Ethical and Safety Issues in Doing Sex Work Research: Reflections From a Field-Based Ethnographic Study in Kolkata, India

Sunny Sinha

Abstract
While much has been said about the risks and safety issues experienced by female sex workers in India, there is a considerable dearth of information about the difficulties and problems that sex work researchers, especially female researchers, experience when navigating the highly political, ideological, and stigmatized environment of the Indian sex industry. As noted by scholars, there are several methodological and ethical issues involved with sex work research, such as privacy and confidentiality of the participants, representativeness of the sample, and informed consent. Yet, there has been reluctance among scholars to comment on their research process, especially with regard to how they deal with the protocols for research ethics when conducting social and behavioral epidemiological studies among female sex workers in India and elsewhere. Drawing on my 7 months of field-based ethnographic research with “flying” or non-brothel-based female sex workers in Kolkata, India, I provide in this article a reflexive account of the problems encountered in implementing the research process, particularly the ethical and safety issues involved in gaining access and acceptance into the sex industry and establishing contact and rapport with the participants. In doing so, it is my hope that future researchers can develop the knowledge necessary for the design of ethical and non-exploitative research projects with sex workers.

Keywords
HIV/AIDS; infection; sex workers; sexuality; sexual health; research design; methodology; cultural biography; India

Introduction
People from different walks of life have consistently asked me, “How did you get involved with sex workers?” The first time I was asked this question, I thought people were genuinely interested in knowing what made me advocate for such a stigmatized and marginalized group of women in India. However, I understood the meaning of this question better when Shakti, one of my informants, asked me, “Can you explain to me why of all the topics in this universe, you chose this dirty topic to study? You are so smart and well-educated. Do you think once you get married you can do all this? It doesn’t matter what you do, didi (sister); this society can never accept this. You tell me; when you get married, will your husband tolerate you going out with us? Society thinks we are “bad” women, and by mingling with us, you are ruining your own life.

At that very moment with Shakti, I realized that as a young, unmarried woman, born and raised with “Indian” Hindu middle-class values, I was inviting trouble by transgressing the assigned normative female roles, by being vocal about women’s sexual health issues, and by associating with...
women in the sex trade. My reply seemed unconvincing to Shakti, as she said,

Why are you wasting your time doing this? Unnecessarily, you are jeopardizing your own safety and reputation. Nobody will listen to our stories. Even if they do, they can’t do anything about it.

What Shakti described in her narrative is a perfect illustration of Goffman’s (1968) notion of “courtesy stigma,” or stigma experienced by association with stigmatized groups. Stigma, defined by Link and Phelan (2001) as a “co-occurrence of its components—labelling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination” (p. 363), and which must occur in the context of a power situation, becomes a real issue for researchers studying the Indian sex industry. For instance, several scholars outside of India studying the sex industry or the topic of sexuality have discussed how stigma has impacted their personal as well as professional lives: It has resulted in sexual objectification by research participants (Grenz, 2005; Zurbriggen, 2002), safety issues (Hammond & Kingston, 2014; Sanders, 2006b), emotional labor pain involved with managing their own negative feelings as well as their participants (Melrose, 2002), and even perceptions that their research topic is unworthy of study (Attwood, 2010; Israel, 2002; Sanders, 2008). The stigmatized nature of the sex work environment raises several methodological issues and ethical challenges for researchers, and has a direct bearing on the validity of the data collected (Shaver, 2005). However, very little information exists about the effects of the stigmatized and politicized nature of the Indian sex industry on the research process, particularly issues related to gaining access to participants through non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the safety of researchers, and the ethical issues of informed consent, confidentiality, privacy, and respect of sex workers. While several scholars have emphasized that researchers must engage in the ethical practice of reflexivity throughout the research process when working with historically marginalized and stigmatized groups (Sanders, 2006b; Wahab, 2003; Zheng, 2013), very few scholars have published their own experiences as observers, collectors, and recorders and how their positionality and emotions in the field affected the research process (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2006, 2008; Gray, 2008; Jeffreys, 2010; Melrose, 2002; Sanders, 2006a).

Reflexivity, defined by Rix, Barclay, and Wilson (2014) as a “multilayered and sustained critical reflection on the conscious and unconscious beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, motivations and actions influencing a researcher” (p. 3), is a powerful tool in uncovering the knowledge creation process. As Hart (1998) argues, it “not only ensures researchers’ accountability for the research, but also reveals the cultural norm of the research setting” (as cited in Zheng, 2013, p. 53). Wahab (2003) further reasons that “the absence of reflective practice in most studies conducted ‘on’ sex workers has, among other things, contributed to a production of knowledge that many sex workers claim does not reflect realities” (p. 626). In other words, the practice of reflexivity enables researchers to bridge the knowledge gap that arises due to the differences between the power, class, and cultures of researcher and participants. Therefore, researchers need to pay particular attention to their emotions; this mediates the relationships that are formed in the field between the researcher and the “object”/participants of the study and the research process. This article fills this gap in knowledge by providing an in-depth, self-reflexive account of the ethical and safety issues faced while conducting a 7-month, field-based ethnographic research project with “flying” or non-brothel-based female sex workers in Kolkata, India. In doing so, it is my hope that future sex work researchers, particularly in the Indian context, will be better prepared to address ethical and safety issues during the planning phase of study.

**Research Context and My Background**

In February 2004, I began working as a Project Manager in the sexual health outreach project of an NGO in Kolkata, India, an eastern metropolitan city located in the state of West Bengal. Prior to beginning work on this project, everything I knew about sex workers came from films and newspapers, which repeatedly depicted them as fallen, wicked, tainted, and outcast women bringing dishonor and shame to their families and society. Women are indoctrinated with these negative societal beliefs about female prostitutes through the powerful mechanism of daily socialization. From a very early age, a good girl versus bad girl binary is ingrained in the minds of young girls which results in divisive thinking. An Indian girl is made to realize that her honor or “izzat” in society is tied to her sexuality, which implies that the family’s honor is dependent on her sexual conduct. As a result, strict control and vigilance is exercised in society over women’s sexuality. The notion of honor or “izzat” applies to all women in Indian society, and those who dare to defy the gender norms of sexuality often fall victim to so-called honor crimes and honor killings, which Abu Odeh defines as the killing of a woman by her father or brother for engaging in, or being suspected of engaging in, sexual practices before or outside marriage; honor crimes can also involve different types of manifest violent behavior against a woman, including assault, confinement, imprisonment, interference with choice in marriage, and
labeling a woman as a minor or insane (as cited in Vishwanath & Palakonda 2011, p. 389). Given the life-threatening consequences meted out to women who defy the gender norms of sexuality, I believed that all women were forced into sex work, and I therefore subscribed to the abolitionist perspective on “prostitution.” Before I came in contact with this population, I strongly believed that women involved in the sex industry needed to be rescued and rehabilitated.

My involvement in an HIV prevention/sexual health outreach project for sex workers in Kolkata, India, was a sheer coincidence. I had moved to Kolkatā, my hometown, after living independently for 8 years in several cities, including Ahmedabad, New Delhi, and Mumbai. I was searching for a job when I came across a project manager’s position in the local newspaper. The job posting provided no details, other than the fact that the project was about women and children. I applied for this job and was called for an interview. During the interview, I was informed about the sensitive and complex nature of the work, which involved women prostitutes—who were being referred to as “sex workers”—and HIV/AIDS. I was offered the position despite having no prior work experience with the sex worker population and no knowledge of the HIV/AIDS disease spectrum. The sexual health outreach project was funded by the West Bengal State AIDS Prevention and Control Society (WBSAPCS) and implemented by a faith-based NGO. During my first day on the job, I learned that the position had remained vacant for several months, and that the reason I had been hired immediately was that very few women candidates were willing to risk their image in society by associating with sex workers or an HIV-infected population. Unmindful of the risks and stigma associated with the job, I was drawn to the daring and challenging aspects of this work; that is, I welcomed the opportunity to meet with the invisible/stigmatized segments of society and to become aware of the HIV/AIDS disease.

Working in the NGO’s sexual health outreach project brought me an awareness of the everyday struggles and complex realities of the female sex workers who were employed within the project as peer educators, and also an awareness of the “courtesy stigma” (Goffman, 1963, as cited in Bernstein, 2007, p. 61) imposed upon female project staff associated with HIV prevention programs. For instance, there were several aspects of my work that became a constant source of anxiety for my parents. First, they would worry if I returned home after sunset. This was in part due to concerns about my physical safety, but what bothered them most was how neighbors, friends, and relatives would interpret my late return home, as “respectable” women do not stay late at work or return home in the middle of the night. Second, associating with women sex workers was not considered respectable, either. My parents worried what people would think if they saw me with these women, and often asked me to focus on the administrative aspects of the work and to avoid visiting the field sites or participating in public events organized for promoting awareness about HIV. Third, my work made seeking matrimonial alliances for me more difficult. Women are required to be shy, passive, and reticent about matters pertaining to their sexuality, but my job required me to be vocal, open-minded, and aware about the transmission, prevention, and treatment aspects of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV/AIDS. I realized that in their dealings with prospective partners for me, my parents chose to be discreet about the nature of my work. My personal experience of stigma strengthened my belief that women’s subordinate political, economic, and social position in this society makes them most susceptible to HIV and AIDS infection.

Struck by the lived experiences of women operating in diverse sex work settings and the multiplicity of risks that women experience in their daily lives, irrespective of whether or not they are involved in sex trade, I embarked on a doctoral study in August 2005 with the aim of doing “research with sex workers” (van der Meulen, 2011). As the literature noted substantial differences between the risk experiences of women operating from indoor settings (brothels) and the risk experiences of women operating in non-brothel-based settings or on the street (Sanders & Campbell, 2007), I chose to focus on a highly marginalized sex worker population, namely the “flying” or non-brothel-based female sex workers. The aim of the study was to understand how members of this group perceive the risk of HIV in the context of other risk experiences in their lives. Unlike their counterparts residing in brothels, non-brothel-based female sex workers have no fixed place or time of operation. They work independently and solicit their clients directly from public places such as bus stations, railway stations, ferry stations, or spaces marked for public recreation or sports, such as cinema halls, parks, resorts, or clubs. They are highly mobile because it allows them to escape the permanent stigma that arises from residing in brothels (Sinha, 2014). Departing from the prevalent knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and practices (KABP) survey-based approach used in most HIV risk-related research conducted among sex workers in India, I instead chose “cultural biography” (Frank, 2000), a method that combines the use of life history and participant observation (a defining tool of ethnography). The 7-month ethnographic study (December 2009–July 2010) was implemented in two stages. In the first stage, I collected 46 short life-portraits. In the second stage, I collected three in-depth life history portraits. Both the short life-portraits and the life history interviews were collected using a maximum variation sampling approach.
(Miles & Huberman, 1994) and repeated interview methodology (Wax & Shapiro, 1956).

I approached my doctoral research project using feminist standpoint epistemology, as this enables the researcher to examine the impact of risk on the life course of women in sex work (past, present, future) by considering “risks in particular times and places and through the voices of particular informants” (Caplan, 2000, p. viii). The main findings of this doctoral study have been published elsewhere (Sinha, 2014, 2015). However, because “research is a process, not just a product” (England, 1994, p. 82), I provide in this article a self-reflexive account of the process of doing field-based ethnographic research with non-brothel-based sex workers in Kolkata, India. First, I provide a discussion of the ethical issues encountered while accessing the population through the NGO’s sexual health outreach projects, and the precautions a researcher needs to take to ensure the ethics of informed consent, confidentiality and privacy of participants, as well as the issue of participant remuneration. Second, I discuss how navigating the sensitive and stigmatized nature of the sex industry enabled me as a researcher to establish contact and rapport with the participants, and to gain a more truthful account of the sex workers’ lives and the stigma associated with the sex industry. Third, I discuss the safety issues and the methodological insights gained from negotiating the “insider–outsider” dilemma with sex workers in the field. Finally, I conclude with my reflections on the advantages of using critical ethnography as an approach to studying a stigmatized and marginalized population.

**Negotiating Ethical Issues With NGOs as Gatekeepers**

“Gatekeeper” is a term used in research to refer to individuals, organizations, and groups that act as intermediaries between researchers and participants and have the power to grant or withhold access to the participants for study (Clark, 2011; De Laine, 2000; Reeves, 2010). Sanders (2006b) aptly uses the phrase “layers of access” to describe the complexity involved with the issue of gaining access and acceptance into the sex industry. In my study with non-brothel-based female sex workers operating from multiple field sites, I too had to seek approval from several layers of formal and informal gatekeepers (Reeves, 2010) but as Clark (2011) explains, concerns about methodology, representation, and intrusion can make the relationship between researcher and gatekeepers difficult and tenuous. I approached three different local NGOs in Kolkata, India, to gain access to the participants through their sexual health outreach projects. The projects were all funded by the National AIDS Control Organization (NACO), a division of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare that provides leadership to HIV/AIDS control programs in India. Ethical clearance for this study was gained from the University of South Carolina, Columbia, and from local organizations. Pseudonyms have been used to conceal the identity of the participants. NGOs have not been identified to further maintain privacy and confidentiality of the participants.

First, I approached Organization “A,” a community-based organization reaching out to women sex workers in Kolkata, India. I went through a rigorous 3-month process of obtaining the organization’s ethics review board approval prior to gaining access to the sexual health outreach projects of the organization. Despite having obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, which required submission of field instruments, I was frequently grilled for information by the Project Manager on the methodology of my study. My fieldwork was interrupted twice by the Project Manager as I used a conversational approach to interviewing instead of using the standardized survey-based questions:

> We could only allow you to continue visiting the projects, if you provide me with a detailed list of your questions. If it was a matter of 1 month or few weeks, then it was not a problem, but you are going to stay here for six months, which is a long time. Therefore, we need a detailed list of your interview questions.

It was evident from the above response of the Project Manager that, as gatekeepers, they wanted to control my access to information by making decisions about what questions I should be asking the respondents, who I should be interviewing, and which sites I should be visiting. In my meeting with the project manager and chief advisor of the organization, I was informed that my questions had upset the women, as I had asked them sensitive questions about income. I explained the context in which this question was asked to the participants, but the Project Manager’s reply to me was unyielding:

> It is not a problem if women pose questions to you, but you have to be careful while posing questions to them. You can ask them how many customers they have in a day, but not what your income is. Also, if you ask them how much you pay to goons and police, they will tell you an amount they pay but whatever answer they give is utter non-sense.

After meeting with the Project Manager and the Chief Advisor of the organization, it became evident that they wanted me to depict women as empowered and liberated women who wanted sex work to be recognized as a legitimate profession, which very much aligns with the political stance of the organization. In addition to facing ideological differences with regard to the issue of sex work, I was also asked not to remunerate the participants...
for the time they devoted to the research project; instead, this amount should be given to the NGO. In agreeing with the organization, I would be going against the ethical protocol of both the organization’s ethics board and the University of South Carolina IRB committee. Therefore, after spending 4 weeks observing the sexual health clinic and outreach services of this organization, I decided to terminate our collaboration and approach other organizations to gain access to the participants of the study.

The second organization I approached was Organization “B,” reaching out to street-based sex workers in Kolkata, India, with a rescue and rehabilitative approach to sex work. I was twice refused access to the participants by the director of the organization, on the grounds that the organization was in the process of streamlining the project with new staff, and including any new assignments would further complicate the process. The organization could have informed the peer educators about the study and made their participation in the project voluntary, but the option to participate in the research project was not officially communicated to the members of the community. As suggested by Hubbard (1999), I tried to convince the organization by volunteering my expertise in project management and helping them carry out the streamlining of the project activities, but was refused access to the participants nevertheless. I suspected that because I did not agree with the organization’s rescue and rehabilitative approach to sex work/prostitution, its leaders feared that too much would be revealed about the organization through my long-term engagement with the participants.

The third organization I approached was Organization “C,” which provided outreach to rural-based sex workers with a service delivery orientation to sex work. The organization viewed their role as being restricted to outreach that provided information to the community about the government’s programs and services. Unlike NGOs “A” and “B,” this organization mostly served women sex workers operating in the suburbs and rural areas of Kolkata. In a telephone conversation with a member of the governing body, I was given permission to seek access to the participants through their sexual health outreach projects, but faced with similar issues of strict control and vigilance over the methods employed in gaining access to the participants; I could only work with them for 4 months.

Finally, I decided to work independently. The process of trying to recruit participants without the gatekeepers/NGOs was difficult and time-consuming, but proved to be a beneficial strategy as it allowed for a holistic understanding of the issues of women in the sex industry. I was able to speak to participants who were unwilling to participate in the NGOs’ activities or were too busy to visit the NGOs’ clinics. Knowing that I was working independently allowed women to openly share their views about the role of NGOs in their lives, which did not occur when interviewed on the premises of the NGOs. In the section below, I discuss the ethical issues faced when accessing participants through the NGOs and the strategies used to counter these ethical challenges.

How to Ensure Informed Consent?

The principle of informed consent requires that the research participants be made fully aware of the risks, benefits, and participation procedure involved in the research prior to beginning data collection. However, in both Organizations “A” and “C,” the informed consent of the participants was taken for granted based on their membership in the organization. The counselor and project manager handed me a list of names of peer educators whom I could interview for the study. Despite my insistence on obtaining the informed consent from the peer educators, the organizational practice mandated the peer educators’ participation in research. When I tried to explain to the staff the importance of obtaining informed consent, the counselor in Organization “C” intervened to say the following:

That won’t be necessary because these women work for us (organization) and you can ask them questions. They report to [our] office so you can easily get their interviews. I will have to assign them to you or else you won’t be able to interview them.

Other studies examining sex workers’ perspectives on research ethics in India and the Philippines also found that informed consent was constrained by several social and contextual factors, such as perceived government coercion, feelings of exploitation, and participant skepticism that the research would not result in any direct community benefit (Reed, Khoshnood, Blankenship, & Fisher, 2014; Urada & Simmons, 2014). Based on the findings of their study examining female sex workers’ experiences with research ethics in Andhra Pradesh, India, scholars argued that informed consent needs to be understood as a process and not merely the signing of a form. They recommended that IRB should require researchers to include in the informed consent form the safety implications and protections for female sex workers against fears of arrest, violence, and economic loss, as the standard ethical guidelines being implemented in the region do not fully respond to the values and expectations of the study population (Reed et al., 2014).

Several participants, especially those with whom I had built rapport and trust, expressed during interviews their resentment over the organization’s practice of mandating their participation in these projects:
Just because we work here that does not mean I got to narrate my stories to everyone that comes to this project. (Saraswati, 35 years)

Similarly, Shristi, a community representative of Organization “A,” had the following to say:

I don’t like the way they keep showcasing us in front of anyone who comes to the project. They can provide general information but why should they escort these people and introduce us as “sex workers.” I don’t like this practice of theirs. You can’t trust these other people and there is no way to control what these other people are going to do with the information. You tell me? (Shristi, 28 years)

The narratives of Shristi and Saraswati give credence to Agustin’s (2004) argument that, to avoid encountering “outright lies, omissions, and sad stories” by sex workers (p. 6), researchers should employ long-term participation observation methods, which place emphasis on establishing respect, trust, and rapport. In my study, even though the organization mandated the participation of the sex workers, I elected to take the time to inform the women about the research project and establish rapport with them if they showed any signs of non-verbal resistance to the project.

How to Maintain Confidentiality and Privacy of the Participants?

The issue of confidentiality and privacy is of critical importance in working with the sex worker population because a woman publicly exposed as a sex worker can face severe life-threatening consequences, such as arrest, eviction from home, violence, social boycott, and so on (Sinha, 2014). Similar to the findings of an India-based study examining female sex workers’ perspectives on research ethics (Reed et al., 2014), I too witnessed instances when NGO staff violated the privacy of the participants by revealing information about their lives, or mistreated the women by essentializing their identity as a sex worker and ignoring other aspects of their lives. For instance, even when NGO project staffs were knowledgeable about confidentiality issues with regard to HIV/AIDS clients and sex workers, this knowledge did not translate into their actions. On several occasions, I was informally asked by the counselor and other project staff members to provide them with the names of the interviewed participants, on the pretext that they would like to encourage the participation of people who had not yet participated. Once, after reviewing the list of interviewed participants, the counselor from Organization “C” confronted me and asked why certain names were missing when she clearly recalled those women had spent time talking with me. I made the mistake of explaining to her that the names were not included in the list because they did not want to participate in the project, and had said explicitly that they were not “sex workers.” On hearing this, the counselor scheduled a meeting with each of these women and confronted them about why they had told me that they were not in sex trade. This incident created a very awkward situation for me, and I apologized to the affected participants, stating that I was unaware of the counselor’s intentions when she asked for the list. After this incident, I became very careful not to share any information about the women with the office staff, and consequently included all names and provided them with remuneration, just to avoid further conflicts and confrontation between the NGO staff and peer educators.

The physical environment in which research interviews are conducted is also an important aspect to be considered in ensuring confidentiality, privacy, and respect for the participants. Studies have found that when women sex workers are interviewed in their workplaces, particularly in the presence of their employers, they feel restricted and compelled to tailor their responses into “safe” answers to maintain their positive image within the organization (Urada & Simmons, 2014). In my study, I experienced similar problems when asked by Organizations “A” and “C” to interview participants in the presence of other staff. Most of the women, when approached, would provide a rehearsed response, such as “I use condoms, how will HIV happen to me,” and they would limit the focus of their conversations to their knowledge of HIV transmission and prevention. As I listened to their responses, the non-verbal communications of the participants clearly suggested to me that they feared upsetting the organization relations and therefore tailored their responses into safe conversations that related directly to the NGO’s activities. I quote the following narrative excerpt from Saraswati, my key informant at one of the solicitation sites, to further illustrate that women in sex work are averse to research methodologies that treat them like “guinea pigs” without any regard for their privacy, confidentiality, or sentiments:

I like the way you spend time with us on the field. You bought that girl an ice-cream even when she refused to spend time with you. You extended your understanding toward her. She was desperate for work and instead of getting angry you bought her an ice-cream to cool her head. This is what I like. We don’t mind being asked questions. Ask us as many questions you want, but if you are going to ask me whether or not I use condoms, then I am not going to answer. Will you like to be asked this question? Why are we asked this same question again and again? You know, this explains why the girls in “pandua” (name of the brothel site) strip their clothes off in defiance when they are posed with these types of insolent questions from researcher (referring to researchers using survey-based approach). They are doing right. They are teaching these researchers a good lesson. I know you are
Should Participants be Remunerated for the Time Allotted in the Research Project?

Use of monetary incentives to recruit participants for HIV studies, be they clinical trial studies or social and behavioral studies, remains a controversial issue (Dickert & Grady, 1999; Saunders & Sugar, 1999; Thomas, 2004). For Sanders (2006a), who has conducted research on the “indoor sex markets” of Britain, paying sex workers for gaining access to information about their life experiences is similar to the situation of a client paying the sex worker for gaining access to her body, and is therefore highly exploitative. Maher (2000), however, who has conducted an ethnographic study with drug-using sex workers in Brooklyn, New York, contends that providing modest remuneration to women is only a fair practice, one that also encourages participation. Similarly, an India-based study, which aimed at understanding female sex workers’ experiences with ethical issues of confidentiality, privacy, and respect, reported women’s resentment toward studies requiring long wait times for participation, as this interferes with their ability to earn the daily income necessary to meet their basic survival needs. As a result, the authors recommend that research ethics protocol should require researchers to address the additional burdens that may be unduly imposed on women’s time (Reed et al., 2014).

One of the most complicating aspects of this research was the NGOs’ resistance to the idea of offering remuneration directly to the participants for their time and involvement in the research project, especially when they were being approached during their work hours. According to the NGOs, providing remuneration to the participants for their time allotted to the project sets a bad precedent in the community. As one of the counselors employed with Organization “C” explained,

If you tell them about money, they will get greedy. You won’t be able to manage. So I would suggest don’t tell them. Just give them a small gift or souvenir towards the end.

Similarly, a governing body member of Organization “C,” who did not approve of participants being offered monetary compensation for their time, said,

It is good that you want to pay them but you have to understand that it is going to raise problems for us on the field and other researchers too. After you are gone, these women will demand for money from us in future when they are asked to participate in any form of research activity. You can pay them but not everyone can afford to pay them. So it will be my “request” to you that you do not commit to any form of payment to the participants on the field.

On the contrary, the peer educators opined strongly in support of women receiving remuneration for the time allotted toward this project, their views were often silenced and went unheard within the project. Saraswati, a peer educator in Organization “C,” said,

You should stick to your decision of remunerating the participants. If you give them money, they can use it based on their need. You should not listen to their views on buying for us something. Everybody does not need the same thing. So it will be better if you give them cash.

As noted by Singer and Couper (2008), incentives are problematic only when used by researchers to encourage participation in the presence of avoidable or unreasonable risks, but when monetary incentives are used by researchers to minimize the risks of the participants, it is not an ethical problem. In my study, the participants received remuneration, which ranged from $2 (Rs. 100) to $10 (Rs. 500) depending on the amount of time allotted to the project.

The most striking aspect of the interaction with the NGO’s project staff was the manner in which the issue of remuneration was being dealt with and debated. For instance, there was no effort made to consult the peer educators, who work as staff within the project, on how to resolve the issue of informed consent, confidentiality, and participants’ right to remuneration. I quickly learned that the peer educators had very little power to influence decisions arrived at by the project staffs, who were members outside of the sex industry. For instance, the peer educators’ involvement was restricted to bringing “patients” to the sexual health clinics of the organizations. They were not consulted or involved in making decisions concerning other aspects of the project, such as project planning and budgeting; therefore, in all three NGOs, a high turnover rate was commonly reported among peer educators. The limited involvement of peer educators also reflects how NGOs exert their power and influence on the sex workers whom they want to empower. Despite being resentful of the ways in which NGOs produce and reproduce inequalities, peer educators participate in the oppressive practices of the NGOs because membership in a NGO/HIV prevention program creates opportunities for mobilization and incentives (Sariolo, 2009). As Sariolo (2009) notes, “HIV prevention is a performance, rhetoric and a resource available to sex workers as well as NGOs” (p. 65).

This section has shown that gaining access to the participants through NGOs is not a simple process. Rather, it involves careful negotiation and implementation of
research processes such as the assurance of informed consent, the maintenance of confidentiality and privacy of participants, and the remuneration of participants. It is important that, prior to beginning data collection, researchers organize educational sessions/meetings—individual meetings as well as group meetings—for NGO’s project staff, to reduce their anxieties about the research findings and how these findings might impact their project funding. As NGOs are the gatekeepers, their practices often go unquestioned by “naive” first-time researchers in the sex industry, especially those who are dependent on an NGO for field-related assistance such as translation, transcribing, or cultural knowledge. IRB’s put naive researchers in danger by not raising these critical questions prior to beginning fieldwork. In my case, I brought to the field 2 years of work experience with sex workers and various stakeholders, such as NGOs, funding organizations, and HIV professional staff in the region. In addition, my non-resident Indian (NRI) status encouraged a perception of me as a “foreigner” in my own country, which gave me a lot of leeway to do things that were forbidden for other Indian women residing in the country. What’s more, as the study was funded by a Fahs-Beck Research and Experimentation Doctoral Dissertation Award, it was lent importance in the eyes of NGOs, which was beneficial as I was not totally dependent on the NGOs for logistic support and access to the participants. Agreeing with Melrose (2002) that relying solely on an NGO’s project staff for access to participants can introduce bias into the findings, I reached out to a larger sample of women by contacting them directly at their solicitation sites.

**Challenges to Building Trust and Rapport With Stigmatized Participants**

Establishing rapport with stigmatized participants is not a simple and straightforward process; often, a researcher faces resistance—manifested in the form of unwillingness to talk, avoidance of the questions posed by the researcher, and the provision of inconsistent responses—even when informed consent is obtained and participation is made voluntary (Beaunae, Wu, & Koro-Ljungberg, 2011). I concur with Beaunae et al. (2011) that it is only by becoming aware of the unequal power dynamics inherent in the researcher–participant relationship that researchers can develop sensitivity to the “participants’ positions as resistors of power” (p. 419) and work toward minimizing their effects. In my study, I found inconsistencies in the narratives of women. In the first encounter, women would provide me with a story that depicted them as victims who were forced into the sex industry. I saw these narratives change after a relationship of trust and rapport had been built with the women and they felt they had a say in the interview process. For instance, in the second or third meetings, the narratives reflected a sense of women’s agency and voice, as they spoke of sex work being a conscious decision over other employment opportunities available to them. Sex work was described as an occupation that pays them well and provides them the flexibility to juggle the responsibilities of being a nurturer as well as a provider (Sinha, 2015). Some of the structural issues that acted as barriers to the formation of rapport and trust with the participants were their fears of being reported in the media and their prior experiences with survey-based research/researchers.

**Fear of Being Reported in the Media**

Quite a few of the women feared being reported in the media or written about in the newspapers. Many would not vocalize their fears and instead chose to maintain formality and distance from me. One of the women asked, “You won’t give it in the newspapers or in the TV. Will you?” These anxieties came up quite often, especially during the beginning stages of the research. They intensified when I requested to tape record one of the focus group discussion meetings with the women. One of the peer educators spoke in a hostile tone, “Why do you need to tape record? That is not right. If you want you can just take notes or else we don’t want to participate in all this.” I could sense from her reaction that insisting on tape recording or explaining the reasons for tape recording would result in jeopardizing my relations with them. I chose not to tape record the group meeting and also clarified that without their informed consent, I did not have the right to tape the session and that it would be ethically wrong. Quite a few women wanted to know why I wanted to tape record instead of taking notes in my diary. I took this opportunity to explain to them that it helped me to take verbatim accounts of their lives and also to better understand the situation if I listened to their stories in another time and place. The key was to maintain a polite and calm demeanor throughout and genuinely respond to their questions and concerns. I often said, “If I were you, I would have also asked these questions.” This statement made a huge difference, as it immediately calmed the whole atmosphere. A few of the women who understood the research process chose to then explain to other participants that the purpose of tape recording was to communicate their views in their own words and voices. I also needed to translate the accounts from the Bengali or Hindi language to English, so when I spoke about translation issues, they seemed convinced. The more I shared the process of conducting research with them, the more they were willing to cooperate with the tasks involved in the research.


Prior Experiences With Outside Researchers

Most of the research conducted with female sex workers in India has typically relied on survey-based research methods and has focused on their sexual health alone, and this has resulted in a feeling among the women that research treats them as sexual objects. Thus, I found women interacting with me based on their prior experience with research. As one of the participants said to me upon our introduction, “All you want to know is how many clients I do, and how many condoms I use. You can ask me now so that I am done with it and can do my work.” In the first few weeks, women did not open up, and only provided information pertaining to whether they were married, whether they had the opportunity to have their meals, and had gone hungry the whole day while running pillar to post. Hence, I made it a point to carry out the clinic activities, but also helped the organization by assuming the responsibility of organizing the monthly focus group meetings with the women, during which I informed and educated the women about STDs, including HIV and AIDS.

Calm Demeanor and Sense of Humor

Maintaining a calm demeanor and a sense of humor was essential in handling the tenuous relationships with these women. For example, it is easy to get offended by the non-stop sexual jokes and gestures that women make toward each other, when in reality they are just trying to evoke reactions from an unfamiliar researcher. It is their way of testing the researcher’s credibility and character (Sanders, 2006a). On one occasion, a few women tried to joke about my singlehood by raising speculations about my sexual orientation. Chulbuli said, “I will not marry. What to do if I do not find a boy?” Reema interjected, “We said ‘girl-friend’; we did not say boyfriend.”

I responded, “Well, if I find the right boy, I will certainly marry. What to do if I do not find a boy?” Reema interjected, “We said ‘girl-friend’; we did not say boyfriend.” All the other women laughed heartily at this statement and waited to hear me react, but by choosing not to react and instead showing my amusement too, I demonstrated to them that I was serious about my interactions with them.

Maintaining Rapport Both In and Out of the Field

Maintaining a rapport both in and outside the premises of the organization proved essential in nurturing the relationships with women. This was made possible by contacting them over the telephone, spending time with them
after the clinic hours, and conducting home visits. Each woman contacted was given the choice of either contacting me on their own or having me contact them at their specified time. I respected whichever choice they made, handed them my number, and followed up with them later in person or via phone. Quite a few of the women gave me specific times of the day to call and also warned me about not mentioning their involvement with the sex trade on the phone. For instance, Madhuri, who wanted me to call her, said, “Don’t talk about all ‘this’ (sex work) when I answer the call at home. Nobody knows in my family.” When I tried to contact them on their cell phones, I found most of the women’s numbers were switched off during the morning and afternoon hours. I later learned from them that they keep two phone numbers, and switched their SIM cards upon reaching home to avoid harassing calls from their customers. I also realized that following up with the women on their phones at their given times made them feel important and also formed the impression in their mind that I was serious about my work with them. Quite a few women showed interest in keeping my number as they planned to call me in times of trouble, such as after arrests by police or when harassed by clients. I felt comfortable giving away my telephone number because most of the times women just wanted to consult and seek advice. Moreover, they were fully aware of my limitation as they knew I was risking my reputation by associating with them. Asking for telephone number was their way of testing me—to see how far I could go. Even though I felt that they were very protective of me in the field. However, to avoid creating any unrealistic expectations of me in the field, I ensured that women understood that I was doing research and could only link them to existing resources within the community.

Maintaining a Reflexive Journal

Throughout the data collection phase, I maintained a reflexive journal to record my own experiences, beliefs, thoughts, assumptions, and feelings, which allowed me to better understand how concepts of positionality and intersectionality (Suárez, Newman, & Reed, 2008) impact my relationship with the study participants. For example, my uneasiness about women’s garish attires in the field and dark lipsticks made me aware of how embedded social class was into my consciousness. Upon deeper reflection I was able to understand that women’s garish attire and demeanor were meant to make them stand out in the crowd, and that this was the only way to differentiate themselves from the women not in the profession. Similarly, my uneasiness about being introduced to the partners/clients of study participants made me aware of the prevalent gender inequality and the sexual objectification of women in Indian society.

Paying Attention to Non-Verbal Cues, Culture, and Silences on the Field

In her book *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*, Visweswaran (1994) argues that the notion of agency cannot be reduced to speaking alone. Instead, the notion of agency should include a reading of silences, and should regard women’s refusal to speak as a way of resisting the power structures. I too think that sex work researchers need to pay special attention to the non-verbal cues and silences maintained by women in the field, as it has implications for the validity of the data collected. For instance, words like “sex work,” “condoms,” and “HIV/AIDS” were never uttered in public; instead, women would say “I do this” [i.e., sex work] or “I use it” [i.e., condoms] to remain discreet about their association with the sex industry. In addition, words like “penis” and “condoms” were referred to as “maal” (thing) and “jama” (clothing) or “tupi” (cap) in their discussions to maintain secrecy about their work. This also exemplifies that women are not passive recipients of oppressive practices, rather they are actors and co-creators of their reality—using their agency to sometimes transgress the patriarchal boundaries and at other times reinscribing them.

This section has illustrated that to form a rapport with stigmatized participants, researchers need to pay attention to the issues of power and unequal relationships inherent in research interactions (Poole, Giles, & Moore, 2004; Presser, 2005; Rix et al., 2014). Scholars like Rix et al. (2014) and Beaunea et al. (2011) suggest that maintaining a reflexive journal during fieldwork can enable researchers to make sense of their participants’ inconsistent responses, silences, indifferences, and avoidance.

Safety Issues and Methodological Insights Gained From Negotiating the Insider–Outsider Dilemma in the Field

Much has been written in the literature about the harms experienced by female sex workers (Rekart, 2005), but we know little about what risks and dangers exist for female researchers who wish to study the Indian sex industry. This section discusses the safety issues for sex work researchers and the methodological insights gained in occupying the “spaces between the insider or outsider status” (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 60).

According to Sanders (2006b), while one anticipates experiencing the obvious risks, such as physical risks, legal risks, health risks, and personal risks, when associating with stigmatized and marginalized populations, it is the emotional risks of doing sex work research that are significant and that need to be carefully reflected upon and managed by researchers. Although I was an outsider...
to the sex industry, as an unmarried woman I experienced a lot of anxiety, tension, and psychological trauma just standing alongside women at their solicitation sites and listening to the women’s narratives of rape, abuse, client harassment, stigma, discrimination, and public ridicule. The general public at these sites looked at me with disdain and suspicion which made it difficult for me to focus on the research process. On one occasion, while observing one of the solicitation sites from a distance, one of the peer educators expressed concerns about my outsider status, saying mockingly, “If you want to study us, then you have to stand with us. Then only you will understand better and learn a lot about our lives.” Standing alongside the peer educators in the field made the dynamics of the trade more visible to the eye. All of a sudden, a few males started doing the rounds, speculating as to whether I was the “new girl” in the business. Finally, one man walked toward me and said, “Log korbe” (Will you do men?). Before I could respond, the peer educators spoke in unison, “No, she is not into this.” He stepped back, alarmed at their chorus reply, but did not appear to be convinced, as this is a normal reaction for women in the industry when a “new girl” tries to solicit work for herself in the same venue. One of the peers, in a very composed tone, said to him, “Look, she is not from here. She has come from [the United States] to do research on our ‘project’ and is working in our ‘office.’” I was relieved when I heard them say this in public, because there were others who were also curious about my interactions with this group. From the manner in which he approached me, and the fact that he asked me if I was interested in “doing men,” it was apparent that he was one of the middlemen (pimps) in the sex trade business. Although this was quite an unsettling experience for me, it gave me a better understanding of the contexts and the key players of the trade.

I kept my gaze on the women and maintained a calm demeanor throughout the rest of my stay in the field. I found it difficult to block all the negative thoughts, as I worried about being followed home by the customers or middlemen. I was wrong to think that nobody would notice me in the crowd. These women were always the “spotlight.” Although the business remains invisible to outsiders, the operations of this business and speculations on the workings of these women is very much a part of local knowledge. Only the “insiders” (the women, their customers, the middlemen, and local businesses that depend on these women) would know how these spaces were utilized at different times of the day. Having spent time with these women in the field, I went back to the center and further explored my understanding of the experiences. Being open to the women about my feelings, asking more not-knowing questions, and maintaining a nonjudgmental stance all created the space necessary for co-constructing cooperation with my participants (De Jong & Berg, 2001). Trishna, a 48-year-old participant who could sense my anxiety, tried to comfort me by saying, “It is quite possible that if you stand with us, people will approach you, but the most important question that you should think of is how to tackle this problem?” She held my attention, teaching me something that I did not really think of. I was so gripped by the fear of being perceived as one of them that my mind could barely think any longer. She said, “Whenever you are approached by a customer, you should look straight into their eyes and speak loudly ‘you are [making] the mistake of confusing diamonds with glass.’” It was interesting that she referred to me as a “diamond” and herself as “glass” that can be easily broken and is less precious, but her advice was comforting and also conveyed to me something about her sense of self.

Personal safety became an underlying issue when meeting the women outside of the organizational settings, as there are moments in the field when insider–outsider status gets blurred and the researcher experiences a deep sense of stigma and marginalization as a result. In particular, what really had a chilling effect on me were the study participants’ stories of being betrayed by their own female friends. For instance, Kavi, when asked how she got into the trade, said,

"Like I am telling you my stories, I told my friend my difficulties and problems. She then asked me to come to a place for work. I entered this room and there was this man. She had taken money from him and convinced me into doing this (sex work). I couldn’t do anything. I needed the money too.

Similarly, Geetanjali, a life history informant who has been practicing in the sex trade, said,

"It is hard to figure out the intents and motives of people you interact with here. You might consider them to be your friends based on the sweet and nice behavior displayed by them but you never know what [is] going on in their minds.

Hearing repeatedly the stories of betrayal and deceitfulness from women made it difficult to decide whether or not to accept women’s invitations for home visits. It felt intimidating to visit the homes of the women alone because most of them resided in remote rural areas on the outskirts of the city with minimal transportation facilities. Each time I tried to schedule a home visit, my mother would say, “Be careful, you never know, they might sell you, too.” Her concern was genuine given that women spoke about being introduced into the trade through other women who they considered friends. Also, because quite a few women took clients in their homes, visiting them at home introduced the risk of becoming visible to their
clients. Not paying much heed to my mother, as I could sense her bias toward the women, I sought advice from the NGOs and was strictly cautioned by the project manager against home visits:

I would suggest not conducting these home visits. You never know what to expect. They might have customers. You are completely on your own and we won’t be able to do much when you go so far away. I would say you should avoid home visits.

Not getting much support from the organizations, I sought advice from my friend Mou, who said, “You should not have gone alone. You will never know how you get sold in this trade.” I explained to her that I had known this person for a long time and therefore trusted her enough to visit this place alone. Mou said,

So what, she is just a woman working in that area. In a wink of an eye, girls get picked here. They have people around you and with one gesture you are picked up by people. You’ll keep shouting and no one will be able to do anything. You’ll find yourself in a totally strange place. It will be too late by the time your parents contact you. The police might not even bother to do anything and would instead blame your parents for knowingly leaving you alone. So you better be careful. Don’t take risks unnecessarily.

These narratives from friends, family members, and NGO staff further reveal the cultural stereotypes and the negative attitudes that tend to portray the women in sex work as deviants and evil elements of the society. It was difficult to go against these warnings, because if anything happened the first comment would be “We advised her strictly not to go alone, still she did not listen. She called for the trouble on her own.” Also, from the point of view of my research—that is, to maintain objectivity—I realized that I needed someone whom I could trust in the field without complicating the matters of the field. I needed someone who would come to my rescue in the event that a problem arose, someone whose sheer presence would provide me the moral support to conduct fieldwork without having to worry much about what my family, relatives, and neighbors would make of my interactions with him and with women on the field. Shaver’s (2005) advice of “working in pairs” when in the field was comforting, and to resolve my concerns over personal safety, I planned to hire a field assistant whose role in the project would be to escort me to the various solicitation sites. Despite advertising the position on the student’s bulletin board of the Women Studies Department at Jadavpur University, I did not get any response. My attempt to hire a female social work student trainee placed with one of the NGOs during fieldwork also fell apart, as she could not convince her parents and family members to permit her to be associated with the project.

I then approached my father to accompany me to the field and for home visits, primarily with the intent of providing me with physical and psychological comfort. His presence in the field allowed me to think clearly without having to excessively worry about being followed or harassed by clients or the general public. I asked my father to meet me in a nearby area in the field soon after I had finished my meeting with the women, just to avoid being approached by clients or general public on the field. It also made a huge difference to my relations with the peer educators who acted as key informants, as they felt more responsible toward me. During home visits, I was dropped by my father in front of the women’s houses, and after a brief exchange of greetings with them, he would leave me in their company and hang around in the neighborhood until I was done. Once I entered the home, he would call periodically to confirm that all was well with me. I would keep him informed about my whereabouts and maintain telephone contact with him throughout. Because I had the luxury and privilege of staying in a gated community with my father, it was not possible for anyone to enter the company’s compound without having to explain to the security guard the purpose of their visit and who they were meeting. I was able to take these getaways from the field every now and then to process perceived threats and work out my plan for mitigating these risks with a clutter-free mind. By putting myself in these situations, I could relate to the stories of women, in which they spoke about their fear of being harmed or stalked even after they had arrived at home because they lived alone. I also made it a point to return home before sunset. Relying on my father’s support in the field allowed me to better understand how women sex workers dealt with concerns of personal safety in the field, and why they prioritized their transactions with regular customers over transactions with new customers. My father’s role in the research was simply that of a field escort; he was not present while I interviewed the women in their homes or outside of the organizational settings. I concur with scholars Poole et al. (2004) that formal support and debriefing should be made a prerequisite for studies that involve emotionally disturbing materials. In my study, emotional support from friends and family members, advice from colleagues and doctoral thesis advisors, institutional support derived through varied funding sources, and affiliating myself with scholars at the local institutions/universities enabled me to minimize negative effects from fieldwork.

While the dangers mentioned above persist in the field, sometimes real and often times imagined, it is only by bridging the insider–outsider boundaries that one can hope to get a “true” account of the lives of these women. For instance, despite the negative image of sex workers painted by family, friends, and NGOs, I enjoyed the home visits, as they allowed me to see the human aspect of the
participants’ lives. As I was introduced to and greeted by members of their family, I got to know my participants in their roles as mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters, too. They cooked, cleaned, disciplined their children, and performed multifarious chores for their families as they went about narrating their stories of struggles and accomplishments in their lives. Trupti took pride in the fact that despite being associated with the sex industry, she was able to arrange the marriage of her two daughters. Similarly, Madhuri shared how she saved her husband from the jaws of death, managed to have her house built through her earnings, and now sends her children to school using those same earnings. It was a big achievement for these women to be able to fend for themselves and their families without any support from government, friends, or relatives, and they had no regrets about being involved in the sex industry. On several occasions, while spending time with the women in small-scale eating joints and solicitation sites, I found myself laughing at their stories, especially when they recounted stories of how they fooled their clients by pretending to be helpless women. I also admired their courage in fighting the system as they talked about the importance of sisterhood in dealing with challenges in the field, especially the manipulations of their shared clients.

The role of IRBs is particularly important in ensuring that researchers are mentally prepared to tackle personal safety issues during the process of doing research. Scholars like Irvine (2012) have faced significant restrictions from their IRBs; in Irvine’s case, the IRB perceived her topic as too risky. Hammond’s (2010) IRB, meanwhile, posed questions concerning her own personal safety. In my experience with the IRB boards at both the University of South Carolina and Organization “A,” I was not asked any question about how I would tackle any of the risks that women experience in the field even though I was a female researcher. Most of the questions posed to me in the IRB review process were about minimizing the harm and risks for the participants of the study. In retrospect, I do think IRBs can prepare “naïve” first-time researchers, especially those who conduct fieldwork in a foreign country, to be better prepared to tackle their safety issues. They can do so by requiring investigators to identify the safety issues faced by other researchers and to put a safety plan in place to avert the risks and dangers that abound in the field. In my study, I minimized many of the risks prior to entering the field because I carried a sense of invulnerability given my privilege and background. I also felt that I had the necessary social and cultural competencies to understand my experiences in the field and to develop an impromptu response to those experiences. Having done the research, however, I now think that no matter how experienced a researcher may be, safety issues should not be neglected as this has serious effects on the research process and the quality of data collected.

This section has discussed how proactively addressing the safety issues in the field—by having my father escort me to the new fields or places, by carrying my cell phone and letting people know my whereabouts before entering and after leaving the field, and by creating support for myself by speaking to family and friends—allowed me to avoid getting carried away with the representations of risks and dangers that are created by the media; rather, I got to experience the participants as delightful, friendly, compassionate, and good-humored human beings. What’s more, bridging the insider–outsider boundaries by building meaningful relationships with the participants allowed for a deeper insight into the lives of these women.

Conclusion

This article aimed at highlighting the ethical and safety issues experienced by the researcher while conducting an ethnographic study with non-brothel-based female sex workers in Kolkata, India, and provided strategies to overcome these challenges. It is only by addressing the issue of trust and building meaningful relationships with the participants of the study that researchers can gain insight into the lived experiences of historically stigmatized groups like sex workers. I concur with Agustin (2004) that researchers need to make use of methodologies that require them to spend long amounts of time in the field, such as anthropological ethnography. The ethnographic approach used in this study was critical ethnography, defined by Schwandt (1997) as “studies that engage in cultural critique by examining larger political, social and economic issues that focus on oppression, conflict, struggle, power, and praxis” (p. 22, as cited in Cook, 2005, p. 131). Departing from “conventional” ethnography, which “speaks for the participants by describing ‘what is,’ critical ethnography speaks on their behalf by stating ‘why this is and what can be done about it’” (Cook, 2005, p. 22). Implicit in this approach is the desire to bring about cultural change by confronting the dominant powers on the grounds of racism, sexism, and classism so that everyone can enjoy the rights of citizenship. I participated in the lives of women through the sexual health outreach projects, and sometimes met them at their homes and public spaces. Meeting them outside at the solicitation sites allowed for a better understanding of their anxieties and fears in the field, as I too experienced the same level of anxiety, stress, and preoccupation with risks and dangers as women in the sex industry. Interacting and being seen with the participants in “spaces” marked as stigmatized enabled me to gain both the insider as well as the outsider perspective of what risks mean in their lives.
Unlike survey-based approaches, engaging in field-based research allows researchers to observe and “capture the complex and layered representations of participants’ shifting identities while participants co-create those identities in the research interview” (Beaunae et al., 2011, p. 420). Moreover, van der Meulen (2011) argues that the frequent use of conventional social science methods fuels a relationship of distrust between sex workers and feminist researchers. It is critical that researchers engage with historically marginalized and oppressed groups in a manner that ensures minimal exploitation and maximum benefits for participants, as well as the inclusion of their voices. Therefore, if we are serious about promoting social and economic justice and the rights of historically stigmatized populations, it is important that we teach our students to engage in the practice of mutuality and reciprocity, and most importantly to use reflexivity as a tool for maintaining a critical relationship with the means through which knowledge is produced and acquired (Zheng, 2013). It is my hope that future researchers will embrace cultural biography as a methodological framework for their research projects with stigmatized populations as it enables the researchers to build trust and rapport with the participants. By paying particular attention to the issues of diversity and power relations in the field, this methodology enables researchers to maintain an ethical stance in relating with stigmatized populations.

Acknowledgments
I would like to thank Dr. Naomi Farber, Dr. Alice Bee Kasakoff, Dr. Terry Wolfer, and Dr. Darcy Freedman for their comments and feedback. I am also grateful to the editors and anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback on the manuscript. In addition, I would like to thank the following people for proofreading my manuscript: Aviral Shrivastava, Indulata Prasad, Jodi Skipper, and Brian Whelan.

Author’s Note
The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect the policy or position of the funding agencies.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Support for this study was provided by Fahs-Beck Research and Experimentation Award, and Walker Institute of International Relations and Area Studies, South Carolina.

Note
1. Peer educators are female sex workers employed in the sexual health outreach project as peer educators; in this capacity, they played an important role in linking organizational services to other sex workers in their social networks. As peer educators, these women were required to conduct outreach services at the various solicitation sites, and to escort the women to clinics for sexually transmitted disease treatment, counseling, and the provision of female and male condoms.

References
Agustin, M. L. (2004, June). Alternate ethics, or telling lies to researchers. Research for Sex Work, 6–7. Retrieved from http://www.lauragustin.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/05/LAgustin_AltEthics.pdf
Attwood, F. (2010). Dirty work. Researching women and sexual representation. In R. Ryan-Flood & R. Gill (Eds.), Secrecy and silence in the research process (pp. 177–187). London: Routledge.
Beaunae, C., Wu, V., & Koro-Ljungberg, M. (2011). Exploring performativity and resistance in qualitative research interviews: A play in four acts. Qualitative Inquiry, 17, 412–421.
Bernstein, E. (2007). Temporarily yours: Intimacy, authenticity, and the commerce of sex. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
Caplan, P. (2000). Risk revisited. London: Pluto Press.
Clark, T. (2011). Gaining and maintaining access: Exploring the mechanisms that support and challenge the relationships between gatekeepers and researchers. Qualitative Social Work, 10, 485–502.
Cook, E. K. (2005). Using critical ethnography to explore issues in health promotion. Qualitative Health Research, 15, 129–138.
De Jong, P., & Berg, K. I. (2001). Co-constructing cooperation with mandated clients. Social Work, 46, 361–374.
De Laine, M. (2000). Fieldwork, participation and practice: Ethics and dilemmas in qualitative research. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
Dickert, N., & Grady, C. (1999). What’s the price of a research subject? Approaches to payment for research participation. The New England Journal of Medicine, 341, 198–203.
Dickson-Swift, V., James, L. E., Kippen, S., & Liamputtong, P. (2006). Blurring boundaries in qualitative health research on sensitive topics. Qualitative Health Research, 16, 853–871.
Dickson-Swift, V., James, L. E., Kippen, S., & Liamputtong, P. (2008). Risks to researchers in qualitative research on sensitive topics. Issues and strategies. Qualitative Health Research, 18, 133–144.
Dwyer, C. S., & Buckle, L. J. (2009). The space between: On being an insider-outsider in qualitative research. International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 8, 54–63.
England, K. V. L. (1994). Getting personal: Reflexivity, positionality, and feminist research. The Professional Geographer, 46, 80–89.
Frank, G. (2000). *Venus on wheels: Two decades of dialogue on disability, biography, and being female in America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Goffman, E. (1968). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books.

Gray, B. (2008). *Putting emotion and reflexivity to work in researching migration*. *Sociology*, 42, 935–952.

Grenz, S. (2005). *Intersection of sex and power in research on prostitution: A female researcher interviewing male heterosexual clients*. *Signs: Journal of Women and Culture in Society*, 30, 2091–2113.

Hammond, N. (2010). *Tackling taboos: Men who pay for sex and the emotional researcher*. In K. Hardy, S. Kingston, & T. Sanders (Eds.), *New sociologies of sex work* (pp. 59–74). Farham, UK: Ashgate.

Hammond, N., & Kingston, S. (2014). *Experiencing stigma as sex work researchers in professional and personal lives*. *Sexualities*, 17, 329–347.

Hart, A. (1998). *Buying and selling power: Anthropological reflections on prostitution in Spain*. Oxford, UK: Westview Press.

Hubbard, P. (1999). *Researching female sex work: Reflections on geographical exclusion, critical methodologies and “useful” knowledge*. *Area*, 31, 229–237.

Irvine, M. J. (2012). *Can’t ask, can’t tell: How institutional review boards keep sex in the closet*. *Contexts*, 11, 28–33.

Israel, T. (2002). *Studying sexuality: Strategies for surviving stigma*. *Feminism & Psychology*, 12, 256–260.

Jeffreys, E. (2010). *Sex worker-driven research: Best practice ethics*. *Challenging Politics: Critical Voices*. Retrieved from http://www.nswp.org/sites/nswp.org/files/Elena-Jeffreys-Sex-Worker-Driven-Research-1.pdf

Link, B., & Phelan, J. (2001). *Conceptualizing stigma*. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27, 363–385.

Maher, L. (2000). *Sexed work: Gender, race and resistance in a Brooklyn drug market*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Melrose, M. (2002). *Labour pains: Some considerations on the difficulties of researching juvenile prostitution*. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 5, 333–351.

Miles, B. M., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *An expanded sourcebook of qualitative data analysis* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.

Poole, H., Giles, C. D., & Moore, K. (2004). *Researching sexuality and sexual issues: Implications for the researcher? Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, 19, 1468–1479.

Presser, L. (2005). *Negotiating power and narrative in research: Implications for feminist methodology*. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 30, 2067–2090.

Reed, E., Khoshnood, K., Blankenship, M. K., & Fisher, B. C. (2014). *Confidentiality, privacy, and respect: Experiences of female sex workers participating in HIV research in Andhra Pradesh, India*. *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Ethics*, 19, 19–28.

Reeves, C. (2010). *A difficult negotiation: Fieldwork relations with gatekeepers*. *Qualitative Health Research*, 10, 315–331.

Rekert, M. (2005). *Sex-work harm reduction*. *Lancet*, 366, 2123–2134.

Rix, E., Barclay, L., & Wilson, S. (2014). *Can a white nurse get it? “Reflexive practice” and the non-Indigenous clinician/researcher working with Aboriginal people*. *Rural and Remote Health (Australia)*, 14, 2679.

Sanders, T. (2006a). *Researching sex work: Dynamics, difficulties, and decisions*. In D. Hobbs & R. Wright (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of fieldwork* (pp. 202-221). London: Sage.

Sanders, T. (2006b). *Sexing up the subject: Methodological nuances in researching the female sex industry*. *Sexualities*, 9, 449–468.

Sinha, S. (2014). *“Flying” female sex workers’ perceptions of HIV risk and NGOs’ sexual health outreach projects: A case study of HIV prevention in Kolkata, India*. *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work*, 29, 206–223.

Sinha, S. (2015). *Reasons for women’s entry into sex work: A case study of Kolkata, India*. *Sexuality & Culture*, 19, 216–235.

Suárez, Z. E., Newman, P. A., & Reed, B. G. (2008). *Critical consciousness and cross-cultural/intersectional social work practice: A case analysis*. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services*, 89, 407–417.

Thomas, J. (2004). *Unmet ethical concerns of the proposed preventive HIV vaccine trials in India*. *Indian Journal of Medical Ethics*, 1, 87–88.

Urada, A. L., & Simmons, J. (2014). *Social and structural constraints on disclosure and informed consent for HIV survey research involving female sex workers and their bar managers in the Philippines*. *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics*, 9, 29–40.

van der Meulen, E. (2011). *Action research with sex workers: Dismantling barriers and building bridges*. *Action Research*, 9, 370–384. doi:10.1177/147675031140976

Vishwanath, J., & Palakonda, S. C. (2011). *Patriarchal ideology of honour and honour crimes in India*. *International Journal of Criminal Justice Sciences*, 6, 386–395.
Visweswaran, K. (1994). *Fictions of feminist ethnography*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Wahab, S. (2003). Creating knowledge collaboratively with female sex workers: Insights from a qualitative, feminist, and participatory study. *Qualitative Inquiry, 9*, 625–642.

Wax, M., & Shapiro, J. L. (1956). Repeated interviewing. *American Journal of Sociology, 62*, 215–217.

Zheng, T. (2013). Ethical research in a fraught environment. In S. Dewey & T. Zheng (Eds.), *Ethical approaches with sex workers: Anthropological approaches* (pp. 39–54). London: Springer.

Zurbriggen, E. (2002). Sexual objectification by research participants: Recent experiences and strategies for coping. *Feminism & Psychology, 12*, 261–268.

**Author Biography**

**Sunny Sinha** is an assistant professor in the School of Social Work at Marywood University, Pennsylvania, USA. She is also a Fahs-Beck scholar and has obtained her PhD degree in Social Work from the University of South Carolina, Columbia. Her research and scholarship focuses on a wide range of global issues, including HIV prevention, sex work, trafficking and issues related to gender, race, class and sexuality. She has published mostly on the issues of non-brothel-based female sex workers in Kolkata, India. She is currently working on using male clients of female sex workers and using cell-phone based technology for violence prevention among non-brothel-based sex workers.