



CHALLENGES AND UNHEARD VOICES OF FEMALE MASSAGE THERAPISTS' IN ADDIS ABABA CITY ADMINISTRATION, ETHIOPIA: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

In Africa so many archeological evidences assert that massage therapy has been practiced since ancient time, for the purpose of medication. Currently, people in African countries use massage as an illicit sex business activity. Massage work is one of the growing business activities in Ethiopia and women become the main actors in the business. However, little is known about the challenges faced by female massage therapists. Hence, the main purpose of this study is to capture the experiences of female massage therapists in Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia. To meet the objective of the study, qualitative approach with phenomenology design was employed. Ten female massage therapists were purposively selected and interviewed. The data was analyzed by using thematic qualitative data analysis technique. The results indicated that female massage therapists encounters a number of challenges which include social prejudice, sexual violence, psychological problem and health related challenges like sanitation and hygienic problems, sexual transmitted infection and skin diseases. It was concluded that the working conditions of female massage therapists were negatively impacted by the aforementioned problems. Therefore, corrective measures are to be taken by concerned bodies to redress the problems.

Keywords: Massage, Female Therapists, Addis Ababa and Ethiopia

INTRODUCTION

Massage refers to any method of treating the external parts of the human body for remedial, relaxation or any other purpose (Kennedy *et al.*, 2016). Massage techniques are commonly applied whether by means of pressure on, friction against or stroking, rubbing, vibrating or any other manner of touching external parts of the human body with the hands, or with the aid of any mechanical appliance, with or without supplementary aids such as oil, powder, cream, ointment or other similar lubrications (McLaughlin, 2016). Massage therapist or practitioner means any person who administers massage to another person in exchange for money (CAMTC, 2016).

It is not exactly known when and where relaxation massage therapy business started, but it has been practiced for a long period of time in the history of mankind. Some literatures indicate that it has been exercised since ancient Egyptian time in the 21st century, but throughout the period, massage has remained a favored means of treatment for pain and other ailments as well as a means to achieve relaxation and wellness (Calvert, 2002). Soldiers during World War I also used it to treat nerve damage and

shell shock. Interestingly enough, it was Thomas's Hospital of London which had established a formal department of physical massage therapy in 1930's (US Career Institution, 2017).

Likewise, massage therapy had been appearing in Ethiopia during ancient time through ancient merchants, but nowadays the massage business changed its form and becoming the issue of prostitution and human trafficking (McLaughlin, 2016). However, this new development is not only seen in Ethiopia but it has also existed in the rest world. For instance, the Colorado regulatory agency reported that there are numbers of prostitution and human trafficking offense cases linked to massage therapy and its report stated that over the last two years, the Division of Professions and Occupations had dealt with more than 30 cases in Colorado that indicated suspected human trafficking and prostitution cases within the legitimate practice of the massage therapy profession (Brown, 2016).

Although relaxation massage has negative side due to the recent development, it has been still an important topic only for medical researchers. To mention some of these medical researches which were merely done in developed





countries, Corbin (2005) done a study on “Safety and efficacy of massage therapy for patients with cancer”. Billhult and Dahlberg (2001) also studied on “Meaningful relief from suffering experiences of massage in cancer care”. Bell (2008) also conducted a study on the topic entitled: “Massage therapy helps to increase range of motion, decrease pain and assist in healing a client with low back pain and sciatica symptoms”. Furthermore, Hillier *et al.* (2010) studied on “Massage therapy for people with HIV/AIDS”. When we evaluated these research works, almost all of them focused on the health related benefits of massage, and, therefore, failed to focus on the social aspect of massage therapy which ought to be catching the attention the researchers in the contemporary world.

Unlike other developed countries, Ethiopian scholars have given little attention to relaxation massage therapy. Hence, it is hardly to get ample research on relaxation massage therapy in Ethiopia whether it is medical or social researches. The only available local studies that related to massage therapy were Bethlehem (2005) and Addis Ababa Women Children and Youth Affair (AWCYA) (2005) studies. Bethlehem (2005) on her study that entitled: “Negotiating social space: sex-workers and the social context of sex work in Addis Ababa” divulged that massage service centers are a place of hidden commercial sex. However, her study had given more emphasis on the experience of sex workers in Addis Ababa and she did not treat relaxation massage therapy as the main part of her study.

The other research conducted by AWCYA (2005) focused on factors influencing of immigrant culture on women and youth life in Addis Ababa and among its several findings, within a single paragraph, it mentioned that massage business houses are a place of illegal (hidden) sex which is performed mostly by high school girls and poor women. To conclude, relaxation massage therapy has been so far overlooked by Ethiopian academicians and researchers. Cognizant of the above research gaps therefore, this study attempts to generate deep understanding of the lived experience of female massage therapists in the Addis Ababa city, particularly at *Bole* and *Yeka* sub city Administrations.

METHOD

Study Area: Addis Ababa is the capital city of Ethiopia, with a total population of 3,384,569. It is also the political

capital of Africa, where the Africa Union (AU) headquarters is situated. Addis Ababa lies 9°1'48"N latitude and 38°44'24"E longitude (Central Statistical Agency (CSA), 2012). The city is located at the heart of the country at an altitude ranging from 2,100 meters at *Akaki* in the south to 3,000(9,800 ft) meters at *Entoto Hill* in the North. The city is divided into ten sub-cities, in terms of area coverage *Bole* is the largest sub-city followed by *Akaki- Kality* and *Yeka*. *Addis ketema* is the smallest and followed by *Lideta* and *Arada* Sub-cities. The sub-cities are also divided in to *weredas*, which are the smallest administrative unit in the city. There are 116 *weredas* in the city administration (BoFED, 2019).

Research Approach and Design: A qualitative approach with phenomenological design was employed to explore the different challenges that female massage therapists experience at their working places. The researchers applied this design due to three major reasons. The first reason is that this study focused on exploring the lived experience of female massage therapists and secondly, it tried to explore their hidden experiences. It also attempted to discern their experiences from their own own words.

Sampling Technique: In this study, the purposive sampling technique was dominantly employed to select the area and participants of the study. Accordingly, Addis Ababa was purposively selected partly because of the availability of massage centers and partly because of the fact that the researchers are familiar with the study area as the researchers had been living in the city for a long time. Among the capital's sub cities, *Bole* and *Yeka* sub cities were selected as the study sites because many tourists and foreign guests are hosted and served daily in these places. Regarding participants selection, the researchers used both purposive and quota sampling techniques. In this respect, the researcher initially grouped the participants into two (those who are high profiled massage worker and those who are not). By applying quota sampling technique, the researcher selected both high profiled and low profiled female relaxation massage workers from top hotels and slum houses respectively. Subsequently, purposive sampling technique was applied to select participants from the two groups. At this stage, some inclusion criteria were set to select the participants purposively.

Inclusion and Exclusion criteria: These inclusion criteria are: being female, having more than one year working experience, being a regular massage worker and having an





age greater than 18 years. Massage workers or thereapists who did not meet any of these criteria were excluded.

Sample Size: A total of 10 female massage workers that met the inclusion criteria were interviewed.

Ethical Considerations: In order to comply with the code of ethics of research, this particular study began with the successful effort to secure ethical approval from Bahir Dar University Ethical Clearance Committee. Following the ethical approval, we prepared a written consent form. Within the consent slips, the participants were informed about the purpose of the study and other pertinent issues regarding the study. In order to preserve anonymity and confidentiality of the participants, we used codes instead of their real names. In addition, any individual participant identifiers were totally removed from the report of the findings of the study. Pertaining to the right to privacy of the participants, we did not impinge on the participants not to withdraw from the study. For that matter, none of the participants exhibited any inclination to withdraw from the study. Moreover, we did not force them to provide information that they did not want to disclose for the sake of their own privacy. Additionally, the time and settings of the interviews were selected by considering the interest of the participants. We also took every crucial measure and caution not to inflict any harm, inhumane treatment and deceptions on the participants during interview sessions. We reported only the real findings of the research without distortion or omission.

Data Collection Technique and Procedure: An in-depth interview guideline was initially prepared in English but it was then translated to the local language, Amharic. It was pretested before the actual field work. 12 female massage therapists were selected based on the above stated inclusion criteria. Prior to the interview session, some arrangements were also made to find a convenient time for each interviewee. The massage therapists were found usually busy as some of them needed to meet someone else after knocking off, while others work 16 hours at the massage parlors. To find a convenient interview time, the researchers exerted lots of effort and waited for them patiently. At the end, the researchers successfully conducted interviews with them. Each interview was held without disturbance and lasted for more than two hours. The issues covered in the in-depth interview session included social, sexual, health and psychological challenges. The interview was done by the researchers and their reflections were captured via audio recorder.

Data Analysis: The phenomenological research's data analysis is relayed on information collected from interviewees. Though this method was lengthy and time consuming, its data could be organized categorically and analyzed thematically (Creswell, 2013). Thus, in accordance with phenomenological research data analysis process, the researchers followed the following major steps. First, the voices and responses of the participant recorded during the interview were transcribed to text form. While performing this, attentive listening and careful note taking was employed for valid documentation. The noted data was translated from Amharic into English. After the transcription and translation processes, coding procedure was followed by giving a false name to address participants. The coding helps to minimize the researchers bias in the analysis of cases. Then, the researchers read the coded text data thoroughly so to be familiar with the information. Afterward, the coded data was categorized into similar or related categories. The categorized data was then converted into themes. Finally, interpretation and analysis was made on each theme.

Data Quality Assurance: To ensure the quality of the data, the in-depth interview guideline was first prepared and was given for experts on related discipline to comment on the contents, language and overall patterns of the tool. Based on the comments improvements was made and enriched. In addition, the instrument was pilot tested on similar participants who were not incorporated in the study. Based on feedback from the participants, the instrument was further enriched. As the phenomenology study focuses on the lived experience of individuals, the data was merely collected through in-depth interview method. Hence, this kind of study has an innate limitation to crosscheck information by using different qualitative data collection instruments. However, to minimize this limitation, member checking system was utilized. To this effect, the researchers met the participants again and briefed them about the result of study and then asked them to confirm whether their real voices are properly captured or not. This indicates that the result of the study was crosschecked by the participants of the study.

RESULTS

This study found out that female massage workers in the study area face diversified and complicated challenges throughout their working life. The major obstacles, which come from different corners, are classified into four broad



themes which are social, sexual, health and psychological challenges.

Social Challenge

As per the result of the study, many people had considered all female massage therapists as prostitutes, though majority of them were doing the massage work by refraining themselves from sex business. In the light of this, one of the interviewees demonstrated her views as:

I thought that massage work is a good profession but the purpose and benefit of massage work are not clearly known by the society. Due to this reason, many people have labelled female massage therapists as prostitutes. Such negative perception of the community makes me feel discomfort about the job that I do (Participant 1).

Moreover, female massage therapists did not let their family members know about their job since they had a fear that their parent may not accept their job due to the current social taboo given for massage work. This matter is briefly elaborated by the account of the following participant;

The major challenge I am facing while I am doing the massage work is attributed with the negative societal stereotype towards massage work. I do not still inform to my parents what I am doing. I just cheat them as if I am doing another job. The massage house that I have worked for is located in the hidden area and far from where my families reside, so nobody can see me and inform my parent about my job (Participant 2).

The prevailing wrong perception of the society about massage work is resulted due to two major reasons. The first reason is related to lack of societal knowledge about the importance of massage therapy since the Ethiopian government did not take any measure to sensitize the community about massage work. The second reason is aligned with the expansion of illegal sex massage houses in the city. In one way or another way the community knows about the existence of illegal massage parlors that do offer sex. Such scenario would ultimately affect the society to have a belief of massage work is used as a front for prostitution. One of the participants clearly explained this matter by saying:

Recently, illegal massage houses have been expanding at an alarming speed in the Addis Ababa city. This situation drives out the legal massage houses at the same time the professional therapists from the market. Therefore, this development has its own role in the creation of wrong societal perception towards female massage workers. In spite of this problem, the government did not take action either to aware the community about the importance of massage work or to control the expansion of illegal massage parlors in the city (Participant 3).

Based on the above information, we can deduce that female massage therapists had suffered a lot due to the prevailing negative societal attitude towards massage therapy. However, the participants declined to criticize the society for the occurrence of this problem, rather they blamed the government as it failed to sensitize the community and control those illegal and unethical massage parlors that distorted the good image of massage therapists.

Sexual Violence

As the study pinpointed out, sexual violence was another challenge facing female massage therapists. The participants asserted that sexual violence has been manifested in various forms that include rape and sexual harassment. Concerning the rape issue, the participants undoubtedly disclosed that rape was committed against them at their working places or outside. However, it is a less reported issue since the victim therapists were afraid to report the case for the legal bodies. In this regard, one of the victim female therapists shared her story by saying:

One day, the owner of the massage parlor ordered me to give massage service for his friend at his home. I could not oppose his order because I was afraid that he would dismiss me from my job. His friend then took me to his home and I had given massage service for him there. When I was ready to leave his home, he had suddenly caught my hand and asked me to sleep at his home. I had refused his request, but he took me to his bed forcefully. When he tried to rape me, I was screaming loudly, but no one saved me. I did not report the issue to the police office because I felt that the police officers might



not accept my appeal by thinking that I would not go to his home if I do not need sex with him (Participant 4).

Based on the above reflection, we can understand that rape was practiced against female massage therapists by their customers with the knowledge of the massage owners. This suggests that the massage parlors' owners were the one who facilitated all arrangements for the customers to commit such inhuman activity on female therapists.

Regarding to sexual harassment, the participants of the study elucidated that sexual harassment was perpetrated against them in various ways. Forcing to wear sexy clothes, forcing into prostitution, unwanted sex request argument, and unwelcome touching of sexual bodies were among the ways that the perpetrators used to sexually harass female massage therapists. In this regard, one participant shared with us her experience as follows;

When I took courses at the massage training center, I learned that a massage therapist must respect the dressing ethics that the massage work demands. It is recommended that a massage therapist should wear a white gown during massaging time. As opposed to this, the massage owner has often ordered me to dress in a way that provokes the sexual interest of customers. This scenario exposes me to confront unnecessary sexual requests from some of my customers (Participant 5).

The above quotation clearly asserted that the professional dressing right of female massage therapists was violated by the massage centers. This was happening only for the benefit of the massage parlors. Due to such self-centered motive of the massage parlors, female massage practitioners had frequently faced sexual harassment in their workplace. On top of this, some massage houses had deliberately forced female massage therapists to be engaged in illicit sex activity. The story of the following participant affirmed this problem;

After I graduated from the massage training center, I started searching of massage work. However, most of the massage centers had not vacant post for new therapists. At that time, I got frustrated because my families are very poor and they need my support. One day, I visited a massage parlor located somewhere

around 'bole' sub city and I asked the owner of the parlor to offer me a job. He said: 'If you are willing to engage in sex business at the massage house, you will immediately get a job'. I was a bit nervous by his words. In the meantime, I used to think how my little sisters and mother lead miserable life. Finally, I decided to involve in sex business just to get money for my family (Participant 6).

The study also found out that most of the customers had inflicted unwanted sex request and unwelcome body touching against female therapists. The participants vowed that they were victimized for such types of harassment on daily bases. In connection with this idea, one of the participants said:

Most of my customers have requested me to have sex with them. I have usually handled such case by telling them that I am a married woman and do not want harm my marriage life. Some other customers have attempted to hold or grab the sexual area of my body without my consent. My customers are from varying ethnic, race, nation, academic, age and financial backgrounds. I was harassed by all these different groups of customers. However, I was usually harassed by local customers (Participant 7).

Likewise, another participant stated that;

I don't want to participate in sexual activity in the massage house. I have faced many customers failing to control their sexual feeling. Some behave like a person who is sexually addicted. Whenever I face this problem, I have often advised them to showering their sexual organs in cold water for getting rid of erections. On other occasions, I have informed them to insert their sexual organ into the hole located in the middle of massage bed which is prepared for masturbation purpose (Participant 8).

From the above verbatim accounts, we can comprehend that all groups of people irrespective of nationality, race, profession and age were involved in the sexual harassment practice, though local customers were mentioned by the participants as the major groups who frequently



committed sexual harassment against female therapists. From the reflection of the participants we can also know that female massage therapists used various coping mechanisms including giving space for masturbation to manage any potential sexual assault that might be inflicted against them.

Health Related Challenges

Based on the result of the study, the massage work exposes female massage therapists for different kinds of health problems. The health related problems are discussed thematically as follows;

Hygienic and sanitation problems

The study found out that the absence of inspection by the Addis Ababa Health Bureau on the massage houses makes the safety of the massage industry in a dangerous position. In most cases, the massage rooms were suffocated and unhygienic. Concerning this issue, one of the participants disclosed that;

Most of the massage centers have violated hygiene rules. For example, the massage rooms' windows are not on the side of fresh air ventilation, sometimes suffocation is happening in the room while we are doing our job. The materials that we are using are not also cleaned. This implies that we are doing our work by risking our safety. Most parlors' owners do not give much attention for sanitation and hygiene since there is no governmental inspection system in the city. As a testimony, I have never seen any governmental officials who come and inspect the parlors since I started this job. (Participant 9).

The above verbal account implies that massage centers were not that much concerned about the health of their massage therapists as they had unsafe massage rooms; and such massage parlors' limitation was the result of the poor inspection of health bureau.

Vulnerable for sexual transmitted infections and skin diseases

As the nature of massage work requires body touching between therapists and customers, it, therefore, exposes both partners for skin transmitted disease if it is not properly handled. Moreover, gender based violence and sex work were the common scene of massage work and as

a result of this female massage therapists were at high risk to be infected with sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS. In respect to this, one of the interviewees said:

Illegal sex massage work has brought lots of health problems upon us. Some customers have forced us to have oral and anal sex with them. These kinds of sex practices are uncommon in our culture and lead us to experience different kinds of sexual transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS. Unsafe Massage work also caused transmission of different types of skin diseases from one another (Participant 10).

From the above accounts, we can note that female massage therapists were at high risk to be exposed for STD and skin disease. Their vulnerability for such types of health problems are associated with the presence of illegal massage parlors which are often characterized as unhygienic and sex business enterprise.

Psychological problems

The study found that many female massage workers were socially stigmatized and neglected. They were mistreated and disrespected by the society. They were also sexually abused by their customers. These societal segregation and gender based violence had brought psychological problem upon them. The other sad story is that some of them were joined the business without knowing the hidden practice of sex work. Once they joined it and experienced sexual violence, they became depressed. As a testimony, the following participant stated her experience as:

Initially, I thought that massage houses are working in accordance with the massage therapy's professional ethics and that is why I have engaged in massage work by working at one massage center. But, I realize lately that I am working a company intended to work illegal sex business. Then, my moral get down and I am depressed and regretted a lot. I never want to inform my parents about my work. I am cheating them as if I am doing another job (Participant 2).

As it is reflected in the above information, female massage therapists were facing different psychological problems and these problems had a devastating effect upon their overall wellbeing. These problems are resulted due to the social taboos and sexual violence that they faced.





Therefore, they need good psychological and moral treatments from their customers and the community members.

DISCUSSION

The present study found out that female massage workers are discouraged by the whole society who can be their family members, relatives, friends or others. These sections of the society are labelled them as sex workers. As opposed to this, many studies done in developing countries showed that massage therapists are considered as professionals, not sex workers (Kennedy *et al.*, 2016). This implies that the societal negative stereotype towards massage workers has often exhibited in developing countries like Ethiopia.

As it was demonstrated in the present study, illicit massage industry appeared to be booming in Addis Ababa City and female massage therapists are forced to involve in sex business with and without their knowledge. According to Polaris's (2018) research illicit massage parlors is increasing in the United States and the total annual revenue gained from this industry is estimated 2.5 billion dollar. Many women are trapped in massage parlors by emotional chains built in lies, manipulation and terror. Similarly, a study done by Dale (2017) reported that the Korean women are trafficked and then sexual exploited in the US-based massage parlors. This indicates that the sexual exploitation of female massage therapists is a common practice in both developed and developing countries.

Massage therapy is widely regarded as one of the healing methods used on sexual violence survivors. Skilful massage therapy can help survivors to reconnect with their bodies (Price, 2007). However, the present study found out that female massage therapists could not even save themselves from sexual abuse though they are expected to help other victims. When we compare female and male massage therapists, it is hardly to find research works that reported male massage therapists are victim of sexual violence rather they have allegedly sexually assaulted women clients. This suggests that female massage therapists and women clients become victim of sexual violence just because of they are women. Therefore, it can be concluded that the sexual violence perpetrated against female massage therapists is a just a result of the existing patriarchal and misogynistic structure in which women's dignity and humanity are simply devalued.

The present study also explored that women massage workers were facing health challenge and specifically they are exposed to HIV/AIDS, skin diseases, and sanitation problems. Similarly, the Ethiopian public health association reported that health problem is the major social problem in this globalization world and the intensification of this problem is a result of the rapid inflow of immigrant culture and practices. It also identified that the major immigrant practices existed in Ethiopia are free and unprotected sex, the spread of unlicensed sex massage houses, excessive usage of drugs etc. These practices lead the productive section of the society particularly women to be vulnerable for sexual transmitted diseases like HIV/AIDS, Gonorrhea and the like (Ethiopian Public Health Association conference Report, 2006). This implies that the result of present study is matched with Ethiopia public health association's report.

According to result of the present study, female massage therapists had experienced stress because of the societal misperception towards them and those sexually victimized female massage workers became more depressed and anxious. Likewise, many studies done on sexual violence showed that survival of violence have faced so many psychological problems. An experimental study done by Field *et.al.*(1997) reported that Women who had experienced sexual abuse, were given a 30-minute massage twice a week for 1 month and immediately after the massage the women reported being less depressed and less anxious. This implies that massage has a significant role to mitigate the psychological problems of sexual victimized women. As opposed to this fact, the present study reported that female massage therapists were not in the position to support other women who are victim of sexual violence instead they could not protect themselves from sexual violence and experienced psychological problems resulted from it.

CONCLUSION

Based on the result of the study, it was concluded that there are various challenges that female massage therapist face. The most common types of challenges are social discrimination, rape, sexual harassment, sexual transmitted diseases, skin disease, violation of work ethics, suffocation and various psychological problems. Even if they had a dozen of challenges, female massage therapists wanted to stay on their job as they do not have alternative survival means. It was also concluded that female massage workers were not always silently facing those problems, rather they





were undertaking some measure to cope with the challenges. For instance, they were trying to escape from potential rape by giving room for masturbation to their clients. Generally, it was concluded that female massage therapists have suffered from multifaceted problems but the problems have not a power to push them out of massage work. This implies that the economic problem they have surpasses the challenge they face. However, their patience to the challenges is continued until they get alternative job or develop economic capacity to establish their own business firm.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the finding of the present study, the following recommendations are proposed for all concerned bodies. Since the multi sectoral response is needed, the following recommendations are forwarded to the government bodies, development organizations, private massage house business owners and massage practitioners.

1. The top official of the government should design policy, regulation and structure which are intended to promote the right of women’s massage therapists.
2. Bureau of Women, Children and Youth Affair should organize extensive awareness creation campaigns and training about massage therapy for local elders, religious leaders, community leaders, massage practitioners, parents and community at all levels.
3. Mass media agencies should give coverage to massage work so as to change the attitude of the community at all levels.
4. Bureau of Trade and Industry should work closely with the concerned bodies to bring hidden sex massage houses into court.
5. Health bureau should control the qualifications and ethics of massage therapists.
6. Health bureau should also inspect the ventilation system of the massage houses, the neatness and cleanness of the area within a proper scheduled plan.
7. Local and international non- governmental organizations should design program, projects to

address issues related to the challenges that women massage therapists encounter.

8. Massage business owners should play their own great role in the development of legal massage industry and restrict themselves to participate in the illicit activity.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

SDW and YMB had conducted interview at the field work. YMB gave direction on the methodology and result sections of the manuscript. SDW developed the full manuscript by getting guidance from YMB.

