

Review of Moni Nag's, *Sex Workers of India: Diversity in Practice of Prostitution and Ways of Life*

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July 29, 2007

Moni Nag's *Sex Workers of India: Diversity in Practice of Prostitution and Ways of Life* provides a detailed account of sex workers in India beginning with the Vedic Age in 8th century BC to the present day. The bulk of the book describes the various types of sex workers in India, illustrating the enormous diversity in Indian prostitution. We first learn about sex workers in the guise of *devadasis*, described as a Hindu religious practice in which girls are "married" to a deity or to the temple only to eventually end up becoming sex workers. We also learn about occupational inheritance of sex work; in some societies, women inherit prostitution as a profession and are actively encouraged to maintain the family tradition. These sex workers are generally from semi-nomadic communities and/or communities depending on music and dance (and prostitution) for their livelihood. The next few chapters describe categories of sex work that are more familiar to the average reader, such as brothel-based sex work, street or floating sex work, call girls, male sex work, and child prostitutes. The last chapters are more analytic in nature as Nag discusses the root causes of prostitution and calls for various legal reforms, and the final chapter provides a nice overview of the book.

The author's main contribution is to summarize a vast amount of disparate literature on sex work in India, both published and unpublished, and he should be commended for this. In fact, the book presents the first comprehensive overview of Indian sex work, an area that requires much more study given the number of women involved in the industry,<sup>1</sup> the economic importance of remittances by sex workers, as well as implications for HIV/AIDS transmission. Nag writes that he was somewhat struck by the "lack of interest on the part of social scientists on this subject"

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<sup>1</sup>Nag estimates that there are 2-3 million sex workers in India.

(pg ix), and as an economist who also studies the market for sex, I have often been surprised by this as well. However, it is probably fair to point out that this apparent lack of interest may reflect data deficiencies due to the clandestine nature of the market, which is an obstacle for quantitative research in particular. Or it may be the case that sex work like domestic labor, childcare, etc. has taken longer to get on mainstream research agendas because it is work done primarily by women. In any case, given the author's vast knowledge of the state of the literature, the book could have profited from a clearer statement of an agenda for future research in India.

While Nag attempts to highlight the diverse nature of sex work in India, a single sentiment pervades the entire book: that sex work is involuntary by nature. For Nag, sex workers are victims of a socioeconomic system which has forced them into prostitution, whether directly by kidnapping or by other forms of seduction. Without diminishing the social ills and abuse faced by women and children who are forced into the sex trade, we must recognize that some women do choose to enter sex work due to its associated economic benefits. In fact, the economics literature has made some important contributions in this area and Nag's lack of attention to this work is one of the book's weaknesses. For example, Robinson and Yeh (2007) argue that sex workers in Kenya engage in commercial sex as a way to cope with unexpected non-labor income shocks. Conditioning on skill, Edlund and Korn (2002) show that sex worker pay is quite high.

For most this occupational "choice" may stem from poverty, yet there is a growing number of women and girls who use sex work to sustain a certain standard of living which might include consuming imported goods, paying for school fees, etc.<sup>2</sup> Recent empirical work in economics has shown that sex workers respond rationally to economic incentives. For example, Rao et al. (2003) use data from India and Gertler, Shah, and Bertozzi (2005) use Mexican data to show that sex workers vary risk behavior choices in response to price incentives, as clients are willing to pay a premium for non-condom use. Recognizing that sex work is not always involuntary and that sex workers do respond to economic incentives is an important finding for those attempting to implement effective policies which influence both entry and exit into the sex market as well as risk behavior.

Another shortcoming of the book is the penultimate chapter, in which Nag argues for changes in legal provisions for prostitutes in India. While few observers would doubt that present law needs

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<sup>2</sup>Nag calls them call-girls.

reform– in that it disproportionately penalizes sex workers and not traffickers or clients– the entire concluding section of the book rests on a dubious statement: “[there is] a remarkable consensus regarding one particular viewpoint: Legalization or regulation of prostitution....is likely to be more harmful than beneficial for sex workers” (pg. 267). The basis for this “consensus” is far from clear given both the diversity of sex worker movements in India clamoring for very different policies as well as the sparse status of current research on this issue.

In much of Latin America the sex market is regulated, and sex workers in brothels are required to obtain a license which certifies their good health status. Evidence from Ecuador suggests that regulating the sex market does have the potential to improve overall public health outcomes, but only if enforcement is concentrated in riskier sectors (i.e those marked by lower condom use and higher disease prevalence) (Shah 2006). In general however, very little empirical work testing the impacts of different legal policies on sex worker health and welfare outcomes exists. Understanding how different legal policies affect the sex market should be a priority if we are to develop policies that protect the rights of women and children involved in the sex industry as well as reduce disease transmission.

This book draws together much of the existing research on sex work in India and is a valuable read in particular for those who want to learn more about the history of prostitution in India. For the reader with limited time, the last chapter is a nice overview of the book based primarily on the contents of the previous chapters.

## References

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