

Issues of COVID – 19

“Survivors of Human Trafficking & Women in Prostitution for Prevent Second Generation to be trafficked”

In **India**, the first case of the 2019-2020 corona virus pandemic was reported on 30th Jan 2020, as of the **Ministry of Health and Family Welfare** have confirmed a total of 4,426 cases, 326 recoveries and 114 deaths in the Country. The outbreak has been declared an epidemic in more than a dozen states and union territories. The educational institutions and many commercial establishments have been shut down. All tourist visas were suspended, as a majority of confirmed cases were linked to other countries. On 22nd march 2020, India observed a 14 hours voluntary public curfew and on 24th March, the Government of India ordered a nationwide lockdown for 21 days, affecting the entire 1.3 billion population of India.

Andhra Pradesh has witnessed the surge in the number of positive corona virus cases in India. The state has confirmed a total of 326 cases. The pandemic was contagious and more cases were being reported day by day. In Andhra Pradesh, Vijayawada, Krishna Dist, West Godavari, Guntur, Prakasam, Ananthapur and Kurnool are put under RED ALERT Districts. In these districts nearly 1 lakh families were isolated and kept under observation. The national wide lockdown is strictly implemented and followed in all the infected districts. The irony of the situation is nearly 50,000 to 75,000 sex workers and 1,500 rescued victims are living in those districts have no alternative livelihood, no basic amenities such as food, shelter and safety gears.

Fear and loathing in sex workers' (Prostitution localities) in Andhra Pradesh: While many professions seeing a gradual decline in business, **sex workers and survivors of human trafficking** are witnessing a sharper fall. With almost no source of revenue, it is difficult to safeguard their children who are now at home all the time due to shutdown. These women cannot even benefit from the benevolence of the general public who are coming forward to lend a helping hand to other women.

The 21-day lockdown by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to fight the pandemic has put everyone under the fear of uncertainty. While all of us are trying to figure out our lives under the lockdown, there are certain sections of the society that are worst hit by this epidemic such as sex workers. The lockdown has escalated the risk of poverty and ill health for the sex workers, as there are no clients in the market. Isn't that the responsibility of government to protect these vulnerable people amidst the lockdown who are struggling for their daily bread? The corona virus pandemic has only intensified the plight of thousands of sex workers, whose futures hang in the balance, but has also endangered the lives of their children.

Add to hunger other finger pointing. There's loathing and societal shame right now with people in their areas calling them names or being a potential source for disease. Many sex workers don't even have the money to afford food since the nationwide lockdown was announced on March 24. Since the savings of these workers are meager there is no other source to finance their daily expenses. as we are all aware that most of the sex workers are mobile population and many prostitution localities in these districts are stagnated due to lockdown and people are stuck up in these localities. Authorities are strictly monitoring the moments of people from these areas and are pointing out often.

The women in the prostitution localities / areas are being looked at as a big threat, thereby making them much more vulnerable. The administration and society are worried that once the virus perpetrates in

such dense communities like the prostitution localities/ areas, managing and containing it will be very difficult and so the administration has clamped down heavily on them. The Police can be seen everywhere in these prostitution localities / areas restricting the movement in and out of the area.

Since women in the red-light area earn on a daily basis, the lockdown has directly affected their earning capacity. The brothel keepers are making the women pay rent and with no source of income, if they are unable to pay the same, this is being considered as a loan to be repaid once the lockdown is called off with interest. Additionally, these women, in the absence of support have to depend on their brothel keepers to lend them money or on local private money lenders who have escalated the rate of interest from 10% to 20%.

Post the lockdown, the local ration and grocery shops were shut down and thus became inaccessible to the women. They were also not able to make purchases due to lack of cash in hand. During a recent follow up done by HELP organisation outreach team, few women shared that they have had to pay a much higher rate than usual for essentials. A woman shared “I paid Rs. 100/- for 1 liter of kerosene. We aren’t allowed to leave the building on most days”. It has become extremely tough for them to meet their daily needs. “The police are keeping a close vigilance on us, ensuring that no one enters our buildings and we are not allowed to stand on the streets” said Radha who is 35 years old and is happy that her two daughters are safe in a children’s home.

Since 29th March, we at HELP have been regularly checking with the local ration shops so that ration cardholders can get the subsidized supplies from these shops. Many women in the sex trade have no identity documents, no proof of residence and therefore they don’t have ration cards. Nutrition is very vital for women who are on HIV treatment (ART).

Over the last two weeks, HELP’s outreach team has been working daily to procure and provide these items to the women. Although we have been in contact with local suppliers, other organisations/ institutions who have been facilitating provision of food grains for the needy communities, the response has been slow. Since the lockdown, HELP has also been working to raise funds to provide food supplies to the women in the sex trade. There are too many barriers in the supply chain which our government till today has not been able to resolve. Till date, we have been able to provide ration to only 120 women from the prostitution localities of Prakasam, Guntur and Vijayawada that would suffice them for the next 15 days.

“We cannot even go out to buy groceries or medicines. Many of us are sick but now we have no means to even reach a doctor or call for help, let alone wearing masks. The police do not really listen to us. We anyway have little money left. We do not know when this lockdown will get over. I wonder if all of us will survive this,” said the worker.

Lack of support from government: Till now there are no relief packages being exclusively announced for the sex workers. However some NGOs and police personnel have voluntarily come forward to help them by ensuring proper food packets, masks and sanitizers. But this is not enough. The sex workers need urgent help from the Government, so there is a kind of sustenance available for them.

Making this worse for sex workers in that community support from social impact organisations is also suffering. **“all the positive effects of such programs on the participants and ultimate recipients are slowly withering away.”**

The women in prostitution are deprived of their livelihood and are almost dry handed without earning to meet expenses for their routine life. They are in need of medicines, provisions and are starving for a day meal even because of the stern limitations on people's movements by police. Some of their living abode that are kept under red zones across above cited districts are even more worse to severe where there is no acquaintance of outer life due to customary lockdown restrictions in addition to the stigma and discrimination prevails over these women in prostitution and their children who became scapegoats of impact over lives of their mothers.

Uncertain future:The sex workers are worried about the length of this lockdown and the impact on their income. Even after the lockdown ends and get recovery from their dilapidated lives towards resuming normalcy, there will be all sort of apprehensions among the clients, they worry. The business will take some time to regain its momentum which is another fear among these sex workers.

Every calamity leaves behind a horrid story of destruction and we must prepare for the worst. Given the complex socio-economic conditions, the vulnerable sectors and sections of India will feel the impact of this pandemic long after it abates. The economic slowdown, increase in unemployment and rise in trauma is imminent. It demands work at war footing by the government, NGOs and society at large to minimize its impact.

Various NGOs and people have been working continuously to support sex workers in different ways. Such as HELP who raised money to help the sex workers of Prakasam and Guntur District, amidst COVID-19 lockdown. The organisation is out on the mission to help these workers, as their daily earnings have taken a hit due to dearth of customers. HELP also did a project work, named 'Survivors Leadership Programme', with the sex workers and closely interacted with them to raise awareness regarding their rights. HELP organisation has extended a helping hand to make the lockdown period a little easier for sex workers. HELP will provide groceries to 125 families of sex workers. Each kit has sufficed consumption for April month and is worth Rs 1000. The HELP NGO pooled the donations from various people and then using the money for the betterment of the sex workers.

The much-needed lock down came with its consequence. Many of the sex-workers cant travel to their home towns. Self-isolation, at luxurious best, is a cramped room with four. It has now become a matter of survival. Prostitution is financially precarious, unlike regular employees. Many sex workers aren't benefited with proper care. Thus, many social workers are demanding the government to provide masks, sanitizers and financial assistance for them.

Increase in the incidence of trafficking: Lack of employment stressed administration and hunger makes it easy for traffickers to lure parents into sending their underage daughters to work in cities in exchange of little money. Though there is no data to fall back on, but our collective experience indicates that these crimes have normally amplified in the past after calamities like earthquakes, etc as it leads to disruption in the administrative mechanisms. This makes it difficult for the workers at the grassroots level to convince parents and even girls against migrating to cities.

Hundreds of sex workers in Guntur and Krishna Districts are struggling to survive amid the countrywide lockdown to prevent Covid-19 cases from rising. Packed in claustrophobic cabins, these sex workers are left with no income, little food and absolutely no precautions from Covid-19.

No one listens to us: A sex worker living in one such brothel, Asha rani (name changed), told that they are stuck in these dirty corridors and authorities are strictly monitoring us."We cannot even go

down to buy groceries or medicines. Many of us are sick but now we have no means to even reach a doctor or call for help, let alone wearing masks. The police do not really listen to us. We anyway have little money left. We do not know when this lockdown will get over. I wonder if all of us will survive this," Asha rani said.

Many of these sex workers came to the Prostitution localities to escape poverty. Now, with business coming to a standstill, they find themselves in the middle of nowhere. Along with them, there are more than 75 children at least 22 aged between 1 month to 1 year who are staying without proper food and sanitation.

Because she is a single woman and the stigma attached to sex work, Jaya has not been able to procure a ration card – a necessity to claim the benefits announced by the state government, such as supply of rations and an allowance of Rs 1,000. "How am I supposed to live the next few days?" she asks.

Had it not been for responsibilities, killing myself would be a great option. The river is nearby. I have a child. So, I can't take the step. I never got into the profession by choice. I thought it would bail me out.. says **Rama (name changed)** 26 year. Who operates in Vijayawada city with a lump in her throat.

Not only Vijayawada to anywhere else in the world. Corona virus outbreak has hit the sex workers hard and many stories a like Rama's resonate. The impact has created a crater not only to the incomes but also safety as they struggle to survive during these testing times.

My family in the home town runs on the money which I earn here, for my children's future. I have chosen this unusual option. If I do not send the money to my home town, it will be hard to survive says Ms.Lakshmi (name changed).

'At least save our children': Another sex worker said she had to stay back due to her one-month-old baby. Lakshmi (named changed) hails from a small village in the outskirts of Eluru town. The 30-year-old was forced into flesh trade when she was 21and has been living in the brothel ever since.

"Many of us managed to leave as soon as the pandemic hit. But we were not really made aware of the preparations or repercussions. As soon as the lockdown was announced, the owners left, leaving us on our own without telling us anything properly," Lakshmi said.

With no govt help, lockdown likely to spur trafficking

- NGOs working with commercial sex workers point dire situation faced by this ignored section of the society owing to the crisis created by the Covid-19
- The lockdown is forcing to go for high interest loans from moneylenders which will ultimately lead to trafficking in women and children
- Community-based organisations urge the govt to distribute aid through the organisations working with the district AIDS prevention and control units



NARESH NANDAM

Ongole: The coronavirus pandemic hit all sections of the population, including commercial sex workers (CSWs). The lockdown conditions in the state have affected the income of the sex workers, forcing them to take loans at higher interest rates for survival. The community-based organisations that are working closely with them suggest that the authorities help those people too, as most of them do not have ration cards. They observe that there would be a spike in the trafficking in women after the control of Covid-19 if the government doesn't respond fast.

The data from the National AIDS Control Organisation (Naco) and Andhra Pradesh State Control Society, there are around 80,000 female commercial sex workers in the state, in which nearly 8000 are from Prakasam district. Apart from these women, there are another 1.20 lakh women from migrant families, who are also involved in the sex trade. Most of these women are single mothers and women who are neglected by their husbands and families or the main breadwinners for their families. Due to the work they do, they would be habituated to alcohol, ganja, and other narcotics and spend most of their income on them.

With the unexpected 21-day lockdown, CSWs too lost their livelihood. Shaik Munni, a project officer in a community-based organisation for the welfare of sex workers

in Ongole, said that these women are being forced into debt with higher interest rates due to the lockdown. She said that though the other people require surety for taking the private loans, the greedy money lenders give money to these women without any surety but collect higher interest rates like Rs 10, Rs 15 and Rs 20 a month depending on the emergency and demand payment in short duration. She explained that women are utilising the money for immediate needs and emergencies in the family. This lockdown is also forcing the women who were rescued earlier and came out of the profession to go back into it again, and will result in more trafficking in the state, she said.

N V S Rammohan, secretary of HELP, an NGO closely working with the women rescued from sex trade, says such victims were not receiving the compensation assured by the law. He said that as per the NCRB data, only two of the 1,115 women rescued in 2018 received the compensation. He opined that the neighbourhood of these destitute women won't leave them to live peacefully. "Lockdown now is forcing most of these women in the trade to go to sleep without any food. The government should distribute help through the community-based organisations working with the district AIDS prevention and control units when they attend for regular medical check-ups," he said and also advised the government to protect the women from the greedy lenders and save them and their girl children from trafficking again due to the hefty loans.

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"Most of us do not have money. We have very little food left which we are dividing among us and surviving somehow. I do not have enough milk to feed my kid. Some activists are helping us. We know we are outcasts in Indian society but even we are humans. If the government does not save us, we would starve. At least save our children."

VIMUKTHI, state level survivors collective, told ...that its members are trying to help sex workers across the state of Andhra Pradesh but added that they do not have enough. "Our members are trying to help sex workers across the state but we do not have enough. We are even more concerned about the children. Firstly, they have to stay all day inside those inhuman rooms plus they are not being able to maintain any precautionary measure due to lack of resources. We will also write to the government to help these women in this hour of need," Lakshmi Priya, Executive Body member of VIMUKTHI said.

On an average these sex workers earn between Rs.300 to Rs.500 a day, according to Rani "The workers in high demand, about 100 or 200 of them, can probably survive for a month like this, but for the rest of the 1,500 the situation is really difficult. They immediately need food," Rani told.

Satya, 35, a sex worker, said she had not been able to send money to her 8-year-old son who lives with a family outside the brothel and she feared he was not being fed properly.

While government aid was promised, Vijaya Lakshmi was unsure it was going to help them in the long term. "Even if restrictions are lifted next month, I don't think people will come to the brothel for a long time because of the disease," she said.

Munny, an office bearer of the **VIMUKTHI** (State Level survivors Collective) working for prevention of Rights of women in Prostitution and rescued victims of human trafficking observes that more than half of the sex workers in Andhra Pradesh do not have ration cards. Most sex workers are also finding it hard to access medical facilities, including for some, getting their quota of ART tablets that are used to treat HIV. "We can get it only from the ART centres at Government Hospitals. But since March all govt hospitals treated only for the coronavirus positive peoples, we have not been able to visit the hospital. The tablets are given to us once in three months. For those who are running out of tablets, it is going to be difficult."

Even for those who have the tablets, there are other concerns, says Anjali. "The tablets require you to consume nutritious food. How many can afford it now? Most of us cannot afford a square meal." HELP & VIMUKTHI suggests that the government must and should appoint district level committees for implementing GO Ms.No:1 / 2003 and provide free houses – and prevent second generation to be trafficked.

Pointing out that the women are prone to domestic violence or intimate partner violence during the lockdown, when they are staying at home for an extended period of time, Mr.Bhaskar says this might result in stress and other mental health issues. "There must be a response plan from the government", he adds the lockdown has sent a wave of panic among sex workers. "Our priority had been to advise sex workers not to work, at any cost.

Keeping in view of the magnitude of the issue and cruelty of the context, **HELP** intends to support these women to manage the lockdown period with safety and dignity and to protect their children especially young girls from getting in to the trap of human trafficking and forced prostitution. The support planned by HELP include provision of food grains, groceries, health and hygiene kit for the

women as well as the adolescent girls, awareness raising in these localities against the mis-concepts of spreading of virus as well as on prevention from contacting to the virus. Besides capacity building activity for the frontline workers are also planned to support the sex workers for health and hygienic practices in the context of COVID 19 impact.

HELP aims to support at least 125 families of sex workers for coping of the situation at least for three months till the normalcy returns. Also HELP wishes to empower the young generation economically by providing skill building courses for them to choose suitable alternative livelihood option.

'At least save our children': Another sex worker said she had to stay back due to her one-month-old baby. Lakshmi (named changed) hails from a small village in the outskirts of Eluru town. The 30-year-old was forced into flesh trade when she was 21 and has been living in the brothel ever since.

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According to Mr. V. Bhaskar, project officer of HELP organization, the pandemic has taken a huge toll on the business of sex workers since their work involves contact between humans. "There is loss of income, which means there is a scarcity of food for themselves and their families. Many also have to pay off loans and or pay rent for their homes," he says.