

Vadamalar Federation and SIAAP

April 2019-March 2020

Main activities

1. Increasing membership

Sex workers went out on the field and explained to other sex workers the importance of collectivisation, the benefits of coming together to form registered organisations, the laws related to sex work and the work done by Vadamalar and NNSW. Sex workers in the community were invited to regular meetings of Vadamalar so they get exposed to the environment and see the potential of collectivisation, and find what interests them.

2. Capacity building

Sex workers in Vadamalar received training on myriad topics such as legal awareness, human Rights, communication, leadership, crisis management, social entitlements, and sexual and reproductive health and rights. These training sessions were useful for them to understand their position in society, and advocate with healthcare professionals, lawyers, students, the media and the Secretary of social welfare this year.

Sex workers were also trained as community counsellors and provided handholding supported through regular supervision of their counselling sessions and providing feedback on their counselling techniques.

Legal awareness training sessions were conducted by the District Legal Services Authorities in Madurai and Kaniyakumari. Two sex workers in Kaniyakumari were selected for the Para-legal volunteer scheme.

Organised by Solidarity Foundation, sex workers in Vadamalar attended a capacity building training on usage of smart phones, mobile applications and the internet. The training was interesting and fun and sex workers felt that they have adopted an entirely new skill.

3. Establishing and strengthening redress mechanism

Two sex workers in each district formed the redress committee, and were trained on identifying crises, whom to approach and how. Members of this committee were trained by role playing different crisis situations, and finding effective ways of handling them. A pamphlet with a list of phone numbers including members of the committee, office bearers of Vadamalar, lawyers and staff from SIAAP, were printed and distributed in the community. In Thiruvannamalai, the committee sought the help of a lawyer while handling such crises.

In Madurai, a massage parlour was raided and women who offered sexual services during massages on request by clients were arrested. Vadamalar federation immediately stepped in, met the sex workers in jail and offered full support to take them out on bail. They were

met on a regular basis and given emotional support. A lawyer was also arranged for. However, the women refused help because they were afraid that their identities would be revealed to their families.

4. Gathering research evidence

Qualitative evidence was gathered on the impact on criminalisation on the mental health of sex workers through focused group discussion among sex workers in Tamil Nadu. The data showed that state criminalisation of sex workers contributed to fear and anxiety that they are forced to live and thrive in the shadows. The study found that there is also the fear of exposure that would lead to violence in the family and disrespect in society. Sex workers said that this uncertainty and fear does not allow them to enjoy the income they earn through sex work, and that they are constantly living in mental stress that often results in suicide ideation and attempts. This evidence was shared in the meeting on Gender and SDGs.

The evidence was also shared in the International Conference of Victimology where sex workers from Vadamalar spoke against structural victimization of sex workers, explaining that they are not victims, and that sex work is their own choice of livelihood.

5. Electing and strengthening the board

After attending the AGM of NNSW, sex workers in Vadamalar were inspired by the ballot system of voting. They were enthusiastic to replicate a similar method in their own election for the new board. In 2019, the new Vadamalar board was elected through secret ballot voting. The board met every month to bring updates from their respective CBOs, and take important decisions with respect to the federation. The board worked together to establish systems like conflict resolution between members, adherence to rules of decorum and registration of the federation.

On important days like Women's Day and World AIDS Day and International Sex Workers' Rights Day the board as well as other sex workers gathered to celebrate and show solidarity. They travelled and came all the way to Madurai from other districts to meet everyone and have a good time together. The federation has become stronger not only in terms of processes and systems, but also as intimate friendships.

6. Registration

Though all the CBOs under Vadamalar had been registered, they had not been renewed the past few years. Sex workers themselves took the responsibility to re-register their respective CBOs, and directly involved themselves in the registration process, with the help of SIAAP. Four CBOs were registered this year: 'Thenmadurai Vadamalar Pengal Nala Sangam,' 'Deepam Pengal Nala Sangam,' 'Kanmani Pengal Nala Sangam' and 'Bodi Natural Pengal Nala Sangam.'

7. Planning and participation in Chennai Pride

This year, Vadamalar Federation was included in the planning committee of Chennai Pride organised by the Tamil Nadu Rainbow Club. It was a good opportunity for sex workers across Tamil Nadu to forge alliance with the LGBTQ community in Chennai. Sex workers wore red sarees and carried red umbrellas while rallying at the Chennai pride and celebrating their choice to be in sex work.

8. Mental health initiatives

In collaboration with Nirangal and Sterling school of playback theatre, sex workers attended the introductory and intermediate workshops for playback theatre. The workshops were a new experience for the women, as they got to theatrically enact their lived experiences evoking emotions among those watching to not only feel for them, but also relate to the person enacting for having had similar experiences. The workshops also had participation from youth and people from LGBTQ communities, enabling insight into each other's lives and drawing empathy and emotional support.

Along with Nirangal, a support group was formed with sex workers, students, social workers and LGBTQ persons to address burnout and mental health issues that arise out of activism and social work. This was a useful platform to share and listen to emotions of people from different walks of life, working in different forms of activism and social work, and discuss ways to address burnout.

9. Sensitization of stakeholders

Vadamalar had meetings with lawyers, police, healthcare providers, students, media and government departments to sensitize them about the issues faced by sex workers, the laws related to sex work and their agency. Lawyers, healthcare providers, police officers and government departments were sensitized onsite; and workshops were conducted among students, an anti-trafficking unit and the secretary of Social Welfare along with the Commissioner of Social Defence and the Human Rights department. The rights of voluntary sex workers were explained, a demand for eliminating stigma, discrimination and violence against sex workers was made.

Vadamalar also engaged with labour unions and NGOs working for the welfare of Dalits, and the communist party in Madurai, to garner support for the cause.

In Thiruppur, Vadamalar participated in a sensitization programme of politicians and government departments along with LGBTQ persons. Here, sex work as a livelihood option for women and LGBTQ persons, and the right to voluntary sex work were explained. It was interactive panel discussion where sex workers answered questions about their lives, the law and what they are fighting for.

10. Positive media portrayals

This year multiple news stories were published to portray sex workers as agents of change in their own lives as well as civil society. A press conference was also conducted where sex workers addressed the media to convey their demand for decriminalisation of sex work, and to treat sex workers with respect and dignity. This has drawn visibility to Vadamalar Federation, the sex workers' movement, and caused a shift in the narrative from sex workers as victims of exploitation or women with bad conduct.

11. Linking sex workers with government services and schemes

Sex worker leaders in each district are constantly doing outreach for government services and schemes to reach all sex workers in the community. Sex workers living with HIV, have been supported to apply for and receive the 1000 rupees cash entitled for people living with

HIV. They have also been supported to submit applications for free houses with plots allocated for marginalised communities.

On a regular basis, sex worker leaders in Vadamalar refer and accompany sex workers to hospital for tests and treatment for sexual and reproductive health issues as well as non-communicable diseases.

Key results

1. About 100 new sex workers have begun participating in the activities of the CBOs and the federation this year.
2. A new and active board has been established. Activities of the federation are more robust, and the members are more enthusiastic. Sex workers are taking greater ownership of the activities of the federation, rather than depending too much on the NGO partner. The members themselves call for meetings, organise, and even invite resource persons for the meetings.
3. There is greater self-esteem among sex workers, considering themselves as people with knowledge and capacity to advocate and achieve what they want. Addressing a large group of police officers was a different experience as sex workers have always had a feeling of animosity towards the police. But here, the police were listening while sex workers stood on the pedestal. Addressing the media on a press conference openly as sex workers gave them a feeling of self-actualization.
4. Rapport established between allies from other movements such as Dalits, LGBTQ and workers. On January 8th, Vadamalar participated in the All India Strike along with the workers unions. A sense of solidarity has developed across movements. The Chennai pride saw transgender sex workers marching along with the female sex workers in Vadamalar. The communist party in Madurai now has an amicable relationship with Vadamalar federation, and they invite the federation to their activities. On their invitation, Vadamalar federation participated in a protest meeting against the draconian Citizenship Amendment Act.
5. Four CBOs under Vadamalar have been registered this year. This has increased credibility during advocacy initiatives.
6. Sex workers in Vadamalar widely interacted with the media this year, creating a change in society's perspective about sex work. There is a shift in the way media reports on sex workers, which has stimulated a flurry of discussions on social media platforms about the legality of sex work and sex work being a legitimate source of livelihood.
7. Community outreach for counselling and knowledge sharing has been successful, increasing the reach of the movement. Sex worker leaders have been reporting back monthly on sex workers being referred and taken to hospitals for SRH as well as NCDs. Sex workers have developed utmost trust in the CBO representatives. Indra from Kaniyakumari district said that many sex workers have called her even during midnight for emergency health issues related to thyroid and kidney stones, and without any hesitation she had accompanied them to the hospital. Sex workers in the area look up to the CBOs and the sex worker leaders, confident that they will get any help they need. Counselling was also a success as sex workers got the opportunity to vent their emotions and see confidants among their own people. Solidarity among the community has become much stronger.
8. The legal awareness trainings by the DLSA resulted in 2 sex workers being chosen to undergo training under the paralegal volunteer scheme. However, the training would begin on the approval of the State Legal Services Authority. The bureaucracy in the system is causing a delay.
9. The Secretary of Social Welfare agreed to pass orders to police asking them not to arrest voluntary sex workers. She also said she would address the issue of violence in healthcare

settings with the Director of the National Health Mission. Sex workers felt happy and proud to have directly had a conversation with the Secretary in her chambers.

10. The research evidence was a useful tool to show empirical evidence on the impact of criminalisation of sex workers, which made the stakeholders take our argument more seriously.

Greatest successes of the organisation

Outreach

Between 2019 and 2020, Vadamalar Federation has reached out to a large number of stakeholders to advocate for the rights of sex workers. The federation has interacted with students, lawyers, government departments, police and allies such as Dalits and LGBTQ persons. Such engagements have brought greater visibility to Vadamalar Federation, NNSW and the sex workers' movement. It has instigated conversation about sex work as work and the rights of sex workers among people in power. Our meeting with the Secretary of Social Welfare, Tamil Nadu was a great success. She agreed to pass orders to the law enforcement to refrain from arresting voluntary sex workers. She also said she would speak to the departments of Health as well as the department of Human Rights to take action against violence by police and healthcare professionals against sex workers.

Stronger board

In the past year, Vadamalar has seen more and more participation in the activities of the federation. This has led to emerging leadership in the federation. The June 2019 board election is an important milestone in Vadamalar's journey. It was the first democratic election where sex workers competed with each other by presenting compelling speeches on why they should be elected. This was a brilliant opportunity for women to be eloquent and display their skills, and others to choose the best candidate to lead them. This board has incrementally become stronger and more inclusive. Even after elections, sex workers have been engaged in regular board meetings, exchanging a wide range of ideas and taking important decisions. Resolving conflict is also being done in a democratic manner.

Agency of sex workers

The narrative about sex work has seen a gradual shift in Tamil Nadu, from sex workers as victims or vectors of infection, to agents of change. Many sex workers have been articulate in this front while speaking to the media and the public. Sex workers have also been feeling empowered by this narrative while sharing their stories to the public, as they have begun to see themselves as individuals who have consciously made pragmatic choices in their lives. Such ownership over their own lives has made sex workers in Vadamalar demand for their rights vehemently. Looking at such activism, other sex workers have also been encouraged to join the federation, and participate in its activities. Having been part of the Chennai Pride, sex workers from all over Tamil Nadu gathered in Chennai and asserted their positions in civil society.

Stronger bond between sex workers

The friendship between the sex workers in the federation has developed into a sisterhood where they are there for each other emotionally at all times. Sex workers trained as community counsellors have been providing mental health services to other sex workers in the community. In all times of crisis, sex workers themselves come to each other's aid and arrange for necessary help.

Challenges

Discrimination

Revealing sex workers status during advocacy often leads to discrimination of the sex worker. The moral perception against sex workers causes them to advise that they choose alternative professions and leave sex work. Because of this, many people refused to be sensitized. It was hard to break through the conservative mindsets of people. One sex workers who took another sex worker to the hospital for STI treatment was verbally abused by a doctor who said that sex workers are vectors of infections and demanded that her clients be brought for testing too.

Further, many people who read our news stories expressed on social media that sex work is illegal in India and that promoting sex work is destroying the cultural sanctity of India. However, many others rebutted by supporting our cause.

Bureaucracy

It has been difficult to train sex workers as paralegals as the DLSA officers said that the PLV scheme has not been functioning for a long time, and that they needed official intimation by the SLSA from Chennai. Because of this, though women have been chosen to be trained, they have not been called for training yet.

Registration of the federation in Madurai has also been a challenge as it was a cumbersome process to renew the already registered federation.

Restriction by police

After the raid in massage parlours in Madurai, the police became alert. As the massage parlour was in the same building as the federation office, the police insisted that they wanted to make a visit to the office and see what kind of work happens there. This made the sex workers anxious as they were afraid of the police and worried that if they find out that they are sex workers, they would be detained and not be allowed to travel back to their districts. Because of this, they took down all the posters and props that indicated that they are sex workers. However, even after the visit, the police ordered that an official letter needs to be given with the names of people and their addresses if they want to stay overnight in the office. Though they submitted the letter, the women were worried that their safety may be threatened because the police had all their details.

Learning

Sex workers in Vadamalar have engaged in multiple advocacy initiatives and dealt with government and administrative procedures. This has been a practical learning experience on how to deal with government departments, ways to communicate with them, and the excruciating bureaucratic procedures. Sex workers expressed that they felt enriched being exposed to these things and successfully getting things done. These experiences have motivated them to take up all matters and procedures of the federation in their own hands, with support from SIAAP, but not completely dependent.

The Annual General Meeting in May 2019 was a great learning experience for sex workers. After witnessing the elections, they were highly enthusiastic to replicate a similar system in Vadamalar

federation. They were also inspired by the formal ways of functioning of NSW. Based on this, they conducted the elections of the new board, registered new CBOs and conducted regular meetings in the federation.

As sex workers have begun to fully involve themselves in decision making and carrying out processes, they have realized their own potential and that the onus is on the community to take their work and the movement forward.

Experience working with NSW

NSW has been an inspiration to members of Vadamalar federation as an example of how effective collectivisation of sex workers can be. It has also been an enriching experience for cross-learning from sex workers in other states. Meeting people from other states has also been enjoyable and a good time spent away from home in a different state experiencing and learning new things.