Body politics and the politics of technology: technological experiences among street-based sex workers in Bangalore

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ABSTRACT

This paper illustrates how body politics and the politics of technology compound one another for female street-based sex workers (FSSWs) in Bangalore city, India, in their experiences of three technologies – mobile phones, CCTV surveillance, and television media. Mobile phones have emerged as an integral part of street-based sex work in Bangalore as a result of FSSWs abstaining from public spaces that have been overwhelmingly eroded due to urban transition and gentrification over the last two decades in Bangalore, as well as due to their inherent advantages. Simultaneously, intensified CCTV surveillance of city spaces keeps watch on them, while native-language television media, a techno-cultural predator, routinely conducts self-assigned gentrification operations covertly or overtly discovering and publicly disseminating information on immorality and delinquency. All three technological experiences understandably have had complicated fallouts for FSSWs, a result of the politics of technology that are at the foundations of these experiences.

The main argument here is that the position of subaltern informal workers such as FSSWs is complicated not only by the politics of technology, but by the body politics that intersects their technological experience. This comes about because both the politics of technology and body politics share strikingly similar concerns in the territories of self, community, support, resistance, negotiation, commerce, and power among FSSWs, which are unraveled in this paper through first-hand narratives from these workers. We also, thereby, contextualize body politics and the politics of technology within the larger literature on sex work, a new perspective presented by this paper.

Technological experiences and bodily experiences

Technological experiences are assuredly socio-political experiences, tightly linked to critical undertones of power and other social institutions of the societies they are

embedded in (Winner, 1980). Socio-political circumstances set the context to study individuals' everyday interactions with technologies, due to which we cannot be blind to the gendering of these technologies, and to the fact that their deployment and experience are the outcome of power structures, social constructs of gender, and capacities for individual agency (Cockburn & Ormrod, 1993). Drawing from feminist insights on technological experience urges us to adopt an intersectional approach by studying social location to comprehend the complex inequalities of these experiences among the economically and sexually marginalized; in turn revealing how concerns of equity, justice, and citizenship are entirely bypassed by policy (Eubanks, 2007; Shade, 2011). We are also called to acknowledge the fluidity and co-evolution of the gender-technology relationship, wherein technological meanings are continually debated among different gender groups, and where gender identities (and power relations) are produced and negotiated simultaneously with technological development (Wajcman, 2004, 2007). Hence, technological experiences end up unanticipated, indeterminate, non-obvious, and non-inevitable (Monahan, 2008).

Whether these experiences are via individually-owned or externally-enforced technologies, it is important for our understanding of digital embodiment to help contextualize technology-facilitated bodily experience (Powell & Henry, 2017). Individually-owned technological artifacts such as mobile phones often become extensions of one's body and self, channeling expressions of selfhood or serving as platforms for livelihood creation or social collectivization. Externally-enforced technologies such as CCTV surveillance observe and control the presence and movement of the body in space and time, facilitating investigation and dissemination of information on these bodies. External techno-cultural platforms such as television media proactively track the presence, activity, and agency of the body in public and private spheres – within a context of social morality, public health, and social order – and provoke popular opinion on further control and regulation of these bodies. Let us visit each type.

Surveillance technologies monitoring movements in public space are structured through social categories, these technologies facilitating the formulation of new political relationships and reconstruction of social relationships (Lupton, 2015; Nayar, 2015). Those monitored are often observed involuntarily and are unaware. However, the subject is sometimes actually made aware of corporeal surveillance, with political institutions legitimizing this detailed monitoring and disciplining of the body in the public sphere on the pretext of "security" and "physical wellbeing" (Svenonius, 2018; Lupton, 2015). "Ban-optic" surveillance, ever agile and fast-moving, identifies "contaminated" individuals and groups through social sorting (Coleman & Sim, 2000; Nayar, 2015; Monahan, 2008; Lupton, 2015). Social ordering strategies are also steered by locally powerful networks operating as alliances of interests, who construct negative images within public spaces by defining "risk," "insecurity," "threat," "pollution," "vulnerability," "proper conduct," and "natural and legitimate use of city space" (Coleman & Sim, 2000; Nayar, 2015). "Prickly spaces" are defined and targeted in locally-monitorable areas (possibly even by minor neighborhood associations), keeping out "inappropriate users" and demanding further policing and (in Lefebvre's terms) real spatial practices" such as surveillance (Mitchell, 2003; Flusty, 2004; Nayar, 2015; Ranganathan, 2011). One's citizenship (as well as the very sense of self) is therefore

produced within a crucible of techno-cultural surveillance managed by state, corporation, and mainstream society. Hence, surveillance systems are not simply "inevitable" developments that impinge individual privacy out of the necessity to provide security – they are social structures in their own right that actualize a micro-politics of social control, aggravating hyper-visibility for marginalized groups based on mistrust and risk, amplifying social inequalities, and creating "truth regimes" around guilt, trustworthiness, value, and suspicion (Monahan, 2008).

The body becomes a critical site of exercising surveillance, whereby transparency of bodies and blatant threats against selected individuals aggravate; these individuals are rendered unable to resist surveillance due to needs of income and social capital (Lupton 2015; Svenonius 2018). The bodies of FSSWs are monitored for their public presence, as concerns for public health and social morality, and to improve the economic appeal of the city (Klauser, 2007). Aggressive or punitive surveillance colored by concerns of "welfare" and "rehabilitation" forms the basis of monitoring in a "watch-care" system that normalizes observation and paternalistic control over these workers (Ghosh, 2005). New forms of voyeurism, harassment, and involuntary circulation of bodily data emerge in the process, which reproduces their deprivation (Kovacs, 2020). In this manner, the FSSW becomes less a political-subject aspiring for a body-positive legitimate-worker subject-citizen status, and more a delimited empirical-subject around her bodily and socio-economic subaltern existence that is compromised by modernity in public space (Ghosh, 2005). This is appended by media surveillance of the FSSWs' bodily presence in space and time, effectively used by the anti-prostitution campaign to represent the public woman in conjunction with local and state definitions (Tani, 2002). Hence, the FSSW becomes a "passive participant" in externally-enforced technologies (Oudshoorn & Pinch, 2003), whether CCTV or television media.

As far as individually-owned technologies go, the sex work sector has historically embraced technology adoption with negligible lag. From the automobile, to the (wired) telephone, to the pager, and finally to the mobile phone, the sector has kept abreast of technological developments (MacPhail et al., 2015). Though it is impossible to statistically ascertain whether sex work has increased due to greater mobile phone penetration in metropolitan India, our empirical information indicated that it could have possibly been one of the first informal livelihoods to adopt digital technologies for solicitation, advertising, transactions, and worker solidarity. Cunningham & Kendall (2011) suggest that it was one of the first markets to develop online, giving low-income FSSWs (who encountered the police disproportionally) some of the advantages of high-income escorts, and possibly actually raising the supply of services by newer workers as well as new customers who may not have otherwise publicly transacted. The proliferation and legitimacy of sex work has significantly progressed with the aid of mobile phones and mobile-internet technologies, which allow bypassing of traditional service providers, pimps, formal forms of surveillance, thereby atomizing and collectivizing them simultaneously, and blurring physical and digital boundaries (MacPhail et al., 2015; Ryan, 2019). The majority of Indian sex workers have been observed to use mobile phone solicitation as a routine practice (Shourie & Fernandes, 2017). However, experiences with mobile phones for FSSWs are mixed because engagements with them are on users' own terms and in the context of specific social

infrastructures (Sambasivan et al., 2011). Secrecy from family and expansion of client networks have improved, the artifacts often themselves obtained as payments in kind or as gifts from clients, or as aspirational symbols (Stark, 2013; Suryawanshi et al., 2013). But while continuous visibility in open public spaces is avoided and while advertising has diversified, there are also difficulties for health and outreach workers to trace them, aggravating the likelihood of risky sexual behaviors and the inaudibility of indoor conflict and violence (Murphy & Venkatesh, 2006; Cunningham & Kendall, 2011; Lowthers, 2015; Navani-Vazirani et al., 2015; Panchanadeswaran et al., 2019). Sexual abuse and threats using non-consensual image exchange, disproportionally greater objectification of body parts (and the very personhood) of the FSSW, intimate image abuse, cyber-flashing, "sextortion," technology facilitated sexual violence, and digital rape by jilted customers or even other rival sex workers may become rampant with increased use of smartphones, though it has also helped in counter-surveillance of problematic customers by workers themselves (Nussbaum, 2010; Maddocks, 2018). The detailed study by Panchanadeswaran et al. (2019) in an Indian context also shows how new fears of nonconsensual and stealth photography and video recording by strangers and clients have arisen as seriously as new possibilities in grassroots activism, immediate responses to emergencies, and possible skill building. Mobile phones are therefore ubiquitous and synonymous to sex work even in the global south.[1]

For FSSWs, technological embodiment pronounces the already aggravated subordination and oppression and enhanced marginalization at the hands of revanchist and oppressive policing forces (Neethi, 2020). The social construction and colonization of the sex worker's body is considered a precondition for the maintenance of social order, thereby valorizing social and state practices of containment and control through new technologies, and provoking FSSWs retaliatory contestation and negotiation of power (Brown & Gershon, 2017). The structure and configuration of power itself can be viewed in the entity of the body (Foucault, 1980), most especially so for FSSWs. This need not always be at a macro or aggregate perspective alone. As Wendy Harcourt, who has provided one of the most granular treatments of the theme of body politics, argues: in the normative construction of gender and power, it is everyday life or micro politics that shapes our knowledge and experience of the lived gendered body (Harcourt, 2009). With the rise of digital media, the body has taken on further significance as a site of both self-representation and surveillance, this tension underpinning particularly the female body because it is more subject to constant regulation through hegemonic femininity (Baer, 2016). Digital life is lived through the body in one's engagement with the technologies around us, because digital sexual violence is very much an extension of sexual violence in everyday life, and because technologies can easily help facilitate embodied harm (Powell & Henry, 2017).

So, on the one hand, the politics of technology, experienced through externally enforced or individually owned technologies, are associated with the body and being of the street-based sex worker across gender and economic class. On the other hand, body politics becomes a natural component within technological experience because the bodies and beings of FSSWs have always been pinned-up for socio-political contestation by virtue of their bodies deployed for commerce, livelihood, and survival. Hence, for FSSWs, if technological artifacts are either extensions of one's body

or are weapons of reinforcing power over their bodies, at once, the politics of technology is absorbed into the domain of body politics, and body politics becomes a concern for the politics of technology. We have an interesting reality among FSSWs, where the body becomes a site for socio-political and technological experience, and therefore the politics of technology reinforces body politics in novel dimensions. Adapting from Grosz (1994), socio-political experiences and technological experiences find the body as an arena to situate, providing within this site avenues for emancipation as well as avenues to unfurl convolutedness. At once, the public and private domains of existence for FSSWs are caught in one pincer grasp as a result of body politics and the politics of technology mirroring into one another in one clasp.

Method

We targeted these three technological experiences as they featured most frequently, from their own part, in our primary conversations with FSSWs on the transitions in the sex work sector as such. We soon realized that there was scanty documentation or secondary data on technological experience, and that information was to be sourced verbally. While we would conventionally have embarked on fieldwork employing the interview or focus-group discussion methods, armed with a questionnaire, we discerned that what we actually wanted was more on the lines of collecting experiences around technologies that were interwoven with their own life and livelihood experiences. Accordingly, we sought the oral histories method (see Bosi & Reiter, 2014; Janesick, 2014; Porta, 2014; Ritchie, 2003), assembling, aggregating, collating, and reconstructing recollections and personal commentaries – about experiences, people, artifacts, spaces, and other entities to create a more pixelated picture of their socio-technological experience. This involved us steering and circulating our conversations with FSSWs around these three technological experiences. Following Kamath (2018), we actually collected micro life-histories, i.e., oral accounts of twenty years – much shorter than an entire lifetime, given the emergence and internalization of these technologies in their life and work. We analyzed the material using the narrative analysis method (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Prakash, 2015), analyzing interactions with these technologies across space and time – therefore a metaphorical three-dimensional narrative enquiry space around social, spatial, and temporal technological experiences. Therefore, there was no structured questionnaire, and information was recorded by hand, in their presence; verbal consent was sought, audio-visual recordings avoided, and anonymity ensured.

Overall, we collected narratives from five dozen FSSWs in Bangalore city, aged twenty-four to sixty, snowball sampling them and spending eighteen months visiting and revising them, with the invaluable support of a research assistant. We located them through organizations such as Sangama (our principal guide), the Alternative Law Forum, Aneka, Solidarity Foundation, Sadhana Mahila Sangha, the National Network of Sex Workers, and the Karnataka Sex Workers Union, besides other organizations that cannot be named here. Equally interesting were our interactions with ancillary actors such as health workers, and adversaries such as the police. We chose locations in Bangalore that were geographically and historically focal for FSSWs, such

as the KR Market area (the central wholesale market), the Majestic area (the central bus terminus), and the MG Road area (the central upmarket commercial area). We adapted Kotiswaran (2011) and Hoang (2011) to restrict to low-income FSSWs who solicit in open urban space and in the institutional setting of the street economy, who overwhelmingly and not incidentally of Dalit caste or lower caste.

Technological experiences

Hands, ears, and voices

In our conversations with FSSWs over the entry of the mobile phone in their trade, it was claimed by workers that they were actually one of the initial adopters of the device, stretching as far back as 2001–02 long before most of the mainstream economy adopted this technology for routine commerce. There is clearly, and obviously, an economic-class element in ownership, access, and operation of mobile phones among FSSWs today. In Bangalore city, only the older workers (aged over fifty) or those desperately too poor to afford a device are known to still solicit entirely through traditional verbal or behavioral cues in public spaces. But otherwise, the contemporary sex work era is overwhelmingly operated through mobile phones even among economically lower-middle class and working-class FSSWs who still do stand on the streets but own and operate devices for sex work commensurate to their affordability. These range from simpler GSM phones, to the middle-range smartphones that are affordable with savings from a few months' earnings, to the high-priced phones that are operated by younger FSSWs and those with greater monetary clout.

Workers narrated to us, enthusiastically, how the phone is a boon for solicitation. They expressed vividly how it is a fantastic platform to put forward expectations, declare limitations, advertise variety of services offered, share photographs and text messages between customer and worker, improve quality of services and negotiate for prices, allow the customer to woo the worker to agree to offer services, maintain personal contact long after services, and keep a repository of customers' and workers' numbers. FSSWs expressed how it is now better when finding customers and negotiating over the phone as compared to standing on a pavement, bus station, marketplace, park, shopping complex, or any other such open public spaces where it was impossible to sustain being concealed. One of the workers put it quite succinctly, suggesting a bodily presence in virtual space:

> I am inside the phone [sic], which is much better than me being in the open areas.

Several other FSSWs concurred how it felt safer for their bodies to be planted for solicitation within that virtual space compared to physical urban space. It was revealed to us how there are dozens of FSSW groups on WhatsApp, and how it is very difficult to enter these groups because it requires consent from workers incumbent in the group to affirm that the applicant was not an undercover police informer or trafficker or abuser. The purpose of these groups is not only to share information about availability at a certain day or time, but also to share pictures and videos for solicitation, and for strengthening solidarity (which we shall discuss later). One worker described how if a customer contacted her and she was not available or willing to offer services

to him, she would forward his text message onto the WhatsApp group so that someone available and willing would respond. Often, FSSWs receive phone-calls or text messages from anonymous men who sought their services, who had received the worker's contact details from other past customers. When this was narrated to us by a worker, another worker chimed in and said rather eloquently:

> I feel like I'm being passed around

While this statement was conveyed with a slant of amusement, it strongly suggested that the phone facilitated the bodily commodification of these workers much more than they traditionally already were subjected to as "prostitutes." More accounts on detrimental experiences were replete, elaborating on how it is also a tool for creative forms of oppression and exploitation against FSSWs. While workers are dexterous with the phone as a prosthetic to their hands and bodies, they have little control when other external agents gained a grasp on it. Many workers related how there is an interesting trend in police atrocity against sex workers that has been established as a de facto modus operandi when arresting or detaining an FSSW – take her phone away and use the device to threaten her. Workers narrated that while in the old days it was usually a baton lashing or a standard overnight detention at the police station with rampant sexual abuse, the first move now by the police is to confiscate their phone, browse through their contact list for other workers, threaten to call families, and even publicize the worker. One worker poignantly said that when a policeman grabbed their phone and clutched it in his hands throughout their detention or interrogation, it felt like being "handcuffed." Another worker explained how the police now actually do not need to restrain them or keep them in custody for twenty-four hours, relating her personal experience of how on one occasion a policeman asked her to submit her phone and sarcastically asked her to "now go home;" in effect, they had restrained her entire body at the station without touching her or directing her movements. It felt almost like she could not leave the station with a part of her body behind. Another worker shared:

> They don't need to clutch my hand anymore … they now only need my phone. It's as good as tying me up.

A disturbing trend was how the police, even on the open streets, simply snatch the phone away from the hands of an FSSW, and create a spectacle of humiliation. One worker narrated:

> He just kept shouting out "Geetha, Aruna, Dhanalakshmi, Nagamma … " from my phone in his hand, right in front of Triveni theatre, a really crowded area where people were looking and wondering what was happening. In fact, Dhanalakshmi was standing right across the road and she froze stiff. She later wept seeing my condition that morning.

If the handover of the phone is not complied with, workers are easily threatened for bribes in cash, or even with demands for unpaid sex. While conversing with a police inspector during fieldwork, he brandished to us his ingenuity in establishing a routine among lodges and hotels in his precinct in central Bangalore to send a photograph of their guest register every night by WhatsApp to him so that the police are minutely aware of bodily movements within lodges. Yet another strategy was to retain their contact lists and call other FSSWs on that list posing as potential customers or

old customers, lure them, and trap them – again, with threats to confiscate their phones.

However, the police were not the only agents in using phones to trap workers. Customers with criminal intentions also lured FSSWs to desolate areas by directing them through phone-call to "preferred" locations for sexual services, and then robbing them, attacking them, or even gang-raping them. Before digital payments became common, fraudsters posing as customers demanded photographs and videos on the pretext of offering higher prices, but eventually did not show up for paid sexual services at the agreed location, and instead shared the material from their part for a price, or simply for thrill among friends. Some of these individuals would even intimidate the worker about how the material was now (or would be) widely spread, and that she would have to pay him with either cash or unpaid sex to cease this. One worker told us quite emotionally:

> The pictures of my body are now everywhere, without me knowing!

This practically holds the worker at ransom for money or unpaid sex. Kidnapping FSSWs in the past was not easy given the protection they had from local goons, male sex workers, transgender workers, and others on the streets. Or in other cases, workers submitted to unpaid sex because they could not afford to inform their families that they (in the capacity of sex workers) were held for ransom, as the families would abandon them immediately. Now, however, kidnapping the body virtually is all too familiar an issue for FSSWs. When we asked them how they got around it, they said that they now offer photographs only subsequent to a digital payment that was a sizeable percentage of the actual fee for sexual services in person. This was not foolproof, and opens up a whole new Pandora's Box of transaction and service, but did curtail incidents of illicit circulation and threat. The unkindest cut, however, is when on some rare instances FSSWs share (or sell) their colleagues' photographs and videos to customers as vengeance for some interpersonal rivalry. One worker said that before the phone came, rival workers met at a desolate location in the city's outskirts to fight and settle scores, or request goons to harass a rival in public. Now, however, bodies of rivals are available in virtual space to harass and avenge.

At the same time, the phone is now the voice, the ear, and the forum for solidarity and outreach among workers and their supportive ancillaries such as health workers and social workers. Much more than for settling scores, the phone, workers overwhelmingly related, has been instrumental in offering emotional support and even saving workers' lives. Many friendships with other workers are entirely on the phone, often never having personally met one another. In this manner, cliques of workers have formed on virtual spaces where one can raise an alarm if they are in bodily danger, or if they are being harassed by families, or on the verge of suicide, or if they need money (which can be transferred digitally too). When a worker is accosted by police or henchmen on the street, other workers have on many occasions signaled and alerted either their FSSW colleagues or local goons they have befriended, and they also reached sex worker unions and collectives operating at state and national levels, prompting public outrage and seeking of legal support. Workers said that they have on many instances put up photographs, names, phone numbers, and even

secretly filmed videos of customers who have either misbehaved or have not paid, as a warning to other FSSWs to keep off these individuals. Some are known to even maintain open and visible communities on Facebook for the public to understand issues of atrocity, rights, and livelihood concerns of sex workers, where any worker is welcome to post instances of transgression.

Experiences have been mixed for social workers, though. While on the one hand they are able to extend legal support by circulating contacts of legal and social services (or even human rights information, job offers, government schemes, etc.) on the phone to workers; on the other hand, it is also now harder to track those workers who have disappeared from the streets of the city and who leave negligible digital footprint. Emotional and psychological support is both easier with immediate reach, on the one hand, but also hard in case the worker loses or gets robbed of her phone during violent skirmishes or by the family. Health workers, however, have lamented for the most part that while finding FSSWs on site was much easier in the days when the streets were filled with them, migration to digital platforms have scattered them and made it far harder to track them. This was a particularly hard problem for health workers who had to already do an additional job of persuading them to come for medical checkups and receive condoms, but are now perplexed as to how to pursue workers who are for the most part invisible in their phone networks. "They just conveniently disappear" said one health worker, suggesting that the more hesitant FSSWs were now able to hide behind a digital curtain.

Eyes and memories

But one could not hide in public spaces as easily. When FSSWs frequented the open spaces in the city for decades, they usually encountered the local police constable. However, there are now "many more eyes" as one worker put it with obvious references to the ubiquity of CCTV cameras in bus stations, railway stations, shopping complexes, parks, traffic signals, on private buildings, shops, and plazas. In our conversations, FSSWs constantly referred to the threatening eyes that looked down upon them from every other pillar and wall:

> I can't go to that park anymore since the cameras are all over. The young lovers seem to have little problem continuing their activities, but the bunch of [neighborhood] association people who installed those cameras are on the prowl for people like us and of course TGs [transgender individuals].

While those with a criminal intent would (perhaps deservedly) feel intimidated, and regular passersby would probably not bother (or might even feel safe), FSSWs have a complicated experience with CCTV surveillance. While the feeling of being watched is a direct inheritance from the traditional social monitoring of "prostitution," the intensity of being watched by CCTV surveillance is altogether a new experience. Another worker related:

> It feels like those cameras also have some vulgar intent. Yes, we know they are not alive, but there are people behind those cameras, right? Now aren't they seeing our bodies? I can't throw stones at that camera and expect it will stop looking at me. They'll arrest me if I damage the camera, and then simply replace it.

Before CCTVs, we could easily shoo away boys who used to just stare at us. But now, whoever is behind those cameras don't want our services and instead just wants to watch us. I can't possibly shout at a camera or ask the person behind it whether he wants my services!

While sentiments about their bodies being watched with perverted intent might or might not be misplaced, what is certain is that the motivation of surveillance is to maintain a sense of "decency" and to nab solicitation of sex work or pimping in public. Commercial sex work is easily conflated with immoral trafficking in India and is routinely brought under the scrutiny of law and order through the easily misused Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act 1956.[2] Our conversations with police personnel on CCTVs brought out how they wish to create a "safe" and "clean" space for "good hard-working people" and "families" (these terms reproduced here verbatim, also implying that FSSWs are neither good, hardworking, nor family women), intending to remove elements such as transgender individuals and homeless beggars around city spaces. One police inspector put it very directly:

With this superb technology, we are now able to control all movements and all people in public. We are not doing anything secret, and everyone must know that they are protected. That's why they are there for everyone to see. And by the way, why should anyone be scared? If you're not doing anything wrong, there's nothing to be scared of. But if you're doing something wrong, we can see your every move. You decide which side you want to be on. Our job is to maintain law and order and make sure Bangalore doesn't become like some Bombay red-light area or some picnic garden for the mafia. These CCTVs help a lot.

FSSWs had a very different position on the matter. They cited that "rescue" and "rehabilitate" strategies dispossessed them of their agency as women workers, and that CCTV surveillance was routinely used to move them away from the public space for their "protection," or how some police constables used to gesture to FSSWs that a CCTV camera is watching them. Supervision and abuse were simultaneously achieved with this. One worker told us of the first time she realized what this technology was.

A police constable and his friend a shopkeeper told me of these cameras. I never knew what they were until a week after they were installed near that mall. They mockingly told me that my every move is being watched. Only then did I realize that there's now something else that has got control of my body.

Quite strikingly put by this worker, other FSSWs also chimed in:

I really felt on many occasions that that camera was menacingly looking at me, practically groping me.

I felt almost that something or someone was watching and controlling every move of my body. That thing actually has an angry expression if you look closely, telling me that it knows what I am doing here with my body.

When workers were adding in to this conversation, one of them said that the police even informed her that her movements were remembered "forever" by the camera. At this point, other respondents sitting around froze in shock. Many, mostly older workers, were genuinely not aware that it had a memory. We vividly recorded what our respondents had to say after this fact was put forth.

You mean to say that thing has a brain to remember all that I did?

> So anyone in the police station can bring up where I was standing? Even who I was with? My clients, my friends who are not sex workers, those who are sex workers? It can see all of them?

> Oh God, save us all! Now I am stuck inside its brain too.

The last utterance was particularly remarkable for us, as it evoked an eeriness that her body was trapped in a device for all to see and recollect. Other similar narrations imparted the message that their omnipotence in facilitating the monitoring, supervising, and controlling of bodies in open public space is worsened only by the fact that their bodily movements were even stored in memory for a period of time.

Techno-Cultural mobs

A new actor on the scene in the sphere of sex work is television media, particularly native-language news channels. Using concealed audiovisual recording equipment, or often unabashedly openly recording and broadcasting the personal identities, families, solicitation operations, and even fabricating conspiracies against the community, television media has emerged as a new aggressor. While the paramount motivation is to whip up sensational appeal and boost television rating points[3], at the root is a new-found veneer of morality that coats the imagination of a "desired" city, where foraging for and exposing human desirables within this imaginary is a task that is outsourced to agents far smaller than the state and law enforcement. Actors such as the media hunt and uncover individuals and groups, embellish their existence and livelihood with sleaze and convolution, and broadcast this with blaring pulp and thrill.

This has been achieved most spectacularly when pursuing transgender individuals. In an "exposé" by the Kannada language television channel TV9 in 2016, a young transgender individual was accosted and accused by this channel of forcefully castrating a young "normal" boy, based on his mother's allegations; this transgender individual herself supposedly the victim of such a procedure. The ripple effects were felt by dozens of other transgender individuals who found the police and the media barging into their homes and invasively video-recording with no consent.[4]

With FSSWs, however, media hounding in public spaces has been rampant and habitual in Bangalore and other cities and small towns, with the express intent of unveiling the immoral and criminal horror that lurks in the streets of our upright and proper cities. Almost all of our FSSW narrators brought out story after story of how they have been spied upon by television cameras planted secretly on the terraces of buildings, or sometimes have even had a camera and microphone thrust in front of their faces. In one instance:

> When one or two journalists came up to me while I was standing in front of a medical shop and asked me dirty questions about my price and clientele, I gave them the choicest of abuses and they ran away. But one day, they came with in a van that had all kinds of equipment in it, and practically attacked us. Not with sticks or batons, but with cameras and mics.

> Yes, I too was there. They rounded up many women, some of them beggars and homeless, and showered them with cameras. The man with the mic was not even asking us questions, but rattling away with his own descriptions, asking – "what is going on in our city?" Later, when my friends told me they saw us on TV, I realized with shock that they were covering us live.

> I've been doing sex work on the streets for thirty years. We never had this problem long ago, but that's because there were no such cameras, no WhatsApp, no online [sic], and the only thing telecast live was a cricket match.

FSSWs also narrated how, in a few instances, after being dragged to the police station, there was already a cameraman and reporter standing there. While it was still unclear if the police had requested the media to arrive, the police-media nexus in surveillance and control of FSSWs has solidified, as one worker told us:

> Not every time is there a media presence outside a police station. But it is quite common now for the police to threaten of "media attention," roping in TV journalists and displaying us to the whole world.

It was not the aggressive reporting on the ground, but also the final product of the investigation that radiated a thrilling scandal. Reportage on FSSWs display fancy graphics and thumping and menacing background music that create an ambience of sordidness and criminality, and a (male-voice) narration that swells and swoons with shock and exasperation on what has become of the city and how these women were destroying the sanctity of femininity. The body and being of the immoral public woman were for all to see and critique, given the explicit (rarely blurred-out) faces of FSSWs telecast in full view, routinely with simulated visuals (such as circles and arrows in the visual) that highlighted their movements and activities in public and private. In their own words:

> I'm sure audience were looking at me with both shock and lust on that TV program. I was showcased on TV for everyone to comment on my appearance and how I earned. They put a red blinking circle pointing at my handbag and phone.

> I'm doing nothing illegal. But I was on full view for all the world to see. My face and my body. They blacked out everyone else on the screen except me. The cameras scanned and broadcast every part of me. After all, that's what they were looking for, to show and earn their money. What is this? Some new form of mob justice?

There was no doubt that this techno-cultural hounding was possible with sanction from viewers, who silently approved of this variety of techno-cultural surveillance by avidly consuming these savory snippets and anecdotes. The control of these bodies in public or private spaces is a collectively legitimized and valorized project, elevated innovatively by the media.

Summary and discussion

Let us summarize our findings for each technological experience to realize how the experience of body politics and the politics of technology are multi-faceted and concurrent.

For the mobile phone,

- There is a surrogate presence of the body in virtual space that assists in FSSWs' operations
- The commodification, exploitation, and abuse of FSSWs' body have donned a virtual incarnation, both by abusive and criminal customers as well as the police (who

have found it a proxy of the FSSW body to pursue detention, threatening, and invasion of personal privacy)

- However, it has also improved worker solidarity

In the case of surveillance,

- The endorsement, legitimization, and weeding out of unwanted bodies such as FSSWs are now done by silent spectators through a high-technology medium
- The historical tradition of monitoring the female body is now done digitally
- There has been severe erosion of the ownership and agency of the FSSW's body, as well as dissemination of information about its movements

And with television media,

- The identification and victimization of the FSSW's body are now done by techno-cultural actors
- Invasive and humiliation tactics toward FSSWs are now technologically far more sophisticated
- Opinions on the moral legitimacy of the public woman and existential questions on the FSSW are now thrown open to those viewing far beyond the immediate space

Let us elaborate on these. The mobile phone creates a surrogate presence of the body of the FSSW in virtual space, where she is able to effectively solicit, negotiate, and even offer limited forms of service and voyeurism. Operations using mobile phones have gained especially significant validity during the time of writing this paper, when the COVID-19 pandemic is raging in India, manifold times worse in the second wave than the first, with sex workers suffering disproportionately with little state or social support (with the exception of states such as Maharashtra that have recognized these workers). The threat of physical violence on the street may be diminished but one's bodily privacy is also seriously compromised. Commodification is intensified when bodies are "passed around" via the phone, a discomfort exploited by law enforcement who virtually handcuff the worker and restrain her in the police station by holding hostage her phone, an extension of her body. The bodies of the workers are held to ransom, threatened with illicit circulation of images and videos. However, FSSWs have also narrated at length how the phone is not only an extension of the hand but also an extended ear, voice, and heart. It appears, as we meditate more on these metaphors, that the phone is a proxy of the body itself, and hence the politics of the device intersect with the politics of the body.

However, an equally anthropomorphic casting of a technological device that exerts control over the body in space and time is with respect to CCTV cameras. As evidenced by law enforcement agents, this surveillance (publicly and legally endorsed and legitimized) serves multiple purposes including the sifting and weeding out of undesirable bodies in the urban human landscape of the imagined city, motivated at its core by a reconstructed definition of the "public" itself. This technology has faithfully continued

the historical tradition of monitoring the immoral public woman. The outcome is an unwilling and helpless erosion of ownership of their bodies in space and time, with respect to agents possessing knowledge and information about their bodily presence and movements, which can be drawn from to implement social control.

Television media as a techno-cultural actor has become a self-ordained guardian of social morality, dutifully weeding out dastardly elements such as FSSWs who adulterate social order and the purity of the female body, often by preemptive sting operations. This new emissary of social morality has given itself the full freedom to identify and victimize those bodies who are not in consonance with the larger social definition of legitimate public bodies or urban informal workers (such as street vendors, recreational walkers, blue- and white-collar workers, families, shoppers, etc.). This new techno-cultural force, with its intentions of scanning and scrutinization of threats to morality and public health, curtails the agency of the body in public and private spheres using invasive and public-humiliation tactics, and calls upon the public to comment upon and circulate these visuals, almost in the medieval manner of putting a person on stocks and pillories in a town center. The patriarchy-framed discourse around the definition and classification of the "public woman" is regurgitated by this actor, inviting the gaze of "decent" citizen to question the moral legitimacy of her very existence and her bodily citizenship.

When we understand technology as everyday experience and practice among the marginalized (and when "equitable technological access" moves beyond merely redistributive issues of devices), oppressive power structures immediately stand tall before us, prompting us to evaluate the interaction between technology, citizenship, and social justice (Eubanks, 2007). Technological experience then becomes a site of struggle, and the visibly massive penetration of technology into everyday life provokes questions of social justice and socio-cultural and political inequalities (Feenberg, 1991; Shade, 2011). We need to rectify the tone, tendency, and content of the public discussion around technology from one that studies unidirectionally the social impact of a technology to one that studies the social circumstances of its development, deployment, and use (Kamath, 2020; Winner, 1980). The need to ruminate over and include critical technological citizenship in policy discussions and academic analyses becomes a pronounced necessity, because technology is an actor itself on the shifting terrains of citizenship claims, and which can effortlessly erase socially just values as much as it can help build them (Eubanks, 2007). Bangalore's FSSWs can immediately testify to this with their technological experiences, which not only intersect with their bodily experiences, but also with their citizenship and labor rights. Their ongoing struggles and movements seek to counter their technological status as "implicated actors" (Oudshoorn & Pinch, 2003), i.e., those who may not be present in the development of technologies but who are certainly affected by the action of being discursively constructed and targeted by explicit political agendas embedded in the technologies they encounter.

Conclusion

Bangalore's FSSWs have encountered new socio-technological experiences both in the capacity of individually-owned devices as well as externally-enforced artifacts and platforms. As we have revealed in this paper, the politics of these technologies have a

unique fallout for this section of informal workers because it mirrors their body politics as well. These are not incidental but deeply intertwined in a spectrum of directions. The intersections between body politics and the politics of technology continually conjoin on several planes, sharing multiple rationales and empirical experiences. If technological artifacts are extensions of the body or are weapons of reinforcing power over their bodies, the politics of technology and body politics effortlessly overlap in their case. We reinforce with this study that the FSSW's body becomes a site for socio-political and technological experience, simultaneously.

Notes

1. There is also ample literature on the politics of the mobile phone arising out of its construction as a bodily extension. It is perceived as an affective technology that is perennially proximate to the hand and body (even when not in use), practically an extension to the hand, and which radiates a display of the self, a sense of style, and an aesthetic with emotive significance, which fundamentally transforms people's perception (and construction) of themselves and the world (Campbell, 2008; Kiesler et al., 1994; Lasen, 2004; McGuigan, 2005; Oksman & Rautiainen, 2003; Townsend, 2000, 2012). While there are variable social constructions of its usage (Kamath, 2020), universal consistencies still remain even across disparate cultures (Campbell, 2008; Katz & Aakhus, 2002).
2. See the work of Prabha Kotiswaran (such as Kotiswaran, 2011) for a much deeper treatment of the theme of the law and sex work in India.
3. TRP, a numerical indicator of the viewership of a television program, has emerged as the basis of television content in contemporary India. While corporate interests may justify sourcing news stories that attract larger audiences, these are often divorced from news broadcasting standards as well as legal and common ethics.
4. See 'Operation Anandi: A Sting Operation That's Filled With Bias and Lies' by *The Ladies Finger*, published online 10 November 2016, accessed 1 June 2020.

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