
Migration and sex trafficking

Interview with Sharvari Karandikar

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Sharvari Karandikar began her career practicing as a social worker for sex workers and victims of sex trafficking in Mumbai, India. During her Ph.D. program in Social Work at University of Utah, and through her work at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) in Mumbai and later at the Ohio State University, she has focused her research efforts on issues related to the female sex workers and victims of sex trafficking particularly on gender-based violence, health and mental health issues. Dr. Karandikar's current research relates to sex work and sex trafficking in Asia, egg donation, international gestational surrogacy, medical tourism and its impact on women.

Título Migrações e tráfico sexual

Sharvari Karandikar começou a sua carreira como assistente social com trabalhadoras do sexo e vítimas de tráfico sexual em Bombaim, Índia. Durante o seu programa de doutoramento em Trabalho Social na Universidade de Utah, e através do seu trabalho Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) em Mumbai, e mais tarde na Universidade Estatal de Ohio, concentrou os seus esforços de investigação em questões relacionadas com as trabalhadoras do sexo e vítimas de tráfico sexual, particularmente em questões de violência baseada no género, saúde e saúde mental. A investigação actual da Dra. Karandikar relaciona-se com o trabalho sexual e o tráfico sexual na Ásia, a doação de óvulos, a subserviência gestacional internacional, o turismo médico e o seu impacto nas mulheres.

Keywords Sex trafficking, migrations, violence, humanitarian work.

Palavras-chave Tráfico sexual, migrações, violência, trabalho humanitário.

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Emigration Observatory (ahead OEM) – Dr. Sharvari Karandikar is in Lisbon on the core of the MFamily seminar on “Violence, trafficking and humanitarian action”. Thank you very much for accepting our invitation. At the Emigration Observatory we mainly deal with Portuguese emigrants in stock, flux and remittances, but we thought that, since you're here and you're talking about humanitarian work and trafficking, and it is extremely related to migrations, it would very interesting to interview you and to learn more about your work. Your areas of expertise are more on sex workers in international context and sex trafficking in an international context. But, before we talk about your areas of expertise, I would really like to know how you began your career as a social worker for sex workers and victims of sex trafficking in Mumbai. What made you choose that path?

Sharvari Karandikar (ahead SK) – Thank you very much for having me here. It's a real honour to be here today. So, how did I start working with sex workers and victims of sex trafficking and Mumbai? I have my bachelor's in psychology and my master's degree in social work, and that was the first job that I took as a master student. I was very sure that I wanted to work with women and violence and, as I was looking through jobs, I landed upon a job that was in the red-light area in a drop-in centre back in 2004. HIV was very high among this population of women involved in sex work and women who have a history of sex trafficking in Mumbai, and we were still kind of figuring out how to prevent HIV infection in this population and how to spread awareness in the community about HIV, and this job that I got was on working with women who were infected, but also those who are affected with HIV. So, it was like a drop-in centre, a small room in which every day at nine o'clock in the morning I was a centre based social worker. So, I would go and open the door and there would be 50 women who came and took shelter in that organization. Most of the day they would sleep, they would rest, eat food, we did activities with them, we took care of these women, we took them to the hospital. Most of them were HIV-positive, they took care of their children. So that was the kind of job that I did and I think it was a life-changing opportunity it led to a lot of future work.

OEm – There are differences between sex workers and sex trafficking. When you worked there did you see those differences? Were the women that you worked with sex workers because they wanted or were they trafficked?

SK – The women in the red-light area of Mumbai, the majority of them are trafficked for sex work. So, they are victims of trafficking and migrants from other states of India, south Indian states mostly, or they're migrants from other countries like Nepal and Bangladesh who come into Mumbai as victims of trafficking and lived their whole lives in that red-light area. However, there are also women in that area who are sex workers who continue to live lives there, have children, families and practice sex work and support their families back home. So then there is both. The agency that I worked with, we worked with just anybody who walked through the

door who was in need of care and support, and then we had both women who identified themselves as sex workers, women who call themselves as women involved in prostitution, as well as those who referred to themselves as women who are trafficked into sex work and were at some point living as sex workers or survivors and victims of trafficking. So, I just like to use the term that the women like to use themselves instead of putting a label on them.

OEm – You said that some of those women came from different areas of India and some from Nepal and Bangladesh. So is there a connection between migration and sex trafficking?

SK – Absolutely. I think sex trafficking and migration are very highly connected, especially with the women that I work with or do research with in Mumbai. The majority of them, as I said, are migrants and they're either from other places around Mumbai, in southern states of India, or they're from different countries, and mostly they are from Nepal and Bangladesh. So much so, that traditionally, this particular red-light area where I've done most of my work, had one whole lane of women who lived in that lane, and were all from Nepal, and one whole lane of women who were living there and were originally from Bangladesh, so they were migrants. What attracts them, or the traffickers to bring these people into this area, is because it's the centre of the city of Mumbai and it's very well connected with a very big railway station. It's very, very easy to get to, so all the classic signs of how migration happens, also it is very connected with how sex trafficking happens.

OEm – Who do you think the victims are? Who do you think the perpetrators are? In your opinion is there a specific group of people that may be more susceptible to being trafficked or anyone can be targeted to those perpetrators or traffickers?

SK – I think anybody is very vulnerable to being trafficked, but women, children are most vulnerable to being trafficked. There are a lot of issues in the rural parts of India that kind of compel people to migrate and to go to bigger cities, and then they get caught in the cycle of trafficking somehow, get in touch with the traffickers and that's how human trafficking happens, especially in a city like Mumbai. So, there are a lot of vulnerabilities like the lack of education, the lack of opportunities and jobs, as well as a lot of poverty that drives people into moving into Mumbai and most, many of these women who I do work with, talk about how they were deceived into coming into Mumbai. They were promised that they would get a job or an attractive opportunity, and then ended up as sex workers in the red-light area. So that is a very big concern for young children, young girls as well, but not to say that there are no boys who are trafficked. Just anybody who's vulnerable is trafficked in this red-light area of Mumbai, traditionally we used to see a whole lane. There are 13 different lanes we know of, and it's a large red-light area. It's a very old neighbourhood, with almost 200 years old, that started off as a red-light area for the British who were ruling India, and then kind of continued,

so there is whole lane that we had with transgender sex workers, and then there was, as I said before, a lane with the Nepalis sex workers, and then Bangladeshi. So, there was all these different characteristics in this area for a long time.

OEm – Could you share some of your experience with the victims that you worked with?

SK – Yes. Most of the victims of trafficking who I worked with had stories about how they were trafficked, and we have done research on this topic as well. So, who are the traffickers and many of them talked about how their own family or somebody who's an acquaintance was responsible for trafficking them. Their own family members or acquaintances, and that was indeed a difficult reality, but true, that woman after woman talked about how they were trafficked by somebody they actually knew and it wasn't a stranger. So that's the reality of these women. But then, once they were into this area, the majority of them were kept captive for a long time, they were sold into brothels and they had to pay back to the brothel owner, so they had to work as sex workers in order to give the money back, so that kind of continued for several years until they were released. By the time they were let go, and the majority of them of course were children as they were trafficked, they had already been living there for 10 years as sex workers. So that's all they knew. So then, they continue to live on as sex workers. Story after story of violence, and abuse, and then not being able to go back to where they've come from. At the same time, being just like involved, having relationships with their clients and then continuing to live in this area as sex workers...

OEm – So, it's very hard for them to start living a life other than the one that they always knew.

SK – The majority of them end up living there, in the streets. There are several non-profit organizations that work in this area and they help the women, especially with health-related concerns, help their children with education, there are boarding schools, there are day and night shelters. So there are services that are offered. But, there is again, a big gap in sort of trying to take the women away from it. That's an impossible reality that most of them don't even go back to where they came from. But trying to give them a better life, and some of them want to live there because that's where they came from.

OEm – I think the main question of identity is, you live in the place for a long time, that's what you know as your identity. And it's very hard to give it away, because it's everything that you know.

SK – Absolutely and there you said it and that's my whole concern that these women do live like sex workers and they identify themselves as a sex worker after spending a lot of their life in this red-light area, they learn their work, they embrace it and that's what they do. And the

issue still remains that they are still looked upon as criminals, as immoral women, which is simply not true because they are there due to their circumstances and they continue to live there and, like I said, most of them have families there, most of them have children, most of them are mothers, they're just there because they care and have to support their families. They're paying for their children, their husbands or partners, and also for their families back home. The majority of them do send home money to their families. So, at that point, I think that there is no protection given to these women for the work that they do.

OEm – On the National Crime Victims' Rights week, you presented four common themes when talked about individuals who are sex trafficked. Can you explore them?

SK – Yes. So I think the one important reality is coercion where women are forced into sex work. They are trafficked from different parts of the country or from different countries as migrants and forced into sex work, and that is one reality that I know as part of women who live in Mumbai as sex workers or victims of sex trafficking. The other one was deception, which they are cheated. The majority of them are promised that they would get jobs in Bollywood or different kinds of opportunities that they are never exposed to, and end up in the red-light area without even them knowing about it. I think I also talked about them being vulnerable. Through research, we have found that the majority have really difficult financial situations in their homes, abject poverty, lack of education, big families and no one to take care of them. Several women also talked about how they had marriages that were broken and they had to get away from horrible situations and ended up coming in to Mumbai. So vulnerable conditions, I think, drive people to being trafficked, unfortunately. And the last thing was violence. We see in research the majority of the victims of trafficking, sex trafficking, are also victims of physical, sexual, emotional violence, verbal abuse. Their day-to-day reality of living as a victim is also living as a victim of violence.

OEm – So, you talked about coercion, and people end up being trafficked because they're obliged to do it. But in the end, when you interview those people, when you do research with them, do you feel that at some point, they lose their own sense of personality and identity and they start feeling like they should be doing it because they deserve it, and because they were coerced to do it for so long? I think that's connected to all the four themes that you talked about. Most of them are promised something that they're not fulfilled with and then they are coerced to do something that they don't want to, and maybe, sometimes in extreme points, they suffer from violence in order to do what you don't want to, they start losing their sense of personality, of identity of the person that they were before that happened and then they start feeling “okay, so I should be doing this because I deserve this and it's something that it's part of me now”. You said before that

some women, when they paid their debt to the brothels, they continued to live as sex workers. Did you interview anyone that told you “okay, I have to do this because I deserve what's happening to me”, because they suffered so much violence?

SK – Yes, what you're saying is really true, they do internalize their trafficking and internalize their life as “okay, I’m destined to do this”. I think in the context that I'm talking about many women think that “well, this is what I'm destined to do” and continue to live as sex workers. The one thing that I distinctly remember doing, is an interview with woman in this red-light area in Mumbai, and she was talking about how if I was in her place and she was in mine, I would be telling her the exact same story that she told me, that nothing that she did was in her control and that everything that happened to her was just something that happened, she had no control over her life and her destiny sort of is to be a sex worker in this red-light area, so she had definitely internalized that unfortunately, seeing no other option to get out of that situation. The one thing, though, that I will say in my recent research is on understanding women as mothers, because most of us talk about victims and sex trafficking without realizing that you really cannot talk to a woman in these 15 years of me working here, without them talking about their children. That is the first thing that, in the first five minutes, they will tell you: how much they’re concerned about their children, how much they care about their girls and boys. So my research, just last year, was about mothering and sex workers as mothers and victims of sex trafficking as mothers and their challenges as being mothers. And in that, what was different, was that all of them said that “we want a better future for our children, so we don't see a future for us living here, but for when it comes to our children, we want them to be different. We don't, we don't want them to have anything of our life that we had”. So many of them had send their children back home to live with your own families, with their husband's family, somebody in the village wherever it is. They were working as sex workers here, sending money home, taking care of their children, so that they are not exposed to the red-light area, and protecting them by living away from them. So, there's a huge sacrifice that they are making just to make sure that what they have gone through, their children don't have to go through.

OEm – **So that was a big difference between the research that you did and the one from the mothers?**

SK – I think it is really humanizing to see that just like everybody else they are doing everything they can to protect your children.

OEm – Yes. You also said that on the National Crime Victims’ rights week that many of those women that were trafficked get in trouble with the law and that, when they get arrested, that they're treated not like victims, and a lot of times they're treated as people that are doing something wrong. Is there any way to educate those law forces that they are victims? They may be sex workers, but that they went through a past where they were victims and that they feel that there's nothing else that they can do with their lives. Is there any way to educate people that most are victims and people should have rights and should not be stepped on because they're doing something that it's not according to what they think that it's right?

SK – Yes, absolutely. So, I really stand by what I said. The majority of the times the police, whether it is in India or the United States, the way that they identify victims of sex trafficking is when they see them on the streets. So they see sex workers and arrest them, without knowing that this woman is probably a victim of sex trafficking. That is the common way that even in India sex workers are kind of rounded up. The majority of these women are victims of sex trafficking. So now they are not just vulnerable on the street, they're also in the fear of getting arrested, and then of course, they do get arrested and then eventually released and so on so forth. So, one of the most common complaints of the women is the views that they have from the police. It's terrible the kind of violence, but also verbal abuse and every other form of violence and abuse that they suffer from the law enforcement. I think it's really important to work with the law enforcement. I have done a lot of work with the law enforcement not so much in India, but most of that in America, in Ohio specifically, on educating the law enforcement agencies or officers around Asian victims of sex trafficking who we have in Columbus, Ohio, and training them on how to best identify victims and how to even talk to them, deal with them. Dignity and respect towards women is really important. Instead of making them feel more pressured and afraid, because the first reaction that any woman has after being interrogated by law enforcement or officer is fear, it's absolute fear because if you look at them, they look scary and they are scary. It's a very traumatizing experience. So, it's really important to work with the law enforcement organizations and with officers. They, themselves, agree that they want to help the victims. It's not like they don't, but the only way that they can get to the trafficker is through the victims, and that is their justification for arresting the victims. So, there is a wild understanding, all they want is the name of the trafficker, but some of these women don't even know the name of their traffickers because that's a very difficult thing to do. You get trafficked, you don't always know who is the person who trafficked you. There are many people who are involved sometimes so it's really difficult for the women to give all the information that the law enforcement wants. At the same time, the law enforcement just wants what they want. So, they were both on a very difficult place

and that, I think, causes a lot of anxiety and fear for law enforcement, among the women who are trafficked.

OEm – So, you said that the victims, they were coerced and that they suffered from violence and vulnerability. But when they deal with the law enforcement, they're going through that again because they are coerced to talk to name the person that it's above all the hierarchy of trafficking. And then they suffer from violence, even if it's not physical, emotional violence, and they're just there for hours being vulnerable because they are victims and vulnerable because it's something that they have no knowledge of, right?

SK – It is. Yes, the positive change that can happen, is happening is the involvement of non-profits and the social workers who now go with the law enforcement officers. We see this more in the United States where we do have victims advocates who go along with the law enforcement officers on a raid in a massage parlour and would help sort of intervene in the situation where this victim advocate would actually talk with the victim instead of the officer talking. So, that makes the situation a little better. There isn't a situation like in India. When women know that the police are coming, they try to run as much as they can, but they get arrested and some of them have to bribe to get released, and it's just keeps on going. So, there is a lot of work, I guess, that needs to be done with law enforcement officers as well.

OEm – And how big do you think this problem, is the sex trafficking?

SK – It is a really big problem. And unfortunately, it is a problem that keeps on increasing because, unfortunately, there is a demand for sex trafficking all over the world and people moved and transported, deceived and cheated, into this, and it just keeps on increasing. It's the unfortunate reality of our world.

OEm – And you think that this problem continues exactly because of the high demand that exists or could it be any other reasons...

SK – I think that the high demand is one of the biggest reasons why the sex trafficking exists. I also think that there are always new ways in which people who are traffickers are finding out on how to continue this trade. There is a lot of money that is involved in this, obviously, but recently what I'm focusing on is how technology has been used for trafficking. Now, we have Internet that is used for trafficking, now we have cell phones that are used on a regular basis and everybody is now trying to figure out how to deal with this big giant, which is moving really fast. So, how can we then use the same technology to prevent trafficking from happening instead of letting it grow? That is, I think, one of the things that we can look at, because trafficking has also changed a little bit from how it used to look traditionally, to how it is looking now.

OEm – So, you conduct a lot of years of research on sex trafficking and you published numerous papers and now you're working on sex work and sex trafficking in Asia. Can you tell us a bit more of your work?

SK – Yeah, so majority of my work with the women involved in sex work and victims of sex trafficking has been in India, in Mumbai. I have done work also in Nepal on women who are trafficked, but also women who practice sex work in Nepal. The interest was because, like I said, in Mumbai, there is a big population of women who were migrants from Nepal, who are trafficked into sex work. So that sort of motivated me to understand what were the driving factors for women to come from Nepal, or not come but being trafficked from Nepal, into India. So that is where we did some research, about two years back and also conducting some research in the future in Bangladesh and hopefully in Malaysia and the coming years to understand the traffic in patterns from those countries not just to India, but within the countries themselves.

OEm – Have you come to any conclusion on the driver factors?

SK – Most of the driving factors are around poverty, lack of opportunities and employment. The sex workers in Nepal are very vulnerable to poor health conditions, like they are in India as well, but there they were well aware of how trafficking happens from Nepal to India and that was interesting for me as a researcher to learn that they actually knew what happens. It is not something that no-one knows, something that people now know that this happens and yet we fail to do something about it. To stop that from happening.

OEm – Thank you so much. Is there anything else that you would like to talk about?

SK – No. Thank you very much for the opportunity to talk about my research.

OEm – Thank you. Thank you very much.

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Observatório da Emigração

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