

**“They don’t belong here”: Moral Panic, Symbolic Boundaries, and
the Exclusion of Sex Workers in South Delhi**

Student: Ishita Jain

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Erasmus University Rotterdam

Erasmus School of Social and Behavioural Sciences

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Abstract

The oldest occupation of sex work moulds itself into a new format, looming over the cultural landscape of South Delhi, an area of the capital catered to the elites. This study examines the emotional and actionable responses of the residents living in the regions, and the justifications they give to reinforce exclusion, maintain symbolic boundaries, and preserve the perceived respectability of their neighbourhood. The presence of these sex workers challenges the elite norms, exclusivity and moral values that is further examined through Bourdieu's theory of distinction, symbolic boundaries, and Cohen's framework of moral panic. This perceived threat was met with emotions ranging from disgust and fear to selective empathy and sadness, translating into community actions such as distancing, social resistance, and formal interventions. All of their actions were rooted in broader class anxieties, gendered fear, and elitist spatial logic that justified these hierarchies. The study contributes to pending conversations regarding the invisibility of sex workers in law, policy, and urban planning, pushing them to marginalised spaces in the outskirts of the city (into the shadows). The research calls for context-sensitive urban planning and clearer legal frameworks surrounding sex work in India.

Keywords: Symbolic Boundaries, Sex Work, Spatial Exclusivity, Moral Panic, Community Actions

1. Introduction

As the clock strikes 11 pm, a quiet shift unfolds in the bustling markets of South Delhi. The energy shifts, yet the streets remain alive—now painted with the presence of women and eunuchs of all shapes, sizes, and colours. Dressed in ordinary clothes but adorned with bold makeup, they stand in clusters, their silhouettes illuminated by the glow of passing headlights. Behind them, auto drivers and pimps linger in the shadows, watching, waiting—ready to strike a deal and earn their cut. This stands true to the idea that the city of Delhi never really sleeps (Vice, 2018).

Although this should be considered a normal practice in most states in India, low-end prostitution in a region like South Delhi is a deviation from the norm (Dasgupta, 2023; Patnaik, 2023). Being one of the capital's most affluent areas, South Delhi often serves as an exclusive space reserved for the upper class (Bhandari, 2023). In this context, their presence appears socially incongruent, challenging norms of belonging in elite environments.

This perceived incongruity of the sex workers' presence can be attributed to several reasons, including historical context, symbolic boundaries (Bhandari, 2023; Bharadwaj, 2019), and implicit moral reasoning (Bardiya, 2024; Weitzer, 2020). The historical development of South Delhi as an elite space has reinforced exclusivity through architectural, economic, and social markers. Post-independence gentrification and colonialism influenced the region's design, which catered to the upper class, characterised by various symbols of wealth and privilege (Bernroider, 2015). The symbols of wealth featured within the city's architecture, consisting of gated communities, high-end boutiques, and members-only clubs, visually reinforce the boundary between the upper class and the urban poor. (Waldrop, 2008).

Regarding implicit moral reasoning, the country's social and political climate is influenced by religious and conservative beliefs, emphasising the idea of purity and sanitisation. In such a landscape, sex work is often viewed as vulgar and deviant, conflicting with the upper class's image of respectability and refinement. In affluent neighbourhoods like South Delhi, where appearances and reputations carry significant weight, the visibility of low-end sex workers is perceived as a moral threat that disrupts the social order.

Sex work in India dates back to the 3rd century CE, when references to dancers living in temples were first recorded (Sharma, 2018). These dancers were known as Devadasi, historically linked to sex work. This association became more coherent during British rule, when dances were banned because they were considered vulgar and impure (Sonaji, 2019). As one of the oldest occupations, the profession plays a vital role in shaping the social and moral standards for the functioning of society (Hubbard, 1998), which has further influenced a lot of conversations regarding legal frameworks, cultural perceptions, societal norms, discourses on morality, gender roles, and human rights (Hamdani, Suryandari & Tohari, 2024; Momoh & Patel, 2024).

This historical and moral influence continues to shape how laws, policies, and government structures are situated around the subject. In India, the legal framework remains quite vague, with prostitution being deemed legal, but brothels, pimps, solicitation, and pandering being illegal (BBC News, 2009; Goyal, 2019; Immoral Trafficking (Prevention) Act of 1956). In practice, sex work is largely confined to designated red-light districts, such as Delhi's Garia Bastion Road (G.B. Road), housing over 1000 sex workers operating in a legal grey area.

While red-light districts have historically been the primary spaces for prostitution in Delhi, many sex workers have started operating outside these areas. Goyal (2019) notes that while most prostitutes still reside in brothel-dominated zones, some of them move out to work independently, which is a new emerging concept known as independent street sex workers or street sex workers. They primarily function in makeshift brothels in decentralised neighbourhoods. What sets South Delhi apart from most decentralised neighbourhoods is that it has remained a hub for high-status individuals, with its exclusivity continuously reinforced (Dupont, 2004; Webb, 2011).

Street sex workers pose a challenge to both spatial hierarchies and legal frameworks governing prostitution in India. South Delhi, often associated with affluence, faces complications due to ambiguous prostitution laws, affecting residents' and authorities' responses in high-end markets.

Such spaces mainly function on cultural capital, class, and privilege (Bhandari, 2023; Ghertner, 2011). Viewing this access from the lens of Bourdieu's Theory of Distinction (1984), at some level, the presence of sex workers outside Delhi's upscale shops leaves the residents uncomfortable, triggering social commentary on their conduct and behaviour. Bourdieu (1984) argues that to create a space of exclusivity, the elites (or in this case, the residents of South Delhi) cultivate a refined taste, which helps them distinguish themselves from the lower classes.

Such distinctions create social hierarchies, which are constantly reinforced and maintained by creating symbolic boundaries (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). This would ensure that indoor access to spaces like luxury markets, clubs, and gated communities remains exclusive. However, this exclusivity is put into question when these sex workers start their business at the edge of these markets. When marginalised groups—such as

street prostitutes—enter these elite spaces, they are often seen as "out of place", triggering some form of social reaction. These reactions could cultivate negative, neutral, or empathetic community attitudes and various community actions (Kingston, 2013; Pitcher, Campbell, Hubbard, O'Neill, & Scoular, 2006).

Despite being an elitist space, the presence of the low-end sex workers challenges the notions of exclusivity and privilege, triggering community-based reactions among its residents. This study examines how these elites react to such disruptions and how they justify their responses.

1.1. Research Question

Noting that there could be a variety of potential responses, the primary research question that this paper seeks to answer is, *'How do the residents of South Delhi react to the presence of low-end sex workers in their high-end markets, and what justifications do they use if they resist?'*

The secondary question this paper aims to explore aligns with three themes: the range of emotional reactions and perception, justification and boundary making, and its impact on social hierarchies. The secondary questions are:

Emotions and perception

1. *How do the elite residents in the area perceive the presence and visibility of independent street sex workers?*
2. *What are the different kinds of emotions that influence these responses? [Disgust, Empathy, Indifference]*

Justifications and Boundary-Making

1. *On what basis do the elites justify their reactions and stance on independent street sex workers? [through legality, morality, class distinction, or economic concerns]*
2. *In what ways do elites use symbolic boundaries (e.g., respectability, security, aesthetics) to distinguish themselves from lower-class individuals?*

Impact on Social Hierarchies and Urban Spatial Order

1. *How does the presence of sex workers in South Delhi's elite markets challenge existing social hierarchies?*
2. *What mechanisms (formal or informal) do elites use to maintain exclusivity in these spaces?*

By answering these questions, this paper seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how residential elite spaces can negotiate and maintain their exclusive nature when marginalised groups (independent street sex workers) enter their spaces. This finding aims to bring forward a micro-reaction narrative within the close to non-existent conversations about sex work in India on an academic and policy level.

While there has been research on different Indian communities and their reactions to prostitution and sex work, they have usually been focused on prostitutes who are tied to a brothel or conduct the activity in one location (a hotel or guest house). Research in the past has barely focused on the concept of independent street sex workers. Goyal (2019) notes that the lack of legal clarity around sex work has contributed to this gap.

This study addresses that gap by applying Bourdieu's Theory of Distinction and the concept of symbolic boundaries, both of which are especially relevant in India's class-conscious social landscape. Similar research has been conducted in the United Kingdom,

where communities had active reactions such as complaining and vigilantism [for example, leaking the car numbers of kerb crawlers to media, or police actions] (Kingston, 2013, Liechty, 2005; O'Neill, Campbell, Hubbard, Pitcher, & Scoular, 2008). However, in India, especially South Delhi, offers an interesting context, where law enforcement has shown minimal intervention [as though they are almost normalised to the sex workers or get paid by them] (The Tribune, 2009). Furthermore, the research examines the cultural and moral perceptions that shape the community's reactions. It aims to reveal the complex negotiation between law enforcement, public attitudes, and the lived experiences of sex workers in an evolving urban landscape.

This research question will be answered through 20 in-depth interviews of the residents living in a locality of South Delhi region. The paper sheds light on how the presence of low-end sex workers in South Delhi's elite markets disrupts established social and spatial hierarchies, triggering resistance from the elite residents. These reactions are further examined by dissecting and understanding the various shapes and forms social resistance moulds itself into—the presence of sex workers affects the language, emotions, justifications, culminating in actual actions. By examining their reactions, this paper explores the tension between exclusivity, class distinctions, and urban spatial dynamics.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Class, Space, and Exclusion

Notions of class, justified through devices such as education and private assets (Parkins, 1979), have long shaped conversations about spatial access and exclusion. Property ownership is further stratified by location in a city like Delhi, with the upper-class Hindu population predominantly choosing South Delhi and New Delhi—areas long recognised

as their domain (Dupont, 2004). Access to private educational institutions is often restricted to these property owners and their children (Nambissan, 2021; Saksena, 2020), which contributes to the shared value systems.

The exclusion is further reinforced by symbolic filters, fashion, body language, and education, which shape who is perceived as legitimate in elite spaces. Bourdieu (1984) defines taste as an expression of distinction that classifies; however, in doing so, it also classifies the classifier. Through ‘cultural capital’, which consists of elite education and social affiliation, dominant groups determine ‘good taste’, reinforcing symbolic violence, a subtle, culturally embedded form of domination and classification. This classification process extends beyond personal preferences, shaping the social and physical organisation of space.

These exclusions are not only based on aesthetics but also driven by the broader social frameworks that contribute to one's identity and group belonging. Kingston (2013) notes that a key aspect of Bourdieu's work is that social actors are shaped by social norms while simultaneously developing strategies that align with the specific demands of their social environments. Social psychologists like Tajfel and Turner (1985) frame this dynamic through the lens of in-group/out-group categorisation, where power is reinforced by marginalising the “other”. Epstein (1997) suggests that exclusion operates through behaviour and infrastructures shaping into gated communities, members-only clubs, and high-end boutiques (Alkazi, 2015; Bhandari, 2023; Singh, 2020), where the ‘other’ feels ‘out of place’ through implicit social codes such as dress codes, referral systems, or pricing (Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Sherwood, 2010).

The dynamics of class exclusion, evident through both symbolic and physical barriers, shape urban environments in cities like Delhi. Whether via education, property

ownership, or the cultivation of ‘taste,’ elite areas enforce their exclusivity by defining who is included and who is not. Yet, these mechanisms do not operate independently; broader urban changes constantly influence them. As cities undergo modernisation and gentrification, marginalised communities such as independent street sex workers, street vendors, and lower-income groups could face increasing vulnerability. Gentrification actively alters urban landscapes, redefining which groups are accepted and which are pushed to the margins.

The next chapter will explore how urban development, gentrification, and the proliferation of elite spaces interact with the presence (or absence) of marginalised groups, reinforcing existing social hierarchies.

2.2. Urban Spaces, Gentrification and the Presence of Marginalised Groups

Gentrification is defined as the process of changing a neighbourhood that often accompanies the influx of more privileged populations, such as the upper-class Hindu elite (Smith, 1996). In contrast, the revamping process of a neighbourhood is commonly justified as a means to reduce social inequalities. It typically results in increased residential socioeconomic segregation (Musterd, Marcińczak, Van Ham, & Tammaru, 2017). As the area becomes expensive, long-term, underprivileged residents start moving out due to increased rents and other living costs (Krieger, 2014). Beyond physical segregation, gentrification also causes symbolic segregation by primarily catering to the elite, reinforcing class-based and cultural hierarchies (Moore, 2009).

Symbolic segregation is observed as the wealthier population moves into urban areas, leading to the restructuring and commercialisation of the region. The aesthetic upgrades

of the landscapes are characterised by increased policing and surveillance, restricted access to public spaces, and the privatisation of amenities (Hyra, 2024; Smith, 2002). This makes it difficult for groups on the low-end income spectrum to conform to the newly gentrified space.

The gentrification of Delhi NCR displaces lower-income groups—guards, gardeners, domestic helpers—to hidden slums at the city's margins (Kapur, 2020). To function within South Delhi, marginalised groups such as vendors adopt informal coping strategies such as: staying mobile, working during low-surveillance hours, or informally negotiating with authorities (Dave, Purohit, & Gorey, 2024), which safeguards them from segregation and policing (Bose, 2024; Mahajan, 2024). This shows that they do not passively accept displacement but actively resist exclusion to maintain their presence in public spaces.

As gentrification reshapes the neighbourhoods into exclusive spaces, it carries along a vision of high morals, sanitisation, and upstandingness that the presence of sex workers challenges (Neville & Sanders-McDonagh, 2018). These clashes carry tension, which not only fuels micro-level responses such as moral panic and framing the ‘other’ as a social threat but also influences institutional responses concerning policing and regulation.

To understand how gentrification and social perception produce exclusionary tactics, it is essential to examine the foundational basis that constructs moral panic.

2.3. Elite Perception of Sex Work and Moral Panic (See figure 1)

In elite spaces, the visibility, presence, and occupation of marginalised groups, such as the likes of low-end independent street sex workers, would be perceived as ‘out of place’, triggering anxiety and social resistance. This anxiety mirrors the concept of Moral Panic as described by Cohen (1972). Moral panic is triggered by “a condition, episode, person

or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests” (Cohen, 1972, p.p. 9). Drawing on the Moral Panic theory, this section tries to understand how the issue of low-end independent street sex is constructed, amplified, and responded to by different stakeholders.

This perceived threat is reinforced through recurring narratives that depict sex workers in limited and often contradictory ways, shaping public perception and fuelling the panic.

Worldwide, sex workers are often portrayed as criminals, victims (Krishnakumar, 2025; Sagade & Forster, 2018), or enablers (Campbell & Storr, 2001; Kingston, 2013). Public discourses link them with drugs, human trafficking, and kerb-crawlers, who are blamed for associated crimes and violence (Campbell & Storr, 2001; Kingston, 2013; Krishnakumar, 2025; Meriläinen & Vos, 2015). Sometimes, they are viewed as ‘deviant’, posing a threat to public morality (Goel, 2016). In contrast, media and NGOs often depict them as helpless trafficking victims, ignoring their agency (Andrijasevic & Mai, 2016; Matthews, 2008).

Within the context of the Moral panic theory, the foundational knowledge of the sex workers is based on these varying identities, which the media amplifies through overgeneralisations, reported with a negatively ‘loaded language’ [flesh trade, forced into, rescued] (Kumar, 2018; TOI, 2025). At the third level, moral panic over independent sex workers would lead to a public outcry driven by religious groups. India’s political and social climate is influenced by religion, which shapes beliefs about morality and women's roles. Chakraborty (2024) notes that conservative Hindu nationalists marginalise those who do not conform to traditional norms, including sex workers. Thus, conservatives may trigger moral panic.

These narratives, when repeated and consistently validated by dominant cultural and political institutions, lay the groundwork for more formalised responses. As fear escalates, moral panic is no longer just symbolic; it becomes embedded in policy, policing, and legal enforcement.

Cohen's concept of deviancy amplification further suggests that moral panics often worsen the problem rather than solve it (1972). Crackdowns on sex workers are conducted through policing, raids, and displacement, which would just leave them vulnerable. It pushes the business underground, making it more dangerous for workers by increasing their dependence on exploitative middlemen (Dasgupta, 2019).

This panic also contributes to the main policy regarding prostitution in India. The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act (1956) is identified as a vague set of laws. They refer to the fact that sex work is not illegal; however, it criminalises brothels, third-party involvement, and solicitation, making it harder for sex workers to operate safely (Bhatty, 2017). The term 'immoral' functions as a blanket label, often applying even to consensual activities. This reflects the deep-rooted stigma surrounding sex work and its influence on legal discourses (Pal, 2024).

However, the effects of moral panic are not limited to formal policy and policing but also manifest at the microlevel, everyday interactions where local members of the community take matters into their own hands to reinforce moral and spatial hierarchies (Di Ronco, 2021; Hubbard, 1998; 2013). These actions range from being socially resistant to vigilantism; communities in the past have taken these actions as a response to sex work practices (Kingston, 2013). Rather than being rooted in civic responsibility, the logic stems from personal preferences and NIMBYism (Not in My Backyard) (Hubbard, 1998, 2013; O'Neill et al., 2008).

The logic of NIMBYism is typically masked by concerns about children being exposed to prostitution or illicit illegal activity (drugs, having sex) or dangers to female residents (Ali, 2024; Prior & Crofts, 2012; The Tribune, 2009). Media narratives further these notions by printing articles where prostitution is framed in association with crimes (PunePulse, 2024) or how normal, respectable women are harassed for being mistaken as sex workers by kerb crawlers (PunePulse, 2024).

This gendered form of fear extends beyond the presence of sex workers. In a city such as Delhi, which is already perceived as unsafe for women, the labour of safety is frequently shifted onto the women themselves. Instead of addressing the root cause of the issue, women adopt avoidance strategies such as changes in routes, avoiding public transport, changing travel timings to avoid the dark, or being assigned safety chaperones (Bharucha & Khatri, 2018). Meanwhile, elites would use the language of safety as one of the primary justifications for exclusion. In her book, Krishnan (2020) notes that men within Indian culture operate from a 'protective brother' position, which might appear benevolent; however, this becomes another way of exercising control and spatial assertion over women (Chowdhury, 2021). In this context, the moral panic framed by various elements of the profession extends beyond sex workers to encompass all women, reinforcing patriarchal control over female mobility and respectability within elite urban spaces.

If not as criminals, Krishnakumar (2025) notes that sex workers are regarded as victims of poverty or human trafficking. They argue that the profession is not seen as a choice. This is because it opens up more conversations and questions regarding the patriarchal society and the government's responsibility for pushing them into this profession by not

providing any opportunities, a result of belonging to marginalised communities (lower class, and socially excluded).

This moral panic around the subject of sex workers causes a range of reactions that only increase the dangers that these women face (Dasgupta, 2019). By examining these patterns and their potential justifications through the lens of moral panic, it becomes clearer that societal reactions to sex work are shaped more by constructed anxieties than by a genuine effort to address the well-being of the stakeholders involved.

2.4. Community Responses

While the previous section focused on structural impacts of gentrification, this section examines every day, community-level enforcement of spatial norms. As the above literature mentions, there are three identities attached to sex workers that get amplified by various voices and stakeholders (Media, NGO, Police), eventually causing a state of moral panic. This state of moral panic does not exist conceptually; rather, it frequently translates into collective actions that reinforce social norms and spatial hierarchy. These responses range from everyday social resistance to more structured interventions, such as moral policing, legal complaints, and even vigilantism (Dasgupta, 2019; Kingston, 2013; O'Neill et al., 2008).

To understand these responses, one must understand what constitutes their justification. Boltanski and Thévenot's (2006) framework of justifications found that there is a certain order of worth that people draw their justifications from. Community actions are often considered legitimate by associating them with civic order, moral duty, gender-based fear, or family values. These justifications set a respectable narrative under which class-based

exclusions operate. Therefore, within the context of ethical reasoning, community responses that are also considered reactive can exist and further exercise exclusions.

Kingston (2013) and O'Neill et al. (2008) identify social resistance as the most common community response. Here, they employ understated yet effective strategies to voice their discontent (also Cooper, 2016). These involve ignoring, discouraging clientele, and leveraging social pressures to engage with customers.

In their research on sex massage parlours, Cooper (2016) notes how residents often keep their interactions to a minimum with the sex workers. Sometimes, in addition to these passive exclusions, communities also engage in moral policing. Here, notions of respectability and safety are constantly reinforced. Instead of indirect interactions, there are public complaints about declining neighbourhood standards, demands for stricter surveillance, campaigning against sex workers, and pressuring local authorities to take action (Sagar, 2005; Wright, Heynen, & van der Meulen, 2015).

Residents within the gated community can voice their concerns to the Resident Welfare Associations (RWA) (PunePulse, 2024a) [we would also like to explore whether they raise their concerns through WhatsApp groups]. This furthers the idea of 'us' versus 'them', where residents and store owners rally people from similar social standings to get support (Cooper, 2016; Pitcher et al., 2006). Moreover, it solidifies negative perceptions, creating an atmosphere of hostility that discourages sex workers from operating freely.

Considering the roles and responsibilities of the RWA, it is assumed that they would take a more active role, positioning themselves as protectors of the community's image and mobilising against perceived threats (Magicbricks, 2024). Sometimes, this complaint becomes a formalised process, where individuals escalate their actions to legal measures

(PunePulse, 2024a). From filing petitions to shutting down establishments suspected of harbouring sex workers to lobbying law enforcement for increased surveillance on a particular street, these legal interventions serve as a means to institutionalise exclusion and reinforce spatial hierarchies (2024a; Wright et al., 2015; Sagar, 2005).

While this could hold, in certain cases, residents' reactions could be influenced by the bystander effect (Latané & Darley, 1968). A socio-psychological phenomenon in which individuals are less likely to take action or report wrongdoing, instead diffusing responsibility onto others, such as the RWA, law enforcement, government, or fellow residents (Banyard, Weber, & Grych, 2016; Geyer, 2021). Rendsvig (2014) views this inaction on the part of residents as characteristic of a 'hesitator' agent type, who refrains from intervening due to uncertainty, perceived social norms, or the mistaken belief that others will act.

In certain cases, this response also involves direct interaction with the 'other', where they were shamed, threatened, or sometimes chased away (Jayasree, 2004; Sanders, 2013).

Many times, these residents file complaints to the police, pressuring them to do something about it and removing the prostitutes (PunePulse, 2024b; Urunkar, 2025).

These mechanisms attempt to create a hostile environment for sex workers, thereby discouraging their presence. The legal frameworks play a crucial role in maintaining elite spaces while marginalising communities that do not conform to the standard of respectability (Cooper, 2016; Krishnakumar, 2025).

When law enforcement and other formal institutions fail to take action, communities respond strongly through vigilantism. In this community-driven response, residents would be likely to take the matter into their own hands, resorting to violence, aiming to displace the sex workers. A notable example of this occurred in Mahipalpur, South Delhi, in 2009,

when 100 residents barged into a guest house, 365Inn, making accusations regarding its links with prostitution. The people living in the area saw this as necessary, as no action was taken by the police and other authorities (The Tribune, 2009).

All of these actions show how community fears about sex work often lead to indirect, direct, and sometimes harsh responses, helping to maintain the divide between elite spaces and those seen as outsiders. Building on these theoretical perspectives, the next section outlines the methodological approach that was used to examine the responses of South Delhi's elite residents towards independent street sex workers.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Methods

A qualitative approach was chosen to answer the following research question: ‘*How do the residents of South Delhi react to the presence of low-end sex workers in their high-end markets, and what justifications do they use if they resist?*’. This study explored the attitudes, emotions, and responses of residents of an elite South Delhi Market to the presence of independent street sex workers and how they justified these responses to themselves. The data collection method involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews.

For the study, 20 participants were interviewed, all being residents of a market where sex workers have gained access. The questions of the interview were based on the cultural concepts of class, distinction, exclusion, morality, justifications, and community responses in the form of emotions, attitudes, and actions. For example, I explored questions regarding their feelings, and moral, economic, and legal concerns regarding the subject. These questions were open-ended and focused on exploring and understanding the experiences of the residents of the street.

3.2. Participants and Sampling Strategies

The interviews were administered to 20 people, with the age range being 21 to 78. While there was no maximum age range, the 78-year-old participant was the oldest resident I found. 21-year-olds were chosen as most individuals under 21 either lived away from home for university or did not fully grasp the concept. All of these belonged to a specific urban neighbourhood in South Delhi.

For this research, a randomised sampling strategy was undertaken, combined with a snowball approach. I used a door-to-door strategy to approach the participants and used my network to facilitate additional interviews. Furthermore, if participants were able to provide references to neighbours, I used those as well. The first approach ensured that the research could capture varying reactions based on differences in age, occupation, and social standing. The personal network of the interviewer and participants also ensured that the new candidates for the study felt comfortable answering these questions.

3.3. Data Collection

Following the interviews, the transcripts were documented on Google Docs and coded and analysed through Atlas.ti. A combination of inductive and deductive coding took place, with an initial inductive phase of open coding, followed by axial and then selective, which will be partly based on the theoretical framework (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

The codes that I had used were:

- Emotions and perception
- Justifications and Boundary-Making
- Impact on Social Hierarchies and Urban Spatial Order
- Community Action

3.4. Positionality

As a researcher who grew up in one such elite area, I have a deep understanding of my responsibility towards this research. Being around such people, I was equipped to create a safe space for them without any judgments. As this study only aimed to understand the reactions and actions of the residents, at no point was it aimed at creating a space where individuals felt moral dilemmas or were judged for having certain viewpoints.

Furthermore, being more informed about the subject, I ensured that no answers had probes that could create biases. Feeling quite passionate about the study, I also understood the responsibility I had towards the participants and this research. Therefore, as an interviewer, I tried my best to maintain a neutral stance. No leading questions were asked, and I stuck to the interview questions that were prepared. The only thing that was changed a couple of times was the framing of the question (for translation purposes) or the sequence. At no point did any of the participants feel awkward or uncomfortable; however, they had been informed that if they did, they could choose not to continue with that question. The aim was simple: to create a safe and non-judgmental space for participants.

Another point to note is that I had to stop data collection midway, as my country went into a state of war, and it did not feel right to collect interviews.

3.5. Privacy Measures

Following a delicate study, the following ethical and privacy considerations were undertaken. The participants were **informed** of the subject, their interview, and the fact that they were being recorded. Before the interview, each individual signed a **consent form**. Furthermore, **anonymity** was maintained by clubbing all the information in a code. Finally, the study only encouraged **voluntary participation**; all the participants were preemptively informed that if they felt uncomfortable, they did not have to answer or could leave the interview midway.

4. Results

This chapter presents the findings from the qualitative interviews conducted with residents of South Delhi regarding their perceptions and reactions to the presence of independent sex workers in their neighbourhood. I used Descript for transcribing, then translated from Hindi to English and uploaded the transcripts into [ATLAS.ti](https://atlas.ti.com/).

A total of 20 interviews were coded using ATLAS.ti, which were analysed by 4 core thematic clusters. This section builds upon the four primary themes, drawing from interview data to explore the secondary research questions within each thematic category.

4.1. Context

In South Delhi, a 7 km stretch features gated residential zones and markets with high-end jewellery and luxury brands. During the day, it's accessible to all; however, the primary areas homes and shops are restricted. At night, the streets become a hub for independent sex workers, who openly provide services to visible clientele. It's intriguing to observe how residents respond to their presence.

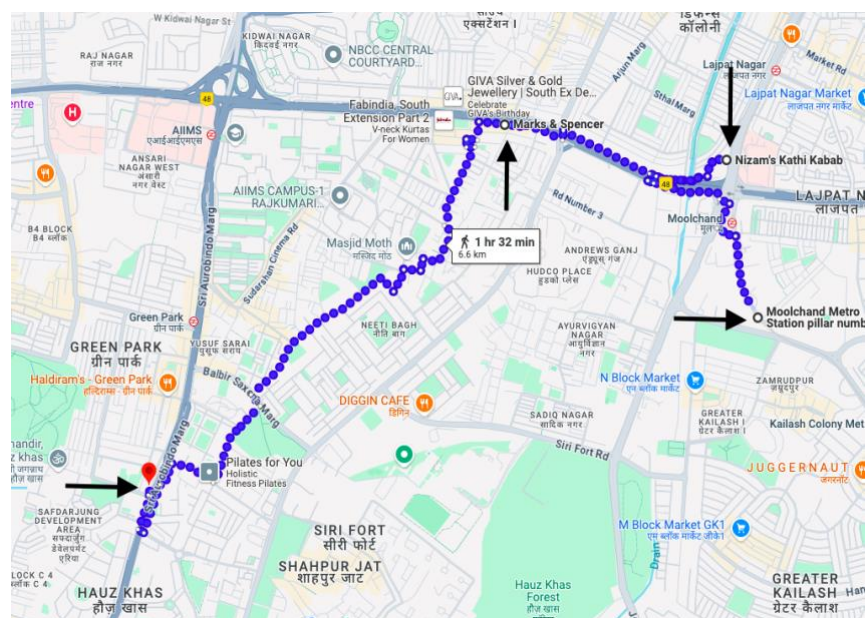


Image (1) [All the hubs for low-end independent sex workers. For this study, we have chosen the third locality from the right.]

One such market attracts a mix of visitors; however, only a select few are permitted to enter the shops or the residential area. Being on the highway, the market is superficially accessed

by migrant workers who travel to and from the outskirts of Delhi at early morning and late night hours.

In South Delhi, people create symbolic boundaries through elements of exclusivity, such as shop access, pricing, and gated communities, which serve to develop and reinforce existing social hierarchies. After 10:30 PM, the market began to be accessed by sex workers and kerb crawlers. This presence evokes a range of emotional reactions, including fear, insecurity, sadness, and curiosity.

The result section further narrates the concerns expressed by residents related to the association between kerb crawlers and prostitutes with increased alcohol consumption, drug usage, crime, and harassment. These justifications have led to varying forms of community response, ranging from ignorance and passive observation (such as making videos) to direct engagement with neighbours, involving politicians, police, and NGOs, holding the RWA and police accountable, and in some cases, removal or violence.

4.2. Emotions and Perception

This section explores how residents emotionally react to the visibility of sex workers in elite public spaces. Sub-themes include fear, disgust, sadness, discomfort, indifference, curiosity, visibility, and age.

SQ1: How do the elite residents in the area perceive the presence and visibility of independent street sex workers?

The visibility of these sex workers was met with a range of emotions, which included fear, disgust, sadness, discomfort, indifference, and curiosity, where a fear-based response was the most commonly observed. These reactions stemmed from visual cues, which included

clothes, open access, the presence of pimps (more often lower-class individuals), a rowdy clientele (demanding kerb crawlers), and a police car, usually parked in the shadows.

“Sometimes, even the police cars are parked right behind these women.”

Participant A, 53, Male

The clothes, overdone makeup, and their overall observational behaviour were interpreted as signs of sex work.

“They have a lot of makeup on... bikes usually talking to them.”

Participant K, 27, Male

Their presence was not seen as an isolated act of defiance; rather, the responses were justified through market reputation, respectability politics, cultural conservatism, legal system, the nature of the profession (Good Vs Bad), and boundary language (emphasising how they shouldn't belong here). Viewing the concept as new or unfit for the locality, most residents described their feelings as a strong sense of discomfort, fear, and disgust. The root cause of fear is often cited as the well-being of other women and daughters, making it a central reason to feel unsettled.

“ It feels like...especially at that time.”

Participant B, 55, Male

Residents were often questioning why anyone would willingly participate in the profession, frequently using moral reasoning as a way of expressing reluctant empathy, framing these

women as helpless and uneducated. In certain cases, the emotion translates into support or advocacy.

Rather than the profession itself, visibility has been treated as the problem. For the residents, the issue was bigger than sex work; the fact that it was being practiced openly on their street. This openness of practices was often met with comparisons with the main red light area of the region (GB road), threatening the exclusivity and respectability that elite residents associate with their neighbourhood.

“There is an area everyone knows as GB Road...talking about our market like that.”

Participant B, 55, Male

In his book *Class and Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984) expounds on how fashion, makeup, and in some cases even their body language are all visual cues, serving as symbolic filters that violate the idea of ‘good taste’ shaping elite spatial norms. Within the theoretical framework, we find that these violations trigger a series of emotions and justifications, which are followed by a reaction consistent with the participants’ experiences.

SQ2: What are the different kinds of emotions that influence these responses?

The response of the residents ranged from **Disgust, Fear, to Curiosity, Empathy, and Indifference.**

The most common response was fear, which further aligns with Cohen’s framework of moral panic (1972). The emotion, too, ranged from gendered fear (more insecurity regarding the safety of a specific gender) to visibility fear (their child seeing such nefarious activities).

Regarding gendered fear, while female participants noted how they won't travel alone, concerned parents spoke about restricting their daughters' movement, taking different routes, coming home early, and avoiding late-night walks. Most participants who reflected unchanged movements were men. This aligned with the viewpoint that street sexual harassment in India is so normalised that women and other stakeholders (in this case, parents) are more likely to find avoidant and restrictive strategies around it instead of dealing with the problem itself (Bharucha & Khatri, 2018).

“Nothing can be... is quite inconvenient.”

Participant E, 56, Female

Another common emotion was disgust, which was tied to the idea of sex work degrading the poshness of the area. This disgust shaped into moral, aesthetic, or class-based critiques, which questioned the presence of this entire business on the street, using terms like *“they don't belong here”* or how it *“definitely spoils the image.”*

This range of emotions, more specifically, fear and disgust-based emotions, aligns with Cohen's moral panic theory (1972), where these sex workers are classified as 'disgusting' or 'dirty' for deviating from elite norms of cultural purity (Chakraborty, 2024).

Participants demonstrated a layered sense of empathy. Although disgusted or insecure due to the profession, many recognised survival as the reasoning behind sex work. In some instances, empathy was replaced by sadness, which rarely prompted any action. Indifference emerged as a subtler emotion, stemming from limited encounters with prostitutes or not being out late. Even in moments of emotionally charged reactions, people tended to be more indifferent and ignorant regarding a response. The inaction aligned with Kingston's (2013) findings of social resistance (ignorance) being the most common response.

It should be noted that these emotions construct a climate that makes it easier to justify the elite's discomfort. There is not just a moral reasoning behind these subjects, but rather it is combined with deeply felt emotions and preservation of respectability and cultural values.

4.3. Justification and Boundary Making

SQ3. On what basis do the elites justify their reactions and stance on independent street sex workers? [through legality, morality, class distinction, or crime concerns]

To rationalise these emotions, discomfort, and opposing stance to sex workers, the residents worked through a combination of legal, moral, economic, crime-related, and class distinctions.

The prominent justification was based on morality, which many viewed as the very fabric of 'Indian Culture'. This idea of Indian culture is shaped by monogamy (2 residents cited sex work as an opportunity for men to cheat) and traditional family values. Residents argued that having sex work operate out in the open stands against the culture of the nation and shouldn't be viewed by children or respectable families, labeling it as "dirty" or "disgusting".

"No one wants these kinds of things in front of their children. It's not a good thing to be seeing."

Participant O, 54, Male

The elite's justification for their views on sex work is cited as 'against Indian culture,' which is a way for the dominant group to define the social and moral values, while viewing the other as inferior, which is another reflection of creating a symbolic boundary (Bourdieu, 1984)

Legal justifications also emerged as a response, where many residents argued that the profession itself is illegal. However, one participant, a lawyer, pointed out that the laws are too vague to determine what is legal. They suggested that residents should appeal to the government for clearer laws, which would simplify community action and assist women in the profession who face daily violence.

“Now as for the residents– they should appeal to the government for clearer laws. The issue is, if the government tries to put a complete ban on sex work, the Supreme Court has multiple judgments stating that such a move would violate Article 21 of the Constitution (right to life and personal liberty)... At most, what residents can do is invoke public place laws...Similar restrictions apply to prostitution-related activities.... On one hand, the Constitution allows adults to engage in it, but on the other hand, only restrictive laws can be enacted.”

Participant R, 26, Male

From the way that they dress and put on makeup to their surrounding factors, everything about these sex workers was seen as unfit to the South Delhi aesthetic that the residents have claimed to maintain for so long. Residents argue that their presence attracts “bad elements” such as kerb crawlers, alcohol consumption, and unwanted male attention, which could confuse or endanger non-sex-working (normal) women in the area.

“Their clientele is this rowdy... follow you or try to ask for your rate.”

Participant I, 25, Female

Concerns about crime and safety were woven into nearly every justification offered by the residents. The presence of sex workers is closely linked to fears of increased theft,

harassment, and violence, making morality and crime indistinguishable in elite residents' narratives.

“We keep hearing...like thefts, attempted kidnappings, and other unsettling things... back of your mind.”

Participant Q, 48, Female

For residents to cite such fears within their concerns aligns with Cohen's (1972) theory of moral panic, which shows how the presence of the 'other' acts as a threat to social values, evoking disproportionate responses. As these lines between deviance and danger blur, people respond to them through deviancy amplification, shaping into community responses.

SQ4. In what ways do elites use symbolic boundaries (e.g., respectability, security, culture) to distinguish themselves from lower-class individuals?

While most of the residents kept emphasising the idea that they live in a gated community, they would still question the presence of sex workers on their street. These boundaries were not just physical walls reinforced by gates; rather, they were perceived as symbolic, justified through **boundary language, nature of the occupation, morals, respectability, security, and aesthetics.**

Respectability emerged as the central concern. The neighbourhood is described as a place where 'respectable families' live, positioning these sex workers as a threat to the market's reputation. There is a juxtaposed image that the residents paint; they describe the area as 'posh', 'exclusive', and 'clean', while viewing these sex workers as 'dirty', 'disgusting', and 'low quality'. This aligns with the in-group/out-group dynamic, where the dominant group shapes the social and moral identity of the marginalised 'other' (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Using characteristic descriptions also aligns with Bourdieu's (1984) theory of distinction,

which is reinforced through aesthetic and cultural judgements. As one participant puts what going to the market would be like:

“Unless like going to a gavaar (uncultured) place is the theme of the date.”

Participant K, 27, Male

The idea of respectability also extended beyond aesthetics and security, including the nature of the profession. Many people questioned why anyone would willingly become a sex worker when there are more ‘respectable’ jobs out there, equating respectability to domestic labour.

“I’m surprised to see this because I see a lot of demand for labour at home... in the daytime.”

Participant A, 54, Male

This reflects Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of symbolic domination, where the dominant class defines and enforces what forms of labour are morally acceptable. In doing so, residents not only express class-based judgments but also shape the cultural norms they deem appropriate for maintaining a ‘decent’ society, and are more in their control. In such cases, social dominations such as job and education play a great role in maintaining the hierarchy.

Although security should serve as a tool of control, the inactivity and blame towards law enforcement further contribute to the frustration of these residents. They often cite concerns regarding daughters being mistaken for sex workers, fears of kerb crawlers, and the suggestion that “bad elements” are attracted to the area reflects a desire to preserve a gendered, controlled public space.

These justifications are furthered and made more intimate in the tone and language used by participants, creating a picture of us versus them, where they constantly distanced themselves from the sex workers. This was done by using words like “they,” “such people,” and “these

women”, while using terms such as family and community as a way of describing oneself. In this, language became a tool in reinforcing and maintaining boundaries by constantly eliciting that such activities shouldn’t be allowed here. This narrative of us and them can be interpreted through Tajfel and Turner’s (1985) in-group/out-group dynamics, where the sex workers are seen as outsiders who threaten the shared moral identity of the group.

4.4. Impact on Social Hierarchies and Urban Spatial Order

SQ5. How does the presence of sex workers in South Delhi’s elite markets challenge existing social hierarchies?

There is an idea of access that many residents take pride in, seen through the emphasis on gated communities, guards, police, and other formal measures. However, this notion of a gated residence is disrupted by the visibility of sex workers, the existence of parlours, their interaction with homes, and the involvement or lack thereof of the police.

“It was a massage parlor... nefarious activities...and shut it.”

Participant G, 38, Female

Many residents have noted that they have complained or taken action against these women time and again; however, they keep coming back and making themselves visible. This pattern was not only observed with the presence of independent sex workers but also in how a new spa is often set up within two months of action being taken to remove the previous one.

These findings mirror Cohen’s (1972) concept of deviancy amplification, where elite anxiety causes them to resort to surveillance or policing instead of finding an actual solution to the problem. In fact, in a recent incident, these women were also hired to do some nefarious activities outside one of the participants' houses

“I had a tiff with someone a while back, and honestly, he is not someone with a very respectful character. A few days passed, and then this man came 12 prostitutes outside my home and started screaming. There were videos and pictures everywhere. I didn’t know they were prostitutes. Later on, the guards of the nearby house told us that these were the same women who stood outside in the market. Their plan was very simple: come to my house, get naked, and start recording to show that I was doing something wrong or involved in questionable activities. I was quite shaken up by it. Also, because we reported to the police and they only came 5 minutes after everyone left, it almost felt like everyone was mixed up together.”

Participant P, 50, Male

This episode further highlights how anxieties regarding morality and culture extend beyond public spaces into private spaces. There is a sense of contamination felt by the resident, which could be interpreted through the in-group/out-group framework. Here, the presence of the ‘other’ further serves as a threat to the insider (Tajfel & Turner, 1985)

There is also a clear hierarchy present of who is allowed to access the residential space—vendors, auto drivers (through Uber), maids, and guards, often being tolerated as they serve a functional purpose. This idea of exclusions aligns with Bourdieu’s (1984), where access to urban space is seen as a form of cultural capital. The toleration of vendors is a form of symbolic filtering, which the sex workers' presence contests.

“There are vendors...point in them being here.”

Participant F, 21, Female

Lastly, the lack of effective response from police reinforces residents' frustration. Goyal (2019) notes that local law enforcement often benefits informally from intermediaries, making their inaction a structural feature rather than a failure, further eroding residents' sense of order and control.

SQ6. What mechanisms (formal or informal) do elites use to maintain exclusivity in these spaces?

While the above responses align with Kingston's (2014) notion of social resistance, maintained through behaviour, language, symbolic distancing, or, most commonly, inaction. Many residents adopted an "ignorance is bliss" approach, choosing to ignore the issue rather than confront it directly. This strategy allowed the residents to deflect responsibility and shift the burden of action onto others, reinforcing a collective sense of moral disengagement.

Some residents also claimed to have taken more drastic steps in the past (a form of vigilantism), which included intimidation and chasing these women away, but no one had done anything of that sort to these independent sex workers. With this matter, people don't feel an urgency as it is outside the gated community, or there aren't too many in numbers, as one of the participants noted

"If this becomes a serious problem, then I would go directly with 30–40 residents and confront these people."

Participant M, 76, Female

Residents turned to formal mechanisms when other options failed, primarily leveraging connections with high-ranking police, RWAs, and local politicians. They rely on direct contact with local authorities, reflecting their power and social standing. These individuals are viewed as 'influential contacts' for visibility-based removals. Legal action through

official channels is uncommon; power instead is exercised via backchannel influence, a hallmark of elite privilege.

“I would say ...called elite market.”

Participant E, 56, Female

Many residents also cited that the best way to ensure that no illegal activities are happening is by installing cameras in that particular part of the street. It would record everything, the interactions, the kerb crawlers, harassment, solicitation, and the inaction of the police. In the above literature, Cooper’s (2016) findings show that communities push for increased surveillance with minimal interaction, noting it as an effective mechanism for moral policing.

“Formally, people rely ...safety or maintaining decorum.”

Participant T, 25, Male

Residents also rely on RWAs and WhatsApp groups to circulate videos and complaints, building collective pressure while keeping their identities protected, a finding that aligns with the theoretical framework. These forms of surveillance help residents document and monitor perceived violations without having to intervene personally.

“People upload videos ...of this space”

Participant K, 27, Male

While most residents remained indifferent or disgusted, there were a few who showed genuine empathy. A few residents spoke about how they wanted to help either by raising funds or providing them with healthcare, education, or, in some cases, even a new job. However, what many of the residents didn’t realise is that they don’t know what these sex

workers require; all of these methods of helping are rooted in having them removed to reinforce and maintain the exclusivity of the market (Lamont & Molnár, 2002).

This section highlighted the reactions of the elite residents and how they chose to justify their concerns and actions through morals, safety, respectability, and civic order. Under these themes further operated layers of class based distinctions, control, and spatial exclusivity.

5. Discussion

This study examined elite residents' reactions to sex work in South Delhi. This region is known for exclusivity strategies that uphold its elite status. The presence of sex work conflicts with the area's nature, provoking emotional and actionable responses aimed at maintaining social boundaries that reinforce elite culture. Utilising Bourdieu's theory of distinction, the study analysed residents' emotions, including fear, disgust, curiosity, empathy, and sadness for sex workers. These emotions led to responses ranging from passive inaction to formal and informal enforcement measures to monitor and control the narrative. These strategies maintain symbolic boundaries and are rooted in control and class-based discrimination, justified by moral and family values, as well as women's safety. This chapter interprets the findings in light of the previously discussed theoretical framework.

The findings concerning emotional responses are situated within broader frameworks, revealing that elite reactions and community responses are not isolated events; rather, they serve as a means to maintain spatial hierarchy, control, and class distinction, and morally regulate according to standards deemed fit. The emotions expressed by the participants ranged from fear and disgust to curiosity, empathy, sadness, and indifference. The most common reaction was fear and disgust.

Disgust was expressed as a reaction to the challenges the presence of sex workers posed to the symbolic boundaries. These symbolic boundaries are shaped through aesthetics (fashion, grooming), moral expectations (purity, monogamy), and culturally accepted 'good taste,' all of which are markers of elite respectability (Bourdieu, 1984). From their sense of fashion to their behaviour, the participants picked on everything, viewing their mannerisms as a deviation from the norm, which in this case was being a respectable woman. The emotion of

disgust often followed cultural values that shaped these women as sexually deviant, as they challenged traditional norms regarding monogamy and purity.

On the other hand, fear was often seen as a communally felt response. Every participant reported feeling this sense of insecurity as a result of the violation of their 'home ground'. Fear was associated with an obstruction of family values, a gendered sense of insecurity, and a perception of others. These fears aligned with Cohen's (1972) theory of moral panic and the narratives media amplifies. Almost every participant reported feeling worried about women's safety, which had caused women or their guardians to take safety measures that further restricted the movement of the women. The kerb crawlers became a mechanism that took control over the women's movements. Another justification for fear was how people who belong to other areas of South Delhi, who also contribute to the construction of 'cultural capital', perceive their market, thereby tarnishing the reputation of the market (Bourdieu, 1984).

As the symbolic boundary that the residents and market created was being challenged, another justification for this overflow of fear was based on the exposure of sex work to their children. Children seeing these women was further considered as 'bad taste', going against the cultural norms of India that oppose the openness of these ideologies. All of these narratives were based on a certain reputation that sex work had built over the years due to the media narratives that were constructed around the subject, which also meant the strong association the occupation had to crimes such as theft and eve-teasing. The sense of insecurity and control over the aesthetics of market space ties into the way policing and surveillance are used to maintain sanitisation in elite markets (Hyrá, 2024; Neville & Sanders-McDonagh, 2018). This aligns with Cohen's (1972) notion of 'folk devils', where a group is constructed as a symbolic threat to shared values.

While most residents viewed the sex workers as deviant, there were a few who viewed them as victims, someone who was coerced into being a part of the profession. These participants expressed empathy and sadness, frequently framing their presence as a consequence of poverty, lack of education, or exploitation, rather than individual choice. This entire narrative takes away the autonomy of these sex workers, viewing them as passive recipients of charity or rescue, rather than as agents making strategic choices within constrained circumstances. People with great empathy were also likely to question the nature of the profession, blaming the organisations and institutions for these women not having better opportunities. This idea of victimhood fits well with the elite notions regarding sex work (why would anyone willingly do this?) (Bourdieu, 1984), and the reputation the profession has gained over the years due to its representation in media and otherwise (Andrijasevic & Mai, 2016).

While these emotional responses reveal deeply embedded elitist spatial logic, they also translate into distinct patterns of action or inaction, depending on the intensity and moral framing. Empathy and sadness frequently led to social resistance (Kingston, 2013), whereas escalated fear, disgust, and discomfort often resulted in people trying to fix the problem, aligning with Cohen's (1972) concept of deviancy amplification. According to Kingston (2013), most residents resorted to social resistance or ignoring, as all of them felt that interacting with these sex workers further blurred the symbolic boundary that they had successfully created for themselves. However, while doing so, they were also quite likely to diffuse their responsibility and the blame on the RWA, government, law enforcement, and even the sex workers, instead of stating accountability for their inaction, which reflected the bystander effect (Latané & Darley, 1968).

Whereas, in other cases where the residents were so emotionally charged up that they took action, most of the actionable responses were based on the idea of taking control, by using

formal reinforcements or informal reinforcements such as vigilantism, only in cases when the reports were not taken seriously. These patterns reflect Kingston's (2013) analysis of community responses, where actions were driven by civic order and moral duty. Participants relied on direct contact with local authorities, reflecting their power and social standing. These individuals are viewed as 'influential contacts' for visibility-based removals. Legal action through official channels is uncommon; power instead is exercised via backchannel influence, directly reflecting social capital and symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1984).

According to the literature, the basis of these actions was to gain back control and uphold NIMBY (Not In My Backyard) sentiments, which aligned with the way participants functioned (Hubbard, 2013). Many residents did not have a problem with the existence of sex workers per se; their main concern lay with their visibility and proximity to elite spaces. This reflects a broader concept known as 'geographies of exclusion', where Sibley (1995) highlights how urban elites push away or distance themselves from groups that are seen as morally and aesthetically out of place to purify their environment.

The visible presence of sex workers disrupted this established order, triggering feelings of threat and loss of exclusivity. In response, residents turned to mechanisms such as surveillance, gatekeeping, and appeals to RWAs or the police aimed at reclaiming dominance over their environment by controlling or removing the 'other' from their immediate view. These mechanisms all reflect the historical pattern of South Delhi favouring the upper class (Bernroider, 2015), where the right to space is determined by class-coded norms of respectability and visibility, all highlighting the idea of symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1984).

In sum, all these interviews show that the interactions the elite residents of South Delhi have with the presence of these sex workers are not only rooted in emotions and moral values, but some deep-rooted class-based resentments are reflected in day-to-day language and tone.

These emotions, whether fear, empathy, or actionable such as enforcements, all work to preserve a particular vision of urban class and order rooted in gender, hierarchy, class, sanitation, and respectability. By drawing on Bourdieu's (1984) symbolic boundaries, Cohen's (1972) moral panic, and Kingston's (2013) typology of community responses, the findings highlight the layered mechanisms through which exclusion operates, even when disguised as protection or concern.

To further contextualise these reactions, it is useful to compare them with community responses research in other socio-cultural settings. Prior literature on community responses towards sex workers had highlighted fear and moral outrage as the main justification in shaping public outrage. While this study affirms that in the South Delhi context, elite residents similarly rely on moral values and gendered safety concerns to justify exclusionary practices, the residents of the region were notably more direct and severe in their language in comparison to the other studies (Kingston, 2013; O'Neill et al., 2008). However, when it came time to respond, they were more likely to avoid the problem fully or react through formal channels. In extremely rare cases, the participants interacted with the sex workers; usually, they used authorities such as the police or local politicians.

Moreover, the UK-based studies largely framed the residents' worries as limited to prostitutes and kerb crawlers. Whereas, in India, street sex work was seen as a business with way more stakeholders, who were all men, which made the aesthetic of the entire occupation way more alarming. Additionally, the intermediaries also took care of the interactions with the police, ensuring that the prostitutes did not get in trouble, which created a different socio-cultural setting of operation.

Lastly, India operated on class-based cultural norms that Kingston and Cooper's framework did not acknowledge. Culturally speaking, the elites operated in a conservative culture, where

women's mobility was always questioned and restricted, whether this was through the sex workers who were constantly surveilled and at risk of losing their jobs, or the residents who had to change routes and timings to avoid being mistaken for a sex worker. Under the garb of culture and notions of morality and respect, there was a consistent attempt to control and surveil the movement of all women.

This study, though rich in contextual depth, is not without its limitations. This study focused on a single locality of South Delhi and was limited to 20 interviews with residents. For a more comprehensive understanding of community responses, future studies could use a bigger sample size, including other residential areas across the 7-kilometre stretch, which had various independent sex worker hubs. Furthermore, future research could also include viewpoints of other stakeholders, such as intermediaries, sex workers, law enforcement, and even the guards and other domestic workers who reside in the residential area. This would help generate more holistic insights and inform well-rounded, inclusive policy interventions.

This study holds several implications for policy-making, urban planning, and shaping public discourse around sex work in India. The insights gathered from elite reactions in South Delhi point to the urgent need for more inclusive, rights-based, and context-sensitive approaches, which include:

- ❖ **Clearer Laws:** Findings from the primary and secondary research suggest that there is an urgent need for clearer laws regarding sex work in India. Instead of having laws that criminalise and further marginalised these women, they should be centred around protecting them from violent clientele or middlemen and authorities that could take advantage of their plight. Furthermore, regulations shouldn't be dictated by elite anxieties; instead should use a grounded and inclusive approach engaging all stakeholders.

- ❖ **Urban Planning and Spatial Hierarchies:** Findings based on historical analysis and interviews with residents suggest that the spatial planning of South Delhi has catered to the elites. These findings point to the need for a shift toward planning models that accommodate, rather than erase, marginalised groups.
- ❖ **Construction of identities:** Findings suggest that NGOs and media narratives often shape the sex worker as a victim or criminal. Instead of oscillating between two extreme identities and chasing sensational news, public discourses must view sex workers as neutral parties, often autonomous women making their own choices.
- ❖ **Right to Equal Opportunities and Employment:** Findings based on residential interviews highlight the need for inclusive employment schemes focused on marginalised women, so that sex work is not the only viable economic option available to them.

The study successfully highlights the reactions of elite residents to the presence of sex workers in South Delhi and the justifications they present to support their actions. In doing so, it was able to point out the loopholes within the spatial logic provided by elite residents, often masking their own political and personal agendas under the garb of gendered fear, spatial control, and moral values. Control over these hierarchies showed a greater pattern that has governed the dynamics of South Delhi, rooted in class-based distinctions, dominant elite norms, and gendered control. These dynamics were translated into moral policing, surveilling, and in some cases, intimidation and shutting down enterprises.

While the presence of these sex workers contests the broader spatial hierarchies, they shed light on broader problems related to legal regulations, policy regulations, and a lack of government intervention. Here, a bigger pattern emerges, where micro-level day-to-day conversations have a policy-level impact, yet the women at the centre of this discourse

remain largely invisible. Their well-being, safety, and agency are not prioritised within larger regulatory frameworks, rendering them peripheral to both policy concern and urban planning agendas.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Ethics and Consent Form

Title of Study:

Researcher: Ishita Jain, Erasmus University, Rotterdam

Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of this study is to explore how the residents and store owners feel about the sex work practices that take place outside their street. The research also aims to understand community responses and how they participate in community activities.

Type of Methodology: Semi-structured interviews

Time spent: 30 to 60 minutes

Confidentiality: Your privacy is the most valuable to us. All data will remain confidential and will be stored securely. Furthermore, a string of your personal information will be assigned a code so that it remains safe. The only person with access to this data would be the sole researcher.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You can leave the study mid-way or choose not to answer the questions that make you feel uncomfortable.

Questions and Contact Information: If you have any questions about the study, you can contact the researcher at 694335ij@eur.nl.

Consent: By clicking 'I agree', you have indicated that you have read all the information and have consented to participate in this study.

Appendix B: Questionnaire

Demographic Questions

Name

Age

Occupation

Which region

Substantive Questions

Emotions and Perceptions

While driving past the street, how does it make you feel? (e.g., discomfort, indifference, concern)

What do you think about the presence of these street sex workers in the area?

Do you believe their presence affects the atmosphere or reputation of neighbours? Why or why not?

Justifications and Boundary-Making

Do you have any specific moral, legal, or economic concerns related to sex work in your area?

Do you think it's fine if they are present here? If not, why?

—If yes, then why?

Do you feel that due to their presence, the way the market used to be is being challenged?

Or do you think it is still the same?

How do people around you react to their presence? Why do you think that might be happening?

Do you feel that the exclusivity of this area is being challenged by their presence? If so, how? (unsure)

Impact on Social Hierarchies and Urban Spatial Order

How do you think their presence in this market disrupts existing social hierarchies?

What formal or informal mechanisms do you think people can use to maintain this exclusivity?

Have there been any actions taken by residents, businesses, or authorities in response to this issue?

Community Responses and Actions

Have you or others in the community taken any steps to address or discuss their presence?

Do you think these sex workers should have designated areas for their work? Why or why not?

Do you feel like a lot of these answers are based on your upbringing?

What kind of conversations, if any, have you had with neighbours or business owners about this topic?

Have you brought this up in any of the RWA meetings or WhatsApp groups? What were the reactions to this?

Do you think others are concerned?

Appendix C: Code Book

name	comment
Emotions and Perception: Sadness	
Justifications and Boundary-Making: Moral Justification	
Impact on Social Hierarchies and Urban Spatial Order: Market Reputation	
Community Responses and Actions: Passive Inaction (Ignorance is Bliss)	
Emotions and Perception	Fear, Sadness, Disgust, Empathy, Indifference, Discomfort, Curiosity
Emotions and Perception: Fear	
Emotions and Perception: Empathy	
Emotions and Perception: Disgust	
Emotions and Perception: Indifference	
Justifications and Boundary-Making	Moral JustificationCultural ConservatismRespectability PoliticsGood Jobs vs. Bad JobsClient-based BlameBoundary Language (“shouldn’t be allowed here”)
Justifications and Boundary-Making: Cultural Conservatism	
Justifications and Boundary-Making: Respectability Politics	
Justifications and Boundary-Making: Good Jobs vs. Bad Jobs	
Justifications and Boundary-Making: Client- based Blame	

Justifications and Boundary-Making: Boundary Language (“shouldn’t be allowed here”)	
Impact on Social Hierarchies and Urban Spatial Order	Market ReputationUrban ExclusivityElite Spatial LogicComparison with Lower-Class Areas
Impact on Social Hierarchies and Urban Spatial Order: Urban Exclusivity	
Impact on Social Hierarchies and Urban Spatial Order: Elite Spatial Logic	
Impact on Social Hierarchies and Urban Spatial Order: Comparison with Lower-Class Areas (e.g., GB Road)	
Community Responses and Actions	Passive Inaction (Ignorance is Bliss) WhatsApp/RWA Surveillance Informal Enforcement (intimidation, moral pressure) Blame on Others (Clients, Police) Collective Inaction Complicity vs. Concern, Talking, Helping
Community Responses and Actions: WhatsApp/RWA Surveillance	
Community Responses and Actions: Informal Enforcement (intimidation, moral pressure)	
Community Responses and Actions: Blame on Others (Clients, Police)	
Community Responses and Actions: Collective Inaction	
Community Responses and Actions: Complicity vs. Concern	
Emotions and Perception: Curiosity	
Community Responses and Actions: Formal	

enforcements	
Emotions and Perception: Discomfort	
Emotions and Perception: Talking	
Impact on Social Hierarchies and Urban Spatial Order: Benefits Vs What doesn't	
Emotions and Perception: Visibility	
Emotions and Perception: Physical Appearance and Presentation	
Impact on Social Hierarchies and Urban Spatial Order: sanitisation	
Justifications and Boundary-Making: Legal Regulation	
Community Responses and Actions: Community Action	
Justifications and Boundary-Making: Violence Against Women	
Community Responses and Actions: Helping	
Community Responses and Actions: diffusion of blame	
Emotions and Perception: age	

List of Figures

Figure (1)

Triggering Event: Presence of Sex Workers in South Delhi



Symbolic Boundary Violation and Media Amplification

- The sex workers are seen as ‘out of place’
- Their presence is amplified by the media, while using heavy words like ‘flesh trade’ and ‘rescued’, each having a negative connotation
- NGOs, politicians, and media paint a narrative, causing the sex workers to oscillate between three identities: victim, enabler, and deviant
- Overflow of moral panic and anxiety (Cohen, 1972)



Constructing a threat

- The sex workers are seen as a threat to:
 - ◆ Moral Values
 - ◆ Traditional Values
 - ◆ Women’s Safety

◆ Exclusivity of South Delhi

- Gendered fear and violation of traditional values justify exclusion
- Personal preferences and NIMBY are projected onto their presence



Community Responses

- Social Resistance (ignoring, gossiping, creating distance)
- Informal Enforcements (intimidation, discouraging clientele, chasing them away, moral policing)
 - Formal Enforcements (Police, MLAs, NGOs)
- RWA (surveillance, going through channels, policing)
 - Vigilantism (Mahipalpur Hotel, 2009)
- Changes in women's movements– more restrictions



Deviancy Amplification & Policy Reaction

- Policing, raiding, and women are displaced
 - The business goes underground
 - Dependency on pimps increases
- Symbolic exclusion shapes into formal exclusion
- The already vague laws, ITPA (1956), are not able to help these women out



Outcome

- Sex workers get pushed to brothels, more organised spaces, where it is hard to get out
- For the time being, the space gets sanitised for the elites, until a new batch of sex workers start showing up