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TWELVE

NEGOTIATING CONTRADICTIONARY
EXPECTATIONS:
STORIES FROM “SECRET” SEX WORKERS IN
ANDHRA PRADESH, INDIA**Annie George¹**

Abstract: Drawing upon research in rural coastal Andhra Pradesh, this article analyzes sex workers’ negotiations of family and social life with their work in a highly stigmatized profession. Such women routinely described the double bind presented by their work, which simultaneously provides these relatively low status individuals with a sense of personal value while exposing them to severe violence and stigma. Findings presented here accordingly document the processes by which sex workers collude with members of their social networks to purposefully foreground their actions as “good” woman and to underplay or even hide their sex work.

Introduction

As a way to manage multiple, sometimes contradictory, gendered, normative expectations about ideal femininity, young women who sell sex in rural south India claim to do so secretly. Their actions are best understood when contextualized in the stratified social organization of rural life in India, which revolves around three inter-related structures of caste², class and gender. Men and women share dominant caste, class and patriarchal ideologies of normative gendered behaviors predicated upon a framework that upholds heterosexual marriage, and female chastity. Marriage symbolizes the formal acceptance of a woman into her husband’s family and her social placement as a member of that family, the bearer of his legitimate children, and the continuer of his family line. Both partners and their families have an investment in the long-term continuity of the marriage, regardless of tensions that

may exist in married life (Uberoi, 1994). In this sense, marriage is an expression of kinship ties and family identity.

These shared understandings of complexly structured identities, while not always practiced, form a core of values and ideologies that guide the choices people make and the identities they seek to assume. When women are expected to be faithful wives and caring mothers even in the absence of financial support from husbands, they may meet these expectations by selling sex; in so doing, they violate gendered norms. They then have to engage in the complex process of negotiating contradictory expectations; one way they do this, with variable degrees of support from family, is by claiming to do sex work “secretly”. Secrecy allows women and families to manage contradictory expectations, uphold their social standing, and remain enmeshed in the kinship and community structures that form the core of their social identity.

The argument developed in this paper is based on data from in-depth interviews with forty women aged between eighteen and twenty-five years of age who live and work in villages of Krishna district of coastal Andhra Pradesh state in south India.³ Krishna District ranks high in the state’s development index.⁴ Its sustained agrarian economy for the past several decades produced important social transformations including the growth of urbanization and creation of centers of commerce and education (Srinivasulu, 2002). The region also witnessed the emergence of a substantial rich peasant class out of the dominant cultivating and land owning castes, and the creation of sharp differentiation and inequalities in agrarian relations. Caste has traditionally been an important dimension of hierarchical organization in the state. The majority of agricultural laborers and marginal cultivators are drawn from *backward* and *scheduled castes*, while the medium and large land owners generally belong to upper caste groups. Caste-based discrimination leading to the social alienation of the *scheduled castes* and obstruction of their upward socioeconomic mobility leading to limiting of their livelihood options is a pervasive feature

of this district. Compared to other districts of the state, Krishna has good indicators of health and literacy for women, yet at least half of rural girls have no schooling and half of women first marry before the age of sixteen (International Institute for Population Sciences & Macro International, 2008). The Krishna District is known as a hub for the traffic in women into prostitution as a point of origin, transit and destination of sex workers (Population Council, 2008; Sen & Nair, 2004).

From the perspective of women themselves and their village communities, the women on whose stories this paper is based faced multiple disadvantages. They came from *scheduled* or *backward castes*, had low literacy, were married early and supported at least two dependents. Their relative youth, and stigmatized marital status (twenty-two women were single, widowed, or separated) were added disadvantages in a social milieu where age and being married add to social status. Doing sex work could intensify social disadvantage and stigma. In this context, passing as housewives or workers in socially acceptable occupations provided a cover to practice sex work secretly.

The Context of Sex Work in Krishna District

The kinds of cultural practices that characterize sex work in rural Krishna District promote secrecy. Women solicit clients directly from their agricultural or other work sites, through phone calls or through mediators, and entertain them in orchards, fields, clients' homes or shacks adjacent to the fields, as well as in rented rooms in towns. Women have varied work timings during the day and night and, unlike sex workers who solicit openly on the streets of district towns, rural women can provide paid sex alongside their other daily activities without arousing suspicion. Police harassment and arrests, commonplace in urban sex work settings, are almost unheard of in villages. And, unlike sexual transactions in other sites, in rural areas every sexual encounter does not involve cash exchange. Rich landlords, a much-valued type of

client among sex workers, usually pay women a few times a year in large quantities of food grains. Other regular clients also pay occasionally in kind or cash. Women usually have no more than three or four clients, typically men who are known to them or to the mediators who refer them. Although a quarter of the women interviewed said they work alone, most depended on a range of mediators, including neighbors, friends, other women doing sex work, and other clients, to refer clients to them.

Here lies a potential risk: to sell sex secretly, they depend upon others to bring in customers; yet the involvement of others means that there is a risk that their sex work-related activities could become public knowledge. Family, work and community are key sites that ground women in their social location and each site potentially can shame and isolate the woman and her family if a woman's sex work activities are known. Through women's stories, I present the strategies they use to manage their multiple identities and negotiate within the intertwined structures of family, work, caste, and community to avoid stigma, and financial loss. These distinctions are separated only for discussion; in reality, they overlap and are the structuring forces of women's personal and social lives, and the reasons why their sex worker status needs to be kept hidden.

Family Secrets

Women and families who depend on income from sex work, albeit to varying extents, express ambivalence about their source of economic support. They use silence strategically to maintain the "good" status of the woman involved in sex work. For instance, Manga⁵, a *scheduled caste* woman abandoned by her husband, was supporting a child and her elderly parents at the time of our interview. Her brothers had violated social norms by abdicating responsibility for their aged parents, and so the responsibility fell to Manga. Describing her situation, Manga explained, "mother takes care of household work; father looks after the kids. I believe

they are not aware that I do this [sex] work. Even my sisters don't know about it. At least no one talks about it." Yet such secrecy did not prohibit others in her family from criticizing her, as happened when she accidentally encountered one of her male cousins while working at a brothel in a town close to her village. Her cousin slapped and cursed her, "You have come so far to work as a whore?" Although the irony of their encounter did not escape Manga, she felt that she could not ask her cousin why he had come so far to have sex with a prostitute. This incident led to her family experiencing social ridicule in caste community, and Manga asked, "After all this, is it possible that my parents don't know what I'm doing?"

This story highlights the interconnectedness of material and symbolic conditions that compel women and families to maintain family secrets. Gender norms were violated: an absent husband did not support his wife and child; sons did not support their parents; and the woman, not a man, took on these responsibilities, albeit through stigmatizing work. The caste community did not support its members; instead unfavorable gender-caste ideology was evident through the power of Manga's cousin to successfully stigmatize her and her family, and her apparent inability to hold him accountable for his actions, despite the fact that they were the same as hers – sex outside marriage. Here the woman's parents and brothers kept quiet because they knew that not only was Manga doing what, in the gender-caste ideology, is typically expected of men, but because if she did not sell sex, they would starve. So, even though the family was ostracized by their caste group, the parents did not ask the woman to stop because in this case, economic considerations trumped morality; instead, the woman and her family dealt with the shame through silence. But in other cases, as the next story shows, in-laws also support married women who keep a marriage going, even when doing *tappu pani* [wrong work], as sex work is referred to locally.

Twenty-four year old Nagamani, who is married and had two small children, began selling since sex three years prior to our interview when, in her words, “running the house became impossible.” Landless and *scheduled caste*, she and her husband work as seasonal agricultural laborers. Her husband spends most of his earnings on alcohol and gambling, prompting her to ask, rhetorically, “What am I supposed to do? Where will I get the money from? To buy food, I took a loan and have to repay the interest every Friday. I can repay it by doing agricultural work. But to meet household expenses, I have to do *tappu pani*.” Once her husband caught her entertaining a client in their house and he made a huge scene and involved his parents and married brothers. She told the interviewer,

After that incident my brothers-in-law asked me whether it was true. I out rightly denied it. I lied that [the client] came to meet my husband not me. My in-laws support me *to an extent*. I think they know what I’m doing but they don’t ask me. They think, “This good for nothing fellow [her husband] doesn’t earn anything. How is she supposed survive?” None of the women in my [husband’s] family go out and work. They stay at home. I’m the only one who goes out for *kooli pani* [daily agricultural labor]. They feel sorry for me. They include me in the family affairs. They never taunt me.

After her husband’s verbal explosion that followed his discovery that Nagamani was engaging in sex work, she and her marital family dealt with it through silence. In a life structured by kinship and caste relations, Nagamani knows her security and claims to entitlements come through a firm social placement in a family (Risseuw & R. Parliwala, 1996). Nagamani’s denial was a form of silence, a way to keep her sex work secret, deflect personal blame and secure her marital and financial situation. In this and the previous story, both families’ silent ignoring of the woman’s *tappu pani* is perhaps a mark of their ambivalence. Men and their

families can claim male privilege when men provide for their wives and children. However, when families know that their son cannot or does not support his wife and children and that it is the woman's work that keeps the family going, patriarchal families remain silent about these activities.

Further, given its high social value, making a marriage work was imperative for women and men. Nagamani's in-laws supported her to keep her marriage going, even when doing *tappu pani*. In both cases discussed here, families were silent about the women's work because they were all caught in the constraining web of local social norms. Silence would safeguard their personal and familial social standing in their community. Such ambivalence regarding sex work stems from a kinship system based on caste-gender ideology that relies upon both inherent contradictory structural imperatives and a sense of diffuse solidarity. Although the family's disadvantaged social location pushed the women into prostitution, collective family and personal silence provide Manga and Nagamani with enough room to negotiate their way within structures of family and marriage so that while breaking social norms, they could appear to be maintaining it.

Breaking Silence is Disruptive

The previous stories showed how families rallied together to keep a secret, perhaps because they recognized that, in the absence of strong financial support from a husband, the women's only other choice, however constrained it was, lay in sex work. Not all families are willing to uphold such secrets. Indira's story shows the consequences when the secret is revealed and how women and families live with this uneasy knowledge. Married at age fourteen to elderly widower, twenty-two year old Indira cares for three stepchildren and one biological child. She and her husband are *scheduled caste* agricultural workers, but their combined income cannot support their family. One day, a woman in her work-gang informed her that the high caste landlord in whose field they

worked sent word that he was interested in having sex with her. Indira immediately agreed, fearing that she and her husband would lose their jobs if she refused. In exchange for having sex with her, the landlord opened an account for Indira at the local grocery store that enabled her to buy enough to feed her family for an entire month. She concealed the true source of this income by informing her husband that the groceries were a gift from her parents.

Unfortunately, this arrangement did not last long, as one of Indira's coworkers threatened to expose her relationship with the landlord to the rest of the village unless Indira paid her a bribe, which she did. When the woman repeated the threat, and asked for half the grocery items as well, Indira refused, causing the woman to inform the village, including her husband and the landlord. The results were devastating: the landlord promptly ended his arrangement with Indira and refused to hire her or her husband as laborers, thus ending their sole source of income. Unable to bear the humiliation, Indira consumed an overdose of sleeping pills, but survived because she was discovered and taken to the hospital. Constant quarrels, sometimes ending with Indira being beaten by husband and in-laws, led her to attempt suicide a second time. The family's financial condition did not change and, as a consequence, Indira started a relationship with a merchant in their area. Her family suspects this and Indira lives with the daily quarrels and beatings, and her family lives with the tension of keeping this knowledge.

This narrative poignantly underscores the implausibility of selling sex secretly, and the consequences to women and their families, of loss of social standing and income and family disruptions, when the secret is revealed. The hierarchical caste-class-gender relationship which the high caste landlord controlled, but which also kept Indira's family economically afloat, unraveled completely when information about his relationship with the lower caste woman became public. In the process, Indira's kinship arrangements and family practices marginalized her because she

violated social expectations. She tried to re-negotiate her inclusion, entitlements, and obligations within family, sometimes through extreme measures (Harlan & Courtright, 1995).

Indira's two attempted suicides were both forms of denial, a silence of sorts, and her efforts to prove her innocence from the charge of engagement in paid sex did not receive any sympathy from her family. With the revelation, her support systems – of livelihood, mediator for sex work, and client for sex work – collapsed. Family anger and blame for her actions led to family disruptions, and narrowed Indira's space to negotiate a life where she could support her family in ways that they could have a chance to live beyond a hand-to-mouth existence. The narrative shows the perception held by men in power – the landlord in this case – that a socially disadvantaged woman is available to any man for sex; this sense of impunity is not directed merely towards the sexuality of *scheduled caste*, laboring women, but also towards the economic standing of their men and families who are lower on the class and caste hierarchy.

Women do not simply resort to silence fatalistically when their sex work status is revealed. Instead, they use silence strategically, sometimes to contest the power structures and other times to subvert it. Constrained, but not determined by stigma when knowledge of their sexual labor becomes public, they negotiate spaces for themselves within constraining structures. For instance, twenty-four year old Jaya is mother of two and lives with a husband who is taunted in the village as “someone who cannot please his wife sexually” because she conceived several years after marriage. Both husband and wife belong to the *backward caste*, and work as daily wage laborers. Jaya explains the economic difficulties that led her to engage in sex work as follows:

We got loan of rupees 15,000 [U.S. \$320] to buy buffalos for which we have to pay installment rupees 330 [U.S. \$7] per week. Ten village women form a group⁶, and if one

does not pay, the other nine have to. If we don't pay [the financier] comes and asks the other nine members to pay. These members scold us; they come home and quarrel. I need work regularly to pay the loans.

To make ends meet, Jaya found work in the informal construction sector. She says, "I go with three people for *topy* [casual construction laborer] work near my village. In this work, if we do not agree for sex with the *mestri* [supervisor] we are not given work. I think if I go to any other place for work I cannot escape from this; the situation is the same everywhere." She agreed to have sex with the supervisor, and his friends when required, for which she received occasional payment as well as assurance that she will have *topy* work every day of the season. Jaya explained:

Sometimes I felt that this [sex] work is wrong, but if I don't do this, who will give food to my children? So I am doing [it]. I go secretly for fear of what neighbors will think. Neighbors behave well with me; they don't talk any wrong words.

Through her membership in the microcredit group, Jaya was allotted a plot of land to build a house for which the signature of the village headman was needed on an official document. Her husband would not make the rounds to get the signature, so she had to do so. The headman made her come several times to meet him, and made it clear he wanted sex with her in return for his signature. She says, "I got to know that he is knowingly coming to me to have sex. If he gives the order, the land may be forbidden to me; he has that much power." But Jaya did not agree to his request out of fear that the word about her sex work would spread around even more, and she decided to forgo the land.

Jaya's story, like the previous one, highlights the impunity with which men inflict gender and caste violence on socially disadvantaged women. Men in positions of power, whether of the

same caste or a higher caste than a woman, expect a *scheduled* or *backward caste* woman to trade sex for employment requirements such as signatures on documents. Jaya mentioned neither the supervisor's nor the village headman's caste status in her narrative, but regardless, both men had power over her, a poor, *scheduled caste*, woman who needed work and a signature. The story illustrates the woman's active and strategic use of silence. In the case where she needed work and a regular income, through which she could access other productive assets like a buffalo, the woman decided to silently bear with the landlord's demands for sex. In contrast, when she perceived that giving her sexual services to the village headman would probably not result in her getting a piece of land, she again used her sexuality actively – by withholding it from him, she signaled that she was a “good” woman whose sexuality was inviolable.

Final Remarks

These stories about families collectively maintaining secrets in order to negotiate stigma and survive, reveal the complex structures of women's social location and how these impinge upon their daily lives. In these examples, women are not only wives, mothers, members of village groups or secret sex workers; they are also landless, laborers, and debtors who live with the everyday exercise of patriarchal, class and caste privilege. The possibilities for women's resistance in situations where they are less powerful or privileged vis-à-vis men, families, employers, government officials, are minimal, and thus the silence of women who sell sex “secretly”, and that of their families, can be viewed through various lenses.

Silence allows women to remain incorporated into their marital family and to be entitled to its resources. Using to their advantage the imperative of family, wherein marital ties are considered a long-term kinship investment, silence or denying involvement in sex work allows women to remain situated in the familial register:

they are accounted for as women, embedded in networks of relationships that carry ideological and moral value, and by virtue of this, respect and status. Entitlements fall out of social placement in that women who are socially situated as a member of a kinship network have the moral and social entitlement to a share of that family's resources. Women's attempts at secrecy also bring out the social dimensions of their identity. The threat of revealing their sex work activity damages the non-familial relationships that women have built over a period of time with other social groups and institutions.

Women's silence can be viewed as extraordinary courage and resilience in their attempts to ensure the economic security of their children and families. By appearing to adhere to gendered norms, yet carrying on with socially unacceptable actions, women negotiate spaces at the margins of patriarchal families and cultures and silently and covertly continue to secure economic stability for their families and to exert control over their lives. The nature of muted family negotiations, family survival strategies and the materiality of kinship and its consequences are clearly seen through family reactions to women who violate gendered expectations. For families who keep silent, their silence can be viewed as an attempt to avoid conflicts, keep up appearances of family, uphold family standing in their community, and secure a family life for the children.

Quiet acceptance of a family member's sex work defuses the potential threat that disclosure would wreck to the culture of family. Families work to silence, co-opt, or undermine those who are different from normative expectations in part because family ideology presents marriage as a lifelong relationship that must be maintained. The power of the familial ideology and the stigma of violating it kept women and families silent about their sex work. Yet, like kinship and marital ideologies, sex work arrangements and practices are mutable. Flexible sex work arrangements and

practices give women the space to negotiate their way through family expectations and economic realities.

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² Caste here denotes the generic meaning of the stratified social system and in a restricted sense the ritual-based hierarchical structure of social relations located within this social system. Throughout this text, emic terminology is indicated in *italics*. In India, especially in the South, the terms *backward caste*, *forward caste* and *scheduled caste* are commonly used terms. The term *scheduled caste* refers to people from a range of castes, who were deemed by members of higher castes to be ritually impure and hence, untouchable. *Scheduled caste* members were socially segregated and banned from participation in social life because, historically, they were associated with occupations regarded as ritually impure, such as leatherwork, butchering, removal of rubbish, animal carcasses, and waste, and cleaning latrines and sewers. Today such discrimination exists mainly in the rural areas. The *scheduled castes* are explicitly recognized by the Constitution of India which lays down principles of affirmative action for them. Other *backward Castes* are constitutionally defined by two Commissions: Kaka Kalelkar Commission of appointed in January 29, 1953 and B. P Mandal Commission appointed on January 1, 1979. They created list of *backward castes* on the basis of educational disadvantage, social disadvantage such as access to water, economic disadvantage such as the absence of formal sector jobs across generation. These groups are entitled to reservation up to 27% of the government jobs. Mostly they come from landholding small and middle peasant communities with certain degree of access to schools in vernacular mediums. Forward castes are deemed by the government as those groups who are unsuitable for affirmative action (reservation in India) because of their educational and economic advantage over the rest of the population. In Andhra Pradesh these groups include Brahmin, Kapus, Reddys and Komatis. They are overwhelmingly represented in formal sector jobs ranging from bottom to top and also constitute the majority of large landholding rich peasant classes and land lords. In Andhra Pradesh, the *forward castes* represent about 30 per cent of the state's population, while the backward castes representing 46 per cent comprise a range of 92 castes; the *scheduled castes* (SC) form 17 per cent and the *scheduled tribes* (ST) 7 per cent of the state's population.

³ These interviews were part of a larger study on patterns sex trafficking in coastal Andhra Pradesh, which was approved by the IRB of the International Center for Research on Women.

⁴ Krishna District ranks second, next only to the state capital, Hyderabad (Government of Andhra Pradesh & Centre for Economic and Social Development, 2008).

⁵ All names are pseudonyms.

⁶ For a critical review of self help groups in Andhra Pradesh, see Galab & Rao (2003).