Life in the red light: A qualitative investigation of the daily life of trafficking victims in Indian brothels

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Abstract: This study provides a glimpse into the daily life of women living in the brothels of Delhi, India, highlighting the process of acculturation and habituation of females trafficked into sex work. Participants were 30 female sex trafficking survivors, rescued from red-light establishments, and recruited from a government shelter home using purposive sampling. Participants were asked about their personal histories, trafficking initiation, experiences upon entry into the trade, routine activities within the brothel, and those who looked after their daily lives. Participant narratives described the brothel as a complex business enterprise comprised of many players. Females were socialized into brothel culture through the use of special treatment and favoritism, followed by, if necessary, coercion and violence. The sex workers found ways to earn as much money as possible and to protect the little money they were able to save. Some females reported forming friendships with other sex workers in the brothels, while others reported a state of perpetual competition for the affections of madams and clients. A few participants reported developing love affairs with clients. This study provides a detailed narrative account of the experience of sex trafficked females – both the traumas and the ways in which they adapt to their new daily life. Emergent themes highlight the need to recognize the psychological complexities that result from working in a brothel, which point to the necessity of intricate and client-focused rehabilitation processes to assist females in readjusting to life outside of the brothel.

Keywords: trafficking; qualitative research; sex work; violence; India

Introduction
Red-light districts are found in almost all cities of India, both in sprawling metropolis and smaller urban areas. However, little is known about life in red-light establishments other than horrific tales of violence and sexual coercion. Stories of innocent and naïve females forced into “modern slavery”, commoditized as objects for sexual gratification, and subjugated to evils of all sorts characterize the trafficking narrative linked to these establishments. This discourse, which focuses on the vulnerability, victimization, and misery engulfing the lives of victims in these brothels, is crucial, as terrible experiences, ranging from sexual violence to HIV infection and unwanted pregnancies, are common. However, these accounts are not all-inclusive and fail to describe the habituation of girls and women
to brothel settings while in captivity. The daily life events of females who have adapted to brothel culture have not been reported to date; however, these less dramatic accounts contribute a crucial aspect to the overall picture of trafficking experiences. As such, they play a vital role in the type of rehabilitation and reintegration processes required for girls who survive trafficking. This study is an attempt to construct a more complete picture of daily life in red light establishments on Garstin Bastion Road (G B Road) in Delhi – both the traumas experienced and the process of adaptation.

The Delhi Sex Trade

India’s capital, Delhi, is both the hub of the country’s political activities and a commerce and industrial center. People from both inside and outside of India come to Delhi in search of employment, business, and tourism, etc. Delhi has also emerged as a destination for sex trafficked females, both those from within India and from across international borders (Hameeda et al., 2010; Joffres et al., 2008; Sen and Nair, 2004), as well as a main transit zone for international trafficking (Sen and Nair, 2004). Recently, yet another variant of sex work known as “flying prostitution” has increased instances of prostitution outside red light establishments. This form of sex work takes place in private rooms, apartments, hotels, and exclusive clubs under the guise of call centers, friendship clubs, and beauty and massage parlors. These services are especially prolific along national highways (Sen and Nair, 2004).

Trafficking and Prostitution

The definition of “trafficking” used for this study is taken from the recent United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women, and Children (UNODC, 2000). The definition of trafficking, as enshrined in Article 3 (a), entails three elements: the act (what is done) involves recruitment, transportation, harboring or receipt of persons; the means (how is it done) involves threat or coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or vulnerability, or giving payments or benefits to a person in control of the victim; and the purpose (why it is done) is for exploitation, which includes sexual exploitation, forced labor, slavery or similar practices, and removal of organs. The Article iterates that recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation shall be considered trafficking in persons even if this does not involve any of the means set forth. Prostitution becomes trafficking when force, fraud, or coercion are used to convince an individual to provide sexual services. For the purpose of this study, the terms sex trafficking, sex trade/work, or prostitution have been used interchangeably without invoking the moral dogmas typically attached to each.

Life in Red Light Establishments

G B Road is the biggest red-light area in Delhi. The history of this area dates back to the Mughal days; a British collector earmarked one area of G B road for sex work activities. Today the area boasts the biggest conglomeration of brothels in the capital. As of data collection, about 100 active brothels were located on the road. Although there is no specific data available, it has been speculated that more than 20,000 females of different age groups (sometimes as young as 12 years old) are found in these brothels (Joffres et al., 2008). Research suggests victimization of children as sex workers in these brothels is on the rise (Sahasrabuddhe and Mehendale, 2008).

While there has been a notable amount of research on the trauma experienced by females in this setting, little is known about how trafficked females adapt to their new environment in order to survive such traumas. This information is crucial in order to sufficiently create client-centered rehabilitation and reintegration programs once females escape or are taken out of brothel life. Without knowledge of the complexities of their self-protective mechanisms and their means of surviving daily life, comprehensive rehabilitation is unlikely. Thus, the objective of this study was to provide an in-depth description of the routine activities carried out in brothels, habituation of girls and women to brothel activities, and adaptation to its culture, including the sale and purchase of sex.

Method

The study used qualitative data collection methods to gather narratives from trafficked survivors and
service providers in a government shelter, Children’s Home for Girls No. 3 (CHG3). Thematic methods were used to analyze this data. Key informants were also interviewed, including the superintendent of CHG3, welfare officers and other staff, police personnel, a government attorney, and staff from non-government organizations (NGOs) from Delhi and West Bengal (which has a similar red-light setting). This paper reports on the data collected from the trafficking survivors only. Using an interpretive paradigm, the study set out to explore and understand the lived experiences of brothel workers.

It is worth noting that researching trafficked women in red-light establishments is challenging, as identifying and reaching informants, without putting the researcher or the informants themselves at risk, is very difficult (Cwikel and Hoban, 2005). However, once survivors are released from captivity and placed in safe custody, access to informants through trusted sources becomes possible. Reaching this cohort via support service providers was the most plausible approach for this study, as it created safe spaces wherein informants could share their experiences, as survivors may find it difficult to confide in a stranger. The researchers fostered relationships with service providers, who then spoke with survivors about the option of participating in interviews. Thus, social workers mediated any distrust and facilitated rapport building with the researchers.

The study involved retrospective qualitative analysis of information collected by the researchers through interviews conducted at CHG3. The first author is a female Indian national who was of close age (mid twenties) to the participants at the time of data collection. It is possible this allowed participants to view the researcher as an older sister or friend, rather than as a researcher or critic. The participants referred to her as ‘Didi’, which in Indian culture is a respectful way for a female to address another female of a similar age. This “peer” rather than “researcher” dynamic facilitated rapid rapport building, which was demonstrated by many of the participants wanting to get to know the researcher better – her family history, marital status, whether or not she had children, etc.

The study was designed with the WHO ethical and safety recommendations for interviewing trafficked women in mind (Zimmerman and Watts, 2003). The ethical review board of the Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur approved the study protocol prior to data collection. Study approval was also obtained from the superintendent of the shelter from where participants were recruited.

Participants
Participants were 30 female, sex trafficking survivors released from brothels by the Child Welfare Committee (CWC) of Delhi and placed in a government shelter home. Data were collected between September and October 2012. The sampling was purposive and convenient due to the challenges in recruiting participants for research on sex work, as described above. Prior engagement in sex work was the primary criteria for selection of the participants.

The CWC Delhi rescued all participants during routine brothel raids at establishments located on GB Road. All participants were Indian nationals, and most were single and recruited into the sex trade at a very young age, almost all of them in their teens. Participants ranged from 14 to 25 years old. The eldest participant was twenty-five years old and had a baby of two years of unknown paternity, the only participant with a child. Most of the participants had some primary education but were forced to discontinue their studies due to reasons such as poverty or domestic violence.

Procedure
Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and observation. An icebreaker activity between the facilitator and each participant was used to establish common ground, build rapport, and to diminish the power imbalance. The purpose of the study was described to participants, and informed consent was obtained. The participants were assured they could withdraw from the interview at any moment if uncomfortable. The safety and well being of each participant was given the utmost priority throughout the interview process. If a participant appeared to be uncomfortable or emotionally distraught during the interview, the discussion was interrupted, and the participant was given adequate time to regain composure or to voluntarily discontinue the interview. Each participant was assigned an anonymized identification number in order to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.
Interviews were held in the office of the Welfare Officer (although she was not present during the interview itself). This setting served two functions: first, the survivors had the psychological support of the welfare officer upon being confronted with an outsider alone in wake of security. Secondly, the participants were able to articulate their experiences freely in a familiar and safe environment. Interviews were conducted to obtain information regarding basic demographics, trafficking history, and experience of entry into the trade (i.e., recruitment technique), routine activities inside the brothel, and the personnel who looked after their daily lives. Due to the extreme sensitivity of the interviews, and in view of methodological limitations described by others when conducting research with sex workers and/or trafficking survivors (Bosworth, Hoyle, and Dempsey, 2011; Brennan, 2005; Gozdziak, 2008; Harrison, 2006), wording and inclusion/exclusion of specific themes were chosen in order to avoid emotional distress (Brunovskis and Surtees, 2013). Interviews lasted approximately 30 to 40 minutes each. All interviews with the exception of one were conducted in Hindi. Audio recordings were transcribed, two independent coders conducted the coding by hand, and codes were analyzed using narratives to identify overarching themes. The coders compared their coding and discussed the resulting themes together until reaching full agreement.

Results

A Typical Brothel

The participants described the brothels as entrepreneurial. There are the ‘maliks’ (owners) who run or lease the establishment and occupy the top position in the brothel hierarchy. One malik may own many brothels. Below the maliks are ‘madams’, who are the chief coordinators of the brothels. A madam is usually addressed as ‘Didi’. Sometimes, maliks and madams may be the same person. Madams look after the entire managerial operation and are accountable to the maliks. Older, experienced sex workers often become brothel madams when no longer able to pursue sex work. Madams look after the girls and women and keep them well maintained in order to market a quality product, please customers, and extract maximum revenues. One of the participants described the brothel management: “There are lots of brothels there, more than eighty, ninety in number. Didi looked after the brothel where I worked, and the brothel was owned by a malik.”

Maliks maintain a steady supply of clients through a network of pimps. Pimps are analogous to brokers. They are often, though not always, the male offspring of a malik or madam, and it is the madam’s responsibility to solicit someone to fulfill this role through monetary tips and desirable gifts. Pimps are entrusted with providing a supply of clients for the sex business and receive attractive remuneration in return since competition for such a resourceful broker is high. The proficiency of a pimp lies in his ability to procure wealthy clients; thus they maintain local agents who can help them locate clients at hotels, railway stations, taxi stands, etc. Through the help of local low-level gang members, pimps also keep track of sex workers and clients to avoid nuisance. There is strict security on the brothel premises, movements of girls and women are closely monitored, and sex workers are not allowed to leave the brothel area unless doing so with a well paying client.

In addition to maliks, madams, and pimps, auto and rickshaw drivers, hotel managers, and others have been found to be complicit in the sex worker trade. The total money generated by the enterprise is divided among this network. The local police also receive their share of the revenue to ensure the law remains on the side of the maliks. All potential clients are vetted carefully, as undercover police sometimes pose as customers looking for girls under 18 years old, a criminal offense in India for brothels owners. The profile of customers is quite dynamic and difficult to characterize. Students, rickshaw pullers, service men, businessmen, and others were reported visiting these brothels. Describing the clients, one of the participants replied, “All types of customers visited the brothels – rich as well as poor and young as well as old.”

The brothels keep snacks, narcotics, and alcohol on hand that customers can purchase in addition to sexual acts. The sex workers also share these items with their clients to increase rapport and build customer relations. Customers pay tips or offer gifts to the workers for specialized attention, which
serves as an added incentive and increases the prestige of the sex worker. Customers are able to take the workers out of the brothel establishments for additional payment.

Early Socialization into Brothel Life
The stories of sex work initiation for those interviewed in this study echoes stories from other research. Early socialization of females into the trade involves cajolery, flattery, and pampering from the madams, who often prey upon the vulnerable status of the females; they are enticed with offers difficult to resist. The females are lured with monetary rewards, projecting sex as a harmless, lucrative trade. They are made to believe that sex is a gateway to easy money and material comfort, as they usually come from impoverished backgrounds. One of the participants described an offer made to her in the beginning of her role as a sex worker: “You can earn thousands and thousands of rupees in just one night. Women with low socio-economic status are often unable to get work in the formal market sector, thus they see sex work as a gainful opportunity to ward off poverty.”

Women are promised they can leave the trade if they desire, without any idea about the reality of their indentured servitude. However, once women have been initiated into sex work, traffickers resort to coercive means to ensure the females are performing their work and duties. The brutality is generally greatest in the initial stage of integration into the brothel in order to instill fear among the workers. Those who do not obey are physically assaulted and exposed to a variety of atrocities. Women are locked in rooms without food and water for days to break their resistance. Rape is another popular tool utilized by the traffickers, as is threat or actuation of physical violence. One of the participants recalled: “They would strike unbridled. Those scoundrels struck me for a year. They made me work even during menstrual periods.” Another participant reiterated a similar experience: “I was beaten with a leather strap.” Yet another added: “Whatever came to their hands, they just hit with that.”

Once a female surrenders and succumbs to the good will of madams, coercive treatment is replaced by partnership and complements. As soon as the sex worker gives up all potential signs of resistance and conforms to the norms of the brothel, she gets to share in the money she generates through sex work—a way of incentivizing and positively reinforcing work performance. Periodically, she is bestowed with presents and rewards from the madam to inculcate a sense of gratitude and loyalty towards the perpetrators, creating a feeling of obligation in exchange for these luxurious gifts.

Lucrative Economic Transactions
Maliks usually purchase females from the pimps for lofty amounts. A female’s worth depends upon her age and physical features. Young girls are highly priced due to their high demand, and thus, they enjoy special status in brothels. This demand is due to several beliefs and factors. First, young girls are believed to be free from sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Second, the myth that sex with a virgin can cure HIV/STIs has drastically increased demand for young girls in sex work (Pandey, 2010; Rubenson et al., 2005; Sen and Nair, 2004). Although not extensively documented, there also seems to be a fascination with sexual engagement with virgin girls, as virginity is associated with purity; sex with one is viewed as a sign of prestige (Tambe, 2008).

Interviews revealed that brothel owners have little concern for the safety and well being of their workers. As soon as an exploited female turns unsuitable for business due to illness or age, she is easily and cheaply replaced with new recruits. Widespread economic impoverishment creates an ideal situation for brothel owners, as it means there is no short supply of easily manipulated women and girls. The sole concern of brothel owners is to maximize profit. Hence, a female is forced to attend to as many customers as she can, ranging from ten to fifteen per day. The more customers each sex worker attends to, the higher the income for the brothel owners and the shorter time needed to recover the amount invested in procuring the female. The purchase price is a direct debt upon her, which she is supposed to return through sex work.

Females are made to believe freedom will come as soon as they can return their purchase price, but debt bondage makes this nearly impossible. Some money is deducted from their income for expenses such as lodging, condoms, clothes, medical care, cosmetics, drugs, etc. Further, the money spent to secure political mileage in the form of bribes to law enforcement is also extracted from the workers’
income. Sometimes the workers are lied to about their purchase price, and a higher debt may be imposed upon them to ensure their continued captivity. Thus, the brothel owners confiscate virtually all money generated. However, once a female is settled and does not show any signs of non-compliance, she is allowed to keep some of her earnings. Customers usually pay INR 250-750 (US $4-12) per encounter. Some customers also give tips to the females, which they are often allowed to keep. One of the participants reported: “That rogue woman (the madam) even seized tips paid by the customers.”

Lack of personal living space to store items and lack of access to financial institutions pose a major constraint to the safety of the little money sex workers are allowed to keep. Hence, most females keep their savings with the madams. The practice of larceny by other workers was reported in the interviews. One participant said: “The girls do not have any proper resting place or cupboard to keep their belongings. I kept all my things in an old rugged pouch. I use to keep my earnings in the hope to start my own shop when being released from there. One day I found a hundred bucks were missing. I remained silent. A few days later, another girl also reported the same thing. Then a girl informed me, ‘Salma (co-worker) was fiddling with your bag while you were asleep.’ Then we both abused that scoundrel.”

Sometimes brothel owners may release a worker after a few years. Usually when money spent on acquisition and associated costs is recovered through sex work and a sizeable profit has been made, or a female moves to a higher age bracket, she is set free. After release, the dilemma as to where to go arises. Some live independently without disclosing their prior sex work and make their own living. Some return home, if their experience as a sex worker has not reached their communities, especially if the female belongs to a lower caste group. Lower castes tend to be more accepting of trafficking survivors, not putting as much value on the “immorality” of females’ experiences in the brothels (Mahat, 2011). Those unable to return home due to stigma or other reasons may start performing sex work independently, not affiliating themselves with a particular brothel, but rather hiring a space within a brothel in order to have a place to work.

Social Interactions in the Brothels

Favoritism: Favoritism, whereby brothel owners bestow special favors to some workers deliberately to bring others into submission, was a recurring theme throughout the data. New recruits are lured by the promise of lavish gifts (e.g., better food, dresses, etc.) paid to the older or noncompliant victims. They are made to believe they can also own all of these items if they trust their traffickers. In addition to gifts, sometimes females receive higher payments and have the liberty to keep the tips paid by customers. They enjoy the good will of the brothel owners and exercise free choice in several domains. This favoritism serves multiple functions for the brothel owners. First, it helps to generate a sense of gratitude and obligation among recipients. The females may find themselves overwhelmed by the favors made by the brothel owners and feel under moral obligation to repay these gifts through continued sex work. This creates a faction of faithful and loyal workers who are easier to manipulate. Second, loyal females often develop an alliance with the brothel owners and serve as inside informants, notifying the owners of other workers who do not conform to brothel norms. Third, favoritism prohibits any unionism amongst the workers, upholding the policy of “divide and conquer.” Divided workers have little mobilization to rebel against their perpetrators.

Relationships between workers: Interviews revealed that interactions among sex workers are very complex. Levels of acclimatization range from cooperation to competition. The participants reported that they shared their woes with each other; however, conflict among the brothel inmates was also common. Brothel owners constantly maneuver females around to prevent amicable bonds between the workers and the building of alliances. Attracting customers sometimes becomes an area of conflict, as the competition creates strife among the workers. Moreover, robbery within the brothel also gives rise to discord. There were a few females interviewed who were rescued from the same brothel who were clearly at odds with each other. During one of the sessions, when asked to describe the behavior of the shelter residents, one of the participants suddenly got aggressive when describing another resi-
dent. She furiously replied: “She seized my customers there [at the brothel]. Here, also she grabs my food.”

At the same time, some of the participants recalled healthy affinity among the workers. Oftentimes workers would support each other. Many of them cherished making friends at the brothels. They reported being able to share their agony with each other; strength and resilience was gained from these ties.

**Surrogate intimate relationships:** Being tricked into the sex trade is especially traumatic for the child survivors; the experience often turns them numb and emotionally fragile. The madams take advantage of their youth and naivety by displaying extra care or sensitivity, and the young females fail to see their ulterior motives. Girls and women from broken and dysfunctional families are soft targets. This care and bonding from the madams culminates in surrogate ties.

One of the participants described how she developed a motherly bond with her madam, to whom she referred as ‘Mummy’: “Mummy loved me a lot, and she never hit me, but she did not turn up to meet me here [at the rescue center]. This participant had developed a kind of affectionate relationship with her madam, loved her, and was not ready to file a police report or case against her. This created a problem for legal jurisprudence, as in the absence of a witness the police find it difficult to prosecute a brothel owner. Another participant repeated similar affections: “Poor ‘Didi’ was crying when I left. She used to look after me whenever I fell ill.” Yet another participant reported: “Didi was a big bastard but the owner was good.”

The workers also reported sometimes becoming emotionally attached to customers. The experience of sex work has a devastating impact on their psyche. Unable to move out of their captivity, they resign and accept it as a fait accompli. Customers, who are usually viewed as kinder than madams and owners, provide hope for a better life. The workers reported they sometimes developed emotional bonds and grow close to them. These customers sympathize with them; clients who are unhappy with their own lives, lack a social network, or come from distressed family backgrounds turn to these females for emotional support. This may lead to the development of emotional ties between the customer and the workers. Such love affairs are therapeutic for the females, offering them escape from their daily life and a fantasy to distract them. One of the participants told how she financially helped her client, who was hard pressed to pay his child’s fees: “One of my clients, Raju, was a good man. He loved me a lot. Once he was sad, and he came to me. He did not have money to pay his children’s fees. I knew the ‘Didi’ is a scoundrel and would not let him go without paying. Hence, I gave him some money from my savings.”

The emotional ties the females developed, whether with their capturers, their fellow sex workers, or their clients, all seemed to serve as a respite from the horrors of their daily lives in the brothels.

**Discussion**

The narratives gathered in this study present an interesting picture of the business enterprise of a brothel and habituation to a life of servitude for females held captive that is consistent with previous research. The brothels of G B Road are quite old and have developed into an extensive enterprise. The whole gamut of prostitution is a business venture involving various stakeholders. The sharing of income runs in a nexus of brothel keepers, procurers, pimps, local gangsters, police, etc. and forms an integral part of the sex business. The madams who run these brothels, and in many cases own them, are often former trafficked sex workers themselves (Adams, 2011; Mahat, 2011). This pattern of income sharing, particularly in the form of bribes to law enforcement, has been shown in other research. For instance, the Global Report on Women (as cited in Regmi, 2006) reported madams often notify the police of the arrival of a new female in her establishment and pay a bribe for their silence. A madam routinely pays money to the local police in line with the price she paid for the female; when the trafficked female is a child, the police take more money because punishment under the law is more severe in cases of prostitution of children (Regmi, 2006). Sadly, although it is prohibited by the Indian constitution, the entire venture runs under administrative and political patronage and, thus, it is
difficult for anti-trafficking activists to take action in eliminating this illicit business. As a result, the sex industry continues to thrive unabated.

This critical analysis of the brothels reveals they closely resemble the natural resource business model developed by Shelley (2003; 2010). According to this framework, females trafficked for sex work are treated like a commodity. This business model is focused on short-term profits with little concern for the maintenance of supply or the long-term durability of the business. The participants in this study reported brothel owners have little concern for the safety and well being of the workers. Widespread economic impoverishment creates an ideal situation for brothel owners, who, due to the destitute environment, have an endless supply of easily coerced women at their disposal (Sarkar, 2014).

The prices of trafficked females are determined by their age, beauty, and virginity, as has been previously articulated (Hoque, 2010; Sahni and Shankar, 2008). Previous research has shown that a younger female is a prized asset in terms of the purchase price and subsequently fetches higher payment for sexual acts. This phase, however, involving peak price per act, lasts only for a short time. As the victim becomes an established sex worker, the price decreases and stabilizes in a lower range. As the worker ages, her young age is no longer an asset in determining her price and is replaced by a higher level of creative solicitation approaches (Sahni and Shankar, 2008).

Participants in the study reported their purchase price was directly imposed as a debt upon them to be paid through sex work. This is consistent with multiple previous studies reporting debt bondage in brothels (Adams, 2011; Gupta et al., 2009; Sahni and Shankar, 2008). In other studies, females were forced to work for free for an extended period of time until they paid off their debt (Adams, 2011; Hennink and Simkhada, 2004; Schloenhardt and Loong, 2011). However, in the current study, receipt of payment did not always result in an ability to save substantially; women reported they were not directly paid, but their pay was kept on the books and all living expenses deducted, which is consistent with other research (Logan, Walker, and Hunt, 2009; Shah, Brar, and Rana, 2002). This financial dependency is a strong factor that keeps females in brothels (Joshi, 2002; Surtees, 2008). Once the debt was paid off, the workers were free to change their place of employment and keep their earnings (minus remittances). While receiving a salary does not ameliorate one’s status as a sex worker, it does influence the decision to remain in a trafficking situation.

Joshi (2002) asserts that perceptions of exploitation are subjective and contingent upon to what one can compare one’s situation. People may accept exploitation if they are sufficiently compensated and the alternative seems worse (Surtees, 2008), highlighting the significance of the inclusion of “abuse of a position of vulnerability” in the definition of trafficking. The females in this study were particularly vulnerable to the perception that other options were limited and non-existent, thereby perpetuating their perceived need to perform sex work.

The data reveal that traffickers capitalize on the workers’ vulnerability and isolation. The combined use of current threats, intimidation, violence, and manipulation to control females breaks their will, keeps them in captivity, and forces them to engage in sex acts. This is consistent with work done by Clawson et al. (2003). Flattery or manipulation are common in the initial stage of hazing a new worker, methods which may be particularly effective for young girls and women in a culture where females are often treated as second-class citizens. The new entrants are lured with lucrative offers, which poor and vulnerable females find hard to refuse. The poverty-stricken females bargain their body, personality, and well being in exchange for money with the hope of improving their socio-economic status. No sooner than the women succumb and conform to the norms of the brothels, the trust of the brothel madam is gained and violence is withdrawn. This could explain the contrasting statements made by some participants, whose testimonies reflected horrific physical and mental abuse and forced sex, and others who reported relative freedom (see Gozdziak et al., 2006; Gozdziak, 2008). Favoritism was another tool employed by brothel owners to instill servility amongst the participants interviewed, a popular tactic documented elsewhere (Shigekane, 2007). Differential treatment
and special rewards are offered to compliant females to facilitate the generation of a docile and loyal cohort.

Limitations
As with all studies, there are some limitations to be considered when assessing these findings. Social desirability might have influenced some participants’ responses. While the interviewer utilized many strategies to minimize this phenomenon, the topic is extremely sensitive and therefore participants were at particular risk for self-censorship. Additionally, retrospective studies often yield missing data due to lapse of memory of minor or seemingly insignificant events, which participants might have failed to report. This is especially relevant in this study, as it focused on the everyday lives of women. Further, repression of traumatic events may have affected recall. Finally, the findings are not generalizable beyond the participants interviewed. However, the objective of this study was not to gain generalizable results but to acquire detailed accounts of daily life in brothels for the participants selected.

Implications
The findings of this study are important in order to accurately view the lived experiences of those trafficked into sex work, rather than seeing them solely as helpless victims. It is clear from the data that the girls and women found ways to habituate to their surroundings, normalize them, and thus succeed in their new environment. This information is important for those working in the rescue and care of trafficked women, as sex workers who have habituated to brothel settings may find it difficult to untangle themselves from them.

Future research should include interviews with maliks or other relevant personnel to gain a well-rounded perspective; however, this task may be difficult to accomplish given the clandestine nature of the brothel business. Future research should also include documenting sex workers’ experiences within the brothel setting to refine knowledge in this area. This may be difficult to accomplish due to fear of arrest on the part of the workers. Additionally, research on the impact of habituation to brothel culture as it relates to the process of rehabilitation and reintegration is warranted. A different type of rehabilitation therapy or a different level of intensity may be necessary for survivors who have been in the trade long enough to normalize brothel culture.

It is important for practitioners to be knowledgeable of both macro and micro level contributors to global sex trafficking in order to be productive in their work with survivors. The social work profession, for instance, is committed to reducing poverty, empowering the vulnerable and eliminating oppression, thus it is important that social workers recognize global human trafficking as a violation of all of these principles. At the same time, addressing violations with individual survivors requires focused attention on the micro-level factors that play a role in rehabilitation beyond immediate physical needs, such as identification with traffickers, the severing of relationships built within brothels, and fear of the unknown in a life beyond sex work. The role of social workers at this micro level may include attending to the housing, food, legal, and public benefits of the survivors, and to their psychological needs, which may include post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, suicidal tendencies, or a host of other mental health issues. This study was an attempt to bring the micro level into clearer focus.

There is a great need to recognize the psychological complexities that result from coping with forced sex work. Such complexities are important for psychologists, social workers, health care providers, and law enforcement officials to keep in mind as they help survivors navigate the rehabilitation process. Females removed from sex trafficking situations are often comfortable with what they know, even if it includes sex work and violence, simply because it is familiar and they have adapted. The voice and lived experiences of such females such as that described in this study, even if it is one in which they identify with their traffickers or clients or value the relationships formed within the brothels, is an important one that cannot go unacknowledged. Appreciating the depth of acculturation and responding to such habituation is an important hurdle for service providers to consider when
working with sex trafficked females to overcome their traumas and work towards reintegrating back into general society.

References


