Looking Beyond “High-Risk”: An Exploration of the Commercial Sex Work Industry in India’s HIV/AIDS Discourse

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In India, the rhetoric of the country’s discourse on the HIV/AIDS epidemic is largely focused on transmission through heterosexual intercourse with an explicit focus on high-risk groups (i.e. migrant workers, sex workers, homosexuals, and intravenous drug users). India's focus on high-risk groups and particularly intense focus on the commercial sex work industry in HIV/AIDS research and prevention strategies, exhibits some marked gaps and critical voids in the academic literature, scholarship, and discourse surrounding the subject. Over the course of this research study I spent several months interviewing sex workers in Pune, India to gain a better understanding of the circumstances and social factors that contribute to women's involvement and participation in sex work and the sex work industry. Using my interviews, experiences in the red light district, and extensive academic research on India's HIV/AIDS discourse, I have attempted to highlight the fragrant and uncritical use of the term high-risk in the rhetoric of India's HIV/AIDS discourse and bring attention to the underlying social factors that create, maintain, and perpetuate entry into the sex work industry in India. The central focus in this research study is to displace female sex workers as the “vectors” of HIV/AIDS (Kadiyala and Barnett 2004: 1888) and highlight patriarchy, gender inequality, and economic vulnerability as the social forces that lead women to participate in the commercial sex work industry, and hence to participate in high-risk behaviors and a high-risk industry that is significant in the spread of HIV/AIDS in India.