

Culture and mental health: The status sex trafficked victims in South India

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Abstract

Health is the upmost wealth of any living being. Preservation of good health becomes an essential factor to lead a happy and purposeful life. Social justice and the human rights are the factors which are in peek when the issue of health is considered. These factors are in heightened when the issue of sexual exploitation of women is considered. Human Trafficking for sexual exploitation has been recognized as the second major social problem of the world. In such scenario, contributions of culture to the disturbed mental health status of the victims of sexual exploitation has been admitted by the practitioners. To understand the same a study was conducted considering 32 NGOs in south India. The descriptive and diagnostic research design was adopted along with interview schedule as tool for collecting data. Statistically, simple descriptive and Contingency Co-efficient tests were adopted to analyse the collected data. The data reveals that the survivors are suffering from depression, post-traumatic stress syndrome, anxiety and mood disorder. The prejudices towards the issue and the survivors, stigma and discrimination in the society, masked attitude of the society in the same of culture, socialization process of women in Indian culture and the addiction to alcohol, different types of drugs etc., are the factors influencing the quality results of NGOs intervention in mainstreaming these commercially sexually exploited women in their working areas. As corrective actions, the NGOs are intervening with educative programmes for sex buyers, introducing programmes to empower vulnerable women in economic issues, awareness creation for healthier environment, working out on de-addiction attempts as well as reduction of risk factors which are responsible for women in such exploitative situation. All these understanding support the influence of cultural factors on mental health of women in sexually exploitative situation.

Keywords: Sexual Exploitation, Human Trafficking, Culture, NGOs, South India

1. Introduction

Health is the upmost wealth of any living being. Preservation of good health becomes an essential factor to lead a happy and purposeful life. According to WHO the concept of health can be perceived in four dimensions such as physical, mental, social and spiritual. All these dimensions are interdependent and mutually influencing. Among the four, mental health stands in the prime as it involve the perception of human being towards anything and everything which contributes in total health and over wellbeing of the individual, society as well as the nation. Further, WHO defines the objectives of good health in two folds such as “the best attainable average level- goodness and the smallest feasible difference among the individuals and the groups – fairness? (2000) (p.xi, italics in original). The issue of fairness here concentrates on social justice and issue of human rights. This upholds the significance of mental health of the citizens of a nation.

From the past couple of decades, the issue of human rights is in its peak and influencing many major areas where the human beings are in pathetic condition and rights are denied. One such area is human trafficking for sexual exploitation whose frequency is increasing drastically. According to an analysis of data from the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles by Ward *et al.*, the proportion of men who reported paying women for sex more than doubled from 2.0 to 4.2% between 1990 and 2000. Further, the sex trafficking was considered as the third major problem of the world which has been rated as second in recent past. This indicates and supports the increased frequency and intensity of the problem. Base for sex trafficking, specially in India, is rooted in

religious practices. The evidence can be traced through the history of prostitution in the country. The practices such as Devadasi, Basavi etc., are some of the examples for the same. These practices indirectly have influenced the social sanction in disguise to prostitution. With the immerse of time, introduction of middlemen such as pimps, goonds, gharwalis and now the traffickers make the practice to take up the shape of commercial exploitation. Though such practices are practiced with social sanction, it was always in disguise and never accepted by the mainstreamed society culturally. This masked attitude of Indian society is contributing in majority of the mental health issues, especially with commercially sexually exploited women.

In fact, one of the original meaning of the word ‘culture’ is “husbandry” which periodically got an abstract meaning from being an activity to an entity. The word “cultivation” was also derived from the word ‘husbandry’. The term also used synonymously to being civilized. Gradually, with the intervention of anthropology, it took a shape of giving a meaning “unique way of life”. (Eagleton, 2000, p.26). But today the word refers to the bended patterns of behaviour and cognition existed because of the attitude, belief, perception and adaption. The word is also applicable to the way of individual thinking in the specified environment. Further culture is also understood as a way of life common to a group of people, which many not be a community itself. But may represent a conceptual structure, it determines the total reality of life with in which people live till they die. So the fact of culture is imbibed by the people which indirectly influence their mental health.

Culture refers to the shared values, beliefs and norms of the people living in a definite geographical area. In India, the varna system, practice of caste system also influence the behaviours pattern of people, their living style, values, attitude, believes etc. Such factors also influence strongly the mental health of the individual, especially with those women who are commercially sexually exploited. Being a strong influencing factor, it can hinder the mainstreaming process implementing by the NGOs. To examine the same mental health issues among the survivors of sex traffic and the contributory culture factors and to brows the need interventions for prevention and constructions of positive life of the survivors, a study was conducted in South India.

2. Methodology

A study includes four states of South India such as Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and a Union Territory i.e., Pondicherry. 24 selected NGOs were considered for the study who works for mainstreaming commercially sexually exploited women, without advocating legalization. Two Management level representatives from each organization, mostly from top level were interviewed for the study to understand cultural factors involved in exploitative situations

as well as to realize the level of hindrance experienced by them from cultural point of view. The descriptive and diagnostic research design was adopted along with interview schedule as tool for collecting data. Statistically, simple descriptive and Contingency Co-efficient tests were adopted to analyse the collected data.

3. Results and Discussion

Conceptually, the concept of sex and sexual activities are the practices which are culturally prohibited to discuss or to practice in public. Those are the practices expected to be always in the dark or in silence or in private. It has never been perceived as a contributory factor for mental health aspects of the individual without consideration of gender issue. In such socio-cultural conditions, the unacceptable form of sex practice can directly hit the mental health of exploited individual, specially the women folk. The practioners in the field who are putting their efforts in rehabilitation and mainstremaing of commercially sexually epxloited women are having their unique experiences in handling the exploitied women and understanding their mental health status. When the same was probed, the below said results were observed.

Table 1: Frequency and percentage of the statement “Observed mental health issues among the survivors of sex traffic” by different states:

S. No.	Observed mental health issues	States					Total	
			AP	KA	TN	PON		KL
1	Depression	F	10	2	2	1	3	18
		P	83%	25%	33.3%	100%	60%	55.8%
2	Post-traumatic stress syndrome	F	4	7	4	0	2	17
		P	33.3%	87.5%	66.8%	0%	40%	52.7%
3	Mood Disorder	F	2	0	0	0	0	2
		P	16.6%	0%	0%	0%	0%	6.2%
4	Anxiety	F	7	0	0	0	0	7
		P	58.1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	21.7%

The practioners in the field who are taking care of the victims of commercial sexual exploitaion, in the process of rehabilitation have identified certain mental health issues with the survivors in the organisations. The most identified problems are depression and post-traumatic stress syndrome. The symptoms of such as beings sad, loss of interest in any activities or decreased involvement in day to day activities, restlessness, irritability or very little sleep are expreed very freequently. Futher they avoid to get exposed or dislike to get involved into such practice which reminds them their unwanted experiences. They observed with frequent complaints about unwanted distressing memories and dreams

which disturbs their mood very frequently. The mood fluctuation are strongly perceived the practitioners as a barrier for successful rehabilitation and mainstremaing of the victims. Two respondets also have felt that this can be the reflection of post-traumatic stree syndrome or can be truly a mood disordered too. Another 21.7% of the respondents have mentioned the symptoms of anxiety such as palpitation, sweating, being panic without reasons and highly disturbed sleeping patterns. All these variation in their psychological conditions are keeping them away from involvement in effective rehabilitation process.

Table 2: Frequency and percentage of the statement “the contributory cultural factors of the survivors of sex traffic” by different states:

S. No.	Most contributory cultural factors	States					Total	
			AP	KA	TN	PON		KL
1	Process of socialization	F	1	1	2	1	3	8
		P	8.3%	12.5%	33.3%	100%	60%	24.9%
2	Stigma and Discrimination	F	0	6	4	0	2	12
		P	0%	75%	66.8%	0%	40%	37.6%
3	Masked attitude of the society	F	7	0	0	0	0	7
		P	58.3%	0%	0%	0%	0%	21.9%
4	Addiction	F	4	1	0	0	0	5
		P	33.3%	12.5%	0%	0%	0%	15.6%
	Total	FPP	12	8	6	1	5	32
		P	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

CC = .712; P=.008

Society and social acceptance are the major contributory factors for keeping the mental health fit. The social support for nay psychological situation can be a good remedy. But the issue of sex trafficking is the one issue which carry stigma and discrimination towards the victims. Such attitude influences the mental health status of the victims as well as their families. The very rejection of the society towards them, lack of minimum acceptance into the cultural circle of the society makes them feel unworthy. The up bringings or the process of socialization also influences the victim’s mental health. In Indian society, the socialization process always teaches the women to be away from men or to keep physical distance from men. This indirectly strengthens the institutions like marriage and family. But when it gets disturbed or such imbibed issue is not able to follow, a sense of guilt or hopelessness develops. Further, the masked society, its behaviours and treatment towards the victims also contributes in disturbed mental health of the victims of sexual exploitation. Though culturally Indian society does not accept the issue of prostitution or the commercial sexual exploitation, the members of the society are using women for sexual purpose beyond marital bonds. The increased frequency and intensity of the problem of sexual exploitation

is the evidence for the same. That means to say, though the women are targeted in the issue, the men also holds equal or a bit more part of the responsibility for women being in such exploitative situation which disturb their mental health. The patriarchal system of India accepts and acts blindly towards such exploitation against women, though it is a known fact to everyone in the society. This offers less scope for women to open up with their situations causing more damage to their mental health status. Addiction to alcohol and different types of drugs among the victims reflects on the strong relationship between ill-health both physical and mental, risk behaviours and the regional culture. Infect, sexual exploitation is associated to lot of psycho-social vulnerabilities. Failure of management of unpleasant feelings, living situations, eating habits, sleeping disturbances etc., motivates the victims to get addicted to certain sedatives. All these issues results in meager results of NGOs towards mainstreaming. When the statistics applied, a non-significant association was observed between states and the contributory culture factors of the survivors of sex traffic, where contingency coefficient value of.715 failed to reach significant level criterion of.05. In other words, the expressed contributory culture factors of the survivors of sex traffic is statistically same.

Table 3: Frequency and percentage of the statement “the needed interventions for prevention and construction of positive life for the survivors” by different states:

S. No.	Needed interventions	States					Total	
			AP	KA	TN	PON		KL
1	Educative interventions for sex buyers	F	1	0	0	0	2	3
		P	8.3%	0%	0%	0%	40%	9.3%
2	Motivating for economic security	F	0	1	1	1	0	3
		P	0%	12.5%	16.7%	100%	0%	9.3%
3	Awareness creation for healthier environment	F	3	1	1	0	1	6
		P	24.9%	12.5%	16.7%	0%	20%	16.6%
4	De-addiction	F	1	1	0	0	1	3
		P	8.3%	12.5%	0%	0%	20%	9.3%
5	Reducing risk factors	F	8	5	4	0	3	20
		P	66.4%	62.5%	66.8%	0%	60%	62%

Prevention and construction of positive life for the survivors are the challenging factors in Indian society. Since the sexual exploitation is there in its culture with the support of religion or in disguise from ancient time. But the practitioners at NGOs believes in prevention and reconstruction of life of the exploited women is possible with the time, the efforts has been put in y them with great optimistic approaches. The same are identified as needed interventions and has been implemented in their field area. Majority of the NGOs are found focusing preventive interventions where the economic crisis perceived as biggest contributive factor. Activities such as economic empowerment, education, formation of vigilant committees etc., have been introduced to reduce the vulnerability towards human trafficking for sexual exploitation. Awareness creation for healthier social environment where stigma and discriminations toward the issue can be addressed are next most concentrated area by the NGOs. 16.6% of the NGOs have adopted the mode to create a healthy environment which accepts the exploited women back in mainstreamed community without much stigma or biases. The focus of sexual exploitation is always around women in exploitative situation and the men who are also taking up the major part will never be in focus. 09.3% of the NGOs are

putting efforts to educate the sex buyers, who are generally the men folk regarding legal issues involved in the process, the issue of human rights and mental health of the exploited women etc. and also sensitizing the men involved in sex trafficking towards humanitarian behavioural patterns. Further, the nongovernmental organisation also found introducing saving schemes with the exploited women where they are motivated for economic security through savings and also investments with safe returns such as deposits at banks, post offices etc. This has succeeded in developing a sense of security and an improved self-confidence. Addiction to alcohol, tobacco and certain types of drugs on highly exploitative situations where the women are expected to entertain more than twenty men in a day are the common hurdles for successful rehabilitation and mainstreaming of these women. Because these addiction acts as their limitation to get involved in mainstreamed society by the survivors. To curb such pathetic conditions, to build up their self-reliance and propose re-assurance for the sustainable future, the interventions for deaddiction have been started by the organisation. Though the results of such interventions are slow and takes a long time, the interventions are implementing with positive and optimistic approach.

4. Conclusion

Health is the upmost wealth of any living being. Preservation of good health becomes an essential factor to lead a happy and purposeful life. All the dimensions of health are interdependent and mutually influencing. In the present social scenario, the issue of social justice and human rights on its peak. One of the challenging situations for such peak stood legal issues is sex trafficking where women are clearly violated with all types of their rights. To understand the mental health issues and concerns of the women in sex trafficking and the rehabilitative interventions of NGOs a study was conducted which reveals that the practioners at NGOs have identified the victims of sex trafficking suffering from certain mental health issues such as depression, post-traumatic stress syndrome, anxiety etc. Furthr the study witness the contributory culture factors for women being such a pathetic condition are stigma and discriminative attitude of the society, masked attitude of the society in the same of culture, upbringing of the exploited women in the background of Indian culture and the addiction to alcohol, different types of drugs etc., are the factors influencing the quality results of NGOs intervention in mainstreaming these commercially sexually exploited women in their working areas. As corrective actions, the NGOs are intervening with educative programmes for sex buyers, introducing programmes to empower vulnerable women in economic issues, awareness creation for healthier environment, working out on de-addiction attempts as well as reduction of risk factors which are responsible for women in such exploitative situation. All these understanding support the influence of cultural factors on mental health of women in sexually exploitative situation.

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