

BUSTING THE MYTH

MOBILE & (IM)MOBILITY
IN LIVES OF
PROSTITUTED WOMEN
IN MUMBAI'S RED-LIGHT AREAS

DECEMBER 2018

There was a time when even in the metropolises people, who wanted to make a long-distance call outside their city or state or to a foreign country, had to book the call – it used to be called ‘Trunk Call’ then – through the post and telegraph department. They would be required to wait sometimes for three to four hours to get the call through. The call used to get dropped half-a-dozen times and after several attempts many would give up any hope of getting reconnected in the last lap of the drop and reconnection. A few privileged people, who would have phone in their homes, could book a call from home and wait endlessly to get connected.

After some years, the landline phone became a reality although people had to wait to get a landline phone for five to eight years. Over a period of time, the household landline phones became a common possession in the upper- and the middle-classes houses. A few years later, long-distance calls became easier from the household landline phones with the introduction of ISD (international) and STD (intra-country) codes. Around 1990, the IT/digital revolution and advancement in satellite technology ushered humankind into an era dominated by mobile phones. The phone connectivity got liberated from the confines of fixed lines at households and offices.

The mobile phone technology offered a phenomenal mobility to certain economic classes by facilitating their physical and socio-economic mobility. This journey was also dotted by a discrepancy. Speaking of the lighter side, for many initial years on the arrival of mobile phones it was also observed that a person walking in public places would halt when he would get a call and would complete the conversation before resuming his mobility. Traffic laws and safety consideration banned engaging on a mobile phone (now called a cellphone) while driving. The law-abiding ones among the persons on the wheel, too, followed a simple rule – pull the car on the side, take the phone, complete the conversation, shut the phone and then resume the driving.

It is believed that barring these two instances, the arrival of cellphones globally facilitated the physical and socio-economic mobility of the human kind. The cellphones, initially limited to incoming and outgoing phone calls, became smartphones in an avatar of a mini variant of computers performing several functions otherwise performed by calculators, cameras, videographers, music players, video players, gaming machines, entertainers, etc. In a parallel process, the space and time dimensions shrank considerably. Technologically-evolving human societies have now a love and hate relationship with cellphones. They are a boon and a bane at the same time. Starting from the dangerous radiations emitted by the hardware to the increasing trend of users becoming narcissistically asocial, to psychological vulnerability linked with social media, which is played on the cellphones, to loss of privacy and attention, to the easy accessibility and vulnerability, to pornography, to causing havoc in the family-based system of socializing the young ones... the technology is also aptly called a “disruptive technology” or a “public health hazard”.

Cellphones technology, like any other technology, being ethically neutral is today helping the criminals as well as the enforcement agency personnel do better in their respective activities.

Here is an attempt to understand how has the arrival of cellphones affected the life of the prostituted women on the streets of Mumbai. This is not an exhaustive account, chronicling or cataloging of all the effects. It is a modest attempt at an ethnographic record of some aspects of the changes in the lives and functioning of the red-light area-based prostituted mothers of the children beneficiaries of Prerana, as we believe in having our ears to the ground.

TECHNOLOGICAL INTERPLAY IN RED-LIGHT AREAS



With technological advancement in leaps and bounds, cheaper internet and free calls, one appears to practice one's own agency and freedom. But does the technological interplay have the same impact on the lives of victims of commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking? Does it allow them to exercise their autonomy, if at all, when it comes to client soliciting and relationship? Or has it made them more vulnerable, with brothel-keepers and pimps wielding intense control over them?

As compared to 1980s, when electronic means like videocassette recorders were used to lure customers, prevalence of mobile phones in the early decades of the 21st century may appear as a means to liberate prostituted women, giving them access to the outer world. But has the reality actually transformed?

One of our Mothers' Meet held in September 2018 was an opportunity to gauge the extent to which the fast-developing mobile technology has changed their lives and livelihoods; and given the stigmatized nature of the sex trade in India, if the technological advancement has improved their situation or worsened it.

In 2015, when Prerana conducted an extensive study on the use of cellphones by prostituted women in the red-light areas of Kamathipura, Falkland Road and Vashi-Turbhe in Mumbai, it was noticed that the device was more of a tool of escalated control as opposed to a means of liberation.

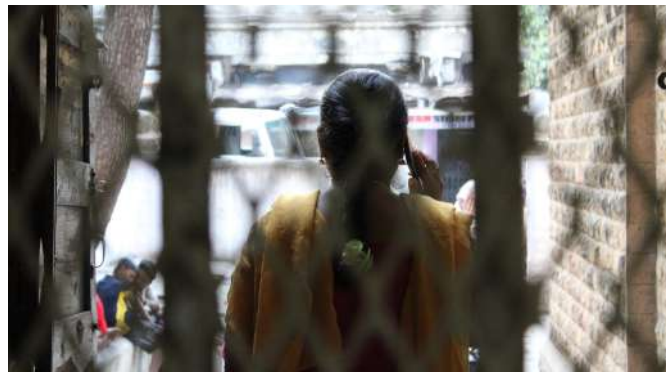
THE CELLPHONE & SEX TRADERS – TRAFFICKERS, BROTHEL-KEEPERS & PIMPS

*The sex traders – traffickers, brothel keepers and pimps – use smartphones or **bada dabba** as the women call it. More often than not, these smartphones are stolen. The prostituted women, except a few, use basic phones or **chhota dabba**.*

It has been observed that mobile phone has given a significant remote-control capability to the sex traders and has become a weapon of digital abuse. While the traffickers can now transport the victims without actually physically being with them – the act which draws attention of the vigilant eyes – the brothel-keepers and pimps are only happy possessing the mobile. They can manage a larger customer base.

For the prostituted women, it is a technology with merits and demerits both. Let's see how each segment of sex traders exploit the prostituted women.

The cellphone and aadmi (the fancy man-cum-pimp)



Aadmi or a fancy man is a regular customer who enters into a make-believe marriage with the prostituted women of the red-light areas. That way he manages to get free sex from the woman. Quickly, he takes over the job of her pimp and controls her finances. He is less than a husband and more than a pimp. *Aadmis* play havoc in the lives of the prostituted women.

While the technological exploitation by customers and outsiders is often immediate, visible and palpable, those by the *aadmi* is very gradual, clandestine, tacit and emotionally baffling.

“*Accha. Aapney kab kharida ye mobile (Ok, when did you buy this mobile)?*” asked one of Prerana’s staff.

“*Ye mera aadmi ka tha. Usney naya liya aur uska mujhe diya (This was my fancy man’s. He bought a new one and gave his old phone to me),*” the mother said, adding that he checks her phone every now and then and deletes whatever he finds as “*galat*” (wrong).

But as we delved deeper into the conversation during the mother's meeting, the mothers revealed how they are being closely monitored by their fancy man.

“Mera aadmi hamesha mujh par nazar rakhta hai didi. Agar mai kabhi bahar jati hoon toh mobile phone pey baar baar call karkey poochta hai mai kahan hoon (My fancy man keeps a tab on me. If ever I go out, he constantly calls me up and asks my location),” said 42-year-old Babita, pointing towards him, across Prerana's window, awaiting her return after the meeting.

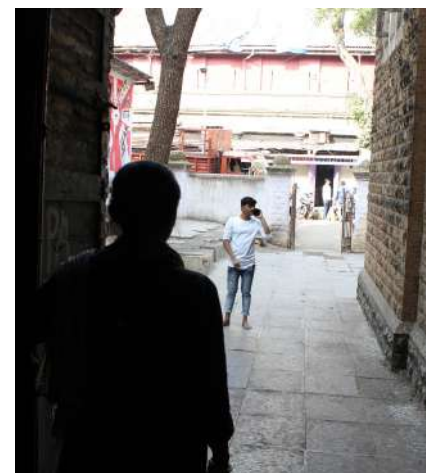
The mothers also said that in some cases the fancy man buys one SIM with two IDs – one his' and the other the woman's. That way, whenever she receives a call, he also gets a notification. He can receive the same call on his mobile and simultaneously hear the ensuing conversation between the woman and the third party. Thus, they keep a track of the number of customers and get an idea how much the woman has earned.

A mother said that *aadmis* check who the women talk to, and if they find anything suspicious, they hit them black and blue. The same happens in cases when they are unable to receive their calls.

“Uski najar mein hum sirf uski property hai. Jab hum customers sey chat kartey hain, unko lagta hai hum haath sey ja rahey hain (For them we are just a piece of property that he owns. And when we chat with customers, they feel we are slipping out of their hands),” said Priya.

Cellphones have become a tool to monitor and control their lives in the hands of their *aadmis* and pimps. “The pimps teach women to use the gadget only to the extent it benefits the former. He does this for his own gains. Pimps sometimes get stolen mobiles for INR 6,000 and then sell those to the women at INR 10,000. They sometimes record conversation and blackmail the mothers,” said Ms. Aruna Katkar, Project Manager, Prerana.

These pimps try to control the women by various means. “The fancy man buys the SIM card in his name, gives it to the woman and whenever she visits her village, he constantly makes voice or video call to check if she has actually gone or not. Sometimes, some mothers use the basic phone to avoid the man,” said Ms. Vaishali Karande, Senior Outreach Coordinator, who has been working with Prerana for the past 14 years.



The cellphone and increased monitoring

Why are mothers then so submissive and subservient to their aadmi?

One of the women said, *"Merey bacchey ka papa nahi hai. Jo koi hai yahan, wahi hai. Dono saath mey rahega. Aapas mey sab bat kar rehtey hain* (My child doesn't have a father. Whatever is there is the fancy man. We stay together. He shares my things and so do I)."

"Mai kamati hoon toh mera aadmi bazaar bhi lakey deta hai, chawal bhi daal key deta hai. Har cheez karkey deta hai. Gaon mey baith key khaoongi, doosrey key ghar mey kaam karna padega, tab khana milega. Yahan rozi-roti izzat bechta hai tab milta hai, gaon mey do deen ka, teen din ka sada hua chawal, sada hua roti, ye sab milta hai. Paisa nahi milega. Din bhar mehnat karo aur sadaa hua khana milega (My fancy man helps me run errands with the money I earn. He buys rice, does everything for me. Back in my village, I get two to three days of stale food when I work at others' home. I sell my honor here, but at least I can afford money and food. In village, nobody gives money. We labor for the entire day and all we get is stale food there.)"

"Their dependency on *aadmis* has NOT come down in any way. It is very difficult for them to gauge that *aadmis* are actually their key exploiters and not benefactor, given the mind and material games they play," said one of the senior outreach members of Prerana.

Due to the complex nature of a prostituted women's dependency on her *aadmi*, they easily get swayed by the latter's make-believe world.

The cellphone and customer (the regulars and the stalkers)

"Phone par gharwala jada pareshan nahi karta didi, baharwala karta hai (It is not the aadmi who bothers me, it is the outsider, the customer who bothers us the most using the mobile phone)," said one of the mothers.

In the meeting, while most mothers said they possess the basic mobile phone, some did flash smartphones, albeit a bit hesitantly. Initially, they said that they used their smartphones only to make calls, but gradually they opened up to tell how the gadget and the internet have wreaked havoc than benefiting them.

All of them said that it has become a tool of exploitation rather than empowerment. And the primary exploiter is the **CUSTOMER**.

The women said they feel digitally unsafe irrespective of the venue — whether a customer captures her pics while he zooms past a red-light area sitting in a taxi, whether when he seeks sexual release within the brothels, or even through unsolicited chats and calls on mobile phones.

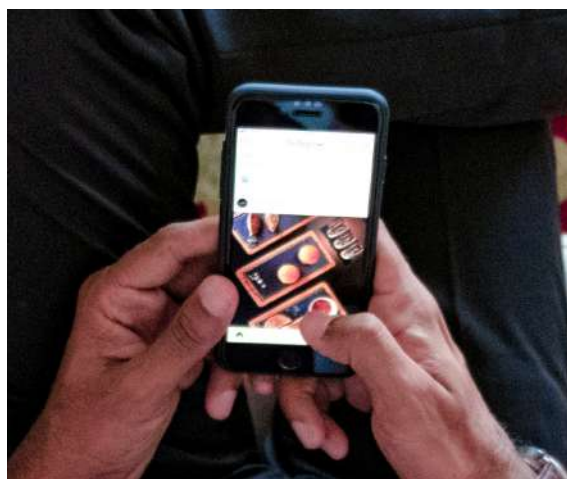
The women pointed out that while they stand on the road, customers and passers-by often clandestinely photograph and video shoot them and upload the content on the internet. *“Wo hamara photo aur video banakar usko YouTube me dalta hai. Koi akhbaar mey bhi chaap detey hain* (Those people click our photos and videos and upload them on YouTube. Some even publish them in newspaper),” said 29-year-old Reema.

“What do you do in such cases?” asked a Prerana’s social worker.

“Kucch nahi hota. Hum police key paas jatey hain, par wo boltey hain ki road par mat khadey raho. Khatam! (If we approach the police they ask us to stop soliciting on public roads. That’s it!),” Reema, one of the mothers, replied.

The mothers said that in many cases, their families and relatives back at their ancestral village end up watching those videos, which have their faces visible.

The technological misuse often continues within the brothel as well, as clients pressurize the women to watch pornographic videos with them while engaging in the sex act. “Wo humko zabardasti gandi cheezen dikhatay hain aur wahi karney ko boltey hain (They force us to watch porn and ask us to enact it),” said one of the mothers.



The customers first win the trust of the women and then exploit them to no limits. The mothers said that in many cases they find customers good at the first instance. Sometimes, to build a customer base, they, too, share their numbers with the customers. *“Par baad mey wo ek doosrey ko hamare photos bhejtey hain, group calls kartey hain, usmey ched chaad kartey hain, ganda dikhatay hain, nanga hokey khada rehtey hain* (They forward our photos to others, make group calls, harass us, show porn material and all of them stand naked),” said 31-year-old Priya, recalling how once her son happened to see this.

"Hum number dosti key khatir accha samajh key diya, wo teesrey ko dete hain. Hum majboori mey ye kar rahey hain, lekin saamney wala insaan apney mazey key liye poorey group mey photo share karta hai." (We befriend them thinking them to be good but they give our numbers and photos to others. What we are doing is out of sheer helplessness, but it becomes fun for them)," she said.

"How do you understand the client behavior?" asked a social worker.

"Time lagta hai. Jo paisa deney key time khit-khit kartey hai, kaam karney key time kiss-wiss kartey hai, hum unko number nahi detey (It takes time. We don't share numbers with those who haggle while paying us or forcefully kiss us)," said Priya, who was trafficked to Falkland Road when she was 13. She has been in the red-light area for 18 years and has gradually understood the customer behavior.

Sometimes the women are forced to change their SIM cards and block the numbers due to harassment by the customers. *"Hum customer ka zada number nahi rakhta. Paanch sou ki jagah hazaar deta hai, toh bata deta hai is time par nahi is time par phone karna hai. Jab nahi suntan hai toh do-chaar baar bolkey mai uska number block kar deti hu* (We usually do not give our numbers to customers. If we find a better deal, we give but tell them to call only at a particular time. If they do not listen and persistently call us, we block their numbers)," said Kishna, who once had to take her son's help to block a number.

The other form of abuse is stalking. Stalking assisted by technology involves the use of social media, smartphones, audio or video recording or other devices to monitor, control or intimidate the victim.

The mothers said the young college-goers were the worst perpetrators. The women reflected their helplessness to avoid such situations, which threatens their anonymity.



THE CELLPHONE AND THEIR FINANCIAL STATUS

With the tool of control and monitoring by *aadmis* and customers notwithstanding, have mobile phones actually given any kind of autonomy to the prostituted women in terms of their earnings?

Some mothers did claim that mobile phones have facilitated in developing their own client base and so they independently solicit outside the purview of the red-light areas.

Thirty-three-year-old Kishna, who has been living in the Falkland Road red-light area for the past six years, narrated that initially when she was forced into the trade, she was made to stand by the roadside. "*Lekin mere se waisa kaam nahi hota tha jaise ki — aane jaanewale aadmi log ko kheechna, aandar lena. Isliye, merko paisa bhi to nahi milta tha* (I couldn't do that — pull the men inside. This is the reason I couldn't earn much too)," she said.

Later, Kishna solicited at Grant Road red-light area, saved money and bought a smartphone. Gradually, she gathered customers. "*Aisa karkey customers poora jum gaye* (By this means, I got my fixed customers)."

"How much do you spend on phone?" a Prerana staff member asked her.

"A total of INR 500 for three months. I have taken a Jio recharge pack," she said.

For the women, who visit other areas to solicit, customers are just a call away. They contact the women directly to confirm their availability.

"*Humko hisab nahi dena padta* (We are not accountable to anyone)," said Kishna referring to pimps. She said she plans to return to her village in the next two years once she pays the yearly LIC instalment of INR 20,000 of her son.

"For those women, who solicit outside, the income has surely increased as they have got easier modes of communications like voice call and video call with the customers. They also save money as clients pay for the hotel where prostitution happens," said Ms. Vaishali Karande, mentioning how a woman saved enough money to refurbish her *aadmi's* house.

Lata, a 45-year-old woman, from the Falkland Road red-light area, who was trafficked into the sex trade 15 years ago, is critical of the *aadmis*. She considers them as sheer nuisance.

"Hum lukka tapori pakad key khilaoongi, ye galati kiska hai? Mera. Ismey na pado wahi accha hai. Hum kyon usko khilao, daaru ka paisa do, usko khana khilao, uskey paas so, uski seva karo, jatan karo, wo kya hai? Apna baal bacha nahi hai kya? Kyon rakhoon mai aadmi? (If I lug a rowdy, feed and pamper him, who is to be blamed? Is it not me? I say stay away from them. Why keep him, feed him, give him money for the booze, sleep with him, take care of him? Who is he? Don't I have my children? Why should I keep an aadmi)," Lata asked.

Lata has gradually built a trusted customer base — for which she gives credit to easier communication through mobile phones — and now visits Grant Road for soliciting. She says she effectively coordinates with customers over the phone and need not have to rely on any pimp or an *aadmi* to get customers.

The cellphone has equipped her with a sense of independence when it comes to finances. *"Hum yahan mehnat karney key liye aaye hain, paisa udaney key liye nahi* (I am here to work hard not to splurge)," she said.

"Have you benefited from the coming of mobile phones in your life?" one of the Prerana staff members asked Lata.

"Ha mereko fayda hai. Abhi khali kamaney ka, baccha ko khilao pilao, padao, dekhbhaal karo (Yes, I have benefited. Now I only have to earn, feed my child, give him education and care for him)," she said.

One of the mothers said that for those who solicit in the red-light areas, their *aadmis* control their money but also arrange everything like cook food, wash clothes and sometimes take care of their children. *"Wo unki marzi hai. Wo log khud aisa karkey rakha hai* (It is their (mothers') wish. This is how they have arranged things for themselves)," said Samina, claiming that since she has no *aadmi*, she has to do all the chores on her own.

However, in Prerana's observation, there has been no single case where the prostituted women do not have their fancy man, given the fact that they are in dire need of emotional, psychological, material and social backing, a need which is exploited by these men. At some point during them being in the sex trade, they have four to five fancy men who also double up as their pimps.

"Kisi ko asaani ho gayi, kisi ko taqlif hai (It has made things convenient for some, and created troubles for others)," said a mother. She said according to each one's preference, the peer network has gradually split between the red-light areas and those who go outside to solicit.

THE CELLPHONE AND THE SEX TRADE

So, has the street-based soliciting come down due to the technological interplay? Priya, a prostituted woman, said, “Yes, it has.” And she said that there were mainly three reasons:

- When women solicit on the streets, quite a few antisocial elements, explorers and customers harass them by taking their photos and videos.
- Cellphones have liberated them from a conventional red-light area or a localized brothel. Women have moved away to attend to the customers, who are just a call away.
- Mobile phones have freed them from the constant harassment by local hoodlum extortionists and *bhai log* (rowdies and hooligans).

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Priya recalled instances of harassment by police and ruffians around. *“Police log ka pareshani, bhai log ka pareshani, dada log ka pareshani. Karo to kya kare, pet paaley ki unko sambhale? Iskey liye sab alag alag jagah bhaag gayi* (Police, ruffians, rowdies, all harass us. What should we do then? Should we earn or handle them? This is the reason why we are scattered now,” said Priya, claiming herself to be the oldest *“ladki”* of the road. She recollected how an entire row of girls used to stand on the Falkland Road until a few years ago.

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There are others who consider mobile phones in the hands of the customers as a menace and a dangerous weapon. *“Pehley mobile nahi tha, par insaan bharosey key the. Customer log kahan kahan phone ka camera chipakar kya tasveere nikalette hai. Aur wo bhi net pe chadhaa dete hai. Sharam aati hai. Daar key marey bahar nahi jatey. Ye sab mobile aane ke baad shuru hua.* (In the past, mobiles were not there but people were trustworthy. You never know where the customers would have hidden the mobile with camera to take our pictures. That is not all. They load the pictures on the internet where the world can watch us. We die with embarrassment and humiliation),” said a mother. Thus, soliciting venue has certainly seen a transition.

THE CELLPHONE AND CONNECTIVITY

“Baat hum chota phone mey bhi kar saktey hain, dekh nahi payengey (We can talk on the basic phone, but will not be able to see them),” said Babita, mentioning how video calling and exchanging photos on WhatsApp helped her to stay connected with her family back at her village. *“Baccha ka photo bhejta hai. Ma log dekhta hai gaon mey. Mil nahi paata hai, phir bhi baat hota hai (I send photos of my child. I see my mother. I don’t get to meet them, but at least I get to communicate with them),”* she said.

THE CELLPHONE AND CHILDREN



The prostituted women feel scared that their children will come across inappropriate video clippings installed on their phones by their pimps and customers. They are also worried if they manage to get hold of a mobile phone and visit pornographic sites.

Children being more comfortable with the mobile technology, the women sometimes take their help for some age-appropriate and proper tasks such as blocking some numbers of customers who stalk them.

They also feared that their children grow up seeing their mothers in the sex trade and they all want to keep their children away from this. *“Apney ko kharab lagta hai, apun toh aisa hun, bacha log mobile mey dekhega toh wo bhi seekhega (I am like this. But if children see dirty things in mobile phone, they will also learn it),”* one of the women said.

But some mothers took pride in telling how their children smartly teach them to operate mobile phones. They said that they also learn good things from their children through phones.

THE CELLPHONE AND LEARNING NEW SKILLS

Many women see value in having mobile phones in their own hands. Mobile phones in the hands of the customer and pimps is, however, a possession dangerous for the women.

“Mujhe yahan se nikalna hai didi. Mai kuch aur kaam karoongi agar seekh gayi toh (I want to get out of this place (the red-light area) didi. I am ready to take up any other work if I learn a new skill),” said young Sabita, who proudly said that she has learnt to stitch clothes by watching YouTube videos on her mobile.

Other women reported that they, too, learn different skills like painting, *mehendi* (Henna), cooking different cuisines and beauty care, besides using their mobile phones to watch tele-serials — their only source of entertainment.



“Hum dekhtey hain kahan kya hua, kya nahi hua, kahan murder hua. Hum log ganda video nahi dekhtey. Net pe kuch accha bhi hota hai. Paisa-waisa bhejney ke liye mobile kaam aata hai. Phone se rail ki ticket nikalate hai. Make-up karna sikhte hai. Baal nikalna (waxing) sikhte hai. (We know what’s happening around and where murder took place (news). We don’t watch dirty videos. There are good things as well on the internet. We get tickets booked. We learn to do make-up and waxing),” said Kishna.

CONCLUSION

For Prerana, it is a journey of over three decades of intense and untiring ground work, field observation, service delivery, crisis intervention, rapport building, research and understanding the lives of the prostituted women and their children living in the red-light areas of Mumbai. It has witnessed the technological transformation and its impact on the red-light areas over three decades. “It is more of a drawback than an advantage,” said Ms. Aruna Katkar, a senior social worker. A swift mode of communication notwithstanding, the mobile phones are a bane more than a boon for the marginally exploited and invisible victims of sex trafficking in Mumbai’s red-light areas.

NOTE: Pictures are for representational purpose; Names have been changed to conceal identity.