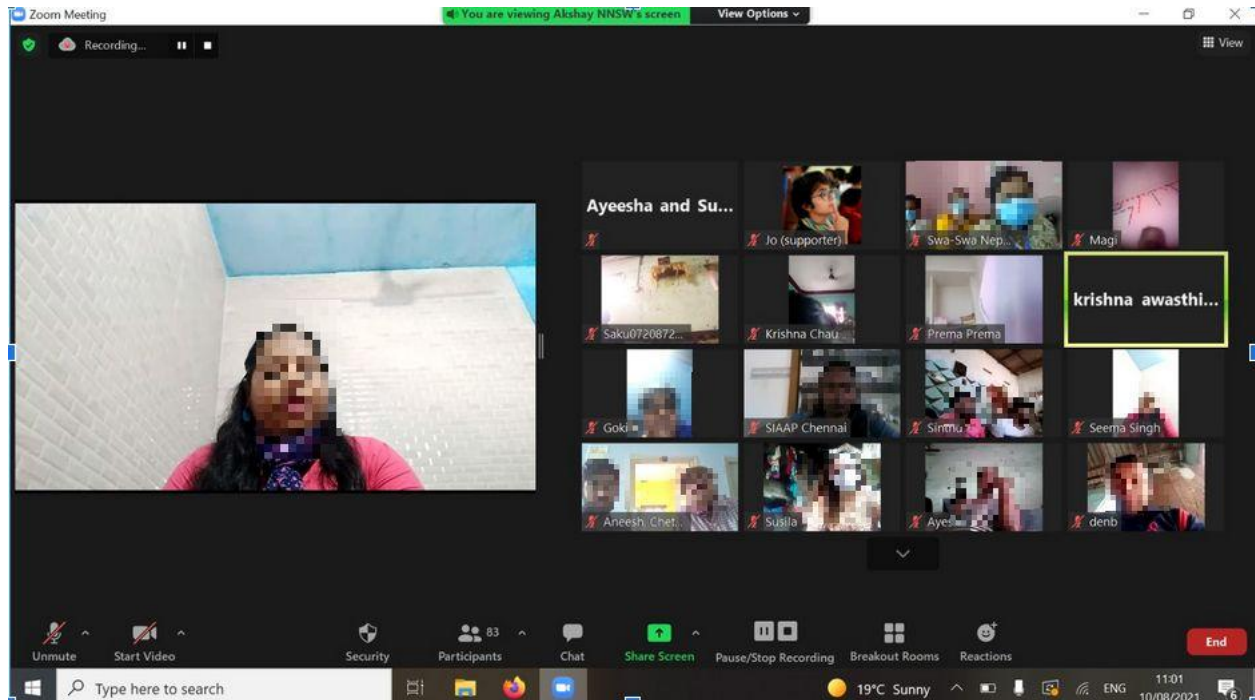


The No Fun Spared Edition: SWASA Goes Online in 2021!

The 3rd Regional Sex Worker and Allies South Asia (SWASA) meeting was held on the 10th of August 2021, online, on Zoom. The last two meetings were held in Kathmandu in 2019 and Colombo in 2020. This year, teams from partner organisations across the region came together to create an event online that was reflective of the love we feel for each other across borders, as well as to share stories on the last year since our last meeting, mostly affected by the pandemic.

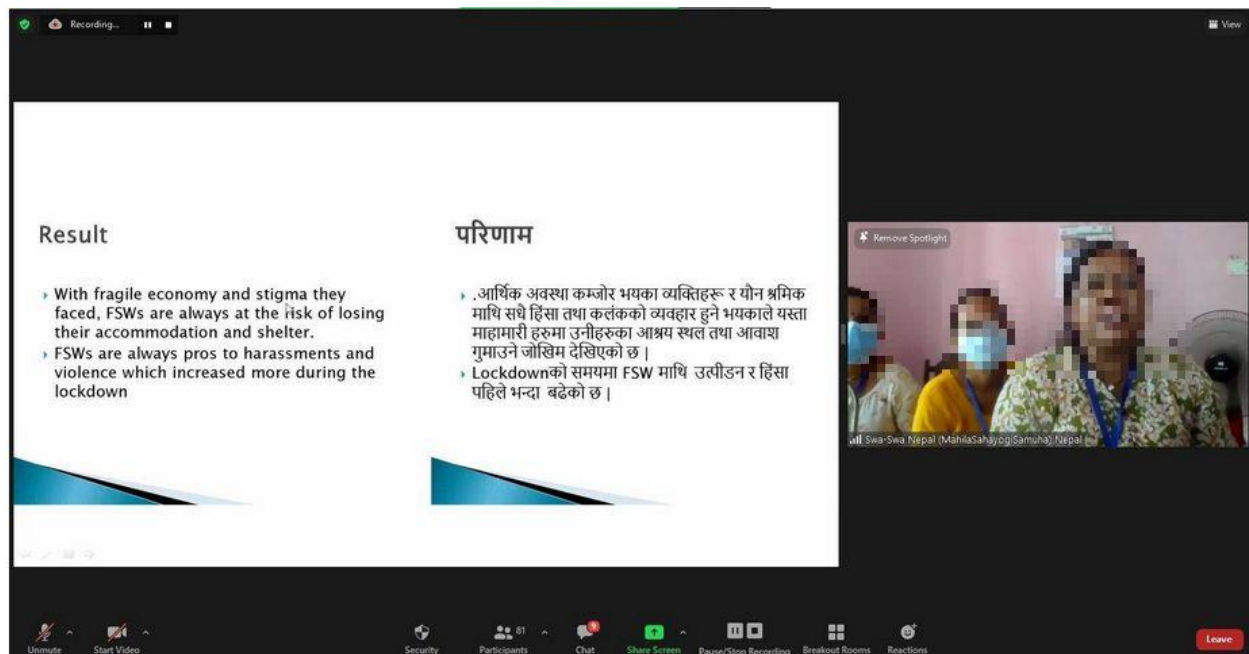


A screenshot from the meeting, NNSW's Lalita presenting the report on India

Ayeesha Rai and Sudhir from the National Network of Sex Workers moderated the entire event, with supporters across Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and India. The event began with an introductory activity wherein a representative from one country read the list of names of attendees from another country. In doing so, we were able to acknowledge and welcome all 150+ participants (through 83 Zoom connections) who made it to the meeting. Following this, Ponni Arasu did a short ice breaker where we used our faces and bodies to emote what we felt about certain words, like *love*, *sex*, *masks*, *covid* and *SWASA*.

The formal presentations from each country followed- the team from **Bangladesh** presented their work first, on the issues sex workers face in Bangladesh, including marginalisation from social safety nets, non recognition of the profession and vulnerability to state violence and torture, especially since in Bangladesh, the police can arrest sex workers without a warrant and because male sex workers can be tried under sodomy laws. The Bangladesh team presented data on how these issues are being combated by the sex workers' networks in the country, through focus groups, research, dialogues with police, and capacity building measures. Partner

organisations have been building solidarities with other movements like the queer rights, health and womens' movement to work on emergency responses, and conduct local evidence collection activities as well.



The team from **Nepal (above)** presented next, covering aspects of their research work, and evidence collecting work to combat the violence sex workers face in Nepal- especially with regard to evictions, and the lack of basic necessities caused by stigma and marginalisation.



The team from **Sri Lanka (left)** presented, through two pre recorded videos stories of their trans and cis women sex worker members. A notable point by one of the trans members was- "We, trans people use hormonal therapy and the access was not possible during lock down. During this time the police harassment also increased, and the army has taken over so many aspects of our lives, including vaccinations". Another member from Colombo said ""We found out that many sex workers in Colombo district faced a lot of police harassment during lockdown. We were beaten up, harassed and exploited. In these instances, we could not access health services, hospitals were closed". These notes were familiar to many of the members present at the event, even though they were stories from another country- and that helped build a stronger sense of solidarity in the conversations afterward.

The team from **India** presented in recorded video format as well, a summary of all the activities done and challenges faced by each of the 8 member states of NNSW over the year. Covering challenges, like fundraising and reaching medication to members across states and districts,

they also spoke about highs in the journey, like being able to reach 25,816 through 34 helpdesks pan India. A noteworthy aspect of last year has also been how fast members of the networks in all countries have managed to 'get online' as fast as they have, to be able to keep in touch and take the movement and our voice forward. NNSW also covered their cross border solidarity efforts with Australian and European sex worker rights organisations as work they want to push further in the future.

In true SWASA fervour, the formal presentations were followed by a curation of performances sent in from all four countries to present at the meeting. The performances began with the Condom Song, straight from Sangli, Maharashtra into everyone's laptops, as the rest of the members sang along with the recording. The song was followed by a short film presented by Gareto, Nepal on the incarceration and stigmatisation of sex workers, along with the complex, violent relationship between collectives, the police and individual sex workers and their clients. The short film is based on a real life incident that happened in the lives of the workers who made the film.



The Condom Song being performed



A still from the short film from Nepal

To get us all off our seats and on our feet was the next performance, from Gujarat- a garba dance in colourful, beautiful ghaghras (skirts) flowing with the wind. Following the dance, the team from Tamil Nadu presented a short skit on *The Life of a Sex Worker*- defining the pain of marginalisation through a digital story. The performances were tied to a close with a song about the pandemic from Nepal set to the tune of a Nepali folk song. Members from other countries were so happy that we received videos of people dancing along in their own rooms to people singing 1,612 kilometres away from them. This was the true spirit of SWASA, and its members.



The India team from Gujarat with a stunning dance performance



Where have you gone little sparrow,

Folk Song being performed by the team from Nepal on the pandemic and its effects- talk about immense creativity and love for what they do!

To bring the event to a close, Bijaya, from JMMS, Nepal issued an address of thanks to all the participants and member organisations- "It is difficult for us to bring our issues together similar to other issues. We all South Asian have some things in common, like taking sex work and trafficking in a same line, treating sex workers as prostitutes, and stigmatizing our peers' identities. They have also been deprived of access to the services provided by the state". Being able to connect beyond borders, and beyond the walls of our houses has been important for many of the members, and Bijaya's thoughts echoed this sentiment.



A shot from the street play clip presented by the Sri Lanka team

We ended the meeting, and the long but beautifully heart warming day with the thought- "Sanghatan Hi Shakti Hai!" (strength is in the collective) and with the feeling that we are blessed to be able to reach out across borders, and connect (and dance, fly, sing) in the way we do.