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Rochelle L. Dalla

Kaitlin Roselius

Victoria J. Johnson

Jessie Peter

Trupti Jhaveri Panchal

See next page for additional authors

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Authors

Rochelle L. Dalla, Kaitlin Roselius, Victoria J. Johnson, Jessie Peter, Trupti Jhaveri Panchal, Ramani Ranjan, Mrinalini Mischra, and Sagar Sahu

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A life-course perspective of sex trafficking among the Bedia caste of India

Rochelle L. Dalla,[1] Kaitlin Roselius,[1] Victoria J. Johnson,[1] Jessie Peter,[1] Trupti Jhaveri Panchal,[2,3] Ramani Ranjan,[3] Mrinalini Mischra,[3] and Sagar Sahu [3]

1 University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NT, USA
2 Tata Institute of Social Sciences. Mumbai, India
3 Samvedna, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, India

Correspondence — R. L. Dalla, Department of Child, Youth, and Family Studies, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 250 LPH, 512 N. 12 Street, Lincoln, NE 68588-0366, USA;
email rdalla1@unl.edu

Abstract

Thousands of Indian women and girls enter the commercial sex industry (CSI) annually based solely on membership in particular castes (e.g., Bedia, Nat). CSI-involved females bear the burden of sustaining entire family units on money earned in the sex trade; it is a life-long responsibility with negligible social status or personal indemnity. Based on the life-course developmental theory (Elder, Jr. 1994, 1998) this investigation was intended to examine trafficked women's experiences within the commercial sex industry across time. Beyond the CSI, we were equally interested in experiences with factors that could promote well-being (i.e., social support) and normative developmental transitions including education attainment and motherhood. To that end, three questions were posed. First, to what extent do factors surrounding CSI entry and continued involvement differ through time among CSI-involved Bedia? Second, how do CSI-involved

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Bedia describe social network composition and perceived support through time? Finally, are differences detectable, through time, in CSI-involved Bedia women's experiences with normative developmental transitions including education attainment and motherhood? Interview data were collected from 31 Bedia females (age range 17 – 65 years) residing in rural Madhya Pradesh, India. To examine change through time, participants were divided into cohorts based on age and time involved in the commercial sex industry. Data were then analyzed within and across cohorts with particular attention to cohort-related experiential differences. Policy implications and suggestions for continued research are presented.

Keywords: Bedia, Caste, Life course developmental theory, Sex trafficking

1. Introduction

The most widely agreed upon *international* definition of human trafficking is provided by the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime (UNHRC, 2000) (aka Palermo protocol). Article 3 states as follows:

(a) "Trafficking in persons" shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs;
(b) The consent of a victim of trafficking in persons to the intended exploitation set forth in subparagraph (a) of this article shall be irrelevant where any of the means set forth in subparagraph (a) have been used;
(c) The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation shall be considered "trafficking in persons" even if this does not involve any of the means set forth in subparagraph (a) of this article;
(d) "Child" shall mean any person under eighteen years of age.

The Palermo Protocol was ratified by the Indian Government in May, 2011.[1] Despite legal documents to prevent sex trafficking and the commercial sexual exploitation of children, it is estimated that thousands of Indian girls are forced to enter the commercial sex industry (CSI) because of caste-membership (Bhattarcharya, 2019) and of which, according to Joffres et al. (2008, p. 3), "comprises socially (if not legally) accepted forms of religious and tribal prostitution".[2] Such is the case for girls of many Indian castes (e.g., Nat, Devadasi, Perna; Black, 2007) including the Bedia. Cornered by caste and gender discrimination, and lack of education, which create and maintain severely restricted economic opportunities (Rana et al., 2020) many Bedia families rely on centuries-old customs of survival—the commercial sexual exploitation of young girls and the continued prostitution of Bedia women (Agrawal, 2016). Girls forced to enter the CSI because of "cultural proscripts" and custom related to caste membership are nonetheless *also victims of sex trafficking*. Furthermore, CSI-involved women whose *initial* entry into the sex industry was forced, coerced or facilitated prior to age 18 because of caste norms or other contextual factors, *very likely do not recognize* themselves as victims of human trafficking. However, the complexities of their situation, and the culturally-defined nature of the commercial sex industry that operates within some unique castes, likely challenges their ability of freely exercise agency to pursue life goals or progress through typical developmental life stages (e.g., marriage, childbearing) in a self-determined manner to the same extent as their peers not bound to the CSI by caste membership. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that aspects of well-being are profoundly impacted when one's sense of agency is severely restricted; this assumption forms a piece of inquiry in the present study.

1 Despite its global reach and ratification by 190 parties, we recognize controversy surrounding its use (e.g., Skilbrei & Tveit, 2008). Other legal instruments are likewise critiques, including the Indian Trafficking Law (or the The Immoral Trafficking (Prevention) Act of 1956) which, according to Helpingstine et al. (forthcoming) "…[in India] there is a multiplicity and overlapping of acts and laws to handle the offences of common nature due to which these laws do not adequately address the complex issues related to trafficking."

2 For an historical background on the impact of cultural and religious practices of intergenerational prostitution in India see Acharya, A. K. (2007).

The World Bank (2014) identifies three dimensions of agency, including goal-setting, perceived control and ability ("sense of agency"), and acting on goals. Kabeer (1999) addresses "sense of agency" in detail, describing it as "…individuals' capacity to define their life-choice(s) and pursue their own goals, even in the face of opposition from others" (p. 438). Kabeer's (1999) conceptualization is particularly relevant to this analysis as it situates individuals within social contexts, recognizing that others' intentions may challenge—even preclude—one's sense of capacity to define or act upon life-goals.

Inarguably, well-being and sense of agency are deeply connected (Hojman & Miranda, 2018; Moore, 2016; Sen, 1985). In fact, to be "fully operative," argues Rao (2014), individuals must have "… a sense of agency, including freedom of movement, access to resources, and decision-making capacity" (p. 80). In other words, sense of agency contributes to well-being and resource accessibility is necessary for agency. Rao is one among many (e.g., Dennett, 2014; Deshmukh-Ranadive, 2005; Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007) to stress direct linkages between sense of agency and resources. Simply put, action toward achievable goals (i.e., agency)—especially in the face of opposition—is only possible to the extent that *viable choices exist among alternatives* (Khan et al., 2018). For many, especially those in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC), life choices are severely constrained due to insufficient and/or inaccessible resources.

Yet, capturing one's experience of agency is difficult(Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Narayan et al., 2009), and must be approached with consideration of key elements of identity (Black et al., 2019; Munro, 2020; Myers, 2002). For women in India, "key elements" typically include caste, marital status, life-cycle stage, kinship support, individual attributes and contextual change across the life course (Rao, 2014). Of these, caste is an especially profound social force that may severely impact opportunities and constraints. This study was guided by an overwhelming need to better understand complex issues inherent in the interplay between personal agency and sex trafficking, among populations outside the scope of mainstream science, as a means of pushing boundaries of knowledge and understanding.

There exist numerous Indian castes traditionally engaged in sex work as a primary (or only) source of income. If entry was not of one's choosing, and especially if CSI-entry occurs early in life, it is reasonable to assume that those impacted experience severe restrictions on life goals,

thereby limiting sense of personal agency. If correct, factors that could promote well-being—such as attainment of educational milestones or normative developmental transitions into motherhood—are particularly important to discern.

Compared to macro-level studies, micro-level investigations of "special, delimited populations" have the potential to (a) produce more reliable numbers on victimization, (b) identify context-specific structural catalysts for…trafficking and slavery, and (c) generate richer insights regarding actors' lived experiences (Weitzer, 2015, p. 232). This micro-level study was intended to examine perceptions of commercial sex work and indicators of well-being (assessed via informal social support) across the life cycle among Bedia women trafficked into the CSI. Three questions guided the research. First, to what extent do factors surrounding CSI entry and continued involvement differ through time among CSI-involved Bedia? Second, how do CSI-involved Bedia describe social network composition and perceived support through time? Finally, are differences detectable, through time, in CSI-involved Bedia women's experiences with normative developmental transitions including education attainment and motherhood?

2. Caste-based sex work in India

The CSI industry in India, as elsewhere, is complex; with life experiences in the CSI differing based on age, sex, gender, as well as reasons for and processes of entry, among others.. However, India's CSI is overwhelmingly comprised of lower caste women whose entry was either forced or coerced, or who lacked other viable options for generating income (Chattopadhyay et al., 1994; Jha & Sharma, 2016; Saggurti et al., 2011). Dalits (formerly "untouchables") are those who officially comprise the Scheduled Castes (SC)[3] and constitute about 17% of India's total population. SCs include about 1100 unique castes who, collectively, occupy the lowest rung on India's caste hierarchy (Metcalf & Metcalf, 2012).

3 Scheduled castes and scheduled tribes (ST) are officially designated groups of historically disadvantaged people in India (Metcalf & Metcalf, 2012). Though differences between caste and tribe exist, for all intents and purposes the term "caste" is used throughout this paper.

Historically, untouchables were denied social, economic, cultural and political rights, including rights to property and education. Despite the enactment of laws to abolish discriminatory practices against Dalits, caste discrimination remains pervasive across the country (Agrawal, 2016). Dalit women are particularly vulnerable due the compounded burden of caste discrimination, economic deprivation, and patriarchy (Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015).

Caste discrimination reduces individuals' access to educational, economic, social, political, and other tangible and non-tangible resources necessary to improve one's circumstances. Abject poverty (and associated facilitators such as debt and unemployment) is strongly linked to CSI involvement (Guha, 2018; Mishra, 2019; Mohindra et al., 2012; Saggurti et al., 2011; Sinha, 2015). Family tradition (or caste-based sex work) is also implicated in Indian women's CSI entry (Orchard, 2007a, 2007b; Saggurti et al., 2011). However, family tradition works *in tandem with indigence*—rather than as a distinct facilitator. That is, if viable income generating options are available, families are unlikely to push daughters into the sex industry *even if* they belong to castes where sex industry involvement is customary (Dalla et al., 2020; Gopal, 2012; Jha & Sharma, 2016; Mishra, 2019).

Family-facilitated child sex trafficking is especially relevant to this investigation. Although precise numbers are difficult to gauge, thousands of Indian women are thought to be involved in the sex industry due to caste membership (Black, 2007). Historically, in some castes (e. g., Devadasi; see Orchard, 2007a, 2007b) sex work was a manifestation of religious or spiritual practices. Today however, caste-based sex work is regarded as a form of child sex trafficking (Jha & Sharma, 2016; Meshelemiah & Sarkar, 2015).

2.1. The Bedia

Contemporarily spread across three Indian states (Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan), the Bedia were historically nomadic and earned income through dance and musical performances, and possibly minor criminal activities (e.g., petty theft; Chowdhuri, 2003). Today, Bedia are infamous for their CSI participation. They live in multi-caste communities in rural, resource-depleted villages. Agrawal (2003, 2008) spent time studying marriage and kinship patterns among the Bedia

residing in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. She described them as a unique anthropological group; that is, in contrast to the characteristic preference for sons across India (Chavada & Bhagyalaxmi, 2009; Gierstorfer, 2013; Pande & Malhotra, 2006), the Bedia prefer female children (Agrawal, 2008). This, Agrawal (2008) argues, represents "a clear manifestation of the economic imperatives of dependence upon prostitution" (p. 107). Second, all familial and economic labor is performed by females: the wives of Bedia men assume all domestic duties (e.g., cooking, cleaning, childcare) and CSI-involved Bedia females earn the preponderance of familial income. Yet, Bedia women retain few rights.

Rana et al.'s (2020) recent study of the Bedia living in Madhya Pradesh parallels many of the earlier findings of Agrawal (2003, 2008) . Both studies report results indicating that Bedia girls are "selected" for entry into the CSI based largely on long-held family patterns reinforced by pervasive structural vulnerabilities (caste discrimination, gender discrimination, inaccessible education) that give way to intergenerational illiteracy, indigence, and—ultimately—reliance on female labor for survival. Results of both also indicate that CSI entry occurs typically at "maturation" (about age 15 or 16). Finally results of both also indicate that CSI-involved Bedia are culturally forbidden from legal marriage— but are instead "married to money" (Mishra & Mishra, 2014a, 2014b)—and remain participants of the CSI until they can no longer earn at which point younger female kin assume the economic provider role (Agrawal, 2003; Rana et al., 2020) thereby maintaining the pattern generationally.

3. Theoretical foundation

The life course developmental theory (LCDT; Elder, 1994, 1998; Elder et al., 2015) provides the theoretical foundation for this research. This theory focuses on developmental trajectories of individuals and groups, as shaped by social forces, life pathways, and individual development. Five principles form the bedrock of the LCDT (Elder et al., 2015); each is relevant to the present study. The first principle addresses lifespan development and is an articulation of human development and aging as lifelong processes. In the present study, we aimed to examine changes through time in women's perceptions of the sex industry as well as aspects of life that might promote well-being (e.g., social networks, access

to education). The second fundamental principle is that of agency, or the choices individuals make among available options that construct unique life trajectories. Noteworthy here is that, "all life choices are contingent on the opportunities and constraints of social structure and culture" (Elder, 1998, p. 2). Agency is of particular focus in this study because of a perceived lack of agency available to women whose CSI entry is compelled by caste-membership and family tradition. The third principle addresses historical time and place. It is quite likely, we assumed, that the rural sex industry has changed through time and that the experiences of those who entered 50 years ago, for instance, would differ considerably from experiences of those who have only recently entered. The fourth LCDT principle addresses *timing* and is explained as the sequencing of age-related roles. According to this principle, important life transitions (e.g., marriage, birth of a child) are impacted by cultural expectations and punctuate developmental trajectories, such that off-time events (e.g., teenage childbearing) can have adverse developmental effects. It was assumed, for instance, that "normative" transitions—such as educational milestones and maternity— are deeply challenged by CSI involvement. Here, we sought to examine such assumptions. Finally, *interdependent and linked lives* constitute the fifth principle of LCDT. Individuals, especially family members, are interdependent. The LCDT contends that actions, behaviors, and choices made by one reverberate with consequences to others, through time. That is, historical events and individual experiences "… are connected through the family and the linked fates of its members," (Elder, 1998, p. 3). This principle is also significant in the present study. For instance, with entry of one female sibling into the CSI, her life is forever changed—but so too are the lives of her siblings who, because of her financial support, have the opportunity to participate in age-related and normative life-stages (e.g., attend school, marry)— that she is perhaps unable to experience.

4. Methods

4.1. Ethics

This research involved a collaboration between the principal investigator (PI) and Samvedna, an India-based non-governmental organization

(NGO) who has worked to eradicate sex trafficking among the Bedia since 2003. Samvedna advocates for change by building trust and working collaboratively with Bedia communities, rather than attempting to impose change from the outside. Thus, Samvedna promotes formal education of all Bedia children and the development of skills (e. g., goat husbandry) to allow for economic pursuits beyond the CSI. Working with an established partner is critical when conducting fieldwork research as an "outsider." However, there are also important issues that must be navigated. One issue of concern regards potential biases toward the NGO and how those might impact responses provided in the research. This was navigated in two ways. First, the NGO translator selected to accompany the PI during field-work was only recently hired; she had no pre-established relationships with any participants and, in fact, had never before visited the Bedia villages included in this study. Second, as part of the consent process, we clearly stated that the research was separate from the NGO (service provider versus research) and further, that their relationship with Samvedna, including services received, or feelings regarding those services, would not be questioned as part of the interview.

World Health Organization (WHO) recommendations for interviewing trafficked women (Zimmerman & Watts, 2003) were followed, including assurances of anonymity and confidentiality, selecting and preparing suitable interpreters, and respecting each participant's evaluation of risks to her safety and situation. Samvedna staff approved the research procedures and interview questions prior to data collection and IRB approval was granted by the PI's home institution.

5. Procedures

Data were collected in rural Madhya Pradesh, India. Prior to the PI's arrival, Samvedna staff identified potential participants (PPs) and briefly explained the study, asking if they would be interested in meeting with the PI at a later date. When the PI arrived, she was introduced to PPs; she explained the purpose and methods in greater detail and answered all questions prior to seeking verbal consent. Participants received a unique identifier and pseudonym, then engaged in an in-depth, semi-structured interview. Translation occurred in real-time, assisted by a

Samvedna staff member who served as a research assistant (i.e., questions were asked in English by the PI, translated into Hindi for participant, with responses back translated for PI). Interviews were audio-recorded and lasted about 45 min (range = 30–90 min).

5.1. Dependability

Procedures to ensure dependability, as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985), were followed. These included summarizing and verifying concepts and perceptions during data collection, debriefing and triangulation, and member checking.[4]

6. Participants

In total, in-depth interviews were conducted with 31 Bedia females residing in seven villages in rural Madhya Pradesh. The final sample was comprised of women ages 17–65 years (χ = 31.6 years, SD = 5.1). As a group, they had entered the CSI at an average age of 15.8 with variation in age of entry ranging from 12 years to 20 years. Although 18 had been exposed to formal education, their experiences were minimal, with an average of only 3.5 years of formal education received (range = 2 years – 10 years). Twenty-two participants were mothers. They had, on average, 2.2 children each (range = 1 – 8 children). None were "legally" married although many reported involvement in a "love marriage."[5] Because this was a convenience sample, cohorts acted as a proxy from which to examine change through time. Three cohorts, based on age and time involved in the sex industry (refer to Table 1), were created as follows: Cohort 1 (aged less than 25 years; time in CSI less than 10 years; n = 11), Cohort 2 (ages 25 – 40 years; time in CSI 10–20 years; n = 13) and Cohort 3 (aged over 40 years; time in CSI more than 20 years; n = 7).

4 Refer to [*Author Redacted*] for complete details.

5 Per cultural proscripts (see Agrawal, 2003, 2008; Rana et al., 2020) CSI-involved Bedia cannot legally marry.

7. Data analysis

Interview data were translated and transcribed into text and included original questions asked by the PI, questions as they were translated to participants, participants' responses, and responses translated back to the PI. Transcripts were entered into MAXQDA-11 for analysis. The research team (i.e., the PI and three research assistants), received professional training on the software prior to data analysis. An inductive content analysis approach guided this process. Inductive approaches are ideal for allowing research findings to emerge from the data—without restraints imposed by structured methodologies (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Thomas, 2003) and are typically used when there are no previous studies on the phenomenon of interest (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Open coding was used to identify dominant within the data based on questions of interest. Biweekly team meetings allowed discussion of codes, concerns, issues, and progress. If new codes were identified, previously coded interviews were recoded. Thus, the coding system was solidified as data analysis proceeded. In this iterative process, cross-comparisons allowed for identification of themes and subthemes within and across subgroups (i.e., textural and structural descriptions; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

8. Results

Research Question 1: How do experiences of CSI entry and continued involvement differ through time among CSI-involved Bedia?

8.1. CSI entry

Regardless of cohort, participants overwhelmingly explained their CSI involvement as, essentially, the only way to resist the drag of all-consuming poverty and to fulfill their familial responsibility.

8.1.1. Crushing poverty

Women in all three cohorts cited crushing poverty and family debt as the

primary reason for CSI entry. Avni's (30)[6] words were a common refrain, "We needed money and there were no other options." The women spoke of no alternatives – no financial assets (i.e., land), no education, no help from the government, no employment options – that could keep them from entering the commercial sex industry. "What reason [do I have?] There was poverty, hunger," Raadha (65) explained. Often the women spoke of a financial crisis, such as a medical emergency or family debt, that immediately preceded entry, although there were women from each cohort who asserted that their involvement was also anticipated. Neha (18) pointed out, "In our community, it's just like that. All the girls do it … I had no other option."

8.1.2. Sense of responsibility.

Although participants emphasized lack of alternatives, individuals from each cohort spoke of entering the CSI using both agentic and nonagentic terms. Younger women spoke of how their plans for marriage were thwarted by financial crises, but also of willingness to sacrifice for their family. "I wanted to study and get married, but my brother had an accident and the debt increased which couldn't be paid off by my parents," shared Salila (19). Among those in the middle and older cohorts, "no other choice" was contextualized by both an emphasis on being "compelled" to enter as well as making the choice out of a sense of duty. Sometimes the experience of compulsion and duty were wrapped together, as evident in Raddha's (65) explanation. She said, "My mother told me that if 'I'll get you married then who will support these brothers and sisters?' I said, 'As you wish mother, I accept whatever you want.'" Padma (~34) shared a similar story, "I thought if I can take care of four lives, I could get my sister married. So if my life is getting worse at least I can make their life better…" In other cases, sense of family duty was described without any element of personal choice. Mala's (65) comment is illustrative. She exclaimed, "I did not want to join [the CSI], but I was compelled. When you live at someone else's place, you need to follow their instructions."

In the middle and oldest cohorts there was also more frequent mention of male kin not stepping in to help, and an emphasis on caring for children and aging family members. "Life isn't one day long…there

6 Each participant's age appears in parentheses.

are kids, like I have a son," Pari (27) said. "I had no other choice," Raya (26) explained, "looking at the situation of parents and their health, brother didn't do anything seeing father's health." Similarly, Ramsa (55) complained that her nephews had an opportunity for employment but instead "they do nothing." When asked why, she gave a stark reply: "What can I say, ask him. He just doesn't want to work." Shriya (57), however, contextualized the situation as follows: "There is problem everywhere, for girls as well as for boys. When they don't have any alternative then what can they do?" This was echoed by Avni (30) who, when asked if her brothers worked, answered, "No, they don't, what will they do? They do farming and labor work. What can anyone earn from that in today's time?".

8.2. Feelings about CSI involvement

Across all cohorts, participants viewed their situation in ways that normalized their circumstances and justified the work as both acceptable and commonplace. For instance, participants in the youngest cohort tended to live for the day, framing involvement in the sex industry as normative. Few of these young women expressed serious thoughts about their future and/or eventual exit. As Meera (18) stated, "It [CSI entry] just happens in our society." In contrast, women in the middle cohort often described feelings about involvement with an added layer of responsibility and understanding—especially because many had transitioned into motherhood. "Even if we don't want [to do it] then also we have to do it otherwise children will remain hungry, we can't get medical facility, how can we get these things, if we don't do this?" asked Vedha (29) rhetorically. There was a recognition among the middle-aged cohort that others' lives (namely children and older kin) were dependent on their ability to earn income.

Similarly, women in the older-aged cohort contextualized their CSI involvement within the larger problem of poverty, many of them having ushered their own daughters and nieces into the CSI, despite their disinclination to do so. However, the *necessity* of the work did not equate to *approval* of the work. In fact, a number of those in the middle- and older-aged cohorts spoke of the CSI with disdain and hopes of change, insisting that the work should stop and that girls be educated. "I wish God to give me more choices, to get rid of this bad profession," Poonam (25) said,

feeling that change should have happened before she was chosen to enter the CSI and echoing sentiments of others who expressed determination to keep their daughters and younger sisters out of the line. Participants collectively insisted things should change. In Kalindi's (48) words, "Community is unable to understand this [the need for change]. I hope that community should change." Gitali (50) too insisted, "I don't like this. I tell them all." However, despite expressing a *desire* for change, most in the older cohort, especially, regretfully acknowledged that change was unlikely. "We think that this shouldn't be continued," Ramsa (55) said, "Boys should earn, girls shouldn't be kept [for CSI work], but it's not like that." Similarly, "I can't see any change in our community;" Bakul (43) said regretfully, then continued "it can rise but it can't fall."

Table 1. Demographic Data.

Variable	*Total Sample N=31 Mean SD (range)*	*Cohort 1 n=11 Mean SD (range)*	*Cohort 2 n=13 Mean SD (range)*	*Cohort 3 n=7 Mean SD (range)*
Age	31.6 5.1 (16–650	18.9 1.4 (17–22)	29.3 3.0 (25–40)	54.8 8.5 (42.5–65)
Formally Educated (n)	18	8	5	3
Years of education	3.5 3.5 (2–10)	7.6 1.4 (5–10)	5.6 2.2 (2–8)	3.2 1.6 (2–5)
Mothers (n)	22	5	11	5
Total children	44	5	16	23
Number children ca.	2.2 2.9 (1–8)	1	1.45 .4 (1–2)	4.8 3.1 (1–8)
Mean child age (yrs)	11.3 14.6 (9 mos.–44)	2 (9 mos.–5.5)	9.5 3.2 (2–16)	** (10–44)
Child sex (F/M)	22/23	¼	10/9	11/10
CSI				
Age entry	15.8 1.8 (12–20 yrs.)	16.2 1.2 (13–18 yrs.)	14.3 1.5 (11–17 yrs.)	16.5 2.1 (15–20 yrs.)
Years in CSI	15.7 6.7 (1–36 yrs.)	2.8 2.0 (1–6 yrs.)	14.9 5.8 (10–20 yrs.)	29.4 8.6 (22–36 yrs.)

Mean, SD and range included for all continuous variables.
** Insufficient data.

8.2.1. Reframing

Noteworthy is that members of cohort three often reframed their circumstances to fit with perceived ideas of social-acceptability. Shriya (57), emphasized that there are "two types of Bedias" – those that get married and those who go through a Sardhakai[7] and work in the industry—then stated: "I am also married. I have never been in this profession." Follow-up with Samvedna staff, however, revealed the contrary; Shriya did indeed have a long history of CSI involvement. She was not alone in "reframing." Many in the older cohort referred to intimate partners as "husband" or indicated that they or other female family members participated only minimally in the CSI or that their work was limited to one customer only.

Moreover, members of Cohort 3 frequently insisted that work in the CSI was different in their time and that they were very different from the young girls currently involved – complaining that contemporarily, girls entered the CSI at younger ages, entertained more customers, and faced more trouble than they had as young women. Kalindi (48) explained, "At our time it wasn't like this. One to two customers only." Likewise, Mala (65) explained, "[The] thing is, earlier it was more about dancing, and things would go ahead only if there is a connection [an attraction to the client] … but nowadays it [is] all about the profession, there is just prostitution." Ramsa (55) further noted that the quality and behavior of customers had declined over time. "[The girls] are helplessly enduring," she said, adding, "Now father comes, son also comes." Despite the oldest participants' *beliefs* that females were entering the CSI at younger ages, the demographic data (refer to Table 1) suggest otherwise. In fact, the average age of entry for those in cohort 1 and 3 were nearly indistinguishable (average age of CSI entry 16.2 vs. 16.5, for cohorts 1 and 3 respectively).

8.3. Personal loss

Although all participants expressed no alternative to entering the profession and collectively normalized their circumstances, participants often spoke of crushed hope for a different life path. "I wanted to study and get married," Salila (19) said, echoing a regret commonly expressed

7 A ceremony marking a Bedia girl's formal entry into the CSI.

by others. Many spontaneously offered how familial dependence on sex work not only reshaped their life course, it also resulted in numerous personal losses including love, claim to land, and social status. "My life is already ruined," Sarassa said, describing a sense of hopelessness despite her mere 25 years of age. Her feelings were reiterated by many. Kalindi (48) summarized her CSI entry from two decades earlier by saying "My life was shattered," and then, "It's destiny. What can I do?" Despite reticence to their life's "destiny" several expressed hope that change would cultivate options to the CSI for females in the future or solace in contributing to their family's situation. Poignantly, Bhadra (18) explained: "I had thought that if by ruining my life I can make my family's life better, then what's the problem in ruining one life?".

Research Question 2: How do CSI-involved Bedia describe their support systems and does perceived support change through time?

8.4. Support from Peers and Kin

Despite expectations, questions pertaining to the presence of close relationships that consistently drew dispassionate, matter-of-fact responses. Even amongst the youngest cohort, supportive relationships did not seem to exist, as illustrated by both Ramani (20) "I don't have any friends whom I can share my feelings with. Even if I tell someone it won't reshape my life and I won't be able to quit this field" and Neha (18), "No one is there…". These sentiments were echoed by the majority of participants, *regardless* of cohort. As a member of the middle cohort, Kavya (30) explained, "[There is] no one…. If I would have a friend, then [they] would have supported me…I am living my life alone." When probed further about "friendships" with others she responded, "… whoever has the pain [of CSI entry] needs to bear it; others are not going to take it." Similarly, Sarasssa (25) said, "I don't consider anyone my friend," and Vedha (29), "I have no one, I just drink some and be done with it." The oldest cohort felt similarly. For instance, Mala (65) rhetorically asked: "So even if I get angry who would I talk to? Even if I would be beaten up, who would I talk to?" The *loneliness* of a life devoid of emotional fortification from others was evident when Raadha (65) asserted, "I don't talk to anyone…I just sit silently." She then explained

that the burden of CSI work is a solitary endeavor: "Even now I can't talk about problems with anyone, because I am the eldest, I still feel weight on my head." Among the 31 participants, few exceptions were found. Two women indicated having peers that they talked and/or danced with, and three others mentioned female kin (e.g., cousin, sister) as people they could talk to. However, even these relationships were described impassively. Raya (26), whose cousin also worked in the industry, said simply, "I can share with her." And, although Mitali (30) first indicated having "no one in particular" to talk to, she then added, "My sister is there, we talk amongst ourselves."

8.5. Intimate partners as support

Numerous participants described current (n = 18) or former (n = 3) involvement in a "love marriage." Love marriages were described as informal commitments between CSI-involved Bedia females and male partners that endure through time—sometimes for decades—in the absence of legal status. In all cases of love marriage, the male partners were of a higher caste, resided in other communities, and were typically legally married to non-Bedia women of their own caste. However, despite its name, *love* was not a necessary component to enter into—nor remain in—a love marriage. To illustrate, when asked about the presence of "love" in her long-term relationship, Sarassa (25) replied: "No, it's not like that … no love, he [just] gives money." And, at just 20 years of age, Sudevi had entered a love marriage with a wealthy man twice her age. He supported her entire family so that she would not be with any other men. Yet, when asked if she was in love, Sudevi quickly replied "no." Entering a "love marriage" seemed to be an aspiration as it meant financial support—and the concomitant ability to exit (or significantly reduce time in) the CSI—as well as improved social status. Mishka (22) explained: "In our community, [if we could] we would do love marriage and he would take us [financially support us] for our lifetime." Similarly, when asked when she would exit the CSI, Manali (19) responded, "When I find someone good [love marriage] … it depends on luck."

On the other hand, for Bedia women tasked with financially supporting their kin, enduring relationships based on love alone (i.e., in the *absence* of financial gain), were destined to failure. Ramani (20) provided a case in point when she professed to having been "in love" for several

years; however, the relationship ended. She explained, "I felt that if he can't help me [financially] then what's the benefit of such friendship? So, I left him." This was reiterated by Avni (30) who also revealed that although she was in love with a man who wanted to be with her, he couldn't (or wouldn't) commit the monetary support she needed and she therefore had to distance herself from him. "What [value is] there in love, no one lasts," she said. And, despite participating in a love marriage for more than 20 years, Padma (~34) somberly shared, "Whoever is in this profession, she has to kill all her desires. She has to leave her love."

Those in the oldest cohort felt similarly. In fact, a few laughed outright when asked about "love", stating, "What love?" or "Where is time for love?" Not experiencing love did not mean such relationships were not wanted. Raadha (65) explained, "I wanted to [get married/find love] but what could I do? I didn't have any choice." And, despite having met someone she wanted to marry, Ramsa (55) explained: "I wasn't allowed to get married. He lived in his house and I lived in mine." Bakul (45) had entertained hopes of getting married or falling in love, but flatly explained that she had never once been in love; customers were simply customers—a means to an end.

Although far from typical, several in the oldest cohort described love marriages comprised of financial support *as well as* respect, appreciation, and shared living arrangements negotiated in tandem with their partner's legal wife. Gitali (50), as one, had been with her partner since her Sardhakai ceremony (age 15). And, despite being legally married and having a child, this man spent significant funds on medical expenses trying to successfully address Gitali's infertility; he also built her a temple where she could pray. Similarly, Mala (65) described being taken with the honesty, behavior and 'aura' of her intimate partner—a man whom she met as a customer 30 years earlier. She proclaimed: "[Our love] will go to heaven." Kalindi (48) described a similar relationship with the man who paid for her Sardhakai. "We connected and lived together," she explained. "He has a good heart."

Research Question 3: To what extent do typical life-course transitions including education attainment and motherhood, differ through time among CSI-involved Bedia?

Research question three was addressed through analyses of both demographic and interview data. Although the sample was too small for cross-cohort statistical comparisons, examination of trends through time revealed two noteworthy trends. First, although only 18 participants (58%) had received *any* formal education, the data suggest an upward trend in both the number of women receiving education (three in cohort 3 vs. five in cohort 2 vs. eight in cohort 3) as well as the average number of years of exposure to formal education (average years of formal education = 7.6 [cohort 1], 5.6 [cohort 2], and 3.2 [cohort 3]). Second, there was a dramatic reduction in the average number of children per participant between the oldest and middle-aged cohorts (χ = 4.8 vs. 1.45 children each, respectively) suggesting increased reproductive control through time. Noteworthy too, is that despite Agrawal's (2008) contention that Bedia prefer female children; demographic data provide no evidence that Bedia engage in sex-selective procedures to ensure female births. In fact, the ratio of female-to-male children has remained consistent *across* all three cohorts.

Interview data provided further insight into challenges faced by Bedia, generally speaking, and Bedia females in particular. To illustrate, it was discovered that access to school was difficult—for women of all cohorts. For instance, primary schools did not exist in all villages when Cohort 3 participants were school-age; travel to a distant village was impossible without a form of transportation. Ramsa (55) simply stated why she had not received any formal education: "There was no school here…children of the village had to go to Najirabad [distant village] for study." Four decades later–by the time Cohort 1 participants were school-age, primary schools existed in all Bedia villages. However, secondary schools did not. Thus, accessibility continued to be problematic. Neha (18) explained: "In village there was only [school] till class 8th and for further education we could go to another village and that was far and no buses went there and we had to walk." Thus, Neha stopped attending school at age 12. Beyond transportation issues, familial *willingness* to allow female children to attend school depended on their acknowledging the value of education *as well as* having the financial means to survivor *without* income that the girl could earn through work in the CSI. Again, Ramsa (55) provides a case in point. When asked if her family allowed her to go to school, she simply replied "no." Instead, she explained, she

began "dancing"[8] at 10 years of age—and thus her journey into the CSI. Family approval for education was not limited to those in the oldest cohort. In fact, those in Cohort 1 faced similar educational barriers. Ramani (20) provides a case in point. With 10 years of school attendance, she was the most educated of all participants. However, she was forced to leave school at age 15 because, she explained, "[Aunt] said to me 'you have studied enough, now you have to come to this profession [CSI]'." At 57 years of age, Shriya was angry because many challenges—beyond familial approval and financial need—prevented Bedia girls from being educated and these issues had existed for decades. She explained, "There are so many problems. There is no electricity or water in the village. There is a school till only class 5th. Girl child can't travel. When girls will grow up, they can't go farther. There are no jobs and all. These are the problems that they are facing." When asked who was responsible for addressing those problems— central or local government, she quickly replied: "Local government," and then stated, "Sarpanch [village head] can get it done. [But] he is not performing his duties."

With regard to parenting, 22 participants were mothers including five (45%) in cohort 1, 11 (85%) in cohort 2, and five (71%) in the oldest cohort. Childless women in the youngest cohort indicated a desire for children in the future—after finding someone "good". Yet, women did not necessarily select men to be "fathers" to their children. As a case in point, when asked about the father of her child, Prenali (18) simply responded, "Anyone can be a father…there was nothing special about him." This then, raises the question of birth control and "choice" regarding pregnancy among CSI-involved Bedia. Although a few of participants noted that condoms were available, their use for birth control—or the availability of other contraceptives—is unclear. In fact, two participants, both in the middle cohort, had terminated unwanted pregnancies—suggesting contraceptives may not be available to (or used by) all. In contrast, women in the older cohort described having no reproductive choice. Kalindi (48) stated: "If I had known that much [about contraception], I

8 Bedia are famous for the Rai dance—and their performance at weddings and other celebrations is considered auspicious. Thus, Bedia are hired by non- Bedia to perform and can make a considerable income. Rai dancers work in the CSI. Noteworthy: one can be part of the CSI without dancing, but Rai performers are always part of the CSI.

wouldn't have done three children, I would have only done one. I didn't have much knowledge and I didn't have support."

The amount of time participants spent in childcare activities is unknown, although comments from several participants suggest that other family members (e.g., mothers, sisters-in-law) assume the primary parenting role so that CSI-involved women could focus on earning money. Assuming this is the typical pattern, being a mother did not necessitate taking on a parenting role beyond that of providing financial support. Insightfully, Vedha (29) remarked, "Some things make us parents and some things are necessary to live." Having children (especially daughters) was a necessity to live. That is, among the Bedia, children represented financial stability in the future—and were expected to support older family members unable to provide for themselves kin . Without children, one's future was tenuous. Raadha (65), a mother of eight, explained, "Siblings leave when time comes. No one takes care of you in the old times. At least if there are children, they will care about us."

8.5.1. Daughters

Regardless of cohort, none of the participants wanted their own daughters to enter the CSI. Participants frequently mentioned the importance of educating younger siblings and their own children—with a belief that it could break the cycle of intergenerational sex trafficking. To illustrated, Salila (19), who was yet to have children, described her goal as a future mother: "I'll try to provide education [for my children]. I'll do whatever is within my reach." And, in reference to her daughter, Suvali (35) stated, "I want her to study a lot and do something good, do some job…don't come to this line [CSI]." Geta (30) similarly stated, "We will make them [daughters] study…we won't make them like us [work in the CSI]." Aanya (30) mirrored these sentiments, indicating that her children "…should study and become something in life." Ultimately, educating children *required* a source of income —where such income would come from was unclear. Furthermore, it must be noted that, due to caste discrimination as well the absence of industry in the rural Bedia communities, education did not equate to employment.

Marriage also provided an alternative to CSI entry as married females were forbidden from working in the sex economy. Thus, marriage was a path many envisioned for their daughters. For instance, referencing

her own daughter, Avni (30) remarked: "No, I don't want her involved [in CSI]. If I'll have something then I'll get her married, but I don't want to bring her into this line." Likewise, referring to her twin toddler girls, Sarassa (25) said, "We [she and her parents] will get them married… what I have gone through, I won't let them feel." However, marriage eliminated daughters as potential sources of income; to get daughters married *necessitated* having enough financial resources that this source of income could be "forfeited." This may explain then, why so many spoke with pride about having married daughters—it meant that they had earned enough to *guarantee* they would never have to enter the line.

Often however, and in spite of their best efforts, participants' desires to keep daughters out of the sex industry diminished with time. Shriya (57), for instance, initially denied that her daughter worked in the CSI, but regretfully explained, "[We] had no choice. We didn't have land or property. We used to do labor work. So, we had to make her work [in the CSI]. For 14–15 years we kept her, we wanted her married, but couldn't." Raadha (65) similarly lamented how she never wanted her daughter to walk the "thorny" path she had been on, but after her son was killed, she had no choice, stating, "I borrowed money to eat." It should be noted that the desire or ability for male Bedia to earn money is unknown—although statements by some (such as Raadha) *suggest* men contributed financially, statements from others cast doubt. For instance, one participant remarked: "I have two daughters. *If* the boy gets a job, then I won't push my daughters in this profession; otherwise, I'll have no choice" [emphasis added]. While another explained how men claimed to "labor" in the fields, whereas in reality, agricultural work was for food sources, not income.

9. Discussion

Framed by the life course developmental theory, the goal of this investigation was to examine the experiences of CSI-involved Bedia across the lifespan—from CSI entry to exit—with attention to social relationships and normative life stage milestones such as education attainment and childbearing. As a theoretical tool, the LCDT allowed for deep contemplation of the life course experiences of CSI-involved Bedia; LCDT principles provide a framework that reveals intellectual insight as well as questions yet to be answered, as discussed below.

9.1. The principles of the LCDT

The *lifespan development* principle of the LCDT addresses individual or ontogenetic time (i.e., chronological aging) and assumes that various developmental stages (e.g., childhood, adolescence, old age) are associated with culturally defined and understood positions, roles, and social status. Interpreting the data through the lens of this principle, noteworthy points emerged. First, formal education is neither assumed nor compulsory among the Bedia. Children *may* attend school, or they may not; if they attend, it *may* be for a year—or for five or six years. Among the Bedia, extended years of formal education is not expected and life experiences are often contingent upon family sustenance. Despite education described as a "birthright" by the UN Secretary General—this aspiration is yet to be achieved on a global scale (United Nations, 2015). Indeed, formal education plays a *minimal* role in the lives of Bedia children and youth. Yet, as demonstrated here, formal education attainment appears to be trending upward. This is great news—but cannot be sustained without *access* to—and parental support of—education. Samvedna, the partner NGO for this investigation, has as its mission the eradication of sexual exploitation of Bedia girls via education. In 2012, Samvedna launched a unique program to help educate Bedia children *outside of their rural villages* in Bhopal, the capital city of Madya Pradesh. An urban-based education was deemed critical in order to overcome quality, infrastructure, and accessibility issues notorious in rural Indian village environments. Challenges to the program are many and include: cost (e.g., fees, books, uniforms, and housing), removing children from their familiar village environments (e.g., culture shock, loneliness, caste-based discrimination), and convincing families to allow their children to attend urban school—including the potential income lost from female children not entering the CSI. Funded primarily by a handful of donors, the program's ability to initiate broader initiatives that could enhance student success (e.g., peer mentoring, counseling services) and the ability to engage in on-going evaluation processes necessary for optimal programming is severely limited. The evaluation and expansion of additional programming—aimed at eradicating the root causes of caste-based sex trafficking—is clearly warranted.

Personal agency is another LCDT principle. In this investigation, CSI entry, regardless of cohort, resulted in a *singular focus*: earning income.

This profound responsibility consumed participants' lives and—as a result—guided all decision-making, including deeply personal life choices such as intimate partner selection and childrearing. Simply stated, *familial* financial needs took precedence over all *personal* interests or aspirations. In effect then, rather than life-trajectories becoming more unique and individualized through time based on unique and personal decision-making, the lives of CSI-involved Bedia look *nearly identical from entry to exit.* In the LCDT, Giele and Elder (1998) describe turning points as "life events or transitions that produce a lasting shift in the life course trajectory" (p. 8). Among the Bedia, entry into the CSI is *"the"* (not *"a"*) turning point—it constitutes a milestone marking personal lives as "ruined" and "shattered". This sense of shattered lives did not differ by cohort. However, it must be noted that "agency" was exerted by participants in numerous ways (e.g., entering the CSI so younger sisters would not have to, developing a "love relationship" or not). These results underscore the work of others (see, for instance: Choi & Holroyd, 2007; Parreñas, 2011; Sanders, 2005) who document efforts made by women in the CSI to improve their lives and the lives of their loved ones—in spite of myriad structural and contextual barriers.

Because of the decisive role that income generation plays among the Bedia, we expected to find social status associated with CSI-involved women due to their primary role as economic providers. This expectation was unfounded—to a certain extent. Although many participants often expressed feelings of having little social status and concern for their future well-being (once exited from the CSI), they did control family income. Questions about money—and its role in influencing women's agency and social power—is a question worth exploring among those whose CSI-entry is bound in culture, context, and caste-based norms (e.g., Nat, Devadasi, Perna). Moreover, little is known about female kin who perform critical familial work (i.e., unmarried sisters and sisters-in-law). Further investigation into the status associated with these important female roles is warranted. This line of inquiry leads to additional questions regarding *male* Bedia. In particular, do defined roles exist for male Bedia and, if so, what are they? And, how are Bedia males socialized to perform those roles (assuming they exist)?

Historical time and place, the LCDT's third principle, allowed nuanced interpretation of data as well. In particular, despite oldest cohort participants believing girls were entering the CSI at much younger ages

than in prior decades, age of CSI entry *did not differ perceptibly across generations*. This is good news as well. However, there is no doubt that caste-based commercial sex work constitutes *child sex trafficking.* Acknowledging this unique form of sex trafficking—within the broader academic base—is critical for prevention. However, we urge resistance against over-simplification of deeply complex cultural processes embedded within contexts characterized by vulnerability and deprivation. That is, when entry into the commercial sex industry is *intergenerational, normative,* and situated within *resource-poor* communities—as is the case among the Bedia—intervention of any sort will likely be deeply complicated by culture, context, and familial relationships. Working *with* community partners is critical to sustained change.

For all intents and purposes, lives of CSI-involved women have changed little across time. Yet, notions of what *could be*—hope for a different future for children—resounded among those in the youngest cohort. Those participants, in particular, were still optimistic that their actions and economic contributions will be enough to prevent future generations from having to enter the line. Older participants—those in both the middle and oldest cohorts, reported little optimism for change. Their perspectives were from looking backward – a view colored by generations of disappointment and anticipation of economic alternatives that failed to materialize. To date, NGO efforts to develop alternative economic initiatives (e.g., weaving, tailoring, animal husbandry) among the Bedia or other similar castes (e.g., Perna, Nat) have been largely unsuccessful (see Baruah, 2019; Prabhu, 2016; Rana et al., 2020) because earnings from these endeavors fail to compete with what Bedia girls can earn in the commercial sex trade.

In this study, marriage and maternity among CSI-involved women were of particular interest in the context of *timing,* or the sequencing of age-related roles. CSI participation, per se, did not appear to alter women's childbearing, but instead had profound implications for their "parenting." Among the Bedia, childrearing tasks appear to be performed mainly by female kin (e.g., yet unmarried sisters, sisters-in-law); leaving CSI-involved women the singular focus of earning money. Because of this cultural prescript, the role of CSI involved Bedia women *as mothers* is not clear. Questions remain regarding their relationships with their own children, through time, as well as their relationships with female kin who (presumably) provide maternal care to their children.

Examination of CSI-involved women's intimate partnerships across cohorts revealed intimate relationship patterns dictated by *life-stage* and *earning ability*. Specifically, women in the younger and middle cohort groups—those whose life mission is to earn money and support kin—fashioned intimate relationships primarily on *financial support*. In fact, "love marriage" based on *financial* support, and perhaps also an emotional connection, appeared common among the Bedia. In fact, many aspired to such an arrangement, regardless of the male's legal marriage to another. To be clear, "love marriages" exist in numerous countries of the world (Allendorf, 2013; Epstein et al., 2013; Xiaohe & Whyte, 1990) and may, in fact, be increasing in prevalence in parts of Asia, Africa and the Middle East (Allendorf & Pandian, 2016; Rubio, 2014). Globally, the notion of love marriage is contrasted against "arranged" marriage—and refers to mate selection based on personal choice and emotional/physical attraction rather than *familial* choice emphasizing demographic similarity (i.e., education, income, caste, religion, culture; Epstein et al., 2013). Contrasted against global norms, "love marriage" as manifest among the Bedia is uniquely distinct due to low expectations for emotional connection, strong reliance on financial support, and navigating one's partner's relationship with wife and children. Intimate partner dynamics—including those of CSI-involved Bedia women involved in "love marriages", warrant further investigation.

Finally, within the LCDT, *interdependent and linked lives* asserts that actions, behaviors, and choices made by one person reverberate with significant consequences to others, through time. We were particularly interested in the role of social support and its potential for promoting resilience among CSI-involved women. In contrast to expectations, participants rarely spoke of supportive relationships. Although reliance on others for assistance (e.g., emotional, informational, financial) was not often discussed—even when asked directly—support was, it should be noted, present. For instance, sisters-in-law perform tremendously critical family labor (cooking, caring for children) and male partners were sometimes mentioned as meaningful financial, and even sometimes emotional, providers. The beneficial effects of social support are well-documented (see for instance: Brakša-Žganec & LipovČan, 2018; Burnes et al., 2018; Fuller et al., 2020; Siedlecki et al., 2014); so too are deleterious effects from *lack of* social support (see Wang et al., 2018 for a systematic review). In fact, Sergin and Passalacqua (2010) describe how

poor social support, especially perceptions of loneliness, can "accelerate the rate at which physiological resilience erodes and health problems develop" (p. 314). Although participants were undoubtedly self-reliant and resourceful, informal support was also evident, even if not spontaneously described by participants. Investigations point to the powerful role of social capital in resource-poor communities (Combinido, 2018; Hawkins & Maurer, 2010; Saegert et al., 2001). Further research exploring the informal systems of support—and its impact on psycho-social well-being and resilience—among this and similar populations (e.g., Nat, Devadasi) is warranted.

10. Legal definitions and lived experiences

It is worthy reiterating that, based on the *legal* definition put forth by the Palermo Protocol (and ratified by the Indian government), anyone who enters the commercial sex industry prior to age 18 is considered a victim of sex trafficking, regardless of *how* entry ensued (choice, coercion, force, etc…). From a legal point of view, only three participants were not *implicitly* victims of sex trafficking due to age of entry into the CSI. Two were members of the oldest cohort and one a member of the youngest. Each entered the CSI upon the exit of an older female relative; entry was necessitated by financial need and family wellbeing. All were aware of their pending entry prior to its occurrence and none were physically forced or held against their will. But, were they "coerced"? It certainly depends on how "coercion" is interpreted and applied; lack of definitional clarity is a primary critique of the Palermo Protocol (and other anti-trafficking documents, for that matter). From a legal perspective, the situation of the Bedia raises important questions (and highlights) the ridiculousness of applying simplistic definitions to complex life experiences. Does it really matter—in a real world sense— whether or not those three women are "legally" considered victims of sex trafficking or not? To what extent does the "victim of sex trafficking" label impart anything of value or induce harm to Bedia women or those of other castes who regularly participate in the commercial sex industry? Clearly, these are rhetorical questions meant to unearth the nuances of—and reiterate the need for—on-going cross-cultural qualitative research investigating extremely complex

and varied manifestations of "sex trafficking" among underserved and difficult-to-access populations.

11. Limitations

Interpretation of the data should be made with research limitations in mind. First, although we took efforts to create age-graded cohorts that could represent the life-course of CSI-involved Bedia, our stratification is imperfect and gives rise to challenges in interpreting data both within and between cohorts. On the one hand, chronological age did not necessarily relate to years in the CSI. That is, based on age of CSI entry, women within the same cohort could have vastly different experiences based on years of CSI involvement. On the other hand, participants of differing cohorts were not, in some cases, much different in chronological age (e.g., a year or two). Nonetheless, we feel our goal has been achieved and that the data reflected through cohort groups reveals important lifecycle experiences. Notably, perspectives from non-CSI-involved Bedia (females and males) were not included in this investigation, such information could fill important gaps in understanding and knowledge.

12. Conclusion

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948 (Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights [OHCHR], n.d.). The 30 Articles of the UDHR are clear, indivisible and interdependent, with Article 1 proclaiming: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" (OHCHR, n.d.). For 70 years then—a time frame encompassing the lives of all participants in this study–indemnifiable, inalienable, and universal rights to equality, to education, to own property, and to an adequate standard of living—to name but a few—have guided international law, policy, and practice. Yet, caste discrimination, gender inequality, indigence, and severely circumscribed assess to education and employment *preordain* females–across the globe–to a life of drudgery as participants of the commercial sex trade. Caste-based prostitution is *not hidden, not a recent manifestation, not an anomaly* and *is not unique to India.* Although the factors

which allow caste-based forced prostitution to thrive are complex, they *can* be addressed if a collective of change-makers (i.e., policy-makers, service providers, human rights advocates) choose to do so.

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