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Two sides of one coin? Women's experiences of selling sex and engaging with NGOs in Dhaka

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# Agency and exploitation: Two sides of one coin? Women's experiences of selling sex and engaging with NGOs in Dhaka

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**Bethany Jennings**

The University of Edinburgh, UK

**Vivienne E Cree**

The University of Edinburgh, UK

**Steve Kirkwood**

The University of Edinburgh, UK

## Abstract

Social work has long been concerned about women's involvement in the sex industry. This article asks what can be learned from sex workers themselves about how social work might better support those who work in the industry. Based on a qualitative study in Bangladesh, it is argued that although the non-governmental organisations who worked with these women helped to increase their feelings of agency, violence and abuse continued to feature in their daily lives. It is concluded that in order to more holistically meet sex workers' needs, social workers should understand better the ways in which agency and exploitation co-exist.

## Keywords

Agency, Bangladesh, exploitation, non-governmental organisations, sex work, violence

## Introduction

Social workers throughout the world have an established tradition of working with sex workers (Wahab, 2002). Sex work, for its part, has been a constant feature of Bangladesh's history since the days of the British Empire (Frances, 2011; Levine, 2003). Although there have been a number of non-governmental organisation (NGO)-sponsored studies of sex work in Bangladesh (see e.g. CARE Bangladesh, 2004), there has been little independent in-depth exploration of the views of the women working in the sex industry. This article sets out to fill this gap, by reporting the

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### Corresponding author:

Bethany Jennings, Chrystal Macmillan Building, 15a George Square, Edinburgh EH8 9LD, UK.  
Email: [bethany\\_jennings@outlook.com](mailto:bethany_jennings@outlook.com)

perceptions and lives of sex workers in Bangladesh. Findings are drawn from a wider study of women in low-income employment in Dhaka, Bangladesh's capital city, carried out by the first author, for a PhD in social work. This article explores findings from the second part of the PhD project, during which the first author got to know 21 sex workers over the course of 6 months, spending time at their homes and visiting the places where they worked. The second and third authors were her PhD supervisors who supported the PhD project and contributed to the development of both the ideas and the writing.

We begin by considering the academic literature regarding sex work and the concept of agency, both of which are central to this discussion. We go on to describe the nature and context of sex work in Bangladesh and, more specifically, Dhaka, before going on to present the methodology used for the data collection. We explore the findings and conclude that although NGOs' involvement in the women's lives has brought some positives, violence and abuse continue to be central to their experiences.

## **Literature review**

In order to get to grips with this topic, it is necessary to engage with the prominent and long-standing debate regarding the nature of sex work. Simply put, this falls into two camps: there are those who believe that selling sex ('prostitution') is fundamentally oppressive and should be abolished (the 'abolitionists'), and those who view 'sex work' as a form of personal service, little different in essence to, for example, hairdressing or massage therapy; they argue for its decriminalisation (Kissil and Davey, 2010; Sanders et al., 2017). A great deal of energy has been expended in promoting each of these two broad positions over the last 30 years or so. However, there is a growing recognition that these binary views are too simplistic and ignore the complexities of women's experiences (Sanders et al., 2017).

For example, Barry (1984) and Jeffreys (1997), identifying as part of the abolitionist movement, argue that sex work exists because of women's subordinate position in society. It is, they believe, inherently violent. For these reasons, they conclude that it cannot be considered 'work' (Barry, 1984, 1995; Jeffreys, 1997). Taking a slightly different approach, Overall (1992) asserts that although sex work is not necessarily violent, it should be abolished because it is tied up in patriarchy and capitalism. She argues that it exists for men's benefit and that accepting 'prostitution' as 'work' contributes to wider inequalities within society. Abolitionists draw attention to a wealth of studies which illustrate that exploitation and violence are endemic, first, in the sex industry and second, in many of women's childhoods, which, they suggest, cause women to be more vulnerable to exploitation (Hunter, 1993; Silbert and Pines, 1982; Waltman, 2011). Research conducted with 854 individuals in the sex industry across 9 countries on 4 continents found that 63 percent of the participants had been sexually abused as children, 71 percent had suffered physical assault during work and 75 percent had experienced homelessness (Farley, 2004). Abolitionists argue that this study, and other similar findings from research, illustrate that prostitution is characterised by abuse, violence, and vulnerability, proving that it is fundamentally exploitative (Waltman, 2011).

In contrast, others define selling sex as a form of 'work' and therefore prefer to use the term 'sex worker'. For example, the first sex workers' rights organisation, 'Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics' (COYTE), began in San Francisco in the 1970s. Its purpose was to raise awareness of issues relating to sex work, to normalise sex workers' experiences and to decriminalise sex work (Weizer, 1991). As similar organisations emerged throughout the world, academics and researchers took up the cause. For example, Zatz (1997) pointed out the diversity of sex workers' experiences and argued that a single theory cannot claim to represent all sex workers. Furthermore, she argues that the root cause of the problems associated with sex work is its illegal status, including the violence

many women experience. The argument follows that if sex work were to be made legal and given the same rights as other forms of employment, the difficulties that are associated with it would no longer apply. Kempadoo and Doezema (1998), in support of this, add that abolitionists' views contribute to sex workers' stigmatisation, because they ignore women's ability to make choices. Similarly, Comte (2014) points out that there have been many studies identifying women who choose sex work and feel empowered by it, disproving that sex work is inherently oppressive. Comte highlights the fact that men's experiences of working in sex work are commonly excluded from the debate, and yet they face similar issues to women sex workers, challenging the view that sex work is fundamentally the oppression of women by men.

Our aim is not to make an argument for or against the sale of sex, or to take a moral stance on the issue. We accept that women make choices to sell sex in a range of different situations and for various reasons, and we recognise that there is a great deal of evidence showing that much of the sex industry is exploitative (Hunter, 1993; Scoular et al., 2019; Silbert and Pines, 1982; Waltman, 2011). Nevertheless, we are also aware that women may make considered, though restricted, decisions to sell their bodies for sex. We therefore agree with Sariola (2010) who, based on her research with sex workers in India, argues that it is elitist to concentrate on whether women should or should not sell sex. This debate has little relevance to most women who sell sex, and many will be unaware of it. However, the complexities and challenges that are reflected in the debate are part of their lived experiences. A key aspect of these complexities is how they utilise their agency and deal with the limitations on their agency. A discussion on the concept of agency is therefore key to this research.

Agency can be defined as a person's ability to form intentions, make choices and take considered actions (Sewell, 1992). It is essential to understand that agency exists in varying degrees, in morally contested situations, and is always within the confines of historical and social structures (Hutchings, 2013; Mahmood, 2005). It is important to recognise that both agency and coercion may exist simultaneously (Madhok et al., 2013). Madhok (2013) argues that agency is too often viewed as synonymous with autonomy, but it can exist outside it. Choices can take place in oppressive situations, involving decisions on what causes least harm or safeguards women's needs. Banerjee (2017) agrees, stating that 'Agency therefore cannot be read as being opposed to difficulties or suffering but rather as what one can and cannot do, or how one can endure within that set of suffering' (p. 28). Madhok and Banerjee conclude that agency must be viewed in terms of 'strategies'; strategies enable people to manage situations that are oppressive in various ways. The concept of agency is therefore essential to the debate on sex work precisely because the individuals involved are often in oppressive contexts with limited choices. In order to understand how sex workers experience their lives and utilise their agency, we must first understand the context of selling sex in their specific location.

In Bangladesh, the common position taken by NGOs is to view sex work as a legitimate form of work. The focus is generally on improving women's working conditions and increasing certain aspects of their agency within their situations. Research has found that abuses of human rights, extreme stigma and experiences of violence are common for sex workers in Bangladesh (Alam and Faiz, 2012; CARE Bangladesh 2004; Haque, 2011; Moral and Tahmina, 2004; Ullah, 2005). Both clients and police officers have been found to be perpetrators of violence (Haque, 2011; Ullah, 2005). Large brothels operate a system of bonded labour (Hosain and Chatterjee, 2005; Jenkins and Rahman, 2002; Sabet and Ahmed, 2012). Women and girls are sold into brothels by traffickers, who may be women promising work or men with whom they have a relationship. They are bought by madams and then set to work to pay off the 'sale price', before they are allowed to earn their own wages. Many bonded individuals are under 18 years old and gaining their freedom can take anywhere from 1 to 5 years (Jenkins and Rahman, 2002; Sabet and Ahmed, 2012).

None of these brothels exist in Dhaka city. In Dhaka, sex workers work from the streets, hotels and/or residences. There has been some limited research on this group already. For example, Save the Children, Australia (2011) attempted to estimate the size of the issue, suggesting that there were as many as 11,320 sex workers in Dhaka, most of whom were street based. Looking in more depth, Alam and Faiz (2012) interviewed 47 so-called 'floating' sex workers, who had come to Dhaka looking for work as domestic help or in garment factories, and were raped before entering sex work and/or sold to brothels or hotels by pimps who often coerced them through promises of a job or marriage. Those who had been raped or sold felt that they had been 'spoiled' and therefore viewed themselves as having few options other than sex work. The stigma attached to sex work meant that once a woman sold sex, it was difficult for her to leave the industry. But it was not all negative. Other reasons for not leaving sex work were the levels of freedom and income that they had, since sex work can pay considerably more than other forms of female low-income employment.

The Bangladeshi government's response to the sex industry has been mixed, and the legal status of women who sell sex is unclear. Most interventions for women in the sex industry are carried out by NGOs, and, despite a lack of formal training, NGO workers often call themselves social workers (Sultana, 2015). NGOs run a range of services including mobile clinics, condom distribution, basic health care provisions, drop-in centres for homeless sex workers, rights-based and awareness-raising interventions, savings groups and income-generating activities (Haque, 2011). Most focus on the areas of HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention, as well as legal support and human rights issues (Alam and Faiz, 2012; Sultana, 2015). NGOs have also played an important role in providing childcare, safe housing, and schools for the children of sex workers because they are at high risk of abuse, face high levels of stigma and often have difficulty attending mainstream school. Furthermore, there are some groups of sex workers who are mobilised to recognise and fight for their rights. Sultana (2015), however, is critical about the current approach, arguing that it

. . . does not take into account . . . the fact that sex workers live their lives as part of broader power and community structures and that in countries such as Bangladesh, the choices they make are rarely, if ever, free. Rather, their actions are shaped by structural factors, as well as by notions of purity and pollution. (p. 788)

## Methodology

This research was conducted as part of a PhD study at the University of Edinburgh, examining women in low-income employment in Bangladesh. The purpose of the research was to understand how participants perceived and experienced their lives. Therefore, a qualitative approach was taken, acknowledging that the meanings placed on social realities are continuously produced and re-produced by the social actors involved (Blaikie, 2009; O'Reilly, 2009). The fieldwork had two phases. In the first phase, the first author lived alongside women and their families in a low-income community on the edge of Dhaka, using ethnography (observation) and informal interviews (O'Reilly, 2009). The second phase, discussed in this paper, focused on women who self-identified as sex workers in Dhaka. As will be described next, this required a more formal approach, and used both individual and group interviews.

Contact was made with the participants through an NGO in one area of Dhaka and two other NGOs in a different part of the city, and sex workers were invited to take part in the research. These participants went on to introduce other women who sold sex, using a 'snowball sampling' approach, widely acknowledged as help in researching 'hard-to-reach' populations (see Atkinson and Flint, 2001). All the participants lived in one-room dwellings. Nineteen had been married but only half

were living with a husband. The remaining were separated, divorced or widowed. Most had been involved in other forms of work including as domestic workers, garments factory workers, day labourers and street vendors before or while they were sex workers. Many had experienced homelessness after being evicted from their homes when their identities as sex workers were discovered by their neighbours.

Data collection was carried out over a period of 6 months from November 2015 to April 2016, and during this time 21 women participated, 11 of whom were met on several occasions. Apart from one participant who was interviewed in an NGO office, all interviews took place in their homes or at their places of work (which included a train station and public meeting place). Both group and individual interviews were conducted. The interview questions were open-ended; women were asked about their lives and experiences of work, and they were able to direct the conversation as they thought fit. The interviews were audio-recorded and detailed notes were taken of both observations and informal conversations.

Data collection and analysis took place coterminously. Emerging themes were explored and comparisons made to the literature (O'Reilly, 2009; Sarantakos, 2005) in what O'Reilly (2009) has called a 'spiral' approach to analysis, where the researcher searches for patterns and themes in the data, compares them to theory and then returns to their data. Separate notes were recorded in a journal and memos typed to piece some of these thoughts together (Charmaz, 2006; Gibbs, 2007). NVivo was used as a tool to organise my data.

Before embarking on fieldwork, ethical approval was received from the University of Edinburgh, and throughout the data-gathering process ethical issues were considered and addressed. All the participants were over 18 years old and were working as independent sex workers. None are identified in this article by their birth name, exact age or area of residence for reasons of confidentiality, and instead pseudonyms have been used. Rapport with participants was built up, and they were continuously reminded of their right not to participate in the research. Verbal consent was obtained before recording interviews. Many of the participants were unable to read and therefore written consent was not appropriate. Invasive questions were not asked, and social work skills were utilised to minimise distress caused when participants did become upset. The most challenging ethical dilemma faced by the researcher was in hearing about continued experiences of violence and abuse that participants and people around them suffered. Unfortunately, there were no services available to address these issues. All the participants were involved with NGOs that advocated for their rights and offered limited services, but they did not provide protection or alternative opportunities, and this became one of the key findings of the study.

## Results

Although there were many aspects of the participants' lives reflected in these data that were interesting, experiences of violence were central to all of them. Another commonality was the involvement of NGOs and, in general, participants were positive about the role that NGOs had in their lives. However, as the theme of agency within oppressive situations came to light, it was important to explore how women themselves understood both these aspects of their lives and the relationship (if any) between them.

### *Experiences of abuse and violence*

All the participants in this study worked independently and therefore were not being forced to sell sex when the research was taking place. Most called themselves 'sex workers' and were clear that they believed that they engaged in legitimate work that benefitted society. However, the majority had been sold into the sex industry or experienced a sexual assault before entering the industry.



They rarely made a distinction between childhood rape and abuse and their later work selling sex. They felt that their being 'spoilt' or 'made bad' forced them into selling sex and therefore it was not their choice. It was at the point of having what was considered an illegitimate moral relationship, whether that was forced or consensual, that changed or 'spoilt' the moral identities and was perceived as leading women to sell sex. For example, Rekha was a sex worker in her thirties who lived with her second husband. Rekha's only child went missing while she was working and Rekha had not seen her since. She described how her experience of sex led her to engage in selling sex:

After a while a boy moved next door and fell in love with me. He loved me, and I loved him. He took me and then what happened? He made me have sex. He said that he was going to marry me. We had sex. He didn't want to marry me? That is when I got into sex work. Then he didn't want to marry me, ja! You had sex with me, marry me . . . When he didn't want to marry me, that's when I entered this path . . . When he didn't want to marry me, I didn't say anything. I stayed with him a long time, doing sex work, he'd take my money and beat me. (Extract from individual interview with sex worker, aged 30s)

Being made 'bad' or becoming 'spoilt' was their reason given for doing 'bad work'. These were terms commonly used when women described beginning to sell sex. Key to their descriptions of selling sex not being their choice was avoiding taking on blame for their work. This demonstrates how ingrained the belief systems are regarding women's moral status.

Abuse and violence were common reasons given for women entering the sex industry. Violence continued to be a central part of the experience of their work. It was an expected part of the industry and is a well-documented part of the experience of sex workers in Bangladesh (Alam and Faiz, 2012; Haque, 2011; Ullah, 2005). During a group interview, a group of women in their forties who had sold sex for many years described the violence that they experienced and the dilemma that it caused them:

On the streets, the situation is not good. In Motijheel, in Gulistan, they (sex workers) are lined up like dogs and beaten. Is your own life more important, or money more important? If you want to save yourself, you can't earn money. (Extract from group interview with sex workers, aged 40s)

Without exception, all the participants of my research who sold sex described violence as a part of their work. The main perpetrators of violence were clients and the police. Being arrested and put in jail or the vagrants' homes, which were described as being like prisons, were common experiences.

### *Role of NGOs*

All the participants had some involvement with NGOs, though to different degrees. Drop-in centres run by NGOs provided a safe place for them to go during the day for practical support and health advice. For those who lived in the south of the city, NGOs were a major part of their lives. An NGO project employed three of the participants to work as peer supporters and raise awareness in the areas where women who sold sex lived. However, all these women lost jobs due to the cuts in funding during the lifetime of the research study. One of them, Banu, continued to be a leader in the sex worker community. She had run away from an abusive home as a child and sold sex since her adolescence. When I met her, she was living with two other experienced sex workers but had stopped selling sex. Like the other participants involved in advocacy work, she passionately defended sex work as a form of legitimate work. During a group interview Banu explained:

I think I'm a doctor. I am giving these people a service. Those people who come to me are patients. They are a patient. I am a doctor. I use my whole body and they give me money. (Extract from individual interview with sex worker, aged 40s)

Banu clearly stated that there is a purpose to their work. She was owed money for the service that was supplied. Interestingly the language used and description of providing a service was almost identical to the words used by participants of research carried out by Haque (2011) with street-based sex workers, which suggests that a common narrative was used within this community, reflecting the ideology that NGOs promoted of sex work as a legitimate form of work.

It was evident that involvement with an NGO project had given these women a sense of pride in their achievements and encouraged the ideology of sex work as legitimate work. It gave them a sense of belonging. They complained that their project had lost funds to an organisation that they claimed cheated donors. The 'us' and 'them' rhetoric illustrated their sense of ownership and investment in the organisation, as demonstrated by the following excerpt:

The NGO did good work. No one else did work like them. Being beaten by police and gangsters . . . listening to people talk. We taught them (other sex workers) how to use condoms. Now they sell condoms. They used to be free. Now people say to me, sister, give me condoms. Where am I going to get condoms from? None . . . I don't have any. Now HIV is going to spread. It was low. Now girls can't get condoms. So, what was the point? Now even I work without condoms. I can't get them, what can I do? What? Now we work without condoms. So, for so long we worked hard . . . Now those who used to give funds, they won't work with these girls. They won't help or give opportunities to these girls. The girls aren't good. If they (donors) don't help, can they (sex workers) do anything. I have no home, I have nowhere to sleep, I can't rest, I can't wash. (Extract from individual interview with sex worker, aged 40s)

Some of the statements made here were exaggerated. Condoms were still used, though not having free access may well have reduced their use. Banu took it upon herself to buy condoms in bulk and sell them at a cheap rate. These interactions were witnessed during visits. Parul, being quoted above, was also not homeless. When she stated that 'I have no home. I have nowhere to sleep', she was referring to other sex workers. The rates of HIV in Bangladesh are comparatively low and whether these rates will rise with the closing of projects for groups like sex workers is an interesting question, and yet to be seen. However, Parul's description of the consequences of closing this project in such extreme terms communicates just how important she perceived it to be. For her the personal consequences were high; she has lost a significant income, as well as a sense of purpose and work that she was proud of. Her work had given her a positive identity and sense of belonging. The project's closure was taken to heart. Parul said that people who give funds do not want to give to these girls because they 'aren't good'. Part of her suggested explanation is a moral rejection by the 'donors' that perhaps reflects the rejection sex workers face from wider society.

Furthermore, the project connected these participants to people in more powerful positions than themselves through meeting donors and attending international conferences. Banu described conferences where she had met powerful people, often international professionals. It was not *despite* her stigmatised identity that she had access to these spaces, but *because* of her stigmatised identity. The NGO world that Banu and others had become part of, with its focus on HIV/AIDs, had provided these women with international links. The NGO had a strong sex workers' rights-based narrative that can be recognised in similar organisations and movements throughout the world. This is an example of how global organisations connect to grassroots organisations with a shared purpose and form a common identity (Kabeer et al., 2013). Women's involvement with these networks was not only another method of accessing power, but also provided a sense of belonging to a wider, international community.

A key role of Banu and her colleagues working with the NGO had been to enable sex workers to live in their community without being harassed or kicked out of their homes. For example, Banu explained how they had brought about change in their neighbourhood:



There are meetings . . . sometimes twice a month. We call the landlords, we call the *hazers* (religious leader), we call the members (of the community), we call the chairman. We bring different people and explain, 'They (sex workers) are like your sisters. And if this was your sister? If your wife was like them? If your mother was like them? What would you do? Would you throw them away? They work for their stomachs (from hunger). They have four or five children. They do this to feed them' . . . We have done a lot of work, otherwise they would bother us a lot. (Extract from group interview with sex workers, aged 40s)

Banu and other sex workers supported by the NGO brought about significant transformation in the area they lived in. They created a place where sex workers could reside without being harassed. In order to achieve this, they had to work with the leaders in communities that had played a role in rejecting them, and they justified their work to them. The language that they used to explain their work was common. They described women as having little choice and engaging in sex work to feed their children. They called on the leaders to consider them as they would their own family. They presented themselves in a way that was acceptable and described extremes in order to mitigate negative responses, though they were never fully accepted by the wider community. While the language used portrayed themselves and women similar to them as having limited agency, the task of contacting leaders and convincing them to treat their community differently was challenging and involved a great deal of agency and courage. As women, they had a limited amount of power and had to appeal to those with power for their own protection.

## Discussion

Dominelli (2010) argues that social workers should respond to issues at both global and local levels. This study sought to do just that, by exploring a particular group of women's experiences while speaking to the global issues of sex work and agency. It is essential for social workers to have a theoretic and empirical understanding of these issues in order to effectively address them.

What came across most vividly in this research were the contradictions that the sex workers lived on a daily basis. They called their work 'bad' at the same time as defending their right to work; they held both a negative view of their work and a rights-based justification for that work. In the literature review, we argued that the 'sex work' versus 'prostitution' dichotomy is too simplistic (Sanders et al., 2017). The industry clearly involves both exploitation and women utilising their agency. The demographics of women who sell sex are too broad and experiences too varied to make binary conclusions. Participants of this study described experiences of violence and of choosing their work, although they were clear that this was a limited choice. The majority described experiences of childhood rape, abuse or being sold into the industry. At the same time, women also talked about being workers and providing a service. As illustrated in our data, the women presented themselves as 'beaten', treated 'like dogs' and forced into destitution, yet also as professionals working as 'doctors', as helping each other and working at a high level to advocate for change. While in much of the literature these two narratives are at polar opposites, for the participants both narratives were essential elements of their experiences as women who sold sex. So in the same conversation, a participant would passionately talk about her right to work and say that the only reason any woman did the work was because of destitution. While these may seem like conflicting points of view, in the participant's mind they were not. Even the experience of child sexual abuse was understood as an explanation for entering the sex industry. Women said that they continued to feel the stigmatising effects while believing in the legitimacy of the work. Similarly, women who sold sex faced extreme violence and were excluded from mainstream society, and yet at the same time, they were able to support themselves and be part of a new community. The women's term 'bad work' provides a third alternative to the simplistic dichotomy of 'exploitation' versus 'work': it is a dangerous form of labour consisting of both violence and opportunity.

What this study demonstrates above all is that experience of agency does not exclude experience of exploitation, nor should one side of the dichotomy be privileged over another. This suggests that what is meaningful when trying to support and empower women is understanding their particular, nuanced and multi-faceted positionalities. Interventions and policies must therefore be designed to respond to women's experiences and promote their agency rather than concentrating on adhering to a particular ideology.

Participants did not completely conform to one single ideology but incorporated different ones into their belief systems. Involvement with an NGO that was guided by rights-based ideologies gave them the resources and confidence to challenge their insecure housing situation. At the same time the reality of their stigmatised identities and position in society led them to utilise 'strategies' that may appear to be submissive. Their agency was utilised creatively to successfully bring about significant change for their community. Social workers need to understand the different ideologies that influence women and the various ways agency is expressed in order to effectively impact their lives.

Feminists from the Global North must be particularly aware that their views of women's 'liberation' are too often ethnocentric and that 'empowerment' can be realised by women in multiple ways (Mahmood, 2005); in truth, women experience both coercion and agency simultaneously (Madhok et al., 2013). They utilise their agency as strategies to cope with exploitative situations in which they find themselves (Banerjee, 2017; Madhok, 2013), by for example appealing to men within their community to lessen the abuse they received or by marrying customers to provide limited protection.

As important as it is to highlight women's agency, our findings show that it is equally essential to give attention to their experiences of victimisation and violence. It is clear from this research that there were few protections available to women and children; the NGOs did not provide protection and their interventions did not focus on this area of women's needs. While service providers and policy makers must view women as agents and build on their already existing resources and relationships, they must also recognise their need for the protection that was starkly missing for all the research participants.

Similarly, we would argue that the idea of 'empowerment' must include women's need for protection and safe spaces. Despite being part of empowerment programmes, women who sold sex continued to face violence, often from those in authority, including police officers to whom they were forced to pay bribes in order to continue to work. The programmes that they were involved with did not seem to challenge political structures or demand services from the government. When interventions did engage with the authorities, it was to convince them not to harm women or to allow women to continue to sell sex. For NGOs, this was a practical response; they had little faith in the government to provide security and justice for women. These findings mirror the criticism of Sultana (2015); services for sex workers in Bangladesh rarely address their oppression at a structural level. We would like to suggest that the social workers involved with these organisations must not only seek to improve the individual situations of women, but also work towards structural changes, fighting for women's safety and creating opportunities for them to change their stigmatised identities, should they choose to do so.

## Conclusion

Women in the sex industry in Bangladesh are highly stigmatised and face extreme violence throughout their working lives. Their entry into sex work is often marked by violence, with experiences of rape or being trafficked. Despite these experiences of exploitation, women are not devoid of agency. This study found that they made use of a range of strategies to manage the stigma and violence that they faced. In addition, it was found that the majority of NGOs that worked with sex

workers in Bangladesh took a medical and rights-based approach to intervention (Sultana, 2015). While women clearly benefitted from the services that they provided, forming communities and fighting for their right to work and live in certain areas, most continued to face violence and were excluded from much of society. The study concludes that social workers should recognise sex workers' dual experiences of exploitation and agency, because both are constant features of their lives and work. This means that more attention must be given to their need for protection from violence and exploitation, at the same time as supporting their agency and their rights. This conclusion has broader implications for *all* social work, whatever the setting or international context.

## Limitations of the study

This is a small-scale study that illuminates the experiences and perceptions of a small group of participants; it does not and cannot make generalisable claims about all sex workers in Bangladesh or even in Dhaka. Due to inevitable difficulties in recruiting within this stigmatised group, all participants had some connection to NGOs, and it is acknowledged that the experiences and perceptions of sex workers without these connections may be significantly different.

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### **Author biographies**

**Bethany Jennings** completed a PhD in social work at the University of Edinburgh. She has worked as a social worker in the United Kingdom and Bangladesh.

**Vivienne E Cree** is an emerita professor of social work studies at The University of Edinburgh. She is currently working on a research project on nineteenth-century emigration from Scotland to New South Wales.

**Steve Kirkwood** is a senior lecturer in social work at the University of Edinburgh. His research focuses on criminal justice, restorative justice and the integration of refugees, often using discourse analysis and evaluation research methods.