

## An Exploratory Study on the Barriers and Conditions for Reintegration of Commercial Sex Workers of Guwahati, Assam, India



Submitted by  
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# **An Exploratory Study on the Barriers and Conditions for Reintegration of Commercial Sex Workers of Guwahati, Assam, India**

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## **Abstract**

### **Introduction**

Very little is studied and understood about the Commercial Sex Workers (CSWs) in Guwahati, Assam with respect to their living and working conditions, initiation into sex work and their opinion on exiting and reintegration into mainstream society as well as alternate livelihood aspirations.

### **Objective of the study**

The objective of this research study was to gain insight into the CSWs of Guwahati Assam, India, to be able to identify the barriers and enabling conditions to exit and reintegration of CSWs of Guwahati and to come up with alternative livelihood intervention strategies based on the same.

### **Methods**

The study was an exploratory study and participatory approach was used using a combination of experiential learning research tools including life stories, immersion, focus group discussions and semi structured interviews.

### **Findings**

The study findings showed that the sex work occupation in Guwahati is highly mobile and largely hidden with no designated red light area and absence of brothels as found in other states in India and other countries. The study results show that the barriers and conditions to exit and reintegration can be broadly segregated under economic, social and institutional factors. These barriers include profitability of sex work, lack of skills, social network, lack of support from family and society, education expenses for children. The enabling conditions include stable income, alternate livelihood opportunity, and safe working conditions for women in informal industries, legal aid and gender equality.

### **Conclusions**

Despite the fact that the CSWs in Guwahati are mobile and hidden, which makes it easier for them to continue their work and earn more income; they have mostly entered into this profession because of their financial hardships and low level of skills and education. Many of them have a desire to exit the industry if given an alternative to stop reliance on sex work income as they are not into this profession as their first choice of livelihood.

### **Recommendations**

It can be said that CSWs in Guwahati share many similarities with their peers elsewhere on the issue of exit and reintegration. However there exist barriers and conditions that remain unique to CSWs of Guwahati, Assam and that entails a contextualized approach to provide recommendations towards any new intervention strategy, which has to be preventive as well as rehabilitative.

**Key words:** CSW, sex work, reintegration, alternate livelihood

**Word count:** 23,062

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## List of Abbreviations

CSW	Commercial Sex Work
CSWs	Commercial Sex Workers
NACO	National Aids Control Organisation
ASACs	Assam State Aids Control Society
NE-INDIA	North East India
HIV/AIDS	Human immune deficiency virus and acquired immune deficiency syndrome
FSWs	Female Sex Workers
MSMs	Men Having Sex with Men
IDUs	Injecting Drug Users
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
EHA	Emmanuel Hospital Association
STDs	Sexually Transmitted Diseases
UHC	Universal Health Coverage
GOI	Government of India
TIs	Targeted Interventions
NGO	Non Government Organisations
KI	Key Informants
FGD	Focus Group Discussions
BPL	Below Poverty Line
PAN	Permanent Account Number
ID	Identity Document
SHGs	Self Help Group
NRC	National Register of Citizens of India
RSBY	Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
SBI	State Bank of India
NABARD	National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development



## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 State Profile

Assam is a state in the Northeastern region of India bordered by neighbouring countries of Bhutan, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Nepal. The word 'Assam', which means "peerless" in the now extinct Ahom language, became a constituent state of India in 1950 after India got its independence in the year 1947. As of June 2016, the state of Assam has 33 administrative districts (Districts of India, 2017) within its territory. It covers an area of 78438 km<sup>2</sup> and has a population of 31,205,576 (31.20 million) as per the last census report (Census of India, 2011). Due to its special location Assam provides the only direct physical link with road and rail links between mainland India and the northeastern states. Assam is often referred to as the gateway to the northeast of India. As a result, Guwahati, the capital city of Assam is an important center for trade and commerce in this region and remains one of the major cities of India.



Fig 1: Map of Assam

Source: <https://teabuddy.wordpress.com/>.

## **1.2 Demographic and Socio-Economic Profile**

Due to its strategic geographical location and status as an important northeastern city, the state of Assam particularly the capital of Guwahati receives a lot of migration from within the state as well as from the bordering countries such as Nepal, Bangladesh and Myanmar. Assam's population comprises of different ethnic groups, which have been formed after years of assimilation of Austro-Asiatic, Indo Aryan and Tibeto-Burman races. In 2011, the total population of Assam was 31,169,272 out of which the total population of native Assamese in Assam was estimated to be 13 million or 48.8 % Assam's population according to the Census of India. The literacy rate in Assam is also at 73.18% (Census of India, 2011). Assam's economy is mainly agro based. Agriculture makes the highest contribution to the domestic sectors, accounting for more than a third of Assam's income and employing 69 % of the population (Assam Human Development Report, 2003). Assam is also world famous for its tea and silk, which are important foreign exchange earners for India. More than half of India's tea is produced by Assam (Indian Tea Association, 2017). With regards to silk production, Assam is famous for its golden silk (Muga) and produces 95% of the world silk (Saikia J, 2011). The other important products that contribute to Assam's economy are crude oil and natural gas, rice, jute, sugarcane, potato, mustard, turmeric, cane and bamboo, handicrafts, etc. Fishing is another source of income for the people of Assam, but fishing is still in its traditional form and production is not self sufficient (UNDP, 2004). Tourism also forms a part of Assam's economy, Kaziranga National Park and Manas National Park, which are home to the one horned rhinoceros and world heritage sites, are part of the state. Even though Assam is rich in its natural resources, economic poverty is quite high in the state with about 32% of the state population falling below the poverty line (BPL) (SECC, 2011).

## **1.3 Migration & Sex Trade in Assam**

The city of Guwahati is the largest and fastest growing city of Assam, with an estimated population of 957,352 (Census of India, 2011). As a result of its strategic location Guwahati is the connecting gateway with road, air and rail links between the northeastern region and the rest of mainland India. Sharing porous borders with Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar, there is a high amount of internal and external economic migration with its share of negative consequences. Due to the porous borders, it provides an easy destination for the people from neighbouring countries to come in search for work even though most of them do not possess proper documentation to stay in India. Within these immigrants coming into Assam, are females who are either falsely promised jobs by scammers in India or are trafficked illegally mainly for the purpose of selling them into prostitution in India and abroad. In addition to illegal trade, reasons like economic hardship, unemployment, excess labour force etc. together with social, political, and environmental factors in the neighbouring countries have also led to the movement of people into Assam (Joseph & Narendran, 2013). Though there is a lack of statistics showing the exact number of girls migrating to Assam from the neighbouring countries for sex work, there are studies which states that about 60 percent of sex workers in India are from Nepal (Ray, 2015). According to the National Crime Records Bureau in 2015, Assam has emerged as the trafficking hub of the country. With 1,494 cases in 2015, Assam accounts for 22% of the total reported cases of human trafficking across India (NCRB, 2015). Assam also recorded the most child trafficking cases, which accounts for 38% of the national figures (NCRB, 2015). For the city of Guwahati, since it is the hub of many trading activities and an entry point for many commercial traders, prostitution in the city has been on the rise. The movement of truckers through the region also makes it a popular hub for sex workers to come to Guwahati in search of work and money. The growth of prostitution in this region is mainly considered to be an expression of a complex socio-economic fermentation that the region is reeling under (NMAP, 2016).

## **1.4 HIV/AIDS in Assam**

Assam is categorized as a low HIV prevalence state in India. However the adult HIV prevalence in the state has been steadily increasing from 0.04 % in 2007 to 0.06% in 2015, with 928 new infections whereas the rates in the other states are on a declining trend. (NACO, 2015) According to a report by Assam State AIDS Control Society, there are several causes leading to this increase in HIV prevalence. Firstly, Assam is the gateway to the northeastern states and surrounded by three high prevalence states of Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland. Secondly, a large number young people from the state go to large cities for employment and engage in risky behaviour. Similarly, a high number of female migrants from neighbouring states and countries are coming in search of work and getting involved in risky behaviour favourable for HIV transmission The report also states that HIV prevalence in the state is higher among the high risk group populations of female sex workers (0.46 %) men having sex with men (1.40 %) and injecting drug users (1.46 %) (ASACs 2018).

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW & CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.1 Prostitution and Commercial Sex Work**

Weitzer (2009) defines a sex worker as a person who provides sex, sexual stimulation or erotic services in exchange for cash or goods. Sex work is a term used to describe a wide range of activities relating to the exchange of money (or its equivalent) for a provision of a sexual service (UCL Institute of Health Equity, 2014). The term has been adopted as it is free of complicated, derogatory and sexist connotations which are more commonly associated with the term 'prostitute' (May, Harocopos and Hough, 2000). In India sex work is consensual sex between the two individuals of legal age above 18 years of age (UNAIDS, 2012), and receiving money in exchange for sexual activities (Buzdugan, Hali & Cowan, 2009). India has an equal mix of brothel and non-brothel based sex work (Sodhi, 2013). Brothel based sex workers are among the groups based in red light areas and elsewhere, and include those who engage in sex work as their profession for economic survival, as well as workers who have been sold or trafficked into prostitution (Land & Prabhugate, 2012). Non –brothel based sex workers include groups such as home based and mobile sex workers who are hidden to the general public (Celentano et al, 2011). Women make up the majority of the sex work population (UCL Institute of Health Equity, 2014).

In India sex work is not treated as work, but as a dirty and immoral lifestyle threatening act to taint the "innocent" public (Mukhopadhyaya S, 2018), although sex work or prostitution has been referred to in abundance in the Indian Vedas and the Puranas as an organised, established and necessary institution. In the post-Vedic era the custom of devadasi (servants of God) system came into practice. Today, the word 'devadasi' is a euphemism for referring to a woman engaging in sex work in the name of religious tradition (Mukhopadhyaya S, 2018). Sex work or the exchange of sexual services for money, is not an offence in India but practicing it in a brothel or within 200 metres of any public place is illegal. A brothel covers the premises shared by two or more sex workers which includes their homes (Immoral Traffic Prevention Act, ITPA 1956). Further, a number of related activities including soliciting in public place, kerb crawling, owning or managing a brothel, prostitution in hotel, child prostitution, pimping and pandering are illegal in India (ITPA, 1956). This ambiguity in the Indian law makes the status of prostitution in India quite complex leaving the sex worker vulnerable to harassment, extortion and violence from both the law enforcing agencies as well as the customers. The risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) is always present for women involved in commercial sex work where they are in contact with customers from various strata of the society, with various kinds of demands and it makes them highly vulnerable. In a study done on sex workers in India, it was found that the customers of the female sex workers would often pay them less if the sex workers insisted on protection (Goswami, 2017). An article in The Guardian 2010, wrote about husbands of most sex workers being unaware that their spouses were in the profession while there were also husbands who were involved in contacting customers for their wives. In the literature there has been found mention of sugar-daddies or "adult males who exchange large amounts of money or gifts for sexual favors from much younger women", especially in the context of African countries, however that is sometimes wrongly assumed as commercial sex work (Kuate-Defo, 2004). There are also studies where it has been found that pimps or madams (a term used for female pimps) would be engaging women for sex work and would be collecting part of the earnings. Benoit and Millar (2001) found that low-priced sex workers ("street-based") retain over 90 % of their earnings, while higher priced suppliers utilizing more sophisticated intermediaries often only saw up to 50 % of their earnings. Frequently sex workers face harassment and violence when trying to protest or break free from their pimps. In a study by Farley et al (2005) of Vancouver women in prostitution, it was reported that 75 % had suffered physical injuries from the violence including stabbings and beatings, concussions and broken bones, cuts, and black eyes. The women also had their

heads slammed against walls and against car dashboards. Further, the customers and pimps regularly subjected the sex workers to extreme violence when they refused to perform a specific sex act (Farley et al. 2005). In India in spite of the recognition to prostitution in the Indian religious books, post Vedic Indian society and the Indian legal system, the sex workers in India do not get respect and recognition from the society at large. Many of them become victims of sexual violence, abuse and exploitation at the hands of pimps and madams as well as police and government officials.

Throughout the literature economic needs and coercion are mentioned as the primary motivating factors for entering into sex work (Odek et.al 2009, Pillai, Bhattacharjee, Ramesh & Isac, 2012). When interviewed, sex workers across settings express desire for alternative forms of employment, but lack the skills to find another job (Fitzgerald-Husek et al., 2011; K, 2004; Ngo et al., 2007). Poverty and limited options are the most-cited reasons for entering sex work (Moret W, 2014). For many of these women with a background of poverty and low education, sex work is perceived to be an 'easy' way out of their deplorable economic condition. There are very few other jobs compared to commercial sex work that is accessible and offer the same advantages to these women, including ease of entry, a ready market and higher earnings (Vuylsteke & Jana, 2001).

India is a highly stratified society in many ways but caste and religion is no bar when it comes to sex work. In a country where women are rarely in control of their own finances, all classes of women can find themselves forced to turn into sex work. Many of these women have been widowed or divorced and find themselves barred from other forms of employment. Others may be single or married, but work in secret to supplement their family's meager income (The Guardian, 2010). Goswami (2017), in the study paper where she interviewed sex workers in India, one of the respondents replied that in recent times girls are coming to the profession on their own choice. According to NMAP (2016), *"the absence of social security and the impact of urbanization, modernisation, and migration to cities have led to the disorientation of the joint family. It is also the emerging problem of single women: How to survive without a partner."*

## **2.2 Reintegration and Rehabilitation**

Reintegration and rehabilitation has in recent years been a central approach of NGOs and INGOs in places such as Nepal as it has been found essential to the issue of girl trafficking. Chen and Marcovici (2003) imply the term reintegration to refer to the process of reunification of the trafficked returnees with family members. Reintegration also incorporates support to the trafficked returnees so as to make them economically viable and socially acceptable (Ibid). According to Derks (1998) 'reintegration' refers to renewed reunion or incorporation with a social unity. In the case of reintegration of victims of sex trafficking, it aims at assuring some minimum social acceptance and protection against discriminatory social treatment ensuring victims would have access and control over resources as other members of the respective society (Brunovskis & Surtees, 2012; Derks, 1998). Reintegration also incorporates support to the trafficked returnees so as to make them economically viable and socially acceptable (Chen & Marcovici, 2003). Social reintegration is also a term that has been used in the area of drug dependency treatment. According to the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, 'social reintegration' means 'any social intervention with the aim of integrating former or current drug users into the community'. It has three main pillars which are housing, education and employment (vocational training). Further, supportive measures to overcome personal and structural level barriers to obtain employment, to increase personal employability are recognised as key to social reintegration. Social reintegration therefore also includes all those activities that aim to develop human, social, economic and institutional capital including counseling, leisure activities etc. (Sumnall & Brotherhood, 2012)

Despite the economic benefits of sex work, many sex workers desire to exit and reintegrate back into society due to the hardships involved with the profession (Sociology of Prostitution Research, 2015). These include hardships such as physical and sexual violence, substance abuse, low self-esteem, inequitable work environments, risk of disease, exhausting working hours, poverty, degradation, and marginalization by society (Kennedy et al., 2007). The birth of a child also acts as a catalyst in a sex workers life for her decision to leave sex work (Dodsworth, 2012). This statement echoes the findings of King et al (2009) whose study of Canadian street involved young women indicated that pregnancy and parenting were reasons for them in turning away from street involvement and drug use. The literature on pathways to exiting describes exit from sex work as a process not an event. But it provides some pointers as to how changes in circumstances can act as a springboard for exiting. While sex workers often 'take breaks' and frequently come back because of financial needs, there can be 'turning points'. These can be fortuitous events that alter the balance of play (a new relationship for instance), or 'crisis' situations (such as violence or losing children into care) (Mayhew & Mossman 2007). But it is also true that not everyone wants to exit the profession or is into sex work profession because of coercion or exploitation, but sometimes on their own choice as well. In a study article published in the Canadian Press, 2017, it was reported that while a third of sex workers who were surveyed entered the industry due to "critical life events" such as abuse or neglect; it was more surprising to find that a quarter found the work appealing. On the issue of alternative livelihood, literature has also shown that strategies or options such as micro-finance can help CSWs to exit and reduce their financial dependency on sex work. In a study in Kenya offered micro-loans after requests came from the sex workers themselves. This study introduced micro-finance and assessed the individual effects of adding micro-enterprise services into an existing HIV intervention program. The findings showed that two-thirds of the study participants had operational business by the end-line survey while nearly half of the participants reported to have stopped sex work. There was also reduction in self-reported average weekly number of sex partners. The study further reported that micro-enterprise may empower CSWs by giving them an alternative livelihood when they wish to exit or reduce reliance on sex work. (Odek et al., 2009)

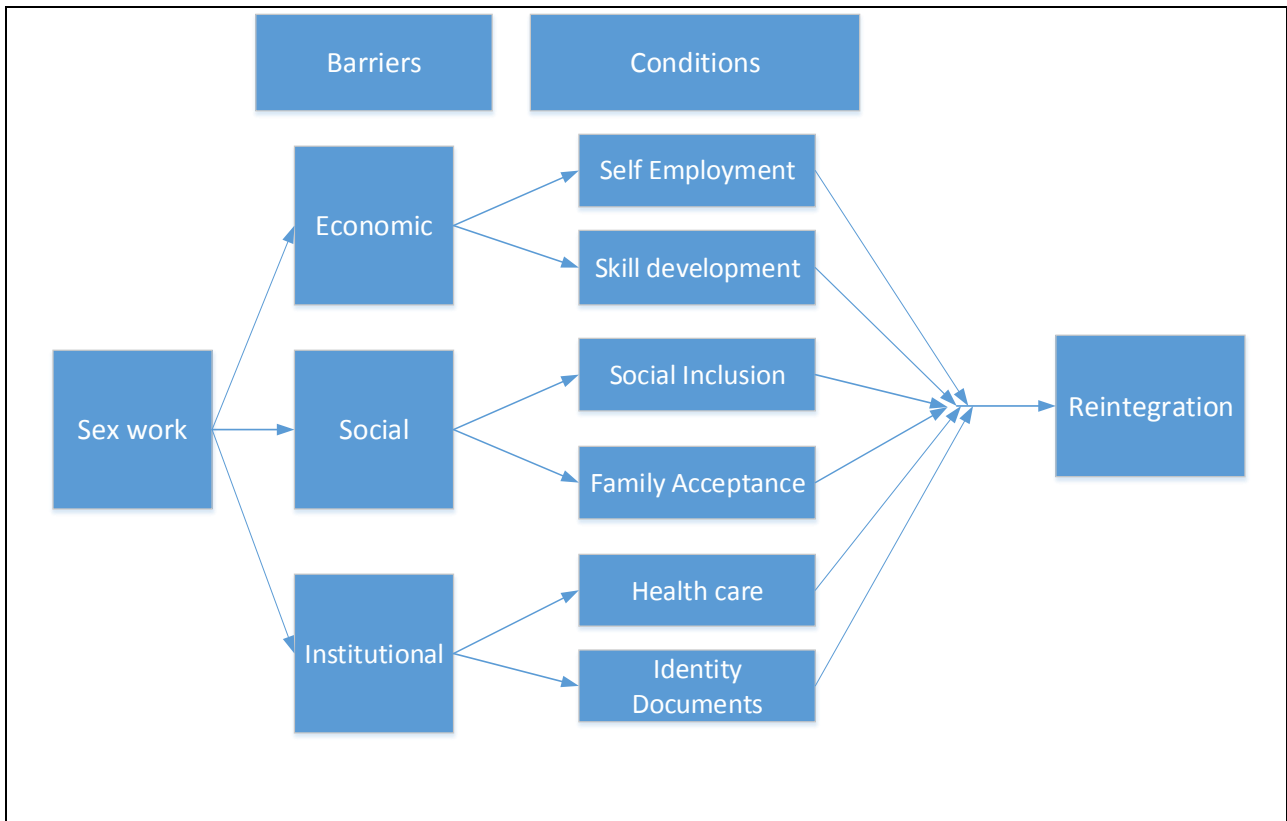
## 2.3 A Conceptual Model

Based on the literature we can develop a conceptual framework for reintegration of CSWs using the barriers and enabling conditions under three main headings viz. economic, social and institutional as shown in figure 2 below.

**Economic barriers and enabling conditions:** Literature shows that as many of these women are also known to enter the sex work profession due to poverty, lower levels of employable skill or education among other factors, the lack of an immediate alternative income source on exit that is more or less comparable to sex-work earnings becomes a barrier. Throughout the literature economic needs and coercion are mentioned as the primary motivating factors for entering into sex work (Odek et.al 2009, Pillai, Bhattacharjee, Ramesh & Isac, 2012). When interviewed, sex workers across settings express desire for alternative forms of employment, but lack the skills to find another job (Fitzgerald-Husek et al., 2011; K, 2004; Ngo et al., 2007). Studies have shown that finding routes to exit sex work is often a difficult and lengthy process, especially due to the complex and disparate needs of the women involved (Brent Council, 2010). To ensure successful exiting, many forms of provision may be needed. For instance, suitable housing and access to drug treatment were most crucial to establishing the stability needed to enable sex workers to contemplate leaving sex work (Brent Council, 2010). It also requires being economically viable after exiting sex work through alternative employment options.

**Social barriers and enabling conditions:** Socio-cultural factors such as stigma and discrimination also makes it very challenging to reintegrate into the family and community for girls who have gone into sex work (Terre des hommes, 2003; Sahara Group, 2004). In Nepal for instance, the trafficked returnees are often treated with hatred and considered as social evil hindering their reintegration in the society (Adhikari, 2011). The successful reintegration therefore encompasses acceptance of the returnees by their respective family and society, without any discrimination. Social barriers also play a big role in preventing reintegration. In one of the study paper 'Diversity in sex workers' strategies for the protection of social identity (2013)', female sex workers of Kolkata, India, were interviewed and some of the respondents replied that they had to lie about their sex work profession to their families, because if the family came to know about their profession they will not let them enter the house. It is also true that many of the sex workers are not in the profession by their choice and are usually victims of poverty or trafficking but still the Indian society does not accept them as a part of the mainstream society and discriminates them, and this argument holds true for Assam as well. Social inclusion requires lesser stigma and discrimination against those from this background, to be reunited with families without reproach and accepted back.

**Institutional barriers and enabling conditions:** The process of reintegration requires the availability of several enabling conditions. For instance non availability of institutional factors such as healthcare and identity documents have been found to be important barriers. A study conducted by UNDP 2012, indicates that lack of identity documents restrict the sex workers having property and inheritance rights, freedom of movement and access to education, housing, and banking. In some countries, like Bangladesh and India, sex workers have reported difficulties obtaining voter identity cards that are required for access to a range of government services. In China and Lao PDR, sex workers who are internal migrants report harassment from local officials or difficulties in accessing services because they are living away from the town where they are officially registered as residents. Sex workers in Malaysia and Myanmar also report restricted access to services arising from difficulties obtaining identity cards (UNDP, 2012). Access to health care is also a crucial determinant. Yet, even within settings that appear to provide universal health coverage (UHC), sex workers' experiences reveal systematic, institutionally ingrained barriers to appropriate quality health care (Socias et al., 2016). Research shows that in Canada, and in other contexts that criminalize sex work, sex workers bear an array of health and social harms, including violence, exposure to HIV and other STIs, and substance use that require attention within the health care system (Socias et al., 2016).



**Fig 2: Conceptual model for reintegration of commercial sex workers into mainstream society.**

## 2.4 Problem Statement & Rationale

A study conducted by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Govt. of India in 2004, estimated the numbers of commercial sex workers (CSWs) in the state of Assam at around 52,625. In Guwahati city, the number of CSWs currently reached by the HIV targeted intervention program is around 600, according to the Assam State AIDS Control society, the state nodal agency for HIV prevention. The actual number may be higher since many hide their identity by not openly disclosing about their profession because of the taboo and stigma associated with sex work profession.

Emmanuel Hospital Association (EHA) is a charitable not for profit organisation in India providing affordable clinical health care services and various community health and development programs in some of the remotest and underdeveloped parts of India through a network of 20 mission hospitals and 42+ community based projects. EHA provides affordable clinical health care services to the poor and the marginalised, empowering communities through health programs, spiritual ministries and leadership development. In addition through a network of over 42 community based projects, EHA provides HIV/TB care, Disaster Management, Sanitation, Mental health care, Education etc. EHA also has experience in working on HIV prevention among the high risk groups to HIV including commercial sex workers. Currently EHA is interested in looking at the prevention and rehabilitation/reintegration of CSWs in Guwahati, Assam. Since sex work as a profession involves many kind of risks, including health risks, and the women involved in this profession are looked down upon by the society and highly stigmatised and excluded from the mainstream society, the organisation as a development agency and health service provider would like to look into the various barriers that compels them to be in the profession and the enabling conditions that will help their reintegration with the mainstream society. At the moment, there is a huge knowledge gap as very little is documented about the CSWs of Guwahati owing to the sex work profession being considered an anti-social activity which should not be discussed openly, and sex and



sexuality a taboo topic in the Assamese society. Till date any interest in sex workers has occurred only in relation to HIV/AIDS prevention or for human trafficking. There is an absence of research done on the CSWs in Guwahati particularly on the issues of initiation, exiting, reintegration and alternate livelihoods. The only literatures currently in existence are national estimates of HIV prevalence amongst this population and their comparatively higher risk and vulnerability to HIV and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) as captured by the national HIV estimates.

## **2.5 My Role as Researcher**

I am currently pursuing my course in Master of Development in Gender studies at Van Hall Larenstein university of Applied Sciences, Netherlands. I have been working with EHA since 2007 in the administration and finance department in HIV prevention programs targeting high risk population groups such as CSWs, MSMs and IDUs in the states of Manipur and Nagaland adjacent to Assam. While working all these years in my organisation I became interested in working with the communities. As part of my Master's thesis, I have chosen a research study looking at the topic of reintegration and alternative livelihood intervention projects for the CSWs of Assam. This topic was selected in consultation with my organisation as EHA wished to look at the possibilities of developing alternative livelihood intervention projects for CSWs in Guwahati. My role as the researcher consisted of research design, proposal, field data collection and report writing. In all these tasks I was guided by my supervisor and assisted by my organisation at the project site.

## **2.6 Research Objective**

As my organisation is interested in developing projects that will be able to help vulnerable women, particularly from backgrounds of sex work, the objective of this research study was to gain insight into the lives of CSWs in Guwahati Assam, to be able to identify the barriers and enabling conditions to exit and their reintegration into the mainstream society and to come up with alternative livelihood intervention strategies based on the findings.

## **2.7 Research Questions**

**1) What is the current profile of CSWs and the sex work industry in Guwahati?**

**2) What are the barriers to reintegration for the CSWs of Guwahati?**

- a) What are economic barriers to reintegration of CSWs of Guwahati, Assam?
- b) What are socio-cultural barriers to reintegration of CSWs of Guwahati, Assam?
- c) What are institutional barriers to reintegration of CSWs of Guwahati, Assam?

**3) What conditions may support reintegration for the CSWs of Guwahati?**

- d) What are economic conditions that will support the CSWs to exit and re-integrate?
- e) What are socio-cultural conditions that will support the CSWs to exit and re-integrate?
- f) What are institutional conditions that will support the CSWs to exit and re-integrate?

**4) What is the best method to study the process of exit and reintegration of CSWs?**

## **CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Research Design**

The research approach used is participatory as it allows the use of innovative methodologies to elicit more complex and diverse realities of a problem and capture the multi-dimensionality and commonalities (Chambers, 2007). The majority of studies focusing on sexual exploitation and sex work have utilized a qualitative approach which requires nonrandomized sampling strategies, as these kind of studies generally aim to uncover phenomena and understand processes that would be lost in quantitative design (Padgett, 2008). Participatory research aims to combine investigation, education, and action while taking measures to enable participation of “oppressed and ordinary people in the problem posing and solving” (Maguire, 2008). Face to face experiential learning is one of the approaches within participatory approaches. Face to face experiential learning has three main forms namely life stories, immersions and total participatory research (Chambers, 2007). For answering my research questions I utilised life story and immersion methods which have been discussed in the following sections, as well as focus group discussions and semi structured interviews with key informants, to enable me to achieve my research objective.

### **3.2 Life Stories**

Life stories come from the oral history tradition which has a long pedigree in research. The practice allows empathetic interaction and listening as a source of insight and the narratives are able to show not only how study subjects cope and survive, but also bring out their endeavor to overcome problems that affect them. Life story collection also has its own rigour, adds new depth and involves us more as researchers (Kumaran, 2003). In his book on Poverty Research (2007), Chambers talks about interaction and listening to people’s life stories as a source of insight, personal learning and inspiration. He mentions about a number of studies where life stories were used to tell stories of street children, sex workers, women, dalit, tribal survivors of atrocities, people living with leprosy and HIV/AIDS, etc. Hence for my research study I collected life stories of CSWs in Guwahati to enable better understanding of their life events which led their entry into the sex work profession, their life struggles, thoughts on staying or exit from the profession and the conditions which they feel are needed for them to reintegrate into the mainstream society.

### **3.3 Immersion**

Immersions are open-ended, experiential, face-to-face, interactive, and a human learning form of experiential learning. The human and emotional aspect is important because unlike conventional science where emotion is believed to distract and distort. In experiential learning it is integral, for it is the whole person, not just the mind that is learning. Immersions in more organised forms have a period of preparation beforehand and another for reflection afterwards (Chambers, 2007). For my study I used this approach because I was not only interested in knowing their stories but also feeling their stories. I visited some of the CSWs at their houses, work places, customer soliciting sites, chatted with them over a cup of tea and observed the various conditions and situations they have to face and deal with everyday in their lives.

### **3.4 Focus Group Discussions**

Focus group discussions were conducted with CSWs in order to find out about their opinions on staying or exiting from the profession and also to find out if they would be willing to come up with an alternative livelihood strategy on their own initiative. During the discussions I found that it is not easy for them to

participate and open up about their own life experiences so easily to an outsider so I had to change my strategy and ask them to share about funny moments that they can remember from their sex work experiences and thereby set the environment for further discussions on my topic. This made them open up and they started discussing a lot of things about their occupation and their lives. Since their education level was low they found it difficult to engage in participatory exercises and so my colleague was taking down the notes while we were discussing on various topics. After the FGD was over some of the CSWs even approached me separately to share about their life stories on their own. The second FGD was conducted with the Project staffs.

### 3.5 Key informant Interviews

Semi structured interviews were conducted with different key informants and an interview guide (refer appendices 4) and consent forms (refer appendices 3) were prepared to enable me to collect relevant information for my research study. These interviews were also recorded after seeking permission from the key informants and transcribed for analysis.

### 3.6 Research Location

The research location was selected to be Guwahati, Assam due to the literature and knowledge gap for the state compared to other states in India. Further, as I wanted to learn more about the lives of woman from my own region and being an Assamese woman I felt that I would be in a better position to help my organisation collect information about the CSWs of Guwahati than a person who is an outsider to the place. I as the lead researcher was based at the regional office of EHA during my research study, located in the same city which helped me to carry out my research study in the area.

### 3.7 Research Duration

The study duration lasted for a total of 3 months from July- September, with 5-6 weeks of data collection in Guwahati as per the time availability of the study participants and the remaining period was utilised for analysis and report writing. Based on the data analysis follow up interactions was also used.

### 3.8 Research Participants

The study participants of this research were Commercial Sex Workers (CSWs) of Guwahati, Assam. Weitzer (2009) defines a sex worker as a person who provides sex, sexual stimulation or erotic services in exchange for cash or goods, the same criteria has been considered while selecting the CSWs of Guwahati for this study. The focus of the study was on women in commercial sex work who are heterosexual and not on LGBT community and men. For this research study life story interviews were done with 12 CSWs who are current CSWs and 1 ex-CSW who have exited from the work. The details of the same along with the other participant numbers are provided in the Table 1 below.

Research Tools	Participants	Numbers
Life Story Interview	CSWs	12
Life Story Interview	Ex- CSW	01
FGDs	CSWs	06
FGDs	Project Workers	05
Semi structured interviews	Key informants	10
<b>Total participants</b>		<b>34</b>

**Table 1: Details of research tools used and study participants**

### 3.9 Data Collection

Since the CSWs were not easily accessible to me, my strategy was to get in touch with the peer leader or staffs of local CSW HIV intervention projects currently running under the National AIDS control program. Towards this objective, I approached the Assam State AIDS Control Society, a nodal agency for HIV/AIDS program under the Ministry of Health in Assam, asking for their advice as well as permission to access the FSW HIV intervention projects under their supervision. This strategy gave me access to the CSW projects and to find my peer leader or initial participant who created access to other CSWs who were willing to be a part of this study. For some of the life story interviews and FGDs I was able to use the counselling room available at their project offices. For the life story interview with the ex-CSW I had to do a phone interview as she was not available for a face to face interview. For the immersion experience, and to gain insight into the living and working conditions, I spent time with the CSWs, followed the peer leader during her outreach work as well as chatted with the CSWs there. Photos of these sites as well as the houses of the CSWs, which would inform about general aspects of the sex industry to outsiders, were taken with permission of the CSWs. For other key informant interviews, such as managers of other local NGOs, vocational institutes, Director of Ujjawala centre for trafficked women, they were contacted by taking appointments by mail or phone.

During data collection, Assamese (the local language) had been the working language, as well as in Hindi for those who were more comfortable with Hindi. During the data collection process, I had an assistant from my organisation to assist me in recording and note taking as well as to help me conduct the discussions and ensure the safety of the participants and researcher. For data collection, a voice recorder was used after obtaining permission and transcripts done after every discussion session. Additionally, field notes and observations were also captured by both me as the researcher and my assistant.



Pic 1 dated 19/07/18: Researcher conducting life story interview with CSW in the counselling room.

### **3.10 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations were considered due to the sensitive nature of the study and utmost care was taken to ensure that the rights of the individuals were respected and that no harm be subjected to each participant. The study purpose, objective was explained to each participant before every discussion and life story session, and a written consent form provided which detailed the confidentiality and other clauses. After each discussion and life story session, participants were provided debriefing and given opportunity to ask any questions to the researcher. All study participants were informed of the procedures that preserve their confidentiality. The life stories and other information collected were linked only by the study site code. Participant's names were recorded by the names of their choice and no report contains information that could potentially identify an individual. The final report will be shared with the participants after completion. All study-related materials are kept in a secure place that will be accessible to only the researcher and will be destroyed at a future date.

### **3.11 Data Analysis**

For analysis of life stories/case stories, the data analysis process followed the five different forms of analysis and interpretation for case study research as given by Creswell (2007). The first step involved thorough description of all aspects of the case as whole. This included details of the participants to the study, the work places, dynamics and conditions of sex work, perceptions and attitudes etc. which helped me answer RQ No 1. The second step involved categorical aggregation, coding and interpretation of the collected data from transcripts as per the conceptual model (fig 2), which helped me answer RQ No2 & RQ 3. The third step of analysis involved direct interpretation of any data that did not fit into the previous categorizations. The fourth step involved reviewing all the data to specifically identify reoccurring patterns. The fifth step involved naturalistic generalization of the data as a whole.

## CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS

This section presents the findings of my study starting with a description of the current profiles of CSWs and the sex work industry in Guwahati, Assam and the sections following are presented according to the barriers and conditions to reintegration of CSWs in Guwahati as per the conceptual model (fig 2)

### 4.1 Description of CSWs and Sex Industry

The participants of the study mostly belonged to the state of Assam. They were from the neighbouring periphery areas around Guwahati or from other districts of Assam as part of in-migration. One of the study participants was originally from Bihar which is another state in India and she came to Guwahati with her husband after her marriage. The ethnicities of the respondents were Assamese, Bengali and Bihari. The age group of the participants ranged from 33 years – 50 years. The educational qualification of the study participants were below class 10 standard, illiterate and one of them studied till class 12. Most of them were married but there were a few study participants whose husband had died, separated or divorced and one of the study participants was unmarried. Their family sizes in general comprised of the husband and 2-3 children. A brief profile of the study participants is provided in Table 2 and 3.

No.	Name	Age	Religion	Ethnicity	Place of origin	Jobs tried/currently doing
1	Nilima	➤ 35	Hindu	Assamese	Nalbari, Assam	Court clerk, worked in wine company, plays small roles in Assamese theatres and local TV series
2	Afsana	➤ 38	Muslim	Bengali	Patsala, Assam	working as Hospital patient attendant, ferrying massaging items
3	Arifa	➤ 40	Muslim	Assamese	Mangaldai, Assam	Owned pan shop, owned night super bus
4	Anima	➤ 40	Hindu	Assamese	Guwahati, Assam	Owned small shop, working in tailoring shops
5	Kushi	➤ 50	Hindu	Bihari	Bihar(other state)	Working as maid, sells chana(snacks) in school with husband
6	Rumi	➤ 35	Hindu	Bengali	Dhubri, Assam	Owned pan shop and small hotel in ISBT, Working as maid now
7	Aruna	➤ 35	Hindu	Bengali	Guwahati, Assam	Worked as daily wage labour, into selling of small clothing items and making baskets
8	Ritu	➤ 35	Hindu	Assamese	Tihu ,Assam	Worked as patient attendants at hospital, works as maid in houses
9	Munmi	➤ 40	Hindu	Bengali	Kokrajhar, Assam	Worked in hotel and as maid earlier, does not work anymore.
10	Nabia	➤ 30	Muslim	Bengali	Dhubri, Assam	Worked as maid but now into sex work full time
11	Rukia	➤ 40	Muslim	Bengali	Boko, Assam	Owned spices shop, works as maid and cleaners at godown
12	Rabia	➤ 35	Muslim	Bengali	Barpeta, Assam	Works as maid and godown cleaner
13	Shargun	➤ 25	Muslim	Assamese	Mangaldai, Assam	Ex sex worker, currently working as Counsellor

**Table 2: Profile of CSW for Life story interviews**

The CSWs in Assam can be categorized broadly into the high level CSWs and the low level CSWs. The high level CSWs earn higher amount of income and are mostly dealing with the affluent of the society, e.g. politicians, business man, government service holders, tourists, etc. The low level CSWs mostly deal with the other strata of men in the society for e.g. daily wage labourers, truckers, small business men, cycle rickshaw pullers, taxi drivers, small shop owners etc. The income of this section of CSWs is lower in comparison and the older CSWs may also continue to supplement their income by doing other manual jobs along with sex work.

No	Name	Age	Religion	Ethnicity	Place of origin	Jobs tried/currently doing
1	Binita	➤ 25	Hindu	Assamese	Morigaon, Assam	Full time CSW
2	Dolly	➤ 25	Hindu	Assamese	Morigaon, Assam	Full time CSW
3	Pinki	➤ 20	Hindu	Assamese	Guwahati, Assam	Full time CSW
4	Jutika	➤ 30	Hindu	Assamese	Morigaon, Assam	Full time CSW
5	Nishita	➤ 25	Hindu	Assamese	Dhekiajuli, Assam	Full time CSW
6	Kaberi	➤ 32	Muslim	Assamese	Guwahati, Assam	Full time CSW

**Table 3: Profile of CSW details for Focus Group Discussion**

The sex industry in Guwahati is found to be more of a mobile based operation and transaction would take place in the homes/rented houses and the dhabas and bars. The medium of operation would be through the mobile phone. The advent of affordable mobile phone technology has changed the sex industry so much so that although the street based CSWs who solicit their clients on the street do exist, their numbers are declining to an almost non-existent number as the new medium of operation is all through the mobile phone. In Guwahati a section of the sex workers are also said to be day time sex workers. These sex workers come from the peripheral areas around Guwahati city. They take a day trip or even two-three days trip to Guwahati city under the guise of working in daily wage jobs, but are actually engaging in sex work. In Assam, the transaction of sex work is higher during festivals like Bihu (spring festival), Durga Puja (religious festival), etc, with a growing increase in tourists who come to visit the wildlife sanctuaries and other tourist attractions and look for an escort. The CSWs of Guwahati are mostly hidden from the general public. They hide their identity as CSWs by engaging in other kind of works like maids, daily wage labourers, roadside pan-shop (tobacco products, betel nut leaf) or other small shop owners, vegetable and fruit sellers, ferrying and selling items, hospital attendants (unskilled work) etc. Their involvement in sex work is only known by trusted people in their social network such as partners, contacts at the dhabas (motels), lodges, regular customers and lastly HIV NGO staffs if they register as beneficiaries to the program.

### **Immersion**

The findings from the immersion are presented in the following pictures. With a short description they give an insight of the work places of sex workers and also to show the condition of their homes and work places.





**Pic 2 dated 23/07/18**

The selected method of immersion brought me to the house of the CSW interviewed. Pic 2 shows the rented house of a CSW which is an example of the poor economic and unhygienic conditions they are staying in, with thatched partition walls, tin roofs. Picture 1 shows the water wells from where water is drawn manually and sharing outdoor toilets with other tenants staying in the same compound.



**Picture 3 dated 26/07/18**

Another interview started at the vegetables and fruits market in Guwahati where the CSWs use to await clients. I was told that some CSWs wait for customers, as well a work as daily wage labourers in the godowns when they do not find any customers. It is convenient for the CSWs to get customers in this area as can be seen in Pic 3 because it is a busy area and the market is mostly frequented by men. While interviewing the CSW in this market I felt that I was observed by people as a potential CSW.



Another immersion with a CSW led me to a Dhaba (Motel) cum Restaurant in Guwahati city highway where the younger CSWs go looking for customers. These Dhabas provide food, drinks and rooms which are utilised by the CSWs and their clients. These Dhabas are usually on the secluded highway areas where the CSWs go and sit for customers or communicate with their customers over phone before booking rooms at these places. It is also true that not every Dhaba in Guwahati is connected with CSWs.

### **Life Story Interviews, Key informant Interviews and FGDs**

It was found that sex transaction was done in the CSWs own rented houses, rooms of peers or the rooms of madams, bars, lodges and dhabas. Dhabas are affordable food outlets with rooms along the highways where travelers can come and eat and drink. Bars in Guwahati are mostly frequented by men and it is not uncommon to see CSWs milling around in the evening hours looking for customers. Lodges are usually residential buildings transformed into commercial inns or hotels. For the few CSWs who were street based, they engaged in sex transaction in the godowns or available spaces within the busy Fancy Bazar and Ganeshguri area of Guwahati.

*“Now days the FSWs contact the customers in the Dhabas or bars and from there after negotiation they go to the rooms in the Dhabas”* **Key informant-5**

Some of the sex workers use their rented houses with the consent of the landlord in exchange for a percentage of the earnings. It has to be said that most landlords in Guwahati would not want to associate themselves with sex workers so would throw them out if they came to know. The landlords who allow the sex workers to bring customers are very much a minority. Similarly, in the dhabas, bars and lodges the managers, waiters and security guards of the place have links to the sex workers and would be taking part of the earnings from them for providing them with rooms or allowing them to carry out sex-work in those places. The meeting place for sex worker and client is usually discussed beforehand except for times when the girl herself looks for clients at the bar or dhaba. Travel expenses of the sex worker would be included in the payment if she has to come to the dhaba from her residence.

The sex industry in Guwahati operates through a connected social network. From the pimps to a madam, contacts at dhabas and bars etc. As shared by a study participant, whenever the girls are caught in the act by police and arrested, the girls themselves try to take them out at first by paying bribes but would take help from their madams and ‘higher-ups’ as they refer to if necessary.

On the topic of sexual health and risks, all of the study participants said that they were aware of the health risks involved in their work and they made sure that precautions for HIV/AIDS, pregnancy, etc were taken care of. All of them said they knew about HIV/AIDs and STIs from the HIV prevention project and mentioned that they take extreme care about it as exemplified by CSW Mina:.

*“I straightaway tell them to use condom and only then I will do it.”* **CSW – Munmi**

One of the study participant who had girls working under her mentioned that they (the madams) checks on the customers when new girls are with them, if the customers are using protection or not because they do not want the new girls to become pregnant. Also project workers indicated that STD prevention is important and they feel confident about the level of awareness as we see in the statement made by one of the project workers during FGD

*“They are very aware of their health risks in the profession.”* **FG Discussion**

## 4.2 Economic Barriers

### 4.2.1 Financial aspect of entry

It is assumed that the relatively high income of commercial sex work is a major barrier to exit and reintegration for the CSWs of Guwahati, Assam. In this study also the economic condition was an issue at the time of initiation into this occupation. Almost all of the CSWs interviewed entered into sex work due to financial difficulties. They all said that it was compulsion (*majburi*), the need to look after their families and especially their children that they had to come into this occupation. At the beginning all of them had no idea of occupation and they were working in different other jobs, it would be mostly through their friends or other women and madams who were already in this occupation that they were introduced to the sex work industry in Guwahati. The following two fragments of life stories exemplify that entering CSW may result from a long trajectory of economic needs and diverse affective relations.

*“My father is poor. We are three sisters and two brothers. Father was doing work alone and looking after my family. He got me married to a guy at the age of 17 years but he was a bit mental and I could not stay with him. After that my uncle and aunt of my present husband bought me to Guwahati. After that they married me to my present husband. The two of us worked and managed our house. I worked as maid in houses and my husband worked as a cycle rickshaw puller. We had three children together. My husband used to gamble also. My children were growing up and I needed to pay for their school fees. So through all those I opened a hotel near the ISBT bus stand. We did the hotel for 3 months and after that the hotel was demolished from the site because it was illegally constructed. During that time I was in love with a building contractor. He used to come to me to visit in my house to which the landlord kept complaining. Even my husband was giving problems. So we moved to our own house in the hills and started staying there with my children. My daughter was growing up and I needed money for her school and nor was I able to marry her off. Then the lady who was staying near our house called me to her house one day and asked me why I kept working in people’s houses. She told about this work and said you can work and earn money like this. That is how I came into this line. Even now I do it along with my other works like cooking in people’s houses and do not do it so regularly. Then one time my husband went into prison for 3 months in dhubri. Then I did not know what to do. I had to run the house also. Some girls approached me and said they were looking for some jobs then I said ok to them. I do this work like this once a while but not so much on a regular or urgent basis. If I get some work or some customer call me then only I go. In a day sometimes I earn 300 rupees. I work as a maid so I do not get so much time for this work. And it is not possible to call my customers to my home as I have sons and if the locality comes to know about it we will lose our land and house and have to move away from there. My husband income is not enough to run the house. My one son works in a clothes store. Another son is studying. My daughter is married off now. I have continued in this line for 10 years.” – **Life story interview CSW Rumi***

*“My husband is not good. He is very bad. He drinks and all. He brought me to Guwahati. I have a son and a daughter. The daughter is grown up. She studies in the school now. I do not have any work; I do not know to do anything also. My husband left me and married again. So what can I do now? I work in a Marwari (a North Indian business community) household. But the income is not enough; we need food, house rent, school fees etc. I kept working in the Marwari house, and then one day I met the sister on the road. Then she asked me what work do I do, I said I work in a Marwari household. I go at 8 in the morning and come back at 4 in the evening. I get 5000 rupees for a month. But that does not run my house; even house rent is 1500 rupees. Then she said ok you do one thing you start working with me. I asked her what kind of work. Then she told, you have to do this kind of work and you will get daily money for daily work. The more work you the more money you will get. So since I had no other option and the income from other work was not sufficient, I started doing this work.” **Life story interview CSW Nabia***

Many of the women came to Guwahati with their husbands after marriage in search of work for leading a better life but there were also a few of them who had failed relationships back in their villages and had come to Guwahati to work and earn money and look after themselves and their families back in their villages.

*"I am from Guwahati but my childhood days I spent in Dimapur Nagaland. My first husband tricked me into marriage. I was very young then, 13 years of age and did not understand things much. He was older. I went back to my family after my husband died for some illness because my in laws did not want me after his death. I had my baby at 16 years and my in laws did not want me but only my baby. She was my first child how can I give away her. After all I am a mother, so I refused to give my child to them. That's the time when I came to Guwahati in 2002. After coming here in Guwahati I worked as daily wage labourer. It was my first time to work as a labourer. I was working as a helper to a mason. The mason was a known person to me and staying nearby my house, since I was just staying at home and not doing anything I thought it was a good idea to work somewhere and earn something. That time my brothers were also young and I don't have my dad, he had expired. It was only my mom who was earning that time and she was working in a hotel as a cook. I felt sad about her situation and thought that I need to work and support her. And it became time to send my daughter to school also and give her admission.*

*So the first day when I went to work at one house the owner of the house saw me from the floor above working. Then next day again he was watching me and that day he called me to his floor. Then he asked me to come inside and told me you do not look like a daily wage labourer to me. Then he asked me what made me come into this work, you must be facing some problem that is why you have come to work here. If you have some kind of problem, then please tell me. Then I narrated my story to him. Told him that my husband had died and my mom was working in a hotel, even my child needs to be admitted to school. My child is 3 years old I need to give her admission. After that he asked me around how much I would need for the school admission. I said around 2000 rupees would be enough for admission. Then he gave me 2000 rupees and asked me to go down and not to tell anyone. That time I did not have mobile. That brother wrote down his phone number in a piece of paper and gave it to me. He told me to meet him in front of Commerce College the next day. Then next day I took an auto till Commerce College. I went to the PCO nearby and from there I called up the brother. Then he reached there within 10 minutes in a car. This brother took me to a lady and introduced me to her. Then he openly discussed the whole thing with me. He told me that see you are beautiful still and so young. No matter what job or work you go for, people will give you an eye so do not do it with someone just like that instead take money from them, which will be good for you. After that the brother told me that I will do like this with you, because when I saw you I liked you. I also said ok and then I did the work with the brother in that lady's house for the first time. That time I was around 22-23 years of age. After that the lady took me to 2-3 other places. Sometimes if there is work at her place she called me."* – **Life story interview CSW Aruna**

Another CSW shared that she was the third wife of an old man and not being satisfied sexually she had ended up in extra marital sex and earning money from it.

*"I did not come so much for the money, of course men give money for the work for doing the work, but my husband was a little aged and he got married 3 times. I am his third wife. And he was not able to give me much physical satisfaction to me and so that is how I ended up in this line. Other than that I did not have any problem."* – **Life story interview CSW Kushi**

Most life stories describe combinations of economic needs, emotional issues and an entering into CSW without really knowing what they were entering into as it seems almost accidental or by a relative outsider bringing them into this business.

*"I am originally from Mangaldai. I gave divorce to my husband, he was a school teacher, and after that I came to Guwahati to work. I had a 3 yr son to look after. My aunt was staying in Guwahati that time and she helped me start a Pan shop near Ganeshguri and I looked after myself and my son like that. I came into this occupation in 2007. At first I did not know anything about all this and that work happens like this. It was when I was working in my Pan shop, one lady used to keep coming to buy things from me and she used to keep staring at me. One fine day she asked me if I would like to work somewhere else. I said if I get something I will like to work. The next day she asked me to come a bit well dressed and go with her. After that the lady took me to her house where she was doing these works with other girls, and then through her only I came to know about this line. Then slowly I also got involved in this work. After that I made a lot of money by doing this work. I took a house and did this work by giving the landlord a share of my money. I would give him 100 for each customer and if they stay for the night I would give him 500 rupees. Like this I made a lot of money."* – **Life story interview CSW Arifa**

*"But later on wherever I went to go for work, men will be always asking for this kind of favour. So after sometime I also got involved this kind of work. Since everywhere man wanted to get physical then why not to do it for money."* **Life story Interview CSW Rukia**

The legal aspects are not mentioned frequently but are however an issue as can be witnessed from the following fragment:

*"I am originally from Patsala, Assam. Now I stay in Hatigoan. I have been in this work from 2009. I am 38 years of age. I have studied till class 10. I had a love marriage. After that we came to Guwahati. We got a free room without the landlord staying with us. After that I had three daughters. I had one son but he died. Some girls were staying in the compound with us those girls used to go early morning and come back in the evening. They used to come back with good supplies. I used to ask them where they work and what kind of work they do. They used to say that they work in people's houses. Then one day my husband fought with me and he left the house. That time I was left with my three daughters. I waited for him 1-2 months and had no money for food and paying rent. I was not able to explain to my landlord about difficulty in paying rent. My daughters were also going to school that time. I was not aware that the girls staying in the compound were involved in sex work, I did not know anything about this work or how it is carried out. Sometimes they used to give me 20-50 rupees for betel nut. Then one day one of the girls came to me and said sister if you do this work you can earn money. I did not understand what work it was and how it can be done. Then she explained that we will bring men for you after you do the work we will give you some amount from the earnings. When I started doing the work at home I used to earn 150-200 rupees sometimes even 300 rupees. Then we share the amount 50:50. This way I did the work for 2 years. After that the girl took a room somewhere else and got caught by the police. I was also called to the police station. I was asked by the police not to do this job and to stop doing this job. But I had no other option so I still kept doing the work because I had to look after my daughters and run the house. Around 6 months later my husband came back but I did not stop the work. He was not aware that I was doing this work behind his back. It is now 6 years that he has died. I have married off my 3 daughters now. So since 2009 I have been in this line and this is my story."* **Life story interview CSW Afsana**

#### 4.2.2 Profitability of sex work

The income of the CSWs varied per service and per month.

*"The income that the CSWs usually make can be around 2500-3000 rupees in a day. The minimum can be of 500 rupees and can go up to even 4000 rupees."* **Key Informant 5**

*"I can earn 3000-4000 by doing this work in a single day."* **CSW - Arifa**

The difference in income varied based on their age. The younger the CSW the higher price she can earn from her customers. Although on an average it can be said that if a CSW is young in age (18-28 years) she can earn from 10000-40000 rupees (125-500 Euros) in a month.

*"In a month I can earn around 10,000 rupees, sometimes it is less also. In a day it can be 1500-2000 rupees sometimes it can go up to 4000 in a day as well."* **CSW – Afsana**

The older CSWs would be making an average income of 4000-15000 rupees (50-200 Euros) in a month, but not from direct CSW as it was found out that most of the older CSWs were involved in providing or contacting girls to customers and taking a cut for themselves.

*"To be honest in this work I try to get at least 5000-6000 rupees in a month. Even my age is deteriorating so nowadays I take my customers to other girls and if they like them they stay back and we do not take customers for ourselves."* **CSW- Rumi**

The income from sex work is much higher, takes less time and skill than other jobs that the CSWs have tried. The money earned from sex work is much more compared to other activities that they have tried doing earlier even up to 2-3 times higher.

*"I worked as a security guard at a shopping mall for 2-3 years and was earning 7500 rupees per month but the salary was not enough to look after my daughter who was studying in a private school and I have to pay for the house rent, school fees, tuition fees, etc."* **CSW- Binita**

*"I started working in a tailoring store. I had to keep my children with someone for going to my work. I had to pay 300-400 rupees in a month for that. And even the payment for my tailoring work was not paid fully to me. So it made me think again that by doing so much hard work if I am not able to get my due payment then why not do it "sex work" and earn more money from it. I will be earning more in 1 hr then what I am earning from it in 2 hrs from the tailoring shop."* **CSW- Anima**

(Table 3 below shows a detailed analysis of the household expenses of CSWs and their sources of income)

#### 4.2.3 Household expenses

On an average the household expenses of the CSWs ranged from 10,000- 20000 rupees (125-250 euro) in a month although there were exceptions where some sex workers said that their expenses were much higher in a month. One of the CSWs said that she was staying in a rental apartment where as most of the others said that they were staying in cheaper "Assam type" houses on rent which are usually older tin-roof and wooden houses. Their house rents ranged from 1500-6000 rupees (19-75 euro). The school and college fees of the children were the major expenses they all talked about in addition to food, clothing, transportation and health related expenses.

#### 4.2.4 Children's education

Most of the study participants' reason to enter sex work and staying in the profession was for looking after their children and providing them with a good education. They felt the need of giving their child good education.

*"I came to Guwahati because I wanted to my boys to do well."* **CSW – Ritu**

*"My children are in school and colleges now and we need money to pay for their fees. So by doing all kinds of work I try to earn at least 10,000 rupees in a month."* **CSW – Rabia**

Their own lack of education seems to strengthen the importance of good education:

*"And it became time to send my daughter to school and give her admission. I was dumb that is why I am in this situation today but I cannot make my child dumb also."* **CSW – Aruna**

One of the study participant shared that she was in this condition because of her foolishness but she did not wish for her daughter to become illiterate like her. One of the participants was very proud to share that her son was studying engineering in a college and that she had provided the best of education to him by doing this work

*"I paid 100,000 for my son's admission fee in the engineering college. I had put my son in good private schools and colleges earlier. The reason I came into this line was to look after my son and give me a good life and make him study well."* **CSW – Arifa**

Another two participants shared that the father was not worried about their children's education but they as mothers cannot ignore their children's educational needs and good future.

*"The girl is studying now. I need money for her every month. The husband never gives any money. The daughter is 10 years old now. The boy is 4 years old. He stays along with me. The girl stays in the village I need to send money for my child every month; her father is not bothered about anything."* **CSW- Nabia**

#### 4.2.5 Lack of skills

Education is a subject linked to skills and employment opportunities

*"In the remote area of Guwahati, the countryside of Guwahati there is not many skills, especially the uneducated girls who do not possess education but also do not have any other skills to earn a living from."* **Key Informant 9**

The study participants have very minimal skills or at least report so. Some of them had informal skills like weaving, stitching, grooming, basket making, etc, but no one was actually pursuing those skills full time as their primary occupation

*"I do not have any skills or qualification. I do not know if I would like to go for trainings and all."* **CSW- Kushi**

*"I do not have any other skills or worked anywhere else. I worked only in that house as a maid."* **CSW- Munmi**

*"I have been working in the godowns and as house maids. But the income is not sufficient so in order to meet the financial needs of my family and my children so I started working as a sex worker."* **CSW- Rabia**

When the conversation is about other jobs participants mentioned jobs and thereby implicitly indicate certain skills. What skills they do have are mostly labour intensive and applicable to informal industries

*"I know all kinds of work, like stitching, weaving, etc. I can also work in the rice fields."* – **CSW Ritu**

*"I do not know stitching or things like that but in my village I was doing works like Bidi binding, making incense sticks, etc."* – **CSW Nabia**

*"I did not find any interest to study at home. So my mother made me join a stitching and cutting school, I learnt stitching there and also got a diploma in that. I even got a sewing machine from the government."* – **CSW Anima**

*"I had been trained in beauty grooming and had even tried out the profession in a small way."* **CSW-Dolly**

*"I worked as a security guard at a shopping mall for 2-3 years and was earning 7500 rupees per month."* **CSW- Binita**

*"I also work in a house as a maid and cook food for them."* **CSW – Kushi**

*"These days I also go and do massaging in some households for ladies."* **CSW- Rumi**

#### 4.2.6 Other jobs

It was found that the other jobs which the study participants tried doing or are doing together along with sex work are working in tailoring shops, pan shops, maids, cooks, security guard, court clerk helpers, store sales, ferrying items, beauty parlours, hospital attendants, godown workers and artist.

*"I was working as a sales girl earlier but the income was not enough for me. I am currently working as a clerk assistant in the court as well."* **CSW- Pinki**

Many of the study participants were doing sex work on a part time basis but it is also a fact that younger ones were earning more income from sex work so they were not into doing other jobs so much, as can be seen in table 2 of CSW profile, whereas for the older sex workers it was necessary for them to supplement sex work with other jobs in order to earn sufficient income.

For older CSWs, they were not able to get enough customers to survive on sex work income full time and therefore it became important for them to supplement their income from other sources.

*"I ferry massaging items. And while ferrying those items I am able to find my customers as well as our work."* **CSW- Afsana**

Interestingly, few study participants mentioned that at the jobs that they previously worked at they were asked for sexual favours and they had to do it for free in those work places indicating the vulnerability of poor uneducated female labourers.

*"I am in the sex work profession still and I work as an artist as well. I acted in 2-3 TV serials. That's how I am managing myself."* **CSW- Nilima**

Again their ages are mentioned as relevant in CSW

*"In this profession the age also matters a lot. The younger the girls are the more they can earn."* **Key informant 5**

*"And these days' younger girls are coming in this profession and men prefer them more and the clothes they wear attract the customer that is why we are losing our customers these days. Even age plays an important role in this job."* **CSW- Dolly**

It was interesting to find out that majority of the key informants said that sex work was a source of easy money for the sex workers. However none of the sex workers said so, that it was easy money which they were earning from sex work.

*“As per me it is a source of easy money. Of course they all come looking for a source of income. For instance the family needs a job, nowadays nothing happens without money, children have to be sent to school, fooding etc all these needs lots of money.”* **Key Informant 2**

*“It is a source of earning easy money in less time.”* **Key Informant 5**

*“They are mostly in this work because of their necessity and difficult times. Also it is a source of easy income. Yes it is true, for instance the women who used to be involved in this work in earlier days used to come to this work by compulsion or because of family problems. But nowadays it seems like girls are coming into this line mainly to make easy money.”* **Key Informant 4**

#### 4.2.7 Financial independence

Although all the study participants were hiding their identity as sex workers from the general public, they all appeared to be self-independent women who enjoy the fact that they are earning income, looking after their families and having the ability to not depend on their husbands or partners for their financial needs. In particular, for the older CSWs, the taste of financial independence that they have now does not let them leave the work.

*“I do not want to leave this job, why will I leave this job, I am free now and no one stays with me. I am making my income through it. The income from this helps me pay house rent, electricity and my day to day expenses. What other job will I get?”* **CSW – Afsana**

*“I had asked one of them directly, but she said that it is not possible for her to leave this work.”* **Key Informant 3**

*“My husband is earning 12000 rupees a month and my two sons are working and earning daily wages of Rs 550 every day. So even if I do not do this work I can manage with my husband’s and son’s income Even if I do not do this work my house will run. But then again I think that I can earn some money and utilise it for my expenses.”* **CSW - Munmi**

*“Actually I want to leave this work only because the only tension I had was for my daughter. Now my daughter got married herself. She got married nicely and staying nicely. I have no more tension. Now I have a younger brother next to me who is little ill mentally so his wife and two kids I am looking after. If they want or need something I only give them. That is why I am still doing the work. If this problem was not there I would have stopped doing this work totally. Now knowingly I do not feel like suffering.”* **CSW – Aruna**

Based on the life histories above, a tabular analysis of the household expenses and income is provided below in table 4. Sex work related expenses were considered a part of household expenses and not reported separately by the CSWs.



Expenses	Approx Monthly Expenses as mentioned by CSWs	Income from CS Work monthly	Income from other works/attempted works	Part time/full time CSW	Reported expenses	Participants/ Age/ family members aware of CS work?
Household related expenses	8,000-9,000 rupees (100-120 euro)	7,000-8,000 rupees	4,000 rupees as maid (not working anymore)	Full time CSW	House rent 1500 , education, fooding, clothing, children education	CSW-Nabia ➤ 30  Sister & Brother in law aware
Household related expenses	10,000 - 15,000 rupees (125-180 euro)	4,000-5,000 rupees	4,000-5,000 rupees (hospital attendant, maid, etc)	Part time CSW	House rent 2500, education, fooding, clothing, children education	CSW-Ritu ➤ 35  Family members not aware
Household related expenses	20,000 rupees (250 euro)	3,000-4,000 rupees	4,000 rupees (maid), son and husband sharing other household expenses	Part time CSW (contracts other CSWs occasionally)	House rent, food ,clothing, medicines	CSW-Kushi ➤ 50  Family members not aware
Household related expenses	15,000 rupees (125 euro)	5,000-10,000 rupees	5,000-6,000 rupees (hospital attendant, selling of products, etc)	Part time CSW (contracts other girls for CS)	House rent, food ,clothing, transportation	CSW –Afsana ➤ 38  Family members not aware
Household related expenses	20,000 – 30,000 rupees (250-350) euro	10,000-15,000 rupees	5,000-10,000 rupees (hospital attendant, selling of products, etc)	Part time CSW (contracts girls for CS)	House rent 2000 (Apartment), electricity, water, education, food, clothes	CSW-Anima ➤ 40+  Children aware of CS work

**Table 4: Expenses and income as reported by CSWs**

Based on table 4 findings we estimate expenses around could be around 15000–20000 rupees of CSWs and average earnings from CS work could be 10000-15000 rupees with additional earnings of around 5000 rupees from other supplement jobs. The earning from sex work is double of what they can earn from other manual jobs. Even though they might have to pay some share of their earnings to madams, still the take home amount is higher than the earnings from other jobs. And once they have their own clientele they do not need to pay any share to the madams as has been mentioned by some of the study participants.

### 4.3 Social Barriers

#### 4.3.1 Exposure to sex work exit

When asked about the CSWs being aware if any of their friends or someone that they have known had left this work totally and how they were able to leave, most of them responded that they do not know anyone who had left the work totally. They said that some may have started doing other small income

generating activities like hawking vegetables, fruits, opening a pan shop etc. but while doing that they also continue engaging in sex-work or contracting other girls that they meet while doing this activities for sex work. Further, the girls go for other jobs only when they are ageing and start having lesser customers than before because the younger girls take away their customers.

*"I do not know anyone who have left this line and working in something else. Whoever I have met or seen are still working in this line."* **CSW – Rumi**

*"All these years I have not seen anyone leave this line totally. Even if they themselves are not continuing the work they keep girls and do the work."* **CSW – Arifa**

*"Some of them have left the profession, started working in small company, selling clothes, selling vegetables, etc. And also do contracts with us giving us clients."* **CSW – Afsana**

*"There are girls who are doing other works, like working as maids or doing some business but if they get customers they continue with this kind of work also because starting a business also needs money, from where the girl or women will get money from. It is not possible for poor people to have so much of money that is why they are not able to do any kind of other works or business."* **CSW – Kushi**

*"I have not met so far who have left this profession totally."* **Key Informant 2**

However two study participants who said that they knew some friends who had left this work totally because they got married and they have settled down with their husbands and kids and they are not doing any kind of work now because they are having a good and secured life with their kids and husband. One of the key informants said that she had seen CSWs being reintegrated into the mainstream society.

*"There are some friends of mine who have left this profession and got married started family and have kids now. I know some who have left this job and their husbands were aware of their profession before their marriage but now they do not allow their wives to be in this profession anymore. Even if they are allowed to work after marriage their husbands search different type of jobs for them."* **CSW – Nilima**

*"I have one friend who totally left this work. In fact she got married and has two kids as well now. She left this work because of the man she got married to now."* **CSW – Aruna**

*"I have seen reintegration of CSWs into the society but they are the low level ones. The reason they might want to come to the mainstream might be because of their age, because of their illness that is why they want to return to the mainstream."* **Key Informant 9**

*"There are some friends who have exited from this line but I cannot tell you their names because they will get angry at me for telling it to others. At this time they are not working. But they exited this work because they got married and settled down. They also have kids now. The husband is working and doing well so they do not have to go back to this work again."* **Ex Sex worker- Shargun**

#### 4.3.2 Extra income in pimping

The percentage cut from pimping, finding new girls etc. is another barrier to exit the sex work industry. It was interesting to find out that all of the study participants said they were not aware of any girls who were trafficked or sold in their line of work. They all said that no one can be forced in this work unless the girl herself is interested in doing the work. However during the in-depth interviews, it was found out that many of them were into pimping of girls to other customers and they were specially the older sex workers.

*"They would be contracting girls for the customers as a side business. Because they are old now and they keep other girls under them now. They will do this work after they stop doing the work themselves."* **FG Discussion**

*"So nowadays I take them (customers) to girls and if they like them they stay back"* – **CSW Rumi**

*"There is not many who are trafficked in this line in Guwahati, mostly come on their own will to earn money or because of their poor financial conditions. If we force girls in this profession then we will face problem later on from the police, etc and so we do not do human trafficking and all."* **CSW – Nilima**

*"While working as Peer Educator, the HRGs (sex workers) would save my number and then call me and offer me customers, I used to get very angry."* **Ex Sex Worker – Shargun**

The interviews with other key informants also confirmed that trafficking was happening in Assam and the North eastern states but mostly they were trafficked out of Guwahati to other cities of India and the pimping network also was very strong.

*"The pimps they are so active that even if some are in good line they will try everything to bring them to this line, they know all the tactics."* **Key Informant 9**

*"In Guwahati there are not many cases of girls who are forcefully bought into this line as much as I know or hear about, it is mostly on circumstances that the girls are compelled to join this line."* **CSW- Munmi**

*"In Guwahati the trafficked girls in this line is not so much. Mostly the girls coming to me come on their own will. We do not need to force them if we force them we will be caught by the police. Instead they come on their own to do work in this line because they are in need of money."* **CSW – Afsana**

*"I have not met anyone that has been trafficked or sold belonging to the neighbouring states of Nepal and Bangladesh. Human trafficking is mostly done to the outside states of India from Assam, because the girls of Assam can be recognised here so trafficked girls are difficult to be kept in Assam since it has a local context and people can recognise."* **Key Informant 2**

*"Human trafficking is quite high not only in Guwahati but all over the north east. Guwahati is a transit point, from everywhere people come to Guwahati, come from hills, come from remote areas. It is a source area as well as a transit area. The trafficked girls are very young, slowly the trends are changing. Earlier the married girls used to be trafficked; even now they are being trafficked. From our community (Hindu) married women are less trafficked, it is mostly from the minority (Muslim) community that married women are trafficked, what happens is that they get married at a very young age and the husband marries again, or she has babies and the man marries again. Then some other man trafficks and takes her away. That happens mainly with the minority community.*

*But the new trend now that is happening is that girls of 7-8 years girls are being trafficked. This is not because of maid servant, earlier many people used to take small girls to look after their children. The people of Bihar, Kolkata they have a superstition, that if before a girl reaches puberty if a man have intercourse with her then HIVAIDS is cured. This is a superstition and it is there in Bihar and West Bengal."*

*"And these girls of 7-8 years, like we have massage parlours here, they have places there, where people go to have intercourses who are infected with HIVAIDS. That is why many girls of 7-8 years are trafficked and the younger the girl is the more money the trafficker is able to get."* **Key Informant 9**

*"Actually I happened to know about this whole trafficking way back in 1999 as I told you I was working with YWCA, I do not remember if it was 1997 or 1999 because I was asked to go for a conference, World Council of YWCA, there were four countries and they were doing a collaborative work along with YWCA of India, so YWCA of India, Bangladesh and Korea, I remember these three countries I forgot the other*

two countries, they came up with a report, they wanted to find out the route of the traffickers and to find out the route of the traffickers they interviewed the sex workers of Delhi, so while talking with the sex workers of Delhi they just asked them, they were not the sex workers, they were the survivors and also some sex workers. So when they were talking with the sex workers they gave a description, where did they halt, what did they eat, to identify the different places? So when I was reading that report I found that many of the things that they were saying about like, when they were describing the places, when they were describing the dresses, when they were describing the food, it seemed like that they were describing of Assam and that was the first time I realised that way back in 1997 I think so, I realised that Assam is one of the route.” **Key Informant 7**

#### 4.3.3 Regular Customers

The general opinion of the study participants about their customers were that they were not abusive to them or harass them in any way. The customers came from all sections of the society like rickshaw pullers, truckers, shopkeepers, service holders, businessman, tourists, politicians, etc.

“No there is no harassment from the customers. I do not keep terms with those kinds of people.” **CSW-Rumi**

“Some of them have regular customers. The customers of the CSWS are serviceman, government officials, businessman, labourers, contractors, drivers etc.” **Key Informant 5**

“I do the work outside. But if they are my regular customers I do the work at my home only. The customers in this line are mainly the businessman because the service holder men have to usually stay within their budgets.” **CSW – Arifa**

“The customers I have now are permanent.” **CSW - Aruna**

“Our customers are from every community, if we choose only Assamese clients we will not be able to earn any money.” **CSW – Afsana**

One of the participant mentioned that sometimes they find customers who do not want physical intimacy with them and instead would just want them to sit and talk with them and would even pay the agreed amount and there would be other customers who would be paying less after the work and some others who would be paying more than the agreed amount after the work

“All customers are not bad, some would not do anything and still pay them and send them back. They are mainly looking for someone to talk to and have some company with.” **CSW – Dolly**

The older sex workers more or less had permanent customers coming to them.

“The customers I have now are permanent.” **CSW - Asha**

#### 4.3.4 Partners

For many of the study participants their first marriage had failed or they have problems with their husbands who are into drinking, gambling, not working, etc. For some of them after coming to Guwahati they had found new husbands or partners to stay with however it was found out while discussing with the key informants that though many of them say that they have husbands or married but they are not their actual husbands sometimes the partners who they stay with are the pimps themselves. But no one from the study participant mentioned that their husbands or partners bring in customers for them.

*"But actually they are not their real husbands because when they have to look for houses to stay they have to show somebody as their husband. They just happen to be staying with them. It is a way of showing to the society also that they are married and he is the husband. Like Julie, she is staying with a man but he is not her real husband."* **Key Informant 6**

*"The person who stays with the girl knows about her work and keeps earning from the girl. It is kind of extra income for him as well. Sometimes he brings customer for her as well."* **Key Informant 4**

*"If you ask my personal opinion I felt that maybe he was into the system and he was acting as a pimp in a disguise form, as a husband, because my area was domestic violence so I looked at those victims, so those victims like sex workers can also exist in the form of wives and the pimp maybe their husband."* **Key Informant 7**

*"Yes I have a partner. He knows about my work, he does not know about my doing the work, but knows that I am engaging others in this work."* **CSW – Afsana**

#### 4.3.5 No social acceptance/Invisibility

The hidden nature of the sex work in Guwahati makes it a bit easier for them to work secretly and not face much stigma and discrimination from the society. Except for few of the study participants no one in their family was aware of them working as sex workers. All of them made sure that no one in their neighbourhood gets to know that they were doing this work and tried to carry on their work as secretly as possible and moved their houses if by any chance their landlords or neighbours came to know that they were doing sex work in their houses. Even the sex workers did not approve themselves of working as sex workers as they were of the opinion that they were doing sin and that people should do those kinds of works which are socially acceptable and not sexwork. One of them even put "sindoor" the red mark on her forehead to make herself acceptable to the society as married woman, as then the chances of the neighbours or passerby assuming her to be a sex worker will be less while awaiting customers on the road.

*"No one in my family knows about my work. They only know that I work in the godown. The society never approves this kind of work."* **CSW- Rukia**

*"Sometimes I end up meeting known people in this job also, once I met an uncle of mine and he recognised me but I requested him not to tell it to my family, that I am involved in this job."* **CSW – Anima**

*"This kind of work is wrong, it is a sin. But for the sake of the stomach people do it, the heart never agrees to it."* **CSW- Kushi**

*"Since it is a bad work, no one in the society will accept us. I do not think that my work is wrong but the society thinks it in that way."* **CSW – Arifa**

*"I put sindoor on my forehead because I do not want other people to think that I am a CSW, because people in the society do not see a CSW with a good eye."* **CSW-Binita**

On the other hand, 4-5 CSWs that were interviewed believed that they were providing good service to the society by working as sex workers.

*"If I keep doing this good work (sex work), it is good for the society as well, isn't it? That is why I keep doing this work as well."* **CSW- Aruna**

*"We are making everyone happy through our work."* **CSW –Afsana**

### 4.3.6 Gender Bias

Some of the study participants were victims of a deeper gender inequality which is still prevalent in Assamese society. One aspect of this is the gender bias where boys are seen as an investment for old age and girls are seen as a burden and to be married off early.

*“My first husband tricked me into marriage. I was very young then, 13 years of age and did not understand things.” CSW Arifa*

*“My parents died when I was small. My brothers somehow managed to get some education by staying with relatives. I could not even manage that much. My got me married to a boy of their choice.” CSW Ritu*

*“He got me married to a guy at the age of 17 years but he was a bit mental and I could not stay with him.” CSW Rumi*

*“I fell in love with a boy, but he turned out not be such a nice boy, so after that I left him and went to stay with my maternal uncle”. CSW Anima*

## 4.4 Institutional Barriers

### 4.4.1 Lack of legal documents

Many of the study participants did not have government-recognised identity cards. Some of them who were staying in Guwahati for many years were a little more aware of the need of identity documents and have been able to get ration-cards for getting food supplies at government subsidized rates with the help of their family members or other known persons to them and pan cards, voter ids as identity proofs but many of the study participants said that they do not have any form of identity cards. This makes it difficult for them to even apply for a cooking gas connection which is a basic necessity. The lack of identity card also makes it difficult for single or separated women to find a house or room in Guwahati as the landlords are not willing to give rooms without any identity proofs.

*“I do not have any Adhar card (Unique Identification Authority card) or identity document. But if we have them then it will become better for us”. CSW – Afsana*

*“I have a bank account; my daughter opened it with for me”. CSW – Anima*

*“We have ration cards and also get the 2 rupees per kg rice from the ration stores.” CSW – Rukia*

*“We have told them about some schemes from the government in their villages where the government is providing money to the villagers for building houses. We have provided them with the information but it is up to them if they want to take the facility or not, because we cannot help further with that. We try and help them with whatever possible from our side but because most of them do not have documents they are unable to access the services and schemes of the government.” FG Discussion*

*“The government schemes that are available for poor and marginalised women are for the Below Poverty Line (BPL) women in general and not necessarily specific for sex workers.” Key Informant 1*

On the other hand, 4-5 CSWs that were interviewed believed that they were providing good service to the society by working as sex workers.

*“We make use of their PAN cards (Govt Issued Identity cards for tax payers which can be used as Identity proof), voter Ids and house rent agreement with the landlords to help CSWs open bank accounts. But the girls who do not have those we are not able to help them to open bank accounts. But the identity is usually of made for a different profession and nowhere do they introduce themselves by this profession, because no one in this society recognizes this job.” Key Informant 4*

#### 4.4.2 Lack of education support

For sex workers with children, they want to make sure that their children have a better future than them.

*“As quoted by CSW Arifa in her life story interview” refer section 4.2.1*

*“When my daughter passed her class 10 exam everyone in my locality people were very happy. My daughter is going to give MA entrance exam by the end of this month. My daughter is asking me to leave this job now and I have told her that once she finishes her studies and finds a government job I will leave this job totally.” CSW-Anima*

#### 4.4.3 Unsafe working conditions in informal sector

Few study participants mentioned that at the jobs that they previously worked at they were asked for sexual favours and they had to do it for free in those work places indicating the vulnerability of poor uneducated female labourers.

*“But later on wherever I went to go for work, men will be always asking for this kind of favour. So after sometime I also got involved this kind of work. Since everywhere man wanted to get physical then why not to do it for money.” CSW- Rukia*

*“But no matter wherever I worked, people wanting physical intimacy were there everywhere” CSW Anima*

*“During the time when I was working in the court office I could not understand many things, like my employers used to instruct me to go here and there for official work, to do this and that, and there were many people who were after me, for instance, after the official works were done they used to take me to dhabas and offer me drinks, etc”. CSW Nilima*

## 5: Conditions

### 5.1 Economic Conditions

#### 5.1.1 Stable income

Income on a regular basis and sufficient enough to cover their household expenses is an important condition that would help CSWs to break their reliance on sex work and help them decide whether to exit. For instance they all said that they would like to do some other kind of jobs if they get an opportunity but the uncertainty whether they would be able to do that work or whether the income earned from that work will be enough to look after their children and families made afraid to take any decision. In the case of the ex-sex worker, she was able to leave when her husband's earning became a bit stable and he himself suggested to her to leave the sex work profession.

*“They have to maintain their family. The husband's income is not sufficient or is not enough to cover all these expenses. Hence the female wants to earn some income and this income becomes a little easy. It does not need too much labour also, they do not need to invest too much of time also and the income earning is very good.” Key Informant 2*

*“It is very difficult for girls to exit because it becomes like a chain system, one customer will bring in more customers and the income goes on increasing. Even in my case I was able to earn 10,000 rupees from a single customer sometimes.” Ex Sex Worker – Shargun*

### 5.1.2 Alternative opportunity

The CSWs skills for other works are mainly labour intensive such as weaving, basket making, stitching etc. The income that they can make out of these labour intensive works is very less compared to the income that they can make from sex work.

*“For example the younger girls are earning 15000-20000 in a month but if we try to take them out and provide for an alternative arrangement then we will not be able to pay so much of amount to them.” FG*

#### **Discussion**

*“The likelihood of them taking up other livelihood options and leaving this work is very less because there is very less options for them and no one can give that amount of money which they are earning from this work.” Key Informant 2*

One of the study participants said that if she is provided with two sewing machines she would start a shop and earn like that. She said that she is willing to pay for the rent of the shop on her own from the earnings that she will earn from her tailoring works. Whereas another said that she would not prefer to do business and instead would like to work in an office set up. Another participant shared about starting a self-help group whereby she can provide training to girls on basket making and they can sell those baskets and share the profit making among themselves.

*“If someone helps me with two sewing machines I am willing to do it. I can pay the shop rent on my own from the earnings that I get from the tailoring works. I just need the starting up and then I can manage it own my own.” CSW – Anima*

*“Today I have a brought of friend who knows how to make plastic basket and all. So we are thinking of starting a self help group among us the CSWs. About 12 of us will make investments and she will train us and also engage some people and sell the baskets, and after the selling of the baskets we will share the profit among us.” CSW – Arifa*

## 5.2 Social Conditions

### 5.2.1 Support from the family

The support of the family is another condition which the women or girls need to exit. The responsibility, particularly financial responsibility of a single women, mother or separated women sometimes becomes too heavy to handle alone. The family support and sharing of responsibilities for these women is very much needed for them to come back to the mainstream society.

*“At times what happens the family also do not want them to come back, it is not because they do not want them to come back cause they do not like them, because it is also a source of income for the family because the money goes whatever she earns, a portion of that money comes to the family, so if she comes back the source of income will just diminish or it will just vanish so they prefer them to stay there.”*

#### **Key Informant 7**

*“In my house my mother knows about it and no one else. My mother knows as I cannot hide it from her. If I have any problem, I will share it with my mom only. My mother just tells me one thing, if later on our situation improves, like if I you are able to start a shop or start a family of your own, then you stop this work. That she tells me and makes me understand.” CSW- Aruna*



### 5.2.2 Stable relationship

It was found that most of the CSWs had early marriages or unstable relationships which compelled them to be in this profession. Even during the interviews with the Ex –CSW and the current CSWs they said that they have friends who have completely left this work because they got married and they have the financial and emotional support of their husbands and so they do not have to do this work again and that they are well settled with their kids and husbands.

*“There are some friends who have exited from this line but I cannot tell you their names because they will get angry at me for telling it to others. At this time they are not working. But they exited this work because they got married and settled down. They also have kids now. The husband is working and doing well so they do not have to go back to this work again.”* **Ex Sex Worker – Shargun**

*“But I will be leaving this work after 4-5 months as I plan to get married with my boyfriend by the end of this year and since he is not aware of my this job, I don’t want him to come to know about it because once I get married it will not be easy to hide from him anymore. Prior to him I had a boyfriend who knew about this job of mine but I did not marry him because later on he will abuse me by talking about my sex work profession after marriage.”* **CSW – Nilima**

*“I have one friend who totally left this work. In fact she got married and has two kids as well now. She left this work because of the man she got married to now. That way her luck was good, a Marwari man found her and he married her. After marriage she is living well with concrete house and all. She keeps calling me, does video call with me and shows me her kids. He is a good man. Actually he has married before but he has not left his first wife also and has not left my friend also. He has kept her nicely. Now she has two kids also, one boy and one girl. She also feels happy now.”* **CSW – Aruna**

### 5.2.3 Desire to leave sex work

Another important pre-condition that has to exist for CSWs to leave this industry is willingness to leave sex work. It is important that the women have the mental and emotional strength to take this decision.

*“I do not want to leave this job, why will I leave this job, I am free now and no one stays with me. I am making my income through it. The income from this helps me pay house rent, electricity and my day to day expenses. What other job will I get?”* **CSW – Afsana**

*“I had asked one of them directly, but she said that it is not possible for her to leave this work.”* **Key Informant 3**

*“My husband is earning 12000 rupees a month and my two sons are working and earning daily wages of Rs 550 every day. So even if I do not do this work I can manage with my husband’s and son’s income. Even if I do not do this work my house will run. But then again I think that I can earn some money and utilise it for my expenses.”* **CSW - Munmi**

*“Actually I want to leave this work only because the only tension I had was for my daughter. Now my daughter got married herself. She got married nicely and staying nicely. I have no more tension. Now I have a younger brother next to me who is little ill mentally so his wife and two kids I am looking after. If they want or need something I only give them. That is why I am still doing the work. If this problem was not there I would have stopped doing this work totally. Now knowingly I do not feel like suffering.”* **CSW – Aruna**

*“I wanted to show my family and husband that I can look after my son on my own. I also bought land and property in my village and also bought a night super bus. I have made enough money now and can return to my village and start a shop there and do business there.”* **CSW – Arifa**

*"I took up the responsibility of my whole family. At one time I used to earn a lot of money, but whatever I earned I was not able to use much on myself, but completed building house in my village."* **CSW – Nilima**

Interestingly, in my interview with a key informant who is director of a shelter home (Ujjwala Centre) for rescued girls from trafficking, she mentioned that girls who are trafficked against their will and have been rescued have the willingness to leave sex work. The CSWs who have entered voluntarily after meeting madams or pimps although out of financial compulsions have less desire to leave and exit sex work.

In rare cases such as one ex- sex worker, she said that she was more determined to find some other work because of the fact that she had a baby and she did not want her child to have any kind of bad influence because of her sex work. Also other facts like her husband and her other family members became aware of her work and were asking her to leave the work. She also had better educational qualification compared to most other sex workers who are involved in this work who hardly have any skills or qualification, her husband's income was improving slowly and support from other family members to look for other job/livelihood opportunities made her stick to her decision and not return to sex work again.

#### 5.2.4 Support from the society

In the context of Assamese society it seems that the sex workers were not confident of coming out or opening up to the mainstream society as sex workers. There were instances where if the neighbourhood came to identify them as sex workers they would be chased out of their homes or localities. Support from the society for the sex work profession is necessary for sex workers to exit and reintegrate, otherwise any reintegration has to be in secrecy, which can have its own share of damaging consequences.

*"This job is not accepted by anyone in our society, no religion or caste will allow this to happen. No man will allow his woman to go and sleep with another man. Even if the man is blind he will not allow his wife to go and sleep with another man. Then how will the society accept this job."* **CSW - Afsana**

*"Society should accept this work also. I want to tell something, if today I tie my stomach and lie down at home the society will not come to feed me or give. So they do not have a right to tell me anything also. If someone tells me this kind of words I directly tell it to them, ok come and feed us."* **CSW - Aruna**

*"The first problem that the girls face while going into the mainstream is that when we try and send back the girl to their homes, even if the family is willing to accept the girl back, the village is not willing to take her back into their village or society. Then our counselor has to go there and conduct meetings. We tell them that the girl was with us, she has been learning works with us."* **Key Informant 9**

### 5.3 Institutional Conditions

#### 5.3.1 Educational support for children

The cost of education makes it difficult for sex workers to think about leaving their source of income. Although universal education for children up to 16 years is provided by the Indian government in government schools, there is no similar provision for higher secondary and beyond. Due to the poor implementation of the universal education scheme for children up to 16 years too, these government schools have issues of poor infrastructure, absentee teachers etc. as a result of which they are not a preferred schooling option for Assamese who have the option to choose.

*"I paid 100,000 for my son's admission fee in the engineering college. I had put my son in good private schools and colleges earlier."* **CSW- Arifa**

*"When my daughter passed her class 10 exam everyone in my locality people were very happy. My daughter is going to give MA entrance exam by the end of this month. My daughter is asking me to leave this job now and I have told her that once she finishes her studies and finds a government job I will leave this job totally."* **CSW-Anima**

### 5.3.2 Social safety nets

There are few schemes in Assam that target informal workers in factories as well as social health insurance for the BPL people. However, access is very difficult for many sex workers due to the many legal documents required which the sex workers do not have the awareness or even the time to look for. Most often the benefits available from the schemes are also not worth the effort. In this situation, social security nets in the form of micro-finance assistance to start up a business, revolving funds among Self-Help Group members etc. can be provided.

*"There is neither any help from the government nor any help from the NGOs. There are so many needy persons than me how can the government help me alone. There is a girl who will come to meet you. She is so poor, her husband left her and she has two kids, how will she take care of herself and her kids now."* **CSW -Munmi**

*"We have received no help from the government. Some people have received some help from government through some schemes and all. But we have not received anything till now."* **CSW- Ritu**

*"No help is there from the govt side; unless someone gets affected by HIV/AIDs then may be some health related services are provided."* **CSW - Nilima**

*"We have even given some of them with small wooden boxes to open Pan Shop. But it was from our own side and was not under any government scheme or anything. The wooden box comes for 2000-3000 and if the initial supplies are given for say 1000-2000, the total cost will come around 4000-5000. That is how they run their houses. But even then they would be contracting girls for the customers as a side business. Because they are old now and they keep other girls under them now. They will do this work after they stop doing the work themselves."* **FG Discussion**

### 5.3.3 Legal support

Majority of the sex workers have little to no education and many of them find it difficult to access relevant documents such as ID cards, Voter cards etc. Due to this they also are unable to access any schemes that come from the government such as subsidies for the poor, health insurance for the poor, housing schemes for the poor, etc. that could have made their life a bit easier. Access to free legal assistance is important for these women.

*"I do not have any Aadhar card (Unique Identification Authority card) or identity card. But if we have them then it will become better for us."* **CSW-Afsana**

*"We have told them about some schemes from the government in their villages where the government is providing money to the villagers for building houses. We have provided them with the information but it is up to them if they want to take the facility or not, because we cannot help further with that. We try and help them with whatever possible from our side but because most of them do not have documents they are unable to access the services and schemes of the government."* **FG Discussion**

#### 5.3.4 Safe working conditions in informal industries

A few of the study participants mentioned cases of sexual harassment, being approached by men and being asked for sexual favours without any payment in their previous jobs. This made them unwilling to keep working at these places and also made them think about engaging in sex work for payment. As many of the informal industries in Guwahati, Assam are unregulated, the vulnerability of poor uneducated girls/women is often preyed upon by men. Informal industries, factories, construction sites, maid services, etc. need to have policies and regulations that protect the rights of these women.

## **CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION**

### **6.1 Economic Barriers**

The study results show that there are several barriers to exit and reintegration for the CSWs of Guwahati, Assam which can be tabled under economic barriers. The first economic barrier is the profitability of sex work. The money earned from sex work is much more, even up to 2-4 times higher compared to other activities that they have tried doing earlier. This is similar to findings elsewhere in literature where for many of these women with a background of poverty and low education, sex work is perceived to be an 'easy' way out of their deplorable economic condition. Compared to commercial sex work, few other jobs offer the same advantages for women, including ease of entry, a ready market and higher earnings than any other job these women could find.(Vuylsteke & Jana, 2001). A second economic barrier is the low income they earn from their previous occupations. Many of the study participants have worked other jobs such as maids, roadside tea sellers, roadside pan stalls, unskilled hospital attendants, ferrying goods etc. but have not managed to make any sufficient income to manage a household which requires about 10000-20000 rupees (125-250 euro) per month depending on family size. On average, income earned from a roadside tea stall or working as maid can only fetch between 2000-4000 rupees per month. This is linked to a third barrier which is the lack of education, skills and qualifications which limit their employment options to low paying manual intensive occupations. The fourth economic barrier is the financial costs of raising children and their educational expenses. Many of the study participants have children and some have dependent parents to look after.

Another important economic barrier is the newfound financial independence that the sex workers gain from this activity. The sex work occupation also allows flexible working hours and little to minimal skills requirement for a considerably good pay. This allows them to devote some time to their children and other household chores. Coming from households and a social system where gender inequality is prominent, financial independence for a CSW and not needing to be dependent on a husband is empowering, as can be seen where few CSWs left their husbands and are now sending money home to their parents.

### **6.2 Social Barriers**

Sex work is considered an undesirable shameful profession, immoral and dirty, a last resort by women in difficult circumstances by the general society in Assam. This opinion is also held by the CSWs themselves and they often try their best to keep their children away from the occupation. Due to this stigma from the society as well as the self-stigma, the sex work transaction is largely hidden from the general public. With the advent of technology in the form of mobile phones, a highly mobile and hidden sex-work industry has developed. As a result the social networks of a CSW hold more importance than the general society in determining whether to exit the profession. In Guwahati city, for the respondents of the study, the absence of any peers, seniors in their social networks who have completely left sex work is a major barrier. According to the respondents, no one really leaves the industry, even when they become old they will still pimp younger girls and take a cut. This pimping of younger girls is a natural progression for many CSWs as they age and want to give more time to their families while still making supplemental income.

Literature elsewhere such as in Canada has reported that many women enter the sex work profession due to 'critical life events' such as violence, abuse and neglect (Canadian press, 2017) This is also found to hold true in Guwahati where for many of these girls, their entry into sex work occurred due to critical events in their life such as break down in marriage, death of husband, meeting with a pimp. Today, most

of the study participants have married again, or claim to be married and have partners living with them. Many of these partners are also pimps working in the industry and these relationships are a barrier for any of these girls to contemplate leaving. The madams and pimps are always advising the girls to be in this business as they want their cut. This is similar to studies elsewhere where it has been found that pimps or madams (a term used for female pimps) would be engaging women for sex work and would be collecting part of the earnings. For instance, Benoit and Millar (2001) found that low-priced sex workers ("street-based") retain over 90% of their earnings, while higher priced suppliers utilizing more sophisticated intermediaries often received only about 50% of their earnings .

The next social barrier is the regular clientele that they have built up. Majority of the respondents have regular clients who remain a regular source of income. These clients also direct potential new clients to the girls, which is more income that is hard to resist for the girls. An important finding is that there is very little mention of violence or harassment from their regular clients as often reported in literature. The literatures from sub-Saharan Africa report on the concept of 'sugar daddies' who provide money and material gifts to young girls in exchange for a sexual relationship (Kuate-Defo, 2004) which is little similar to the case of Guwahati where we find that young college girls are entering into the profession for getting cash and goods from their clientele in exchange of sexual relationships, which may sometimes make them get used to the profession and may lead to their continuing in it as a full time profession. However the regular clientele of the older CSWs in Guwahati are generally travelling businessmen and other men who have developed a liking for a particular CSW and prefer to call her again.

Gender inequality and the culture of getting girls married early and looking for a potential husband for marriage instead of giving a girl child a proper education or other life skills also becomes a barrier for a girl or women in her later stages when she faces a crisis or a failed relationship in life. In some Muslim communities, to which some of the study participants belong, it is also common to have 2-3 wives and some of these girls shared that they were unhappy with their polygamous marriage, which was observed during immersion also where the number of Muslim women were seen to be more in this profession in Guwahati.

### **6.3 Institutional Barriers**

The social institution that exists in Assamese society is staunchly patriarchal, which get more and more severe the lower the socio-economic strata and education. In the communities that these girls come from, there is a lot of gender bias where a boy is seen as an investment but a girl is only to be sent off in marriage. This institution creates a system of privilege for boys while the girls' education or career is neglected as they are seen as a burden. This leads to the girls being given off in marriage at a young age through arranged marriages. In cases where marriages fail or breakdown, the girls are left to fend for themselves and their children. Gender inequality therefore serves as both a cause and barrier to exit sex work trapping the girls in a vicious cycle.

A few of the study participants mentioned cases of sexual harassment, being approached by men and being asked for sexual favours without any payment in their previous jobs. This made them unwilling to keep working at these places and also made them think about engaging in sex work for payment. As many of the informal industries in Guwahati, Assam are unregulated, the vulnerability of poor uneducated girls/women is often preyed upon by men. Informal industries, factories, construction sites, maid services, etc. need to have policies and regulations that protect the rights of these women. .

Many of the respondents also do not possess government recognized ID cards. Without legitimate ID cards, it is difficult to get gas connections for cooking, or avail some of the subsidies that the

government provides for BPL persons. Without ID proofs many landlords are also unwilling to give their houses on rent to these girls. Migration is a sensitive political issue in the Assam border with Bangladesh and the state is currently conducting a National Register of Citizens of India update, a verification of citizens which is said to displace/leave paperless over one lakh residents in the state.

Access to healthcare is another institutional determinant to reintegration. In Guwahati, some participants have shared harassment and stigma from the staffs when going to the government hospitals for sexual health related services. This is a barrier not only to reintegration but also to the prevention of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

## **6.4 Economic Conditions**

According to the findings, an important condition for the sex workers to exit and re-integrate is a stable income source with similar earning potential as sex work, or at least earnings that will be able to manage her household expenses. In cases where the sex worker is married and the relationship can be said to be normal, this condition can also apply to the husband having a stable income source and able to run the household on his earnings. According to literature, reintegration also incorporates support so as to make them economically viable and socially acceptable (Chen & Marcovici, 2003) When there is no economically viable employment option left for a woman to provide for her family and children she is compelled to be in this work. Supportive measures to overcome personal and structural level barriers to obtain employment, to increase personal employability are recognised as key to social reintegration. (EMCDDA, 2012)

Alternative livelihood opportunity is the next condition to enable a sex worker to exit. In a study in Kenya offered micro-loans after requests came from the sex workers themselves. This study introduced micro-finance and assessed the individual effects of adding micro-enterprise services into an existing HIV intervention program. The findings showed that two-thirds of the study participants had operational business by the end-line survey while nearly half of the participants reported to have stopped sex work. There was also reduction in self-reported average weekly number of sex partners. The study further reported that micro-enterprise may empower CSWs by giving them an alternative livelihood when they wish to exit or reduce reliance on sex work. (Odek et al., 2009)

## **6.5 Social Conditions**

An important social condition is the support of the family particularly the husband to be able exit from this work. For instance in the case of one ex-sex worker it was found that her husband's economic condition improved after a while and he wanted his wife to leave the work. Another important condition she did not want to have a bad influence on her young daughter. Literature has also shown that the birth of a child also acts as a catalyst in a sex workers life for her decision to leave sex work (Dodsworth, 2012). King et al (2009) whose study of Canadian street involved young women indicated that pregnancy and parenting were reasons for them in turning away from street involvement and drug use. The literature on pathways to exiting describes it as a process not an event. But it provides some pointers as to how changes in circumstances can act as a springboard for exiting. While sex workers often 'take breaks' and frequently come back because of financial needs, there can be 'turning points'. These can be fortuitous events that alter the balance of play (a new relationship for instance), or 'crisis' situations (such as violence or losing children into care) (Mayhew & Mossman 2007). On the opposite side of the spectrum, another study participant shared that she sends money to her family back in the village who know she is engaged in sex work, but let her continue as long as she is sending money.

Another important condition is support from within the social networks of the CSWs. The social network of CSWs mainly revolve around their peers, their regular clients, their husbands or partners (many of whom let their partners do sex work and act as pimps too) and senior peers. To their neighbours, these CSWs stay hidden and keep their distance for fear of being identified as a sex worker. Therefore it becomes difficult for a CSW to get out of these rather exclusive social networks that are her influencers as well as her support system. To be able to exit, one or two persons within these social networks have to be supportive of her decision as is the case with the example above. The individual willingness to exit has to come together with support from a husband, a peer or family members.

## **6.6 Institutional Conditions**

Free legal aid is an important institutional component that can be provided by the government system. Many of the respondents do not possess government recognized ID cards. Without legitimate ID cards, it is difficult to get gas connections for cooking, or avail some of the subsidies that the government provides for BPL persons. Without ID proofs many landlords are also unwilling to give their houses on rent to these girls. Migration is a sensitive political issue currently in the Assam border with Bangladesh and the state is currently conducting a National Citizens register update, a verification of citizens which is likely to displace/leave paperless over one lakh residents in the state. Legal advocacy is also needed to raise the status of women and grant property, inheritance rights in future.

Access to healthcare is an important institutional determinant to reintegration. In Guwahati, some respondents have shared harassment and stigma when going to the government hospitals for sexual health related services. They prefer going to the NGO clinics that specifically are open to CSWs for sexual health related services.

Another important condition is education support for children of CSWs. The cost of education makes it difficult for sex workers to think about leaving their source of income. In this scenario, institutional support from the government for children of sex workers, or children of low income families for higher education needs to be made available. There are few schemes that target informal workers in factories as well as RSBY health insurance for the BPL people. However, access is very difficult for many sex workers due to the many legal documents required which the sex workers do not have the awareness or even the time to apply for. In this situation, social safety nets in the form of micro-finance assistance to start up a business, revolving funds among Self-Help Group members etc. can be provided.

Another important condition is for the safety and the rights of vulnerable women in the informal sector. The findings show that all or majority of the study participants have little to no education, no property rights being female and several of them were married off early. These unequal treatment of females is a result of the gender inequality which consider females as inferior. They are then limited to look for work in unsafe working conditions. As many of the informal industries in Guwahati, Assam are unregulated, the vulnerability of poor uneducated girls/women is often preyed upon by men. Informal industries, factories, construction sites, maid services, etc. need to have policies and regulations that protect the rights of these women. .

## **6. 7 Conclusion**

The study findings show that the sex work occupation in Guwahati is highly mobile and largely hidden with no designated red light area and absence of brothels as found in other states in India and other countries. The CSWs can be broadly separated into two namely the high class sex workers dealing with the higher income clientele and the low class sex workers who deal with the general public. The participants of this study mainly belong to the lower class sex workers although there are crossovers and



they are the more vulnerable to financial hardship, to sexually transmitted diseases, have little to no education and engage in labour intensive occupations. The sex industry operates through a hidden well-knit social network and there is a lot of luring into sex work, pimping activity going on due to the profitable incentives involved. The primary target of this pimps are women in financial hardships, working in labour intensive jobs and with little to no education. With a highly mobile operation, the sexual encounter also takes place either at the houses of the CSW, houses of the pimps and madams or at pre-arranged places such as dhabas or lodges in the city. For the CSWs of Guwahati, there are several barriers to exit the sex work occupation and reintegration into mainstream society. Foremost is the profitability of sex work, which in stark contrast to the other occupations available to these girls provides a higher income. Financial hardship is both a cause and barrier to exit sex work as these girls remember their financial conditions at their initiation and have developed a reliance on income from sex work. The fact that there is a lot of in-migration happening from the other districts of Assam or peripheral areas of Guwahati looking for better income opportunities and the existence of madams and pimps who are always looking for potential sex workers among this vulnerable women to increase their own earnings adds to the difficulty. Many girls are victims of failed marriages, financially unstable husbands, and having children to look after. Social institutions such as the patriarchal system that exist in the Assamese society where women have no property rights after getting married or instances like in-laws not wanting to look after the widowed or separated wife makes it further difficult for these women. The need of paying a huge sum of money or other household gifts (dowry) at the time of marriage by the parents of the girl also compels the parents and girls to get married early as she is seen as a burden on the family unlike the son in a family who is seen as an investment by the parents for their old age. These belief systems are more pronounced among the less educated and economically poor off communities. As a result, the girls are ill-equipped to take up employment after a failed marriage or death of a husband resulting in some girls resorting to sex work. The pressure of putting the children in good schools and giving them all the facilities which they could not afford themselves also makes a poor women look out for any source of income which is available. There is also very limited awareness and interest, possibly due to illiteracy, the lost working hours and very marginal gains from the schemes themselves, from the poor households to apply to different government schemes such as health insurance for the BPL families, different types of national ID cards, subsidized food grains etc. that might have aided their household financing. This results in many of these girls not having legal documents, with the fate worst for those who may have migrated from the neighbouring country. Literature from various countries have shown that there are some enabling conditions that can alleviate these girls from a reliance on sex work and even stop sex work and reintegrate back into the society. These conditions are both at the macro level such as alternate earning options as well as at the micro-level taken here to mean the individual level. At the individual level, literature has shown that certain critical life events such as the birth of a child, or a marriage can make a sex worker decide to exit. A similar finding is found in Guwahati, where a husband finding financial stability and the welfare of their new girl child made a sex worker to exit the occupation. Another critical event was the girl's family finding out about her involvement in sex work. It has to be said that many family members such as mother, sisters etc. of these girls are aware of their involvement in sex work but are dependent on their monetary support and do not object as long as the girls send money back to them. For a sex worker to move towards exiting sex work, she needs a financially stable husband, partner, less dependency from her family on her earnings, educational support for her children and importantly, a new viable alternative livelihood option which effectively should be able to provide her enough income to manage a household. Literature in countries such as Kenya has also shown that alternate livelihood strategies such as micro-enterprises for sex workers can lead to sex workers stopping sex work and reducing their reliance on sex work for income and reducing

their sexual partners. At the moment, very little provisions have been offered or made available to the sex workers of Guwahati. It is possible that similar strategies will achieve similar successes with the sex workers of Guwahati, Assam. The strategy needed for Guwahati based on the findings is both preventive, to be able to stop vulnerable women from entering sex work, and rehabilitative, to reduce reliance on sex work and eventually exit by replacement of income source with an alternate livelihood option.

## **6.8 Methodological Considerations**

Firstly due to the complexity in accessing the study participants who are mostly hidden from the general public and the delicate nature of the research topic, a participatory approach of face to face experiential learning comprising a combination of immersion, life histories and focus groups was used. Participatory research aims to combine investigation, education, and action while taking measures to enable participation of “oppressed and ordinary people in the problem posing and solving” (Maguire, 2008). Due to the pervasive nature of the research topic, it was difficult to approach the topic with a straightforward method in mind. It was therefore necessary to be immersive and at the same time detached and be investigative and reflective to get to the study objectives. A purposive sampling was used with an initial contact as the majority of studies focusing on sexual exploitation and sex work have utilized a qualitative approach, which requires nonrandomized sampling strategies with the aim to uncover phenomena and understand processes that would be lost in quantitative design (Padgett, 2008). As discussed by Chambers in his book on Poverty Research (2007), it is about interaction and listening to people’s life stories as a source of insight, personal learning and inspiration.

## CHAPTER 7: RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings have shown that the CSWs in Guwahati share many similarities with their peers elsewhere on the issue of exit and reintegration. However, there are many barriers and conditions that remain unique to Guwahati, Assam and that entails a contextualized approach to provide recommendations towards any new intervention strategy. The recommendations mentioned below are specifically for Emmanuel Hospital Association (EHA) and can also be useful for government and non-government organisations working with CSWs.

- Firstly, the majority of CSWs (excluding high end escorts) in Guwahati share a common profile of being in poor financial condition, having little to no education, engaged in labour intensive low skilled-low pay jobs and got initiated into sex work through pimps be it friends or acquaintances at previous jobs. Based on this finding, the link between the network of the sex industry pimps and the vulnerability of women having the aforementioned characteristics into initiation to sex work can be seen. The lack of regulation in the informal sector e.g. Factories, construction sites, maid services etc. also make it unsafe for these women who are already vulnerable due to their poor economic conditions. As such, a possible intervention strategy can include preventive steps addressing the vulnerability of these women before initiation. These would involve awareness generation through outreach and advocacy and legal aid for safer working conditions for women in informal industries.
- Secondly, the majority of CSWs rely on sex work income to manage their households but are not averse to alternative livelihoods as many of them do engage in other odd jobs besides sex work as they become older. Exit from sex work has to be seen as a *gradual process of reducing a reliance on sex work income* and not an event by taking up alternate commercial activities, building confidence and eventually replacing sex work with the other livelihood activity. To be able to reduce this dependency on sex work income, a rehabilitative strategy comprising of risk free micro-loans for small businesses, skill development and mentorship, legal aid to support access to government schemes and advocacy can be provided.
- Thirdly, further research study can be commissioned building on the findings of this study. This may include mapping studies of the at risk population, vulnerability assessments as well as occupational health and safety to promote the highest degree of physical, mental and social well-being of informal sector workers in Guwahati, Assam.

Based on the above recommendation, a model alternate livelihood intervention model is attached as table 5.

**Table 5: Logical model of alternative livelihood intervention for Guwahati, Assam**

<b>Target population</b>	Females in Guwahati between the age group of 16-35 years working in low skilled labour intensive occupations, with low education and income inclusive of both locals and migrants as well as those already engaged in sex work				
<b>Target number</b>	2000 ( to be revised after mapping study)				
<b>Strategies</b>	<b>Proposed activities</b>	<b>Inputs</b>	<b>Outputs</b>	<b>Outcomes</b>	<b>Means of verification</b>
<b>Prevention outreach</b>	Mapping of target population Vulnerability & Risk Assessment of target population	Assessment study	Assessment study completed with mapping data and vulnerability/risk profiles by first 2 months	Data on vulnerable women and their risk and vulnerability profiles available for intervention program	Study hard copy
	Weekly outreach to labour intensive jobs sites, labour intensive workers to build awareness about vulnerability, dangers of pimps and sex industry & alternative options Identification of new target (new migrants etc.)	IEC material on prevention of trafficking, sex work	outreach sessions conducted with 2000 target population by year 1	2000 vulnerable women sensitized and diverted from the pimps and sex work by year 1	Project reports
	Advocacy with supervisors and owners of factories, industries, construction companies	Advocacy package for safe workplace policies for women	Sensitization and advocacy meetings conducted with xx number of supervisors and owners of informal industries and job sites by year 1	Xx number of supervisors and owners of informal industries and job sites sensitized on safe workplace conditions for women XX number of informal industries have workplace policies on safety and equal rights for women	Project reports  Workplace policies signed
	Free legal assistance through helpline and in person at Guwahati court	Helpline Legal volunteers	Helpline number provided to target group Legal aid cell established with legal volunteers	Target pop are able to get legal aid and receive assistance throughout the year	Project reports
	Spouse/partner counselling sessions	Counselling module Counsellor	Counselling sessions conducted for xx number of married target families conducted by year 1	Xx number of married partners are able to discuss openly their hardships, and understand the risk of separation as well as the steps to supporting each other	Project reports

<b>Rehabilitation Services</b>	Enlisting and providing low risk loans	Micro-finance/loan for low risk small business activities	Xx number of target pop are enlisted and started on small business by year 1	Xx number of target pop are able to reduce reliance on sex income and able to depend on small business income by year 1	Project reports
	Skill development training	Facility based courses	Xx number of target pop are trained on different skills as per their profile by year 1	Xx number of target pop are able to independently run a small business using their training by year 1	Project reports
	Business skills training (financial literacy, opening bank account etc.)	Training package/module	Xx number of target pop are trained on different skills as per their profile by year 1	Xx number of target pop are able to independently run a small business using their training by year 1	Project reports
	Mentorship	Mentor	Xx number of target pop have access to a mentor for small businesses by year 1	Xx number of target pop have clear cut plans and independently run a small business with guidance from mentor by year 2	Project reports
	Promotion of a savings culture	Part of training pack			
	Free legal assistance	Legal/accompanied assistance for ID cards, government subsidies, social health insurance, other schemes  Advocacy for property rights, safe workplace polices, regulation for women in informal industries	Helpline number provided to target group Legal aid cell established with legal volunteers	Xx number of target pop are able to get legal aid and receive assistance throughout the year  Xx number of target pop are able to access ID cards, other government subsidies, social health insurance and schemes  Workplace polices on safety and equal right of women in informal industries  Evidences for advocacy on property rights, inheritance rights for women etc. collected	Project reports
	Education scholarships/loans	Educational loans/scholarship for children of CSWs	Mapping on access to financial assistance for education of children of CSWs conducted	Access to financial assistance for education of children of CSWs established	Project reports
	Linkages set up with CSR divisions of public private institutions, government departments for sustainability	Linkages strategy/plan	Linkage developed with CSR divisions of xx number of public private institutions by year 1	XX number of target pop are able to get financial assistance/micro-loans from CSR for their small business by year 2	Project reports MOUs signed

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: Written Consent Forms for Life Story Interviews.

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**Introduction:** Hello, my name is Treena Stafford; I am a Master of Development-M.Sc. social exclusion, gender and youth studies student from the Van Hall Larenstein University of Applied Sciences, The Netherlands. I am conducting a study on barriers to reintegration for CSWs and alternate livelihoods in Guwahati, Assam.

**Purpose of the study:** The purpose of the study is to try and understand the barriers and conditions to reintegration for the commercial sex workers of Guwahati, Assam. Another objective of my study is to provide data or report that will help the development of alternative livelihood intervention strategies for commercial sex workers in Guwahati, Assam. Your opinions and experiences are important in informing the design of interventions. Therefore, we would be grateful for your support.

**Your participation in this study:** You have been chosen to be part of this study as you are currently in the sex work profession and Your inputs and experiences will be valuable for this study which aims to study about the economic, social and institution barriers faced by Commercial Sex Workers (CSWs) in Guwahati, Assam. With the findings we aim to support reintegration into the mainstream society for women who wish to leave commercial sex work.

If you are willing to participate in the study I would like to engage you in a Life Story Interview, which is about the story of your life. As a social researcher I am interested in hearing your story. The story is selective; it does not include everything that has ever happened to you. Instead, I will ask you to focus on a few key things in your life – a few key topics, incidents, and ideas. Your contribution is to tell me about some of the important things that have happened in your life and how you imagine your life developing in the future. I will guide you through the interview so that we finish it all in about two hours or less.

If you agree to participate in this study, we will ask you some personal questions about you, your life history, sexual behaviour, relationship with family, friends and society etc. The interview is likely to last for about 1-2 hours. At the end of this form, we will request you to give consent for your participation. I invite you to participate, but please accept this invitation only if you are willing to. You may choose not to answer certain questions, if you do not want to. There is no right or wrong answer to any of the questions. The decision about whether or not to participate in this study or to answer any specific question will not have any impact on you or your family's access to any support services or other programs in your area.

Please know that my purpose in doing this interview is not to figure out something individual, it is not about to evaluate you or judge you. Nor should you think of this interview as a therapy session of some kind. The interview is for research purposes, and its main goal is simply to hear your story. As a social

researcher, I want to collect CSWs life stories in order to be able to understand the different ways in which enter sex work profession, the lives they live, the various barriers they face in their day to day lives because of their profession and the different ways in which they understand who they are. Everything you say is voluntary, anonymous, and confidential.

I hope you will feel useful to the study by contributing with your interview. Do you have any questions?

**Discomfort and risk:** Some of the questions we will be asking might be considered intrusive and personal. You will be free to ask the researcher to stop discussions if you are uncomfortable, or decline to answer any single question if it makes you uncomfortable. A specialist counsellor is also available to provide immediate counselling and referral if necessary. There are no foreseeable risks or benefits to you for participating in this study. There is no cost or payment to you. *However I will compensate for your time for participating in the research study.* If you have questions while taking part, please stop me and ask.

**Confidentiality:** The interview will be strictly confidential. The responses will not be shared with anyone. Your name or a pseudonym will only be recorded on this consent form, which will be kept separate from the interviews and discussions. In all other forms beside this consent form, instead of name, only a code number shall be mentioned. The forms linking your name and the assigned code number will be kept in lock and key. This information will not be given to anybody else without your permission.

If you have questions about this research study you may contact Treena Stafford on +91 98640 69253, +31 619766940 ([treena.stafford@hvhl.nl](mailto:treena.stafford@hvhl.nl)) or the MOD-M.Sc. Course Co-coordinator Dr. Annemarie Westendorp, whose email is [annemarie.westendorp@hvhl.nl](mailto:annemarie.westendorp@hvhl.nl) in the event of a research related injury.

Your participation in this research is voluntary, and you will not be penalized or lose benefits if you refuse to participate or decide to stop. May I continue?

***Statement to be made by a person willing to participate in the study***

I have read this consent form completely and/or this consent form has been read out to me. All my doubts have been cleared. I can withdraw my participation anytime, if I feel so. I have understood this. I have received and understood the information about my rights and have been promised that my personal information shall be kept confidential.

I..... (Print Name/Pseudonym) give consent to my participation in the research study

In giving my consent, I acknowledge that:

1. The procedures required for the project and the time involved have been explained to me and any questions I have about the project have been answered to my satisfaction.
2. I have read the participation information statement and have been given the opportunity to discuss the information and my involvement in the project with the researchers.

3. I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary – I am not under any obligation to consent.
4. I understand that my involvement is strictly confidential. I understand that any research data gathered from the results of the study may be published however no information about me will be used in any way that is identifiable.
5. I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time, without affecting my relationship with the researcher (s)
6. I understand that I can stop my participation at any time if I do not wish to continue.
7. I consent to

➤ Audio Recording

I have been offered a copy of my consent form and (Circle number that is accepted);

1. I want a copy of my consent form
2. I don't want a copy of my consent form

I certify that I have given my consent voluntarily for this interview.....

Participants name .....

Signature-----

Date -----

## **Appendix 2: Life Story Interview Guide**

*Before we start I would like to remind you that there is no right or wrong answers in this discussion. We are interested in knowing what you think, so please feel free to be frank and to share your point of view. It is very important that we hear your opinion.*

Please begin by thinking about your life as if it was a book or novel and you are the storyteller. Like a book contains chapters, may be you can first tell me what chapters you think are very important in your life and we can note down the chapters accordingly. You can have as many chapters as you want but I would suggest from three to seven of them. I will also guide through the chapters so that it makes it easier for you.

### **Possible chapters –**

1. Background , childhood , family
2. Education, employment, skills attained
3. Entry into sex work
4. Experiences as a sex worker – health, relationships, sexuality, violence, income
5. Thoughts about the profession- positive and negative
6. Social stigma, discrimination, engagement with society, relationship with family
7. Personal dreams/aspirations for the future
8. Conditions that will help CSWs exit (alternate livelihood options, family, society, government etc.) ( assuming CSWs wish to find another job /exit)
9. Conditions that will help social reintegration (family, society, government etc.)

### **Sub-questions of my research study:**

- a) What is the current profile of commercial sex workers (CSWs) and the sex work industry in Guwahati?

### **Possible probes on family background –**

Where are you from? Are you from Assam or do you belong to another state in India? Or do you have come from a neighbouring country of India? Are you an Assamese or you belong to a different tribe of Assam? Do you have a family? Who all are there in your family? Do they know you are in this profession? If yes, are you still in contact with them? How is your relation with them? Do they accept you as a family member? What is the financial condition of your family?

### **Possible probes on childhood experiences –**

How was your childhood like? What things did you enjoy doing during your childhood? Or you had a normal childhood like other children?

### **Possible probes on education –**

Did you go to school, any skill training? If not what was the reason for not able to get an education? Do you have some technical skills which you are good at? Which languages are you good at?

### **Possible probes on employment –**

Have you ever worked somewhere else before entering into sex work profession? What work experiences do you have? What earnings did you have? How much do you currently earn on average? What are your thoughts on the alternative income earning opportunities available currently for persons with your background?

**Possible probes on reasons for entering into sex work-**

How did you enter into sex work? Were you forced to enter into this profession? If yes, by who, why and how? If not what made you take up this work as a profession? Was it on your own choice and decision?

**Possible probes on sexuality**

What is your sexual orientation? Were you discriminated because of your sexual orientation? Was it a reason for entering into sex work?

**Possible probes on health conditions?**

How would you rate your current health situation? Do you face any health hazards in your work? Are you able to access healthcare?

**Possible probes on relationships?**

Are you married or in a relationship? Does your spouse or partner know about your profession? If yes how is their behaviour towards you? Do they accept your profession or they are not aware of it? Do you have children? Do they stay with you? Are they aware of your profession as well? Was anytime in your life a relationship was a reason for entering into sex work?

**b) What are economic barriers to reintegration of female sex workers in Guwahati, Assam?**

**Possible probes on economic barriers to reintegration-**

What kind of difficulties do you think you will face if you leave this profession? Is finance a reason for you to enter into sex work profession? Is it your only profession? Is lack of options or skills a reason for you to stay in this profession? Is it the only option you have? Is the pay in this profession better than other available options? Do the pimps or madams take a part of your earnings? If yes, what is their share? Have you ever considered leaving sex work? Is it difficult to leave?

**c) What are socio-cultural barriers to reintegration of female sex workers in Guwahati, Assam?**

**Possible probes on socio-cultural barriers to reintegration-**

Will you be able to introduce yourself as a CSW outside of your circle? Do you know of any CSW who has left the profession and rejoined her family/society? Would you be able to leave sex work and rejoin your family /society? Do you face violence, stigma, abuse and sexual exploitation because of your profession? Are there specific people who take advantage of your situation? Are there any places where you are not allowed to enter or visit? How do you spend your daily life? Do you go out? Do you visit or keep contact with your family? Do you hide your profession for them? Why? What will happen if they know? If you leave this profession and rejoin your family what will be the situation?

**d) What are institutional barriers to reintegration of female sex workers in Guwahati, Assam?**

**Possible probes on institutional barriers to reintegration-**

Do you have any education? Have you ever received any kind of skills training from any NGO or the government? Are there any kinds of facilities provided by the government for women in this profession for exiting? Are the madams and pimps involved in this line a barrier for reintegration of the CSWs into the society?

**e) What are economic conditions that will support the sex workers to exit and re-integrate?**

What is your opinion on exiting sex work profession? What kind of economic security do you need to exit this profession and reintegrate with the mainstream society. What kind of livelihood opportunities do you think will suit you, a job or be self-employed? Do you require some skill-development to make yourself eligible for other income generating activities? How much do you think you need to earn for a living? Would you still prefer to exit sex work if you earn less than your current profession?

**f) What are socio-cultural conditions that will support the sex workers to exit and re-integrate?**

Do you face difficulties in your relationship with the mainstream society? What kind of socio-cultural support do you need from the society to reintegrate back after exit from sex work. Do you need acceptance from your family members, spouse, partner, and children? Do you need acceptance from the society without any stigma or discrimination based on your previous profession? What kind of social and cultural life do you wish to lead after exit from sex work profession?

**g) What are institutional conditions that will support the sex workers to exit and re-integrate?**

How do you identify yourself with the society? Are you open about your profession or hide about it? How do you access the various institutional services that are accessible by other citizens of the country if you hide about your identity or profession? Is it difficult to access services like education, health and housing, banking, identity services, etc. for women with your background? How do the police treat women in this profession? What kind of institutional support do you need from the government, NGOs, police or other organisations to exit from this profession and reintegrate into the mainstream society?

### Appendix 3: Written Consent Forms for Key Informants.

Van Hall Larenstein University of Applied Sciences  
P.O. Box 9001, 6882 GB Velp, the Netherlands  
Tel: 9864069253 Email: [treenastafford@gmail.com](mailto:treenastafford@gmail.com)

**Introduction:** Hello, my name is Treena Stafford; I am a Master of Development-M.Sc. social exclusion, gender and youth studies student from the Van Hall Larenstein University of Applied Sciences, The Netherlands. I am working on an applied research study looking at reintegration and alternative livelihoods for CSWs in Guwahati, Assam as part of my Master's Thesis project.

**Purpose of the study:** The purpose of the study is to try and understand the barriers to reintegration for the commercial sex workers of Guwahati, Assam. Another objective of my study is to provide data or report that will help the development of effective women empowerment/livelihood strategies as my organization is interested in developing projects based on exploring conditions that will be able to help vulnerable women, particularly from backgrounds of sex work of Guwahati, Assam. Your opinions and experiences are important in informing the design of interventions. Therefore, we would be grateful for your support.

You have been chosen to be part of this study as you hold an important position in your organisation and part of social welfare programmes, specially working with women and socially excluded groups. Your experience, inputs and feedbacks will be resourceful for this study which aims to study about the economic, social and institution barriers faced by Commercial Sex Workers (CSWs) in Guwahati, Assam, to get reintegrated into the mainstream society.

If you choose to be in the study, I will engage you as a key informant to the study having had contact with socially excluded groups while offering them health, skill development or other social welfare services and conduct a semi-structured interview with you which will take about 40 minutes of your time.

There are no foreseeable risks or benefits to you for participating in this study. There is no cost or payment to you. If you have questions while taking part, please stop me and ask.

If you have questions about this research study you may contact Treena Stafford on +91 98640 69253, +31 619766940 ([treena.stafford@hvhl.nl](mailto:treena.stafford@hvhl.nl)) or the MOD-M.Sc. Course Co-coordinator Dr. Annemarie Westendorp, whose email is [annemarie.westendorp@hvhl.nl](mailto:annemarie.westendorp@hvhl.nl) in the event of a research related injury.

Your participation in this research is voluntary, and you will not be penalized or lose benefits if you refuse to participate or decide to stop. May I continue?

I certify that I have given my consent voluntarily for this interview.....

.....

Participants name .....

Signature-----

Date -----

## Appendix 4: Key informant interview guide

*Before we start I would like to remind you that there is no right or wrong answers in this discussion. We are interested in knowing what you think, so please feel free to be frank and to share your point of view. It is very important that we hear your opinion.*

1. How long have you been working in this capacity as service provider/NGO manager/Government officer?
2. What is your opinion about alternate livelihood opportunities for women who wish to exit commercial sex work profession in Guwahati? (probe: should we encourage )
3. Based on your experience what roles can development organizations/NGOs play to be able to help women from this background in Guwahati and in what ways? What are exiting schemes etc. available for people from this background?
4. Do you feel there is a viable employment market for ex-CSWs in Guwahati? What are the current options available? What do you think providing which kind of skills will be beneficial for these women to have an alternate livelihood option?
5. How far do you think they will be able to reintegrate with the mainstream society based on their new livelihood option?
6. Do you think the stigma associated with their previous profession will make it difficult for them to stay in the new livelihood option and compel them return back to sex work profession? (probe: what can be done to change this)
7. What in your opinion are the conditions which will be required for women from this background to reintegrate back into society in Guwahati? ( probe: institutional conditions, economic, social)
8. What can the government/NGOs do to create or enable these conditions?
9. Let's summarize some of the key points from our discussion. Is there anything else?
10. Do you have any questions?

Thank you for taking the time to talk to me!!