

The Psychological Cost of Survival in Sex Work: An Indian Review

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Abstract- Sex work is often discussed in terms of legality, morality, and public health, but its psychological dimension remains less explored, especially in a human-centered manner. This review article aims to examine the psychological experiences of individuals involved in sex work, with a specific focus on mental health challenges, emotional stress, trauma, stigma, and survival-oriented coping mechanisms.

Using existing national and international literature, the review synthesizes findings related to depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, social exclusion, and identity conflict among sex workers. At the same time, it highlights adaptive strategies such as emotional regulation, resilience, and psychological endurance that enable individuals to navigate daily survival under difficult conditions. The review also identifies significant gaps in the literature, including limited qualitative research, lack of culturally sensitive studies, and minimal attention to lived experiences within the Indian context.

The findings suggest that sex work should be understood not merely as a risk factor for psychological distress, but as a complex lived reality shaped by social, economic, and emotional forces. This review emphasizes the need for future research to adopt empathetic, humanized, and inclusive psychological approaches. Such perspectives can contribute to improved mental health interventions, informed policy frameworks, and a more compassionate societal understanding of individuals engaged in sex work.

Keywords: Sex work, Mental health, Psychological Stress, Stigma, Survival, Resilience

I. INTRODUCTION

Sex work in India exists within a complex social, economic and psychological context. While public discussion often focuses on morality, legality or social order the inner psychological experiences of individuals involved in sex work remain largely overlooked. For many, sex work is not merely an

occupation but a means of survival shaped by poverty, limited opportunities, gender inequality and social marginalization. Living under such conditions places a continuous psychological demand on individuals, identity and overall mental well-being.

Survival in sex work involves more than meeting daily economic needs. It requires constant emotional regulation, coping with stigma, managing fear and uncertainty and negotiating personal boundaries in challenging environment. Overtime these experiences may result in psychological strain, including stress, anxiety, depressive symptoms, trauma-related responses and emotional exhaustion. However, alongside vulnerability many individuals also develop adaptive coping strategies and psychological resilience to navigate their realities. Existing literature in India has primarily examined sex work from legal, public health or social reform perspectives. Although these approaches are important, they often fail to capture the psychological cost of survival the silent mental and emotional burden carried by individuals engaged in sex work. Understanding this psychological dimension is essential not only for academic knowledge but also for designing empathetic mental health interventions, policy responses and support systems that respect human dignity. Therefore, the present review aims to synthesize existing Indian and international research to explore the psychological experiences associated with particular attention to emotional burden, mental health challenges, coping mechanisms and the influence of social context. By adopting a humanized and psychological lens this review seeks to move beyond stereotype and offer a balanced respectful and evidence-based understanding of sex work in the India context.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Marboh and Ali (2017) conducted a study titled “psychiatric morbidity” among female commercial sex workers” to assess mental health problems among women engaged in sex work. The study included a sample of 100 female commercial sex workers from Shillong, India. Standardized psychiatric interviews were used to assess mental disorders. The findings revealed a high prevalence of psychiatric conditions, including depression, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorders and substance use disorders. The authors concluded that female sex workers experience significantly elevated psychiatric morbidity, highlighting the urgent need for accessible mental health.

Bhattacharya, Chandrasekaran, Ratnabali and Ashok (2025) examined psychological distress and substance use in their study titled “probing the dual burden: assessing psychological distress and substance use among female sex workers in sonagachi, Kolkata, west Bengal, India. The study was conducted on a sample of 149 female sex workers. Psychological distress was assessed using standardized screening tools for depression and anxiety along with substance use measures. Results indicated that more than half of the participant experienced clinically significant psychological distress with substance use acting both as a coping strategy and a risk factor. The authors concluded that psychological distress among sex workers is influenced by socio-economic vulnerability, work conditions and limited mental health support.

A large scale of study conducted as part of the behavioural tracking survey (2010- 2011) explored mental depression among female sex workers in southern India. The study included a sample of approximately 1, 986 female sex workers from Andhra Pradesh. Depression was assessed using brief screening tools. The finding showed that nearly two-fifths of the participants reported symptoms consistent with major depression. Factors such as exposure to violence, alcohol use, police harassment and inconsistent condom use were strongly associated with depressive symptoms. The study concluded that structural and environment stressors significantly contribute to poor mental health outcomes among sex workers.

A quantitative study titled “sex work related stigma: experiential, symbolic and structural forms in the health systems of Delhi, India” (2019) examined how stigma affects lived experiences of sex workers within healthcare setting. Using ethnographic methods and interviews with sex workers, healthcare providers and non-governmental organizations the study highlighted multiple layers of stigma. Findings revealed that stigma leads to fear, shame and avoidance of healthcare services, further worsening psychological distress. The authors concluded that structural stigma within health systems acts as a major barrier to mental well being and access to care for sex workers.

A study conducted in goa titled “suicidal behaviour among female sex workers in goa India: the silent epidemic” examined mental health risks among sex workers. The study included a sample of 326 female sex worker recruited through respondent driven sampling. Finding indicated a high prevalence of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts, which were strongly associated with violence, coercion and unstable working conditions. The authors concluded that sex workers face severe psychological vulnerability with suicide risk emerging as a critical mental health concern requiring immediate intervention.

Collectively these studies demonstrate that survival in sex work is associated with substantial psychological costs including depression, trauma substance use stigma related distress and suicidal behaviour. The literature clearly indicates that mental health challenges among sex workers are shaped not only by individual factors but also by broader social, economic and structural conditions.

III. PSYCHOLOGICAL COST OF SURVIVAL

Survival in sex work is not limited to meeting daily financial needs; it involves a continuous psychological effort to cope with uncertainly fear and social exclusion. The reviewed literature consistently indicates that individuals engaged in sex work experience survival as a long- term mental process rather than a temporary condition. This sustained effort places a significant psychological burden on emotional well- being.

IV. CHRONIC STRESS AND EMOTIONAL BURDEN

One of the most common psychological experiences reported across studies is chronic stress. Economic insecurity, fear of violence, police harassment and unstable living conditions create a constant state of alertness. Over time, this persistent stress leads to emotions in order to continue functioning which gradually reduces psychological strain.

V. TRAUMA AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS

Exposure to physical violence, coercion and emotional abuse has been identified as a major contributor to psychological distress among sex workers. Repeated exposure to such experience often results in trauma related symptoms such as fear, hypervigilance sleep disturbance and emotional numbness. The literature suggests that trauma in sex work is not always a single event but a repeated experience making recovery psychologically challenging.

VI. SOCIAL, SHAME AND IDENTITY CONFLICT

Social stigma plays a central role in shaping psychological experiences in sex work, being labelled and judged by society often leads to internalized shame and identity conflict. Many individuals struggle to reconcile their personal identity with the social identity imposed on them. This internal conflict negatively affects self-esteem and contributes to feeling of isolation, withdrawal and emotional distress.

VII. EMOTIONAL REGULATION AS A SURVIVAL STRATEGY

To manage psychological stress many individuals, develop emotional regulation strategies such as emotional distancing, suppression of feeling and cognitive reframing. While these strategies help in short-term survival the literature indicates that long term emotional suppression can result in emotional disconnection and reduced psychological well-being. Thus, emotional regulation becomes both a coping mechanism and a psychological cost of survival.

Overall, the reviewed studies suggest that survival in sex work involves significant psychological costs including chronic stress, trauma, stigma-related distress and emotional exhaustion. These experiences highlight the need to understand sex work not only as a social or economic issues but also as a mental health and emotional resilience.

VIII. GAPS IN EXISTING LITERATURE

Although existing research has provided valuable insights into the mental health experiences of individuals in sex work, several important gaps remain in the literature. Most studies have primarily focused on identifying psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, trauma, and substance use. While these findings are important, they often present sex workers mainly through a problem-oriented lens, giving limited attention to their lived experiences and emotional realities.

One major gap is the lack of in-depth exploration of the everyday psychological process of survival. Many studies report mental health outcomes but do not sufficiently explain how individuals mentally manage fear, uncertainty, stigma, and emotional strain on a daily basis. The psychological meaning of survival, as experienced by sex workers themselves, remains underexplored.

Another significant limitation is the over-reliance on cross-sectional and quantitative studies. While such studies help identify prevalence rates, they often fail to capture the emotional depth, personal narratives, and subjective experiences of individuals in sex work. There is a need for more qualitative and longitudinal research that allows individuals to express their psychological journeys over time.

The literature also shows limited focus on positive psychological processes, such as resilience, meaning-making, and emotional strength. Although some studies acknowledge coping mechanisms, these aspects are often treated as secondary findings rather than central psychological experiences. This imbalance restricts a holistic understanding of mental health in sex work.

In the Indian context, research remains geographically concentrated in a few urban areas, leaving the experiences of individuals in smaller cities and rural settings largely unexamined. Cultural factors, family dynamics, and regional variations that may influence

psychological well-being are not adequately addressed.

Overall, these gaps indicate the need for a more integrated, human-centered, and psychologically nuanced approach to studying sex work. Future research should move beyond symptom identification and focus on understanding survival as a complex psychological process shaped by personal, social, and structural factors.

IX. CONCLUSION

This review article highlights that sex work is not only a social or economic issue but also a deeply psychological experience. Existing studies clearly show that individuals involved in sex work face multiple mental health challenges, including depression, anxiety, trauma, and social isolation. These psychological difficulties are often intensified by stigma, discrimination, and lack of emotional support from society.

At the same time, the review also brings attention to an important but less discussed aspect: the strength and survival mindset of individuals in sex work. Despite continuous emotional stress, many develop coping strategies, resilience, and emotional adaptability to manage their daily lives. However, current literature gives limited space to these positive psychological processes, resulting in an incomplete understanding of their mental health.

This review emphasizes the need for future research to adopt a more human-centered and empathetic psychological approach. Rather than viewing sex workers only through a problem-focused lens, research should also explore their lived experiences, emotional meanings, and personal narratives. Qualitative and culturally sensitive studies, especially in the Indian context, can provide deeper insight into how individuals psychologically navigate survival, identity, and well-being.

In conclusion, understanding sex work from a psychological perspective requires balance: recognizing both vulnerability and resilience. Such an approach can contribute to better mental health interventions, informed policy decisions, and a more compassionate societal attitude toward individuals in sex work.

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