

MUSKAN REPORT 2010-11

PROGRAMME ACTIVITIES, RESULTS, AND OUTPUTS

MUSKAN

Becoming autonomous

For some time in MUSKAN, the need to transform from a project into a strong, autonomous group like VAMP was felt amongst its staff and members. In this regard, Bhimawa, a member of the VAMP collective, has been giving ongoing inputs to MUSKAN based on the VAMP model. This led to beginning the process of planning for the organisation. After a long struggle, a major achievement last year was registering MUSKAN as an independent organisation with the Charity Commission.

The group faced challenges in this and had to take action when, after several months of waiting, it became apparent that the Commissioner was blocking their application. Not only was his tone and approach hostile and homophobic, he asked inappropriate questions, and dismissed the application, telling the group that the organisation could not be registered in Sangli. In addition to this setback, the appointed lawyer also abandoned the activists mid-application, due to his uneasiness with the topic of MSM and sex work. Finally, with persistence and pressure from MUSKAN members, the application was accepted.

STI's in MSM

MUSKAN has been taking a pragmatic approach to dealing with STI prevention, having observed an extremely high rate of STIs in MSM. They have identified alcoholism as another serious problem experienced in the MSM community. Last year, the number of support group members increased. Visits to transsexual people are also on the rise.

Moving beyond HIV Information

A difficult but pressing issue is that of staff members practising risky sex, despite knowing everything about HIV transmission and prevention. The group has been alerted to the fact that having information is not sufficient. Recently, a staff member had engaged in unsafe sex and the group took him for prophylactic treatment at the civil hospital. As usual, they faced barriers in getting him treated. This incident brought into sharp focus the question of what MSM need to practise safe behaviours all of the time, apart from information. Clearly, self esteem is an area to be worked on and the notion of health must be looked at more holistically - beyond physical to mental health well being.

Outreach strategy

MUSKAN has changed its outreach strategy. Previously, Kothi's used to reach out to other Kothis while Jogappas would outreach their own community. Last year, due to expanding numbers in the community and increasing comfort with 'difference' per se, diversity has been embraced. Kothis and Jogappas now work together to reach out to each other's communities, and to non-feminine men who are MSM. Last year, MUSKAN began reaching Double Deckers (bisexual men).

The result is a larger umbrella of MSM working together. In Satara, Jogappas and Kothis continue to meet in separate spaces, however Muskan members are making efforts to talk about the issues of these communities in both groups. MUSKAN hopes to bring the two communities together as one.

Events at MUSKAN

Last year MUSKAN organised events around World AIDS day and took part in Sex Workers Rights Day and International Women's Day. They celebrated the completion of one year of reading down of Section 377.

Advocacy

It recently came to light that some NGOs working on HIV/AIDS who visit civil hospitals are taking details of people on ART, with the intention of including them in the Sanjay Gandhi Niradhar Yojana. This is a government welfare scheme extending economic support to widows and children. Under this, women get Rs.500 per month and Rs.750 if they have children.

Without consent, the workers subsequently visit the homes of people on ART, inadvertently revealing their HIV status to family members, many of whom are unaware that they have a positive family member living with them. This is a serious violation of positive people's human right to privacy and confidentiality.

Several people came to the MUSKAN support group last year asking for help regarding the fall out of this. The issue was taken up in a meeting by SANGRAM and it was suggested to notify the hospital dean of this development. MUSKAN member, in the presence of dean, called the concerned person of the NGO, and explained the serious implications of this action. Firstly, they explained, it fuels existing apprehensions of MSM and sex worker communities to access public health services. Secondly, it erodes trust in hospital and NGO staff, which has taken years to build up. Thirdly, it reinforces stigma and discrimination and fourthly, slows down progress in forging links between MSM and sex work programmes and other civil society bodies.

Art award received

Sangli Academy of Arts has an annual award for distinguished artists. Bhaskar of MUSKAN won the award for the performance of a traditional dance art form. He was praised for keeping this particular dance form alive. The president of MUSKAN and two members received the award in Sangli. The performance was also aired on Doordashan television.

Vienna AIDS conference

Video clips from interviews with MUSKAN members were shown at the International AIDS Conference held in Vienna, 2010. The clips were powerful testimonies on how people have overcome experiences of stigma and marginalisation as sex workers and positive people in Indian society. People spoke about homophobia and transphobia of medical practitioners, and finding strength through collectivisation to combat this. One clip portrayed an HIV positive couple expecting an HIV negative baby. They spoke about how, with the help of the district campaign staff, they overcame the social barriers against positive people having children.

