

WOMEN WORKING AS TRADITIONAL PROSTITUTES IN PAKISTAN*

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Abstract

This is the product of an ethnographic study on the women working in prostitution in a traditional set-up in Shahi Mohallah, the most famous prostitution district in Pakistan, a certain district in the city of Lahore. Hardly any scientific study has been done on these women, and this study provides some basic information about them: their workplace, training for the job, work-related categories, articulation of self-image, aspirations, and plans for old age.

BACKGROUND

There are several names given to the working women who provide sexual services for money: Prostitutes, dancing girls, call girls, entertainers, escorts. They work outside the home: in hotels, escort agencies, streets and brothels. Their working conditions vary. For some it could be convenient; for

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others, adverse or downright abusive. But for all the differences, they have something in common. This is the stigma society attaches to them in varying degrees because of their line of work.

Women in traditional prostitution in Pakistan mostly work in designated red light areas. One of the most famous is called Shahi Mohalla, located in Lahore. In this place, the prostitution set-up is very different from the modern day brothel system where the commodification of sexual service is devoid of the trappings designed to cover up the harsh facts of buying and selling what ought to be freely given and taken as an act of love or passion. In the traditional prostitution set up, unique entertainment perfected through the centuries is offered to pleasure seekers. In any of the houses plying the trade, men can get their fill of instrumental music, singing, dancing, and, on the side, of course, sexual services (Naipaul 1998).

Most of the prostitutes working in traditional prostitution houses in Shahi Mohalla come from a well-knit community with distinct norms, social traditions, rituals and social control. Making up this community are the families of *kanjars*. This is an ethnic group that has long been associated with the practice of the oldest profession. For centuries, the *kanjars* have been known to hand down, from one generation to the next, the tradition of prostitution. Through the ages, girls chosen to practice the profession have been provided by their respective families the necessary socialization, education and training for the job .

Shahi Mohalla differs very much from the red light districts in western countries. The nude shows, bars with erotic dancing, and women hanging out on the streets in sexy clothes found in the latter are absent in the former. What one encounters are places of entertainment where traditional music

is played and dances held. Each entertainment place is run by small entrepreneurs, usually family members. A family engaged in the business is called a *kotha*.

Around 500 households are said to be involved in this business. Each household provides space where business takes place. There is the living room with its specific protocol for entertaining “guests”. The sexual service takes place in the back room of the house, as technically prostitution is illegal.

The *kotha* is run and managed by a Madame, usually the mother, aunt or close female relative of the prostitute/s. (It is to be noted that women, not men, make it to managerial positions in this business). She is the one who hires the musician who would provide the necessary training for the young girls, usually her own daughter/s or niece/s. A part of the duty of the hired musician is to provide accompaniment to the girls’ singing in evening performances. From these girls are chosen those who will be formally initiated into the oldest profession. Once a practitioner of the profession, the girl leaves it to the Madame to select the clients, collect the fees and manage the income. However, as the girl gets older and becomes confident in the practice of her profession as a consequence of her accumulated experience, she could lessen the tight hold on her by letting her manager know what a prized commodity the managed one has become.

Considering the money earned in traditional prostitution, it is no wonder that daughters are the desired children in Shahi Mohalla, unlike in the mainstream society of Pakistan where male children are preferred. However, this does not mean that all the family’s daughters are pushed into this occupation. A daughter’s fate is decided while very young. If a daughter is not to be inducted in prostitution for lack of the qualities desired in the practice of the profession, e.g., good looks, she is socialized and trained for married life.

Her socialization includes the inculcation of chastity, a cherished virtue in mainstream Pakistan culture. For this purpose she is kept in seclusion. She is not to come in front of any male other than those in her family. She is also given religious training to sharpen her moral and ethical judgment. Because what is envisioned for her is a life dedicated to taking care of family members, she also gets training in household skills and management.

On the other hand, the daughter who is selected for the oldest profession is socialized differently. She is given special attention and taught the appropriate skills for her future roles.

While most of the young women working in this profession are in it because they were specifically selected by their own respective family, there are also those not similarly situated. These are the young girls who are kidnapped and bought by the management through a complex network of agents and pimps. While their number is not negligible, nevertheless, it is a lot less compared to those taken by force into the non-traditional brothel system.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Traditional prostitution was developed and institutionalized in South Asia over thousands of years (Scott 1886, Joardar 1984, Sinha & Basu 1992). In this occupation, sexual services did not comprise all of the entertainment the male clientele expected. Also included was a full array of other forms of entertainment such as the playing of eastern music, the holding of singing and dancing performances, and stimulating conversation. In the olden days, what kept it going was the support and patronage of royalty and the aristocratic elite of the sub-continent (Kapur 1978, Rao 1969).

Today, the entertainment provided basically remains the same though in a less flamboyant manner, and no longer supported just by royalty and the aristocratic elites but also by rich businessmen and powerful politicians.

The prostitutes in the traditional set-ups are way above the ordinary ones working in brothels where the only requirement is the ability to provide pleasurable sex services. The former are highly trained. They are taught the art of conversation and pleasing their clients in several ways (Rozario 1988). This South Asian phenomenon is similar to the Japanese tradition of the *geisha* (Golden 1998, Mente 1966) where women went through extensive training in the art of dancing and singing, conducting the tea ceremony, conversing in a witty manner, and displaying the ultimate politeness and decorum. Nowadays, while the *geisha*'s sisters in Pakistan continue to receive professional training, the standard of training and performance is noted to be not as high as in the days gone by when royal monarchs ruled the sub-continent.

While prostitutes in traditional set-ups in the past were not entirely free of stigmatization for the kind of work that they did, still they were not bereft of social mobility. In fact, their occupation placed them in a specifically defined niche in society (Ghosh 1984). On the job, they acquired so much training that made them highly skilled performing artists. Those who excelled as artists in the realm of poetry, music, and dance became famous. This somehow eroded their stigmatization and even conferred on them celebrity status (Joardar 1984). Much has changed nowadays. Most of the present crop are living in difficult circumstances. Only a few have managed to gain fame. And this is not due to their ability to dance, write or recite poetry or the talent to compose music, sing and/or play a musical instrument. They have gained fame by becoming actresses in the film indus-

try (Vinita 1998, Friedman 1996). As a consequence of present-day prostitutes' waning achievements in the arts, the heightening of stigma attached to their profession has also been noted.

Due to the strict government regulations and police brutality on the residents of the red light districts, the recent trend of prostitution is to move away from the traditional set-up to a brothel like set-up (Varma 1979) scattered all over the major cities and towns of the country. Almost all the women plying the brothel business are there not of their own accord. They were recruited by pimps who (Abbas 1985) usually use brutality and force. Street walkers and call girls are also a recent trend.

TRAINING AND SOCIALIZATION IN TRADITIONAL PROSTITUTION

Formal education

At present, families are realizing the value of formal education. The prostitute with adequate formal education is more likely to succeed in realizing her goal to become a top-notch, high-income prostitute than the one who is deprived, or has too little of this value-enhancing resource. But there is also the other side. Formal education can make the girls more aware about themselves and the world they live in. In fact, they might even internalize the mainstream values about prostitution and would not want to pursue this career anymore. Nonetheless, families send their girls to school up to grade five or eight.

The common age when these young girls start their dancing career is fifteen years old, which is about how old they are when they finish grade 8. Some families even send them to college after the tenth grade and think of it as an invest-

ment for a socially better placed clientele in the future. Those who go on to college usually keep their identity hidden and continue to perform in the evenings at their *kotha*.

Training in music and the dance

Learning music is an important part of the education of those selected for the profession. Usually the music lessons start at the age of four. The quality of the teacher and his teaching depends on how serious the girl's family is about music and their capacity to pay. If the family wants the daughter to really have a solid education in music and money is no problem, a suitable teacher is especially chosen for her from the all-male musician community. Should she show the potential to become a famous singer, her teacher, with the proper economic incentive, can be relied upon to pay her special attention and render the commensurate service.

Dancing lessons are also an important part of a girl's preparation for the job. In the past, this required more rigorous training because what the teacher taught was the classical dance with very intricate steps. Nowadays, the classical dance is progressively given stiff competition by the modernized dance shown in Hindi films. It is the dance steps in cinema rather than the more classical style that the girls try to copy with the aid of their teachers. The average age when a girl starts her dancing career is fifteen years old, which is about how old she is when she finishes eighth grade.

Physical preparation for the career

Another part of the training involves turning the body into a prime asset. Very early in life, girls are made to value their physical appearance. It is stressed to them that they must make it their life-long mission to improve their physical appearance through self-beautification. For most, the main

source of ideas and techniques is big sister or the one considered as a successful prostitute in the *kottha*. Girls watch how the experienced elders dress up and adorn themselves on special occasions. Sooner than later, the girls learn that a beautiful face and a well proportioned body are not the only assets needed for success in the trade. To attract and keep the client interested, definitely much more is needed from the prostitute. In addition to looking beautiful or at least attractive, she has to learn gestures that enthrall and seduce. From big sister or a successful practitioner of the profession, the young girls learn tried and tested body gestures, facial expressions and tones of voice which can make men dig deeper into their pockets as they ask for more. The training is considered sufficient when the girl can play with the emotional and sexual feelings of the client and thus manage to have control over him and his pocket.

Most of the education for attracting a client, maintaining his interest, building his anticipation of more pleasurable sex, pleasing him while keeping him under control, and getting rid of him later, not to mention the technique of increasing the price of the services rendered, is inputted in the socialization, education and training provided by the family.

Girls are taught early enough about the operation of the law of supply and demand. Just like in any business, a girl in the trade has to limit the supply if she wants to command a high price for her goods. Thus, girls learn to be very aware of how to ration their charms and affections so that they can get the most from these commodities.

While yet very young, girls are trained by the elders to ask for wanted things in ways designed to break down the resistance of the one with the power to give. They are taught how to ask for what they want to have, in a manner so affectionate that it seems like an expression of love. They hone this

particular skill by practicing on their elder sister/s' clients. By the time they grow up into young women, they would be experts at it that they can wangle expensive clothes and jewelry from men.

Another skill taught in the family setting is the art of converting conversation into a profitable activity. While yet young, girls are taught the art of conversation with a man. They are also made to know that if a man enjoyed one's conversation, he must not only pay for it but must also offer a gift as an act of appreciation. If he does not, the elders tell the girl to clam up on him, and withdraw the affection that goes with seductive conversations for sale. There is logic in this practice. Since the monetary fees all go to the Madame, at least the prostitute should get a gift for work rendered.

A system of reward and punishment serves as a guide to prostitutes. Competition is the name of the game. The prostitute who gets and keeps wealthier clients gets praise from her peers. An example would be one who gets a long term client, who does not only have wealth but also has political power. She is amply rewarded with praise from the seniors and entitled to show off to her friends and peers. On the other hand, a prostitute who cannot get a rich client is laughed at and is looked down upon. In other words, a prostitute's status depends on the social standing of her clients. The prostitute who is maintained by high status men in society is regarded highly by her peers.

THE CONTROL OF THE MANAGEMENT

As earlier mentioned, it is the women, not men, who have been in control of traditional prostitution. The Madame is the general manager, so to speak. It is she who selects the members of the management group in the *kotha*. This is usu-

ally composed of the Madame herself, older (or ex-) prostitutes, and perhaps a pimp or the mother's husband. The management exerts best efforts to ensure that the girl selected for prostitution grows into the mould carved out for her. This, of course, puts management at cross purposes with the novice, especially when she is already in the job. The search for personal viability in and out of her job will make her seek autonomy. Even in the job, she will feel the need for autonomy for perfecting techniques that enhance sexual power over clients, not to mention exploring options which arise from relationships with men of promise.

To lessen, if not erase altogether the negative effects of the curtailment of autonomy, management engages in brainwashing. It is stressed to the prostitute that her job is for the good of the family. She is responsible for the economic well-being of the whole family and so she has to keep working, and giving the control of the money earned to the mother/aunt as a "good daughter". To enforce this value, the prostitute gets positive response from the manager if she conforms to the defined norms. If not, she is made to feel guilty.

The biggest fear of management is that the daughter, niece or a woman in its employ will run away with a client. This is because the family will lose a major income earner. For this reason, falling in love and running away are tabooed within the community and considered shameful acts. It is stressed upon the young woman that if the client loves her, he should pay the price and just be content to become a long term customer. He should save her from shame in her family and her larger family which embraces her kin group.

Like in any labor-management relation, tension, which could escalate and destroy the relationship, exists between the young prostitute and the management. On the part of the prostitute, this is more apparent in the earlier part of her

career. However, as she gets to understand management's point of view, she makes the necessary adjustments to accommodate demands of the trade. She has to, for it gradually dawns on her that she will have her turn in becoming part of the management group when her productive years in the practice of the profession ends. Besides, she needs to survive her old age by conforming to the rules and regulations of the trade.

SELF-IMAGE

One tested way of preventing deviance from the centuries-old set of rules of the trade is to develop in the prostitute a self-image that will allow her personal viability in her profession. And this is where a social institution, that is hardly associated with prostitution, comes in. Religion plays an important role in developing a positive self-image of the prostitute. She relies on religious rituals more than the average resident of the city. Together with her sisters in the trade, she goes to *sufi* shrines regularly, prays, and make offerings to God. Such external practices of religion are very important for self-esteem.

To project religiosity, religious vocabulary is used extensively in the everyday language of those in the business, especially by the Madame. When talking to an outsider, the use of religious phrases is even more intensified. The idea is to give the impression that all in the trade are also children of God.

A predetermined amount of money is taken out from every night's earning to give away in the name of God. Usually this is used to buy something sweet for distribution among neighborhood children. This ritual can be seen as purification of the prostitute's income. Nowadays, with the onslaught of economic pressures, purification has taken a back seat to

survival. Women in the trade prioritize accumulation of earnings over such acts of purification.

Most of the people living in the area are Shia Muslims. The lunar month of Muharram is the month for mourning the death of the grandson of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) and an important occasion for Shia Muslims. All women in the community wear black and refrain from their work for the first ten days. All the religious rituals are observed including processions and gatherings for mourning.

The elders also try to keep the young prostitutes from becoming too involved in the rat race for procuring clients and the setting and meeting of too high expectations in the job. In fact, women active in the practice of the profession are not allowed to reflect on their occupation, their role in the community, the money that comes in, etcetera.

Young girls who are brought up in the red light district are much more confident and clear in their minds about their occupation than those who have been kidnapped. The ones that are brought up in the Mohalla tend to focus on the values of their community, namely, conformity to the honesty of their profession, obedience to their mothers or elders, earning an income through hard work for their children and siblings and thanking God for it. By conforming to these core values they acquire a sense of satisfaction. Women see the above values as their social and religious obligations. On the other hand, the ones who join this business in their later age have a hard time accepting the value system of the area.

Achievement in their profession is also a source of a positive self image as it brings praise from not only the family and peers but also from the larger kin group. Just like a successful career brings confidence and positive self-esteem for professional men and women in the same manner successful prostitutes who like their work are proud to make it in their

profession. Getting a rich client, landing a part in a film or earning a big sum at a dance performance are all considered achievements that enhance the confidence of the young prostitutes.

THE SUCCESSFUL AND THE UNSUCCESSFUL

A hierarchy exists in the traditional prostitution system in Mohalla. Prostitutes are classified into three categories.

The first, considered the elite class, is composed of the rich and the beautiful. Those born with good looks and enhanced even more by personal adornment hardly stay in the area. Early in their initial years in the trade as dancing girls, they are usually taken away by the talent hunters for the film industry or are selected by rich feudal lords as their mistresses or one of their wives. If they remain in the profession they serve a special class of clients, like Arab sheikhs and high-level politicians. They typically get a house in a wealthy part of the city and reside there. They carry out their business in this rich locality while maintaining a *kotha* for contacts with others in the trade.

Rich prostitutes learn to play high level games. They generally have few rich clients, who can afford them luxuries. Some of them are well educated in formal educational institutes and thus are prepared to serve this class of clients. Others get rich because of their beauty and mastery of the art of their profession. The prostitutes in this category enjoy relatively more freedom and have more control over their income compared to others in the Mohalla.

The second category consists of those prostitutes that live in the Mohalla and run the *kothas* in a traditional way. These prostitutes can be compared to the middle class of the

mainstream society. They are hanging on to their traditions (no matter how diluted at present) and they suffer the most in terms of the reformatory efforts by the Government and their enforcement by the police.

These prostitutes set up their *kothas* in the red light area and perform regularly every evening between 11:00 p.m. to 1:00 a.m. They call themselves entertainers and use singing and dancing as the initial entertainment which later leads to providing sexual services. They continue with their profession in more or less their traditional way. Most of the prostitutes start off in this category. Some become successful according to their own standards and go for the careers that will provide them fame and wealth. Others, not fortunate enough, go on with their lives as prostitutes who keep wishing and hoping for social mobility.

The third category of prostitutes includes those who started out at the mid-level but are unable to maintain a proper *kotha* due to financial problems or lack of a young female to take their position in the business. These women live in poverty, and most times, in poor health. They work in the dark alleys of the Mohalla. As they cannot afford to have a regular *kotha* setting, they cease to provide music and dancing. Thus, the only service they can offer is sexual. Clients who cannot afford to go to the *kotha* rely on these women for a quick service for any amount between Rs.10 – Rs.50. At one point in time they use to have up to approximately twenty clients a day, but now, due to the governmental restrictions, they do not only face poverty but also police action with its attendant dehumanizing effects.

Most prostitutes of the lowest level live in an area in the Shahi Mohalla called Tibbi Galli (Tibbi Street). This is a narrow street with small houses and rooms on the sides. In the past, these prostitutes use to stand outside their rooms

waiting for clients and would charge a small fee for a quick service. Later, during the first Marshal Law in Pakistan, an act was passed which prohibited prostitution in this area. Even today the police is quite strict about letting the women stand in this street. The prostitution by these women still goes on. They get their clients either in the same street or they stand on other street corners within the Shahi Mohalla and rent rooms at a per client rate basis.

AGEING OF PROSTITUTES

With so much emphasis given to youth and physical beauty, the process of ageing is quite traumatic for the prostitutes. Every prostitute gets nervous as she approaches her 30s. Her prime age is between 12 to 25. After that she begins to have quite a clear picture of how her old age would look like. There are some who secure their old age by exercising control over their daughters or the young prostitutes of their *kotha*. Managers of those who leave the area for work in the film industry or a rich suburb follow them like a shadow. They manage their meetings, and in case of those in show business, their contracts. They make sure that they get full attention of the clients and have full control over cash.

Despite all the caution and preparation for their last years there are many who have nothing to rely on. Most of these end up being prostitutes of the lowest level, described earlier. They rent a room in the cheapest part of the red light district and work for whatever money they can get.

CONCLUSION

Traditional prostitutes in Pakistan inherit their profession from their family. They are recruited and trained in the skills of their business by their mothers and aunts. They work

in adverse circumstances, mostly created by the State and the society in general because of the stigma associated with prostitution. Perceived as “fallen women”, any brutality inflicted on them, as well as the abuse of their rights, is not generally condemned nor seen as a justifiable cause for demanding justice, but, in fact, even justified. Yet, this study shows that women earning a living in the traditional prostitution set-up in Mohalla, Lahore, do not differ much from their unstigmatized sisters in other lines of work everywhere else in Pakistan: the former, like the latter, undergo training for the job; work hard to make themselves competitive in their particular sector of the labor market; aspire and work toward career advancement; and make plans for their retirement and future. Once understood in their socio-cultural context and the specificities of their profession, it becomes difficult to pass a moral judgment on them. If at all a moral judgment is to be passed, it should pertain to the society that has engendered prostitution no matter how called or practised.

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