

Resistance and Reinforcement: Rethinking the Underclass Commercial Sex Worker Discourse in Sri Lanka

Abstract

The study takes a discourse analysis approach to the underclass commercial sex worker (CSW) discourse. While critiquing the many existing studies/accounts of CSWs for their failure to go beyond the dominant conceptualization of commercial sex work and their tendency to assess the concerned discourse in terms of the standards of the hegemonic mainstream discourse, the study underscores the need for alternative ways of understanding that discourse. The study is based on the life narratives of twelve underclass CSWs representing three categories (those who work at inexpensive guesthouses, those who are accessed on the street and work in rooms, and those who live and work on the street) gathered using (1) formal and informal interviews conducted mainly with underclass CSWs and also with three-wheeler drivers (TWDs) and (2) field observations in the Kandy area in 2006-2007. Based on an analysis of (1) the sympathy-stories in terms of which they discuss their “predicament” with certain outsiders, (2) the identity-formation process in the CSW discourse, and (3) the symbiotic relationship between certain underclass CSWs and TWDs, the paper argues that the CSWs’ response to the dominant hegemonic discourse is marked by a complex mix of resistance and reinforcement. The study concludes with the argument that the CSWs’ resistance mainly takes the form of exploring alternatives necessarily within the existing value system and social structure(s).

Key words: Commercial sex work; Commercial sex workers; Underclass; Discourse; Underclass resistance; Hegemony

Introduction¹

The predominantly negative attitude that Sri Lankan society maintains towards commercial sex work projects it as an “immoral” and “demeaning” activity that should be eradicated from society. It is invariably seen as a serious social “problem,” which endangers society and devalues culture and religion. This view depicts commercial sex workers (CSWs), especially those from the underclass, *either* as a group of “victims” who have been “forced” into this profession by a variety of social and economic factors and needing “rehabilitation,” thus entailing a sympathetic attitude towards them, *or* as a group of “immoral” social beings who are beyond redemption.

The present study problematises this mainstream understanding of the commercial sex worker discourse and points to a possible alternative way in which to understand the said discourse. The study recognizes underclass CSWs as a marginalized and stigmatized group that articulates resistance to dominant paradigms. They are a resistant group in the sense that they are continually involved in an illegal² and predominantly stigmatized activity, which is invariably considered “immoral,” “sinful,” and “demeaning” by the hegemonic mainstream discourse. This involvement, despite various restrictions imposed on them and the danger involved in their activity, suggests a tendency to go against the “normative” social behaviour, a tendency that could be read as a challenge to or problematisation of the existing social hegemonies. However, although underclass CSWs appear to resist the dominant paradigms, it is *not* the case that they are completely outside of the dominant value system that they resist. In fact, most of them actually share that value system and construct their identities in terms of that value system. Through an analysis of (1) the sympathy-stories³ in terms of which the CSWs discuss their “predicament” with certain outsiders, (2) the identity formation process in the CSW discourse, and (3) the symbiotic relationship between certain underclass CSWs and TWDs, the paper argues that the CSWs’ response to the dominant hegemonic discourse is marked by a complex mix of resistance and reinforcement.

To argue for seeing the CSWs’ continual involvement in commercial sex work as an act of resistance towards the dominant paradigms, one needs to go beyond the conventional understanding of resistance. Foucault’s conceptualization of resistance provides a basis for a broader understanding of this concept. He argues:

Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequentially, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. Should it be said that one is always ‘inside’ power, there is no ‘escaping’ it, there is no absolute outside where it is concerned, because one is subject to the law in any case? Or that, history being the ruse of reason, power is the ruse of history, always emerging the winner? This would be to misunderstand the strictly relational character of power relationships. Their existence depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play

¹ I wish to thank Professor Arjuna Parakrama for his valuable guidance in the initial stages of my study. I also thank all the participants who enabled me to make my study a success.

² See Miller for a detailed discussion of the legal situation in Sri Lanka with regard to commercial sex work.

³ The notion of ‘sympathy-story’ will be discussed in greater detail in the discussion section of the paper.

the role of adversary, target, support, or handle in power relations. These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network. Hence there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial; by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations.

(History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction 95-96)

This conceptualization of resistance points to the inseparable relationship between power and resistance. It also shows that resistance could manifest itself in forms that are least associated with the mainstream/conventional understanding of the notion, which primarily evokes the idea of active rebellion. According to this understanding, every act that problematises a given system, irrespective of how that problematisation is carried out, is an act of resistance. In this sense, in a context where the CSW discourse exists in an antithetical relationship to the dominant discourse in many ways, not only the CSWs' continual involvement in the illegal and stigmatized act of commercial sex work, but also their apparent willingness to share the "secrets" of "truth" about their life-styles with outsiders like the elite researcher could be seen as an act of resistance.

The study uses the term "reinforcement" to denote the opposite of resistance. Reinforcement is always a centripetal force (as opposed to resistance, which is a centrifugal force) that strengthens a given system/centre. An act of reinforcement is always an affirmation of what the system/centre stands for. In the context of the CSW discourse, any act that results in strengthening the dominant value system of society could be considered a reinforcement of the hegemonic mainstream discourse.

The term "underclass" refers to certain elements of the lowest social and economic stratum in society. The literature dealing with this notion (Auletta; Ricketts and Mincy; Wilson) views financial destitution and "deviant" social behaviour as the factors that define the underclass. In their discussion of the underclass in the context of the United States, Rickett and Mincy distinguish the underclass from the poor. They argue that "the underclass is distinguished from the poor by the increasing coincidence of socially dysfunctional behaviours among a diverse population living in inner-city communities" (137). According to them, the 'socially dysfunctional behaviours' that define the underclass include "committing criminal acts, depending on welfare, not participating in the labour force, dropping out of high school, and bearing children out-of-wedlock" (137).

Discourse is one of the most complex and hard-to-define concepts in the fields of the social sciences and humanities. Linguistics defines discourse as "a continuous stretch of (especially spoken) LANGUAGE larger than a SENTENCE" (Crystal 118; emphasis in original). In linguistics, it is "a behavioural UNIT which has a pre-theoretical status" (Crystal 118; emphasis in original). The idea that discourse is mainly text (spoken or written) is inherent in this understanding of the concept. The present study is of the view that this definition provides only a limited understanding of the concept. Pennycook goes

beyond this limited understanding of discourse and conceptualizes it in Foucauldian terms:

[The notion of discourse is used] to refer not to a piece of text or conversation but rather, in Foucault's terms, as that place in which 'power and knowledge are joined together.' This use of discourse is akin to, though in my view preferable to, a notion of ideology. Thus, it is a political understanding of knowledge, a view that sees knowledge as socially constructed and related to questions of power, but does not imply either a notion of false consciousness or some necessary socioeconomic cause. Discourses are organizations of knowledge that have become embedded in social institutions and practices, a constellation of power/knowledge relationships which organize texts and produce and reflect different subject positions. (104)

Parakrama echoes this understanding when he argues, "*Discourse is the 'originary' system of value-coding since it provides the condition of possibility for the diverse coding of value, and since it must appear to be epistemologically prior to value itself*" (82; emphasis in original). These understandings project discourse as a frame of reference that provides the condition of possibility for texts. Discourse, as a political understanding of knowledge, determines what could be said and what could not be said; what gets accepted as a value and what gets rejected; and what is worth paying attention to and what does not deserve attention. Given the position of discourse as a frame of reference, what gets encoded as a text (verbal and/or written) could be seen not only as a product but also as a manifestation of the complex interrelationships between power and knowledge that characterize a given discourse. It logically follows from this that an analysis of the texts associated with a particular discourse would provide insights into the nature of that discourse. In this sense, the CSW discourse could be seen as a frame of reference that provides the condition of possibility for the creation of a set of values, which are available to researchers mainly in the form of verbal statements, and an analysis of those statements would provide insights into the nature of the power-knowledge relationships that produce those values/find expression in those values.

Situating the Study

Most of the existing literature on the subject of CSWs is problematic in two respects. To begin with, *research* studies on commercial sex work are rare in the region. Commercial sex work appears to be the stuff of sensationalist or prurient popular anecdotal journalism. Second, hardly any attempt is made by scholars to dissociate themselves from this dominant view. Most of the studies that have been done on commercial sex work in Sri Lanka in particular and South Asia in general indicate a tendency to be guided primarily by this mainstream understanding of the subject, which establishes commercial sex work as a "problem" that should be addressed with an effective "solution" (Ratnapala 124-131), "a public evil and disgrace to civilization" (Mukherji i), an antisocial phenomenon (Jayasuriya 89-95), and, specifically in the Indian context, "exclusively a city-oriented phenomenon ... with its accompanying evils of diverse

nature” (Joardar 3). This tendency to be guided by the hegemonic reading overlooks possible alternative understandings of the discourse in question.

Ratnapala, who claims to be the pioneer of studies on CSWs in Sri Lanka⁴, emphasizes the need to find “solutions” to the “problem” of commercial sex work: “The best solution that could be perhaps suggested is to find out the reasons as to why this situation arises and then attempt to deal with those reasons” (Ratnapala 124). He identifies economic deprivation and lack of legitimate occupational opportunities as the main factors that perpetuate commercial sex work (Ratnapala 130), and proposes a solution:

Finding out avenues of employment as an alternative way of living would help these women very much. What the majority of street sex workers told us was that if they do have an alternative in that sense, they would certainly give up being in [the] commercial sex trade. But being uneducated and being without skills, it is very difficult to find an alternative. (Ratnapala 124)

This conclusion indicates the researcher’s exclusive reliance on what the CSWs say. He assumes that what the CSWs tell him is factually accurate. He fails to understand that this sympathy-story is one of the few possible ways, if not the only way, in which the female CSW can discuss her “predicament,” especially with a person whom she considers an outsider. Given the illegality of the activity and the stigma attached to the position of the underclass CSW, it is not difficult to understand that hardly any CSW would acknowledge her “willing” involvement in her profession. This exaggerated readiness to give up the profession is an inevitable part of their sympathy-story. In such a context, any uncritical acceptance of this as a true intention would lead to a distorted understanding of the discourse of sex work. At the same time, the implication that those who operate as CSWs have been “forced” into this profession as a result of various social and economic factors such as the lack of education and skills excludes the possibility of reading their engagement in commercial sex work to have much more complex determinations, albeit within a limited range of available options.

Ratnapala also recognizes the lack of “proper” socialization as a major factor that makes underclass women become CSWs:

The socialization process is behind their character build-up. None of these girls whom we confronted had any socialization by way of religious education, or have been to religious or *dhamma* schools, nor do they have a habit of going to the temple or church. Religious values and attitudes are thus not a part of their personal life. Socialization is influenced by those with whom they come in contact with. The poor surroundings in which they live bring them into contact with people of the lowest category, with low

⁴ Ratnapala says, “In spite of the difficulties I had, I thought that women sex workers (there were no men sex workers then) needed a research. ... If due to the social stigma I happened to stay away no research on them could have been done” (xi).

intelligence and hardly any education. Among them, poverty is rampant. Social relationships with such people contribute to their character deterioration. Many of them are anti-social elements, and sex work is nothing new to them. It is through such influences that the new person gets initiated into sex work. (120)

Being guided by the mainstream reading of socialization, Ratnapala makes the parochial assumption that religious values and attitudes necessarily involve participation in public rituals or activities. This overlooks the possibility of a person being “religious,” in the sense that s/he embodies the values that religion appears to uphold, though s/he may not publicly participate in religious activities. At the same time the correlation which Ratnapala establishes between religious values and commercial sex work is problematic. The relationship between the two is much more nuanced than the simple equation that commercial sex work indicates a degeneration in or absence of religious values.

The tendency to see commercial sex work as a form of degeneration is based on the widespread assumption that sex is “immoral.” This assumption leads to a polarization of religious values and sex, thereby establishing these two entities as opposites that cannot be discussed in relation to each other in a positive sense. This polarization is even stronger in the case of commercial sex work due to the immense social stigma attached to it. The uncritical acceptance of this mainstream assumption regarding sex ignores various other possible ways in which the relationship between religious values and commercial sex work could be seen.

The emphasis that Ratnapala puts on socialization based on religious education indicates the common tendency of research studies to evaluate subaltern⁵ discourses in terms of the standards of the hegemonic mainstream discourse. This tendency leads researchers to imply that CSWs are an “inferior” group of people who signify “character deterioration” because the mainstream values and attitudes are not part of their lives. This understanding excludes the possibility of the lack of conformity to the mainstream values being read as an indication of resistance to dominant paradigms.

The idea that CSWs are necessarily an “inferior” breed is explicit in Jayasuriya’s study as well. She writes:

As some sex workers were too lethargic to respond during interviews, they even had to be given financial incentives in order to obtain true data from them. Engaging in interviews with sex workers was not an easy task due to the fact that they are a group of people who are marked for their socially low demeanour. While some of them exaggerated the real situation regarding their profession, some others were reluctant to respond. Sometimes the vulgarity of the vocabulary (language) that they used in the interviews created uncomfortable situations for me. Another problem that I faced in the field was to have had to acknowledge the

⁵ This technical term is used to refer to “the unorganized underclass.” See Guha and Spivak.

sex workers whom I had interviewed for the study when I met them on the street. I got into really uncomfortable situations as the others got a wrong impression of me. (15, Translation mine)

Jayasuriya's engagement in this sort of value judgment at the beginning of the study indicates her conscious acknowledgement of the stigma attached to CSWs. Although she shows some sympathy towards their situation, she does not problematise this social stigma anywhere in her study. This failure or reluctance on the part of the researcher to problematise the social stigma attached to CSWs in a way reinforces the hegemonic mainstream value system of society. At the same time, the researcher's tendency to see CSWs as a group of people who are marked for their "low"/"immoral" social demeanour and "vulgarity" of their language indicates the tendency to regard the mainstream value system as the ultimate standard by which even underclass discourses could/should be explicated.

This account also indicates Jayasuriya's assumption that CSWs should cooperate and be enthusiastic towards the researcher and provide the service, which the researcher expects from them, free of charge. This assumption appears to be based on the understanding that the researcher occupies a superior position in her relationship with CSWs, which makes it obligatory for CSWs to comply with the researcher's requirements. To highlight the idea that the researcher had to pay the CSWs in order to obtain information from them is to challenge the right of the CSWs to either withhold information or to expect a payment for the services they render. This line of thinking could arguably even be used to justify CSWs being left unpaid by their clients after the sex act is performed. At the same time, to claim that her subjects engage in commercial sex work because of destitution on the one hand and to expect them to render a service to her free of charge on the other indicate a clear self-contradiction on the part of the researcher.

Given the illegality of their discourse and the stigma associated with that discourse, the idea that financial incentives would always prompt CSWs to offer "true" information about their profession and life-style is also problematic. The assumption that financial incentives would solve the problem and enable the researcher to obtain "true" information about this underclass discourse indicates a distortion and fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of this discourse. At the same time, the research fails to recognize the possibility of the CSWs' tendency to exaggerate the situation and/or reluctance to respond to the researcher's queries being strategies that they use to maintain the secrecy and "closedness" of their discourse.

Miller's study of Sri Lanka's commercial sex industry is important in a number of ways. It follows accepted research procedures and is based on extensive and thorough field research. In that sense, the study qualifies as one of the few "objective" research studies in the field. It provides a detailed overview of pathways into the sex industry and discusses the nature of coercion, violence, and abuse across different sectors of the local sex industry. The sociological approach that Miller takes to the commercial sex industry enables her to recognize various forms of discrimination that characterize the industry. However, her exclusive focus on issues related to gender-based discrimination in the industry overlooks the possibility of the CSWs' identity being constructed in a

radically different way.⁶ In this sense, Miller's study, although thorough and insightful in its own way, fails to be significantly different from the other accounts/studies of CSWs.

Thus many existing accounts of CSWs do not consider the possibility of an alternative approach to conceptualizing CSW discourse that undermines the conventional or mainstream approach to the study of "underclass" communities. They indicate a clear tendency on the part of the "researcher" to assess this discourse in terms of the standards of the mainstream hegemonic discourse. The present study is different from the existing accounts in that its aim is to go beyond the mainstream understanding of this underclass discourse and recognize alternative ways of looking at it. The study recognizes and analyzes the CSW's response to the mainstream hegemonic discourse as one marked by a complex mix of resistance and reinforcement. The importance of the present study lies mainly in the discourse studies approach⁷ that it takes to the study of the CSW discourse.

Methodology

The study is primarily based on the life-narratives of twelve underclass female CSWs representing three broad categories: those who work at inexpensive guesthouses (first category), those who are accessed on the street but work in rooms (second category), and those who live and work on the street (third category).⁸ The analysis is based on qualitative data gathered using multiple rounds of formal and informal interviews (an average of three-to-four rounds of individual interviews with each) conducted mainly with the twelve CSWs (three each from the first and third categories and six from the second category) and also with five TWDs in selected urban locations in Kandy in 2006 and 2007.⁹

The method of field observation¹⁰ was also used for data collection when and where possible.¹¹ The broad classification of underclass CSWs

⁶ This further highlights the importance of the discourse analysis approach as opposed to sociological approaches to the study of "underclass" communities such as CSWs.

⁷ Defining the discourse analysis approach, Kroger and Wood write, "Discourse analysis involves ways of thinking about discourse (theoretical and metatheoretical elements) and ways of treating discourse as data (methodological elements). Discourse analysis is thus not simply an alternative to conventional methodologies; it is an alternative to the perspectives in which those methodologies are embedded. Discourse analysis entails more than a shift in methodology from a general, abstracted, quantitative to a particularized, detailed, qualitative approach. It involves a number of assumptions that are important in their own right and also as a foundation for doing discourse-analytic research. ... [The discursive perspective] entails (at least) three major shifts from conventional orientations: (a) from a distinction between talk (discourse) and action to an emphasis on talk *as* action, (b) from a view of talk (discourse) as a route to internal or external events or entities to an emphasis on talk as the event of interest, and (c) from a view of variability as an anomalous feature of action to an appreciation of variability both within and between people" (3-4).

⁸ This categorization is based on the findings of a preliminary study on certain underclass groups in society that I conducted in March 2005.

⁹ While the interviews on which the present paper is based were conducted in the 2006-2007 period, I continued to obtain information regarding the discourse in question periodically through informal "chats" with TWDs (the five interviewed for the study and four others) and field observations until early 2010.

¹⁰ The field observations involved visiting three inexpensive "guesthouses" (as a client, in three-wheelers) in and around Kandy and going through the process of obtaining a room with a CSW (first

into the three identified categories does not suggest that these categories are homogeneous social entities with strict boundaries. On the one hand, the CSWs of all three categories share a lot in common, especially in terms of the nature of their “work” and their response to the dominant paradigms. On the other hand, each of these three categories is essentially marked for its inherent heterogeneity. This classification, which takes into consideration only a few factors such as their accessibility and the location of their “work,” is therefore employed only for the purpose of structuring data and convenience of reference and does not in any sense undermine the inherently heterogeneous nature of this underclass discourse.

The fact that this study focuses only on a selection of underclass female CSWs should not convey the implication that commercial sex work is practiced only by those who belong to the underclass and/or female gender. Commercial sex work is practiced by both males and females who belong to different social strata ranging from the affluent, powerful, and prestigious classes [the “call girl” phenomenon] to the downtrodden and absolutely impoverished sections of society. The underclass CSWs are a group of people who are part of this broad social category and located close to, if not right at, the latter extreme of the array.

Discussion

Sympathy-Story as a Discursive Strategy

The study uses the term ‘sympathy-story’ to refer to the set story in terms of which almost every CSW discusses and justifies her involvement in commercial sex work. This story is primarily aimed at arousing sympathy in the listener towards the CSW’s “plight.” They vary from one another in terms of specific details; however, all stories share a common, even predictable, narrative structure/story line. The study identifies two areas that the CSWs discuss in their sympathy-stories: (1) the factors that made them become CSWs and continue in the commercial sex work profession and (2) their attitude towards commercial sex work. The study recognizes the sympathy-story as one of the few possible ways, if not the only way, in which the female CSW can discuss her “predicament,” especially with a person whom she considers an outsider. It is a story not so much in the sense of a factually inaccurate account as in the sense of a conscious representation of her situation with the specific aim of earning the listener’s sympathy and justifying her case.

In a context where the illegality of the practices that define the concerned underclass discourse requires CSWs to maintain the secretive nature of their practices, it would be a mistake to assume that the CSWs’ sympathy-stories are factually accurate accounts. In this sense, exclusive reliance on the sympathy-stories would only result in a distorted understanding of the discourse of sex work. However, the obvious uncertainty regarding the factual accuracy of these stories

category) and observing the street-spaces in which second and third category CSWs operated; the accessed clients/were accessed by clients/TWDs, and negotiated “deals”.

¹¹ As far as the methodology of the study is concerned, it should be noted that this research study is not a quantitative account of CSWs, but a study of discourse where the primary aim is to recognize the ways in which values get coded in the concerned underclass discourse. The objective of this discourse study is not to be empirically exhaustive, but rather to point to the ways in which CSWs carry out their living. Therefore, the limitation of the sample of the study in terms of numbers and its spatial distribution would not render the conclusions of the study necessarily invalid.

does *not* undermine their validity as “research data.” Stories may not always present factually accurate data; nevertheless, irrespective of whether they are true or false, they provide important insights into how people perceive the world.¹² Given that the highly disadvantageous position that CSWs occupy in society requires them to justify their position as CSWs in some way for their survival and that the sympathy-story is the best way, if not the only way, in which they could strive to do that, the sympathy stories arguably provide important insights not only into the way the CSWs perceive the world, but also into how they practically go about the difficult task of justifying their case. In this sense, these sympathy-stories provide ideal research data for discourse analysis studies.¹³

The CSWs cite dire poverty as the primary factor that made them join the commercial sex work profession. The CSW projects herself as the primary, if not the only, bread-winner of her family, which is usually bigger than a nuclear family unit (one that includes not only the CSW and her children but also her parents, siblings, and other adults in the family) and characterized by the absence of a “protective” male figure. They claim commercial sex work to be the only means of income that enables them to “feed” their families. Irrespective of whether it is valid or not, the dominant argument that they do not have “proper” educational qualifications and “skills” to obtain “respectable” jobs enables them to justify, on sympathetic grounds, their claim that commercial sex work is the only option that is left. This aspect of the sympathy-story indicates a tendency on the part of the CSW to justify her involvement in the illegal profession of commercial sex work on humanitarian grounds. Interestingly, she does this using the values and standards defined and upheld by the mainstream discourse, like providing for helpless family members. She subscribes to the dominant notions of “skill” and “education” when she cites the absence of those to justify her involvement in sex work. Her failure to acknowledge, if not her conscious decision not to acknowledge, that she possesses a different kind of “education” and a different set of “skills” that are necessary for her to operate as a CSW creates a space in which she could ignore the intense pressure from the hegemonic mainstream discourse and make her case in a convincing manner.

Ten out of the twelve CSWs cited sexual abuse by a male figure (the husband, the lover, a male family member, or an outsider) and/or wilful abandonment by the husband or lover as factors that pushed them towards commercial sex work. Their narratives implied the idea that the incident(s) of sexual abuse and abandonment “tainted” their character forever and made them “damaged goods,” denying them the opportunity to continue as “normal” women in society. According to them, the only option that is open to women like them is commercial sex work. This argument indicates a tendency to subscribe to the dominant social conceptions regarding the “vulnerability” and “helplessness” of women and use these dominant conceptions to justify their position as CSWs on

¹² See Sandberg for a detailed discussion of this idea.

¹³ Describing what he means by discourse analysis, Foucault says, “I do not question discourses about their silently intended meanings, but about the fact and the conditions of their manifest appearance; not about the contents which they may conceal, but about the transformations which they have effected; not about the sense preserved within them like a perpetual origin, but about the field where they coexist, reside and disappear” (“Politics and the Study of Discourse” 60). He also argues, “discourse is constituted by the difference between what one could say correctly at one period (under the rules of grammar and logic) and what is actually said. The discursive field is, at a specific moment, the law of this difference” (“Politics and the Study of Discourse” 63).

sympathetic grounds. Two CSWs in the first category said that their involvement in commercial sex work was, among other things, their way of taking revenge from the men who “violated” them and made them “impure.” At the same time, they challenged, and did so consciously, the patriarchal value structure, which held the idea of “sexual purity” in high regard, when they expressed their decision to continue to be “impure” and use “sexual impurity” as a weapon against the violators. However, the fact that this decision is based on the assumption that the act of sexual abuse “violated” them and pushed them to a point where they could no longer function as “respectable” women in society indicates an acceptance of the patriarchal values of “purity,” “respectability,” and “womanhood” at a fundamental level.

Their dislike towards the profession they are involved in and their express desire to quit the “job” are essential features of the CSWs’ dominant sympathy-story. All the CSWs involved in the present study viewed commercial sex work as a “shameful,” “disgraceful,” “evil,” “bad,” “immoral,” and “sinful” act/profession that resulted in “social deterioration.” They claimed that they were involved in commercial sex work only because they did not have any other option and expressed their willingness and readiness to quit the profession if they got different, preferably “respectable,” jobs. Their confession that they had not been able to be “good mothers” to their children, their emphatic claim that they would never allow their children to “fall” into the commercial sex work profession, and their express determination to raise their children in such a way that they would enter society as “good” and “respectable” citizens reaffirm the CSWs’ tendency to project their profession as a necessarily “evil” one.

Their attitude towards their profession indicates their acceptance of the mainstream social and religious values of “grace,” “goodness,” “morality,” “motherhood,” and “social correctness.” It also indicates the extent to which the CSWs who appear to resist the dominant discourse are controlled and influenced by the hegemonic structures of that dominant discourse itself. In the context of the sympathy-story, this acceptance of the mainstream social and religious values and affirmation of the mainstream understanding of commercial sex work could be read as a discursive strategy that the CSWs use, if not have to use, in order to project their story as one that is in line with, or, at least, not completely contravening, the dominant value system, hence a story that is worth listening to. The acceptance of the “ground rules” or the “rules of the game” through this initial alignment of the sympathy-story with the dominant value system is a necessary prerequisite for the CSWs’ justification of their case.

Although the dominant sympathy-story accepts the mainstream social and religious values, it would be misleading to see it as passive acceptance. This acceptance is followed by an attempt to redefine these mainstream values. The CSWs’ argument that they render an indispensable “service” to society could be seen as a case in point. According to their view, CSWs render an important service to those who are not in a position to gratify their sexual desires in a socially acceptable manner. They also claim that their service benefits the whole society because the availability of this service prevents sexual exploitation and abuse of family members and other powerless individuals who are mainly women. This claim, which projects CSWs as the saviours of the “womankind,” calls for a radical reevaluation and redefinition of the mainstream social and religious values of “service,” “goodness,” “morality,” and “propriety.” However, the fact that the call is more for a redefinition of the existing mainstream values than for a complete

rejection of those values shows that the CSWs' resistance entails a certain reinforcement of the existing hegemonic structures at a fundamental level.

A couple of subsequent discoveries that the study made confirmed that the CSWs' initial sympathy-stories could not be considered "accurate" representations of their life-style. Certain "insider details" that the CSWs revealed in the second and third rounds of interviews contradicted their initial sympathy-stories. The sense of amusement with which some CSWs described certain sex acts and certain "weird" forms of behaviour of certain clients, and certain slips-of-the-tongue that indicated that they enjoyed engaging in certain sex acts with certain types of clients clearly contradicted their initial claim that they completely disliked their profession. At the same time, the study identified two street women who operated as CSWs while being employed in a town cleaning service, and this shows that the availability of alternative means of livelihood does not necessarily make them give up commercial sex work. The fact that they did not return to their initial sympathy-stories in the subsequent interviews shows that they were largely "stories" that served specific discursive purposes. In this sense, it is logical to view these "stories" as a discursive strategy that enables CSWs to discuss their "predicament" with outsiders, without revealing the insider information regarding their life-style, while elevating themselves to a position where they could expect to gain the sympathy of the listener. The stories could thus be seen as a necessary façade that CSWs are constrained to use in order to protect themselves, at least to a certain extent, from the massive pressure from the dominant hegemonic discourse. Any understanding that fails to recognize the discursive nature of the sympathy-stories would therefore be incomplete.

Identity Formation

The CSWs placed significant importance on physicality in conceptualizing their own identity/identities and the identities of other related persons like clients, policemen, and TWDs. They indicated a tendency to describe and classify their clients, policemen, and TWDs in terms of their physical appearance ("smart," "handsome," "good-looking," "beautiful," "ugly," "stinking," "tall," "short," "small," "childlike," "young," "strong," and "old-looking"). The descriptions of clients that the CSWs provided in the subsequent meetings included specific and detailed references to their sex organs and specific sex acts that they showed a preference for. While most of these descriptions indicated a tendency to create sex organ-centric identities¹⁴, certain descriptions indicated a clear reduction of the client to his sex organ. A similar focus on physicality could be seen in the CSWs' descriptions of other CSWs.

Some of the non-physical characteristics that the CSWs referred to in their character descriptions of TWDs and policemen included "kindness," "cruelty," "goodness," and "badness." A close analysis of the way these words are used by the CSWs mainly in their sympathy-stories would show that they carry specific meanings in the CSW discourse. A "good" and "kind" client/person would mainly be one who does not "hurt" the CSW in the sex act, does not force her to engage in a particular sex act against her will, does not try to cheat her financially, and/or pays her extra amount of money as a gift. A "good" and "kind" TWD would mainly be one who stands for the CSW's rights in dealing with clients and the police. A "good" and "kind" policeman would mainly be one who does not harass/create trouble for the CSW. Clients, TWDs, and policemen who are

¹⁴ Using those (predominantly "derogatory") terms that refer to specific sex organs to conceptualize the identities of individuals leads to the formation of sex organ-centric identities.

opposite to these “ideal” models would be described as “bad”/“cruel.” On the one hand, the fact that certain meanings of these terms are not in line with, if not contradict, the dominant meanings of these terms/concepts¹⁵ points to the role subaltern discourses like the underclass CSW discourse play as sites of radical redefinition. On the other hand, the fact that the references to non-physical characteristics of the different stakeholders are primarily part of the CSWs’ initial sympathy-stories (as opposed to the subsequent accounts of their life-style) and that such references are clearly outnumbered by the references to physical characteristics points to the primary importance that physicality enjoys in the concerned discourse as the defining criterion.

The importance that CSWs place on physicality in the process of identity formation, which even results in the creation of sex organ-centric identities, indicates a complex mix of resistance and conformity towards the dominant paradigms. On one level, this identity formation process becomes an act of resistance mainly in that it challenges the mainstream social standards that treat sexuality as a taboo subject. The CSWs’ “choice” not only to talk about this taboo subject, but also to conceptualize identities in terms of this taboo subject indicates a sense of indifference towards the mainstream social standards. The fact that the “vulgarity” of the language that CSWs use in this identity formation process violates the mainstream notions regarding how women are “supposed” to talk adds to this sense of resistance. However, on another level, the emphasis on physicality results in creating identities that are primarily gender-based, and these gender-based identities reinforce certain gender stereotypes that exist in society. In this sense, the same identity formation process that challenges the dominant paradigms in one way results in reinforcing those paradigms in another way.

Partners in Illegality: The Symbiotic Relationship between Underclass CSWs and TWDs

The symbiotic relationship that exists between those underclass CSWs who access their clients on the street and work in rooms and underclass TWDs¹⁶ is a significant finding of a preliminary study that I conducted in March 2005 in Kandy. This relationship takes the form of a mutually beneficial “business” partnership in a dangerous and illegal context. The danger involved in the illegal activity that the CSW is engaged in makes this relationship inevitable as it is necessary for her survival. In most cases, the CSW of this category is disempowered because for her effective functioning she has to depend on the TWD since her relationship with the TWD determines the success or failure of her profession. Generally speaking, the CSW who provides the service does not have access to the demand; this demand is generally accessed through the TWD. Where the demand is accessed directly by the CSW herself (without the mediation of a

¹⁵ In the mainstream discourse, terms/concepts such as “good” and “kind” may not be used to describe anyone associated with CSWs. From a mainstream perspective, a “good”/“kind” person in relation to the CSW discourse would be one who stays away from CSWs or one who tries to “reform” them. However, in the underclass CSW discourse, these mainstream meanings appear to lose their validity as the primary meanings of their corresponding concepts and instead new meanings take over the terms/concepts.

¹⁶ The majority of TWDs who get involved in this “business” partnership with underclass CSWs belong to the underclass. This, however, does not mean that all TWDs belong to the underclass or get involved in such relationships with CSWs. It should be noted that the references in this paper to TWDs signify only those TWDs who belong to the underclass and get involved in such partnerships.

TWD), the TWD still remains indispensable as he is the one who provides her mobility and also some measure of protection against potential threats.

As far as the TWD is concerned, his livelihood does not depend on his relationship with the CSW. It is an additional source of income for him, which may even become his major source of revenue. The study showed that in addition to his share of the amount, which the CSW charges the client and the travelling charges paid by the client, the TWD is also entitled to a commission from the guesthouse to which the “couple” is taken. The research also showed that the client has to pay him an additional amount if he is expected to stay outside the guesthouse till the client and CSW come back. The TWD is generally in a position to charge higher rates than normal considering the risk involved in the whole activity. Sometimes the benefits that the TWD receives from the CSW go beyond the directly financial; in addition to being paid in cash, he also gets paid in kind. This is specifically so in the case of a CSW who depends solely on one TWD. According to one TWD interviewed for the study, the CSWs “allow” the TWD to engage in sex with them free of charge as a way of showing their “gratitude” for services rendered. Accordingly, the TWD is the person who benefits most from this symbiotic relationship.

The nature of the understanding between the two has a crucial impact on the success of this symbiotic relationship. The reliability of the TWD is one of the main factors that the CSW takes into consideration in maintaining a long-term relationship with him. This concern with the reliability of the TWD highlights the role of the “protector” that the TWD is expected to enact in this relationship. This also entails an acknowledgement of the vulnerability of the CSW not only as one involved in sex work, but also as a woman, to various threats from society. The TWD provides her with protection against possible threats from outsiders such as clients and even the police. In this sense, the involvement of the TWD is essential for her survival. When the client is reluctant to pay the CSW once the sex act is performed, the TWD is the only person whom she can fall back on. The TWD would even resort to violence to protect the CSW’s rights. Forcibly taking the client’s identity-card into his custody and withholding it until the client pays her is one such way of ensuring payment.

The CSW’s excessive dependence on the TWD assigns the TWD a superior position in this relationship where he enacts the roles of the negotiator, protector, provider of mobility, and even manager of financial matters. This powerful position of the TWD places the CSW under his strict authority, and this unequal relationship indicates the possibility of the CSW being exploited by the TWD. This is specifically so when the CSW is restricted to only one TWD in this relationship. Even though the CSW is aware of this exploitation, she cannot question it because of her disempowered position. A CSW’s tendency to maintain relationships with a number of TWDs at the same time may indicate her reluctance to place herself under the authority of one TWD because such a restriction could curtail her freedom and have a negative impact on her income. The presence of many TWDs as “partners” ensures her a better income. Generally, the TWD also does not commit himself to one CSW. The profit motive, which is the primary factor that attracts him towards such partnerships, makes him maintain relationships with a number of CSWs.

Generally speaking, most of the TWDs who are engaged in “business” partnerships with CSWs are rather aggressive as the role of the protector, which they are expected to play in this relationship, requires them to be

so. They also appear to be possessive in these relationships as they do not want to lose the numerous benefits that these relationships grant them. The study showed that one TWD who was involved in such partnerships had also been involved in activities such as getting dead bodies released from hospitals by illegal means and transporting them (dressed as patients), for a fee, to faraway places like Anuradhapura and Ratnapura at the request of the relatives of the dead persons. Another TWD had been involved in peddling drugs before he took to this “business” partnership. These involvements suggest that illegality is part of the lives of these TWDs as members of the underclass. Their association with CSWs, despite the dangers involved in this relationship, could be understood in terms of this “general illegality” that characterizes their underclass life-style.

Given that the symbiotic relationship between the underclass CSW (who is accessed on the street and works in rooms) and TWD is crucial for the CSW’s smooth and effective functioning, even survival, and that this relationship is one of the few options that offer lucrative opportunities to the TWD in the present capital-centric society, the relationship could be seen as a “restricted choice” available to the two underclass communities. The illegality of and the stigma attached to the practices that this relationship embodies position this “choice” outside the “normative” “choices” in society. The CSW and TWD’s decision to pick this “non-normative” “choice” indicates resistance towards the hegemonic structures that define “normativity.”

This strategic alliance enables the CSW to defend her illegal practices in the face of massive pressure from the hegemonic discourse. In this sense, the partnership indicates the CSW’s tendency to move further into illegality in countering this pressure. The CSW’s move towards illegality first in the form of her involvement in commercial sex work and then in the form of her partnership with the TWD is a contestation of the hegemonic structures that expect her to conform to the mainstream notion not merely of the law-abiding citizen, but specifically of the law-abiding and norm-governed conventional woman. In this sense, her partnership with the TWD could be seen as a setting that enables her to step up her resistance to the mainstream discourse.

Although the partnership between the CSW and TWD could be understood as a gesture of resistance in these ways, it also results in reinforcing the dominant paradigms in certain other ways. The different subject positions that this partnership defines¹⁷ could be shown as a case in point. The positions of the mediator, negotiator, manager of financial matters, provider of mobility and, most importantly, the protector that this partnership assigns the TWD gives him power and authority over the CSW. Although the CSW is the primary service provider, her services do not have much value outside her partnership with a supportive TWD. This state of affairs indicates the CSW’s subservience to the TWD not only as a CSW but also as a woman. This reinforcement of gender stereotypes entails an acknowledgement of the subordination of women to men, which is *the* defining principle of the patriarchal value system.

¹⁷ The idea that the partnership between the CSW and TWD defines different subject positions reflects Foucault’s statement, “Discourse is not a place into which the subjectivity irrupts; it is a space of differentiated subject-positions and subject-functions” (“Politics and the Study of Discourse” 58).

Conclusion

The complex mix of resistance and reinforcement that characterizes the CSWs' response to the mainstream discourse indicates that their resistance mostly takes the form of exploring alternatives necessarily *within* the existing value system and social structure(s). Even to articulate resistance, they have to base themselves on the existing lines of thinking defined by the hegemonic mainstream discourse. While it could be argued that the lines of thinking defined by the hegemonic mainstream discourse provide the broadest framework for any act of resistance¹⁸, a position that entails that no act of resistance is possible outside this framework, the disadvantageous subject position that underclass CSWs occupy in the broader social fabric places them in a special place where the dominant lines of thinking have a direct impact on their possibilities of resistance. In this sense, although the underclass CSWs are a resistant group, they cannot be seen as forming an "antisociety"¹⁹ that is radically different from the hegemonic mainstream society.

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¹⁸ Basing herself on the Foucauldian conceptions of power and resistance, Biesecker says, "what is to be called 'resistance' finds its conditions of existence in those virtual breaks or structures of excess opened up by practices performed within the already established lines of making sense that constitute the social weave or social apparatus" (357).

¹⁹ Halliday defines 'antisociety' as "a society that is set up within another society as a conscious alternative to it" (164).

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