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The material and the moral: contradictory imperatives and the production of trafficking narratives in South India

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ABSTRACT

Transnational anti-trafficking networks seek to 'rescue' cisgender women who sell sex in India. This article puzzles out why cis female sex workers might narrate themselves as victims of trafficking in need of rescue despite making comfortable livings as independent sex workers who control their own labour. I draw data from my own ethnographic observations, interviews with 130 Telugu-speaking sex workers, as well as publicly circulating media clips, all from fieldwork conducted in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana between 2009 and 2018. The victim narratives analysed here were told by sex workers familiar with arguments in favour of decriminalising and destigmatising sex work. My research suggests that many women who sell sex value the material goals of the sex workers' rights movement while nevertheless longing for the immaterial moral security touted by anti-traffickers. I argue that publicly performing trafficking narratives allows women who sell sex to disavow moral agency in participating in what they often refer to as *tappudu pani* (bad work) while nevertheless accessing the material benefits of sex work. Participating in what Lindquist has called the aesthetic of trafficking, therefore, enables them to plead for sympathy from not only faceless donors but their own moral communities.

KEYWORDS

Sex work; trafficking narratives; moral personhood

Why was Menaka¹ crying? In October of 2012, Menaka stood in a glistening sari on a dais on the outskirts of Hyderabad, South India holding a microphone and tearfully explaining in Telugu to an audience of some 500 people that she had been forced into prostitution 6 years prior. She and several others had been selected to share their stories that day at an event for a sex workers' community-based organisation (CBO). On the dais and in the crowd sat officials from government agencies and multinational non-governmental organisations (NGOs) paid to prevent the spread of HIV. But the bulk of people listening to Menaka's story that day were other sex workers of various genders similarly attired in their bejewelled best. Many in the audience had heard Menaka's tell her story before – for large live events, TV talk show hosts, investigative journalists, bloggers, and a revolving door of researchers like me, both Indian and foreign. Menaka told me proudly that a filmmaker once made a short documentary about her life. In all of these retellings, both in person and in media, Menaka cried as she explained that her husband abruptly abandoned her shortly after she had given birth to their son. In a cascade of related misfortunes, she was finally forced into the sex trade by a preying *aunty* (an older woman who ran a sex business from her home).

Watching from the midst of the crowded audience, what struck me most about Menaka's tears was their contrast to her material life as a sex worker. At the time, I had come to think of Menaka as the quintessential *enjoy life ka alawaatu* sex worker (those who revel in their work) (Walters

2016a). She was pretty, always laughing, and seemingly everyone's friend in the CBO and NGO spaces in which we first met. She enjoyed describing encounters with clients in detail without blushing. She said she helped impotent old men as well as husbands whose wives 'neglected' them to regain pleasure. She described sex work as more than a form of physical servicing like massage; she characterised it with relish as a feast of different curries for people who are otherwise daily forced to eat plain *papannam* (lentils and rice). On one occasion, Menaka walked through the door of an empty middle-class flat where we arranged to meet and immediately began attempting to convince my research assistant (whose flat it was) to allow her to invite some 'friends' to 'party' there that night. The location was relatively remote and the building was largely unoccupied as yet. 'It makes the perfect spot for a party!' Menaka grinned at us as she made her pitch, trying to infect us with her enthusiasm for this lucky happenstance. In my experience, Menaka had grown so comfortable with sex work in the intervening years since her husband had abandoned her that she pursued business opportunities wherever she ventured.

By the time of her tearful self-narration on the dais in 2012, she had been able to rent a small, neat flat for herself and her young son in Hyderabad's bubbling northwest neighbourhoods. She paid significant fees for her son to attend a private school. She had even begun the slow process of reintegrating herself into her natal village, buying back her relatives' goodwill through gifts of clothing and cash. The material life Menaka availed through selling sex and staffing NGO-sponsored HIV interventions afforded her a consequent social standing that she could not have attained had she remained chastely in her in-laws' home – not least because they refused to feed her without a husband. Only a year before her tearful performance on the dais, a Supreme Court bench in Delhi ruled that prostitution violated women's human rights – specifically, the right to dignity (Mahapatra 2011).² Yet, Menaka had managed to regain much of her material and even social dignity precisely through paid sex. Whence, then, Menaka's tears?

I conducted ethnographic research among Telugu-speaking sex workers and victims of human trafficking in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh in 2009–2010, 2011–2013, and the monsoons of 2016 and 2018. I have participated and observed at a variety of sex worker CBOs and anti-trafficking NGOs as well as conducting semi-formal interviews and focus groups with over 130 sex workers and 50 staff members associated with inter-related organisations.

In Walters (2016a), I argued that participation in sex work contributed to profound transformations in the bodies and habits of cisgender female Telugu sex workers. In the present article, I seek to complicate that insight. Despite encountering messaging that 'sex work is work' and understanding the promise of solidarity in the sex worker identity, many cisgender Telugu women who accumulated money and social standing by selling sex never fully shed their identification with and investment in conservative models of Telugu *sanskaram* (morality) and *paruvulu* (dignity). That is, they often maintained the position that sex work is morally wrong (even going so far as to argue that it should not be decriminalised) despite being able to list the material benefits that it had afforded them personally. I suggest that the dissonance between the contradictory imperatives that 'sex work is wrong' and 'I cannot survive without sex work' created a profound dilemma for many Telugu sex workers during my fieldwork. This dilemma became the site of self-narrations highlighting coercion and distress in order to disavow moral agency while nevertheless availing the material possibilities and pleasures that sex work could entail.³ It set the stage for tearful self-narrations like Menaka's, which acted as pleas for sympathy and acceptance from the communities from which morally alienated.

Sex work in the shadow of Sita: gendered and caste-inflected morality

As Shakthi Nataraj (2022) notes, anthropologists trace the origins of heteropatriarchy to marriage. The ritual act of men exchanging a woman between themselves structures the concomitant nature of all subsequent socio-economic reciprocity. As a form of reproductive property, virginal brides become the gift-of-all-gifts between men. In the context of South Asia, men's endogamous exchange of brides (*kanyadhanam* in Telugu) generates what Uma Chakravarti has dubbed

brahmanical patriarchy. It is a system, she writes, of 'effective sexual control over women to maintain not only patrilineal succession but also caste purity' (Chakravarti 1993, 579). Policing women's sexuality is thus the point of origin for maintaining the caste boundaries that further generate other forms of profound oppression. The centrality of female sexual purity to caste is dramatised most spectacularly by Lakshmana's encompassment of Sita within his magical *rekha* and the chaos that ensues when she makes the choice to transgress her domestic encirclement (Walters 2022). Ultimately, there is no place for the 'transgressive' Sita in Ram Rajya (Arni and Chitrakar 2011).

Many scholars have highlighted caste-based identities tied to forms of sexual labour (e.g., Agarwal 2008; Arondekar 2023; Geetha 2021; Rao 2009). In an analysis of the Maratha empire, Sharmila Rege notes that much of Peshwa revenues relied on the sale of lower caste women who were initially enslaved as a punishment for adultery (1995, 27–28). Out of this system, she indicates, *lavani* dance 'became one of the modes of constructing the bodies of lower caste women as constantly either arousing or satiating male desire' (1995, 24–25). Anagha Tambe ties contemporary prostitution to older forms of caste-based sexual labour, writing: 'There is no longer any doubt that devadasis form a major source of recruitment in prostitution in southern India ... both in urban brothels and in rural areas as "religious prostitutes"' (2009, 85). Dalit feminist, Sunaina Arya (2020), articulates a single 'Dalit feminist standpoint on sex work,' going so far as to decry the sex workers' rights movement in India as a liberal emanation of 'mainstream *savarna* feminists' who, she suggests, ignore the history of caste-based sexual exploitation. Even Ambedkar declined to make space for sex workers in his movement to abolish caste (Rao 2009, 66).

Among my many Hyderabad interlocutors, upper caste and Dalit sex workers were over-represented vis-à-vis their numbers in the general population, while fewer sex workers that I encountered hailed from mid-tier castes (see Walters 2016b for more detail).⁴ Regardless of their diverse caste identities, I suggest that the centrality of wifely chastity to the broader system of South Asian gendered morality (the Sita effect) generated an axis on which turned my interlocutors' ambivalence about their own livelihoods. Despite many of them providing well for their children and managing to raise themselves '*ee sthayi ki*' (to a certain level in life), as they often put it, their mode of earning denied them an identification with the encompassed, ever-devoted *pathivratha* feminine ideal and thereby the sense that they were 'good women.' This gap left most of them in perpetual fear of discovery. The widespread Indian idealisation of feminine domesticity, dependence, and devotion to husbands precariously perched Telugu women who could not or did not wish to fulfil the expectations of this normative role situated them outside the safety of moral legibility. As in the story of Sita, it placed blame on the women for crossing (or being shunted across) the Lakshmana Rekha.

'Telugu jathi sanskaram': sexuality as the basis of nation and ethnicity

A minority of my Hyderabad sex worker interlocutors fully embraced the loud-and-proud sex worker identity that their CBOs actively encouraged through repeated training sessions (see Jayasree 2004; Kotiswaran 2011; Lakkimsetti 2020; Vijayakumar, Chacko, and Panchanadeswaran 2015). The majority sidestepped CBO messaging that urged them to help destigmatise sex work by 'coming out' to the public. While most women pointed to economic necessity and greater control of their own labour as impetuses for entering sex work, by 2013 few of them championed the slogan that 'sex work is work.'

In contrast to the justice on offer via the logic of sex worker empowerment, in 2013 a Telugu television talk show host framed of the 'problem of prostitution' in scriptural terms. He began his commentary by quoting the ancient brahmanical lawgiver, Manu:

'Yatra naryanthu pujiyathe – ramanthe thatra devata.' This means, celestial beings reside in the places where women are respected and worshiped. At every step from Kashmir to Kanyakumari, our country has a temple for worshipping goddesses. But in the same country, every second a woman's body is becoming a commodity. To fill her stomach, to feed her dependents, she is becoming a fruit in the hand of others. She is burning herself

up with these injuries. She is turning her life into a graveyard. She is questioning our duplicitous justice and values (*naithika pramanalanu*) ... 'Do you have the *sanskaram* [culture/breeding/civility] to let us live as *manu-shulu* [humans]?' they ask.

Here the host directly rejected the 'immoral' commodification of women's bodies⁵ – and the capitalist grounds of commerce from which he imagined the morality of sex work *qua* work to emanate. Instead, he alluded to a *savarna* nationalist project meant to distinguish India from the West on moral grounds. This distinction rests on the encompassed moral purity and therein superiority of Indian wives and daughters (P. Chatterjee 1989; R. Chatterjee 1993; Dell 2005). Telugu women's entrance into sex work, by this estimation, is not a personal indignity as measured by human rights, but rather an indignity vis-à-vis a *savarna* vision of *sanskaram* that produces the nation's standing within a broader field of moral geopolitics (Walters 2020).

In 2011, an anti-trafficking NGO staff member expressed to me his disgust with the politics of sex worker empowerment funded for a decade by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. He framed the movement for sex worker rights as a corrupting foreign influence on Indian values, saying 'Western activists forced us to say that sex work is fine. But this is not Indian! It is against Indian values.' Similarly, the talk show host quoted above said in an aside to his viewers after interviewing one sex worker, '*Amma Bharatha Desamu* (Mother India), we bow our heads in shame [*siggu*].' Couching the sale of sex as a matter of *national* shame, as being contrary to specifically 'Indian values,' and as constituting a lapse of the essence of Indian *sanskaram* changes the moral lens through which the sale of sex can be experienced by Telugu women. Seen through this lens, feminine dignity for Indian women can never be located in the commerce of 'sex work.' Here, the politics of justice thought to inhere in 'sex worker rights' is not a desirable justice, as the talk show host points out when he mentions 'duplicitous justice' above. Rather, by this nationalist logic, justice can only be achieved by returning female sex workers to their role of *amma* (mother but also goddess) – worshipped within the home or within the temple, but always enclosed within the necessarily private space of the sacred.

In a 2014 special for a Telugu news channel, Suddala Asok Teja, a film song lyricist, sang the following as a preface to his interview with a group of 10 Hyderabad sex workers:

Who are these people? Who are these people? They are our family girls who share the blood of our *jathi* [here: social group]. They are our family girls who share our blood. We have slipped and dropped the *paruvulu* [dignity/honor/prestige] of our *jathi*. Telugu *jathi paruvulu*. Indian *jathi paruvulu*. Even so, these are Telugu *jathi* family girls. Our family girls.

Sex work, Suddala's song suggested, damages the standing and reputation of Telugu and Indian people as a whole. As he sang, the camera panned the faces of the sex workers, each one wrapped in a headscarf concealing everything but eyes and wisps of hair. Several of them wiped away tears as Suddala addressed his music to the camera, calling them '*mana aada paduchulu*' (our family girls). *Aada padachu* is a term that distinguishes a girl born to the family (natal kin) from a girl married into the family (affinal kin). It indicates a persistence of obligation and a special status of care. When an *aada padachu* travels home to her natal family, she is ideally tended with her favourite foods, relaxation and entertainment, and gifts of new clothes and jewelry. By figuring sex workers as *aada paduchulu*, Suddala cajoled his viewers to extend them the same tenderness and care they felt for their own sisters and daughters. Suddala implied that the existence of Telugu sex workers is not an indication of personal failings but rather the moral failings of Telugu people in caring for their women. 'We have slipped and dropped the dignity of our *jathi*,' he explained in his song.

The sex workers seated around Suddala cried as he sang. Figure 1 provides a screengrab from the episode. These sex workers' tears, like Menaka's in the opening vignette, conveyed their plea to be cared for in accordance with *sanskaram*. They constituted an appeal to be re-encompassed by the rings of Telugu *jathi*. These tears performed sex workers' request to be extended moral belonging and care rather than workers' rights.



Figure 1. Veiled Hyderabad sex worker seated among a group of seven others and crying as lyricist Sudala Asoka Teja sings to them about lost *jaathi paravulu* (ethnic honour) on Sakshi TV.

‘Coaching’ and the humanitarian marketplace

Public self-narrations like Menaka’s in the opening vignette and other women who spoke alongside her that day are imbricated in what Lindquist (2010) has termed the ‘aesthetic of trafficking.’ I understand this term to indicate a discursive but also more specifically affective orientation to the sale of sexual services as always-already severely exploitative. It relies upon the use of narrative tropes that persist across films, television shows, print journalism, memes, TEDx talks, and advertisements, all of which are intended to convey the ‘gritty reality’ of the ‘seamy’ sex trade while eliciting an actionable desire ‘to protect the innocent’ (Doezema 2010; Shah 2014). In this sense, trafficking narratives rely on what Mazzarella (2006) has termed a *politics of immediation* in which the communication of visceral effect is intended to index an authenticity of content – the ‘really real.’ Allen writes, ‘Immediation is the necessarily covert denial of mediation that occurs in the formal properties of institutions and social interactions that aspire to give access to an authentic experience and truth’ (2009, 162). This covert denial of mediation in order to produce a sense of authenticity is, I argue, key to the production of sex trafficking narratives in South India. But the production of mediated trafficking narratives (already well explicated by Carol Vance [2011, 2012]) provides only a partial understanding of Menaka’s tears. What remains less well-theorised is why sex workers like Menaka would participate in producing the aesthetic of trafficking while nevertheless persisting in the trade itself, despite being aggressively and even violently targeted by anti-trafficking interventions (see Ahmed and Seshu 2012; Dasgupta 2019; Pai, Seshu, and Murthy 2018; Ramachandran 2015; Walters and Raghavendra 2022).

In November 2013, an anti-trafficking NGO where I had conducted fieldwork featured prominently in another episode of a Telugu talk show. The programme began with a video of women soliciting in red-light districts in Mumbai and Delhi interspersed with footage of grainy, slow-motion night scenes of women working more secretly at a railway station in Hyderabad. A voiceover described sex work as a form of ‘hell’ and sex workers as ‘living corpses’ with no say and no security. The talk show host then proceeded to interview a series of women who sold sex for a living, many of them people that I knew to be career sex workers intent on remaining in the trade. As the episode unfolded, the host paused occasionally asides to the audience, encouraging them to donate to the relief of these suffering

victims using a number scrolling at the bottom of the screen while mentioning the episode's corporate sponsors, Cellkon and Agrigold.

Sex workers associated with anti-trafficking NGOs produced stories of trafficking for a variety of public outlets during my fieldwork, including for newspapers, researchers, and television. NGO staff often consolidated such representations of women associated with their organisations on their websites, social media accounts, and charity donation platforms such as Global Giving. In this way, 'friends' of the organisation can easily access a repository of victim narratives. These self-narrations help demonstrate anti-trafficking NGOs' authenticity and efficacy while securing them funding for their ongoing work to 'end slavery.' In such media appearances, sex workers were called upon to provide personal testimonials. These usually began with a single point of inquiry: How did you come to enter the sex trade? Reporters and talk show hosts seized on the narrow question of entry as the most relevant matter for viewers. They ignored any potential benefits of selling sex or the changes that occur for a woman across years of participation in the trade. In the interest of furthering anti-trafficking NGOs' claim of ministering to what one NGO head termed 'forcible sex workers,' self-narrations were regularly made to conform to a narrow range of possibilities. These included being incited to prostitution or directly pimped by a husband or lover, being sold to an aunty running a brothel, or being tricked and kidnapped by *goondas* (members of organised crime) into a prostitution racket.

In some of these media interviews, sex workers I knew recounted their own truly harrowing experiences of forced prostitution. Some, however, varied their stories depending on whether the audience supported sex workers' empowerment or the criminalisation of paid sex. Anti-trafficking NGOs' need for trafficking narratives produced a direct pressure on sex workers within their sphere of influence to conform to metanarratives of trafficking already popularised by the global anti-trafficking movement (Kempadoo 2005). Sex workers cooperating with anti-trafficking NGOs in South India thus often felt compelled to produce particular kinds of *salable* humanitarian commodities. For sex workers whose own stories are either too mundane or too morally complex to easily elicit humanitarian sympathy from viewers (the affective commodity being elicited in such portrayals), NGO staff would 'coach' (an English loanword in Telugu) them until they were able to produce self-narrations more in keeping with the organisation's financial aims. Sex workers often accompanied their self-narrations with tears and choked voices, underscoring the immediacy of their retellings – the raw 'truth' of the matter.

In contrast to the authenticity they intended to convey in their public performances of victimisation, sex workers themselves described these performances as instrumentally crafted. One such sex worker said to me wryly in 2013, 'You know that we get strict coaching, don't you?' She meant this as a warning to me in case I had not yet identified the fact that anti-trafficking NGOs closely controlled the self-narrations of the women they presented to the public. I explained in return that while I was aware (having overheard and sometimes seen such coaching sessions), coached answers were as interesting to me as un-coached.⁶ Another sex worker told me earnestly, 'Sir and Madam [NGO heads] told us that if we don't share our *kashtaalu* (travails) with you that no one outside will know how much trouble we've had.' She meant this not as a warning that these self-narrations were coached, but instead as a pointed admonition that I should endeavour to align my own mediated narratives about the NGO that had recruited her with the 'moral good' of the aesthetic of trafficking. Depicting the sex trade as a series of *kashtaalu*, she believed, was the best means to elicit the requisite sympathy from the public towards women like her.

With this moral good kept firmly in sight, many sex workers cooperated in performing roles that their anti-trafficking NGOs assigned them in public performances. For instance, on the talk show described above, one young sex worker who was associated with an anti-trafficking NGO, Kumari,⁷ wrapped herself in a headscarf so that only her eyes were visible. She had been instructed by her NGO to portray herself as a caricature of a selfish sex worker for reasons that will become clearer below. With her face covered and sitting in the dark, she gave a video interview while the NGO head and several sex workers watched from the live studio audience. Figure 2 provides a screengrab of the televised interview from YouTube where it is archived.



Figure 2. Kumari during a TV5 special on sex work, presenting herself as a college student that chose this work for selfish purposes.

The incognita Kumari narrated herself as a college girl who had chosen to enter sex work for the luxuries it provided. She told the host that she had begun sex work after her family sent her to Hyderabad to study for her master's degree in commerce. 'But my [roommates] had expensive phones and dresses' Kumari explained.

They were enjoying their lives. I was anxious to know the reason for the difference between us. When I asked them, they said, 'Why should you lead a hard life like this? If you give up a night, you can also enjoy a life like ours.'

She told the host that she now made 10,000 rupees in exchange for an all-night date with sex and between 60,000 and 70,000 a month. These exaggerated sums were about a third more than the highest earning sex workers that I had encountered at the time and 10 times the average salary for private school teachers in Hyderabad at the time.

When the host asked Kumari what she had purchased with her first earnings, she answered 'jean pants and dresses.' Among Telugu speakers in 2013, jeans for girls marked both youth and a middle-class 'modern' sensibility. They were something that I had never seen Kumari wear in real life. Telugu people are often sentimental about their first earnings, which they traditionally use to buy clothing or jewellery for their closest family members. By asking and answering this question, the host and Kumari worked together to signify her selfishness and moral alienation as a sex worker. They again circled back to underscore this point later in the interview when the host asked her whether she helped to support her parents. Kumari replied, 'I don't give them anything. I buy gold and things for myself, but I don't give anything to them.' The host looked shocked and dismayed. He summed up his exasperation with Kumari's moral failings by dismissing her with a tone of exasperated distaste, 'I have no idea what to say to you! Wish you all the best!' before turning to his next interview.

Kumari had been selected by her NGO head to perform the role of a 'hi-fi' sex worker in order to create a moral foil to the other sex workers appearing on the show that day, who openly identified themselves as recipients of help from the anti-trafficking NGO. Those women, in contrast to Kumari, narrated stories of having been trafficked into sex work. Kumari's performance thus acted to deflect viewers' potential discomfort and antipathy towards career sex workers as a group onto the figure of a shockingly selfish sex worker who chose to enrich only herself rather than redistribute her earnings among her kin. By enacting this foil, Kumari contributed to the production of a binary that allowed

the show's viewers to distinguish between worthy and unworthy recipients of their sympathy and donations. By the logic of the show, worthy victims of trafficking and other extreme circumstances profit only enough to 'fill their stomachs and sustain family members who rely on them.' By contrast, Kumari's performance conveyed to viewers that sex workers who profit from their labour are greedy, selfish, and care nothing for the sentiments of their family. 'Haven't you ever thought of your mother and brother when your friends suggested that you do [sex work]?' the host asked Kumari, clearly aghast. 'I have not!' she replied, explaining that young women who are away at college are more influenced by their peers than their families at home. Kumari's curt response catalysed a common fear that without requisite encompassment, girls are apt to stray morally, not merely through sex work but further still into shameless selfishness.

Near the end of the same episode, the NGO head, Gouramma, took the stage in the role of humanitarian. In her comments, she returned to the contrast between selfish vs. deserving sex workers. Gouramma categorised cisgender sex workers into 'traditional sex workers' who inherited their labour, 'hi-fi sex workers' similar to call girls, 'executive sex workers' who seek sex while their husbands work abroad for two or three years, and 'forcible sex workers'⁸ who are 'forced to enter sex work by brokers, husbands, parents, or those who are cheated by others. They do it against their wish.' Of these four categories, she indicated, her NGO worked only with the last. Later in the show, the host coaxed Gouramma to reiterate her disavowal of sex workers who 'selfishly' work for money. He asked, 'But if we go through the categories, most of the women are entering it willingly, don't you think? They enter it to have luxurious lives.' To which, Gouramma replied, '[Our organisation] cannot do anything about the women that enter it voluntarily. We speak about forcible sex workers ... Because of our program, we have been able to reach these women and to instruct them.' Here Gouramma alluded to the foil provided by Kumari's performance – and indeed, the camera cut to the still veiled Kumari now sitting in the audience – to explicitly divide sex workers into clear binaries of moral and immoral and by implication deserving and undeserving of charitable sympathy.

Her organisation, Gouramma averred, existed only to minister to the needs of deserving sex workers, the 'forcibles.' Her distinction between them encouraged viewers too to compartmentalise the 'selfish' from the 'forcibles' to thereby allay compunctions and doubts about inadvertently supporting the 'wrong sort' of women with their donations. As the host closed out the episode, he again reminded the viewers to send cheques or online bank transfers to 'financially support the victims who participated in [this show].' He completed the commoditisation of the performance of victimisation with a final mention of the corporate sponsors for the episode, who, he said, 'wish for a system to prevent forcible sex work.'

Thickening the Lakshmana Rekha

The thickening of the metaphorical protective line drawn to encompass women in the domestic sphere featured in the anti-trafficking advocacy on TV shows to which active sex workers contributed. This, I suggest, is an extension of the language of kinship and nation employed to re-frame sex work as a national shame. Kumari, in the role of the greedy sex worker, had this further advice for her viewers:

My message to the parents is this: watch whether our children are studying well or not ... Do not keep them in hostels. You better keep them with people you know well. Otherwise, educate them at home and take them to the examination halls personally. That's the way! There are many girls that [sell sex] in Ameerpet and SR Nagar.⁹ [It happens] wherever there are a lot of hostels.

Here, Kumari suggested more careful control of girls to prevent their entrance into sex work. Her admonition drew from the register of truisms about parenting girls, including perpetual watchfulness and the need for rigorous restriction of mobility. She reiterated this point by saying:

My message for family members is that they have to observe their children ... Despite being poor, whether it is good or bad, keep your daughters with you to educate them. But do not send them to other places. Your daughter might be correct, but we cannot say others are correct too.

Kumari advocated tight circumscription of daughters, even if it diminished girls' education. She alluded to this potential damage in her interjection 'whether it is good or bad.' Kumari indicated that familial encompassment offered safety from sex work's lure of dresses, gold, and savings accounts. Kumari also admonished daughters to remember their responsibility to their family's *paruvu* (honour):

My request to the hostel girls is that they don't do this [enter sex work] ... Please think of you and your family members with a cool mind. If your parents come to know about your behavior, what would their condition be? Just think about your mom and dad!

By invoking parental responsibility to impose an impervious Lakshmana rekha around their daughters and invoking, in turn, daughters' own requisite sense of filial piety, Kumari framed the solution to the 'problem' of sex work firmly as stricter purity policing rather than the reconfiguration of the larger gendered economy for female labour in a liberalising India.

When I asked another sex worker, Lata, who was associated with an anti-trafficking NGO, what message she wished to convey to others, she said: 'I want to say to others like me: "Do not trust lovers and get cheated. Whoever the husband is – whether he is blind or squint-eyed – you should stay under his shadow. Whoever he is, you must have a husband."' In this densely packed bit of counsel, Lata cautioned women against being tempted by lovers, whom she suggested will 'cheat' them by failing to financially support them and thereby relegating them (perhaps even introducing them) to selling sex. Rather, she suggested, women should suffice themselves with husbands, by which she meant partners through arranged marriages chosen by their families. A woman should not be dissatisfied with her marriage partner regardless of his shortcomings. Instead, she should practice loyalty, whatever her circumstances. This was Lata's suggestion as a successful sex worker who had long ago parted from her own husband and had amassed significant wealth and independence in the intervening years. Despite being coached in anti-trafficking discourse by an NGO, Lata could not help but quickly add this exception:

But it's necessary to err [*tappu cheyalli* i.e., sell sex] in some circumstances, like if you don't have a husband. Or if you get to the point where he won't cooperate with you. Then you have to work hard and do it anyway [i.e., sell sex]. But don't get cheated! I would say to any women like me, 'Don't get cheated.'

By 'cheated,' Lata meant that women should not be so unfortunate as to select a lover who failed to support them or who trafficked them into sex work. By her logic, this was less likely within the more predictable cadences of arranged marriage, despite the fact that Lata herself had initially been introduced to sex work by her now estranged husband whom she wed in an arranged marriage.

Trafficking narratives as requests for moral re-integration

The offer of charitable rehabilitation through the raising of donations was emotionally potent for sex workers in part because it permitted them to perform targeted requests for reintegration into what they called *maa vaallu* (our people). For Menaka, the term *maa vaallu* referred at once to her relatives and the wider group of people at home in her village in Telangana. Menaka had long been ostracised by her people after being abandoned by her husband and being forced into sex work in Hyderabad. After many years, she had slowly begun to regain their social cooperation, even their grudging esteem for her financial stability. She explained for example:

Whenever I visit my paternal uncle and aunt [in the village], I take a sari or give them money. They have to feed me and my son. I am the one who developed relations with them by presenting them with money. If they want to buy chicken, I have to give fifty rupees. If they want to buy drinks, I have to give a hundred rupees. Then they began to treat me as their daughter and would talk to me on the phone once or twice. That is all. But they would not gift me clothes or feed us well. I have no confidence that they will take care of me.

Her earnings as a sex worker were useful in reintegrating with her people, but only to a point. She had also benefited by aligning herself with a sex workers' rights community-based organisation

(CBO). Ten sex workers from that organisation had once accompanied Menaka to her village to provide her with the vocal and physical support she needed to demand rights to half of her absconding husband's land. Menaka's entourage of sex workers convinced the village panchayat (elders) to rule in her favour against her in-laws. In this sense, sex work and the practice of sex worker empowerment (in the form of the CBO) had each provided her separate modes of material gain. But neither her earnings from sex work nor the practice of sex worker empowerment on her behalf served to bridge the cavernous moral divide between Menaka and her village. Menaka described their persistent suspicions this way: 'They think, "She is living alone. She must be sleeping with men for living. She cannot be a *pathivratha* (respectable wife)."'

It is in this regard that participating in the aesthetic of trafficking served its purpose for Menaka and women like her. Through a disavowal of their own agency in sex work, they narrated their continued moral consonance with their communities. Their performances positioned them as different from the wanton and selfish sex worker foil that Kumari enacted. Such narrations allowed them to convey that their moral sensibilities had not become monstrously foreign and un-Indian. Rather, they communicated that they too yearn for the restoration of Telugu *jathi paruvulu* (dignity) as Suddala Ashok Teja sang above.

I suggest that through their victim performances, sex workers who cooperated with anti-trafficking NGOs narrated themselves as much to their own moral communities as to some vaguely conceived anti-trafficking donor. Shrenika provided a particularly telling case in point. Of all the many sex workers I encountered, Shrenika was the most gifted storyteller. As such, an NGO she was associated with regularly selected her to speak on television. Shrenika told me about one such television appearance, for which she had dressed well, as her earnings from sex work afforded:

My [estranged] family members watched that program. I learned from my brother what they said after watching that program: 'Look how happy she is by abandoning all of us!' They are not happy to see that I am alive. Instead, they said sarcastically that I appear happy. They have that mindset. Though they listened to me, they are not concerned about me. They looked only at my physical appearance. What should I have done? When we go for something public, we should dress well. If I were to go shabbily, would anyone respect me? ... So, I went there well dressed. That was my fault. That is what [my family] has seen.

This experience was painful, but it underscored to Shrenika the fact that in her television appearances she could indirectly communicate with her estranged family in her village. I asked her what could be done for her to reconcile with her family. Her lengthy and poignant reply demonstrated that she had thought a great deal about this question:

To endear them to me, they must understand the circumstances under which I [entered sex work], the number of problems I faced after coming, and in what situation and mindset I am at present. If they come to know about these things – at least one of them, whether it be my parents or my husband – if at least one of them comes to me, the others might also come to me automatically ... It is possible for them to be of two minds. It's difficult to say. They may leave me to my fate, because I am already spoilt. [Or] they may come to me if they believe, 'She is longing to join us even after having faced so many problems. We would relieve her of her problems if we accept her back.' They won't come if they decide against me. Both outcomes are possible. [Laughs] Here I am talking with an open heart as if I am the person who gets to decide whether it is good or bad [to reconcile]. But the minimum that I want is for my children to sympathise with my situation.

She continued with this hypothetical for another thirty minutes. Clearly, Shrenika's hope for reintegration with her family remained vibrant despite their discovery of her participation in sex work. In the three years that I interacted with Shrenika, she agonised over every detail of when and how to attempt a reconciliation. She often talked about the fact that she would require a significant reservoir of savings if she ever hoped to bring her children to live in Hyderabad or even if she were to be allowed to begin openly sending remittances to support them in her village.

But her moral dilemma could not be solved by her earnings in sex work. She wrestled constantly with the fear that her children might come to know of her means of making money from the rest of her family. The majority of sex workers that I interviewed about this question, they were haunted by the fear of their children discovering their secret. Stories circulated among them of sons who had

committed suicide after stumbling upon the truth. Their family's apprehension of their profession was the single greatest fear among my informants. I do not suggest that sex workers always believed their families were listening when they spoke into a microphone. But they were aware that it was possible. More importantly, I suggest, their moving performances allowed them to narrate themselves to their families and potentially even to their children *as they would wish to have the story told*. It provided them a degree of narrative control. In this context, their tears indexed their ongoing pain alongside their enduring moral continuity with their families and communities while disavowing any culpability for their earnings from sex work.

'But still': holding on to sex work's (impossible) end

By Lata's account above, women who adhered to the rules of arranged marriage and Telugu decorum received no ultimate guarantee of security for their dignified choices. As Lata herself put it, sometimes 'it is necessary to err.' In her advice to other women here, Lata manifested clear ambivalence about selling sex: In the same breath she admonished wives to remain loyal to their husbands, and yet admitted that remaining loyal is often infeasible. Her logic was strained by the divide between a moral and a pragmatic imperative. On the one hand, it is *subham* (proper/auspicious) that the women of the Telugu *jathi* not leave their husbands' shadows. That they stay close, keep loyal. On the other hand, husbands can fail them. They die. Many more of them are rendered financially impotent by an Indian economy that has jumped into hyperdrive through ongoing liberalisation. Some poorer Telugu men find themselves as little more than economic drones since the advent of the days of 'India shining!' By the accounts of my sex worker interlocutors, most of their husbands had turned to gambling and drinking in the face of a labour system that valued their full-time toil at less than 6000 rupees (\$200) a month in 2013. These men found it impossible to maintain wives who remained respectable at home. Instead, wives resorted to absorbing cash from clients who themselves had inherited or lucked into success in India's increasingly unequal economy. In short, Lata's contradicting advice indexed a general problem among poorer women. Their husbands found themselves drowning in India's new economy, and women discovered that they had services to sell to remain afloat, but the moral imperative of *sanskaram* persisted.

Women who find new wealth from selling sex seldom summarily discard their identification with Telugu *jathi sanskaram*. Few of them immediately cut themselves new morals from a different bolt of cloth once they enter the sex trade. Instead, many of them experience a profound discord between their mode of business and the moral consensus within which they were socialised. The contradictions articulated by Lata leave sex workers tautly strung between being good and getting by. Telugu sex workers' struggles with these conflicting moral and material imperatives act as a distinct impetus for their contributions to the aesthetic of trafficking. This impetus is analytically distinguishable from the labour that anti-trafficking NGOs elicit from them in exchange for a variety of return favours.

The relevance of this distinction was brought into sharp focus for me late in my fieldwork during a long and intense conversation with Menaka in the empty flat where she had wished to hold a 'party.' At the time, Menaka was also facing severe pressure and threats of physical violence to conform to the dictates of a Hyderabad anti-trafficking NGO. I asked her about her years of narrative performances on this NGO's behalf. She had regularly spoken to the media, to researchers, and public functions about being trafficked and about hoping for the eventual miracle of rehabilitation. How did she feel about these performances now, I asked her, given the threats she was facing from this same NGO? 'You know how it is,' she smiled, 'You have to say what [the NGO head] wants you to say. It's out of fear.' Menaka gave me an example from a few years earlier when the head of NGO had threatened sex workers with violence if they went outside her control to directly contact researchers or other NGOs.

'But what about the request for rehabilitation?' I asked Menaka, 'What do you believe? Would long-time sex workers really leave their work for [formal employment]?' I asked, 'Or are they simply repeating what [the NGO] has trained them to say?' Menaka agreed that the NGO in question

had trained her and other sex workers well, but she vehemently insisted that sex workers associated with the organisation nevertheless persisted in their hope of receiving help from outside donors and ultimately leaving sex work. She insisted to me that despite her own success as a sex worker, she still held out hope that humanitarians would someday 'show her another path' (*vere dari chupinchalli*).

When she said this, I walked Menaka through what existing rehabilitation programmes were offered at the time (e.g., selling homemade pickles and soaps, tailoring, and working as *ayyas* in hospitals). Menaka admitted to me that the low-paid NGO options were dead-ends. Nevertheless, our conversation that afternoon went in circles. 'But a loan! A business loan! That would help,' she insisted. I countered that well-set sex workers like her often furnished their own relatives with loans. Sex workers regularly used their savings to single-handedly pay for their daughters' dowries and weddings. Could established sex workers also not come up with the money to launch a small business, I asked? Besides, would she really earn more from a small business than she did in sex work? 'No, you're right,' Menaka, agreed, 'but still ...' her voice trailed off. She would not be deterred.

Menaka's 'but still' from that conversation in the empty flat sits at the crux of my argument about the utility of her role in the aesthetic of trafficking. Menaka and others who repeated stories of being trafficked (despite now being successful sex workers) did not exchange them solely for handouts or legal help from anti-trafficking NGOs. Rather, I suggest, Menaka argued for her own continued hope of re-encompassment in her moral community.

At that moment, Menaka had several personal reasons to denounce the anti-trafficking NGO with which she often worked. But instead, she maintained an earnest insistence that through this channel, she and other sex workers might eventually be offered a viable alternative. Their self-narrations should not be primarily understood as intended to access anti-trafficking funding, but rather as enabling them to respond to the moral and material contradictions they faced. Menaka and other sex workers used tearful self-narrations in which they requested humanitarian aid to inhabit a seemingly impossible future in which they would one day be suddenly, even magically, lifted out of their contradictory circumstances. The persistence of this fantasy helped address the paradox of trying to achieve Telugu *jathi paruvulu* while surviving in India's liberalised economy by deferring the question to an indefinite horizon contingent upon an unspecified yet 'adequate' humanitarian intervention. Such performances held more moral utility than material reward. Trafficking narratives could serve as a means to indirectly plead a case before a court of shared conscience by foregrounding women's lack of culpability. But they also served to deftly defer the question of giving up sex work's material gains until an impossible horizon – an 'adequate' humanitarian proffer of rehabilitation.

Conclusion

Analyses that understand trafficking narratives as voyeuristic melodrama or as antipolitical spectacle animate some of the critiques of the anti-trafficking movement (Shah 2014; Vance 2011, 2012). Such critiques prime us to read the performance of trafficking narratives by sex workers closely associated with anti-trafficking NGOs as the instrumental production of humanitarian commodities. And indeed, this is an accurate read at one level. I have observed anti-trafficking NGOs persuade sex workers to voice statements with the immediate goal of expanding their funding.¹⁰ It is thus also accurate to claim that the transnational charitable market for stories of the rescue of trafficked women creates a market demand for narratives of victimisation and hence pressure for their production. It is equally true that as a consequence of this demand, anti-trafficking organisations actively cultivate trafficking narratives among sex workers, some of whom also participate in sex worker rights' groups. This lens on the production of narratives brings into focus a critique of the anti-trafficking movement – now perhaps at its zenith – as a new form of coercion in the lives of women who sell sex. Its coercion is manifest through direct pressure to render themselves legible as victims rather than as citizen-workers demanding state recognition of their labour rights.

However warranted such an analysis, it occludes other facets of sex workers' narrations of themselves as having been trafficked. Many of my sex worker interlocutors felt deeply ambivalent about making their living through the sale of sex. Their ambivalence arose in large measure from their experience or fear of social alienation. Relatives, neighbours, and people in their home villages who guessed at these women's involvement in sex work typically ostracised them. Women who managed to save money through sex work sometimes bartered for their social reintegration by offering gifts and loans or by paying for a relative's education, but their moral differences persisted. It was the persistent experience of moral alienation – being estranged from one's own claim to what is collectively recognised as goodness and respectability – that was also at play as sex workers labour to represent themselves to the publics eager to hear stories of trafficking. Women's words, bodies, and friend circles may have transformed through the *alawaatu* (habit) of sex work (Walters 2016a), but the unremitting moral consensus that situated them as 'outside' and 'other' continued to burn keenly.

The contradiction that arose – the need to materially survive and the need to remain morally relevant to family and friends – left sex workers tautly strung between the imperatives of capital and Brahmanical patriarchy. The contradiction set the stage for tearful performances highlighting coercion over material gain. Such performances spoke to their sustained hope of garnering sympathy not only from donors but also from their own people. In a word, Menaka's tears emanated from the contradiction she experienced making a good living doing something she and her community felt to be wrong. By narrating herself as a victim of trafficking, Menaka and others like her pled their cases and requested the sympathetic mercy and moral belonging that Sita was ultimately denied.

Notes

1. All names throughout are pseudonyms.
2. On 19 May 2022, the Supreme Court ruled that sex work *per se* is not criminalised under Indian law, and sex workers should not be unwillingly rescued by police (NNSWI 2022).
3. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this articulation of my central claim.
4. In a pan-India survey, Sahni and Shankar (2011) did not find Dalit women over-represented among sex workers. By contrast in a population-based sample of sex workers in Andhra Pradesh, Dandona et al. (2006) found Dalit women represented at twice their rate in the general population.
5. Sex workers have repeatedly pointed out that they do not sell their bodies but only their sexual services, belying the phrase 'selling her body.' Ironically, Cohen (2004) documented kidney donors – literal sellers of body parts – who gained ethical approval from Tamil hospital boards on the grounds that it would save them from selling sex.
6. Women considered themselves 'coached' when they adhered to explicit instructions regarding what to include and omit. I understand 'coaching' more broadly, including, for example, observations of other sex workers' narratives.
7. I use a pseudonym for her here that is different than the one she used for herself on TV.
8. All of these labels were spoken as English loan words in the flow of Telugu.
9. Areas famous for their many training courses in software, hardware, and call centre-related skills, which are often sought out by upwardly mobile youth from working and middle-class backgrounds.
10. Something similar occurred at the Somaly Mam Foundation in Cambodia (Marks 2013).

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