

Documenting Marginality: Postcolonial Representations of Sex Workers in South Asian Documentaries

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Abstract

Documentary film powerfully shapes public understandings of sex work. This study analyses three South Asian documentaries on female sex workers in India and Bangladesh, addressing a persistent gap in media scholarship that foregrounds victimhood while underattending to constrained agency and everyday care economies. Using qualitative narrative and content analysis, I read scenes through performativity (identities enacted via reiterated, norm-guided acts) and subalternity (structural limits on who may speak and be heard), with systematic attention to film form: who speaks first, how speech is mediated, camera distance and framing, evidence order, diegetic sound, and subtitle register. Findings show that documentaries which grant participants first speech, retain vernacular subtitles, and keep prompts/refusals and room tone audible make legible not only harm but also role-work, debt servicing, and articulated aspirations (e.g., schooling, future occupations). By contrast, films that lead with captions, brokers, or paraphrase tend to absorb testimony into institutional narratives. The study demonstrates a portable, scene-level method for evaluating ethics and representation in documentary practice and argues that respectful portrayal turns less on topic than on craft—how editors sequence, listen, and subtitle. It concludes by urging regionally grounded, worker-involved research on media effects in the Global South.

Keywords: Documentaries, Global South, Intersectionality, Marginalisation, Sex workers

Introduction

In media, especially documentaries from the Global South, sex worker representation is a complex negotiation of the ethics of representation. The role of media in the formation of public awareness and attitudes towards marginalised groups such as sex workers cannot be overstated (Kulkarni & Raut, 2008). Nonetheless, such representations often default to victimhood or sensationalise their lives while failing to recognise the complexity and agency of persons involved in sex work (Kulkarni & Raut, 2008). Such simplification distorts public understanding of the sex industry (Weitzer, 2000).

The phenomenon of sex work in India has been complex and evolving historically. Sex work has been a part of pre-colonial Indian society that ranged from acceptance to repression with varying degrees of regulation: it was connected to temple rituals or

confined to specific castes (Bhandari, 2010). The colonial period saw major changes, including the introduction of the Contagious Diseases Acts to control venereal disease, which in practice led to the surveillance and criminalisation of sex workers. In the post-independence period, debates over the decriminalisation of sex work and the recognition of sex workers' rights have continued (Kole, 2009). Similarly, Bangladesh has a complex history of sex work in established brothel areas and struggles for sex workers to claim rights and recognition (Dasgupta, 2017).

Documentaries can be useful tools for social commentary and advocacy in South Asia, particularly given that socio-cultural norms are still highly contested, as well as legal frameworks surrounding sex work (Parmanand, 2021). Nevertheless, if they are not

made with attention to the ethical dynamics and subjective realities of sex workers (Tsertekidis, 2023), they can entrench stigmas and stereotypes. The power of documentaries to shape public perceptions of vulnerable populations such as sex workers (Weitzer, 2009) therefore demands a critical perspective on their production and reception. With a focus on India and Bangladesh, this article explores how filmmakers negotiate the complex interplay of social, economic and political forces that influence the lives of sex workers (Weitzer, 2013).

For this research, three key documentaries—Kerstin Hilt’s *India’s Prostitution Villages*, Tom Silverstone’s *A Bangladesh Brothel Town*, and Bhumika Saraswati and Mohammad Dawood’s *The Lives of Sex Workers and Their Children*—are analysed. Hilt’s documentary interviews women from a nomadic community in the Alwar region of Rajasthan, foregrounding intergenerational constraints and caste-policing. In Silverstone’s film, which focuses on a settlement housing approximately 1,600 women and 300 children central to the sex trade, the ethical complexities of depicting such vulnerable communities come to the fore. Saraswati and Dawood focus on Delhi’s G.B. Road, presenting anonymised testimonies from women whose speech is often mediated by gatekeepers and institutional actors. This research examines Global South documentaries about sex workers by looking at how these films represent sex workers and whether the representations challenge or reinforce existing stereotypes, and how they tackle broader socio-political issues. Both positive and negative impacts from these representations should be recognised to encourage more informed and ethical conversations about sex work (Farley, 2018).

Literature review

This review synthesises scholarship on sex work and screen representation with a focus on South Asia. It clarifies the analytical lenses used in this article and organises the field into three intersecting strands: abolitionist/victimhood framings; labour- and agency-centred approaches; and postcolonial, intersectional critiques rooted in regional scholarship. Throughout, I draw on performativity (identities enacted through repeated social acts) and subalternity (structural limits on voice and legibility). In reading the films, I also

attend to form—who speaks first, how proximity and framing work, what we hear in the diegesis, and how subtitles handle register—so claims about ethics and agency stay anchored in what the viewer actually sees and hears. These concepts are operationalised at scene level in the analyses that follow.

Abolitionist and victimhood framings

A substantial strand of feminist and clinical literature treats prostitution as intrinsically linked to gendered violence and coercion. Melissa Farley’s work is emblematic: synthesising interviews, trauma studies, and advocacy, she argues that prostitution entrenches male dominance and should be read as occupational sexual harassment and harm. Within this optic, apparently “consensual” choices are often constrained by poverty, debt, and the threat of violence, and media that “humanise” brothels risk normalising exploitation. Read against documentary practice, this tradition alerts analysts to how edits, narrational voiceovers, and NGO-brokered access can obscure coercion, understate debt bondage, or recode structural violence as personal tragedy. It also underwrites policy frames centred on exit pathways, survivor support, and criminal accountability.

Labour, agency, and sex-positive interventions

A counter-tradition emphasises sex work as work and recuperates sex workers’ partial agency within constraint. Jill Nagle’s *Whores and Other Feminists* collects voices that refuse the victim/vice binary and insist on the political stakes of listening to workers themselves. Sex-positive writers such as Carol Queen and Annie Sprinkle call for de-stigmatisation, safer workplaces, and a rights-based approach that separates consensual adult labour from trafficking. Elizabeth Bernstein’s *Temporarily Yours* introduces “bounded authenticity” to describe how emotional and sexual labour are braided in late capitalism. This concept is especially useful for documentary analysis: it helps read negotiations with clients, scenes of care within brothel communities, and the management of intimacy without collapsing these moments into glamour or denial, and while tracking who sets the terms of speech on-screen.

Bridging the strands in representation studies

In moving-image analysis, these two framings often talk past one another. Abolitionist readings may focus on the evidentiary value of testimony and the visibility of harm; labour-centred readings stress everyday negotiation, humour, and solidarity that typical “rescue” narratives miss. A productive synthesis requires attention to form: who speaks first; how close the camera sits; whether diegetic sound is retained or mixed out; and how subtitles frame idiom and affect. Rather than adjudicating harm versus agency in the abstract, close reading of these cinematic choices grounds ethical claims in what the film actually does.

Postcolonial and intersectional critiques

Kamala Kempadoo re-centres race, caste, class, and colonial regulation in the making of contemporary sex work. Her work distinguishes migration from trafficking and critiques data regimes that overcount “rescues” while undercounting labour, consent, and mobility. For South Asia, this is decisive: sex work is inseparable from histories of caste criminalisation, the Contagious Diseases Acts, and contemporary urban informality. Habiba Sultana advances a Southern feminist approach that refuses the automatic equation of “choice” with freedom or “rescue” with justice, foregrounding survival, kinship obligations, and community organising. Together, these perspectives resist universalising Western frames and insist on context—village vs city, caste location, religious regulation, and border regimes. In analysis, subalternity highlights where women’s speech is mediated by brothel managers, police or NGOs; performativity clarifies how role-scripts are learned, repeated and sometimes refused.

Regional scholarship on documentary ethics and feminist representation

Shohini Ghosh’s film *Tales of the Night Fairies* (2002) and her writings around it are pivotal for India. Centred on the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC) in Kolkata, the work models collaborative methods: shared authorship, participant-led access, and an ethics of consent that exceeds signed forms. Ghosh shows how sex workers mobilise pleasure, humour, and performance to claim citizenship, while also exposing police violence and municipal harassment. For

documentary analysis, this practice makes “intimate” camerawork a negotiated relation rather than a voyeuristic stance, and demonstrates how participatory shooting and keeping prompts/refusals in the cut can redistribute narrative authority. Feminist political economy links precarious labour to feeding, schooling, and health expenditures; women’s earnings buffer shocks from illness, lockdowns, and eviction. When films show kitchens, ration cards or school fees, they map how sexual labour is converted into food, education and medicine rather than indulging in “domestic detail.” A literature that couples gendered entitlements with urban poverty research helps decode these scenes, and guards against representational habits that extract erotic value while erasing reproductive labour.

CSSSC (Kolkata) contributions to gendered labour and visual culture

Scholarship associated with the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta (CSSSC) provides frameworks for reading gendered marginality and representation. Samita Sen’s work on women’s labour in Bengal traces how colonial and postcolonial economies channel women into precarious, informal sectors, supplying a labour history to situate brothel and street economies. Tapati Guha-Thakurta’s studies of public culture and visibility illuminate how images circulate in urban space, how “respectability” and “obscenity” are policed, and how gendered spectatorship is produced. This CSSSC corpus, though not about sex work per se, equips documentary analysis with tools for reading the city as a contested visual field and for locating sex workers’ bodies within regimes of visibility, respectability politics and urban redevelopment.

The politics of looking: rescue narratives and audience complicity

Across South Asian contexts, critics have shown how “rescue documentaries” centre NGO or police perspectives and turn suffering into spectacle. The camera’s position at a gate, a raid, or an NGO office can recentre authority, even when the film claims neutrality. Here subalternity helps ask: who cannot be seen or heard without a mediator? Are names and faces anonymised by the filmmaker or demanded by

institutions? Intimate access and proximity are most ethical when negotiated and reversible; they become extractive when closeness stands in for consent or when participants lose editorial power over sensitive footage. These questions are not abstractions but formal: shot distance, the presence of translators or handlers, whether the subject sets the interview terms, and whether speech leads evidence or evidence frames speech.

Performativity and intergenerational scripts

Performativity clarifies how “roles” in red-light areas are learned and reproduced: daughter, junior worker, madam, pimp, NGO peer educator. Documentaries frequently capture training scenes, negotiations with clients, and interactions with police that sediment gendered scripts. Reading these moments performatively avoids simple claims about “culture” by showing how behaviours are iterated under constraint and contested through humour, refusal, and collective action. It also tunes analysis to small gestures—how a woman corrects a policeman’s tone, how a child speaks about school—that signal cracks in the script. Linking these readings to on-screen form—who gets first speech, whether ambient noise is retained during confrontations, how subtitles preserve vernacular—keeps claims grounded.

Synthesis and cautions

Kempadoo’s warning about the politicisation of trafficking data extends to film criticism. Claims about prevalence, age, or coercion are often repeated without source scrutiny; documentaries may cite NGO figures with institutional incentives. A careful literature review therefore pairs academic research with close attention to who produces numbers, for what audience, and with what access. It also resists homogenising “South Asia.” India and Bangladesh share histories and borders, but films made in Kolkata, Dhaka, Delhi, or rural Rajasthan capture distinct legal regimes, caste/kinship structures, and NGO ecologies. Taken together, the strands above justify using performativity and subalternity as the named lenses in this article, while letting the films’ own formal choices carry the ethical argument.

Methodology

This qualitative study employs narrative and content analysis (scene-level, film-form-aware) of three South Asian documentaries centred on sex workers: *India’s Prostitution Villages* (Rajasthan, India; DW Documentary, 2023), *A Bangladesh Brothel Town* (Kandapara, Bangladesh; 2016/2019), and *The Lives of Sex Workers and Their Children* (Delhi, India; 2022). Selection criteria: (i) India/Bangladesh setting, (ii) sex workers are central participants, (iii) publicly accessible versions (YouTube) with identifiable release cuts. Analytic procedure: scene-level coding of (a) order of voice/mediation (who speaks first, who subtitles/translates), (b) camera distance and framing (shot scale, height, angle, duration), (c) address (to camera vs to filmmaker; kept prompts/refusals), (d) evidence order (speech to evidence vs evidence to speech), (e) access and interventions (who brokered entry; on-screen disclosure), (f) sound (retention of diegetic noise), and (g) subtitle treatment (register retained vs paraphrase); themes mapped to harm, agency, and institutions. Analytic lenses: performativity and subalternity guide interpretation; formal observations are reported descriptively rather than as a separate framework. Positionality: The author is an Indian feminist media scholar; the reading aims to amplify sex workers’ self-representation while avoiding extractive interpretation. Ethics: Only publicly available films were analysed; no human subjects were recruited. No screenshots are reproduced; where scenes are described, potentially identifying details are minimised. Reliability and rigour: coding memos were maintained; categories were iteratively refined over two cycles (open → focused); an audit trail (time-stamped notes with timecodes) supports traceability. Limitations: language subtitling and versioning of online cuts may shape what is audible/visible; claims are therefore tied to the specific versions viewed.

Analysis

India’s Prostitution Villages opens on a woman in a yellow salwar suit waiting by the roadside. The camera holds a mid-distance; there is no expository voiceover, only traffic and snatches of passing conversation. Meaning is first set by what she does—posture, glance, micro- gestures of acknowledgement—before any explanation is supplied. That opening establishes the study of waiting as performative work: standing in a

visible yet vulnerable periphery, calibrating attention to vehicles, exchanging quick words with peers. Because the soundtrack preserves diegetic road noise, the moment reads as a lived routine rather than as an illustrative cutaway. From the outset, then, the sequencing favors speech (or embodied action) before evidence—a small editorial choice that grants the subject temporal priority in defining the scene.

As the camera moves into alleys and thresholds, role-learning becomes overt. Seniors correct juniors' stances, demonstrate how to close a deal without ceding too much time, and instruct, "Don't stand there; come inside when the police pass." Read through performativity, these instructions are not background etiquette; they are role-rules to be iterated across the day—daughter to worker to household provider—composed of routinized gestures (where to stand, how to modulate voice, when to hold eye contact) and timed responses (delay, refusal, re-price). Butler's point that identity is produced by repetition rather than revealed as inner truth is made tangible in these threshold scenes (Butler, 1990). Shot choice supports this reading: the film often favors medium shots that keep bodies and doorframes together, making posture and placement legible as part of the negotiation.

At the same time, the distribution of first speech reveals subalternity. In many sequences, elders and gatekeepers speak before juniors; minors and recent entrants appear in frame but are made audible only through paraphrase or after a mediator has framed their story. Where the edit keeps off-screen prompts and refusals—"Not on camera"—consent becomes audible, and the terms on which speech is permitted are briefly visible. Subtitles usually retain vernacular register with light glosses, but moments of smoothing—where a thick idiom is rendered as a policy noun—remind us that translation can recentre external authority. Spivak's insistence that the subaltern's speech is structurally routed through other voices is not a claim of silence here; it is a diagnostic that asks who grants access to the doorway, who narrates the police interaction, and who re-states a junior's sentence in "proper" language (Spivak, 1988).

The film's scenes of household economy anchor purpose without moralising. Women specify where money goes—rent, rations, siblings' schooling, wedding contributions—and some describe paying down loans

that previously trapped the family. The edit often allows participants' statements to precede cutaways to cash, ledgers, or documents, preserving speech to evidence order so that women define the meaning of the money before the money stands as proof. In these passages, the work of conversion—sexual labour into food, education, medicine—appears as a series of performed acts that stabilize households. The same scenes voice aspiration. Classroom inserts and coaching rooms link earnings to fees; girls name futures—wanting to be an air hostess or a teacher—that exceed the lane even as they are sustained by its income. Those aspirations are not offered as a sentimental counterweight; they are presented in the speakers' own words, with first speech and retained room tone giving their statements weight.

Formally, the film's most ethical moments are the smallest: keeping the sound of a hallway's hesitations rather than smoothing it under music; holding the frame on a junior while a broker's interjection remains off-screen; letting a participant say "Don't show the children" and leaving the refusal audible. Each decision interrupts subaltern ventriloquy by returning semantic initiative to participants and by letting viewers hear consent as an ongoing negotiation rather than a backstage form.

Bangladesh Brothel Town (2019) situates the viewer at literal and figurative gates. The first complete sentences often belong to brokers or senior women at entry points, followed by captions that announce totals—numbers of women, customers, children—before individual stories unfold. This evidence→speech sequencing primes meanings toward scale and pathology; testimonies subsequently arrive as instances of a problem already named. Spivak's question—who can speak without a mediator?—guides reading across these corridors, where translators and handlers frequently share the frame and paraphrase speech into policy nouns ("rehabilitated," "trafficked") (Spivak, 1988). Subtitles compress idiom into administrative English, erasing jokes, hesitations, or the pragmatic ambivalence that accompanies survival talk. Such choices are not neutral; they distribute authorship. Where the cut keeps a worker in frame while a broker interjects off-camera, facial micro-reactions can counter-speak; where the camera pans to the broker and lets the worker's sentence trail away, semantic initiative migrates to the gatekeeper. The staging of bargaining

scenes is equally instructive for performativity: price talk becomes a practiced repertoire in which delay, humor, and a hand placed on the doorframe function as tactics. Butler's point about "repetition with a difference" is legible in these micro-moves (Butler, 1990): a woman rephrases a client's time demand—"Half an hour, not one hour"—to push the negotiation into a register she can manage. Performance here does not romanticize freedom; it clarifies how constrained settings still summon learned scripts that can be bent to carve minimal room for choice.

The Bangladesh film's handling of sound and proximity further structures audibility. Entry shots linger at guarded thresholds; camera distance increases near money handlers and shortens around juniors, reproducing hierarchy in vantage. In "rescue" beats, non-diegetic music sometimes overlays room tone, smoothing the pauses through which risk and refusal are ordinarily heard. When testimony is framed by captions or expert voice before it arrives, speech risks becoming data rather than narration; reversing the sequence—letting a woman state, "I owe three months," then cutting to the ledger—would allow speech to define evidence rather than the reverse. These are small editorial decisions with ethical consequences: they either interrupt subalternity by letting participants set the semantic key or reproduce it by placing their words inside an institutional preface.

The Lives of Sex Workers and Their Children (SCMP Films, 2022) pursues intimacy as a negotiated relation rather than voyeuristic closeness. In tight interiors on G. B. Road, anonymous close-ups and altered voices protect participants while preserving the grain of speech—hesitations, breath, occasional laughter—that carries meaning. Crucially, many scenes adopt speech→evidence order: a participant speaks, then the camera cuts to documents or the street below. This sequencing lets speakers define what a document means rather than the document defining them. The film makes consent audible by keeping prompts and refusals in the cut—"No face," "Don't show the children"—transforming ethics from a signed form into an on-screen negotiation. Within this frame, your manuscripted dialogues mark the interface of survival, bureaucracy, and violence. "They told me I'd earn 450 rupees a day... I didn't know they'd keep my documents and say they'd leave me at GB Road" (SCMP Films,

2022, 1:34) locates coercion precisely at the level of document custody and threat of abandonment, shifting analysis from a moral abstraction to an institutional fact: without papers, one's speech is contingently audible. "I was in Kolkata before... There was poverty... I didn't want to do this, but now I do what I do to survive" (SCMP Films, 2022, 0:45) refuses the binary of want/force by asserting constrained agency. "I tried to leave but they asked for ID proof—I had nothing" (SCMP Films, 2022, 7:51) shows bureaucratic voice overriding personal voice: subalternity appears as the condition of being unheard in document regimes, not as literal muteness. "The woman who bought us would keep us drugged... beat us with belts and sticks" (SCMP Films, 2022, 2:50) is delivered to camera without a savior's paraphrase; retained room tone lets the breath between clauses register as risk, avoiding sentimental music that would preinterpret the scene.

In the Delhi film, performativity becomes visible in the care economy. Shots of kitchens, ration cards, homework checks, and medicine sorting—often marginalized as "domestic detail"—are the stylized repetitions through which the identity of worker-mother is performed. These sequences document conversion: sexual labour becomes food, school fees, and health expenditures, a chain that abolition-only readings can obscure by restricting "work" to the client encounter. Within a performative frame, the everyday acts of care that follow client work are not ancillary but constitutive, and the film's choice to let women state priorities—"I send money home first"—before showing a schoolbag honors speech before illustration. The film's subtitle policy largely retains vernacular register with light glosses, preserving idiom and humour that keep ownership of meaning local; when paraphrase appears, it is generally signaled, avoiding the silent translation that would recentre an external moral voice. Here subalternity is partially interrupted by form: first speech belongs to participants, and the film grants enough time and sonic texture for speech to count.

Across the corpus, a set of cross-cutting patterns emerges that support the methodological wager and the chosen lenses. First, who speaks first decides what counts. In Rajasthan, first speech by women at thresholds lets bargaining and caution register as skilled work; when institutional images precede their lines, interpretation tightens around police and records. In

Kandapara, first speech by gatekeepers or captions organizes audience attention around numbers and governance, with worker testimony fitting into a ready-made problem. In Delhi, first speech by participants precedes documents, letting speech define evidence; the film's habit of keeping refusals audible—"No face," "Don't show the children"—keeps consent visible as an ongoing practice, not a backstage form. Second, role-scripts are learned, bent, and sometimes refused. Butler's emphasis on repetition helps us read the small breaches that matter: a daughter steps forward in a police exchange rather than standing behind a senior; a joke delays a client's pressure; re-pricing shifts a power balance; care routines reconstitute identity against a vice-only tag (Butler, 1990). Third, mediation is the message. Spivak's diagnostic insists that we follow the route speech takes to reach the audience: gatekeepers, translators, and subtitle choices can ventriloquize or amplify (Spivak, 1988). The more ethical editorial moves—keeping prompts/refusals, retaining room tone, holding on the speaker while the mediator remains off-screen, signaling paraphrase—are not pieties; they are techniques that interrupt subalternity by returning semantic initiative to participants. Finally, region matters in form, not only content. Rajasthan's caste-police choreography appears in posture and doorway placement; Kandapara's thresholds render access as an image; G.B. Road's tight interiors and voice alteration enact consent and safety as technique. The films' formal differences thus narrate legal regimes, caste/community structures, and NGO ecologies without homogenizing "South Asia."

Finally, regional difference is carried in form, not only in content. Rajasthan's caste-police choreography is visible in doorway placement and posture; Kandapara's gated thresholds render access as an image; G.B. Road's tight interiors and voice alteration enact consent and safety. Rather than homogenising "South Asia," the films' different formal grammars narrate distinct legal regimes, caste/community structures, and NGO ecologies. In sum, limiting the analysis to performativity and subalternity keeps the interpretive field disciplined while allowing the films' own choices—who speaks first, how the camera sits, what the subtitles do—to carry the ethical argument. Where speech leads and vernacular is retained, we see identity performed and audibility opened; where captions,

handlers, and paraphrase frame testimony first, we watch identity and audibility routed through institutional channels. The roadside wait in Rajasthan, the brokered gate in Kandapara, and the breath-held room in Delhi together show how small, repeatable formal decisions make the difference between reproducing familiar narratives and letting new ones be heard.

Results

This section reports what the films show on screen using the stated variables (first speech; mediation; framing; address; evidence order; sound; subtitle register). In *India's Prostitution Villages* (Rajasthan), the opening roadside shot holds diegetic traffic before any exposition; women's words or embodied action typically precede cutaways to money or documents. Negotiations are framed in mid-shots at thresholds; seniors speak first more often than juniors, and refusals ("not on camera") are left audible. Subtitles largely keep vernacular. Household allocations—rent, rations, siblings' schooling—are explicitly voiced; several interviewees describe servicing or clearing family debts; girls articulate futures (air hostess, teacher). In *A Bangladesh Brothel Town* (Kandapara), gatekeepers or captions commonly set the scene, producing evidence to speech sequencing; translators/handlers appear in frame; subtitles compress idiom into administrative terms; non-diegetic music overlays some "rescue" beats. Bargaining over time, price and "fines" recurs, but interjections frequently redirect ownership of sense. *The Lives of Sex Workers and Their Children* (Delhi) uses tight interiors, anonymised close-ups and altered voices; prompts and refusals ("no face", "don't show the children") are retained. Scenes predominantly follow speech to evidence; participants narrate document custody, constrained mobility and violence; room tone carries pauses and breath. Domestic labour—kitchens, ration cards, homework, medicines—is tied to earnings by speakers. Cross-film, semantic initiative is strongest where participants speak first and register is preserved; audibility narrows when captions, brokers or paraphrase frame testimony. Form, not genre labels, governs whether viewers receive accounts as self-defining testimony or as statements nested within institutional narratives. Debt repayment and aspirations are consistently made legible.

Conclusion

Reading the three films through performativity and subalternity shows that representation pivots on small editorial choices that redistribute narrative authority. When participants set the first terms of a scene and their idiom is preserved, viewers encounter situated knowledge rather than pre-framed case material; when intermediaries or captions lead, accounts are absorbed into institutional grammar. This close, form-attentive approach clarifies how everyday role-work and care economies— budgeting for food, rent, school, healthcare, even clearing family debts— are made legible alongside stated aspirations, without collapsing experience into either harm or heroism.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates a practical template for analysing documentaries on sex work: track sequencing, audibility, framing, and captioning to test who owns meaning moment to moment. Substantively, it counsels modest but concrete practices for ethical filmmaking and editing in South Asia: keep on-tape negotiations and refusals audible; favour participant-led openings; retain vernacular with light glossing; disclose when translation or access is brokered; and allow corroborating images to follow testimony rather than pre-interpret it. The corpus is small and restricted to publicly available cuts, and subtitling/versioning may shape what is hearable.

Future work should extend this scene-level method to worker-authored media and to a broader set of regional contexts, pairing formal analysis with participatory critique. Taken together, the films studied indicate that respectful representation is less a matter of topic than of craft: how cameras wait, how editors listen, and how language is carried across to the audience.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Disclosure of Potential Conflicts of Interest: The author declares that she has no conflict of interest.

Research Involving Human Participants and/or Animals: This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by the author.

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Generative AI tools were used only for language refinement and formatting suggestions under human oversight. The author is solely responsible for the content of this manuscript. AI tools were not used for data analysis or interpretation.

CRedit author statement

Sonika Sheoran: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing original Draft, Writing- Review & Editing.

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