

# Phase III: Gender, Power and Sex

## Strategic Impact Inquiry Research Summary

**The Context:** Sex. Power. Stigma. AIDS. How do all of these factors interact in the thriving sex industry, its surrounding communities and the lives of sex workers in Bangladesh? While Bangladesh does not yet face a generalized HIV and AIDS epidemic, there are real risks for it to spread through bridge populations like sex workers and their clients. What does this mean for women engaged in sex work? And for the CARE programs working with them?

**CARE Bangladesh's SII:** In its final phase of the SII, CARE Bangladesh explored the dynamics of gender, power and women's empowerment among marginalized women focusing on how gender and power relate in the lives of sex workers. CARE Bangladesh framed its study around its HIV program work from 1995 to 2005, with a focus on the Stopping HIV/AIDS through Knowledge and Training Initiative (SHAKTI project). SHAKTI worked with sex workers and other high risk groups in Dhaka, Tangail and other parts of Bangladesh to:

- Help SWs manage STIs and promote condom use to prevent HIV;
- Provide voluntary counseling/testing;
- Connect SWs to services to treat HIV, prevent mother to child transmission;
- Build capacity of NGOs to manage programs and develop networks for people particularly vulnerable to HIV; and
- Influence policies/programs on AIDS.

For the SII, the research team explored women's empowerment among street-based (SB) and brothel-based (BB) sex workers to better understand the context of power and empowerment and the impacts of the SHAKTI project on their lives. The study focused on:

- How do women who CARE's projects support define empowerment?
- How do these projects contribute to women's empowerment?
- What linkages do we find between changing levels of empowerment and HIV vulnerability, as described by project participants?
- What are the dynamics of power, empowerment and violence in the sex work environment in Bangladesh?

The [Strategic Impact Inquiry \(SII\)](#) is a three year study that seeks to evaluate CARE's impact on women's empowerment. For the full report on Bangladesh, email: [pqlibrarian@care.org](mailto:pqlibrarian@care.org).

For more information, please contact Fatima Seema ([fatima@carebangladesh.org](mailto:fatima@carebangladesh.org))

**Methodology:** CARE Bangladesh coordinated with local researchers and sex worker self-help groups in Dhaka and Tangail. CARE research and design teams collaborated throughout the process of research design, data collection and analysis.

### RESEARCH DESIGN

- **Participant Selection:** Participants were selected to provide representation of brothel and street-based sex workers. The sample was based on participation in CARE projects.
- **Phased Research Design:** Design involved three phases of data collection and analysis to respond to an evolving understanding of research questions and triangulate across methods.

### DATA COLLECTION

- **Overview:** 449 respondents, 2 sites, 2 months
- **Literature Review:** Grounding research in existing literature
- **Focus Group Discussions** (9 groups-sex workers, ex-staff): Context, power relations, empowerment
- **Informal Interviews** (9 respondents): Demographics, HIV awareness, beliefs, violence, project participation and empowerment
- **Survey Research** (316 respondents): Demographics, gender norms, empowerment, participation, health-seeking behaviors, violence
- **In-Depth Interviews** (29 respondents-12 sex workers, 6 former project staff, 11 community members) Empowerment, HIV risk, interventions, relationships, self-help groups

### DATA ANALYSIS

- **Reflective Process:** Design and field research teams met regularly to share observations and challenges and engage in collaborative analysis.
- **Analysis:** Statistical analysis of survey data, triangulation across methods.

### Limitations:

- Bonded sex workers were not accessible
- Findings not necessarily representative of sex worker population throughout Bangladesh
- Participation of sex worker organizations may have introduced certain biases.

BANGLADESH

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### Women's Views of Empowerment:\*

#### AGENCY

Confidence, courage and self-esteem  
 Money and financial security  
 Management and communication skills  
 Ability to resist violence/exploitation and pursue one's rights  
 Different personal strategies to minimize impact of social attitudes toward sex work (fighting back or verbally protesting against harassment, strictly conforming to social norms in mild dress and behavior, or hiding one's identity as a sex worker)

#### RELATIONS

Greater acceptance from society  
 Improved relations with other groups within the sex work community  
 Ability to negotiate and influence others, particularly the powerful  
 Unity and alliances among sex workers

#### STRUCTURE

Access to services (health, education)  
 Sex worker organizations to represent, protect sex worker rights, and shift norms and social attitudes facing sex workers

\*Responses varied somewhat by context (street or brothel-based), roles in sex worker organizations and exposure to CARE intervention.

### HIV Risk and Empowerment:

#### Sex workers linked unsafe sexual practices to:

- Client preference and lack of negotiating power
- Financial insecurity
- Sexual violence, including power of madams over bonded sex workers
- Desire to please husbands and lovers

### Impact on Empowerment and HIV

#### Vulnerability:

Agency	Structures	Relations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confidence and ability to protest and resist exploitation</li> <li>• Increased awareness of rights and HIV risk</li> <li>• Higher rates of condom use with husbands and lovers</li> <li>• Project participants less likely to have experienced violence in the past 12 months</li> <li>• Increased knowledge and use of HIV and STI services</li> </ul> <p><b>Especially among Brothel-based Sex Workers:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduced stigma about sex work</li> <li>• Reduced violence by police and others</li> <li>• Higher rates of condom use with clients</li> <li>• Lower stigma about HIV</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Representation and organization of sex workers through groups</li> <li>• Some change in police practices toward sex workers</li> </ul> <p><b>In Brothel Context:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Change in certain normative practices which had perpetuated marginalization of sex workers</li> <li>• More democratic inclusion of sex workers in brothel governance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive shift in community attitudes toward sex work</li> <li>• Improved relations with police and other power-holders</li> <li>• Greater unity among sex workers</li> <li>• Increased confidence to negotiate with clients and influence community decisions</li> </ul>

### Implications:

#### Context is Critical

- Program impacts between street-based and brothel-based sex workers exhibit some significant differences, emphasizing the critical importance of understanding context (structures of the work environment, power relations, norms) in program design and implementation.

#### The Importance of Intimate Relationships

- Programs should better understand links between empowerment/sexual practices in intimate partnership and empowerment/sexual practices in the sex trade – especially in relation to how violence and gender norms at home affect sexual practices in the workplace.

**The Power and Limits of Sex Worker Organizations:** While sex worker organizations clearly contributed to sex workers' empowerment, our analysis also raised a number of issues:

- Limits to sex worker organizations' abilities to confront powerful actors within the sex worker community.
- Dangers of co-optation as group leaders form closer relations with powerful external actors (e.g. police).
- Long-term issues of governance within groups.
- The power of sex worker organizations and other powerful actors to control access to sex workers, influencing flow of funds, program design and ability to critically examine sensitive topics such as the situation of bonded sex workers.

#### Multiple Forms of Power

- We should take into account different forms of power and how they relate to needs and aspirations of different groups (e.g. different sex worker groups prefer different approaches to addressing social attitudes toward sex work – in our program strategy should one approach be privileged over the other? What are the effects if so?).