “plight” usually includes accounts of being sexually abused by the lover or a family member, being abandoned by the husband, the absence of the husband or a strong male figure in the family to look after her, not being able to get a “legitimate” job opportunity due to the lack of education and skills, and having to provide for the children and also other family members like aged parents.

Given the highly stigmatized social position of underclass CSWs and the illegality of the activity in which they are involved, the set sympathy-story, which may be based on true facts, is *one of the few ways* in which

the underclass female CSW can discuss her "predicament" with an outsider, especially when the outsider belongs to the hegemonic mainstream discourse. The exaggerated readiness to give up the profession is an inevitable part of her sympathy-story. It is only in terms of this story that she can even attempt to attribute a sense of legitimacy to sex work in order to justify her involvement in it.

While the dominant sympathy-story deliberately projects the financial motive as the primary, if not the only, factor that perpetuates commercial sex work in society, certain snippets of conversation found at various stages of the interviews provide insights into what could be construed as non-financial motives as well. Given this inconsistency (if not contradiction), the CSWs' insistence on the sympathy-story suggests the possibility of there being a conscious attempt on their part to project their identity in a socially justifiable manner.

The existing literature on CSWs in Sri Lanka (eg: Ratnapala and Jayasuriya), which appears to be the stuff of sensationalist or prurient popular anecdotal journalism, indicates a tendency to be guided solely by the dominant understanding of the sympathy-stories of CSWs. It also shows a tendency either to conflate the CSW's dominant sympathy-story or to reduce all versions of this story into one dominant version. As the dominant version of the sympathy-story of the CSW is just one way of understanding and representing her reality, exclusive reliance

on the sympathy-story would result in a distorted understanding of the discourse of sex work. The general understanding that those who operate as CSWs have been "forced" into this profession as a result of various social and economic factors excludes the possibility of reading their engagement in sex work as a much more complex determination of this "choice" within a limited range of available options.

The dominant version of the sympathy-story of CSWs indicates their awareness as well as concern about the extremely stigmatized position, which the dominant value system has accorded them. This concern with the way their identity is constructed by the dominant discourse indicates the bearing that the mainstream value system has on their outlook. This shows that although CSWs appear to resist the dominant discourse by being involved in the illegal activity of sex work, it is *not* the case that they are entirely outside of the dominant value system that they appear to problematize or resist. In fact, most of them actually share that value system and construct their identities in terms of that value system. Despite their resistance, they slip into the dominant discourse in a multiplicity of ways and the dominant sympathy-story is one way of doing that.

References

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