

“Lockdown” for the marginalized

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No sooner did the discussions on Corona pandemic emerge, than it was certain that the sex workers' community would be badly hit by it. This profession is not just a supplementary activity for them to gain some extra pocket money, it's their bread and butter! The lockdown has thus brought on anvil, the issue of the livelihoods of tens of thousands of sex-workers, their own physical and mental well-being and of those dependent on them.

The Corona virus has indeed affected all strata of society. Its spread depends upon people's physical contact with each other. And hence “lockdown” is the only remedy! This implies a total ban on human movement, thus avoiding any contact between people. However, there are many sections of society whose livelihood itself depends upon physical human contact. 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. A huge population that earns its livelihood from this profession has been gravely affected and the looming uncertainty about when this could end, has left them in a lurch.

Lockdown prevents people from physical contact. Moreover, as this is the only remedy to arrest the spread of this virus, the norm of physical distancing might well continue even after the end of the pandemic. It will still remain lurking in the recesses of our minds. The sex work profession will remain endangered for at least the next six months or even for the next year or two, until a vaccine on this virus is found. India has hundreds of thousands of women who depend on sex work to support their families. And the number of men who regularly use their services is even larger. SANGRAM (Sampada Gramin Mahila Sanstha), based in Sangli, has been working in Maharashtra and North Karnataka for more than 30 years, mainly on the health issues of sex workers and transgender population and their children, since the days when the HIV infection began spreading its tentacles in India. These women came together to form VAMP (Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad), which implements several schemes of the State Government for the benefit of its members. These women have contributed a lion's share in arresting the spread of HIV. These women who once practised their profession in slums or in the dark alleys of the town, now act as health workers implementing government schemes. Sex workers from various States of the country have come together to form the national level apex body called “National Alliance of Sex Workers”. When discussions on COVID-19 emerged, it was certain that this would badly hit the sex workers' community. This profession for them is not something to indulge in for some extra income but it is their sole means of livelihood. That such a pandemic would affect their physical as well as mental well-being, was a given. Women began to discuss the issue widely. Would medical services be available to women who were already suffering from various conditions? Would the HIV treatment, which is only available in government hospitals, continue to be available? And many more such apprehensions were being raised. The month-long lockdown once again highlighted the perils of those who have

their livelihoods directly dependent on their day's work. They have now further intensified. We bear witness to the grave turn taken by the problems of the migrant laborers.

SANGRAM and VAMP had already anticipated the looming danger, as soon as the lockdown was announced. Basic rations and medicines were to be given priority. The tensions in the community were on a rise. These streets which would overflow with customers every evening, were now as deserted as a graveyard. This was unprecedented. The women were familiar with day-long, state-wide or nation-wide "bandhs", and even then their neighbourhood would see bustling activity in the evenings as that was not a curfew. But this lockdown has rendered a severe mental blow to the women in this profession.

VAMP declared that sex worker in their community had died with the infection of the Corona virus. But that death was in fact a suicide committed in 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, no man-friend, she was driven to death in a depressed frame of mind and succumbed to 90% of burn injuries. Sangeeta, the organization's field worker had met her only a day before for a survey undertaken by VAMP and SANGRAM to estimate the extent of relief measures to be undertaken. Her name was included in the list of beneficiaries. However, before relief could reach her she ended her life fearing the impending doom of the virus. Her baby was in her native village in Karnataka. Her family was also stranded there. With all her family away in Karnataka, her funeral had to be conducted there. Her family could not travel to Sangli during the lockdown. So one person accompanied her body in the hearse to the native village. There were restrictions on the number of persons that could assemble for the funeral and hence all workers of the organization were deeply saddened by the fact that none of them could pay tribute to her at the end despite being such a large support system. Everybody was helpless before the virus. Thus, the issue of sex workers' livelihood becomes paramount in such situations. Curfew leads to loss of customers and thus loss of livelihoods. And the struggle for survival begins anew.

Providing sexual services is the sole means of livelihood for this community. However, their work does not enjoy social sanction as do other forms of work. Thus, the community has to struggle eternally for their existence. It is necessary to understand the context of this work before estimating the damage that the lockdown inflicts upon them. The primary bane of sex-work, colloquially known as "dhanda" (business), is that it has been criminalized. Thus, those who practice it often do it clandestinely. Women in sex work always have to face difficult situations while earning their livelihood. In our experience, their marginalization results in their having to struggle at all levels, including access to health, education or social justice. For the last 30 years, their collectivization through organizations like SANGRAM, VAMP, Muskan, Mitraa, has enabled them to respond immediately and find solutions on any social problem that they might face. We are using the same method for responding to the situation created by the Corona virus.

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 our area

of operation there are around 5000 to 6000 persons who depend on sex-work for their livelihood. Currently, all of them have absolutely no means to earn a livelihood. The nationwide numbers add up to hundreds of thousands of such workers. Those who practice under covers might further add to these numbers. Besides them, those who are dependent on their earnings have also been affected. 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. Almost all women in sex work are facing this problem. Similarly, there are a large number of men who also indulge in sex work under the garb of “employment”. They too are facing the financial crisis. The government has initiated some relief under certain schemes which has benefitted the trans-genders to some extent. However, so far there has been no scheme or relief measures declared for sex-workers. They have been totally overlooked.

In our area of operation, there are some women sex workers who 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. The workers of the organizations were constantly following up on the situation. They have been brave enough to distribute medicines to the people who need them, while ensuring their own personal protection. Currently through the collective efforts of our workers and the organizations, we have procured dry rations and some financial support for the community. Different field workers are busy exploring the needs of the sex workers in their areas of operation and distributing basic essentials to them. So far, distribution has been done in Sangli, Satara, Kolhapur, Ammalner, Chopda, Vaijapur, Pune, Jharkhand and Karnataka. We have also received cooperation from the government machinery from officers like the District Collector, Police chiefs, Tahsildars, Transport officers, local administration, while reaching out to these areas. Although we are aware that this cannot be a permanent solution, we continue with our efforts.

It is the government who must resolve this crisis incurred due to the lockdown. It is of utmost importance that the government show sensitivity towards the sex workers' community and designs and implements policies and schemes for them. None of the schemes declared by the Central government include this particular section of society. Relief measures can only be of help for a short-term. 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. This has been our struggle all along. Our demand has always been to grant the status of “sex workers” to this community and this will continue in the future. The need of the hour is to transform social perception and accept them as an integral part of our society.