

Lived Experience of Victims of Human Trafficking for Sex Work in India: Liminality Within Rehabilitation Process

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Abstract: The paper focuses on the lived experience of female victims of human trafficking in the sex industry in India, analysing the phenomenon through the lens of liminality. The research combines the obtained data together with the theoretical concepts of liminality through which the daily reality of survivors living in Rehabilitation centre with focus on their transformative period and liminality is depicted. The study is based on field research conducted in 2022 and 2023 in Mumbai and Delhi in selected NGOs and its rehabilitation centres and adjacent RLAs. The submitted contribution is based on research for a dissertation within the framework of doctoral studies.

Keywords: Liminality, Sex Work, Human Trafficking, Intersectionality, Reintegration, India

1. Introduction

The presented research aims to describe and explain the lived experience of liminality among women who became victims of human trafficking for sex work in India, as part of the process of adaptation and acculturation after rescue. The critical period from rescue – i.e., from the voluntary or forced departure from the Red Light Area (RLA; urban districts consisting of brothels) – through their entire stay at an NGO undergoing rehabilitation, and finally to their departure from this organization leading to financial and social independence, is examined in the research.

This period was chosen deliberately because it is a time frame in which the participants find themselves in a very specific situation. They are no longer part of their old life in the RLA (physical, economic and social relations are completely interrupted), and at the same time they are not yet part of the "new" society they are expected to join. This period is characterized by limbo, which is accompanied by uncertainty, unclear plans, and changing circumstances, which is typical for refugees or groups going through the reintegration process. During this time, women may find themselves in a transitional stage or in a state of liminality (Turner, 1969; Gennep, 1960). The research focuses on the analysis of the experiences of victims of human trafficking and recognition of experienced layers of liminality – spatial, legal and social. Special focus is given to the shift and reconstruction of identity within this process. The research combines the obtained data with theoretical concepts of liminality, which define the daily reality of survivors living in rehabilitation centres, with a focus on their transformative period and how liminality is depicted.

2. Methodology

The research uses qualitative research methods which makes it possible to focus on the experiences within these reintegration processes and on how social reality is created for a single individual (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 10). In this regard, qualitative research is a great choice for highlighting and giving importance to the participants' own experiences, since research focused on marginal groups mostly uses a quantitative frame. The research goal and the questions that I have chosen bear certain specificity, which is why I decided to combine two research designs: ethnographic and biographical. I chose ethnographic design because it allows me, as a researcher, to become more integrated in the field and participate in various events and activities. For this type of research, in-depth interviews, specifically semi-structured interviews that allow for cognitive flexibility, and participant observation were chosen as the most appropriate techniques.

Field Research took place in 2022 and 2023 in Rehabilitation Centres for Victims of Human Trafficking in India and adjacent Red Light Areas. In Mumbai, a collaboration was established with one NGO, and the research project focused on the RLAs in Ghatkopar and Sonapur. In Delhi the collaboration involved just one NGO, and the selected RLA was GB Road. Two different NGOs with different rehabilitation programs and in different cities were purposefully selected to ensure a more varied sample and to identify possible differences.

3. Socio-economical Background of Human Trafficking

In today's world, human trafficking can be considered one of the most widespread and serious forms of endangering human rights, which is not only a "third world" problem, as it is sometimes mistakenly stated, but

is already part of the grey economy worldwide. The International Labor Organization (ILO) states that the most registered cases are in the Pacific-Asian region, which is closely followed by Africa. Despite all international and domestic efforts to reduce this criminal activity, human trafficking remains one of the most profitable illegal businesses (Mishra, 2013a). The International Labor Organization reports that more than 21 million people worldwide are currently victims of human trafficking and various forms of exploitation (ILO, 2014). The ILO further states that in 2014, the annual revenue of human trafficking as a criminal activity was estimated at 150 billion USD (ILO, 2014), making it second only to the arms trade. Of the total number of victims of human trafficking, only 22% are trafficked within the sex industry, yet all their profits amount to 66% of all human trafficking profit (Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2011). Women thus remain the largest group within sex trafficking, which demonstrates how this criminal act is a gendered crime that exploits the social and economic poverty as well as the vulnerability of women (GAATW, 2020).

3.1 Human Trafficking in India

Asia, especially India, is key country for the sex industry (including sex tourism and sex trafficking), generating immense profits for individuals and entities in the grey economy (pimps, brothels, agencies, etc.) (Huda, 2006). It is estimated that 1 million people become victims of human trafficking in India every year, with domestic trafficking accounting for 90% of this number and only about 10% of victims being smuggled across international borders (Hameed et al 2010, 1 -2). Of this total number, the sex industry employs almost 2 million sex workers, with at least 20% being minors. However, a major caveat is that it is very difficult to present clear numbers and statistics due to insufficient resources to trace and record all victims.

India's fast-growing sex industry occurs due to cheap labour, low wages, enabled child labour and the shrewdness of traffickers to lure women into lucrative job offers. In Indian culture, especially in rural areas, there is a deeply entrenched patriarchy that promotes gender discrimination. Women have diminished access to resources in terms of rights, employment, finance or education thus become more vulnerable to exploitation and human trafficking (Shakya, 2009; Ray, 2008). Human trafficking is largely impacted by migration associated with changes in the labour market or political issues, occurring when women or possibly children from India's periphery and neighbouring countries are forced to migrate in search of livelihood. The best way to understand the situation of human trafficking in the sex industry in India is to view it through an intersectional perspective: as a complex phenomenon involving several different layers and factors that intertwine with each other. Together, these individual layers help shape "structural vulnerability", which conditions the predetermined position of women within the social structure and their susceptibility to exploitation. Such interrelatedness of factors is the starting point for gender-based structural violence which is rooted in cultural understanding of gender, hierarchy, and stigmatization within Indian society.

3.2 Vulnerability Towards Human Trafficking

The following section frames three main groups of intersection factors causing vulnerability towards human trafficking: 1) gender-based violence and discrimination, 2) cultural practices, and 3) socio-economic oppression.

Long-term observance of traditions across generations leads to the creation of a mindset ingrained in the social structure that subjects women to increased levels of vulnerability and violence. Gender discrimination in economic, cultural, and legal terms are happening because of the intersecting vulnerabilities, such as class, caste, ethnicity, religion, economic rank, marital status etc. (Dey & Orton, 2016), through which women are defined.

Violence against women might arise when the relationship is built on the basis of male authority-female submission, where men have the exclusive right of control and authority over women, and this authority is rooted in cultural practices and values (Gangoli, 2007). It is precisely cultural practices and traditions such as family structure, male child preference and subordinacy of women that are the most common origin of violence against women, much more often than the governmental organization of society (Rammonhan, 2004; Vlassoff, 2013; Ray, 2008). Male dominance might lead to cutting off women from resources and access to education. This, along with other barriers that women face in the educational process, increases their vulnerability, reduces financial and social independence, and keeps them socially and formally in thrall to the male household member (Shakya, 2009; Ray, 2008). The biggest barriers in education are faced by girls mainly due to the already described traditional concept of "male child preference", when sending a daughter to school is perceived as a "waste" of resources (Sharma, 2014, p. 13). Thus, gender discrimination in education increases women's vulnerability to poverty, reduces their level of financial stability, and diminishes their social independence. Barriers to basic education originates with a lack of access to higher or professional education, which results in

inequality in the labour market for men and women, and subsequently in the lack of opportunities for financial earnings for women. The resulting economic instability, lack of security, and non-suitable circumstances for women in the labour process and the market fosters a feminization of poverty which leads women into trap of exploitation and trafficking (Ray, 2008). Family dysfunction is also listed as one of the factors contributing to vulnerability to HT, especially within young women and children (Frederick & Basnyat, 2010, p. 13), along with the dowry system (Maitra 2008) and the caste system.

Disadvantaged access to education, capital and working conditions is one of the signs of structural discrimination against women. It is important to look at women's economic poverty as an important factor driving women to enter the sex industry, as a force that keeps them in this system and makes it impossible for them to leave (Chattopadhyay & Mckay 2004). The vast majority of India's population lives below the poverty level, lacking basic necessities such as water, food and shelter. However, women are disproportionately impacted due to the unequal gender imbalance within society and the disparities between men and women in access to resources. Hierarchical positions and traditional gender roles in families make it impossible for women to attend school or learn a skill or trade that could ensure a regular income, either for themselves or for the whole family. Women who are denied access to resources, experience lack of economic opportunities, and experience exploitation through work process are more likely to end up entering (voluntarily or involuntarily) the sex industry.

4. Anti-trafficking Practices and Help

The anti-trafficking approach of governmental authorities and NGOs play a significant role in addressing vulnerability towards exploitation and combating human trafficking. The 3Rs model -- rescue, rehabilitation, reintegration -- used by governmental and non-governmental organizations outlines their connections and tasks. The NGO takes on a role in the reintegration and rehabilitation process and splits its activities into two streams. The first is working with victims of HT with a focus on formal and informal training of victims on financial and social empowerment of women and their families. The other stream is directed into resolving social stigma as an integral component of reintegration and rehabilitation through social and community work which aims to transform social attitudes related to sex work.

Non-profit organizations are usually divided into several separate parts: a Shelter Home (SH), Training Centre (TC), or Rehabilitation Centre (RC), which are sometimes combined with Training Centres. The main task of these cooperating centres is the rehabilitation and reintegration of victims back into society while the mutual cooperation of these centres helps to relieve victims of the psychological, physical and social consequences associated with trafficking. (Pandey et al., 2013; Pandey, 2021) The main goal of the NGO and the adjacent centres is to help victims of human trafficking and prepare them for reintegration back into society and creating a new life. Here, the focus is directly on targeting and solving the causes which lay at the very beginning of human trafficking – poverty, violence against women and gender discrimination.

5. Liminality

Liminality comes from the Latin word *limen* – threshold, which refers to a part of the door, which must be crossed and over-stepped to come from one place to another. The translation of this word fully captures its meaning as a space or status of transition. The first use in anthropology is attributed to Arnold van Gennep, who used the term for the first time in his seminar work *Rites of Passage* (1909), where he defined liminality in connection with the so-called rites of passage. In his concept, these are defined as "a transition from one social and magical-religious position to another" during which there is a change in the status of an individual, or his transition from one state to another, within society, while these rituals accompany every change of place, state, social position and age (Turner, 1969; Gennep 1960). Individual rituals then relate to the phases of human life and represent milestones such as: "birth, childhood, social adulthood, betrothal, marriage, wedding, pregnancy, fatherhood, initiation into religious societies and funerals" (Gennep, 1960). The structure of these rituals is then characterized by three stages, which must be characterized by each transitional ritual. The individual stages are then: pre-liminal, liminal (threshold) and post-liminal (Gennep, 1960).

Turner, who further elaborated this concept, sees the main meaning of the whole concept in the middle liminal phase, which he characterizes as a "halfway" place where persons are neither here nor there. As he explains within the anti-structure (liminal phase) individuals exist between two levels - the old and the new state, in which they find themselves completely without a given status that makes them socially, spatially, and often and legally invisible within the social structure -- respectively referred to as initiates or neophytes (Turner, 1969). As part of the transition, there is also a rebirth and disruption of their identity due to separation from social roles.

Thus, the main feature is the re-evaluation and challenging of social structure and its rules until they are temporarily interrupted. In *Betwixt and Between* (1967), Turner states that in the process of the liminal phase, neophytes are stripped of their social status, all bonds and characteristics, and as part of this they are stripped of their values, norms, feelings, techniques and habits within which they were used to behave, think and feel (Ibid., 105). The liminal phase does not only disrupt the structure but offers a distance from the given structure and thus the possibility to analyse and evaluate relationships, features, and possible change.

6. Liminality Within Human Trafficking

The participants in this study began the journey of liminality by "rite" (Turner, 1969) separation and entering a rehabilitation centre. One of the conditioning characteristics for the selection of participants was voluntary departure from the RLA and entry into the rehabilitation program. The symbolic abandonment of the old life is primarily accompanied by a change in physical and social space in which we can observe signs of experienced liminality. The victims of HT who entered NGO and became beneficiaries, have strictly controlled physical and social contact with the world outside the centre, as well as strictly controlled contact with people and activities associated with their old life in RLA, while still not having access to the new world and the surrounding society into which they are supposed to incorporate. Beneficiaries are thus trapped in many layers of liminality which can be called structural liminality, such as spatial, social, psychological and legal liminality.

6.1 Legal Liminality

Structural liminality is caused, among other things, by their categorization within legal law. Victims of human trafficking who are placed in reintegration centres are labelled as beneficiaries or survivors, but they do not have the status of "full-fledged" citizens, just as they are no longer who they were before entering the centre. They are marked as something different, separating them from the rest of society. Victims thus become a special category, which holds a special place within the law and within the framework of humanitarian aid. Victims of human trafficking who are without social and economic capital find themselves in an even more ambiguous position, thereby worsening their already vulnerable position and worsening the process of acculturation (Bales, 1999). Victims who still haven't found their place and haven't been fully incorporated into the surrounding society are in a state of liminality. They have been labelled "survivors" or "victims" of human trafficking are officially separated from the rest of society and placed in a special group, thereby being trapped in a distinct legal structure. The life of victims is reduced to "bare life", when they are stripped of their political and civic rights while they face a social exclusion. Since sex work is highly illegal in India many women face issues with police authorities, lack of governmental help, unwillingness of legal services, and unclear pathways to humanitarian help. Their legal liminality is created by experienced difficulties and a lack of clarity on legal status which increases their vulnerability not just in the public space, but also within the workplace.

6.2 Spatial Liminality

Landscapes of liminality have one characteristic in common, namely temporality, transition, and threshold (Turner, 1969). Liminal spaces are created and maintained in spaces on the border of illegality and as such takes place on no-place characterized by temporality and shifting spatial relations such as airports, hotels, containers etc. (Andrews, Roberts, 2012). Rehabilitation centres thus represent a physical and symbolic mark of liminality. Beneficiaries are inhabiting a threshold where they have status as beneficiaries yet lack official recognition by government; they receive shelter, yet don't have a permanent home; they've given up their old identity yet haven't created a new one. They exist on the line of visibility and invisibility, which they must cross to gain official recognition by government and society in order to create a new identity. Very similar findings are presented in research focusing on refugees (Danış et al., 2009; Abourahme, 2011; Vrečer, 2010), where the same function is represented by refugee centres when refugees are excluded from the majority society and "prepared" for life in a second or third country. In the same way, the beneficiaries are removed from the outside world and placed in the centre, which are often located in remote or secret places. The main characteristic of these centres is the prohibition of public entry, as well as limited contact of beneficiaries with the public. Beneficiaries are also subject to a number of rules, such as the assistance of employees in making major decisions, the limitation of financial resources, or assistance in case of need for medical assistance.

Such spaces where people reside for a long time with an uncertain time of departure, such as hotels, refugee's camps, and direct provisions (DP) embody a sense of liminality and 'permanent temporariness' for people living there of their situation for participants (Bailey et al., 2002; O'Reilly, 2018). Living under strict rules, being aware

of ephemerality, renouncing autonomy within a Shelter Home or a refugee camp is a daily reminder of existence in between (O'Reilly, 2018). Life in a shelter centre is akin to what is life in "Direct Provision" for refugees. O'Reilly argues that although residents are free to move, come, and go, they still have an obligation to share information about their whereabouts and movement within DP with management. The same conditions are set for beneficiaries within the Shelter Home. Although their stay is set on the principle of voluntariness and withdrawal from the reintegration program is possible at any time, for the duration of the stay the beneficiaries must renounce some of their rights and autonomy over daily activities. All movement within the centres are constantly monitored and it is not possible to leave arbitrarily (only after permission and often in the presence of someone from staff), and daily activities are controlled. Mandatory adherence to rules, attendance, daily programs, and meal plans lead to lack of control over daily activities and decision making (O'Reilly, 2018). Beneficiaries are forced to share a bedroom, with not only overcrowding, but also unsatisfactory living conditions, where mothers share beds with children or sleep on the floor due to insufficient resources. Sharing personal spaces such as a bedroom or bathroom leads to a violation of autonomy, privacy and freedom over small everyday and intimate concerns (O'Reilly, 2018).

Temporality and time in general are an important factor influencing the perception of the feeling of in-between existence. The time spent in a Shelter home, the uncertainty of the outcome and the time of departure builds in insecurity and "permanent temporariness" (O'Reilly, 2018). Although beneficiaries can leave at any time and their departure is constantly kept in mind - the main goal and program of the rehabilitation centre is preparation for departure, beneficiaries may feel the feeling of being stuck, uncertainty, and lack of control over the time and manner of their departure (successful completion of the program).

6.3 NGO as a Waiting Room

Shelter home or Reintegration Centre is not only a formal placement for beneficiaries, but also a temporary "home" (Pandey, 2013; Pandey, 2021). As mentioned above, beneficiaries exist within the physical space of the NGO and the individual centres, so they are in the space of the liminal and therefore temporary. However, recent studies show that there is a danger that individuals can get stuck in these liminal phases. This situation can be compared to that experienced by migrants in a transit country. A similar situation occurs when analysing the limbo state in which refugees coming to Turkey seeking asylum are forced to apply for it in Turkey and then wait for acceptance, rejection, or get stuck in their current situation (Kutlu, 2002). Until their status is legally decided, they are forced to live in limbo, without appropriate legal or social status. This state can lead to passivity, frustration, a feeling of betrayal, or a tendency to "give up".

The fundamental difference between migrants in transit countries and beneficiaries in NGOs is mainly that staying in an NGO is basically voluntary and leaving it is always possible (if the woman's real options are omitted). A similarity can be found in the concept of an NGO as a "waiting room", when in some cases women lack the motivation and effective means to leave. This can happen especially if the NGO does not have fixed rules and a reintegration program to follow; most beneficiaries leave the rehabilitation process within one-three years, depending on personal circumstances. On the other hand, one investigated NGO in Delhi did not provide such strong barriers and did not motivate its beneficiaries to leave early. On the contrary, many of them stayed in the NGO for three years or more. While they planned to leave in the future, they lacked any practical plan or time frame. Lack of practical help, blurred departure time frame, and inability to plan a clear program led to passivity and a sense of loss of control. This condition prevents departure, successfully building one's own life outside the walls of the NGO, and reintegration. On the contrary, it can lead to the creation and internalization of an identity as a survivor and beneficiary of an NGO, which makes departure emotionally and personally difficult.

6.4 Identity Negotiation

One of the other consequences of the existence "in between" is the questioning of one's identity during the transition through the rehabilitation centre to the final destination. Identity is socially, historically, politically, and culturally constructed within the community (Weber, 1998), which evolves over time based on our surroundings (Whitty, 2002; Pasupathi et al., 2007). This identity is evolving through the constant reinterpretation of past and current experiences and their positioning and adaptation to the future self (Whitty, 2002; Pasupathi et al., 2007). Turner (1969) argues that the liminal phase is seen as a space-time characterized by anonymity and uncertainty. This uncertainty of identity is typical for individuals going through a transition (liminal phase) such as victims of human trafficking, migrants, or war veterans (Alkhaled et. al., 2021; Danis et. al, 2009; Demers, 2013; Stenger, 2024). The trauma associated with the psychological and physical transitions that these groups of individuals experience cause a crisis of identity in searching and creating a new life (Acharya,

2016; Kristeva, 2002). Beneficiaries in this phase, for example migrants in a transit country, are not part of the social structure, on the contrary, they only inhabit a temporary space defined between two starting points - the RLA and the destination home. A change in the inhabited space indicates a necessary change in thinking about one's identity. Beneficiaries who, after leaving the RLA, leave their old life and its social structure are in the phase of searching or creating a new life, which is hindered by their placement in a liminal state requiring anonymity, which can result in an identity crisis (Kristeva, 2002). It comes from the friction between old and new identity and value system, between lost position in old social structure and denied position in new.

Alkhaled et al. (2021) in their research of coping mechanisms among Syrian women refugees recognized three main identity processes, such as recomposing conflicting memories, reclaiming existence and repositioning tradition. Some of them were recognized in the data, such as the processing of the traumatic past or the ability to reflect on the future self. Processing traumatic memories is one of the main points that appeared repeatedly in interviews with participants, and which is also an official part of the program of the Rehabilitation Centre. Participants who became victims of human trafficking and sex exploitation were exposed to emotional and physical violence and harassment for a significant part of their lives. As discussed above, many women leave a RLA suffer from numerous psychological consequences such as post-traumatic stress disorder, dissociative identity disorder, depression, anxiety or suicidal tendencies which is common among these women (Jones, 2014). Trauma processing and psychological help is thus an important part of identity negotiation work (Alkhaled et. al, 2021; Acharya, 2016). The research further revealed that involvement in education and training programs is an effective coping mechanism to help deal with the liminality and uncertainty associated with being in a rehabilitation centre. Learning a new skill guarantees a minimum financial income, which helps in negotiating one's own independence and in preparing for the future after leaving the NGO (Alkhaled, 2021). All of the aforementioned factors and processes together greatly influence the formation of a new identity across beneficiaries.

7. Conclusion

The aim of the presented paper was to explore and explain the experience of liminality within women who became victims of human trafficking for sex work in India, as part of the rehabilitation process after rescue. Research focused on a specific time frame – the rehabilitation process -- which frames the time from the departure from the Red Light Area, through the stay in an NGO and participation in its rehabilitation process, to the departure from this organization and eventual financial and social independence.

The research has shown that victims of human trafficking in the rehabilitation process experience a liminal state that describes their position as an "in between" state, the process of transition between the old state and the new. This process of physical and social transition can be compared to "rites of passage", when not only the old position in the social structure is destroyed, but incorporation into the new society has not yet taken place. They are not resettled nor integrated socially or economically. On the contrary, they are stuck in the liminal space in the social structure.

Findings underline a connection between the theoretical concept of liminality and the daily challenges connected to the rehabilitation process. Individual types of liminality were revealed and explained - spatial, social, psychological, legal - which are a lived experience of survivors. Life within walls of Rehabilitation centre/NGO is marked by temporality and shifting circumstances. Individuals are forced to give up their independence and a considerable part of their rights by submitting to the observance of strict rules, which conditions are a direct consequence of life on the threshold. They also are experiencing liminality through their social status. They have status as beneficiaries yet lack official recognition by government. They receive shelter yet don't have a permanent residence. This occurs while they face social stigmatization connected to their past as sex workers. The circumstances described also have an impact on the negotiation and reconstruction of the identity of survivors, who have to face structural obstacles, including uncertainty and lack of solid foundations for independence. The elimination of these barriers would help stabilize aspirations for reintegration and reconstruction of living conditions.

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