



SWEDISH  
COLLEGIUM  
for ADVANCED STUDY

## REGULAR SESSION INFORMATION

**Session:** Escaping Poverty: Evidence from Life Stories

**Session Convener(s):** Andrew Shepherd, Overseas Development Institute, London; Ellen Bortei-Doku Aryeetey, University of Ghana, Legon; Flora Kessy, University of Mzumbe, Dar es Salaam

**Chair:** Ellen Bortei-Doku Aryeetey, University of Ghana, Legon

**Comments:** -

-----  
I) *Les facteurs d'interruption de la transmission et les expériences de sortie de la pauvreté*

Abdou Salam Fall; Université de Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar

Rokhaya Cisse; Université de Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar

II) *Poverty, Sex Work and the Worlds in Between Mapping Life-histories of Sex Workers in Contemporary India*

Rohini Sahni, University of Pune

V. Kalyan Shankar, Symbiosis School of Economics, Pune

III) *Escaping Poverty in Tanzania: What Can We Learn from Cases of Success?*

Kate Higgins, North-South Institute, Ottawa

IV) *Family Trajectories and Poverty Exits*

Robert Miller, Queens University, Belfast

## ABSTRACTS

### Session description

This panel will explore the different patterns and causes of upward mobility out of absolute poverty in a number of developing countries, and reflect on appropriate policy responses. The evidence will be drawn from studies using life histories as the basic method of inquiry into socio-economic mobility. It will include a comparative paper which compares the findings of four recent studies, in Bangladesh, Kenya, Senegal and Tanzania, written by the convenor and a colleague. This paper will offer an analytical framework and a comparative analysis, and will provide a degree of coherence for the other papers.

The life history method has been extensively used in poverty analysis by the Chronic Poverty Research Centre, and details can be found at [www.chronicpoverty.org](http://www.chronicpoverty.org).

### Papers

I) *Les facteurs d'interruption de la transmission et les expériences de sortie de la pauvreté*

Abdou Salam Fall; Université de Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar

Rokhaya Cisse; Université de Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar

TBA

II) *Poverty, Sex Work and the Worlds in Between: Mapping Life-histories of Sex Workers in Contemporary India*

Rohini Sahni, University of Pune

V. Kalyan Shankar, Symbiosis School of Economics, Pune

This paper reconstructs the lives of women in sex work in India today, not just in the context of their tryst with sex-work but probing backwards to unearth their non sex-work histories. For women in sex work, there is a sweeping erasure of any other occupational identities they may have. That a woman who is presently a sex worker could have an alternative work history hidden in her past (or present) is seldom given due attention. When their past does get probed, it is invariably in the context of their present. From such a perspective, their 'circumstantial' identities from the past end up getting emphasized (like tracing their roots in poverty, in tradition or in trafficking) at the expense of their previous 'occupational' identities, usually in the informal labor markets (like say in domestic work, daily-wage earning or scrap collection). However, the influence of these previous labor market experiences cannot be undermined in the later lives of sex workers; and such a resurrection can be possible only with life histories as the methodological lens.

In existing research, conditions of poverty are linked with girls/women entering sex work in India. But establishing a linkage of this nature is fraught with its own problems, particularly those pertaining to loss of intermediate details. Consequently, it runs the risk of coming across as too simplified a representation at one extreme while getting misinterpreted at the other. Firstly, it gives the impression that in the life journeys of certain girls/women, there exist these two nodes of *poverty* and *sex work* that get directly related as a cause-effect occurrence. But is this linkage as straightforward as it seems? While the nodes are for real, we argue in this paper that the pathways connecting the two are manifold – and of variable lengths, trajectories and experiences. There exist multiple sub-nodes or spaces in between, a series of them in cases, that girls/women (who later entered sex work) have negotiated in their struggle against poverty and it is not a phenomenon of uncommon occurrence.

The second, more serious lapse of judgement –and very easy to slip into– would be the 'insistence' on connecting

the two nodes through the shortest (or the most direct) path of linkages, that of trafficking. The existence of trafficking is undeniable, as has been underscored by several researches; that trafficking thrives on poverty is equally established from them. However, it cannot be differentiated as the sole, intermediary channel connecting poverty and prostitution, obscuring other equally important pathways. By such an emphasis, the debates then get politicized and centered on ‘sex trafficking’ versus ‘sex work’, the latter emerging as a countering, rallying position of those willfully in the activity. Steering away from this rather polarized debate, in this paper we look at the emergence of sex work as an option over other labor forms (i.e. ‘sex work’ versus ‘work’) in the course of life histories of the women. As we argue further, the more meandering (or indirect) of path(s) traversed before entry into sex work is routed through the *labor markets*, usually of the informal kind, involving multiple nodes of entry and exit, into which the women (as girls in several cases) get pushed on account of similar conditions of poverty. Anecdotally, from the array of menial jobs that can be spotted around us, we can glean a host of activities that girls/women typically perform – as domestic servants, baby-sitters, scrap collectors, petty sellers, vendors – by fitting across the informal sectors at different rungs at different ages. These trysts with labor, consequences of poverty by themselves, are in turn responsible for shaping their understanding of incomes in the longer run. In the course of this paper, we address this realization of poverty of incomes in the labor markets from which some of them (at a later point) arrive at a more calculated ‘choice’ of being in sex work. Unlike the previous path of trafficking, they have a measure of agency in this course by picking it from the options available in their contexts, however limited these options maybe. As inferred from the women’s responses, sex work emerges as a viable livelihood option for those coming with an experience of paltry incomes and harsh working conditions in the informal labor markets.

The paper builds its arguments using data collected from the interviews of 3000 sex workers across fourteen states as part of the first Pan India Survey of Sex Workers during 2008-09. The exercise was supervised by the authors and conducted under the aegis of Center for Advocacy on Stigma and Marginalization (CASAM), with the coordinated efforts of several grass-root organizations and groups working with women in sex work. Each interview lasting two hours on an average sought to compile information through a questionnaire that probed into their histories of work, sexual experience and abuse. It charts the life trajectories of the women – family backgrounds, schooling, entry into labor markets, marriage, entry into sex work and life therein. The paper thus bears upon itself the methodological challenge of whether life histories could be charted by integrating them with survey-based research tools on a larger scale.

### III) *Escaping Poverty in Tanzania: What Can We Learn from Cases of Success?*

Kate Higgins, North-South Institute, Ottawa

Drawing on longitudinal Q-Squared data from six research sites across mainland Tanzania, the paper examines how and why people experienced upward socio-economic mobility, and in some cases poverty escape, in a context where this has been limited. Using a locally relevant but comparable well-being classification system, we find that poverty is entrenched across all research sites. The overwhelming majority of households ranked in this study – derived from a representative sample in each site from the 2007 HBS – were identified by representatives in their community as being poor. Further, in line with other analyses, we find that there has been little socioeconomic mobility across these sites over the past decade, and stubborn levels of poverty despite sustained economic growth nationally. Through systematic analysis of the qualitative data set, we find that agriculture is a key factor in supporting upward mobility. But critically, we find that it is non-farm businesses, the accumulation of physical assets (such as land and housing), salaried employment and favourable marriage - some of which agriculture plays a role in supporting - which are most effective at moving people out of poverty. When it comes to moving beyond vulnerability, these findings hold. Those that manage to move beyond vulnerability often have multiple sources of

income and own a number of valuable physical assets. A range of broad policy conclusions are made. These include that agricultural development should remain a priority; rural industrialisation requires greater attention; asset accumulation needs to be promoted (and those assets need to be protected); access to credit, and business development, needs to be supported; and that secondary and vocational training opportunities need to be made accessible to young people from poorer households.

#### IV) *Family Trajectories and Poverty Exits*

Robert Miller, Queens University, Belfast

The concept of trajectory in biographical research was proposed by Anselm Strauss as a series of inevitable life history events in an individual's life normally initiated by a single significant occurrence. A trajectory, once begun, consists of a series of episodes or stages that have an almost inexorable sequential character until coming to a conclusion. The features of the trajectory and how an individual successfully resolves, exits or succumbs to the progression was developed further through the empirical and theoretical work of Schütze, Riemann and colleagues. In turn, within poverty research in developing countries, the 'sawtooth' phenomenon of a family's gradual ascent out of poverty being abruptly forestalled by a calamitous incident or 'shock' is now well-documented.

There clearly is potential for developing a more 'processorial' understanding of the ascent or exit from poverty and shocks and their effects by extending the individually-derived theorization of trajectories to families. This extension is explored through reporting the results of qualitative family history interviews carried out in Kenya with families that had been identified by a quantitative longitudinal household panel study as 'ascenders' out of poverty. Particular focus will be placed on the in-depth analysis of a series of interviews with members of a single family that had been on an upwardly mobile trajectory out of poverty but is now struggling due to having experienced several severe shocks in recent years.