



# **“*All in the name of love*”: Understanding the relationship between female sex workers and their intimate partners**

## **Findings from a participatory research in North Karnataka, India**

**Parinita Bhattacharjee, Raghavendra T, Mahesh Doddamane, Dr. Sapna Nair and Dr. Shajy Isac**

Parallel session III, Epidemiology and responses

Sexual Violence Research Initiative (SVRI)

15<sup>th</sup> September 2015

SAMVEDANA PLUS | Preventing Intimate Partner Violence Against Female Sex Workers



UNIVERSITY  
OF MANITOBA



# Context



- Project is implemented in Bagalkot district, Karnataka state, South India
- District Population > 1.7 million
- FSW > 4000, 80% are from the rural areas, belong to SC/ ST and have been dedicated to sex work as *Devadasis*
- HIV prevalence among FSW is 34.3 %, while state average is 5.5 %
- HIV prevalence among clients is 13%, the highest in the state





- 60% of FSW have at least one intimate partner
- 80% of these partnerships had started off as commercial sex partnerships
- Condom use in these relationships is low(40%) and violence is high (25%)  
This increases risk and vulnerability to HIV
- Current HIV prevention targeted interventions with FSWs do not address this risk and vulnerability

# Objective of the exploratory research



- To understand the relationship between sex workers and their intimate partners and the drivers of violence and condom use in these intimate relationships





The qualitative study was conducted in two separate, three-day residential workshops with 31 female sex workers (FSWs) and 37 intimate partners (IPs).

- The study used five **Participatory Learning and Action** tools with FSWs and six tools with IPs
  - **‘Exploratory Tools’** were used for observation and reflection on experiences
    - Symbols
    - Venn Diagram
    - Hopes and Fears
  - **‘Analysis Tools’** were used to explore relationships, and identify linkages and perceptions
    - Octopus Diagram
    - Problem Tree
    - Ballot Box
- The writings, drawings and other outputs from the tools were analysed and interpreted along with the FSWs and IPs. Their comments and observations during each of the analyses sessions were noted

## With FSW

- FSW groups were divided based on age
- FSWs initially found the use of a pen, drawing and expressing their views on a paper challenging. Preferred verbal expressions
- Some of them started using pen and paper on the second day, which motivated and encouraged others to do the same
- Most of them preferred one to one sharing with facilitators than in a group specially on the topic of condom use

## With Intimate Partners

- IP groups were divided on the bases of their age and marital status
- Most IPs had higher literacy levels and preferred writing about their experiences rather than expressing through drawings
- They were also more open to group discussions
- They appreciated the workshop as they expressed that they rarely got an opportunity to discuss about their feelings



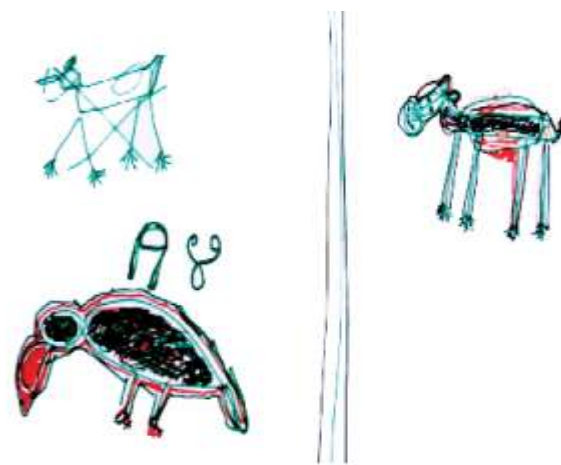
# FINDINGS OF THE EXPLORATORY RESEARCH



# Perception of self and intimate partner



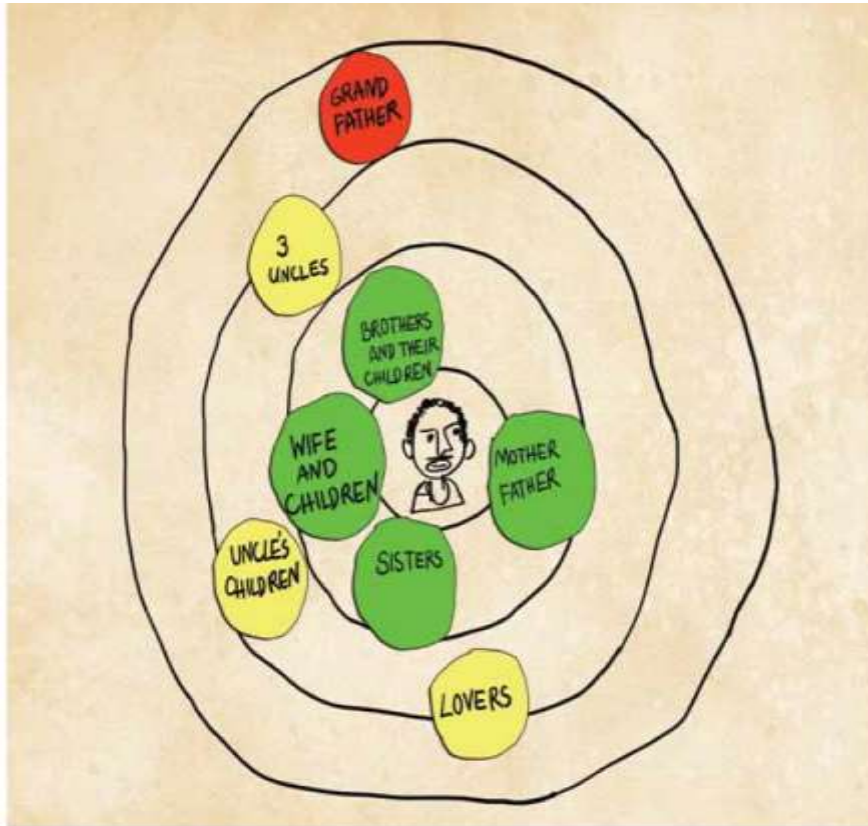
*“My lover is very cunning and follows me wherever I go just like a dog. When he is angry, he wants to bite me and destroy me at any cost...I feel like a parrot and want to fly freely.” - FSW, 22 years*



Most FSWs' relationships with their IPs were marked by signs of insecurity, fear and violence although they described 'love' as the foundation of these relationships

Most FSWs perceived their IPs' as 'husbands', and their relationship with them as equivalent to a marital relationship

# Importance of the relationship



Venn diagram by a Intimate partner, 37 years old

- FSW lovers were placed in the inner and bigger circles of the Venn Diagram, by about half of the IPs, indicating the high importance of these lovers in their lives. Majority of these IPs were unmarried
- Most of the married IPs placed their family members in the inner and larger circles, and assigned them greater importance than their FSW lovers. Parents, brothers, and/or wives and children got priority over the FSW lovers

# Ideal images of the relationship



## Intimate Partners

- *“Both my wife and my lover have to be loyal to me. If I ever come to know that my lover is going with other men, I will kill her.”* - Married IP, 25 years
- Images showed that both wives and FSW lovers were expected to be loyal, possess a good character, dress ‘decently’ and be caring.
- Duties of caring for children and family were expected of wives and not of lovers.
- Though FSW lovers were expected to primarily provide sexual satisfaction, pleasure and even romance.

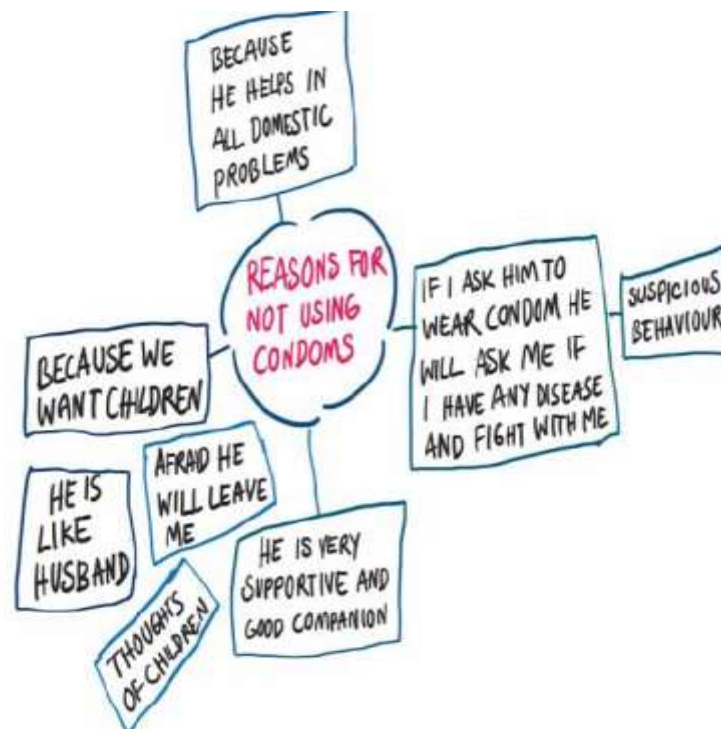


## Female Sex Workers

- *“When he is with his wife, he does not respond to my calls as he fears his wife and parents will come to know that I had called. He calls when he comes out. He lies to me saying that he was at the bus top and does not openly say that I am at my wife’s place. This behaviour affects my trust as I know for sure that he is with his wife.”* - FSW, 25 years
- For FSWs“, ideal IPs were those who:
  - were responsible for their children
  - cared for the FSWs’ parents in their old age
  - publicly acknowledged FSWs as their wives
  - accompanied them to the temple
  - treated FSWs and wives alike



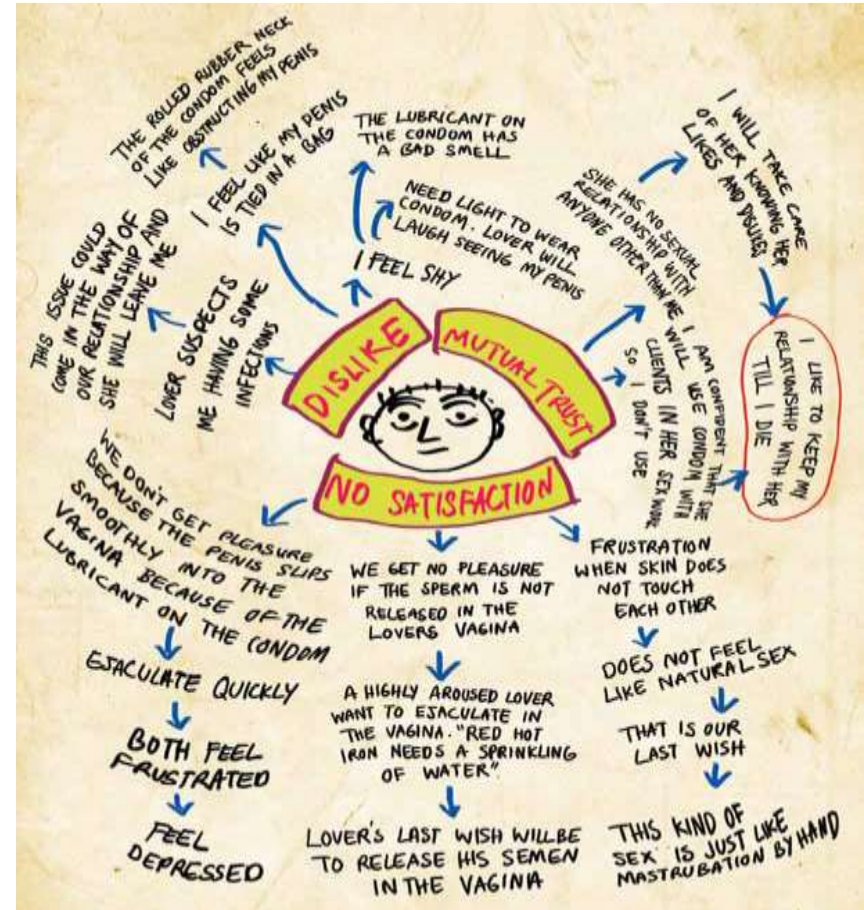
- *“My intimate partner does not get satisfaction if he uses a condom. He says that he is my regular partner and hence has a right to have sex with me without a condom.”* - FSW, 20 years
- Non use of condoms were due to:
  - Deep love and trust in their partner
  - Desire for children
  - Fear that she will lose his goodwill
  - Fear that the partner will become suspicious
  - Fear of actual violence and harassment from partners





## Intimate Partners

- *“I have used condom with my lover when I used to go to her as a client. But now that I am her lover, I do not feel the necessity to use condoms as I trust that she will not have sex with anyone else other than me.”* - IP, 36 years
- Non use of condoms were due to:
  - Non use being considered a privilege as intimacy and love made the relationship superior to client–sex worker relationships
  - Trust and love
  - Perception of condoms as a barrier to sexual pleasure and as being cumbersome





## Female Sex Worker

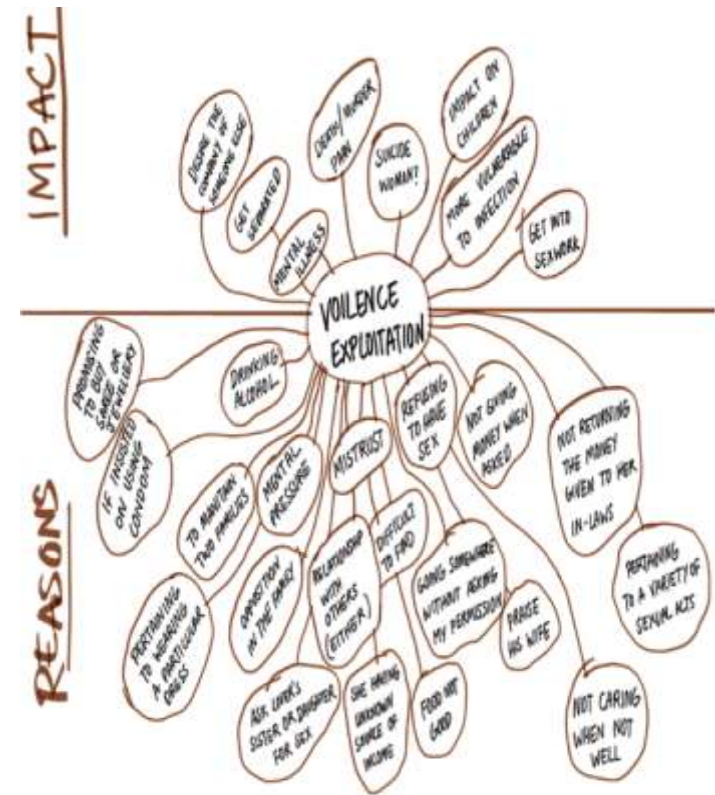
- *“I had gone for training for 3-4 days, he asked me where I had gone, and whom I met and what did I do there. He was not satisfied with my answer so he asked me to prove my love towards him by putting my hand in the boiling oil. He said if my hand does not burn, then only it will mean I truly love him.” - FSW, 33 years*
- Insecurities, suspicion and jealousies constitute one set of causes of violence in intimate partner relationships





## Intimate Partners

- “Sometimes, I see that she has more money. When I ask her where she got this money from, she stammers and lies. She sure had fun with other men! When I have told her that I will take care of her, why should she do all this (sex) work? So I get angry and pick up a fight. Then I will naturally look for someone else, no?” - IP, 36 years
- A sense of superiority give IPs sanction to use violence over the FSWs
- Suspicion and mistrust triggered violence in these relationships





## Female Sex workers

- FSWs had various fears, including:
  - losing their partner and violence in these relationship
  - being caught by their partner while entertaining clients
  - contracting diseases such as HIV from their IPs
- Despite the fears and presence of violence in these relationships, FSWs hope for a ‘romantic future’, where the intimate partners would love them and look after them ‘forever’ or ‘till the end’.





# Hopes and fears



## Intimate Partners

- IPs had various fears, including:
  - estrangement and breakdown of their relationship with their FSW lover
  - Fear that breakdown will lead to alcohol addiction, or encourage them to become violent with their FSW lovers
  - being compelled to use condoms, while others feared contracting HIV from their FSW lovers
- IPs also hoped for a romantic future with their FSW lovers. Some hoped to marry them, have children and live together with them forever.



# Conclusion



- Intimate partner relationships are extremely complex and emotional
- The feelings of jealousy, need, anger are intertwined with love, dependence
- These relationships are mostly unequal and are embedded in social and cultural norms around gender roles, masculinity, fidelity and the acceptance of violence against women
- Programmes to prevent HIV or violence against FSWs must recognise the complex nature of intimate partner relationships, as distinct from commercial, paid relationships and need to include interventions with their IPs
- Prevention efforts must centre around empowerment of women, transformation of social and cultural norms around gender and violence and ending the acceptance of violence against women



# Project Samvedana Plus



- **Samvedana plus** aims to reduce partner violence and increase condom use in the intimate partnerships of female sex workers living in Bagalkot district, Karnataka, India
- Reaching 800 FSW and their intimate partners in 47 villages
- Project period : 2015 - 2017

# Acknowledgement



The sex workers and their intimate partners in Bagalkot district and the intervention and research team of Samvedana Plus



# Thank you



[bhattacharjee.parinita@gmail.com](mailto:bhattacharjee.parinita@gmail.com)

<http://strive.lshtm.ac.uk>

