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## **Children's Participation in Decision Making Process in the Family Affairs of Female Commercial Sex Workers (FCSWs) and its Impact**

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**Abstract:** Children's participation in decision making process in the family is an important factor to strengthen their childhood rights. Would their families or some enacted laws protect their rights? This paper explored the dynamics of children's participation in the family of female commercial sex workers (FCSWs) and its impact in their adolescent/adulthood. For this purpose, 50 children of 8-16 years of age of Bowbazar red-light area of Kolkata, India were selected through simple random sampling. These children shared various aspects of their participation in their families and their status of childhood. In addition to this, parental views were collected. It revealed that children were enjoying liberty and freedom from infancy. Their family affairs as well as community environment also influenced their participation in the decision making process. There was also the hindrance of their abusive childhood. It was revealed that 18% of the girls got married at 14-16 years of age, and about 36% of the boys were involved in workforce at the age of 8-16 years within their community or outside. Hence, the enactment of laws for child rights might malfunction if family as well as community environment does not change significantly.

**Keywords:** Children, child rights, children's participation, domestic assistance, education, family of female commercial sex workers

## INTRODUCTION:

Historically, children are “objects of concern rather than persons with voice” in almost all societies (James & Prout 1997, 45-47). But children are social agents of their own rights and no longer regarded as passive recipients of adult socialization or helpless victims of their social surroundings (James & Prout 1997, 72-76). The family is the basic institution of learning for children from where they can make their first experiences concerning participation processes, basic principles of negotiation and domestic decision making. They can develop the skill of participation in family. They take their parents, brothers and sister as role models (Alderson & Morrow 2004, 79-81). The social frame in which the family is embedded has deep influence. From their developmental stage, children can participate in different ways and to different extents. Children's participation seems to be very much a matter of social construction which depends on the social values and norms the families share. These are not independent from common societal norms and social surroundings of a family (James & Prout 1997, 74).

We see that all forms of participation are a matter of communication which has different procedure. Participatory communication is often ritualized and structured in family events (i.e. common meals, integrity and discussion on different issues, etc.) among parents and children. So, different degrees of participation with children depend on social environments and different set of norms. The sum up of participation of children in decision making process is influenced by – (1) both parents, (2) education, social strata and living place, and (3) outside world (Alderson & Morrow 2004, 81).

Recent discussion of children and society is marked by a series of interlocking discourses which serve to problematic marginalized children. Rights are not just about state-citizen relations, but the imagery of social conversation and participation is central focal point (Roche 1999). Responsibility that children experience is both a privilege and a burden in childhood. There is an interwoven relation between participation rights and responsibilities for children because they are passive objects of adult decision making (Hasson 2013). The

ideas of the child as 'being' and 'becoming', 'equal to' and 'different' from adults are embedded. Children are accommodated as 'different equal' responsible beings (Bjerke 2011).

We know that participation is important for children because it gives them an opportunity to have a say about issues and decisions that affect them, learn new skills, have fun, and develop a closer connection to their community. Their participation ensures their needs and support (Hart 1997, 102; Lansdown 2001, 16; Cavet & Sloper 2004, 106).

Thus, the Convention on the Rights of the Child postulated different appropriate steps to transfer children's right to reality to revive their childhood as healthy one. The scope of participation would strengthen their competency and performance rather than dominance, pressure and exploitation (UNICEF 2014).

This paper explores the dynamics of participation of children in FCSWs' (female commercial sex workers) family. Sex trade is historically a stigmatized multilayered profession that existed in all stratified societies. The females of varied age groups engulf into the trade due to several reasons like poverty, gender discrimination, and patriarchal politics, etc. (Adhikari 2007). Among various forms of sex trade, brothel based female commercial sex workers set up their household and they celebrate their motherhood as cultural practice, in spite of stigma and obstruction towards rendering appropriate care and protection to their off-springs (Rich 1995, 69). They live in imperfect and matrifocal families. The fatherhood is insignificant and it might be considered as "costless" fatherhood (Adhikari 2007). The children grow up in an adverse milieu and their participation is restricted within their community. As such, their social rehabilitation might be facilitated after breaking their vicious cycle of stigma. Generally in FCSWs' families, value contribution to social life has been denied and children's life shapes according to the norms of their own stigmatized community. Their experience of participation, negotiation, and inclusion/exclusion constitutes differently and it is connected with adult/child power relationships according to the social positions. Rights and participation

of children are enough to keep them within their social and economical surroundings.

## **METHOD:**

This study was conducted to explore the following aspects of children's participation in FCSWs' family:

- Children's participation process within FCSWs' families;
- Parental and children's perception regarding dynamics and magnitude of participation;
- Assessment of children participation in their adolescent/adulthood.

Bowbazar (covering the famous Premchand Boral Street and Nabin Chand Boral Street) red-light area is a century old red-light area (out of eight red-light area of Kolkata, India). It is located at ward no. 48 of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation under the jurisdiction of Muchipara Police Station. About 2000 brothel based FCSWs operate sex trade and they have set up their families in the area. Of them, 90% have biological or adopted children and more than 70% of them have two or more children of different age groups.

In order to get into the processes of participation within families and its perception by children and FCSWs, a qualitative research design was framed. The study was based on a child-centered approach that regarded children as subjects rather than objects of research and as competent actors within their own life spheres. For the purpose of this study, different approaches were followed to involve children. Out of 350 children, 50 children within the age of 8 -16 years were selected purposively through random sampling. A semi-structured interview schedule which covered the following subjects was used:

- (i) Who was/were part of their family?
- (ii) What he/she liked most in his/her family?
- (iii) What he/she liked or disliked?
- (iv) How he/she spent time during the week?
- (v) Was there any obstacle they had to face for any activity or decision making?

Further, the children and their parent(s) were interviewed on the aspects of area of participation, parental role as perceived by the children, children opinion towards family norms, and functions and children's participation as perceived by parent, etc. All interviews were transcribed and data were analyzed at a single case level. First, open codes were created out of the data.

## **RESULT:**

### **Parental background of the children according to their age, sex and education standard:**

The family of the female commercial sex workers (FCSWs) is matrifocal and it is structurally and functionally imperfect. Fatherhood is also insignificant as an instrumental leader. FCSWs maintain dual-purpose of their family – i) financial support, and ii) other support as expressive leader in their household (Jamieson 1988). FCSWs are generally the decision makers of their family. It is not only their shelter, but also the place of earning. In their trade, there are three social rankings: firstly, FCSWs who were directly earning from the trade after selling their sex, secondly *malkins* (brothel owners) who provided the place for sex trade to other FCSWs, and the third category was the FCSWs who had withdrawn from the sex trade and did not involve in the trade directly or indirectly. They lived in this community or outside. In this study, these social rankings had been considered as parental background/ background of the mothers (FCSWs) of these children.



From table 1, we find that 60% of these informants' mothers belong to the first category of their social ranking. Among the respondents, 12% were literate, and 10% were attending class I-II standard. On the other hand, 16% (highest) of them attended class III-IV standard, 8% class V-VI standard and 10% class VII-VIII standard education. Only 4% of them (lowest) had above class IX standard education. Twenty two percent of them were the children of *malkins* (brothel owners) and all of them attended schools in different standard. Among them, only 2% female had above class-IX standard education. Six percent each of them were class III-IV and class VII-VIII respectively. The children whose mothers had been withdrawn from the trade were 18%. Out of which, 6% (including 2% female) had above class IX standard education.

### **Family/Household size of the informants:**

Earlier, the family/household pattern of FCSWs was discussed. Table 2 describes the family/household size. Generally, FCSWs' families were loaded with their offspring(s), male partner-*babu*/husband. Sometimes, their sibling(s)' (sister) and relatives lived with them. Many times, they lived without their male partners. Here, it was found that 44% of these children lived only with their mother and siblings. Their father or mothers' *babu* was absent. Majority of them (56%) had father/father figure/mothers' *babu*. In first case, 16% of them (including 6% female) had two members in their household. They had no sibling. Fourteen percent (14%) informants had 3-4 members in their household. They had siblings of both sexes. In these households, the number of females was 2% more than males. Of them, 14% children had more than 4 members in their household.

It had been seen that 22% of the informants who lived with their mother and father/mother's *babu* had 3 members and they had no sibling. Fourteen percent (14%) informants had 3-5 members. Twenty percent (20%) of them belonged to more than 5 members household.



Table 2: Family/Household size of the informants

Parental background	Size of family/household											Total n (%)	
	Only mother alongwith off spring					Both parents/ mother & babu (paramour), along with offspring							
						3-4 members		More than 4 members		3 members			3-5 members
	M n (%)	F n (%)	M n (%)	F n (%)	M n (%)	F n (%)	M n (%)	F n (%)	M n (%)	F n (%)	M n (%)		F n (%)
FWSs	2(4)	1(2)	2(4)	3(6)	1(2)	2(4)	3(6)	4(8)	2(4)	3(6)	4(8)	3(6)	30 (60)
FWSs as Malkins (brothel owners)	2(4)	1(2)	1(2)	1(2)	1(2)	1(2)	2(4)	2(4)	-	-	-	-	11 (22)
FWSs withdrawal from trade	1(2)	1(2)	-	-	1(2)	1(2)	-	-	1(2)	1(2)	2(4)	1(2)	9 (18)
Total n (%)	5(10)	3(6)	3(6)	4(8)	3(6)	4(8)	5(10)	6(12)	3(6)	4(8)	6(12)	4(8)	50 (100)

Source: Field Work

### **Care and support system in their daily life:**

The children are born with stigma of sex work profession because after entering into the sex workers' world, the females lose their social identities and get "clubbed" (categorized) as prostitute. The mothers used to keep in their trade upto 6-8 months of their pregnancy and it depended upon their economy. The baby generally gets delivered at local government hospitals. Thereafter, mothers usually returned to their trade when their baby was 6-8 weeks of age. Firstly, the baby was not allowed breast feeding after 2 months of their age because of mothers' physique and trade. From the age of two months, the baby did not get mothers' attachment. A baby enjoyed mothers' attachment at the time of feeding or at their recess. They were generally looked after by their elder siblings/*malkin*/co-workers (FCSWs) or a surrogate mother deputed by the FCSWs. They usually had to use the open place of their building for their shelter, especially when their mothers were with their clients.

When the children started their mobility, they were kept outside their mothers' room. Children played at open places of their building or at the staircase of their building or roof of their building. They developed their interaction with other members of their building. They played in the street or lane or local club of their community, and at the same time, they also enjoyed care and affection of their neighbours infrequently.

From early infancy, their demand for food, toys and other child friendly materials were met by their mothers, and they availed child-centric care and support. Their mothers used it as an advantage for the cause of their profession because the clients did not allow attachment of their children. If so, they felt anxious in relation to their poor earning.

This child-centric parenting style (Wolfe 1999, 73) supported the child participation in decision making process in their household. Children acted according to their own will. But when their mothers tried to control it, the children did not obey because of their earned habits from infancy. Here, it was also observed that children managed their own specific jobs like dressing and bathing without support and monitoring of their mothers or other household members.

The fathers' involvement in their household was absent or insignificant. Thus, authority of fatherhood was not realized for which the children suffered from the benefits of economic support, educational opportunities, the definition of social roles and affectional relationship. Consequently, the process of socialization was imperfect like a single parent or divorce family (Emery 1999, 39). It was revealed that 18% of the children enjoyed fathers' or father like figure's affection through receiving gifts or monetary rewards. Fathers or father figures did not care what the children of a working mother are entitled to get during mothers' absence. Monetary rewards to the children by mothers/father or father figure's or mother's clients influenced them to fulfill their own needs and demands.

Case: 1

Tumpa (13 years) was a girl child of Rupa who was a *malkin* for 2 years after passing 8 years as FCSW. She had a brother who was 4 years younger than her. She shared, "from my age of 3 or less I passed time with other children of our building. My mother was a *babu*. I called her '*baba*'. He gifted me play materials, goods and money when he used to visit us. I enjoyed with my other peers. There was no restriction from my mother. Whole day, I loitered here and there. I used to take food, bath and dress alone. Even, I did not realize when my mother slept at my side. Thereafter, I joined an education centre at our local club. My mother was very much happy and my performance was very good. Then, I was admitted in a local school. There, my participation and performance were also good. But when my class mates came to know of my residents, they laughed at me and isolated me. Anyway, my mother had not any pressure for education. When I asked for private tuition, she arranged it. There was no separate place for study. So, it was limited to tutorial classes. Gradually, I developed the relationship with a boy and romance started. One day, I left with my boy friend and passed a night at a hotel. It was shocking to my mother. She rescued me.

### **Their daily activities and role of others:**

According to the finding, it was revealed that daily activities performed by these children as per their age. Within the age bracket of 4 years, they only enjoyed different benefits from their mothers throughout the day, and they had not any particular schedule of work. Sometimes, they used to attend pre-primary education centre run by local non-governmental organizations at their community club at day time. They learned literary knowledge and numerical skills with the help of children games materials. But it was only for 2-3 hours per day except Sunday. Rest of the day excluding their sleeping time, they only loitered and played games. Sometimes, they enjoyed mothers' affection.

Within the age group of 4-8 years (beside the above activities), they learnt to perform some household tasks assigned by their mothers or neighbours. It included domestic assistance (cleaning the house and dishes, fetching water, marketing for their household and providing care to the younger siblings or neighbors as partner). At this stage, they also performed duties to assist their mothers' clients when they required any food and beverage or liquor or cigar. It was revealed that 78% of them attended non-formal education centre or remedial coaching centre in the morning, but only 25% were admitted into formal schools nearby their community. Their attendance was poor and infrequent. For their education, their mothers had no strict monitoring while they provided support to educational materials and school fees, etc.

At the age of 8-16 years, they performed household duties and assistance to their mothers in their trade. Girls and boys played different activities. The girls usually maintained all household duties and sometimes, they also performed the job of neo-malkin. Their movement was controlled by their mothers and they generally passed their time differently either at their open place or roof in their houses. Gradually, they loitered in the street and developed romantic relationship with local boys or visitors to their community. Thus, the study found that about 18% got married at the age of 14-16 years. There was no mothers' restriction because they felt their mothers were incorrect and involvement in the trade was unethical. Education or attendance in school was not mandatory to them. It was their self-choice act.

The boys usually performed household duties. They did not stay with their mothers. Generally, they took shelter at local clubs or loitered in the street. Sometimes, up to the age of 12, they played games at the playground within 1½ km of their community. But when they were insulted by the members of the larger society as children of sex workers, they confined themselves within their community. They learnt to consume alcohol or cigar. Development of romantic relationship with local girls including FCSWs of their community was significant. They used to demand monetary assistance from their mothers for their entertainment. The study found that about 36% of them searched for earning. 8% of them assisted in operating the business of unauthorized liquor or cigar or marijuana, etc within their community. Twenty eight percent (28%) of them was in search of jobs within or outside their community. The jobs were of courier agencies, catering services, broker of long distance buses from Kolkata to different districts of the state. Rest of them was in process to make themselves as local errand boys and they developed relationship with FCSWs as their *babu*. Gradually, they entered into the world of thugs or brothel owner.

#### Case 2:

Sukdev (16) was the elder male child of Sremati (34), FCWs. He shared, “From my age of 4 years, I am performing my domestic duties. As the eldest son, I had enjoyed my earlier life without any restriction. My mother was very much affectionate and she offered me money and materials to leave her alone. Even her clients were also fond of me. They rewarded me with money and toys. I never faced any lack in my childhood. But later within a few years, my two siblings were born and my mothers’ income was not sufficient to manage. So, she made a routine of job which I had to perform daily. Gradually, I was neglected and my mother was more attentive to my siblings. So, I faced the problem in my regular life. So, I started to assist others in my neighbourhood who gave me money and food. Thereafter, I took a part time job of selling alcohol and I used to take it frequently. On the other hand, my attachment with my mother was lost. I used to stay at local club. I developed romantic relationship with a FCSW and I am now dependent on her”.

## **DISCUSSION:**

### **Process of decision making in their household for daily affairs:**

The matrifocal household/family of female commercial sex workers was structurally and functionally imperfect. These families were considered as 'line bari' by FCSWs because they used to solicit the customer in queue in front of the gate of their houses or at the street (Adhikari 2007). Being working mothers, FCSWs could not meet the appropriate control and strategies for their children. Their care and attention were imperfect. But they were affectionate to their children. It satisfied their womanhood. It saved them from the stigma of barren. The role and relationship of male as instrumental leader in their family was insignificant or absent.

The above trade related circumstances led to practice child-centre parenting. From babyhood, the children were demanding, arrogant, inattentive, absentminded, and quarrelsome. They preferred to fulfill their needs according to their own choice. They usually rejected their parental (mothers') interference because they learnt that their involvement into the sex trade and their attachment with several males (clients) were unethical. It had been seen that initially the mothers took it as an advantage to keep away their children from their place. As a complement to their thin attachment, they offered materials/monetary rewards to them making an adverse impact as abusive parent(s).

Participation of children in decision making process in their family affairs did not meet enough strength at their adulthood because there was no concentrate planning and strategies for rearing up of these children in connection with their future outside their brothel environment. The process of socialization was just like as representation of their profession. They did not think about their children's fate. Later, it just links as children's fate like mothers' fate. According to the social, economical and political or educational norms of the state for child rights, they provided full freedom to the children. But later in life, it was seen as an obstacle to their career and future survival.

Here, we observed that some of the mothers (FCSWs) (32%) had not enough income to meet their daily needs. In these cases, the

children were the worst sufferers and they had to involve in some jobs as domestic assistance to other FSWs or *malkin*, assisting to operate unauthorized liquor shops/marijuana, etc. Their psychological status was turned to conduct different mal-practices desperately. Poor relationship pattern in their family proved a hindrance. Gradually they learnt to deny their mothers. Negligence and hatred developed towards their mothers.

### **Self management and exploitation to their mothers/guardian:**

The children of FCSWs' families are oriented to be self-dependent from their infancy in terms of self management. Their mothers' attachment and monitoring system were improper or imperfect because they failed to play the dual roles of instrumental and expressive leaders in their stigmatized and typical household set up. Apart from the FCSWs, there was no support system in the family. Only when the senior off-springs/ relatives were with them, they assisted FCSWs in domestic chores and child care. But it was not a full time work because they had to busy with their own pre-occupation or post-occupation. The children learnt to take food, dress and bath on their own from infancy. They had to enter into the culture of their community. Their mobility and willful act were according to their own choice and style. Due to limited space/shelter their mothers allowed or pushed them outside their room. For operating their trade, they allowed freedom to their children and it was the prime factor of their childhood exploitation. The socio-political and cultural milieu of their family and community environment influenced open participation of children in family's decision. Later, it emerged as a burden when the children kept them within their vicious cycle.

### **CONCLUSION:**

A child is a social product. He/she is not only the asset of family; he/she is the asset of the nation. He/she renews the generation, and the future of the nation would depend on him/her because for a progressive civilization he/she relays the race. So, the child should be protected from any sort of difficulty and violence within family or outside. His/her interest is best served by his/her family with the co-operation of state.

But parents are the prime actor for his/her up-bringing with appropriate control and strategies. It is also evident that the children are worst victims of social, economical and political hindrances. Their words are not considered in adult decision and their participation is restricted in almost all spheres of the family. To bring the change of the above status, the state should enforce laws to ensure their participation in decision making process. When the children's voice would not be ignored, their rights would be protected and it would facilitate a happy childhood.

It reminds us that parents are more responsible guides and the family environment imprints social values, norms, and code of conduct to make a positive citizen. Here, the laws enacted by the state are not properly functioned, in spite of pressure.

It was also observed that the family of FCSWs was matrifocal and it was typically constructed with imperfect structure and functions. The father or father figure was insignificant or absent. FCSWs performed their dual roles of earner and household keeper in a single place of living and sex trade. In their 'line bari', there was no assisting member for child care and domestic chores. Sometimes, their *malkin* or co-workers or elderly offspring use to extend their assistance.

FCSWs as head of the family were the only earning member for their household and it was managed through their involvement in the sex trade. Bearing of children in this milieu was a cultural practice of becoming mothers. But operating/entertaining clients in presence of children was a hazard to them. So, they provided liberty to their children from their infancy. Their mothers push them outside their room with material/monetary rewards to their children for their safety and non-disturbance during trade. We find that these children had not any specific task from their babyhood. It pushed them to streets or lanes to loiter with others of their neighbours. Thus, they had to assist their mothers in domestic chores from early childhood. For educational development of these children, there was no sufficient support. That's why, it was revealed that 22% of them possessed class VII standard and more education and 12% of them had not formal education. They were lettered due to their attendance at non-formal schools at their locality.



In the absence of monitoring and authority of their parents(s), they learnt to take decision according to their need and demand. Consequently, it was found that 18% girls were married below 16 years of age. At their age of 16 years or less, the boys (36%) used to search for job and among them, 8% got involved in operating unauthorized liquor shops, etc. They used to orient to be *babu* of FCSWs.

### **Implications for Intervention:**

This study concludes that laws for child rights and its enforcement did not protect the children in FCSWs' families because of their social, cultural and economical milieu. So, the laws for child rights and child participation in decision making process do not alone bring happiness, safety and security in childhood. The parental attitude and family environment should act as correctional home. Otherwise, different childhood would be locked differently. Deprived and neglected childhood like the children of FCSWs would only be prepared to represent their own community.

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