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A Socio-Economic Analysis of Sex Workers in West Bengal and Pathways to Empowerment

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the socio-economic conditions of sex workers in India, specifically West Bengal, highlighting persistent vulnerabilities shaped by income instability, debt dependence, exclusion from formal welfare systems and societal stigma. Thematic analysis of ten semi-structured interviews with women working in the brothels of West Bengal reveals multidimensional deprivation within the Human Development Index (HDI) framework: volatile incomes constrain economic security, limited educational opportunities restrict intergenerational mobility and inadequate access to healthcare, particularly for ageing workers, undermines well-being. The research identifies empowerment pathways anchored in the following pillars: legal recognition, socio-economic inclusion through collective organisation and financial access and investment in human capital through education and health initiatives. The findings indicate that participatory, rights-based empowerment can significantly enhance human development outcomes and promote inclusive social and economic justice.

Keywords: sex work, human development, economic marginalisation, legal recognition, socio-economic empowerment

Introduction

A paradox of visibility and invisibility, that is what sex work is in India.

While acknowledged as one of the oldest surviving professions in India, sex work has persistently been excluded from the formal economic and social policy framework. Historically, sex work has evolved through complex intersections of colonial control, economic marginalisation and cultural ambivalence. In West Bengal, specifically, where sex work took on a structured and institutionalised form during British rule, brothels emerged not only as spaces of sexual commerce but also as microcosms of poverty, caste-based exclusion and gendered labour.

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While colonial authority both policed and profited from the trade, post-colonial governance has continued to oscillate between criminalisation and neglect, leaving sex workers trapped in cycles of informality and vulnerability.

The research problem that anchors this study arises from this enduring exclusion. Although India's Human Development Index (HDI) has improved nationally, the sex worker population, particularly in urban red-light districts like Sonagachi in Kolkata, continues to experience stagnation in income, education and health outcomes. The livelihoods remain largely informal, unregulated and often criminalised, resulting in limited access to welfare, banking, healthcare and education for themselves and their dependents. Economic precarity, coupled with the moral stigma attached to the profession, perpetuates multi-dimensional poverty. Existing state schemes tend to treat sex workers as victims or subjects of rescue rather than economic agents, which further constrains empowerment and social inclusion.

Against this backdrop, this research paper aims to explore how sex workers in West Bengal experience socio-economic marginalisation within an informal economic framework and how empowerment strategies combining legal, institutional and community initiatives can enhance human development outcomes for such workers across India.

Historical and Socio-Economic Background of Sex Work in India and West Bengal

Sex work in India is ancient, embedded in religious, cultural and economic life, even long before colonial rule. Early texts and social practice treated certain categories of sex workers – often referred to as gaṇikā or courtesans – as socially visible performers and transmitters of arts, ritual and culture (Dey, 2023). Vatsyayana's Kama-Sutra and other classical literature record regulated social roles for courtesans and mention payments and social arrangements that treated some sex-work roles as integrated into household and cultural life rather than purely clandestine vice (Mow, 2025).

Medieval and early-modern West Bengal (and broader north India) saw the rise of the courtesan-tawaif complex – women trained in music, dance and literary culture who maintained semi-autonomous social spaces within elite courts and urban culture (Chanda, Patnaik and Chatterjee, 2021). These courtesans performed at ceremonies, and they carried social prestige that distinguished them from later, more commercially driven sex workers. As per an article by Ali (2023), "they (the tawaifs) were considered powerhouses of Indian aesthetic and spiritual culture. They exercised a magnetic stronghold over the minds of the Indian royalty and nobility, commanding dignity and reverence for their professional training in aesthetics, etiquette and the performance of dance and music". Tawaifs essentially occupied a culturally legitimised niche until shifting political economies weakened their patronage networks.

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The decisive rupture came with British colonial rule and the transformations of the nineteenth century. The expansion of Calcutta as an imperial city, the cantonment system and the growing number of British troops and colonial officials created a new market demand for commercial sex; simultaneously, Victorian moral sensibilities and administrative priorities produced intrusive legal controls (Banerjee, 1998a). Colonial health and military policy – most visibly the Cantonment regulations and the Indian Contagious Diseases Act – recast sex workers as public health problems to be regulated, policed and segregated (Biswas, 2020). Enforcement of these laws involved registration, coerced medical examinations and confinement practices which produced humiliation, displacement and sharp social marginalisation for many Indian' sex workers – processes deeply tied to colonial projects of discipling 'deviant' female bodies through intersecting regimes of health, morality and sexuality (Rai, 2023). The impact in West Bengal was dramatic because it re-shaped coutesan culture into a commercial sex market and triggered the dispersal and criminalisation of many women.

The Contagious Diseases Act, in particular, had concrete geographic consequences in West Bengal. As documented in historical accounts of Chandannagar and Calcutta, the Act's policing drove sex workers out of central Calcutta into the suburbs and satellite towns where colonial and local responses varied (Ghosh, 2019). Sumanta Banerjee's (1998b) archival work further shows how the colonial order transformed the pre-colonial courtesan economies into an urbanised, precarious sex trade dominated by rootless and displaced women serving a new clientele – a shift with long-term economic and social implications for West Bengal's red light districts.

Twentieth-century and post-independence trajectories reflected both continuity and divergence. Partition, rural-urban migration, economic dislocation and trafficking increased the numbers and diversity of women in brothels; at the same time, new organised responses emerged. Urban red-light quarters like Sonagachi (North Kolkata) consolidated into large, visible communities where sex work became an urban livelihood for thousands. Starting in the late twentieth century, community organisation and public-health activism, most notably the Sonagachi Project implemented by the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC), produced important shifts: peer-led condom campaigns, cooperative initiatives and collective bargaining that improved some health outcomes and created channels for financial inclusion and advocacy (Ghose et al., 2008). These grassroots developments show how sex worker communities in West Bengal responded to structural marginalisation with institutional innovation.

Finally, the modern period exposes new and persistent harms from systemic stigma to dangerous cultural practices such as the virgin cleansing myth (Brown, 2017), documented by health and investigative reporting in Kolkata and beyond, which heightens risks to children and vulnerable women in red light districts.

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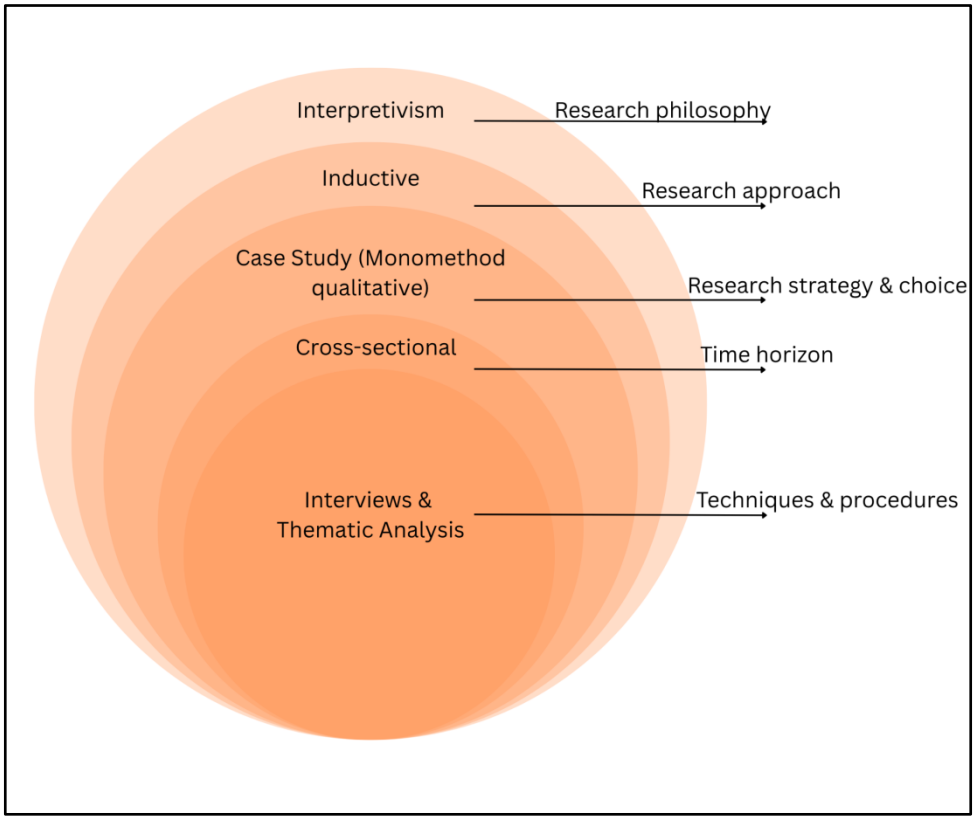
An important issue to shed light on is that while sex work in West Bengal has evolved from a culturally integrated occupation to a criminalised and marginalised trade, the economic and human development outcomes of sex workers have remained relatively stagnant. Regardless of their contribution to urban informal economies, most of the women in brothel districts remain excluded from the formal financial system, lack access to stable income and healthcare and struggle to secure education for themselves and their children. In terms of the HDI, which captures income, health and education, their lived realities represent a concentration of low human development indicators within an otherwise growing urban economy. Through primary research, the remainder of this paper investigates the economic dimensions of sex work in West Bengal, analysing how structural exclusion, financial precarity and limited access to public welfare perpetuate cycles of poverty and underdevelopment among women in this sector.

Methodology

In order to ensure a thorough methodology for this study, the research onion proposed by Saunders et al. (2007) was used to structure the methodological design.



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The first layer of the research onion is the *research philosophy*. Interpretivism was chosen as the philosophy for this study as it emphasises understanding human experiences and social realities through the participants' perspectives. Rather than seeking universal generalisations, the interpretivist approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of socio-economic narratives shaped by historical, cultural and gendered forces. The choice, therefore, aligned with the research aim of uncovering the lived experiences of women in West Bengal's brothels, especially as they navigate socio-economic precarity and systemic marginalisation.

The next layer of the onion focuses on the *research approach*. Building on the interpretivist stance, the research followed an inductive approach in which patterns and insights emerge from the empirical data rather than being tested against a pre-existing hypothesis. By using detailed interviews and qualitative analysis, the study developed thematic generalisations about income distribution, financial agency and the broader socio-economic ecosystem of sex work in West Bengal. This approach was deemed particularly suitable given the paucity of formal economic data on marginalised occupational groups such as sex workers.

The third layer of the onion focuses on the *research strategy*. For this study, the chosen strategy was a case study of the sex workers working in the brothels of West Bengal. The case study method enabled the researcher to capture contextual depth, local economic structures and social interdependencies that shaped the lives of sex workers. By examining both the individual and collective experiences within a geographically bounded yet socio-economically significant context, the case study strategy facilitated a multidimensional understanding of sex work as an informal economic institution.

In terms of the *research choice*, this study employed a monomethod qualitative design relying solely on primary interview data complemented by secondary literature on the history and political economy of sex work in West Bengal. The qualitative choice reflects the sensitivity and subjectivity inherent to the topic, allowing the researcher to interpret meaning, emotion and value systems embedded in participants' narratives.

With regard to the *time horizon*, whilst the analysis acknowledges West Bengal's historical trajectory of the sex industry, the empirical fieldwork followed a cross-sectional time horizon, focusing on a single period of data collection. This design captured a contemporary snapshot of socio-economic conditions while situating them within the broad historical continuum explored in the background chapters.

Lastly, with regard to the *techniques and procedures*, the primary data were collected through 10 in-depth semistructured interviews with women engaged in sex work in the specified area. The interviews were informal and conversational to reduce respondent anxiety and build rapport. The

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questions primarily centred on the participants' income patterns, expenditure priorities, savings behaviour, debt cycles, access to welfare schemes and economic aspirations. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect the identities and the interviews were conducted in Bengali and later translated into English for analysis, ensuring that linguistic nuance was preserved. The data was then analysed using a thematic analysis.

Thematic Analysis

Theme One: Income Insecurity and Informal Labour

Across the sample, the monthly incomes ranged between INR 3,000 and INR 10,000 with most of the respondents engaging in multiple forms of informal labour: sex work supplemented by embroidery, domestic work, cooking or NGO employment. One of the respondents, Sonali Banerjee, for instance, earned only INR 500 a day from sex work and relied on part-time work at DMSC to meet basic needs while another respondent, Saraswati Mondal, combined sex work with helping in a tailoring unit. This diversification underscores the volatility of sex work as a primary income source.

From an economic perspective, these accounts reveal a sector operating entirely within the informal economy, characterised by unregulated earnings, the absence of social protection and lack of contracts. The women function as informal labourers with their work being dependent on fluctuating market demand, age and health rather than standardised wages or protections. When Amartya Sen's terms are considered here, these women's 'capabilities' to achieve economic security remain constrained by structural precarity. The informality of their work thus perpetuates a cycle of income instability and vulnerability with women unable to accumulate capital or plan long-term financial strategies.

Theme Two: Access to Finance and Credit Constraints

Another prominent theme that emerged in the data was the women's relationship with financial systems. While many respondents, including Sonali and Roma, maintain bank accounts, often through government schemes like Jan Dhan Yojana, many of them still rely on informal credit sources. Sonali, for example, reported that although she could access loans, the interest rate was 25% which is far higher than any formal lending institution would charge. Others like Meena Kumari remain completely excluded from financial services due to a lack of documentation or legal identity.

This duality reflects what development economists identify as financial dualism: the coexistence of formal and informal credit markets where the poor are priced out of the former and exploited by the latter. Access to high-interest informal loans traps women in micro-level debt cycles

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where the cost of borrowing erodes potential savings. In this way, the financial exclusion they face directly translates into limited upward mobility, restricting these women's ability to invest in productive assets or alternative livelihoods.

Theme Three: Welfare Dependence and State Limitations.

Almost all respondents reported some form of government welfare access, primarily through ration cards, free schooling for children and occasional healthcare support. Sonali's daughter, for instance, received free basic education in government schools and the family gets annual government assistance of INR 1,000-INR 2,500 for education purposes. Furthermore, Meena Das, Roma Debnath and Farida Khatoon reported benefitting from subsidised rations and Jan Dhan accounts. These interventions provide crucial safety nets but remain consumption-oriented rather than capacity building – none of the women reported receiving substantial financial aid or vocational grants that could facilitate exit from sex work.

Economically, this indicates that while redistributive mechanisms are present, they are limited in scale and effect. The welfare state provides minimal sustenance but fails to promote productive inclusion in the formal economy. In feminist economic terms, these women remain dependent beneficiaries rather than empowered participants. Welfare dependency without structural empowerment perpetuates economic stagnation with women surviving on subsistence aid rather than transitioning into secure employment. The inadequacy of social protection mechanisms thus reinforces the informal economy's resilience as the primary site of survival for marginalised women.

Theme Four: Intergenerational Mobility and Human Capital Investment

A recurring pattern in nearly all the interviews conducted was the prioritisation of children's education as the central financial goal. Sonali Banerjee reported investing heavily in her daughter's English honours degree and an INR 25,000 computer course while Saraswati Mondal sacrificed her meals to buy notebooks for her son. Farida Khatoon similarly expressed her hopes to educate her sons. This intergenerational aspiration highlights an underlying economic rationality – a conscious investment in human capital as an escape route from intergenerational poverty.

According to Becker's Human Capital Theory, investment in education enhances future earning potential and breaks structural poverty cycles. In the context of West Bengal's brothels, this manifests as mothers using informal earnings to secure formal opportunities for their children. The data suggest a nascent form of economic mobility: while the women themselves remain marginalised, they invest in education as a proxy for social advancement. This theme also reflects Sen's Capability Approach, whereby expanding the freedom to choose one's livelihood

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through education becomes a pivotal metric of development. The economic behaviour of the sex workers is therefore not merely survival-driven but aspirational, anchored in a desire for generational transformation.

Theme Five: Debt, Cost of Living and Financial Vulnerability

Debt emerges as a consistent economic burden for the respondents. Farida Khatoon reported an INR 20,000 debt to a local moneylender while Meena Kumari's earnings are seized by her madam under debt bondage – an exploitative form of economic coercion. Rising food prices and health expenses further exacerbate financial instability. Meena Das, for instance, described how food costs have gone up significantly putting her in a situation where she sometimes has to skip meals to save money.

This pattern is a reflection of the financial vulnerability within a low-income, high-cost environment. The sex workers operate on a negative saving capacity whereby their incomes barely cover subsistence, leading to reliance on debt for emergencies. The absence of affordable healthcare and price inflation deepens the poverty-debt nexus, trapping them in a cycle of hardship. From a structural economics viewpoint, this mirrors the experience of the working poor, those whose labour contributes to economic activity but who remain excluded from its benefits. The vulnerability is thus not due to inactivity but to the systemic underevaluation of their labour.

Theme Six: NGO Intervention and Collective Empowerment

The role of organisations like the DMSC is economically transformative as reported in the data. Several respondents, such as Roma, Rupa and Sonali, credited Durbar with enabling them to open bank accounts, access healthcare and gain legal documentation. Rupa's story in particular illustrates how NGO intervention converted her from an undocumented trafficked individual into an economically independent worker who is now able to send remittances to her family in Bangladesh. Moreover, for women like Lakshmi Devi, Durbar also provides small medical stipends and community funds.

From an economic institutional perspective, NGO's function as bridging institutions, filling governance gaps left by the state and linking marginalised groups to formal structures. The interventions are able to promote financial inclusion, enhance social capital and support collective bargaining power. In this sense, Durbar acts as a quasi-cooperative that enables women to exercise limited economic agency within structural constraints. This aligns well with feminist economic arguments that collective organisation and solidarity are essential for distributive justice and income security in informal sectors.

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Theme Seven: Stigma, Legal Ambiguity and Economic Marginalisation

While income and access to finance form the quantitative core of these women's struggles, social stigma and legal ambiguity underpin their economic marginalisation. Roma and Saraswati noted that their children faced discrimination in schools, while Rupa's lack of legal status as a Bangladeshi migrant excluded her from welfare for years. Meena Kumari, who was trafficked from Jharkhand, remains without documents, unable to access even basic identity-linked schemes. Such exclusion not only limits access to social benefits but also reinforces economic isolation as these women cannot rent homes, secure formal jobs or access state credit.

Economically, stigma translates into social capital deprivation, i.e., a loss of access to networks, institutions and opportunities that facilitate financial progress. The ambiguous legal status of sex work in India compounds this by keeping sex work in a grey zone: tolerated but not recognised, taxable but not protected. The result is what sociologist Saskia Sassen calls 'structural invisibility', a condition in which economic contributions exist without institutional acknowledgement. Thus, the intersection of stigma, legality and informality reproduces economic marginalisation, pushing sex workers to the peripheries of both society and the economy.

Theme Eight: Ageing, Labour Exhaustion and the Economics of Neglect

Ageing emerges as another significant economic dimension. Lakshmi Devi's account of declining income and failing health captures the life-cycle vulnerability of women in the trade. Once in high demand, she now survives on occasional clients and an NGO stipend of INR 3,000-INR 4,000. Her advocacy for pensions for retired sex workers highlights an urgent policy gap, the absence of old-age income security for women who spent their lives in informal labour. This mirrors broader patterns of labour exhaustion without retirement protection which is a hallmark of gendered informality in developing economies.

From a welfare economics standpoint, this represents a failure of distributive justice. Having contributed to a hidden but economically active sector, older sex workers are denied recognition of state-supported pensions. The absence of institutional mechanisms for ageing informal workers perpetuates poverty into old age, underscoring the economic invisibility of the sector's labour force.

Empowerment of Sex Workers in India: Legal, Social and Economic Pathways

While thematic analysis of existing narratives reveals deep-rooted marginalisation, stigma and the denial of basic rights, the empowerment of sex workers in India necessitates a rights-based, multipronged approach, combining legal reform, recognition and livelihood opportunities. Legal

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recognition and protection under existing constitutional guarantees, such as articles 14 and 21, offer a framework for reform that upholds equality, dignity and the right to livelihood. Judicial interventions, including the Budhadev Karmaskar v. State of West Bengal judgements, reinforce that sex workers are entitled to the same constitutional rights and dignity as any other citizen (Alam and Fatima, 2023). Implementing these legal precedents into policy can significantly improve the HDI dimensions of standard of living and personal security by ensuring access to justice, safety from police harassment and protection from violence.

Furthermore, sex worker-led organisations play a crucial role in driving change (NSWP, 2015). Collectives like the DMSC and the National Network of Sex Workers (NNSW) have effectively disseminated legal knowledge, advocated for structural reforms and provided workshops on rights. These grassroots-led initiatives not only enable women to claim agency and collective bargaining power but also foster peer education and solidarity. Empowering sex workers to lead and manage community-based organisations builds social capital and fosters a sense of ownership over their lives. For instance, a cooperative run by DMSC provides microfinance and saving options to thousands of sex workers and served as a ground for social entrepreneurship during the COVID-19 pandemic by helping sex workers in Kolkata produce sanitisers, masks and protective equipment, thereby creating alternative livelihoods and restoring financial stability (UNAIDS, 2021). Embedding more such enterprises into India's local governance or self-help framework is therefore vital for facilitating financial inclusion, skill development, microenterprise training and economic agency for women in the sex trade. This would also transform HDI indicators, especially those related to income generation and security, breaking cycles of dependency and vulnerability.

Beyond economic inclusion, empowerment also requires institutional support for education, healthcare and legal aid. Successful empowerment programs across Asia and Africa rely on accessible drop-in centres, peer-education training and educational initiatives for both sex workers and their children (Oxfam, 2018). The integration of children into formal schooling systems, as practised by Cambodia's Women's Network for Unity, parallels India's constitutional provisions under Articles 21A and 39(f), guaranteeing education and dignity to all children. If adapted into the Indian context, such initiatives could substantially improve the education index within HDI for sex workers' families, breaking the intergenerational transmission of stigma and poverty. Similarly, health-focused interventions like those led by the AIDS Mynmar Association and Yayasan Kerti Praja could be replicated in India's red light districts to provide sexual and reproductive health services, HIV testing and psychological counselling. Once again, this would directly impact HDI by raising the overall life expectancy and well-being of sex workers.

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Ultimately, these interventions, including an amalgamation of legal protection and recognition, decriminalisation, social entrepreneurship, community organisations and financial inclusion, can build a pathway towards human development grounded in rights and dignity. The cumulative effect of these strategies is multi-dimensional: improved access to healthcare will boost the health index, education for sex workers' children will strengthen the education index and sustained livelihoods and micro-enterprises will enhance the income index within the HDI framework. By ensuring that India's legal and political environment upholds agency, opportunity and equality for women in sex work, the nation can move closer to realising inclusive human development that leaves no community behind.

Conclusion

The findings of this study, based on the thematic analysis, reveal a consistent pattern: West Bengal sex workers operate within an informal economic system which is shaped by income volatility, financial exclusion and social marginalisation. When viewed through the lens of the HDI, their circumstances illustrate multidimensional deprivation: low and unstable incomes undermine economic security, limited education restricts occupational mobility and inadequate access to healthcare perpetuates physical and mental vulnerability. Despite their economic productivity, they remain excluded from the formal metrics of human development that determine access to state welfare and social recognition.

The economic realities of West Bengal's brothels reflect the contradictions of sex work as part of the larger Indian informal economy: it provides survival but not stability, opportunity but not equity. Without corrective policies, the HDI of this population will continue to stagnate, reinforcing their exclusion from both economic growth and human development. Empowerment pathways must therefore be multi-pronged and rights-based. Legal recognition supported by constitutional guarantees and judicial precedents can secure access to justice, protection from exploitation and personal security. Community-led collectives, such as the DMSC and its initiatives, provide financial literacy, microcredit, skill development and peer education, fostering social capital and economic agency. Finally, access to education and healthcare, both for sex workers and their children, strengthens human capital and intergenerational mobility.

It is imperative that India acknowledges sec workers as economic contributors with full rights, agency and aspirations. Such recognition is essential to achieve truly inclusive development and social justice.

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