

Trapped in the Trade

Economic coercion and lack of agency among women in commercial sexual exploitation in Kanjar Community

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Abstract:

Commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) operates as a gendered mechanism that has been passed down through generations among various tribal groups in India, typically transitioning from mothers to daughters, by virtue of intergenerational stigmatization and economic dispossession. Tribal communities such as the Kanjars, Bedias, Nats (or Rajnats), Faasis, Sansis, Banchhadas, Pernas, and Saraniyas have higher prevalence of girls and women in CSE. The present study focuses on the Kanjar community in Bundi, Rajasthan, examining the shifting dynamics of females in CSE. Conducted in the Bundi district of Rajasthan, where Kanjars predominantly reside, the research involved in-depth interviews with community members, district administration officials, police, and civil society representatives. Findings reveal that CSE remains a significant and economically beneficial livelihood for the Kanjar community. The current study indicates that an estimated 300 to 500 minor girls are still trapped in CSE. Although initiatives like Operation Asmita have been introduced to combat this issue and promote development, such efforts do not address the material realities of the communities nor the constrained agency of women sustained by sexual commodification of marginalized women, often reinforcing the very marginalization they seek to redress. The findings demand a reorientation of policy – away from piecemeal intervention towards a responsible law enforcement with sustained livelihood reparation and rehabilitation intervention that promotes participatory engagement and empowerment of women and girls, dismantling the caste-patriarchial exploitation at its roots.

Key words: *Kanjar, Commercial Sexual Exploitation, Trafficking, Rajasthan, Qualitative Research*

1. INTRODUCTION

For generations, women from certain tribal and marginalized communities across India have been forced into commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) as a means of survival and passed off as ‘family occupation’, with the practice systematically passed intergenerally through the females in the family – from mothers to daughters – though passed could be a misnomer when the girls and women are in reality forced into CSE. Communities like the Kanjars, Bedias, Nats (or Rajnats), Faasis, Sansis, Banchhadas, Pernas, and Saraniyas have historically been trapped in this cycle of exploitation, where CSE is not merely an individual choice but an imposed economic reality (The Sunday Tribune-Spectrum, 2006; Missing Link Trust, 2020; Panwar, 2015). In the states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh in India, the trade is often family-controlled, with male members complicit in sustaining it as a primary source of income (Gaedtke & Parameswaran, 2013). Meanwhile, in the south, the oppressive Devdasi system (*Devdasi is an established practice in South India where a girl is dedicated to serve the god at the very early age. Originally, these women were associated with the singing and dancing, however, with the disintegration of feudal empire they lost their traditional patrons. This made them vulnerable and they were forced to indulge in the commercial sex work*) has similarly condemned women from lower-caste communities to a life of sexual servitude (Gaedtke & Parameswaran, 2013).

The origins of the Kanjar community remain obscured by myth and colonial distortion (Office of Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India, 1961). British ethnographer William Crook speculated that the term “Kanjar” derived from the Sanskrit *Kanan-Chara* ("forest wanderer") (Bhargava, 1950), yet no definitive historical records exist. The Kanjar community is found in more than 15 states of India and Rajasthan has the second largest population of Kanjars after Uttar Pradesh (Joshua Project, 2025). Criminalized under colonial rule until 1956, when it was included in the list of the Scheduled Castes (Office of Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India, 1961). The Kanjar communities are still listed among the Scheduled Castes and mainly found in Hadauti region (Kota, Bundi, Baran, and Jhalawar) and Sawai Madhopur, Alwar, Bhilwara, and Ajmer districts of Rajasthan (**RajRAS, n.d.**). The total population of Kanjars in Rajasthan as per Census 2011 was 53,816, with the majority (86%) living in rural areas and continue to face systemic exclusion.

Table-1: Kanjar Population in Rajasthan (2011)

State/District	Total	Rural	Urban	Males	Female
Bundi	4,645	4,592	53	2,315	2,330
Rajasthan	53,816	46,128	7,688	27,074	26,742
Source: Census 2011					

For generations, the Kanjar community in Bundi—similar to many other marginalized groups—has been caught in a survival cycle shaped by systemic exclusion. Historically categorized as “criminal” during colonial times, Kanjars were compelled to engage in disreputable and criminal trades like theft and informal entertainment, with women disproportionately subjected to sexual exploitation (Office of Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India, 1961). Although certain rehabilitation initiatives, such as the 1933 Bundi State colony, facilitated a transition toward farming and wage work (Office of Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India, 1961), these actions were never extensive enough to eradicate the deep-rooted poverty and caste-driven discrimination that kept the community on the outskirts of society.

Currently, the impact of this systemic disregard continues. Numerous Kanjar families, lacking stable economic options,

persist in depending on exploitative methods—not by choice, but as a result of generational dispossession. Most alarmingly, young girls before attaining their majority are frequently coerced into commercial sexual exploitation by their own families (Press Trust of India Ltd, 2016), regarded as items in deals worth lakhs of rupees, or even pledged or mortgaged for fixed durations. Those raising their voice against the custom incur the wrath of Panchs of the community who impose heavy fines amounting to lakhs (Press Trust of India Ltd, 2016), strengthening a system in which survival requires obedience.

Reports also suggest extensive trafficking of Kanjar girls across state and national boundaries (Rana, 2021), but such crimes seldom receive significant intervention. Due to centuries of oppression that have normalized commercial sexual exploitation, many people in the community view it as an unavoidable reality instead of a breach of fundamental rights. This resigned acceptance is not cultural; it stems directly from a state and society that have consistently failed to offer viable alternatives (Saeed, 2002; Dayal, 2020).

In light of the ground level reports about the exploitative practice of minor girls being forced into commercial sexual exploitation, which was further supplemented by reports appearing regularly in local newspapers about the same. Bundi police, Child Welfare Committee (CWC), Bundi, NGOs, conducted rescue operations on two locations in Ramnagar village of Bundi district on December 11, 2021. These operations resulted in rescue of three (3) minor girls and arrest of four (4) persons trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation of minors.

The highly publicized Ramnagar rescue operations (ETV Bharat, 2021; ZEE Rajasthan, 2021) prompted the Bundi administration into visible action, culminating in Operation Asmita's February 2022 launch (Times of India, 2022). This intervention targeted three Kanjar villages (Ramnagar, Shanakarpura, and Mohanpura) where generations of women have been trapped in sexual exploitation not by choice, but through intersecting structures of caste oppression and economic abandonment.

These rescue operation in Ramnagar got wide media coverage (ETV Bharat, 2021; ZEE Rajasthan, 2021) leading to the Bundi district administration's response to arrest the commercial sexual exploitation of girls and women in all three Kanjar-dominated villages, namely, Ramnagar, Shanakarpura, and Mohanpura, and addressing the fundamental economic and coercion issues within the Kanjar community with the launch of Operation Asmita in February 2022 (Times of India, 2022). The operation aimed to provide a viable alternative to women and girls, and even the men of Kanjar community weaning them away from the degrading and criminal commercial sexual exploitation, through rehabilitation and development through education, skill training and alternative employment opportunities (Dainik Bhaskar, 2022).

Bundi police, in association with UNICEF and ActionAid, has also launched Mission Surakshit Bachpan since Sept 2022 (Times of India, 2022). Though not a Kanjar community specific project like Operation Asmita, it is a data based strategic initiative in 17 Gram Panchayats to check sexual abuse of minors and turn them into model Child Protection Gram Panchayats in the next one year with proactive policing and focused efforts. All this is expected to bring down cases under Protection of Children from Sexual Offenses Act 2012 (POSCO Act), including commercial sex work involving minor girls from Kanjar community in Bundi.

1.1. Objectives of the Study

It is in the above context that objectives of the present study are:

1. To understand the current livelihood pattern of Kanjar community, especially with regard to change in the practice of forcing girls and women into commercial sexual exploitation.
2. To understand the impact of the December 2021 rescue operation and Operation Asmita carried out by the District Administration in rescuing girls and women from CSE and supporting reparations and rehabilitation.

1.2. Study method and approach

This is a qualitative study, involving enquiry into the current livelihood pattern of Kanjar community in Bundi. The enquiry has employed in-depth interviews with community members, Child Welfare Community (CWC) official, police officials, and NGO representatives from Bundi. Two case studies were developed through in-depth interviews with two women belonging to Kanjar community, and analysed. Secondary data from published articles, news reports, government official documents were used to triangulate findings about the tradition and livelihood practices of the Kanjar community. The details of the qualitative information collected over two (2) days, from March 13 to 14, 2023, are given below in Table-2:

Table-2: Details of Interviews with Target Groups	
Target Groups	Number of Interviews
Community Members (Villagers)	7
Frontline Workers	2
CWC Official	1
Police Officials	2
NGO Workers	2
Total	14

The study used structured and open-ended interviews. Fourteen interviews were conducted with representatives from community, frontline workers like Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) and Anganwadi worker, Child Welfare Committee member from Bundi district, police officials, NGO representatives working in the villages. Two in-depth open ended interviews were conducted with women from the Ramnagar village on life of women in Kanjar community, particularly on practice and knowledge on commercial sexual exploitation.

The respondents were interviewed on their availability and willingness to respond to the study. The interviews with women from Kanjar community were conducted through support of the Panchayat members.

The study was conducted in two villages (Ramnagar and Shankarpura) of Bundi district in Rajasthan. These are two of the three main habitations of the Kanjar community in Bundi district. Around 10 kilometers away from Bundi city, Ramnagar is located in Indragarh block of Bundi district. Currently, there are nearly 900 households belonging to Kanjar community in this village, with a total population approximately as 5,000 and total voting strength of 2,500ⁱ. Shankarpura, on the other hand, is located 30 kilometers away from Bundi in Hindoli block of Bundi district. There are nearly 600 Kanjar households residing at Shankarpura.

2. FINDINGS AND OBSERVATIONS

This study aims to understand the current livelihood pattern of Kanjar community in Bundi, Rajasthan, especially with

regard to the change in the tradition of traffick of girls and women into commercial sexual exploitation work, and to understand the impact of Operation Asmita carried out by the District Administration in freeing girls and women from commercial sexual exploitation and supporting avenues for alternative skills development. The study covered two villages - Ramnagar and Shankarpura of Bundi district, where Kanjar community in Bundi is mainly concentrated in Rajasthan. In-depth interviews with community members, district officials, police officials, and NGO representatives from Bundi were conducted to fulfill the study objective. The data was transcribed and analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively.

2.1. Livelihood pattern of the Kanjar community

Seven (7) out of fourteen (14) respondents that the main livelihood source for the Kanjar community was agriculture.

One of the community members said that in earlier days some of the Kanjar males might have been committing theft and robbery and remained hidden in the forests for the fear of police, while women and girls were forced into CSE. Although he clarified that it is uncommon now, with improvements over the years. He further shared that most of the Kanjar households are in possession of at least some piece of cultivable land, ranging from one to four acres, and they are now earning their livelihood mainly through cultivation on their own land.

Some of the households, which do not have cultivable land or who have small pieces of land, their male members work either as agricultural labourers, factory workers, or manual labourers in nearby areas, he added. When asked about the additional sources of income, he shared that some of the households are supplementing their income by engaging in poultry farming and running small shops. *“Male members are no longer engaged in criminal activities, they have become sober and god-fearing. On the other hand, most of the girls and female members of the community have left their traditional occupation of commercial sex work,”* he responded.

Another community member shared that there is a saying among the Kanjar community that *“either you sell your land or daughter to sustain your livelihood, and if neither of these two work, do manual labour (i.e, ya to jameen becho ya beti becho, naheen to majdoori karo).”* According to him, there is also a convention or *pratha* among the Kanjar community which allows parents to ask for money/bride price in exchange of marrying their daughters off. If a girl breaks her marriage with her husband, she or her family members would have to return back the money they took with interest from the husband or his family members.

Table-3: CSE among Kanjars and Involvement of Girl Children			
Respondents	No. of respondents interviewed	Respondents confirming existence of CSE	Respondents confirming minor girls in CSE
Community Members (Villagers)	7	4	3
Frontline Workers	2	0	0
CWC Official	1	1	1
Police Officials	2	2	0
NGO Workers	2	2	2
Total	14	9	6

2.2. Incidences of Commercial Sexual Exploitation among the Kanjar Community

Nine (9) out of fourteen (14) respondents shared that CSE continues as a traditional livelihood option among the

Kanjar community, in one way or the other, and six (6) out of those nine (9) also confirmed involvement of minor girls into it (Table-3).

For instance, a community member shared that a handful of Kanjar households (around 10% of the total) are still making money by forcing the women in their families into CSE.

“Many of such Kanjar women are basically from outside from locations such as Sawai Madhopur, Bhilwara, Jhalawar, etc. and have hired rooms or houses in the village on rent. Nearly 20 to 25% of their income from commercial sex work goes to the house owners. Police knows about it, but nothing happens. There are also some Kanjar households (15 to 20% of total) where women above 18 years of age are going to outside cities, such as, Mumbai, Nagpur and Pune to earn their livelihoods through commercial sex work. They would come only occasionally to their homes in the village. However, they are all making good money and sending the same to their parents/ household members as reflected from the good quality and make of their houses in the village,” he further revealed.

Echoing a similar sentiment, another community member said:

“Agriculture as the main source of livelihood for the community is only on paper; actually it is commercial sex work involving family girls and women as the main livelihood source, so much so that most households are part of it and that too quite openly. There is so much easy money to make in the process, they don’t care to bother about alternative livelihood sources. There are very few persons employed either in the Government or private service.”

An official of Child Welfare Committee (CWC), Bundi, who has had vast experience of working with Kanjar community in the district, claimed that there are very few households among the Kanjars where the women and girls are forced into CSE. The reason the official believes this to be true is that *“as against 185 households from Ramnagar getting tested for HIV regularly two years ago, only 22 households got tested last year.”*

Giving further credence to the statement by the CWC official on CSE within the Kanjar community, a senior police official from Sadar Police Station, Bundi, said:

“There is noticable decrease in commercial sex work by women among the Kanjar community. No minors are involved in commercial sex work anymore. Nevertheless, the risk is always there because children see this work happening in their communities which in turn normalizes commercial sex work in their lives. This harms impressionable minds.”

Table-4: CSE of Women on Kanjar Communities			
Respondents	No. of respondents interviewed	Decline in CSE instances	CSE Continues Unabated
Community Members	7	2	4
Frontline Workers	2	2	0
CWC Official	1	1	0
Police Officials	2	1	0
NGO Workers	2	0	2
Total	14	6	6

On the existence and continual CSE of women and girls in Kanjar community of Bundi, we spoke to four (4) other

respondents, including two (2) community members and two (2) frontline workers. These respondents vehemently denied that any CSE of women and girls by their families in the Kanjar community.

Notwithstanding the above claims about the declining trend or even complete absence of CSE among the Kanjar community women and girls, two NGO representatives, who have had the experience of running a learning centre for the community children, cautioned against any such optimistic outlook that could distort the actual livelihood status of Kanjar community women.

One of them said:

“Majority of the households (over 50%) are still engaged in flesh trade in one way or the other. The only change is that many girls and women (aged between 18 to 25 years) are now moving out to other cities for commercial sex work and related occupation. Mostly women aged 30 years and above are engaging in commercial sex work within village.”

Supporting the assertions made by the two NGO representatives on continuation of CSE of women from Kanjar community, four (4) other community members said there was rampant CSE of the women and girls in all three Kanjar villages of Bundi, including Ramnagar and Shankarpura.

As one of them shared:

“No less than 60% of the total households are profiting out of commercial sex work of girls and women – either as sex workers or parents or relatives of women or girls involved in sex work, or acting as their agents, or simply renting out their houses for sex work.”

Girls are trapped and forced into CSE at a very young age, as soon as they attain puberty. As the CWC official, Bundi, shared:

“Usually, the younger a girl is, the more her parents who act as pimps, earn by soliciting her services. Sex with a virgin earns more money, and any customer who gets to break the hymen of a girl will be shedding loads of money to do so. Virgin girls are regarded as pure. There is also a belief that having sex with a virgin girl cures a man of HIV/AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases. The parents then also go on to sell their daughters to agents out there in cities, both within and outside Rajasthan for a handsome amount of money for a specific period of time.”

As girls from the community are a lucrative and easy source of income to their family members, there is a constant threat from the family and the girls are commercially sexually exploited by their families for as long as possible, and these girls are not encouraged to marry either. To discourage marriage of girl children, a very high bride-price is charged by their parents/family members. Indicating the plight of girls being trapped into CSE by their parents or men in the family, a community member said:

“There are many restrictions imposed on girls getting married. If someone wants to get married, parents of the bridegroom would need to pay as high as Rs.20-25 lakh as bride-price to her parents. Only after that they can get married. Due to this restriction, many Kanjar girls are unable to get married ever. They continue to get sold and resold, thus serving as milch cows for too long a time.”

In a community where girls are discouraged to marry, the fate of boys are equally deplorable. Without offering hefty amounts of money in exchange, it is tough for them to get suitable spouses within the community. Describing the

matrimonial disorder existing among the Kanjars, the same community member further added:

“Marriage is a difficult proposition for the community boys. To make the situation worse, they are also forbidden to engage in sex with community girls or women, both as customers and lovers. They would act only as dealers of commercial sex workers from the community. This often results in violent demeanors on their part - arrogant, bad-tempered, and ready to fight as always.”

2.1.1. Estimate of Kanjar women and girls in CSE

Counting the number of women and girls forced into CSE poses challenges due to its criminal and clandestine nature. And, the fact that many of them have migrated from their villages. Based on a rough estimate, it is believed that approximately 1000 to 1500 females from Ramnagar and Shankarpura are currently engaged in this practice. Among them, approximately 600 to 1000 females, mostly above the age of 20, have ventured outside their villages, predominantly to cities like Mumbai, Pune, and Maharashtra, to work as sex workers. The number of minors among the total commercial sex workers ranges between 300 and 500. Similar information has been observed by the National Human Rights Commission in their study in 2024 (NHRC, 2024).

According to a community member:

"In my opinion, 1000 to 1200 women and girls belonging to the Kanjar community in Ramnagar and Shankarpura are involved in commercial sex work. Almost all of them in Shankarpura, particularly, have embraced this profession. Around 600 to 800 women and girls among them have migrated from Bundi and are employed as sex workers in major cities like Mumbai, Pune, and Nagpur. The remaining women and girls continue to practice sex work within our village. Out of the total, at least 300 to 400 individuals are below the age of 18."

Seconding his view, another community member shared:

"From Ramnagar and Shankarpura combined, no less than 1400 to 1500 females are engaged in commercial sex work. Around 800 to 1000 of them have chosen to work in cities, while the remaining 400 to 500, primarily over the age of 30, operate solely within their villages. There is also a significant presence of minors within this population, with their numbers ranging between 400 and 500."

Table-5: Sample Profile in Bundi District				
Village Name	Total Households*	Total Population*	Total Girl Children (10-17 Yrs)#	Block
Ramnagar	900	5000	438	Indragarh
Shankarpura	600	3500	306	Hindoli
Total	1500	8500	744	
* Approximate figures based on interviews with community members				
# Estimated on the basis of girl children (10-17 yrs) being 8.75% of the total population in Rajasthan (Census 2011)				

Taking into account the projected count of minor girl children in Ramnagar and Shankarpura, which stands at 744

presently (Table-5), with 50% of them (372) are forced into CSE (based on the assumption that girl children aged 10-17 years constitute 8.75% of the total population in Rajasthan according to Census 2011), the estimated range of 300 to 500 minors among the total of those who are in CSE somehow appears to align closely with reality.

2.1.2. Alternative livelihood options for male community members

Regarding the alternative livelihood options for male members of Kanjar households who have shifted out of trafficking/pimping for girls and women, the CWC Bundi official said:

“They have either become farmers or daily wage labourers. Many people have their own land for farming but those who don't, rent land and then farm on it.”

The senior police official from Sadar Police Station, Bundi, too reiterated that the movement towards agriculture and cultivation by the community. *“Agriculture is the most common source of livelihood for the Kanjar community,”* he said.

Table-6: Alternative Sources of Livelihood for Males			
Respondents	No. of respondents interviewed	Farming/ Cultivation	Manual labour
Community Members	7	3	1
Frontline Workers	2	0	0
CWC Official	1	1	1
Police Officials	2	1	0
NGO Workers	2	0	0
Total	14	5	2

Speaking on sources of livelihood for male household members, one of the other community members interviewed, said:

“Male members work as farmers or labourers either in the village or in other nearby villages. Everyone in the village owns land for farming.”

2.1.3. Prevalence of alcoholism and smoking in the community

Among Kanjars, consumption of alcohol is not a health concern. According to a community member that we interviewed, both men and women, irrespective of age, alcohol consumption is near universal and excessive. He said:

“Distillation of country liquor in home and its consumption and sale is a common practice. Household members, irrespective of age and sex, are addicted to drinking. Males and females, along with adolescents and children sit together and freely indulge in drinking. Sometimes a day begins with alcohol and ends with alcohol. At all social and religious functions alcohol is indispensable. Even old women and children consume alcohol.”

Table-7: Prevalence of Alcoholism and Tobacco Smoking			
Respondents	No. of respondents interviewed	Alcoholism	Tobacco smoking
Community Members	7	4	4

Frontline Workers	2	0	0
CWC Official	1	1	1
Police Officials	2	0	0
NGO Representatives	2	1	1
Total	14	6	6

Smoking is also quite common among the Kanjars. One of the NGO representatives from Bundi shared:

“Even adolescent girls and boys can be seen smoking in the presence of their elders. A stranger could soon develop friendship with community members by offering them with cigarettes or liquor. They are, however, very cunning and never give out their secrets to anybody.”

2.1.4. Education of girls and boys from the Kanjar community

As per the information shared by the NGO representatives from Bundi, most of the girls and boys from the community are enrolled in school. The challenge is their regular attendance in classes and learning. One of the respondents with previous experience of running a learning centre in the community said:

“As compared to the girls, enrolment of boys in general is higher. The dropout rates are not recorded in the register though. Due to lack of awareness, they do not understand the value of education. Only smaller children show at least some interest in education, especially from households with some prior education background. They are more interested in extra-curricular activities like dance competition, beauty and make up competitions, etc. as girls in general want to acquire dancing skills to be used later in their lives as commercial sex workers. Even during the class, parents would often turn up asking release of girls on one pretext or the other. This often meant that they had to serve a customer in their home.”

According to a community member, however, there are many households where both girls and boys aspire for higher studies, taking up government jobs and alternative occupation in cities. *“Some children are also taking coaching and preparing for competitive examinations,”* he shared.

2.3. Field Observation

Table-8: Observations by researchers			
S.N.	Indicator(s)	Ramnagar	Shankarpura
1	Women in CSE	Yes	Yes
2	Minor in CSE	No	Yes
3	Open solicitation for commercial sex	No	Yes
4	Alternative vocations by males	Retail shops, cattle rearing	Retail shops
5	Alternative vocations by females	Retail shops, domestic work, cattle rearing	Retail shops
6	Schools in village	Yes	Yes
7	Proximity of school to houses involved in CSE	50-60 meters (approx.)	200 meters (approx.)
8	Police station in village	Yes	Yes

9	Approach roads	Yes	Yes
10	Street lights	Yes	Yes
11	Skill training centre(s)	No	No

The infrastructural development in Ramnagar is much better than Shankarpura, and the community is more rooted. Amidst the claims and counter-claims about the extent of CSE prevailing in the community, the truth somewhere lies in between. As compared to the thriving and unrestricted CSE of girls and women in Shankarpura, this crime seems somewhat subdued in Ramnagar. One reason could be the intervention by district administration post the December 2021 raid and subsequent launch of Operation Asmita in February 2022. However, it would be wrong to assume that there has been a substantial reduction in this practice. The very fact that a substantive number of households are trafficking the girls and women to other cities into CSE, and there are still identified lanes and houses in Ramnagar where CSE persists even with the presense of the police checkpoint, is contrary to the optimistic response by the community members from Ramnagar. Field observation also did not show palpable signs indicating marked changes in the occupation of the majority of household members as farmers, agricultural and manual labourers. Households with livestock, agricultural implements, poultry animals, seeds, crop stores, etc. were rare.

Shankarpura, on the other hand, presents a more open picture. It has a more commercial outlook resonating of a typical red-light area with girls and women with gaudy make-ups openly soliciting customers in their homes and lanes 24x7. Also, on both side of the road starting from the Higher Secondary School of the village, which separates Shankarpura from Bhawanipura, a lot of *taparis* (small transient huts) have come up where Kanjar girls and women could be seen openly entertaining their customers even during the day light. These *taparis* start after 50-60 meters away from the Higher Secondary School.

Case study-1: The story of a girl, sold and resold

Lakshmi (name changed) is a 29 year old woman living in Ramnagar, Bundi. She had a public wedding 5 months ago to a man from Ramnagar. She is living with her daughter, husband and husband's family members. Her daughter, Anaya (name changed) is 6 years old.

Lakshmi was born in Ramnagar but was soon sent to her relatives in Sawai Madhopur. While she says they were her relatives, she is not really sure how they are related. She says she never saw her parents and does not know if they are even alive. At the age of 14, Lakshmi was sold to someone in Sawai Madhopur for sex work. For the next 15-16 years, Lakshmi has been in and out of this profession. She has travelled to Mumbai, Nagpur, Pune, Jaipur and other places for sex work.

Last year, she fell in love with her husband and they both decided to get married. Once married, women from Kanjar community stop sex work. She wanted to get out of the profession and also feared that her young daughter will also be pushed into this. Thus, they both approached CWC chairperson and the chairperson got them married publicly. It is perhaps important to hold a public wedding so that the entire community finds out that the bride is now a married woman and thus, cannot be forced into sex work anymore. This is also the reason why Lakshmi has already engaged her daughter to a boy the same age in Sawai Madhopur. She sees it as a primary barrier to her daughter being trafficked for sex work – education comes secondary.

Lakshmi claims that no one is involved in sex work in Ramnagar anymore. However, one can see women soliciting in the village. Two households near the school even accepted that they themselves engage in sex work at home. Moreover,

Lakshmi's sister-in-law, Chanda (name changed) too is a sex worker according to the CWC Official, Bundi.

Case study-2: Archana, a girl from Ramnagar pursuing B.Ed.

Archana (name changed) is a 24 year old woman living in Ramnagar, Bundi. Currently pursuing her B.Ed. from Bundi, she represents winds of change blowing among the new generation Kanjar girls, which have inspired them to seek a career outside the traditional sex work practices. She was involved in Operation Asmita as a teacher for girls in her village who have dropped out of school. Once her own education demanded more attention, she stopped working for the operation and handed over her duties to other young girls.

She shares that “educated girls and women from the community are determined not to indulge in the traditional sex work practices and let it impact them or their children in future. There is a significant proportion of community members, who are now well aware how degrading is this practice to women and the community and how quality education could provide them with better livelihood option, they have also started opposing the custom of selling their girls and women for sex work.” Archana prefers not to engage with the community women who are still working as sex workers, and she dreams to become a teacher soon.

2.4. Impact of December 2021 Raid & Operation Asmita

Operation Asmita planned to curb CSE of girls and women and address livelihood issues of the Kanjar community in all three Kanjar-dominated villages. However, its implementation was limited to Ramnagar alone, with Shankarpura and Mohanpura remaining neglected. Even within Ramnagar, implementation of the proposed action points was rather tardy. As a result, no clarity emerged during the field visit as to what exact follow-up measures were taken, how many vulnerable households were linked to which government schemes, and how many counselling sessions were organized for girls and women forced into CSE and family members who are complicit in this crime. It is noteworthy that most of the community members do have Aadhar cards, ration cards, and bank account numbers. While efforts were made to provide people job cards under rural employment guarantee scheme and some women over 55 years of age are availing widow pension scheme of the state, these are not universal.

To rehabilitate the girls and women rescued from CSE, their families were to be linked with income generating livelihood schemes, and the action plan also talked about establishment of community livelihood centres. Unfortunately, the research team did not get any evidence of the Kanjar households having been linked to any such income generating schemes. There was no trace of community livelihood centre in either Ramnagar and Shankarpura. Under the plan for setting up useful infrastructural facilities for the vulnerable village households, around 500 households have been given water connection for safe drinking water under the newly constructed overhead water tank under the National Jal Jeevan Mission. Under the Pradhan Mantra Adahrsh Gram Yojana (PMAGY), facilities with regard to the primary school, health centre and roads have also been reviewed and upgraded in Ramnagar.

As per the accounts of community members, frontline workers, and the CWC Official, Bundi, periodic awareness generation meetings involving community members were also held at Ramnagar, on crime of CSE and advantages of alternative livelihood options and keeping children in school. However, the intensity, frequency, efficacy, and involvement of the majority of community members in such meetings remain unclear without verifiable statistics. This was part of the planned activities relating to community engagement.

Table-9: Details of Some Skill Development Training at Ramnagar

Training name/ type	Beneficiaries	Period
Training on sewing	24 girls	2022
Training on beauty parlor skills	20 girls	2022
Training on Mukhamantri Navjivan Scheme (anti-liquor)	Kanjar women	35 days (2022)
Source: Community members, Ramnagar		

As far as skill training is concerned, around 24 girls were trained in sewing in 2022, according to the CWC Official, Bundi. They were all given sewing machines by Bank of Baroda. Fifteen (15) out of those trained girls are right now working as tailors in the village. However, this work does not really pay their bills, she added. This claim was supported by a community member too. Similarly, around 20 girls were trained in beauty parlour skills and are working, but do not earn enough to support their families.

According to another community member, another 35 day training program was organised by another NGO, for awareness generation on the harms of CSE. The research team did not find evidence of repeat skill training done in the recent past by the district administration. With piecemeal approach without market linkages, no material reparations and long term economic reintegrations, these skills trainings and alternative income generation interventions have so far remained ineffective in changing the livelihood pattern of the Kanjar community significantly.

Some of the critical action points as suggested by NGOs to the district administration, such as, barricading outside the community and keeping a record of visitors, installation of CCTV cameras at all the entrances and exits to village, and Child Friendly Corner within police posts in all three Kanjar dominated villages, seem to have remained neglected, they were never acted upon. What is most intriguing is the fact that other than Ramnagar, which is somewhat closer to Bundi city, both district administration and police have been recalcitrant in terms of pro-active interventions to stop CSE by Kanjar girls and women. Shankarpura, where the problem remains acute, remains out of their focus.

Another point of concern is the fact that post the December 2021 raid in Ramnagar, there has been no rescue operation ever in any of the Kanjar dominated villages in Bundi. This is in complete contrast of the action points proposed under Operation Asmita, which include among others, identification, pre-planning meetings, and lodging of FIR post the operation, presentation of child/girl victims before CWC, arrest of the accused, etc.

3. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

3.1. Discussion

The narrative and findings emerging from Bundi's Kanjar villages point towards a grim portrait of what "reparation and rehabilitation" really means when structural violence remains unaddressed. While official reports allude to declining CSE numbers and point to agricultural livelihoods as signs of progress, the ground reveals a more brutal truth—exploitation has not been eradicated; it has simply been displaced, disguised, or outsourced (trafficked) to urban brothels. Young women are trafficked to urban centers like Mumbai, Nagpur or Pune instead of servicing clients in Ramnagar; families trade daughters for bride prices rather than direct payment for sex; and skill trainings in stitching or beauty work remain woefully inadequate against the gravitational pull of fast, stigmatized money.

The constrained agency of Kanjar community women becomes painfully clear in their limited resistance strategies. Some, like *Lakshmi* (name changed), navigate marriage as an escape hatch, while others, like *Archana* (name changed),

pursue education as a lifeline. But these individual triumphs exist within a cage of systemic failures: stigmatisation that makes alternative livelihoods precarious, caste discrimination that blocks formal employment, and a state that offers piecemeal skills training instead of quality education, market-linked livelihoods and skills training, material reparations and sustained economic participation.

The bureaucratic selective blindness is apathy and negligence in action. The open solicitation in Shankarpura—where girls as young as 10 work in shadowy taparis just meters from a school—exposes the fragile claims that CSE has declined. Police and officials point to reduced HIV testing numbers as ‘proof’ of progress, while ignoring the traffick of women to urban brothels. Not a single incidence of prosecution of clients of CSE was found in the research, bringing focus again to the lack of enforcement and apathy of the law enforcement and administration in justice delivery.

3.2. Conclusion

The highly publicized December 2021 rescue of three minor girls and the subsequent launch of Operation Asmita in February 2022 did disrupt the visible exploitation in Ramnagar’s Kanjar community—at least superficially. The study indicate a decline in local CSE, but this shift masks a more insidious reality: the economic coercion driving Kanjar women and girls into CSE has merely been displaced, not dismantled.

While some families have withdrawn daughters from CSE in Bundi, an estimated **300–500 minor girls** remain trapped—many now trafficking into faraway urban brothels in Mumbai, Pune, and Nagpur. This traffick reveals the **structural violence** underpinning their exploitation – the persistent caste-based economic exclusion clubbed with rampant alcoholism systematically aided by patriarchal norms where women and girls are treated as commodities; lack of sustained and coordinated state rehabilitation programmes that fail to address the intrinsic vulnerabilities; and ineffective law enforcement and including their complicity aid in further traffick and exploitation of girls and women in Kanjar communities.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

The persistent cycle of commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) in marginalized communities like the Kanjars cannot be broken without addressing its root causes—systemic economic exclusion and the lack of viable alternatives. Education, when implemented as a comprehensive and sustained strategy, has the potential to disrupt this cycle, both for children and adults. However, current efforts either through law enforcement or through social protection remain fragmented, often failing to provide meaningful pathways out of exploitation. The persistence of the myth of ‘choice’ in an alternative of choicelessness of girls and women, with little to no material reparation, and a system that further marginalizes the exploited and the exploiters (clients and traffickers) benefit from poor law enforcement and impunity, true solutions lie in a combination of dismantling the caste-entrenched patriarchal economy, clear enforcement of rule of law, and real and sustained reparations and rehabilitation of the girls, women and communities affected.

- **Establishing institutional care for at-risk minor girls:** Developing and implementing a comprehensive plan to identify minor girls who are at risk of being trapped into CSE by their family members or immediate care givers. Providing them with a safe and positive environment by shifting them away from their homes to well-managed institutional care facilities might be the only recourse in preventing their traffic and exploitation.
- **Strengthening law enforcement around the vulnerable communities:** to support genuine policing that targets the clients of CSE and not the girls and women, including installation of CCTV cameras, community vigilance with

local administration, rescue operations supported by strong state rehabilitation programmes, among others in all three Kanjar-dominated villages: Ramnagar, Shankarpura, and Mohanpura. Most importantly, identification and prosecution of the clients of CSE in these communities that keeps this criminal enterprise lucrative and economically viable.

- **Coordinating and sustaining programmes for community development:** Ensuring that social protection and economic choice of the Kanjar communities aimed at full socio-economic integration and removing of the social dispossession among them including linking vulnerable households to income-generating schemes, establishing community livelihood centres, options for viable livelihoods including conditional cash transfers, land rights living wage employments, universal health insurance and healthcare, financial literacy, etc.
- **Promoting education and lifelong learning:** Ensuring regular attendance and retention of children, both boys and girls, in schools, is a first step in keeping children away from harm. Encouraging participation in extracurricular activities to promote confidence and personal development, as well as avenues for all round development that resists addictions and substance abuse. Offering counselling and guidance on career options and higher education opportunities to empower them with knowledge and skills would help them make informed life choices.
- **Strengthening support for vulnerable households:** Continuously linking vulnerable households to various government schemes and programmes that provide material reparations including income generation opportunities, skill development, education, healthcare, and social security, is a strong prevention strategy. Similarly, establishing well-equipped community livelihood centres that offer alternative employment options and supporting realtime economic empowerment of the community can support alternative economic 'choices' would prevent exploitation of girls and women for CSE.
- **Enhancing awareness programmes:** Increasing the intensity and frequency of awareness programmes among community members regarding the crime and repercussion of CSE is a much needed intervention. Emphasising the advantages of alternative livelihood options and the importance of education for children, and engaging community leaders, elders, and panchayats to change their mindset and attitudes towards CSE of women and girls from Kanjar communities as a crime and not a tradition is both a prevention and deterrence tactic.
- **Comprehensive skill training:** Providing comprehensive skill training programmes for girls and women exiting CSE or those at-risk of being forced into it, is a bolstering tactic that support financial resilience and participation. Focusing on market-oriented skills and establishing connections with potential employers or facilitating the formation of self-help groups to generate sustainable income, can support survivor-led interventions and long-term rehabilitation and reparations.

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