*Journal of Modern Languages*
*Vol. 28, (2018)*

# Transnational Sex Workers in Malaysia: Methodological Challenges in Data Collection

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*Abstract*

Sex workers represent a community subject to constant stigmatisation and discrimination yet provide an excellent source of data for research about sex work. As part of a larger project on the discursive representations of sex workers in Malaysia, in this article we examine some methodological constraints associated with researching the vulnerable and hard-to-reach population of female transnational sex workers in Malaysia. We discuss the problems in gaining access to these workers, establishing trust and rapport with them, and confronting language barriers. The data for this research were obtained from interviews conducted with 15 sex workers from India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. The interviews were conducted at a national shelter for rescued sex workers and in the field. By describing the methodological constraints that we encountered during data collection, we hope to expose some of the obstacles in the hope that doing so will benefit ethnographic researchers working with transnational sex workers.

Keywords: transnational sex workers, methodological challenges, ethnography, interviews

## 1. Introduction

Over recent decades, there has been considerable regular and irregular transnational labour migration into Malaysia (International Labour Organisation, 2016). Among the developing countries, Malaysia is seen as an attractive destination point for transnational labour markets especially from the South East Asian and South Asian regions. Sexual commerce, both forced and voluntary, forms a substantial part of this movement. Hugo (2017, p. 19) has argued that the sex industry "has undergone a massive increase in scale in Southeast Asia in recent decades". It is mostly run as "a disorganized criminal business that depends on individuals or small groups linked on an ad hoc basis" (Kopp, 2012, p. 188). By the mid-2000s, sex workers from foreign countries began flooding the cities and suburbs in Malaysia (Chin, 2013, p. 29). Lim, Ang, and Teh (2010) reported that, of the 60,000 sex workers in Malaysia, 40,000 were female. The majority of sex workers in the country "were those from foreign countries such as China, Indonesia, India and Philippines" (Nasir et al., 2010, p. 1939). The sex work phenomenon is considered a critical global crisis that poses problems of victimisation for all vulnerable populations, particularly trafficking of women and children for sexual exploitation. Malaysia's strategic location "along the coastline in Southeast Asia and with its known porous border" (Michael, 2017, p. 109) has made the country a popular transit point for human trafficking syndicates who exploit vulnerable victims by selling sex. Although prostitution in general is criminalised in Malaysia under Section 372 of the Penal Code (Jenita, 2011), cross-border sexual commerce is subject to a larger narrative that positions the sex workers as criminals through the lenses of both immigration and prostitution. Moreover, because of the stigma associated with prostitution, sex workers are often neglected and not accorded appropriate attention by the authorities because they tend to be categorised as offenders because of their involvement in the work rather than as victims of the sex trade. Failing to recognise sex workers' victim status is an indication of the authorities' lack of knowledge and awareness.

Sex workers who enter the country without proper documentation are at an extreme disadvantage because they are subject to arrest and deportation. The women's irregular or illegal status makes it difficult for them to seek help from law enforcement or other organisations. Some women enter the country through proper channels, but if middlemen and captors have confiscated their passports and official documents, they too can be positioned within the category of illegal migrants. Middlemen usually recruit vulnerable women from neighbouring countries and persuade them to travel to another country for a better future. At the destination country, some women are coerced into sex work and others willingly "leave low-paying, dead-end jobs for the lure of higher-paying opportunities in prostitution" (Cwikel & Hoban, 2005, p. 307). A report by The Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM, 2010) confirmed that illegal female migrant workers are susceptible to sexual exploitation and that some are deceived into prostitution. The problem is compounded when unscrupulous trafficking syndicates take advantage of the situation and trap the women into sex work "for an extended period into their sojourn abroad" (Kabeer, 2007, p. 4). As long as a woman is able to provide sexual services, even with minimal experience or expertise, she can be required to enter the industry. The women are then taken to brothels and massage parlours where they are informed about the work that they are required to perform. At this juncture, the women are already hooked into the system and cannot escape, often held by psychological or physical constraints. Because the women are often isolated and unfamiliar with the customs and regulations of the country where they work, they become helpless and increasingly reliant on their traffickers. This psychological manipulation, as stated by Karan and Hansen (2018), marks the beginning of the Stockholm syndrome, namely feelings of loyalty that victims develop toward their captors. The complete control disinclines the victims to even attempt escaping because they are often not recognized within the society in which they are located. Also fearing that they would be deported to their own country, these women remain with their captors because they do not trust corrupt police and other agencies in their own country (Kingshott, 2014).

## 2. Literature review

Studies in sex work have attracted the interest of international scholars. Researchers such as Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2003), Le Breton and Fiechter, (2005), Piller and Takahashi (2010), Zheng (2013), and Balfour and Allen (2014) have conducted excellent scholarly research about transnational sex workers at the global level. Booth (1999), Kingston (2013), Shaver (2005), Sinha (2017), and Tyldum and Brunovskis (2005) have made significant empirical contributions especially investigating the methodological challenges in sex-work research. Chin (2013) conducted an ethnographic study investigating nontrafficked transnational sex workers in South East Asia. In her book, *Cosmopolitan Sex Workers: Women and Migration in a Global City*, Chin wrote that migrant sex work provides women with better incomes to support their families, their own education, and their own businesses.

In Malaysia, a number of researchers have conducted research involving sex workers. Jacob (2008), for example, examined the characteristics and coping pattern of young adults as sex workers. In her study, Jacob found one of the reasons why young mothers engage in sex work was to provide care and protection for their children. Nasir et al. (2010) investigated self-esteem discrepancies that existed between Muslim and non-Muslim women in sex work. In another study, Leng, Khan, and Rahim (2014) investigated how information communication technologies, particularly the internet, create an avenue for traffickers to recruit women for sexual exploitation. Additionally, Adib, Hussin, and Ahmad (2018) explored the social patterns of homeless sex workers in Kuala Lumpur. Their study revealed that most of the homeless sex workers migrated to the city in search of better employment because they were living in poverty. Although these studies reveal different aspects of women's involvement in sex work, the methodological challenges in collecting data from transnational sex workers have not been considered in Malaysian studies of sex work. There are few published accounts about observers' and recorder' experiences in relation to data collection processes (Jeffreys, 2010). Because literature about sex work is

still lacking, particularly with regard to methodological challenges, there is a need to expand investigation involving marginalised transnational sex workers.

Research exploring the transnational sex workers is difficult because it entails several methodological considerations (Benoit, Jansson, Millar, & Phillips, 2005; Liamputtong, 2007). The movement of hard-to-reach populations such as sex workers, which takes place almost totally in secret, makes data collection complicated (Cwikel & Hoban, 2005; Mutagoma et al., 2015). Kingston (2013) stated that the stigma attached to the women, as well as the potential threat to the already stigmatised populations, also pose difficulties for researchers. In addition, the collection of data often depends on researchers' ability to take effective field notes and on adequate recollection of interview details. The challenges in collecting data from the sex workers presents further problems because, as Lee (1993, p. 4) has pointed out, "research into them involves a potential cost to those involved in the research including, on occasion, the researcher". Because of this, the number of women involved in sex work becomes difficult to quantify because there are "no reliable data on the numbers of sex workers, and most presumptions of an increase are based on anecdotal reports or spurious estimates using law-enforcement, health service or social work data" (Day & Ward, 2004, p. 22). As a result of their stigmatised and socially or physically disenfranchised circumstances, it is often not easy to reach this group of women, and therefore research concerning groups such as them is restricted. In addition, because of their multiethnic background, communicating in a language that the women are not familiar with poses problems for collecting reliable data. These issues are important given that the investigation of transnational sex workers contributes to the field of ethnographic studies. In an attempt to contribute to studies on sex work, in this article we outline the methodological challenges that surfaced during the process of data collection in a larger research program. Drawing on our experiences in the field, we believe that studies on transnational sex workers are compromised by methodological issues and that discussing these problems would shed some light for researchers in generating better data about the women in the future.

## 3. Research Design and Methods

Because researching transnational sex workers has often been hampered by numerous difficulties (Galiana, 2000; Raymond, 2001), it is important that researchers in this field understand the nature of their study so that rich data can be obtained. Researchers who have investigated sex workers have used a number of approaches in collecting data. These approaches include face-to-face interviews (Matos et al., 2013), online surveys (Sanders, Connelly, & King, 2016), telephone interviews (Mulieri et al., 2014), and questionnaires (Choi, 2011; Salmeron & Pessoa, 2012).

Following an ethnographic approach, in this study, 15 women from India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam were recruited to take part in semistructured interviews. According to Beaunae et al. (2011, p. 420), 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". This context is necessary to enable an in-depth understanding of the research data. Table 1 contains information about the research participants, including the pseudonyms that they chose.

Table 1: Interview Participant Details

| No. | Country of Origin | Participants | Age | No. | Country of Origin | Participants | Age |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Indonesia | Mia | 39 | 9. | Thailand | Pim | 22 |
| 2. | Indonesia | Tini | 38 | 10. | Thailand | Som | 28 |
| 3. | Indonesia | Lina | 30 | 11. | Thailand | Zara | 34 |
| 4. | Indonesia | Mindy | 25 | 12. | India | Meena | 28 |
| 5. | Indonesia | Rika | 31 | 13. | India | Vithya | 30 |
| 6. | Indonesia | Ida | 23 | 14. | Vietnam | Candy | 24 |
| 7. | Indonesia | Rara | 23 | 15. | Myanmar | Maya | 26 |
| 8. | Thailand | Tuk | 31 | | | | |

Twelve of the women were interviewed at the Rumah Perlindungan Wanita Zon Tengah (RPWZT), a temporary government shelter or protection home for women in sex work and those who have been trafficked. The following procedures were employed for data collection:

Step 1 Contacting the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development via email and telephone
Step 2 Obtaining ethics approval from the Director General of the respective Ministry
Step 3 Contacting the officer at the government shelter
Step 4 Setting interview sessions with the officials
Step 5 Conducting the interview sessions

The remaining three women (street-based sex workers) were interviewed at a separate location with the assistance of WAKE (Pertubuhan Wanita dan Kesihatan, Kuala Lumpur), an organisation that conducts outreach programs for women in sex work. The following procedures were employed for data collection:

Step 1 Contacting the WAKE outreach members through telephone
Step 2 Making arrangements to meet the sex workers for interviews
Step 3 Setting interview sessions with the participants
Step 4 Conducting the interview sessions

## 4. Methodological Challenges in Collecting Data

In this section, we outline the main methodological challenges and issues encountered during the process of data collection. These were gaining access to research participants, establishing trust and rapport, and language barriers.

## 4.1 Gaining Access to Research Participants

Weitzer (2005, p. 941) commented that it is not easy "to conduct research on individuals who are stigmatised and involved in illegal behaviour. Gaining access is a chronic challenge". Sanders (2006, p. 456) stated that the process of collecting data on sex workers often emphasises the "generative mechanism in the private lives of those involved" which creates problems for the researchers to gain access due to the fact that most of the women lead "double lives". It was difficult to locate prospective participants for our research when we first started our research.

Accessing the marginalised group of individuals entailed a series of processes. Several criteria guided arrangements for data collection. One main criterion was that the research participants should be transnational women who had been involved in sex work. However, identification of prospective participants was challenging because most victims do not want to be recognised as sex workers (Michael, 2017) and are therefore unwilling to be involved in exposure of any kind. In a study about the perception of international tourists on sex tourism in Malaysia, Zainal, Kamaruddin, Bakhtiar, and Ahmad (2014, p. 349) stated that "sex workers wish not to be identified because of the legal restraint".

The search for the women began by contacting nongovernment organisations that had affiliations with sex workers and sex-trafficked victims. However, those organisations indicated that the sex workers had been either placed at government shelters or repatriated. Some organisations did not have any direct day-to-day access to women working in the sex trade. We contacted the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development to gain access to transnational sex workers who are placed in government shelters. This involved obtaining approval from various levels of gatekeepers because the shelters are highly guarded. Gatekeepers function as mediators between the research participants and the researchers and have the power to give access to the participants for research purposes (Clark, 2011; Reeves, 2010). Phone calls were made to the respective officers for follow-up procedures. An email was sent to an officer at the Ministry to obtain the first level of approval. After 2 months, ethics

approval was obtained from the Director General and permission to visit one of the government shelters was granted.

The second stage involved contacting the manager at the shelter to make arrangements for the interview sessions. All these arrangements were conducted in both English and Malay. When all the arrangements had been finalised, the interviews were conducted according to the schedule agreed to by the participants and both of us as researchers. Consent to conduct interviews was also obtained from the research participants after they had understood the purpose of our research and how their information would be used. The participants were also given assurance that their personal identity and details would not be divulged to anyone. Our first fieldwork was, however, interrupted due to an unforeseen and undisclosed circumstance at the shelters. We were therefore not permitted to proceed with the interviews and were advised to request another approval from the Ministry to visit the shelter another day. This was very frustrating due to the complexity of gaining access to the research participants. Because we were determined to collect more data from the participants, we decided to go through the process of obtaining the Ministry's approval a second time.

In order to access more research participants, we extended our search to street-based sex workers. Nevertheless, accessing these sex workers was not easy because they frequently change their locations in attempts to avoid contact with the enforcement officers and public. At last, with the assistance of WAKE outreach members, contact with them was made possible. The organisation conducts regular visits to areas where sex workers are found in order to provide counselling and educate them about HIV and sexually transmitted diseases. Through their frequent contacts with the street-based sex workers, the members helped make arrangements for us to meet the sex workers for interviews. It was important for us to collaborate with WAKE members as Davies (2008, p. 3) emphasised, "we cannot research something with which we have no contact, from which we are completely isolated". In the beginning, a number of women came forward to participate in the interviews but decided not to participate when they were requested to sign the consent form. They were afraid to disclose anything

that could create trouble for themselves. Because of the unavailability of more research participants, only three women were interviewed, one from Myanmar, one from Thailand, and one from Indonesia.

## 4.2 Establishing Trust and Rapport

Another major challenge in collecting data was gaining the interviewees' trust and rapport. This was crucial in order to get as much information as possible from the participants. Establishing trust and rapport with stigmatised participants is not a straightforward process, however. In our study, resistance from the interviewees was manifested in various forms. Some were reluctant to cooperate, avoided providing accurate details, and pretended not being able to understand the questions we asked them. There were also the participants who gave consent to be interviewed but later withdrew. Because of the clandestine nature and the stigma attached to sex work (Scrambler, 2007), the women were hesitant to share their stories with people they were not familiar with. One strategy to get the participants to speak was to spend some time engaging in small talk before the actual interview took place. This was necessary because, according to Booth (1999, p. 77), taking time to build rapport with the research participants "will provide the researcher with a much better understanding of the issues".

Other barriers in building trust and rapport with the participants were their fears of being reported in the newspapers and narrating their stories to researchers. These concerns surfaced quite often, particularly at the beginning stages of the interviews. The common question that the women asked was:

| | |
|---|---|
| Mia: | *kamu reporter ka*? *Saya takut*<br>(you're a reporter? I'm scared) |
| Meena: | *paperleh ennapathi yehluthuporinggalah*?<br>(you're going to write my story in the paper?) |

Some participants, despite having been given assurance that their identity would be protected, repeatedly requested that their personal details not be

revealed, fearing they would bring embarrassment to their families or even be shunned by them. They also worry about how their husbands will react if they find out about their work.

Rika: *tak beritahu siapa-siapa kan*?. *Saya takut malu sama keluarga*.
(not telling anyone right? I'm afraid of bringing shame to my family.)

Although our presence at the shelter was well received, the participants were apprehensive about our background. The Indonesian women were more sceptical of our presence. We anticipated this and that it was not going to be easy for these women to open up initially. In order to convince them, we had to show our identity cards and other information that indicated our affiliation with the university and not the media or the police. The women in the shelter felt very humiliated and distressed sharing their stories with strangers. Because these women have experienced one of the worst forms of exploitation in their lives, retelling their stories can traumatize them. A few of the participants were curious to know why we wanted to record our interviews instead of just writing down the details in a book. We understood their qualms, so we took time to patiently explain the need for us to take verbatim accounts of their stories in order to obtain a better understanding of their real situation. After listening to our explanation, the participants understood the purpose of our study and agreed to participate in the interview sessions. The interviews went ahead only when the interviewees were in a comfortable psychological zone and appeared to be ready. The first interview was conducted with an Indonesian woman who appeared to be friendlier than other women. This strategy was advantageous because she helped to explain what transpired in the interview process to other women, some of whom subsequently agreed to be interviewed.

Establishing trust and rapport with the street-based sex workers was equally complex. These women, as were those in the shelter, were reserved. In order to encourage them to participate, and because they were in need of money,

each participant was paid RM 50 for their interviews. For Maher (2000), providing a moderate amount of remuneration to the research participants is a fair practice, one that also encourages participation. Despite the popular image of sex workers living a luxurious life, this was not the case for these women. All three of them admitted that they were struggling financially to support their family and children.

| | |
|---|---|
| Tini: | *Saya perlu buat anak sekolah. Anak saya pun mau jadi polis. Saya mau cari wang.*<br>(I need money for my child's school. My child also wants to become a policeman. I want to find money.) |
| Maya: | *Sekarang mak ada hospital. Dia mau banyak wang.*<br>(Now my mother is in hospital. She needs a lot of money.) |
| Zara: | *Zara buat kerja macam ni pun kena paksa dengan suami*. *Suami nak duit, dia hisap dadah*. *Lepas tu, anak semua tujuh orang*.<br>(I'm doing this kind of work also because I'm forced by my husband. My husband wants money, he takes drugs. And then, children, all seven of them.) |

Unlike some of the participants, the Indian women at the government shelter were more willing to be interviewed and showed enthusiasm to communicate with someone who was from the same cultural background. Because one of us researchers is proficient in Tamil, conducting the interviews in the Indian participants' mother tongue was easy. The following excerpt shows how rapport was built instantaneously through shared language:

| | |
|---|---|
| Interviewer: | Can you speak in English? |
| Meena: | Hmm. |
| Interviewer: | You understand English? |
| Meena: | *Neengeh Tamil laa*?<br>(You're a Tamilian?) |
| Interviewer: | *Aamaa.*<br>(Ye.s) |
| Meena: | *Appadiya*? *Malaysiavuleh irukinggalah*?<br>(Really? Living in Malaysia?) |
| Interviewer: | *Naa inggethaan irukken.*<br>(I'm staying here.) |
| Meena: | *Kudumbam irukka*?<br>(Do you have a family?) |

## 4.3 Language Barriers

The experiences faced by transnational sex workers are entrenched in linguistic disparities. The language of the sex workers in transnational contexts is deficient within the larger societal group, when in reality these people are equipped with a large linguistic repertoire from their first language. There is a strong sense of social detachment in most women involved in sex work because they are not able to interact effectively with people who want to help them. Many transnational sex workers from nonEnglish-speaking countries in Malaysia have very limited knowledge of the Malay and English languages. In this situation, even when sex workers are fluent in their first language, they feel hampered when they cannot communicate effectively. As a consequence, they do not find themselves being part of the community. The language barrier makes it difficult for them to give verbal or written information to researchers. For example, interviewing the Thai women was complicated because they had difficulty responding to our questions, partly due to their inability to understand and communicate in English.

| | |
|---|---|
| Interviewer: | How did you uh: end up in this work? |
| Pim: | Me … me work massage. |
| Interviewer: | Massage? Were you cheated? |
| Pim: | Cheated? I no understand cheated. |
| Interviewer: | Uh: cheat, cheat. uh: (tipu?) (cheat in Malay) |

Furthermore, the Thai women used jargon related to sex work that could not be easily understood.

| | |
|---|---|
| Tuk: | Uh: massa *bumbum* body to body |
| Interviewer: | Body to body. Oh! |
| Tuk: | Thai massa: |
| Interviewer: | Uh: |
| Tuk: | (unclear) Uh bumbum |
| Interviewer: | Bumbum? |
| Tuk: | Bumbum. |
| Interviewer: | Bumbum? |
| Tuk: | Uh: bumbum same same sek. |
| Interviewer: | Sex? |
| Tuk: | Yes. |

Most transnational sex workers have difficulty communicating and negotiating meanings in an environment where other languages are more prevalent. Their inability to communicate in a language that is not their own was challenging for us when collecting data. Cwikel and Hoban (2005, p. 312) suggested that when interviewing sex workers, it is better to use the women's first language "to ensure accuracy of data and context of the experiences". They recommended that in situations where researchers are not able to conduct interviews in the women's native language, the researchers should seek the help of an interpreter.

Our interviews with the women from India and Indonesia were facilitated because the participants were able to communicate readily with us because at least one of us understood both Malay and Tamil. The Malaysian and Indonesian forms of Malay are similar apart from variations in accent and diction. Interviewing the Indian and Indonesian participants in their own language was beneficial for them because it enabled them to understand and respond to our questions. Interviews were conducted with two Tamil-speaking sex-trafficking victims at the shelter who agreed to be interviewed as soon as they were asked. Their immediate consent was given primarily because they felt that they could talk about their condition to someone who could understand their language. The participants would not have anticipated a Tamil-speaking researcher at their premises because the shelter is managed entirely by Malay officers who are more fluent in the national language.

Interviewing the Vietnamese and Thai women was most challenging due to the absence of a trained interpreter or multilingual resources to assist with the translation of the victims' native language and the fact that an outside interpreter was not allowed to enter the premises. Therefore, we resorted to speaking in English. However, this posed some difficulties because the Vietnamese and Thai speakers were not proficient users of English. A few participants could barely communicate in English and we had difficulty making sense of what they were saying. There were certain words such as "mahkamah" (court), "polis" (police), "tangkap" (arrest), and "lokap" (prison) that seemed to

be familiar to the participants. These words are probably used by the local police when handling the women's cases.

Because the government shelter did not have an interpreter to facilitate the interviews, we had to enlist the help of another interviewee, a woman who was bilingual, to interpret the Vietnamese and Thai women's conversation into English. In that situation, it was helpful to obtain the interpreter from among the research participants because the participants were acquainted with each other and had shared the same experiences. However, a possible problem with depending on an unqualified interpreter was that some crucial information could have been omitted because the information was based solely on the interpreter's understanding which could have been distorted because she was also a victim. In addition, the interpreter herself may have faced difficulties in conveying the meaning from one language to another if particular words did not exist within her own linguistic repertoire.

## 5. Conclusion

In this article, we have described some of the methodological issues encountered when we conducted research with transnational sex workers in Malaysia. The secretive nature of sex work and the women's diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds created a number of difficulties for us. These difficulties comprised gaining access to research participants, establishing trust and rapport, and communication. Although researching transnational sex workers is undeniably challenging, research of the kind we conducted can provide a remarkable source of information about the stigmatised women's lives as well as insights about problems that researchers might anticipate when dealing with hard-to-reach populations.

The methodological challenges discussed in this article may provide valuable information for researchers seeking to conduct similar studies with hidden populations. It is important to note that research involving sex workers may put researchers in uncomfortable and risky situations, but with care and

consideration on the part of researchers it should be possible to study this kind of population effectively. In addition, researchers should be aware that, when they investigate marginalised groups such as sex workers, the information they obtain should not easily be misinterpreted or result in any kind of additional discrimination. Most importantly, when dealing with such participants, researchers need to maintain a polite and calm demeanour throughout interviews and patiently respond to the concerns and questions raised by the participants.

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*Journal of Modern Languages*
*Vol. 28, (2018)*