

## **Physical and Mental Health Condition of Prostitute Mothers in Bangladesh: The Duality of Profession and Motherhood**



**Mst. Tanna Khatun<sup>1</sup>, Md. Sozib Hosen<sup>2</sup>, Dr. Md. Rajaul Karim<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Department of English, Khwaja Yunus Ali University, Sirajganj, Bangladesh.

<sup>2</sup>Department of English, Khwaja Yunus Ali University, Sirajganj, Bangladesh.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6383-047X>

<sup>3</sup>Bangladesh Studies, Khwaja Yunus Ali University, Sirajganj, Bangladesh.

**ABSTRACT:** Sex work is not a new concept in Bangladesh; sex work is centuries old. Bangladeshi society does not regard prostitution as a noble profession, so it must face many challenges. The challenges become more complex when a prostitute becomes a mother. In this study, the researchers investigated how a prostitute mother passes her life through these difficulties. The researchers also analyzed the mental and physical violence of the prostitute mothers and their children. 30 participants were collected from the Cumilla district in Bangladesh using the interview method in an unstructured way, and the Snowball sampling method was used to collect the data. The study shows that most sex workers and prostitute mothers suffer from various challenges like child-rearing, children's education, and security, ensuring nutritious food for themselves and their children, and deficient earnings. Despite having the same motherly feelings as other mothers, prostitute mothers are forced to send their children (78 %) to relatives or maidservants. The rest of the children can stay with their prostitute mothers at the workplace. To survive in society, sex workers must be tense about their future; the matters are excruciating, especially for prostitute mothers.

**KEYWORDS:** Prostitution, Physical Health, Mental Health, Prostitute Mother, Profession, Bangladesh

### **INTRODUCTION**

Bangladeshi society has been built around the male point of view. Because of male-developed social norms and values, women's status in society has deteriorated. Furthermore, religion and gender inequality make a woman reliant on a man. Men dominate culture, which is reflected in the country's social structure. Even though women constitute half of the population of Bangladesh, they do not have adequate employment opportunities in the country. Because they have no other option, a large portion of the population is forced to accept prostitution as a means of subsistence. When these women become mothers, their lives become more complicated because they must balance family and social lives. As a result, most women, consciously or unconsciously, are compelled to pursue a career in prostitution. It is pretty typical for a country when the government cannot ensure equality of opportunity for all citizens. A woman begins her career as a prostitute for a variety of reasons. Furthermore, if that prostitute becomes a mother, she is cut off from all aspects of society, including her own family. Religious laws force her to leave the community.

So, the primary purpose of this article is to look into the following questions:

1. What difficulties does a prostitute mother face in her social and state life?
2. How does a prostitute mother pass her life through these challenges?

### **1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Women were free from all forms of slavery in the ancient period. However, things began to change after that, especially in the middle stages of barbarism, when men established their authority over women. As a result, from ancient times to the present, women have been dominated and suppressed by a male-dominated society (Engles,1902,p.31). The concept of a prostitute is not new. It is thought that educated women in Greece began prostitution for a living around 2500 years ago. However, the evidence of sex workers in India is recorded by the 10th census of India during the 19th and 20th centuries, as it was in Greece (Wikipedia contributors, 2021). In India, people consider sex workers as beggars or vagrants. During the colonial period, British authorities considered prostitution to be a profession, but after the partition of 1947, the situation for sex workers changed entirely. The governments of newly born countries, Pakistan and Bangladesh ignored sex workers in their respective censuses and did not consider prostitution a profession (Tambe, 2005, pp.163-169).

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## 2. PROSTITUTION IN THE CONTEXT OF BANGLADESH

Due to religious beliefs and gender considerations, Bangladeshi women are forced to rely on men. When gender disparity violates individuals' fundamental rights, it is unavoidable for some women to engage in prostitution to survive, resulting in an identity crisis (Arefin, 1989, p.38). Men have abused women who do not have a solid economic support system since the dawn of civilization (Lowis, 1902, pp. 233-235). As a result, Bangladesh has long considered prostitution a traditional profession. Many brothels have sprouted up throughout the country, mainly near a river or the sea. The main reason is that seamen are the main customers of these brothels because they are separate from their wives for a certain period.

According to reports, the total number of sex workers in these brothels exceeds one lac, with nearly one million customers. According to police reports, the number of sex workers in Dhaka and Narayanganj is 25,000 – 35,000 and 5,000 – 15,000, respectively. The country's largest brothel, located in Goaland, Rajbari, employs 12,000-15,000 sex workers (Arefin, 1989, p.37).

The leading cause of prostitution in Bangladesh is the 1974 famine, which spread over time. People suffered greatly due to the severe famine, particularly women who were forced to agree to sleep in the bed of an unknown man in exchange for a piece of roti (one type of food made of flour). During the 1974 famine, frauds, wealthy farmers, Union Parishad members, and others raped women from impoverished families. Even in Longorkhana, where food is distributed to the hungry, young girls were raped regularly (Ahmed, 1985, p.155).

## 3. OBJECTIVES

In Bangladesh's male-dominated society, a woman faces a variety of challenges. Moreover, if that woman is a call girl, carrying out her profession and motherly duties becomes like adding fuel to the fire for her. In this context, the primary goal of this article is to try to understand 'what types of obstacles must a prostitute face in the existing social systems to pass her life?' Therefore, the researcher will investigate the following issues to achieve the goal mentioned above (Introduction):

- Reasons for prostitution as a profession;
- An attitude of mother and system of child-rearing;
- Attitude towards education and social dignity of their children;
- The duality between work and motherhood;
- Socioeconomic condition; and
- The lifestyle of sex workers.

## 4. BASIC TERMINOLOGY OF PROSTITUTION

### 4.1. Definition of Prostitute

Individuals who engage in sexual intercourse for monetary gain are sex workers (Prostitution, 1828). In a broader sense, Sue (1998, p.52) says sex workers or prostitutes are women who engage in sexual acts for money or another material gain, either legally or illegally, part-time or full-time, on a regular or irregular basis. A woman in our male-dominated society can become a victim of circumstance in various ways. A prostitute's status is much lower than a woman's in the community. People commonly address sex workers with derogatory and hateful names such as Bessha, Nooti, Khanki, Maagi, and Potita in Bangla slang.

### 4.2. Classification of Prostitution

The main reason for prostitution in Bangladesh is the country's economic situation. In Bangladesh, four types of sex workers are visible. It is outlined briefly below:

#### 4.2.1 Brothel or Hothouse Prostitution

In almost every city in Bangladesh, there are brothels. Sex workers permanently inhabit these hothouses. Some sex workers are born in different brothels. Some sex workers accept the profession of their own will, while others are sold through various forms of swindling. Every hothouse has a director, known as a headman. Sex workers of multiple ages can be seen in the brothel. A prostitute typically earns between Tk.10,000 and Tk.15,000 per month.

#### 4.2.2 Floating Prostitution

The number of floating sex workers throughout Cumilla town is nearly 500. The floating sex workers lack licenses and specific locations to engage in sexual intercourse with their sexual customers. They live in various areas throughout Cumilla town with other family members. Apart from the Chourastha, Zoo, rail gate, Dipika cinema hall, and other hidden places, they always use Dharma Shagor Par, Par Related Park, and Kandirpar as their specific locations.

#### 4.2.3 Hotel Prostitution

These sex workers work in some of the most luxurious and expensive hotels and some clinics in Cumilla. Most girls from lower-class families have entered the profession with the permission of their guardians. They chose their job with their husbands' or parents' permission to support their low-income families financially. They number around 4000 people.

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## 4.2.4 Renting House Prostitution

Over time, a new trend has emerged in prostitution. This type of prostitution has increased in various residential areas throughout Cumilla. Some beautiful upper-class girls live in a comfortable, luxurious apartments that they rent. The agents of their business, known as brokers, assist clients secretly in reaching specific locations. Regular customers include upper-class men such as police officers, politicians, and government officers. Sex workers operate their businesses smoothly under the protection of political leaders and administrators. It is important to note that most of these women's [sex workers'] husbands are immigrants. Furthermore, some women seize the opportunity when their husbands leave the house.

## 5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 5.1. Methodology and procedures

To fulfill the purpose of this research, the researchers have used the Snowball sampling method. The researchers first build a good relationship with the people in the research area to reach sex workers easily. At the outset, the researchers get several data from different sources, which are valuable for the research. Before going to the research area, researchers have prepared a questionnaire with some basic questions considering the topic. Researchers also observe every aspect of their life, such as how to fix rates, select time and place with clients or their job type, etc., while getting interviews with sex workers. Consequently, researchers have never deviated from the main point, and it is to say that this is an excellent technique for collecting information for research.

### 5.2. Introduction to the research area

The researchers have chosen the Dharma Sagor Par and nearby Park in Cumilla, the Dipika Cinema Hall, and its surrounding areas as research sites. The selected locations are calm and quiet, with the shadows of various trees and woods. The government has built the park on the Dharma Sagor's bank to help citizens relieve themselves from depression and tiredness. The location is as well-known to the people of Cumilla as Omen. Besides the park, sex workers use Dipika Cinema Hall, Kandir Par, Chauraster Mor, the town rail gates, Shasongasa bus terminal, living hotel, motel, clinic, and renting houses and apartments.

### 5.3. Data collection method

Two types of sources, primary and secondary, have been used in this research. Those who engaged in this research are considered the primary source. Sex workers of the bank of Dhormosagor, Park, Dipika cinema hall, rail gate, bus terminal, Kandhirpar, and residential hotels of different parts of Cumilla city are the primary data sources. And guards of parks, vendors of tea/peanut/betel leaf, and brokers of prostitution are the additional sources. Secondary sources are reports, thesis papers, books, magazines, newspapers, and other research works.

### 5.4. Sample size

In this research project, 30 girls (prostitutions) assisted the researchers greatly in conveying their information. Thirteen (13) of the girls work during the day, while the rest work at night. Those who are in school or college work only during the day.

## 6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### 6.1. The socioeconomic status of sex workers

The majority of sex workers live with their husbands in their families. Some of them work during the day, while others work at night. However, they are unwilling to introduce themselves as sex workers rather than establish themselves as honorable or valuable members of society. Due to social obstacles that conceal their true identity, they present themselves to their neighbors and relatives as garment workers, laborers, nurses, NGO workers, maidservants, or students of any reputable school or college.

### 6.2. Structure of the Family

The study encounters 30 sex workers, 7 of whom live with their husbands and children. The researchers have six sex workers who only live with their children and the other sex workers who live alone and send their children to their mothers in village houses. The researchers also meet seven people living in different halls and female hostels. They form another familial bonding with a strong structure that includes the so-called brother, sister, uncle, and aunt for professional security and responsibility. These inventive relatives serve as middlemen or brokers. These brokers ensure the safety of these sex workers in their workplaces and protect them from outsiders.

### 6.3. Income source

The income of the floating sex workers in the park is not the same. Their earnings vary according to their ages. Sex workers who work in hotels or rent apartments earn more money than sex workers in parks. Sex workers in parks earn Tk20-30 per hour, whereas those working in hotels or renting out their homes earn Tk300-500 per hour. According to information from sex workers, the monthly living cost for their children is between Tk.7000 and Tk.8000.

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### **6.4. Food**

The sex workers who work in the park buy their meals with money collected from their clients, and they occasionally share their meals with their clients. They also use various types of drugs.

### **6.5. Pregnancy prevention method**

A prostitute engages in physical intercourse with 10-15 clients in a single day. In this case, they use various methods to avoid pregnancy. For example, they are more likely to use condoms and take an oral pill or an injection if not. However, if they become accidentally pregnant, they use medicines to abort their fetus.

### **6.6. Workstyle and money exchange**

If sex workers work during the day, they usually arrive at work at night. Again, if they work at night, they do not come to work during the daytime. Generally, they try to manage adult clients during this time. However, a prostitute named Nasrin has stated that she sometimes feels bored when meeting very young clients because they pay only Tk.20-100 per hour. The sex workers spend their time with their clients in calm and uninhabited areas intending to please them. Some clients, however, do not engage in any physical intercourse with the sex workers; instead, they meet and gossip with them for a fee per hour. They earn Tk.150-200 per hour when they visit hotels with clients for physical relations. They sometimes have to pay extra money to the brokers and the cops.

### **6.7. Motherhood and Sex workers**

Marriage and family are central themes in a woman's life. A woman becomes a legal mother through marriage. Unfortunately, some women who work as street whores experience unexpected pregnancies and become mothers. The study examines how their pregnancies and parenting affect them as sex workers and their physical work. In this study, 18 mothers currently involved in sex work in Dharma Sagor Park-related areas in Cumilla town participated in interviews. These mothers reveal how difficult being pregnant or parenting while regularly working the street caused them to feel ashamed of themselves and their professional life, along with anxiety for their own and their children's safety hampered their professional life. Pregnancy and parenting create a dilemma in their lives.

#### **Example 1:**

Kajol, 26, is a mother of two children, four and two years old. When her younger daughter was two months old, her husband divorced her. As a result, she has chosen this profession as she cannot find work. Kajol is from a village, Gopalpur, under the district of ChaddaGram, where her mother, younger sister, brother, and sister-in-law live in the village. She travels to Cumilla town to look for clients though she informs the villagers and relatives that she works in a reputable clinic. She sends money to her mother and sister while also bringing the total cost to her daughters. Kajol lives in a rented house close to the Shasongasa rail station. When she visits her clients, she leaves her daughters in the care of a maidservant. Kajol must bring all the maid servant's living expenses though she does not believe the servant ultimately. She is worried about her babies while she is at work. While returning to her apartment after her duty, she carries bananas, biscuits, and chocolates for her only little kid. She always prays for the well-being of her daughters.

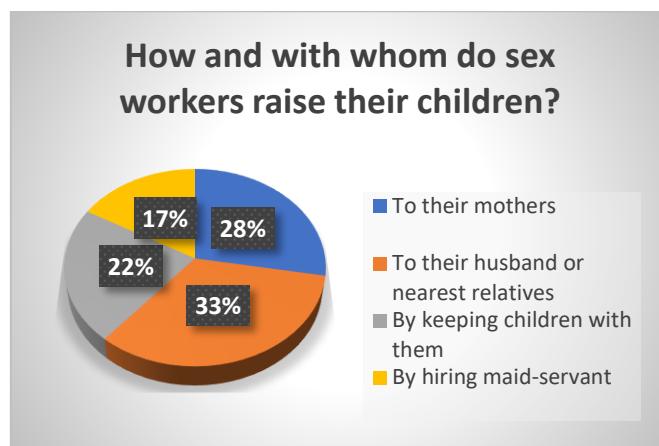
#### **Example -2**

Saima (25) works in a hotel and appoints a maidservant for her son because she has no close relatives. Saima assigns her work to a maidservant from her village, Saharanpur. She is required to pay Tk500 for food and shelter. Her parents and other family members know that she works as a maidservant in a hotel. In reality, she works as a prostitute in a reputable hotel, sometimes disguised as a maidservant at night and sometimes during the day.

From the above story, we see that both Kajol and Saima are always worried about their children because they are cared for by relatives or servants. They are concerned about their children, just like any other mother, and they need some advice for their children's education.

### **6.8. Child-rearing**

After the birth of a child, parents must accept liability. Every mother wishes she could nurse her child by herself. According to UNICEF statistics (Newsdesk, 2020), over 20,000 children are born and brought up in Bangladesh's red-light districts. The girls are recognized as prostitutes' daughters, and they may proceed with their mothers' occupations as early as 12, whereas the boys grow up to become pimps. If a prostitute mother wants to keep her children away from this prostitution, she is forced to keep her child hidden from her. In this case, the researchers have gathered some issues shown in the figure:[1].



**Figure: 1- Ways of raising the children of prostitutes**

Sex workers send their kids to the kids' grandparents, most of whom live in the village. In this context, sex workers bear the entire living cost of their mothers and children. They are always depressed and anxious while parenting their children from a distance. Hamida stated that she is disturbed when she thinks of her child. She occasionally travels to the village to spend time with her child, but she is upset and lonely when she returns to her workplace. She becomes tense about her daughter's studies, and she constantly prays for her daughter's education, food, health, and safety.

The researchers visited four prostitute mothers nursing their children in their own homes in the research area. Consequently, they do not work during the day and only work at night when their children go to bed. They keep their children close because they have no relatives such as a husband, mother, sister, etc.

### **6.9. Children Health and Maternity**

Mothers become more concerned about their children's problems. Prostitute mothers, like other mothers, are worried about their children's future. If their children became ill, they appointed a doctor. They even take time off from work to care for their children's health.

We believe they are concerned about their children's health. In our field, we encounter a prostitute mother, Mahmuda, who is more worried than the other prostitute mothers because her son is physically-challenged. Her husband gave up on her due to their baby's problem. She is constantly concerned about how difficult her autistic baby will face in her absence. She engages with her clients while her son sleeps beside her bed, only to keep her son with her.

Mahmuda requires medical advice for her son. She is concerned about her son's health deteriorating over time. Without her mother, no one knows who she is. She has done everything she can to help her son. She never places a high value on money. Aside from that, she cannot work due to her son's illness. Prostitute mothers experience the same anxiety as other mothers in society. Furthermore, her pain is greater than that of others due to her autistic son.

### **6.10. Challenging profession and social life**

They also express that they have to separate themselves from their children. They have no social respect as mothers, but their thinking, affection, and hope are similar to the general mothers who live in society. Prostitute mothers getting no help from the community have to go to the workplace for livelihood. These mothers have to choose this profession for parenting their children and supplying their living costs. Society considers motherhood, but these mothers are too preoccupied with depression to put it to the test. They cannot give up their job to protect their children. For some mothers, motherhood is the primary cause of their silence and tears. A prostitute mother is always depressed for the sake of her children. She must constantly struggle to feed and raise her children in a middle-class society.

Furthermore, despite their families being financially secure, some female students have chosen a job to get physical pleasure. The researchers met a girl in the Meristop hospital who had come to the hospital to have her fetus aborted. Despite being a sex worker, she appears to have genuine affection for her child. Monira responded to our question by saying, "I am the baby's mother but cannot protect it." She added, "I do not want my child floating like a straw in society." Monira stated that she was being humiliated by society as a woman, so she had come to the clinic to abort the baby so that no one could tease the baby. However, it is an accurate picture of a loving mother, but she has no way. During pregnancy, a prostituted woman's depression and anxiety are so severe, and it reaches its extreme point when her husband abandoned her after two/three months of pregnancy. In this situation, she has no choice but to accept the heinous job.

About six months into her pregnancy, she meets with her clients in intercourse though she has numerous physical problems. She initially conceals her pregnancy from the clients, fearing they will reject her. She must continue doing this work before her baby

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is six months old. When we asked her why she did not abort the premature pregnancy, she replied, "I am a mother according to religion, and would I become a murderer of my child?" In a male-dominated society with no patriarchal support, women must take responsibility for parenting and feeding. These mothers believe their children will provide for them in their old age.

### **6.11. Access to Education and Key Impediments for children**

Some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) established a pre-school in the Daulatdia brothel to educate the children of sex workers. However, when this NGO (Non-governmental Organization) attempted to enroll the children in public schools, the school authorities, teachers, parents of other students, and guardians refused to admit them (Shohel, 2013, p.15). Unlike in Daulatdia, the education system for the children of sex workers in Cumilla town is not fully validated. Currently, 32 of the 85 children are studying in different schools with other children.

Despite the lack of a separate educational institution for the children of sex workers, some NGOs have already taken several initiatives to provide schooling for them. However, the number is deficient compared to the need. Furthermore, these schoolings are not like formal education; instead, NGOs teach them basic knowledge of things such as Bangla and English alphabet, sanitary, good manners, etc.

### **6.12. Profession and maternal conflict**

As a result, a sex worker considers herself a 'social garbage' and tries to keep her professional life hidden from her family and society. People think sex work is 'immoral,' and prostitution is illegal in many parts of the world.

She employs a variety of strategies to keep her job in this field. So, she introduces herself to her son as an employee of an office, such as a nurse, maidservant, NGO worker, sweeper, cleaner, factory worker, beautician, and so on. The aristocratic women introduce themselves as officers of reputed offices. However, they are constantly concerned about their occupation, fearing it will spread to their children and family members.

### **6.13. Profession, Motherhood, and Gender Discrimination**

In the Bangladeshi social context, the concepts of male and female are vastly different. There is a significant difference between female and male babies following their birth. The male child denotes that he will shoulder all of the family's responsibilities, whereas the female child signifies that she will rely on the other family members. The study clearly shows that prostitute mothers have adopted the same concept. They believe that men who dominate society strangle the female children and try to escape society's rubbish and superstitions. Eva, a prostitute mother, expressed her concern that her son-in-law would learn about her previous life, which might cause her daughter's conjugal life unhappy.

On the other hand, prostitute mothers with male children are also concerned that if their sons learn about their profession, they will give up their mother in the future. Motherhood is a role that women must master. Motherhood tries to defeat women, and it is said that being a mother makes a woman successful. It is an example of societal gender discrimination because women are kept down within the kitchen's four walls by the ironic duty of child-rearing.

## **CONCLUSION**

A cruel male-dominated society oppresses Bangladeshi women and suppresses everything from the state to the family. Women have no distinct identity. After their birth, they mature by adopting their father's identity, and after their marriage, they begin to live by adopting their husband's identity. After having male children, they start living according to the identity of their male children. In this case, they never follow the female children. When these women are deprived of their identities or are forced to reject the identities given to them by their families, they turn to prostitution as their primary source of income. Because of the responsibilities of motherhood, most of the mothers whom the researchers visit for this article are forced to accept prostitution. When a father ignores the responsibility of raising children, despite society's rule, a mother must take the responsibility and carry the cost of their livelihood; they have no other option but to engage in prostitution. It is a great shame that when these children are asked to identify themselves, they use their paternal identity, which is so painful for females. As a result of the traditional law of society, a female, in such a way, loses her true identity.

## **LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

To begin, we encounter several difficulties while gathering data. They refuse to speak with us because they think we are journalists or NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) activists. People in the area frequently ask us questions or act in ways that impede our research. We need to speak with their family members to obtain detailed information about the sex workers, which is nearly impossible due to unavoidable obstacles. Some respondents in the group want to reveal their occupations. Furthermore, due to time constraints and job demands, we cannot go into detail and analyze what is needed to improve the accuracy of the research.

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## Conflict of interest statement

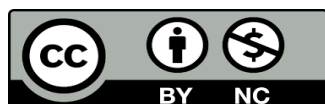
There is no conflict of interest. All concerned authors are well informed about the submission and publication.

## Funding

This article has been completed entirely by self-fund.

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