



Veshya AIDS Muquabla Parishad

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वेश्या एड्स मुकाबला परिषद

बी-११, अक्षय अपार्टमेंट, चिंतामणी नगर, सांगली ४१६ ४१६.
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Sex work in the times of COVID

Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad [VAMP] and Sampada Grameen Mahila Sanstha [SANGRAM]¹

Discussions on anti -trafficking measures and responses have often been overshadowed by debates on prostitution per se as violence and slavery of women; and further muddled by a conflation with sexual exploitation of children. Against the backdrop of the COVID -19 epidemic, the call by many such organisations to shut down sex work, brothels, rehabilitate sex workers has once again been raised. Instead of providing assistance to sex workers such efforts will further push women in sex work into distress.

Migrant Sex Workers

The anti-trafficking discourse also tends to invalidate the narratives of sex workers who migrate due to economic or other pressures and treats them as exploited victims in need of rehabilitation. The epidemic has stranded thousands of migrant sex workers in other towns and cities with no livelihood options, no survival options. Furthermore, their work and identity of sex workers has rendered them ineligible to be considered within the discourse of migrants stranded in the epidemic. They are seen as trafficked victims who should be rehabilitated.

Besides the medical profession, other professions dependent on physical contact between humans, such as beauty parlors, massage parlors, hair dressing salons, etc. are all facing the brunt of the lockdown. Sex work is one such profession which is the primary means of livelihood for those involved in it. The epidemic and lockdown has brought focus on the livelihoods of sex-workers, their physical and mental well-being and of those dependent on them.

In VAMP and SANGRAM areas, the principle of collectivising marginalised communities have enabled sex workers to come together and fight HIV/AIDS and participate in Government health programs. The collectivisation strategy is crucial today to once again identify and arrest the spread of the Corona virus within the sex worker communities.

To understand the problems faced by sex-workers it is necessary to acknowledge the fact that their work is at a complete standstill during the lockdown. The customers, on whom the "business" depends have stopped completely resulting to a total lack of income. In Sangli, Satara, Kolhapur, there are around 5000 to 6000 persons who depend on sex-work for their livelihood. In addition there are many hidden sex workers, whose families dependent on their earnings have also been affected.

¹ Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad is



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Education of Children

Moreover, their children who were staying away from them for educational purposes, have returned home due to the lockdown. Providing for them has further added to their distress. In addition to increasing their food budgets, children's education has come to a standstill. Many sex workers do not have savings to purchase and sustain, e- education for their children. They are beginning to lag behind as other children have started e-learning.

Health

The epidemic and lockdown also led to a severe strain on the mental health of sex workers. A sex worker in VAMP committed suicide due to fear of Corona. She was a 34-year old mother of a six-month old baby earning her livelihood through sex work. Left with no work, no customers, she went into depression. Even as VAMP members were undertaking the task of reaching out relief and support, she committed suicide.

In VAMP and SANGRAM area of operation, some women sex workers need special health care measures. Those living with HIV-AIDS are an important group among them. In the last month, we had to approach the courts to avail of the third line ART treatment from the government. There were also several problems encountered in the first and second line ART treatment reaching the beneficiaries. Frontline workers have been constantly following up and providing them support.

In addition, there are many older sex workers who have diabetes, thyroid, high blood pressure. Despite VAMP reaching out to them, the closure of services in civil hospitals made it difficult for them to obtain cheap generic medicines. As a result many sex workers preferred to stop medicines. Pregnant sex workers, sex workers with infants have found it difficult to obtain nutritious food/ milk for infants during the period. Civil hospitals are not attending to their concerns since they are only running emergency services.

Currently through the collective efforts of our VAMP, MITRA, MUSKAN and SANGRAM dry rations have been procured for the entire community. So far, distribution has been done in Sangli, Satara, Kolhapur, Ammalner, Chopda, Vaijapur, Pune, Jharkhand and Karnataka. But this is not a long term solution. Food relief must include nutritious food packages.

COVID 19 has given another dimension to the abolitionist bias against sex work. A recent study entitled '*Modelling the Effect of Continued Closure of Red-Light Areas on COVID-19 Transmission in India*' emerged from Harvard and Yale Medical Schools and authored by Abhishek Pandey, Sudhakar V. Nuti, Pratha Sah, Chad Wells, Alison P. Galvani and Jeffrey P. Townsend. The study recommends that shutting down red-light areas in Mumbai, New Delhi, Nagpur, Kolkata, and Pune during and beyond the lockdown can reduce the

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number of new COVID-19 cases by 72% and recommends keeping them closed indefinitely². SANGRAM and VAMP mobilized epidemiologists, activists across social movements, researchers, and sex work networks to strongly denounce this study for its lack of rigorous methodology and transparency, misleading assumptions about sex work, and violent disregard for the rights of the urban poor in India.

VAMP demands that it be retracted until it has been peer-reviewed and made publicly available to other academics for critique. <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/india-news-facing-backlash-yale-university-to-review-study-on-closure-of-red-light-areas-to-curb-coronavirus/356275>

Recommendation:

The quality of food assistance during the next few months must be improved so that older sex workers, lactating mothers.

Ensure that health insurance schemes are made accessible to sex workers

Government assistance to sex workers through relief packages, sensitive schemes and policies that do not treat them like victims of exploitation but as women stranded due to an epidemic. [Women and Child Department]

Women in sex work have to be acknowledged as “workers” and be accorded due status in order to accrue the necessary assistance from the government. Their recognition as unorganised and informal sector workers. [Women and Child Department, Ministry of Labour]

Urgent need for legal aid assistance for sex workers who want to pursue justice via the courts against such unethical researchers, academics who are bent on creating an abolitionist bias against people in sex work. [NALSA]

Children of sex workers must be recognised as a special category requiring all forms of assistance during the COVID crisis – including education assistance aid, schemes that will provide assistance to marginalised children. [Department of Education]

माया रमेश गुरव

President, VAMP, Sangli, 6 August 2020

² <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/opening-red-light-districts-could-lead-to-over-12000-covid-19-deaths-harvard-yale-study-projects/articleshow/76701445.cms>