

Observational Study

Psychological Trauma and Associated Schemas of Sexual Assault among Female Sex Workers

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ABSTRACT

Psychological trauma is a negative human experience to an event caused by a highly stressful situation. Female sex workers are vulnerable group of people who are found to be at increased risk of being assaulted and associated psychological trauma by opposite sex people irrespective of their workplaces. However despite being a high risk population, their concerns generally remain unidentified in most of the research areas. The objective of the present study was to observe and measure the severity of sexual assault or violence and associated pre and post-traumatic schemas among female sex workers of Vadodara district of Gujarat state. A total of 30 female sex workers were selected for the study and the data was collected by direct in person interactions with these workers for the study. The data of this study is both qualitative and quantitative in nature. The severity of assault was measured by the use of Sexual Assault Severity Scale (SASS) through which assesses different criteria for sexual assault. The study findings revealed the severe level of sexual assault or violence on these workers and experienced traumatic distress leading to social isolation from the general public.

KEYWORDS: Trauma, Sexual assault, Female sex workers, High risk population, Violence

INTRODUCTION

Psychological or emotional trauma is the result of highly stressful events involving a severe threat to one's life and safety concerns. It is thought to disrupt our equilibrium system leading to a grave concern to our sense of security

resulting in feeling disconnected helplessness and other emotional problems. It can cause severe emotional damage to the person leaving him or her to suffer with memory flashbacks and social isolation. With respect to female sexual workers, they often face physical violence in their workplaces and hence are more vulnerable to have

emotional trauma. From evolutionary perspective, sexuality is widely accepted as fundamental and significant aspect of human life that typically includes features of sexuality and sexual behaviour^{1,2}. As a strong human drive it can be expressed to show love, to achieve pleasure and finally to fulfill the ultimate evolutionary goal of reproduction³. One of the fundamental motivations for human activity is the desire to have sex. The word "sex" is commonly used in everyday language and in a variety of contexts which is most frequently used to describe physical activity and biological sex⁴. The term "sexuality" in its broadest sense is frequently used to refer sexual behaviour, desire, identities, and gender differences^{5,6}. Although sex is a natural process, various ideals and behavioral norms regarding acceptable sexual behavior have been formed by various religions, cultures, philosophies, and legal systems — systems concerned with influencing human behavior. Hence, all aspects of sexuality and sexual practice in any particular culture are mostly influenced by the cultural norms regarding sexual contact, patterns of behavior that regulate sexual behavior in society. Thus, sexuality is a multifaceted, complex phenomenon which covers the numerous ways that people exhibit their sexuality as well as their various sexual likes and dislikes⁷. All of them have an impact on how we explore or express our sexuality and how we view others and ourselves as sexual beings^{8,9}. However, premarital sex, having several partners, and unprotected sex are just a few examples of unhealthy sexual conduct. Furthermore, such risky sexual activities can lead to unfavorable health consequences like HIV/AIDS, unintended pregnancies, and unsafe abortions¹⁰. According to fragments of data, adolescents who have experienced maltreatment from others and show antisocial tendencies are more likely to engage in unsafe sexual practises¹¹.

With respect to violence in sex, sexual assault can be defined as any physically harmful or unwanted sexual activity which is attempted through violence or coercion and committed against a person's consent. The incidents of sexual assault are generally noticed in female sex workers, especially the so-called high-class call girls, are generally found to encounter such acts of violence and discrimination^{12,13}. Female sex worker can be defined as an adult woman who performs consensual sex as her primary source of income¹⁴. However, various studies reveal that sex workers regularly suffer from physical violence and rape at the hands of their clients¹⁵. Hence, in order to gain in-depth knowledge about the sexual assault among female sex workers the present study aimed at studying the Sexual assault among female sex workers in Gujarat state.

METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of the study, 42 female sex workers were approached, of which 30 provided consent for the study. The sample size thus was 30 female participants. The data was collected using Sexual Assault Severity Scale (SASS) from Vadodara and Bodeli areas of Gujarat state. Qualitative and Quantitative both research methods were used in this study.

The research used the survey method via offline mode only. The SASS scale was used to assess the severity of sexual assault among female sex workers. Data was collected in an offline mode by direct interaction with sex workers at their work places and at different areas. Data was collected individually.

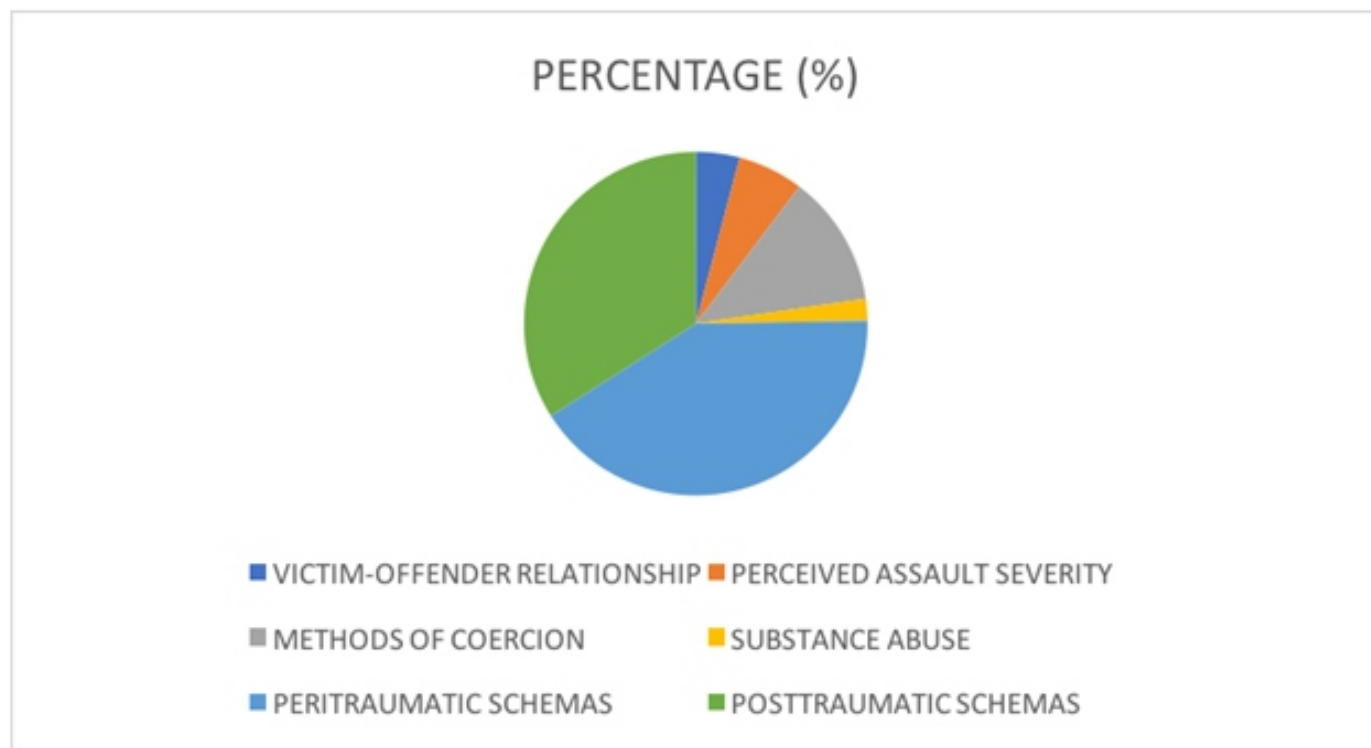
RESULTS

The aim of this study is to measure the severity of sexual assault and associated traumatic schemas among female sex workers and for those different categories of various subtopics had been measured. All quantitative data were in the form of total and percentage in the given table. The Pie-Chart represents the severity of sexual assault among female sex workers through Victim-offender relationship, Perceived assault severity, Method of coercion, Substance abuse, Peri-traumatic schemas and Posttraumatic schemas. The overall result reveals that quantitative data includes victim offender relationship with a mean SCORE 9.8 and Standard deviation 19.06 which makes the total of 4%. Perceived assault severity with a mean value 14.83 and Standard deviation 5.88 making the total of 6%. Method of coercion with a mean value 29.77 and Standard deviation 23.13 which makes the total of 12%. Substance abuse with a mean value 5.8 and Standard deviation 5.90 which makes the total of 2%. Peritraumatic schemas with a mean value 96.87 and Standard deviation 18.27 which makes the total of 40% and posttraumatic schemas with a mean value 80.47 and standard deviation 24.84 which makes the total of 33% whereas the qualitative data described sexual assault characteristics like between the age range of 18-25 years experienced more sexual assault. The qualitative analysis of the data reveals that large number of Female sex workers experienced sexual assault with one person only and other experienced more than two individuals. Sexual experiences mostly occurred in deserted areas and at someone's house or place. In Victim-offender relationship, sexual assault was mostly performed by strangers or by close friends and most of the time no one was present during the sexual assault. In the Methods of Coercion, some ways to pursue sexual act where the female sex workers were tried to convince and if they denied then they were threatened to do the sexual assault. If sex workers still denied performing the sexual act then they were held down or restrained because of which they suffered through soreness. In substance abuse, mostly sex workers were not drunk and were not using any illicit substances during sexual act but a person who wants to perform sexual act was mostly drunken and some of them consumed drugs (marijuana). The common observation was that, they trust others easily because they thought that they were weak and now they are like they will not be the same person ever again.

Table: Statistics on the severity of sexual assault among female sex workers through various means

GROUP	PERCENTAGE (%)	MEAN (M)	STANDARD DEVIATION (SD)
VICTIM-OFFENDER RELATIONSHIP	4%	9.8	19.06
PERCEIVED ASSAULT SEVERITY	6%	14.83	5.88
METHODS OF COERCION	12%	29.77	23.13
SUBSTANCE ABUSE	2%	5.8	5.90
PERITRAUMATIC SCHEMAS	40%	96.87	18.27
POSTTRAUMATIC SCHEMAS	33%	80.47	24.82

Pie Chart: Percentage of the severity of sexual assault among female sex workers through various means



CONCLUSION

The issue of violence against female sex workers and subsequent psychological or emotional trauma has periodically emerged as a pervasive major social and public-health concerns worldwide^{16,17}. However, the problem has not attained much attention in assessing the severity of this assault in existing literature. Sexual violence as a traumatic event can generate the emotional distress and related traumatic schemas. A traumatic schema refers to the set of beliefs and emotions resulting in patterns of maladaptive behavior that is developed after a traumatic event. The present study reveals the presence and severity of sexual assault or violence, psychological trauma and associated pre and post-traumatic schemas among female sex workers residing in Vadodara and Bodeli areas of Gujarat state. The participants of the study experienced severe level of sexual violence, forced sex and social isolation from the general public. The qualitative analysis of the data highlights that female sex workers experienced severe levels of sexual assaults and psychological trauma through various means viz. victim-offender relationship, perceived assault severity, method of coercion, Substance abuse, peri-traumatic schemas and posttraumatic schemas by one or more perpetrators. The study findings reveal that most of the female sex workers in peri-traumatic schemas which are known as emotional distresses experienced during and/or after an assault were more associated with the development posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). However, in posttraumatic schemas almost similar number of other sex workers became habituated with that. In conclusion, the exploration of trauma schemas can be made accessible to the provision of any kind to mental health services. The study strongly suggests and upholds the basic human rights of these workers and proper knowledge about the work should be given to the female sex workers. Furthermore, government policies, protection laws and awareness programs for their basic rights should be implemented properly at various levels for the upliftment of female sex workers.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST: None

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